Changing Settlement Patterns in an Atlanta Neighborhood:
The Reynoldstown Historic District

Reynoldstown is an Atlanta neighborhood that is nestled between the Cabbagetown and Edgewood communities. Downtown Atlanta is in close proximity to the Reynoldstown Historic District, as it is just two miles west of the district. The district was a strategic position during the Battle of Atlanta in 1864, as its rolling hills and elevation made it one of the highest points in the city. Today, many streets in Reynoldstown bear the names of military leaders who fought in the battle, like Manigault and Wylie.

The district’s northern and southern boundaries followed the old Atlanta and West Point Railroad and joined the Central of Georgia (now the CSX) that ran east to west between downtown Atlanta and Decatur. The oldest section of the district is located where these railroad corridors intersected. It is this section of the district that was settled by African Americans who became laborers for the railroads shortly after the Civil War ended. They settled primarily on Chester Avenue and Selman Street.

Arthur Douglas Bailey was one of the African Americans who worked for the Atlanta and West Point Railroad who lived in Reynoldstown. “He was my grandmother’s second husband, and we lived on Chester Avenue,” said Davidayon Mayers-Kelley. Her grandmother, Lula Mae Bailey, taught music and piano to neighborhood youth, and “Pa” Bailey worked in the rail roundhouse nearby, as well as the depot in downtown Atlanta. He lost his leg in a railroad accident.

Davidayon Mayers-Kelley fondly remembers the corner stores that were once abundant in Reynoldstown. “Most people did not have cars then, so we would purchase everything we needed at neighborhood stores.” “Pa” Bailey’s house served a dual purpose, as she remembers it as both a family residence and the site of Arstel’s Confectionary. After her grandmother died in 1994, Davidayon Mayers-Kelley eventually returned to the Reynoldstown family residence that she grew up in and converted the house to a duplex, adapting the side of the house that was the confectionary store.

Isaiah P. Reynolds operated a business in this commercial building at the intersection of Wylie and Kenyon Streets.
Photo by Jeanne Cyragne

One of the early freedmen who came to Reynoldstown was Madison Reynolds. Herman “Skip” Mason Jr. discussed the Reynolds family in Going Against the Wind: A Pictorial History of African Americans in Atlanta. In 1866, “Madison Reynolds, his wife and their seven children moved from Covington, Georgia to a small settlement between Atlanta and Decatur. Their son, Isaiah P. Reynolds Sr., built a two-story brick store on the corner of Wylie and Kenyon streets in southeast Atlanta.” Another brick store

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where Reynolds once operated a business is still standing on the corner of Wylie and Flat Shoals. This two-story building is now home to the Reynoldstown Baptist Church. The community that is now known as Reynoldstown was named in honor of this family.

Most of the historic houses in the Reynoldstown Historic District were built starting in the 1880s. Some of the popular types are gabled-ell, saddlebag and shotgun houses. Chester Avenue has a series of double shotgun houses on one side of the street, and there is an additional row set back-to-back in an alley between them. The houses on Chester Avenue are grouped on small lots and are very close together.

By the close of the 19th century, Reynoldstown began to expand, and developers built seven small subdivisions between 1905 and 1930. These subdivisions were built for whites only. The City of Atlanta annexed Reynoldstown in 1909, and it became one of Atlanta’s earliest segregated neighborhoods during the first decades of the 20th century, as whites settled in these new subdivisions that included Tudor Revival houses, pyramidal cottages and Craftsman-style bungalows. Bungalows are the most common house type in Reynoldstown, and represent over 36% of the housing stock in the historic district. African Americans were confined to the northwest corner of the neighborhood after the Atlanta race riot in 1906.

This racial separation increased after World War II, when returning white veterans qualified for federally-backed mortgages. At that time, Reynoldstown became one of Atlanta’s first neighborhoods affected by the phenomenon known as “white flight.” Veterans qualifying for new houses built with FHA and VA mortgages left urban areas because 40 – 50% of new construction was in all-white suburbs. During the next 15 years, Reynoldstown
went from an integrated neighborhood to an African American community by 1960.

Two historic schools were built in the Reynoldstown Historic District. In 1922, William J.J. Chase designed the Romanesque Revival-style John F. Faith Grammar School. This was a public school that was built for white children. A community school for African Americans was not constructed until 1960.

The John F. Faith Grammar School was built during segregation. This two-story school building features arched entrances. A new sign is currently posted in front of the school that indicates it will soon be the home of Tech High School.

The Isaiah P. Reynolds Elementary School was designed in the International Style. This style lacks ornamentation and features a flat roof and large expanses of glass for classroom lighting. Davidyon Mayers-Kelley attended this school until 1962, and remembers how “Pa” Bailey and other community residents wanted a school built for African American students who lived in Reynoldstown. Today, the building is known as the Lang-Carson Recreation and Community Center and provides offices for the Reynoldstown Civic Improvement League and the Reynoldstown Revitalization Corporation.

