

Reflections



Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network



A Program of the Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources

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FINDING NEW USES FOR THE OLD SCHOOLHOUSE

*Jeanne Cyriaque, African American Programs Coordinator
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One of the leading questions that local school districts ponder in rehabilitating an old school building is to find an adaptive use for the building that is more financially feasible than building a new structure. In Floyd County, the Rome City Schools found that a historic African American school was structurally sound, had intact architectural features such as an abundance of large windows and decorative woodwork, but needed major renovations and a community purpose to preserve it. By cultivating partnerships with the alumni, nonprofit organizations and the City of Rome, they found a new use for this old schoolhouse.

The former Main High School in Rome is a one-story brick Colonial Revival-style building. When the Rome City Schools were first established in 1883, there were no provisions for African American schools. Rented office space was the educational setting for African American students until the Board of Trustees constructed the Main Colored School in 1894. Grades one through eight were taught at the Main Colored School until 1925 and by 1930, the curriculum expanded to grade eleven. Though the 12th grade was not added until the early 1950s, the school had become known as Main High School.

By 1934, Main High School was overcrowded and the Board of Education applied unsuccessfully for federal funds to build a new school. Later that year, the City Council finally approved \$300 for land acquisition and \$11,000 to construct the new

building known today as Main High School. The new building consisted of four classrooms on either side of a double-loaded corridor.

In spite of the addition of the new building, overcrowding continued to be a problem at Main High School. So, by 1938 Atlanta architect Odis Clay Poundstone was selected to design additions to the existing building. Contractor J. P. Roberts completed the additions in



Entrances to Main High School have transoms above other windows and doors. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



The west elevation of Main High School faced the other buildings on the campus. Main High School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on October 24, 2002. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

1939. Reflecting segregation policies, the new classrooms were furnished with used desks from the city's white high school, and Main High School did not receive electric lighting until 1940, three years after it was installed in the city's white high school.

Since it was the only public school for African Americans, Main High School's enrollment soared to over 1,200 students by the end of World War II, and students attended school from both Rome and surrounding Floyd County. The city purchased

continued on page 2

FINDING NEW USES FOR THE OLD SCHOOLHOUSE

Jeanne Cyriaque, continued from page 1

land and built a new high school while Floyd County began paying teachers' salaries shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. This strategy resulted in the construction of six buildings on the Main campus between 1955-1963 that



Classrooms and the auditorium were added to the north end of the building to relieve overcrowding. Photo by James R. Lockhart

provided elementary and high school education, along with a gymnasium. After the new high school building was completed in 1958, the old Main High School became a junior high school and the auditorium was sub-divided into three classrooms to accommodate the increasing enrollment.

As in many other Southern cities, massive resistance to school integration in Rome continued into the 1960s until the implementation of *Freedom of Choice* plans for integration of public schools. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 authorized the U.S. Office of Education to guide school districts in desegregation plans. It also empowered the U.S. Attorney General to halt federal education funds in districts that were found to be discriminatory.

Consequently, in 1966 Rome's city schools began desegregation with the transfer of 200 Main High School students to the previously all-white county high school. During the 1967-1968 academic year, all Main High School students were allowed to choose their school under Rome's *Freedom of Choice Desegregation Plan*. Thus, in the 1968-1969 academic year, the students in the ninth and tenth grades transferred to the East and

West Rome High Schools, and the other grades transferred the following year.

Main High School eventually closed in 1969. While the other buildings on the campus continued educational functions, the old high school became a storage facility for the school system and the meeting place for the Starlight Masonic Lodge #433. In 1995, the African-American Historical Society of Rome began a dialogue with the City Manager to preserve the Main High School building, thus saving it from the wrecking ball. The City Commission installed a new roof to prevent further damage to this historic building.



