

**Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network**

# Reflections

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## AUGUSTA RIOT ROCKS RICHMOND COUNTY, MAGNIFIES A MOVEMENT

*John Hayes, PhD., Special Contributor  
Associate Professor of History, Augusta University*

**O**n May 11 and 12, 1970, Augusta became the scene of the largest urban rebellion in the Deep South in the Civil Rights era. African Americans protested the city's severe racism, damaging \$1 million of white-owned properties. Local and state officials mobilized massive law enforcement to violently suppress the riot. Despite this the riot galvanized renewed activism that won victories in the struggle for racial equality.

In local chapters of the NAACP, SCLC, and Black Panther Party, at Paine College and in their churches, in the watchdog group the "Committee of Ten," black Augustans were organized, mobilized, and seeking to make

equality and justice realities in their city as a new decade dawned. Whites had a stranglehold on almost every elected office and actively sought to maintain the system of white supremacy—segregated and unequal public schools, new industrial jobs for whites, entrenched residential segregation. Undergirding this was pervasive police brutality: black people would simply go missing, white officers would randomly arrest black citizens (especially teenage boys), and harassment by police was routine. 1970 Augusta was "in the throes of American apartheid," a veteran activist reflects.<sup>1</sup>



*The two-day protest was captured in the Augusta College White Columns Yearbook that year.  
Courtesy of Augusta University/Reese Library*

<sup>1</sup> Oral histories with Dr. Mallory Millender (3/19/19), Dr. Roscoe Williams (4/4/19), John Gilchrist (4/18/19), Tim Sanders (5/14/19), Clifford Graham (8/20/19), Wilbert Allen (9/17/19) conducted by the 1970 Augusta Riot Observance History Subcommittee.

## AUGUSTA RIOT ROCKS RICHMOND COUNTY, MAGNIFIES A MOVEMENT

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Matters came to a head on the evening of May 9 with news that a black teenager had been tortured and beaten to death in the county jail. In March 16-year-old Charles Oatman had been in the kitchen of his family's small house when his 5-year-old niece, visiting from Burke County, came in with his father's shotgun. Charles tried to get the gun away from her, but it was loaded, it fired, and she was mortally wounded. It was a grim accident, but white authorities charged him with murder and incarcerated him.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the next month and a half, he was beaten and tortured, ultimately dying in the cell. But when white officials brought his body to University Hospital, they said that he fell off his bunk, hit his head, and died.<sup>3</sup>

The news sent shock waves throughout the black community, and citizens quickly mobilized on May 10. Several hundred demonstrators gathered at the jail that evening, but officials only said that they were looking into it. Reconvening at Tabernacle Baptist Church with increased numbers, citizens shared vivid stories of police brutality until midnight, concluding with a plan to meet at the Municipal Building the next afternoon.<sup>4</sup> On May 11 hundreds gathered outside the building, and a small delegation was allowed inside to talk to officials. The meeting dragged on, and as the group outside grew restless, officers with shotguns were sent to surround them. Inside, officials conceded only that conditions inside the jail needed reform and the meeting ended. That afternoon Sheriff E.R. Atkins charged two of Oatman's cellmates, also black teenagers, with manslaughter; whether or not this was relayed at the meeting is not yet known. The delegation conveyed the meeting's outcome and intense indignation was palpable.

Grievances about flagrant injustice were met with stonewalling by white officials. It was time to be heard. With shotguns pointed at him, Paine College senior Oliver Pope spoke emphatically: "Tonight we're going to war!"<sup>5</sup> The group dispersed in different directions, some roughing up displays at white-owned stores on Broad Street, some

2 Southern Regional Council, *Augusta, Georgia and Jackson State University: Southern Episodes in a National Tragedy* (Atlanta, 1970), 21-22; *Augusta Chronicle* March 29, 1970 p11A; May 12, 1970 p10.

3 Grady Abrams, *I'm Still Standing Thank God* (Augusta, 2010), 164-165.

4 Abrams, *I'm Still Standing*, 165-166; John M. Smith, "The Riot of May 1970: A Humanistic Perspective," *Richmond County History* 7 (Summer 1975), 106; *Augusta Chronicle* May 11, 1970 p15; *Militant* May 26, 1970 p8; FBI, *Investigation of Deaths Occurring During Riot at Augusta, Georgia on May 11-12, 1970 Supplementary Report* Vol. 1 p9-10.