Two historic churches associated with African American denominations are examples of community landmark buildings in the historic district. Both churches are made of granite that was quarried in Stone Mountain.

The Bearden Temple A.M.E. Church is located at the intersection of Wylie and Selman streets. The church features twin towers and arched windows above the entrance. The Second Mt. Vernon Baptist Church is located on Stovall Street.

When the Reynoldstown Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on April 3, 2003 there were 544 buildings that were “contributing resources” because they retained a high level of integrity. While listing the district in the National Register of Historic Places recognizes the historic areas of significance of this Atlanta neighborhood due to its ethnic heritage, social history, community planning/development and architecture, this recognition does not prohibit development. Because of its proximity to downtown Atlanta, Reynoldstown is rapidly becoming a “gentrified” neighborhood today.

Gentrification occurs in urban neighborhoods when middle and upper class residences replace lower class housing that may be perceived as deteriorated. When new infill housing replaces older housing stock, the historic character of the neighborhood is often lost. For example, many of the smaller Shotgun houses that once distinguished Selman Street and Chester Avenue as a distinct African American neighborhood now co-exist with or were demolished for new houses. These houses do not fit the scale and character of the historic houses that they replaced. As more middle and upper class residents now flock to this inner-city neighborhood, the racial composition of the community is rapidly changing. As a result, unless some balance is achieved in this small quadrant of the Reynoldstown Historic District, new residents may never know about Reynoldstown and its significant African American past.
The towns of Bostwick and Buckhead are located in Morgan County. They both contain National Register historic districts due to their significance in architecture, agriculture, community planning and development. While these two historic districts have similar developmental patterns associated with the agricultural-based economy of Morgan County, a crucial difference lies in the current states of the African American resources found in these districts.

The town of Buckhead is located in east Morgan County. In 1796, the town’s settlement evolved when residents of nearby Greene County began migrating in order to hunt and establish farms. By 1837, Buckhead grew and developed due to its location near the railroad. The production and sale of cotton soon became the central driving force of the local economy and this dependency continued throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

During this period, Buckhead became home to a small African American population who worked on the farms of Morgan County. Placed adjacent to the town center, the African American community contained houses, a Masonic Lodge, and eventually a one-story school building. These structures are still extant and illustrate the developmental layout of the African American community in contrast to the white community. While some of the structures are not in the best condition, they are still maintained by the local community and many remain under the ownership of descendants of those who lived in the area during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

After the town’s incorporation in 1902, John Bostwick Sr., the town’s largest landowner, subsequently began subdividing land for purchase by white families in order to encourage residential development. In 1912, Bostwick subdivided land north of the town center for the establishment of a separate African American neighborhood. Resembling other African American communities in Georgia, this neighborhood contained houses and a local church. The Sweet Home Baptist Church still stands today and is the last remaining historic resource in this African American community.

Buckhead and Bostwick are very similar communities. Due to their location in Morgan County, both communities benefited from an agricultural focus and became large cotton-producing towns during the late 19th century. This reliance on cotton influenced the creation of separate African American communities in these rural towns.

The African American neighborhood in Buckhead can be found along Perryman and Saffold Roads. Its remaining structures include saddlebag, gabled ell and hall-parlor houses, a two-story Masonic Lodge and a 1950s era school building. While some of the structures are not in the best condition, they are still standing and complement the entire historic district and illustrate the developmental pattern of Buckhead.

In contrast, the Sweet Home Baptist Church is the only remaining historic structure in the African American neighborhood of Bostwick. Although a new church has been built, the old building maintains its historic integrity and sits in its original location. While African Americans still live in Bostwick, their historic resources have been replaced by new, non-contributing structures. Were it not for Sweet Home Baptist Church, any visible indicators of an African American
neighborhood would be lost. Due to its location, the pattern of
development started by Bostwick can easily be seen as well as the
intentional separation of the African American community, which
is located behind the cotton mill and away from the white community.

Bostwick and Buckhead have similar developmental
histories. The African Americans who lived in these towns
contributed to their growth and success. However, when the growth
and success of their cotton-producing economies ceased, these
African American neighborhoods declined. This decline led to the
abandonment and neglect of historic resources that aid our
understanding of the development of rural African American
neighborhoods. In Buckhead, where a fair amount of resources
remain, an effort must be made to preserve these treasures of rural
African American communities. Thus, we may prevent the decline
that is evident in Bostwick, where relatively nothing remains. As
these resources are lost, so is the history that they tell us about the
African American presence in rural Georgia.

