

Community Building at 6505 Rico Road

By: Laurie Searle

Ask Chatt Hills residents what they think of when they pass the building at 6505 Rico Rd and you're likely to get a multitude of answers.

For the heritage families who have lived here long before Chatt Hills became a city, chances are they have family members who attended the Rico Elementary School in this building from 1933-1980.

For those same families and others who moved here before our City formed, they may have worked part time or enjoyed programs in this building when it was the Rico Recreation Center from 1982-2006.

For those who love to read, create arts & crafts, participate in community events & recreation, and volunteer their time helping others, they have surely enjoyed the services or volunteered with Community Brickworks, whose home-base has been in this building since 2007.

And for those who have worked on the community-building effort of creating and maintaining the city of Chattahoochee Hills, they have come to know this building as city hall since 2008.

In this four-part article, written for the April 2019 edition of the Chatt About Newsletter, a brief history is provided of this historic building at 6505 Rico Rd.



Rico Elementary School



Rico Recreation Center



Community Brickworks



Chattahoochee Hills City Hall

Community Building – Rico Elementary School

A Fulton County Public School for the Rico Community

When the cornerstone of the Rico Elementary School was laid on April 15, 1933, the community must have felt in high cotton, having received such a modern building as part of Fulton County's school system. The brick building would include a central hallway and five rooms, indoor restrooms, and coal heating; and it would accommodate students in grades 1-7.

Down the road and across the street from Rico Methodist Church, students previously attended the Old Rico School. Built between 1880-1889 when the community was a part of Campbell County, the four-room wooden building had no indoor plumbing. At recess a student would go to the church and bring back a bucket of water for the children, and everyone drank from the same dipper.



Miss Hutcheson's class. Rico Elementary School 1934.
Contributed by Sandra Huffmaster.

As rustic as the Old Rico School was, it was still more modern than the first school in the community. Piney Woods School was a two-room framed building with a rock chimney at each end. Located where Providence Baptist Church now stands, it was likely built before 1852 in a rustic style that resembled nearby homes, as was the custom of the period. In a story told by Helen Collins Selman in her 1970s article, *We Wanted to be Called Green Eyes*, "When the school caught fire, the teacher sent George Greene to Geat Herndon's store to borrow a bucket. Mr. Herndon had a customer so George waited until Mr. Herndon asked what he wanted. The school house burned down."

School days, school days, dear old Golden Rule days

We asked residents to share their memories of attending the Rico Elementary School. They said it was a unique experience due to its small student to teacher ratio, dedicated teachers, and strong parent and community involvement.

Tom Peek, who attended from 1936-1942, said school was pretty basic back then. "We learned reading and writing and arithmetic; we didn't have fancy computers. Some of our classrooms had three grades in one room. The teacher would start a lesson and give an assignment to one grade and then move on to the next. Most of the boys wore dungarees, so they'd be ready and dressed for farm chores before or after school. We also did chores at school: we brought in the coal and stoked the heaters, and we drew water from the well for our indoor drinking water. When I graduated, there were only four kids in my 7th grade class: Me, Jim Langley, Donald Reeves and Geneva Gammonds."

Patsy Teal, who attended in 1943, said she only went to the 1st grade at Rico before the school closed. She then transferred to Charles Riley School in Palmetto and remained there until she was ready for high school. Her account of the school closing mirrors the history written by Pat Hall, who was the school's principal in 1961. Pat wrote, "The school was closed during World War II because of gas rationing. When it re-opened, about 1948, the seventh graders remained at Charles Riley. The county planned to send the fifth and sixth graders to Charles Riley along with the seventh graders. There was a community uproar and a meeting with the county administrators reestablished Rico as a 1-7 grade school."



Tom Peek, who works at the Palmetto Hardware Store, still looks dapper in his dungarees.

Kenny Smith, who attended 1948-1954, said there were big coal heaters in every room. He remembers the time one of those heaters caught on fire. “The closest fire department was over 20 miles away in College Park. They had a heck of time getting here because they were in an open fire truck on a cold day, and back then the roads in our community weren’t paved.” As for his education, Kenny said Evelyn Jones was a great teacher. She taught grades 4 and 5 (all the teachers were combination-grade teachers) and the one year when there was only one student in the 6th grade, she taught him too.

