

Georgia Historical Marker Project: The Waffle House

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The following paper was prepared under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Dickey at Kennesaw State University for an Introduction to Public History course.

For many Georgians, Waffle House is more than just a casual dining option, it is a cultural institution engrained in Southern identity. A 24-hour diner that caters to the masses with cheap, consistent, and delicious menu options year-round, “WaHo,” as it is affectionately known, has grown from a single roadside eatery in Avondale Estates to a national chain that caters to over half of the United States. As a proud patron with many fond memories associated with Waffle House, I chose this marker to explore how Waffle House transcended its role as a restaurant and changed the cultural landscape of the South, and why that impact warrants a historical marker.

Opening on Labor Day 1955 in the Avondale Estates suburb of Atlanta, the first Waffle House was the brain child of neighbors Joe Rogers, Sr. and Tom Forkner. Rogers, a regional manager for the restaurant chain Toddle House, was approached by Forkner, a real estate broker whose father had helped to develop Avondale Estates, with an idea of opening a Toddle House in the neighborhood.ⁱ When Rogers stated that the area was not right for a Toddle House, he told Forkner to “build a restaurant, and [he’ll] show [Forkner] how to run it,” and the two agreed upon a location on College Avenue to open up their venture.ⁱⁱ -The duo decided to name their restaurant Waffle House after the most profitable item on the menu. The eponymous waffle was not, however, merely chosen by the pair because of its profitability. As Rogers puts it, their opening year was “the year McDonald's and all the hamburger chains started doing takeout...

[they] wanted to do sit-down, and [they] knew you couldn't take out a waffle or it'd become flimsy."ⁱⁱⁱ This decision proved to be crucial to the restaurant as the sit-down feel, combined with fast and friendly service, separated Waffle House from other fast-food options and made it into a Southern staple that felt like a second home to many of its patrons.

Originally intended to be a standalone restaurant, the success of the first location led Rogers and Forkner to open a second location in 1957, and by 1961 the chain had expanded to four locations. Originally guided by the philosophy of 'better before bigger,' the initial franchising of Waffle House locations began slowly in the 1960s, but the 1970s and 1980s brought rapid expansion. This continued for the franchise and it now spans across 25 states and over 1,600 locations.^{iv} While the expansion was no doubt a boon to the business, the original location still held a soft spot in the owners' hearts, even after its sale in 1973. Rogers would still visit the location in its other iterations through the years, and when the location was up for sale in 2004, the company bought back the building and turned it into the Waffle House Museum, which opened in 2008.^v

A historical marker was erected at the site of the original Waffle House in 2012 by the Georgia Historical Society, Waffle House, the city of Avondale Estates, and the Avondale Estates Downtown Development Authority.-The erection of the marker took place a few years after the reopening of the original location as the Waffle House Museum. The timing of the dedication shows the importance of the site and its renewed association with the Waffle House Company, as a marker was unlikely to happen when it was still operating as a Chinese restaurant. The reacquisition of the original location paved the way for the marker to be erected, as it allowed the Georgia Historical Society to partner with Waffle House and the city of Avondale