5 Southern Regional Council, *Augusta, Georgia*, 24-25; Smith, "Riot of May 1970," 107-108; *Augusta Chronicle* May 12, 1970 p1; *Militant* May 26, 1970 p8; Dr. Mallory Millender Oral History (11/5/19); FBI, *Investigation of Deaths Supplementary Report* Vol.1 p11-13



*After dispersing from the Municipal Building, demonstrators reconvened at this corner and began targeted acts of protest. Courtesy of John Hayes*

throwing objects at passing white motorists. Reassembling on Gwinnett Street in the heart of the black community, protestors ransacked white- and Chinese-owned stores known to exploit black customers. As night fell, they began targeted acts of arson. The protest spread across a hundred-block area and destroyed 67 businesses, about \$1 million of property.<sup>6</sup>

As the riot spread before sunset, police sought to block routes and contain it. But as night fell and the arsons began, Captain James Beck gave broad orders that police could "protect" themselves by any means necessary, and as Governor Lester Maddox mobilized the National Guard and state patrol, he barked, "they're going in with live ammunition—we're not going to tolerate anarchy in this state!" In the dark of night, police fired shotgun blasts at African Americans. They wounded at least 60 people and killed 6. The 6 killed were all unarmed, all shot in the back, and 3 were shot multiple times. Officers arrested over 300 African Americans, primarily for burglary. By dawn on May 12, the riot had ended.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its violent suppression, the riot brought concessions that earlier activism had not. Mayor Millard Beckum agreed to create a Human Relations Commission. Under

6 *Militant* May 26, 1970 p8; *Augusta Chronicle* May 12, 1970 p1,10; Smith, "Riot of May 1970," 108-109; Tim Sanders Oral History (5/14/19); FBI, *Investigation of Deaths Supplementary Report* Vol. 1 p65-68, 74; *Year Book of the City Council of Augusta, Georgia*, 1970 p36.

7 FBI, *Investigation of Deaths Supplementary Report* Vol. 1 p13-14; *Augusta Chronicle* May 12, 1970 p1; *Militant* May 26, 1970 p10; Southern Regional Council, *Augusta, Georgia*, 26, 29-34.

the leadership of Roscoe Williams and Charles Walker, it filed numerous anti-discrimination cases with the EEOC, winning victories and opening new doors to black employment throughout the decade. Black voters made important cracks in the white near-monopoly on political power. A 1964 lawsuit for school desegregation gained renewed momentum, and in 1972 Richmond County began system-wide desegregation under federal orders. A week after the riot, SCLC organized a hundred-mile March Against Death, paying tribute to the 6 victims, protesting the “shoot-to-kill” mindset gaining traction in the country, and culminating in a massive demonstration in Atlanta. New Left activists linked police violence in Augusta with that at Kent State (May 4) and Jackson State (May 15) and with the US invasion of Cambodia (publicly announced April 30), protesting militarism at home and abroad.



Charles Oatman' is buried in a family plot at a rural Baptist cemetery. His brutal beating death was the catalyst for the riot of May 11-12, 1970. Courtesy of John Hayes

The FBI conducted a major investigation into excessive police force. And Charles Oatman's mother Cornelia filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against Sheriff Atkins and other white officials.<sup>8</sup> However, the status quo fought these new endeavors. The Human Relations Commission's gains provoked white opposition, its powers were weakened, and ultimately it was defunded. School desegregation inspired massive white resistance and spurred white flight. Two police officers were tried in federal court on civil rights charges but were acquitted by overwhelmingly white juries. In local trials all-white juries convicted the two teenagers charged with Oatman's death, despite their impassioned not-guilty pleas and the black community's firm conviction that white jail officials were the real perpetrators. Overwhelmingly white juries indicted and

<sup>8</sup> Oral histories with Dr. Roscoe Williams (4/4/19) and Charles Walker (8/13/19); Edward Cashin, *The Story of Augusta* (Augusta, 1980), 299-301; Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, 2001), 145-147; *Augusta Chronicle* May 24, 1970 p12A; *Militant* May 26, 1970; *Acree v Drummond; Oatman v Atkins et al; FBI, Investigation of Deaths.*

convicted 95 people active in the protest, and white officials charged Oliver Pope with inciting to riot and convicted him in a 1972 trial. And based on the technicality that she was only his adopted mother but not legal guardian, Cornelia Oatman lost any claim to damages in the brutal death of her son.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of one decade and on the cusp of a new one, the May 11-12, 1970 riot broke down pillars of an older white supremacy, opening economic and political doors for African Americans, even as a resilient racism of white suburbanization and projected black criminality charted a path for the future. Since 1970, the status quo would seek to win the battle of the memory of the Augusta protest. Their documented narrative was rife with images of black criminality and irrationality. It was a “riot”: anger-fueled violence that erupted out of nowhere, for no real reason, and with no deeper intent than destruction. Perhaps it was instigated by outside agitators, or perhaps these were just violent people looking for an excuse to be violent.<sup>10</sup> In sharp contrast, a handbill circulating in the black community that summer remembered what had actually happened. “The rebellion Monday, May 11, was an effort of the Blacks in Augusta, Georgia and in Amerikka to seek liberation, freedom, and justice... The PEOPLE REVOLTED, because of the pressing and oppressional conditions that they live in, and have been living in.” In a period that historian Peter Levy calls “the great uprising,” noting more than 750 urban revolts in the years 1963-1972, it was Georgia’s and the Deep South’s largest rebellion.<sup>11</sup>