**The Georgia Heritage Grant Program**

*Carole Moore, Grants Coordinator*

*Historic Preservation Division*

Quite often, the award of funds through grant programs makes
a critical difference in a historic and significant property being
preserved or not. One such grant source is the Georgia Heritage
Grant Program. It is appropriated annually to the Historic
Preservation Division through the Georgia legislature. Since its
inception in 1994, the Georgia Heritage Grant Program has provided
seed-money to make hundreds of statewide historic preservation
projects a reality, including many African American properties.

The selection of award recipients, which can vary from
seven to 15, depending on the amount of funds available, is based
on various criteria, including need, degree of threat to the resource,
project planning, and community benefit. Geographical and
demographical distribution and variety of resource types and uses
are also considered in award decisions. Grants are available for
development and predevelopment projects. Development projects
include stabilization, preservation, rehabilitation and restoration
activities. Predevelopment projects include plans and specifications,
feasibility studies, historic structure reports, or other building-
specific or site-specific preservation plans. The maximum grant
amount that can be requested is $40,000 for development projects,
and $20,000 for predevelopment projects.

To be eligible for funding, applicants must be a local
government or private, secular nonprofit organization. The
applicant must provide matching funds equal to at least 40% of the
project cost. The property must be listed, or eligible for listing in,
the Georgia Register of Historic Places, and be listed prior to
reimbursement of funds. All grant assisted work must meets the
applicable Secretary of the Interior’s “Standards for Archaeology
and Historic Preservation.”

Last fall, seven projects were awarded Georgia Heritage
grants for preservation projects, including an African American
historic property. The badly deteriorated Chickamauga Lodge #221
received a $2,100 predevelopment grant for a preservation plan for
the property, which is just the first step in its long-term rehabilitation
goal. The lodge wants to continue to use the second floor as its
meeting hall and use the first floor as a community center and museum
for the county’s African American history. It is the first African
American building in Walker County to receive preservation funding.

According to the grant application, the project “will be
the first tangible project to energize the African American
community to search out their history and preserve their heritage.”
Built in 1924, the Chickamauga Masonic Lodge is located just three
miles from Chickamauga in Walker County. The building has
continued to be used as a Masonic lodge to the present day.
Throughout its long history members of the lodge played an active
role in African American community affairs, including helping needy
children and widows and providing manual labor for local
construction projects during the segregation era. The lodge was
also the location for the chartering and meeting of the Walker County
African-American VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) chapter during
the 1940s. A chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star, chartered in
1944, also met there.

This year’s grant applications are currently available on
the Historic Preservation Division website at [www.gashpo.org](http://www.gashpo.org) in
the Financial & Technical Assistance section. Applications must
be postmarked by July 30th. For further information about the grant
program, please contact: Carole Moore, Grants Coordinator, Historic
Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources,
at 404/463-8434 or email her at carole_moore@dnr.state.ga.us.
In 1931, Lorenzo Dow Turner, an African American linguist, was documenting African-influenced culture among the Gullah/Geechee people who lived in South Carolina and Georgia. He traveled to a remote fishing village known as Harris Neck in McIntosh County and met Amelia Dawley, who shared a remarkable song that she learned from her ancestors. Turner recorded her song, and played it for the next ten years for African students he met to attempt to identify the language and possible country of origin. Finally, a student named Solomon Caultker, who was from Sierra Leone in West Africa, recognized the words of the song as Mende. Caultker identified the meaning of the words to the song, and informed Turner that Amelia’s song was a funeral hymn. Turner’s groundbreaking research in linguistics resulted in the 1949 publication of Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect.

About the time of Turner’s initial visit to Harris Neck, Amelia Dawley’s daughter, Mary Dawley Moran, had already learned the song from her mother. Growing up in Harris Neck, Mary Dawley Moran was an only child. At the time, she thought it was just a play song, unaware of its African origin.

In the 1980s, Joseph Opala, an American anthropologist, was studying the origins of the slave trade in Sierra Leone, and became interested in Turner’s research because nearly 61% of all Africans who survived the Middle Passage and were enslaved in South Carolina and Georgia were from countries like Sierra Leone in the rice-growing region of West Africa. While assisting the Sierra Leone government in planning for a “homecoming” of Gullah/Geechee people, Opala acquired copies of the tapes of music that Turner recorded, and enlisted the aid of Cynthia Schmidt, who was an ethnomusicologist, to see if the music that accompanied Amelia’s song could be found. Schmidt located the music to correspond with the words to Amelia’s song. When the song was performed during the homecoming, a number of Mende cabinet members were astounded to hear a song in their own language that connected them to a Gullah/Geechee fishing village in Georgia.