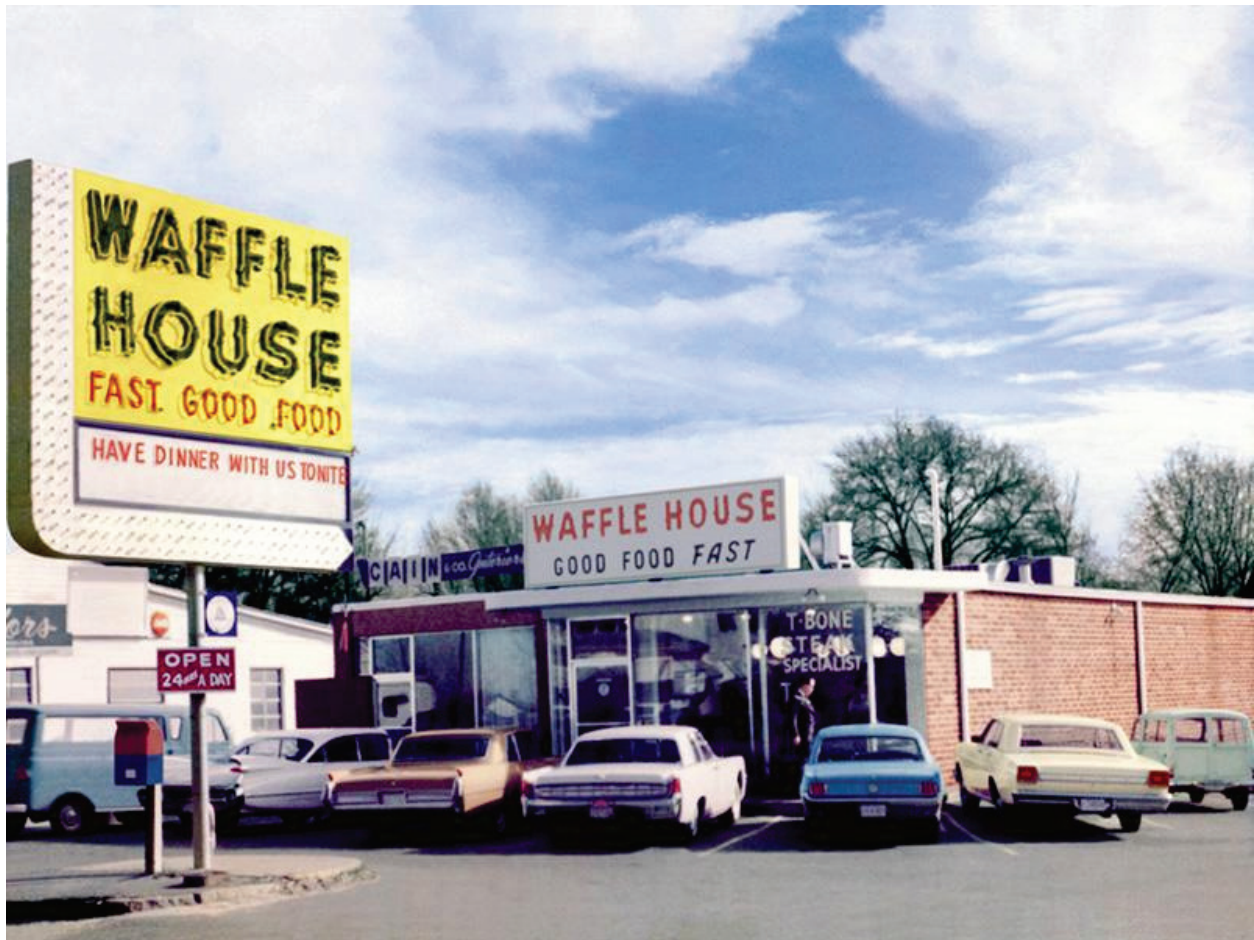
Estates to celebrate the origins of the iconic business and its importance to Avondale Estates as a whole.

The marker does denote the role that Waffle House played in the shift towards an American automobile culture and refers to it as an American cultural icon. Waffle House, however, has deeply embedded itself into the fabric of the South and America in general. Beyond the recording of their own songs for the jukebox – which were songs recorded by Mary Rogers, wife of founder Joe Rogers – Waffle House has found its way into popular music through mentions in songs like Jermaine Dupri's famed Atlanta anthem "Welcome to Atlanta" and the title of a Hootie and the Blowfish album, *Scattered, Smothered, and Covered*.^{vi} Waffle House has also found itself portrayed in Hollywood films, making appearances in movies such as *Blue Collar Comedy Tour- The Movie*, *Crossroads*, and even a major scene in the Kevin Costner film *Tin Cup*.^{vii}

Perhaps the most interesting way that Waffle House has pervaded the traditional role of a restaurant is the use of Waffle House as a guideline for a national government organization. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has created a system known as the "Waffle House Index" to classify natural disasters. According to the index, green means that Waffle Houses in the affected area are running normally, while yellow means that they are serving a limited menu and using a generator for power, with red being reserved for a complete Waffle House shut down. Given the restaurant's perpetual hours of operation, the agency using the effects of a storm on their operations as a gauge for which areas were hit the hardest and needed help first.^{viii}

Waffle House's mission statement states that they aim "to deliver a unique experience to our customers through delivering great food, friendly, attentive service, excellent price and a welcoming presence".^{ix} Through over 60 years of business, the company has proven that this

attention to service is the key to success, as Waffle House has used that guiding principle to transcend its existence as a restaurant to become a part of the American cultural fabric. With its place in the hearts of Georgians, it is only appropriate that it is commemorated in the state at the location where it all began.



Original Waffle House ca. 1956



Historical Marker at the original Waffle House

ⁱ Jim Auchmutey, "Recipe for Southern Success is History," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 02, 2008, B1.-

ⁱⁱ Whitney Filloon, "Everything You Need to Know About Waffle House," *Eater*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.eater.com/2017/5/2/15471798/waffle-house-history-menu>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Auchmutey, "Recipe for Southern Success is History."

^{iv} "Our History," Waffle House, <https://www.wafflehouse.com/history/>.

^v Auchmutey, "Recipe for Southern Success is History."

^{vi} Filloon, "Everything You Need to Know About Waffle House."

^{vii} "Waffle House," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, last edited September 17, 2013, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/business-economy/waffle-house>.

^{viii} Valerie Bauerlein, "How to Measure a Storm's Fury One Breakfast at a Time," *Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111904716604576542460736605364>.

^{ix} Waffle House, "Our History."

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