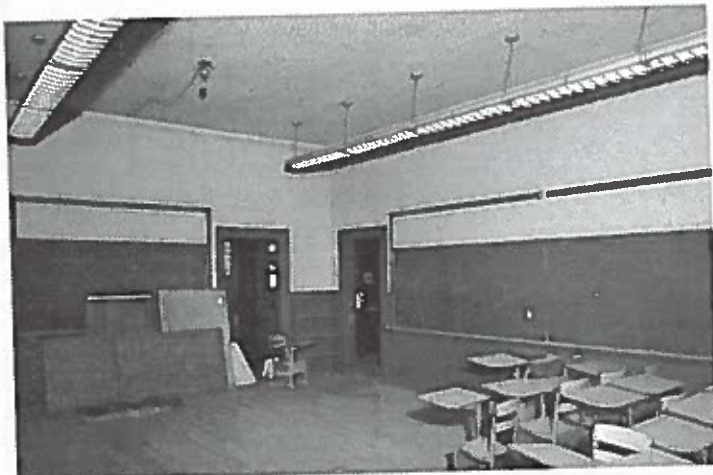
The classrooms with wood doors and transoms were saved in the preservation of the Main High School building. Photo by James R. Lockhart



Signs above the classrooms delineate the fraternal and service organizations' meeting spaces.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The African-American Historical Society began to seek preservation assistance with the Rome Historic Preservation Review Board to list the building in the National Register of Historic Places. The partners sponsored a nomination to the Historic Preservation Division and the Main High School building along with six other historic



Prior to the renovation, this classroom had original blackboards and beaded wainscoting that were intact.

Photo by James R. Lockhart



After the renovation, this classroom is used for a technology center equipped with modern computers.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

buildings on the campus were listed in the National Register of Historic Places on October 24, 2002.

Rome Colored/Main High School alumni hold biennial reunions to foster additional community support for the preservation project. Alumni that still live in Rome and Floyd County and were active members of nonprofit organizations provided community services and mentoring programs to students, although they had no dedicated meeting place. These organizations stimulated a new use for the old building.



The Rome Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. are one of the community center's new tenants.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

In 2004-2005, the City of Rome obtained a \$820,000 Community Development Block Grant for the rehabilitation of the building. This grant provided the necessary funds to upgrade the building to present standards while maintaining its historic integrity. Although the city still owns the building and pays the utilities, it needed additional partners to return the old building to a new community use.

Today, the new use for the old Main High School includes the Starlight Masonic Lodge #433, which continues to meet in the new community center. Six additional community-based, nonprofit organizations agreed to locate in the building and provide education and mentoring services to youth. They were: 100 Black Men of Rome, the African-American Historical Society of Rome, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission of Rome and Floyd County, the NAACP, the Rome Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the Rome Colored/Main High School Reunion Committee. Each organization occupies the former classrooms of Main High School. Three common areas, including a portion of the former auditorium, provide ample space for larger community functions and mentoring programs.



Visitors to the NAACP classroom. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Due to the center's proximity to existing educational facilities on the campus, students can now attend enrichment programs on the "hill" where the former Rome Colored/Main High School once stood. The Kelsey-Aycock-Burrell Center was dedicated on May 8, 2007. The City of Rome and the Kelsey-Aycock-Burrell Center Board of Directors hosted the ribbon cutting ceremony and unveiled a plaque inside the center that lists the many partners who were involved in the preservation of the former historic school. As the Rome Colored/Main High School Reunion booklet pointed out, "Main High School has played a vital role in the educational welfare of a great number of people. This was true despite many deprivations related to the era in which it functioned." The alumni and present partners can now continue the legacy of this historic school by providing new generations with a community center that links it to its historic past. ■

COMING FULL CIRCLE: FROM MAIN COLORED SCHOOL TO THE KELSEY-AYCOCK-BURRELL CENTER

*Hermina Glass-Avery, African American Programs Assistant
Historic Preservation Division*

The building located at 41 Washington Drive in Rome, Georgia evolved from a religious-supported school begun in 1883 to a racially segregated Rome City school in 1934 to a proud symbol of community progress known today as the Kelsey-Aycock-Burrell Center, named for three former principals of the school.



Samuel Burrell, who was the last principal of Main High School, receives a commemorative painting from Curtis Adams, chairman of the Kelsey-Aycock-Burrell Board of Directors during the dedication of the center.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Main Colored High School was immersed in de jure racial segregation stemming from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which legitimated "separate but equal." Although that landmark case applied to public transportation, it was the basis for de facto segregation in public schools throughout the South. Main Colored High School in Rome did not escape the impact of this policy.