After the homecoming, Opala and Schmidt traveled throughout Sierra Leone villages in search of anyone who could recognize the music and words to Amelia’s song. Disappointed, they almost abandoned the search when Schmidt decided to take the song to Senenhun Ngola, a remote village. There, Schmidt met Baindu Jabali, who remembered the exact words with a similar melody in her community. Jabali explained that she had learned the funeral song from her grandmother, and was told that she must pass the song to other women so that they could remember lost ancestors. She explained that her grandmother insisted that she knew not only the song but also a ritual that accompanied it.

With the African link to the song established, the researchers next turned to America. Was it possible that Amelia still had relatives in Harris Neck that might know the words to her song? One of the people who attended the “homecoming” in Sierra Leone was Lauretta Sims, and she located Amelia’s daughter, Mary Dawley Moran, in coastal Georgia. The fishing village formerly known as Harris Neck was now a wildlife refuge, but Mary Dawley Moran still lived nearby. Opala and Schmidt were astonished to hear Moran sing the song, and when she learned of its African origins, another homecoming was planned for the Moran family, who could now trace this ancestral Mende song to Senenhun Ngola in Sierra Leone.

Eventually, the Moran family traveled to Senenhun Ngola and Mary Dawley Moran and Baindu Jabali met for the first time. At the “homecoming” both women wept as they sang Amelia’s song. The incredible journey of this family is preserved in the documentary: The Language You Cry In. McIntosh SEED (Sustainable Environment and Economic Development) offers a tour of Harris Neck. The tour guide is Wilson Moran, Mary Dawley Moran’s son. To learn more about the Mende song and the Gullah/Geechee history of Harris Neck, contact McIntosh SEED at 912/437-7821 or visit their website at www.mcintoshseed.org.
The Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN) hosted the opening reception at the state preservation conference and annual meeting of The Georgia Trust in Thomasville. Early registrants attended Thomasville Conversations at the Magnolia Leaf, a 1908 Neoclassical residence. Today, this contributing resource in the Dawson Street Historic District is adaptively reused as a retreat for business travelers and special events.

The Magnolia Leaf Bed & Business Retreat is a contributing resource in the Dawson Street Historic District, and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on September 7, 1984. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Doby Flowers, a native of Tallahassee, is the owner of Magnolia Leaf. She envisioned a special place that would provide the perfect atmosphere: private suites for business travelers, conference facilities, and support systems like catered meals to pamper her guests. Magnolia Leaf has an adjoining landscaped garden that can accommodate outdoor receptions. Flowers donated the use of the house to the Junior League as a “showcase home.” Artists assisted the renovations of each room to accent Ms. Flowers’ collection of rare antiques.

Ms. Julie Anderson operates the Mitchell-Young-Anderson House, a bed and breakfast inn located in the Stevens Street Historic District. Anderson’s ancestors purchased this 19th century home and converted it to the Rosebush Tourist Home in the 1940s to provide lodging for African American travelers during segregation. GAAHPN Steering Committee members stayed at the inn during the conference.

Jack Hadley discussed his Black Heritage Trail Tour and several conference participants accompanied Hadley on the tour as a field session during the conference. Jack Hadley Black History Memorabilia Inc. is a collection of thousands of photos and artifacts about African Americans in Thomasville. The collection is located in the Douglass High School complex, and the buildings are presently the home for community programs sponsored by the Douglass Alumni Association.

Juanita Jackson, a member of Bethany United Church of Christ, provided information about the historic Allen Normal and Industrial School. Today, Bethany Congregational Church and a former faculty residence are the only buildings remaining from this historic school that was established by the American Missionary Association in 1886.

Dr. Isaac Mullins and Mrs. Josephine Mullins shared the legacy of First Missionary Baptist Church, the oldest African American Baptist church in Thomasville. The church and parsonage are contributing resources in the Dawson Street Historic District.

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Reflections
About GAAHPN

The Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN) was established in January 1989. It is composed of representatives from neighborhood organizations and preservation groups. GAAHPN was formed in response to a growing interest in preserving the cultural and ethnic diversity of Georgia's African American heritage. This interest has translated into a number of efforts which emphasize greater recognition of African American culture and contributions to Georgia's history. The GAAHPN Steering Committee meets regularly to plan and implement ways to develop programs that will foster heritage education, neighborhood revitalization, and support community and economic development.

The Network is an informal group of over 2,050 people who have an interest in preservation. Members are briefed on the status of current and planned projects and are encouraged to offer ideas, comments and suggestions. The meetings provide an opportunity to share and learn from the preservation experience of others and to receive technical information through workshops. Members receive a newsletter, Reflections, produced by the Network. Visit the Historic Preservation Division website at www.gashpo.org. Preservation information and previous issues of Reflections are available online. Membership in the Network is free and open to all.

Reflections

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