Ken Langley, who attended 1957-1963, remembers the school had three classrooms, a closet/occasional classroom, a library and a cafeteria; with an addition added in 1961.

Although Ken transferred to another school for one year in 1961, Pat Hall’s history describes the school’s addition. “During the construction of the addition, the 6th and 7th grades were taught in the back of the Rico Methodist Church in the kitchen. There was running water at the sink, two out houses – “ladies” and “gents”, and a pet church mouse who appeared daily. The teacher drove the school bus, “Jezebel” between the church and school when the weather was cold or rainy.”

Ken also recalled one of his favorite teachers, Virginia Philips. “She was a real disciplinarian, but one of the best teachers I ever had. When she was teaching us cursive handwriting, there were two ways to make the letter “r” and if you didn’t do it her way, (up, out, and back down), she marked it wrong. Another teacher would grab you by the ear and pull you out of the chair if you misbehaved.”

Sandra Huffmaster, who was a teacher at the Rico Elementary School from 1979-1980 shares her memories.

“Forty years ago, in August 1979, I began my new position as a 5th/6th grade combination class teacher at the Rico Elementary School. Back then we had four combination classrooms with around 20 students in each class, and the school had a reputation for being one of the best in our area. While it was a rural school in character, it was more like a private school run by a community, with teachers, staff, and parents (both past and present) all actively engaged in providing the best education for their students. I remember that year, I had my entire class over to my house for a cook out. That would never be done in a school today.

“Over the years, I had the privilege of teaching nearly every child in the community, and those kids became an extended family to all of us who worked at the school. For me they were literally like a family as after the school closed, I moved with them from the Rico School to Charles Riley School, to Bear Creek School over the following years until retirement.



Ken Langley, Row 1, left 2; and **Judy (Bridges) Henderson**, Row 2, Left 2 in their 1959-1960 class picture at Rico Elementary School.



Sandra Huffmaster's 5th and 6th graders at work.
Photo from *The Sun* newspaper (01/10/1980)

“The school building too was an important part of our community. If only those walls could talk, they could share the history of a time when the school day included more than teaching and learning the three Rs – it included teaching children to be social, artistic, inquisitive, and eager learners. And the day included values important to the community, such as praying before lunchtime meals, beginning the day with the “Pledge of Allegiance,” and singing “My Country Tis of Thee.”

“When Fulton County announced its plans to close the school in June 1980, the community, PTA, parents, and staff were devastated. They fought very hard at Board Meetings to save their school—but with only 80 students, 4 teachers, a principal, a secretary, 2 lunchroom workers, and 2 custodians Fulton County determined it was not cost effective, including the age of the building. I doubt there will ever be another school like Rico Elementary School.”

Fulton County School Board approved the building of the Rico Elementary School in 1932. Construction was completed in 1933. The school closed in June 1980.

6. We recommend the erection of a new building at Rico, Central and Sandtown to take the place of the present dilapidated building.

Upon report of the southside committee that it had visited the Rico school and found same to be completed, it was agreed to accept the building and make final payment.

RICO SCHOOL	
General Contract	\$6,485.93
Dry Toilet Equipment	259.07
Finish and pivot hardware	142.59
Architectural services	414.54
Digging well	60.00
Additional strip of land	25.00
Total	\$7,397.13



September Meeting

The Rico P.T.A. held its first meeting for the scholastic year 1942-43 on Wednesday afternoon September 8, 1943 at the school building.

The meeting was called to order by the President, Mrs. L.P. Lowry, and opened by singing "America". The associates then joined in praying together the Lord's Prayer.



Rico Elementary School Band (1963-1964)

Community Building - Rico Recreation Center

Fulton County re-purposes school as Rico Recreation Center

The beloved Rico Elementary School sat vacant until 1982 when Fulton County entered into a 25-year lease agreement with the Board of Education for the building and then re-opened it as the Rico Recreation Center.

In its heyday, the Rico Recreation Center offered a smorgasbord of arts & crafts classes, afternoon school programs, and community functions led by paid staff and volunteers including: karate, ceramics, stained glass, bowling, wellness walking, community breakfast, cards, exercise classes and mother's morning out.