The school was originally organized in 1883 under the auspice of the North Georgia General Missionary (Negro) Baptist Association as Rome High and Industrial School until it was absorbed into the city school system in 1894. The Board of Trustees of Rome City Schools agreed to donate land and to build a "main"



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This Rome Colored/Main High School class photo was included in the 2001 reunion booklet. Photo courtesy of the Rome Colored/Main High School Reunion

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COMING FULL CIRCLE: FROM MAIN COLORED SCHOOL TO THE KELSEY-AYCOCK-BURRELL CENTER

Hermina Glass-Avery, continued from page 3



**Georgia African American
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Photograph Not Available

Students attended the weekly assembly in the Main High School auditorium. This addition to the school was constructed in 1938.

Photo courtesy of the Rome Colored/Main High School Reunion



The east wing of the auditorium still provides a large space and a kitchen for community programs today.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

school for Blacks, hence the name “Main Colored School.” The school was built on the north bank of the Etowah River due east of downtown Rome. Other “colored” schools in Rome that were organized between 1908 and 1929 were held in lodges and only taught classes through the sixth grade.

One of many buildings contained on the campus, the historic 1934 Colonial Revival inspired building was built for the purpose of providing new classrooms for the Main Colored School’s high school department, which was accredited by the Georgia Accreditation Commission and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in 1932. An auditorium and two more classrooms were added to the building in 1938 to alleviate overcrowding. By this time, it would become the only high school with grades seven through eleven for blacks in the Rome area until desegregation of the Rome City Schools in 1965. Eventually, the school would close its doors in 1969 due to low student enrollment.

The hallowed halls of Main Colored High School once echoed the footsteps and voices of hundreds of students who received a stellar education despite the double standards practiced in the Jim Crow South. Principals and teachers alike committed themselves to providing a standard academic curriculum that included English, Math, Science, and History. Some vocational studies were encouraged as supplements to the traditional curriculum.

Historic Main High School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2002 because of its significance in Black ethnic heritage, education, and architecture. The recent rehabilitation of the 73 year-old building that stood in need of repair for many years has sparked incredible pride for the surrounding community and all of Rome. Commenting on the current rehabilitation of the building, former student Rufus Turner, class of ’59 exclaims: “It’s unexplainable. It means that a part of our history, our heritage, has been preserved and used in the community today providing services for today’s youth. It’s a symbol of pride for the race considering when I attended the school. It was not a school



Rufus Turner is a Main alumnus who spearheaded the effort to convert the school to a community center. One of the classrooms is named in his honor.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

School (1966-1969), reiterates Turner’ sentiments: “A piece of African American history is being preserved for the ages. My heart was thrilled when the city obtained a few grants and was able to restore this place of history. I am most appreciative because now it is a place where the community as a whole can begin to work on the problems in the African American community. Mr. Kelsey (1922-1940) and Mr. Aycock (1940-1966) provided excellent leadership on their tours of duty. If Mr. Kelsey and Mr. Aycock were alive today, I am quite sure that they would be tremendously thrilled beyond words to see this day come.” ■

that had all of the amenities of white schools, but the teachers were creative. Preserving this building is helping us to continue the legacy of African American education in Rome. But also, it is an asset to Rome and the county. Not only to African Americans, but also to other races – African Americans, Caucasians, and Hispanics. It is one of the ways that the various communities can bridge the gaps that have existed for a very long time.”

Samuel Burrell, the last principal of Main High



Former principal Samuel Burrell gives remarks at the dedication ceremony. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

REMEMBERING DR. SUSIE WHEELER

Thomas A. Scott, Professor of History
Kennesaw State University

Dr. Susie Weems Wheeler, a great friend of Georgia educators and historic preservationists, passed away on July 22, 2007. A native of Bartow County, Dr. Wheeler was born on February 24, 1917. She began her formal education six years later at Noble Hill, a brand new Rosenwald School in rural Cassville. After graduating from high school, she began her teaching career at Adairsville Elementary. During the summers she took college courses, completing a bachelor's degree in elementary education at Fort Valley State in 1945. Shortly afterward she became the Jeanes Supervisor for rural black schools in Bartow County, a position she held for two decades.



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Historic Preservation Network

Photograph Not Available

Governor Sonny Perdue recognized the remarkable career of Dr. Susie Wheeler when she received a Governor's Award in the Humanities at the May 2007 annual luncheon.

