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David Lawrence of Columbia Records, Nate Quick of WPEG and recording artists Kay-Cee Grogan and Kino Watson celebrate another successful Lou Rawls Parade of Stars viewing party at Renaissance Place in Charlotte.

Klan birthplace not for sale

Building a tourist attraction

By Martha Waldrich
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PULASKI, Tenn. — The tidy brick building stands as a reluctant tourist attraction in a town that's done its best to rid the Ku Klux Klan from its landscape.

But history records the edifice just off the town square as the place where a group of Confederate Army veterans first formed the secret social club that came to be known more for its hooded masks, burning crosses and manifestos of hate.

A law office in its early days, the building also served as a barbershop and a public defenders' office. Today, two attorneys run their private practices from the Madison Street building, freshly painted in a cheerful cream with black shutters and burnt red trim.

In the 1920s, the Daughters of the Confederacy raised money to purchase a bronze plaque identifying the building as the birthplace of the KKK. The group reportedly was indignant that the town of Pulaski was left out of the classic silent film "The Birth of a Nation," which portrayed the KKK positively.

The building became the site of several Klan rallies in the late 1980s when marchers paid homage to the plaque with shouts of "Heil!"

But around 1990, local businessman Don Massey bought the structure and decided it was time for Pulaski to officially turn its back on the KKK. So, he literally turned the sign around and bolted it into the bricks, hiding the words from passersby.

"That sign had hung there for years and years, but it just never set well with me. I didn't think it was anything necessarily to be proud of," said Massey, who is white.

"It would have been easier to just take it down, but that wouldn't have said anything. So we thought we'd just make a statement about the indignant and repulsive feelings we had over the hate mongers and their spewing from the steps of Pulaski's courthouse."

After turning the sign around, Massey received many grateful comments, but also some threats from anonymous callers. He lost some business, too. "But it was nothing we couldn't handle,"

he said.

Today, Massey gets occasional offers to buy the building from out-of-state investors. They don't identify themselves as part of the Klan, but he has suspicions.

Massey has no plans to sell. "I didn't really buy the building to make a statement about racism. It was strictly a business decision," he said.

But for Pulaski Mayor Dan Speer, Massey's actions couldn't provide a more appropriate reflection of the town's perspective.

"We're not ignoring our heritage as the birthplace of the Klan; we're just ignoring the Klan's message," Speer said. "It's an historic fact. We have to deal with it.... But we're turning our back on the Klan and its message, without turning our back on our heritage."

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