Kay Long, a Rico resident, said she worked at the Recreation Center when it first opened. "It was a part time job for summers back in the day. Debra Harper and Jannea (Jay) Sheffield and myself were the three who worked it. We had the whole building then but only used the cafeteria and library side, best I can remember. The pipes were in bad shape and leaked, the roof leaked all over. I had a clothes closet on the end where Chief Brett is now. It was full of clothes, shoes, household items to help people in need."



Chris Ware (left) and Trevor Moulder practice at Rico Recreation Center. Photo by AJC 1995.



Kay Long and children pose out back in Indian costumes they made.



Children take a break for a snack at the Rico Recreation Center.

Judy Henderson, who attended the nearby Rico United Methodist Church, recalls how she started teaching stained glass classes at the Recreation Center. "My husband Ernie and me, and our friend Rocky Reeves, were active in scouting at our church. As part of the wood badge scout leadership program, I needed to take a class so I took stained glass in north Atlanta. After the class they wanted me to teach stained glass, so I checked with the program leaders at the Rico Recreation Center and started teaching classes there." Stained glass was just one of the many craft classes Judy taught in the building over the years.

Improvements

By the early 1990s, the building was in serious need of repair and residents contacted their Fulton County Commissioner asking for renovations. The County wanted to tear down the building and start anew, but residents wanted to keep the former school building because of its sentimental value.

In 1998, the County made many improvements to the building. They added ADA improvements, removed asbestos, painted the interior, put on a new roof, installed tile floor, replaced some of the ceiling, improved lighting, installed a flagpole and security lights, and did minor landscaping – all at an estimated cost of \$500,000.

The Closing of the Center

Fulton County continued operations until 2006 when it announced it was closing three park facilities – Creek Park, Burdett Gym, and Rico Community Center – and making program cuts at others. All these actions were sparked by the Dec. 1, 2005 incorporation of Sandy Springs. The transfer of tax revenues to the new city left Fulton County with a \$20 million deficit in funds it used to pay for police, parks, planning and fire services in unincorporated Fulton.

Judy Henderson recalls the closing of the Center. “Fulton County hardly gave us any notice,” she said. “They closed the Center within a week and parents and volunteers had to scramble to get their program supplies out of the building.”

After the closing, Judy went on a personal mission to talk with Commission Bill Edwards, the District 7 representative for the unincorporated Rico Community. “I followed him around everywhere,” she said, “hoping to have a chance to talk with him about possibly re-opening the Center.” She finally found an opportunity at a commission meeting.

“Fulton County Commissioner Bill Edwards spoke to a full-house of concerned residents from all over district 7,” Judy recalls. “He said if residents would volunteer, some of the community centers might continue to stay open. One rec center had already been saved and he said he had talked to two residents about the Rico Rec Center but they couldn’t run the programs. I thought, hum. . . I think I could do that. So, each time he asked for volunteers, my hand went up. But Edwards would look everywhere except at me. Just as he was about to adjourn the meeting, I stood up and waived a piece a paper over my head and spoke up. I said, ‘What about the Rico Recreation Center? I volunteer to keep it open.’ I finally got Edwards’ attention and soon after, he gave me permission to keep the building open.

The Transition to the Rico Cultural Center

Judy received the key to the building on March 1, 2006, and enlisted the help of her church members to clean up the old Rico Recreation Center. On March 16 she re-opened the building and began referring to it as the Rico Cultural Center.

Early on Judy had contacted Fulton County to ask about bringing its Book Mobile to the center. She was told it would cost (her) \$86,000. At the same time, the head of the Fulton County Library suggested Judy start her own library and so they sent two collections of books to get her started.

With the library well on its way to being established, Judy began offering arts & crafts classes, after school programs, and other social activities, and she recruited resident volunteers to help teach and lead the programs. With the Center well under way, Judy was soon ready to take the next step and formalize her efforts into the Community Brickworks nonprofit.



Gladys Bridges volunteers at the library



Halloween at the Rico Recreation Center

Community Building – Community Brickworks

A Teacher and Two Preachers lay the foundation for Community Brickworks

With the Rico Cultural Center well under way, Judy Henderson enlisted the help of two close friends to formalize a nonprofit.