Photo courtesy of the Georgia Humanities Council

When the Bartow School District adopted a *Freedom of Choice* plan in 1965-66, she became the curriculum director for the integrated system and played a central role in facilitating a smooth transition to full integration. She held that position until her retirement in 1979. A lifelong learner, she worked during these years on a doctorate in education from Atlanta University, completing her dissertation in 1977 on *A Historical Study of Strategies for Change in the Bartow County School System from 1965-1975*.

Retirement provided Dr. Wheeler the opportunity to engage in the community in new ways. In the early 1980s she became interested in preserving the Rosenwald School that she had attended as a child. In 1982 she invited Carole Merritt of the Georgia Historic Preservation Division (HPD) for a site visit. With the support of HPD, future Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert Benham, and others, Dr. Wheeler organized a community effort to save the school. At the time it had been abandoned for over a quarter century and was in serious decay. Dr. Wheeler's sister-in-law, Bertha W. Wheeler, owned the structure, and by 1984 agreed to donate the building in memory of her father-in-law and late husband. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on July 2, 1987. By late 1989 the structure had been renovated and was opened to the public.



Tom Scott and Alice Rosenwald visited the Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center heritage museum following the *Jewish Life in the South* Symposium that was hosted by Kennesaw State University. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Since then Noble Hill Rosenwald School has served as museum documenting what rural African American education was like in the age of segregation. Over the years I have taken numerous classes to Noble Hill. Until her health failed Dr. Wheeler would always meet us, moving the students with her story and her wonderful, caring attitude. In 2005 Dr. Wheeler spoke at Kennesaw State University during a symposium that highlighted the history of Rosenwald Schools. She shared the stage with Jeanne Cyriaque from HPD and two of Julius Rosenwald's grandchildren, Alice Rosenwald and Dr. Peter Ascoli, the latter the recent author of a book on the great philanthropist who did so much to further African American education in the South. The night was extra special because the evening was Dr. Wheeler's 88th birthday. After the symposium, several participants and the Julius Rosenwald grandchildren toured the Noble Hill School and expressed their appreciation for how lovingly it had been preserved and how well it tells the story of his great effort at bringing blacks and whites together.



Peter Ascoli, grandson of Julius Rosenwald, visits with Marian Coleman at the Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center heritage museum.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Dr. Wheeler was a lifelong, active member of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Cassville, and was involved in a host of historical and civic organizations. She has left a wonderful legacy through the Noble Hill Rosenwald School and through her lifetime of service to all people. She will certainly be missed. ■

RENDERING VISIBLE THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN WASHINGTON, GEORGIA: PRESERVING THE SCHOOL STREET CEMETERY

*Hermine Glass-Avery, African American Programs Assistant
Historic Preservation Division*

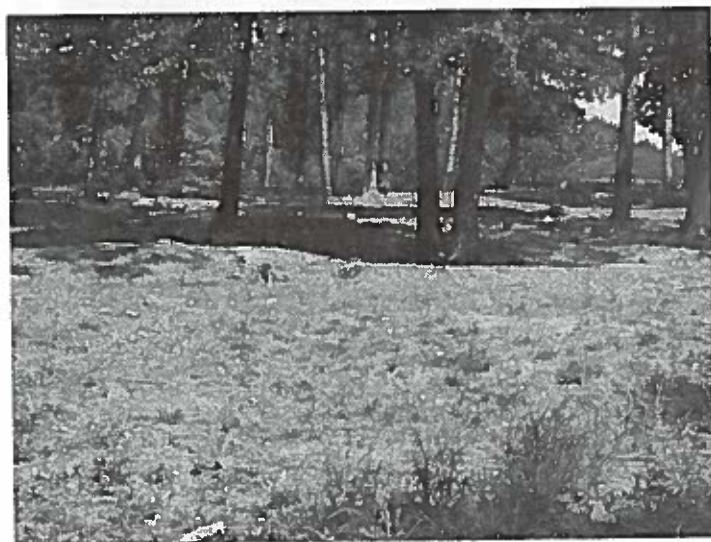
Cemeteries convey important social and cultural information about the interred and their communities by articulating a group's folkways, traditions, customs and beliefs. More than just a graveyard, they are cultural landscape museums encompassing material symbols that link the past to the present. Through landscape layout, vegetation, orientation of graves, grave offerings and plantings, marker types and inscriptions, these open spaces manifest to the living the longings, aspirations, and hopes of our ancestors.



