



• *Architect*

## *Leila Ross Wilburn*

1885–1967

### ***Inducted 2003***

Leila Ross Wilburn was one of the pioneering women architects in the United States. She insisted that the design and construction of the American home should not be reserved only for those who could afford an architect. In a half-century of work, she left a legacy of homes, apartments and commercial buildings in the southeast.

Born in Macon, GA, the first of five children, her family moved to Decatur in the midst of the economic depression of 1895, when Leila was ten years old. Her family strongly believed in the force of education for their daughters — thus Leila attended Agnes Scott College in Decatur. While there, she took private lessons in architectural drafting.

At age 21, college degree in hand, Leila set off to tour the country with a notebook and Kodak camera to document her taste in the architectural styles of family homes and the emerging Arts and Crafts movement. She eventually amassed a collection of 5,000 photographs of homes with design elements that interested her as an architect.

Returning home, Leila joined the Atlanta firm of Benjamin R. Padgett and Son as a trainee. With this move, she joined the only other Georgia woman, Henrietta C. Dozier, in a field previously dominated by men. An apt student with great imagination and skill, at age 22 Leila was granted her first commission, a three-story building that became a YMCA gym at Georgia Military Academy (now Woodward Academy).

With an entrepreneurial spirit not common in young women of her era, Leila's career flourished. Her earliest works were single-family homes and apartment buildings, mainly in Midtown Atlanta. These buildings, many of which were in the Craftsman style that is still popular today, projected her vision of family values, hearth and home.

***“There is nothing I like better and I don't believe I'd be satisfied with any other job in the world.”***

– Leila Ross Wilburn quoted in an article by Frank Daniel, “Atlanta Women Have Man-Size Job,” *The Atlanta*

They are still prized by their owners and praised by architects and scholars today. She later moved into designing commercial buildings and a church (Gordon Street Baptist).

To reach a wider audience, the innovative young architect produced a series of "Pattern Books," from which people could choose a design and purchase construction plans. Today, her homes may be seen in Decatur, Ansley Park, Druid Hills and Candler Park in Atlanta. Some of her buildings are listed among the finest examples of 20th Century architecture. Each year in Decatur, her former home, administers the Leila Ross Wilburn award to those who excel in historic preservation.

In 1961, Leila was welcomed into the Society of American Registered Architects, an honor which is reflected in the fact that the membership certificate at the time still read, "Having given evidence of his qualifications...."

Never married, Leila was deeply involved with her friends and her family. She incorporated the best she had learned and envisioned into attractive, solidly constructed homes that were affordable across a range of family incomes. In that sense, she was far ahead of her time. She is truly a Georgia Woman of Achievement.

### **Additional Resources**

**Midtown Development Tour**

**Candler Park Homes**

**Decatur Homes**

**National Register of Historic Places: Coweta County, Georgia**

**National Register of Historic Places: Lavonia, Georgia (two houses)**

**Jan Jennings, "Leila Ross Wilburn, Plan-Book Architect," *Woman's Art Journal: Spring-Summer 1989*, 15**