Judy, who had not yet retired from her teaching career, realized the importance of providing programs that supported education. Her two friends, Pastor Joyce Williamson and Pastor Donna Bailey, realized the importance of filling the gaps like home schooling, tutoring, and cultural enrichment programs. The idea came to them that they could provide the “missing bricks” and help build a stronger foundation for the community. And with that, they filed a certificate of incorporation with the State of Georgia on October 12, 2006, for their nonprofit organization, Community Brickworks.



Pastors Joyce Williamson and Donna Baily, and Judy Henderson laid the first symbolic bricks for their nonprofit Community Brickworks in 2006.

Early Years: 2006-2008

During 2006 and 2007, Community Brickworks focused on building its volunteer community library, offering after school programs, arts & class workshops, and recreational programs; and providing social activities for the community like luncheons, movie nights, and the popular spook house.

When the City of Chattahoochee Hills started up in 2008, it acquired the building at 6505 Rico Rd for use as its City Hall. The first city manager, Bob Simpson, was soon told by the City’s attorneys that allowing Community Brickworks to continue operating in City Hall could present a liability for the City.

“At that time the attorneys advised us that Community Brickworks should carry a \$1 million liability insurance policy,” Bob said. “They also expressed concern about Community Brickworks operating its programs in the same space as city hall functions. They told us to imagine what could happen if kids were running through the same space where city court was being held.” It was a difficult decision, but based on the attorneys’ recommendations, the City asked Community Brickworks to find a new home.

“Judy Henderson totally understood,” Bob said; “however, the community was a different story. Residents got very angry with the City for asking Community Brickworks to leave. It was a tough time, but working through it with the community made us all stronger.”

The City invited the Chatt Hills Civic Association and Community Brickworks to organize a series of community meetings and gather community input on how best to integrate its needs with the requirements of the City. As a result of working together, a viable plan was presented and adopted by the City Council. Community Brickworks acquired liability insurance and signed a memorandum of agreement with the City. It moved its operations to the left side of the building and installed a door that could be locked so as to separate its business from city functions when needed. It was also allowed free use of the facility, including use of the meeting room for community functions. It was a win-win solution.

Community Brickworks Today

COMMUNITY BRICKWORKS LIBRARY

The door is always open at the Community Brickworks Library, even when it's closed. If you stop by on Monday, Tuesday or Thursday from noon to 2:00ish, you'll meet friendly volunteer David Breece at the desk, maybe working on a craft project as he passes the time. Later in the day, Jane Strickland, Nan Huffmaster, and Estelle Stichcomb pitch in to help. Wednesday volunteers Sandy Simblist, Diane Hautt, Jacqueline Canon-Hall, and Carla Carrabino ready the food bank and help in the library. Throughout the week, many more worker bees lend a helping hand.

And when the library door is closed? Residents are welcome to come in and check out a book or DVD – for as long as they like – using the honor system.

The all-volunteer community library boasts a collection of 25,000 books, audio books, and DVDs which are made available to the community, and to the Chatt Hills Charter School and prison ministries through special borrow programs.

Need a free book? Check out the large book cabinet in the city hall foyer and help yourself. Have some books you want to donate? The Library will gladly accept them. How about a large print book? The Library is in the process of re-arranging a shelf just for large print books, along with a comfy chair for your reading enjoyment.

COMMUNITY BRICKWORKS FOOD BANK

While Community Brickworks has always found a way to help residents in need of food, it has stepped up its efforts in past few years thanks to its many partnerships, donations, and volunteers.

Two years ago, Brickworks applied to the Midwest Food Bank in Peachtree City and has since been receiving food staples and frozen foods. With the recent donation of a large freezer, Brickworks can now accept whole turkeys and hams. Judy still laughs at the one donation it received that had everyone stumped. "We received 6 blocks of ice with 30 crabs in each block. It took us a while to figure out how to process those," she said.

The Brickworks food pantry also receives donations the Palmetto Foodbank, church food drives, and grant funds. The funding they receive enables their nonprofit to assist residents once a year who need help paying their utility bills. Judy says their hope is to one day move to a "one roof" concept, where the community can make one call to Brickworks for its needs, and in turn Brickworks can connect them with other services through local churches and nonprofit organizations.