Headstones of all varieties in School Street Cemetery celebrate the African Americans who lived and worked in Washington and Wilkes County.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Drive down School Street in Washington, Georgia and the seen and un-seen vestiges of the past, present, and future will enthrall you. This thriving working class community holds tremendous history that bears witness to change – socioeconomic, environmental, and ecological.



The School Street Cemetery landscape encompasses trees and slopes with graves interspersed throughout the terrain. Photo by New South Associates

Adjacent to the community ballpark, private residences, and public housing lies the School Street Cemetery, an African American community burial ground that most likely dates back to the plantation era. Once the backyard to the now vanished Washington Colored School, which educated hundreds of black children decades before Brown vs. Board of Education, this sacred site holds a special place in the hearts of many African American Washingtonians. Many of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who were probably only one generation removed from slavery are buried there.

Carolyn Barnes, a lifelong resident of the community, recalls her now deceased grandfather, a former gravedigger, walked her through School Street cemetery when she was growing up. "He would point out where certain family members were buried and this was his way of sharing our family history. I remembered that in our family babies were buried at the foot of trees. So the rock at the bottom of trees in our family plots are not just rocks. Somebody, a baby is buried there. I am not sure if this was practiced by everybody in the community. But we did it."

Nestled just southwest of the downtown historic district in the historically black Whitehall community, formerly "Wylieville" and later "Freedmanville", the ruggedly terraced sloping 7.7-acre cemetery contains approximately 1,700 individual burials with a substantial number of unmarked depressions and mounds.

While School Street does not possess the park-like aesthetics of European-inspired cemeteries and nor does it boast of any spectacular architectural features, what it does have is a strong sense of place; presence and power that deserves inquiry and recognition because it renders visible important aspects of the African American experience in the town and it contributes additional heritage value to the overall historic fabric.

Bound on the north, west and south by thick trees and overgrown brush and on



Some headstones are broken in the School Street Cemetery.

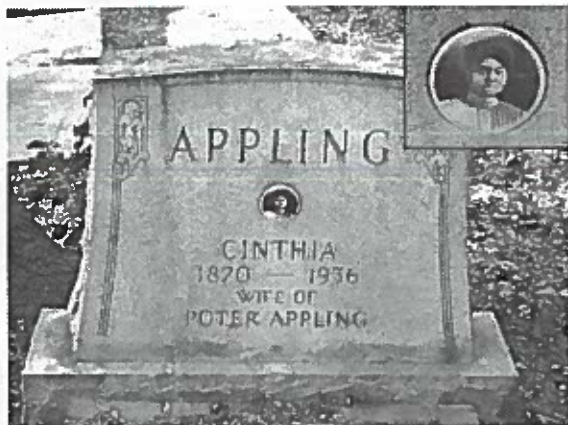
Photo by New South Associates



Sections of the School Street Cemetery contain deep depressions.

Photo by New South Associates

the east by a dirt road entrance, the landscape is covered with vine-choked oak, pine and pecan trees that cast a canopy over the barren grounds and the deep crevices created by years of erosion, decay and neglect.



Cynthia Appling's family included her photo in the headstone that adorns her grave. Photo by New South Associates

However, a stroll through School Street Cemetery reveals a variety of important artifacts that assist in understanding African and Afro-European traditions that have survived for centuries: kinship networks, death and burial practices, material and non-material culture including pottery, ceramics, crafts, superstitions and folk medicine. A few of the marked gravesites contain bits of biographical information that could prove useful for genealogical and family history purposes.



Pottery adorns this grave. Photo by New South Associates

The School Street Cemetery exhibits evidence of continuity of African and Afro-European culture over time. In attempts to create family plots, religious interpretations of east-west burial orientation, the custom of using glass to repel unwanted spirits, affiliations to fraternal organizations and burial societies— these funerary practices and symbols aid in understanding some of the cultural aspects of the African American experience in Washington.

As a recipient of a \$19,625 *Preserve America* grant in 2006, the City of Washington is currently engaged in spirited efforts to preserve and maintain the School Street Cemetery. Willie Burns, the

city's first African American mayor, is hoping to inspire all of Washington to catch the vision of interpreting and preserving the full history of this beautiful southern town. ■



David Jenkins, Hermina Glass-Avery and Mayor Willie Burns stand at the entrance to School Street Cemetery. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



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ABOUT GAAHPN



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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 2,550 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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