The Community Brickworks Food Bank is open on Wednesdays from 1:00-6:00 p.m. Residents in Chatt Hills, Palmetto, and Fairburn may have two plastic grocery bags (or 1 cloth bag) of items per family per month, and may also request a turkey or turkey breast. Items include: canned protein (chicken, tuna, spam, Vienna sausages, peanut butter), meal items (noodles, soup, and mac & cheese), breakfast items (pancake mix, cereal, evaporated milk, and jelly), canned goods, and personal items such as toiletries and cleaning supplies.



David Breece has volunteered at the library since December 2015.



Lynda Kozarski, Carla Carrabino, and Sandy Simblist volunteer at the food bank.

COMMUNITY BRICKWORKS – RICO PARK BALL LEAGUE

In 2009, Chatt Hills resident Lila Rhyne had a “field of dreams” idea. Her children, and her brother’s children, had no place to play softball after their leagues closed, so her mother suggested she start a Chatt Hills ball league.

Lila approached Judy Henderson with the idea, hoping to get her nonprofit’s support for this recreational program. Judy said, “Let’s do it,” so they made an announcement for a community meeting to see if there was any interest.

Only three mothers showed up, but they were all for the idea so they went ahead with registration. To their surprise, 59 kids signed up for the first league. In years since, the largest league had 130 kids. For the 11th season this year, 70 have registered. (Opening Ceremony is March 30 at 9:20 a.m.)

The Rico Ball League has had a positive impact on the kids and community. It brought Rico Park to “life” every Saturday morning in early spring through mid-May. It introduced the game of baseball to so many children, including several with special needs who might not have had the opportunity to play elsewhere. And it inspired Community Brickworks to gift a concession stand to the City of Chattahoochee Hills at Rico Park. Community Brickworks raised the necessary funds and resources, and Alan Merrill led a huge group of volunteers who worked together to build “Judy’s Home Plate Concession Stand”.

Lila and Judy are thankful for the many volunteers who have helped make the Rico Park Ball League a successful run. In addition to themselves, resident Kenneth Bryant is the last of the original volunteers who started this league. They are also grateful to Chris Marks and his Modern Woodmen of America organization for their on-going support.



Lila Rhyne and Judy Henderson are the winning team behind the Rico Ball League.

COMMUNITY BRICKWORKS FELLOWSHIP

Many residents think of Community Brickworks as the heart of Chatt Hills. In November and December 2018, they coordinated efforts and provided 59 food boxes to families and 102 children gifts to make it through the holidays.

Also, in 2018, Community Brickworks began partnering with local churches to host free monthly community luncheons as a way to help build a strong sense of community, and also offer hot lunches to those in their food program.

VOLUNTEERS, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, PARTNERS

Community Brickworks thanks its many volunteers, its boards of directors, and its many partners listed below for their help in making Chatt Hills and the surrounding areas a better place to live.

Palmetto Food Pantry, Midwest Food Bank, Bauer Foundation, Greystone Foundation, City of Chattahoochee Hills, Modern Woodman of America, Rico United Methodist Church, Antioch United Methodist Church, New Hope United Methodist Church, Providence Baptist Church, Sardis Baptist Church, Friendship Baptist Church, Interfaith Fellowship at Serenbe, Palmetto Masonic Lodge #74, Campbellton Masonic Lodge #76, and Chatt Hills Capital View Masonic Lodge #64.



Community Brickworks 2019 Board of Directors

1. Judy Henderson, director
2. Carla Carrabino, board chair
3. Joe Heiberger, treasurer
4. Jane Strickland, secretary
5. Diane Hautt
6. Elaine Bryant
7. Ernie Henderson
8. Jacqueline Hall
9. Sandy Simblist

Community Building – Chatt Hills City Hall

A Tribute to Community Building – Past, Present, and Future

If you've ever tried to take a photo of the building at 6505 Rico Rd, you realize the challenge – the wide building simply will not fit in one frame.

So, you're left with two options: take two photos and stitch them together, or use a special wide-angle lens to capture the big picture. Both options tell the story of Chatt Hills and its City Hall.



The story of city hall is the story of a community-building effort that created the City of Chattahoochee Hills.

Stitching together the Past with the Future

Long before the City of Chattahoochee Hills incorporated in 2007, residents met at 6505 Rico Rd to discuss the future of their community. How could they preserve their rural quality of life while obtaining more responsive service from the County? Several ideas were explored and attempted, from petitioning Fulton County to provide better public safety coverage, paved roads, and public water; to annexation attempts to join Coweta County and later, Palmetto. In 2006, when Sandy Springs incorporated, residents felt an uncertain future for their community and tried one last ditch effort in a dramatic attempt to control their future – they rallied to incorporate their own City of Chattahoochee Hills.

With a well-researched feasibility study in hand acknowledging projected tax revenues were adequate to fund essential city services, residents confidently voted for incorporation in 2007. However, when reality – and the economic downturn—hit in 2008, the fledgling city found itself struggling.

Bob Simpson, a long-time resident of Chatt Hills and the City's first city manager, recalls the early struggles. "The first thing we needed to do was set up city operations," Bob said. "The only building that could potentially serve as city hall was the old Rico Recreation Building at 6505 Rico Rd. Fortunately, Fulton County sold us that building and all of its contents, the fire station and all of its equipment (including the vehicles), and Rico Park – all for the sum of \$81,500."

While the sale price was quite the deal, the City soon learned that the old building – now City Hall – was a money pit. Bob said the first thing they did was fill the oil tanks for the heating system at a cost of \$700. One week later, the tanks were empty because they were in such bad shape. Bob said, "It was the beginning of winter and freezing inside of the building, so the City purchased space heaters, which they used for the next eight years to stay warm."

Even before the economic downturn kicked in, the City was feeling the financial pinch. Tax revenues wouldn't begin to trickle in until October, and the City had the huge expense of paying its start-up management company. It was only able to start up and survive the first few years through the help of many volunteers in the community.

Community Building Efforts

Chatt Hills' first mayor and long-time resident Don Hayes recalls that so many people helped in so many ways. "The City Council forewent their salaries, and even our city manager Bob Simpson worked for free" he said. Several residents tapped into their professional contacts and donated office furnishing and equipment, saving the city funds it didn't have. And city workers and resident volunteers worked side by side to spruce up City Hall, turning it into a functional space for administration, public safety, and court.



City Council Rep Dave Hanson (Dist 3), facilitates the first meeting of the environmental committee under the 2008 mayor's community support plan.

In April 2008, Mayor Hayes announced a Community Support plan to help residents align their volunteer efforts with the needs of the city. He suggested five support groups organize around city operational functions and services: citizen services, cultural activities, public safety, environment & public improvement, and business & commerce; and a city council rep would be assigned to each group to facilitate the first meeting and act as a liaison back to the city government. The plan was hugely successful, and the groups soon formed the Chatt Hills Civic Association. Working together with the City, the Civic Association made many significant contributions including raising funds for the City to purchase its parks.

The one dark cloud in this sunny picture entered the scene in 2009 when City attorneys recommended that Community Brickworks vacate City Hall in order to avoid potential liability for the City. Bob Simpson and Don Hayes both remember that time as one of the City's most significant struggles. But working with Community Brickworks, the Chatt Hills Civic Association, and the residents, the City implemented a solution that allowed Brickworks to remain in City Hall.

Scanning the Big Picture

In the eleven years since the city incorporated, there have been ups and downs and growing pains, and there's still a way to go, but today the City is something that residents can be proud of.

- The Mayor and City Council have worked hard to eliminate the start-up debt and now there are adequate funds and reserves to operate the City.
- The City has a professional and responsive staff that provides the essential services of administration, public safety (police and fire), public works and parks, and community development.
- The City has a strong relationship with Community Brickworks and continues to support its services to the community.
- The City continues to engage the community in its development, such as working with residents on the Comprehensive Plan, Parks Master Plans, and historic initiatives.
- The City, working together with the residents, has preserved the rural character of this community.

Finally, this City's administration is doing as much as it can to preserve the community's beloved building at 6505 Rico Rd so Chattahoochee Hills residents may enjoy this precious treasure for generations to come.