*John Hayes is a member of an interracial local committee organizing a series of observance events for the 50th anniversary of the May 11-12, 1970 riot in Augusta. For information, visit Facebook at 1970 Augusta Riot and Instagram at 1970augustriot . To receive news on events commemoration event this Spring, contact him at [jhayes22@augusta.edu](mailto:jhayes22@augusta.edu)*

<sup>9</sup> Oral histories with Dr. Roscoe Williams (4/14/19) and Charles Walker (8/13/19); *Augusta Chronicle* July 16, 1970 p1, September 2, 1970 p1, December 18, 1970 p4A, February 25, 1971 p1, May 11, 1980 p5E; Richmond County Superior Court case book, May and July 1970 terms; Southern Regional Council, *Augusta, Georgia*, 38; *Oatman v Atkins et al.*

<sup>10</sup> For a succinct recent statement of this narrative, see *Augusta Chronicle* May 11, 2019, pA6. For the narrative as originally shaped, see *Augusta Chronicle* May 12-19, 1970. For its endurance over time, see Smith, “Riot of May 1970” [1975]; Cashin, *Story of Augusta* [1980]; “Family member recalls deadly jail beating that sparked Augusta race riots,” WRDW-TV, May 11, 2010; WSB footage at the beginning of “The Steering Committee,” Augusta-Richmond County Public Library, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> *Augusta Courier* June 22, 1970 p2; Peter Levy, *The Great Uprising: Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s* (Cambridge, 2018), 1; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 234-235.

## UNCOVERING THE AFRICAN TECHNOLOGY OF AN INLAND RICE PLANTATION

Rodney D. Parker, Special Contributor  
Regulatory Archeologist-Savannah District, US Army Corps of Engineer

The Coldbrook Plantation was developed in a bottomland hardwood forest as early as the 1790s to grow rice. It is a freshwater, non-tidal system that floods seasonally. Because of seasonal inundation, there appears to be a reservoir pond adjacent to the rice fields to the south. The raised causeway seen on the east of the site seems to have served as a dam, and there are diversion canals present on both sides of the Coldbrook rice fields (Figure A). With all these observable rice features found on aerial imagery and on the ground, it is not wonder that this historic field/site retains a high level of integrity and significance.<sup>1</sup>

The archaeological investigation of Coldbrook began in the summer of 2017 to identify the presence of both historic and archeological resources as part of the proposed Effingham Parkway project. However this work not only hopes to inform us of the past but to give us a greater appreciation for the enslaved people whose agricultural competence and expertise refined in West Africa transformed the Georgia low country.

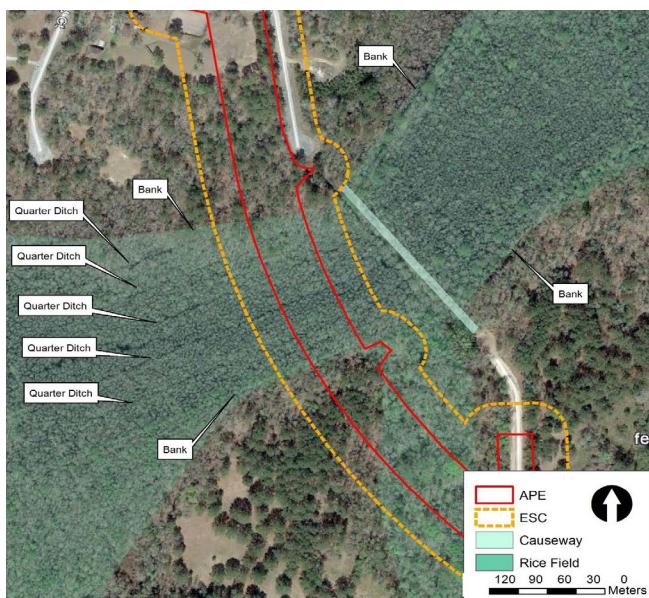


Figure A maps the rice field features created by hand by enslaved Africans in the late 18th Century at Coldbrook plantation.  
Courtesy of Georgia Department of Transportation

<sup>1</sup> Abbott, David, *Phase I Archaeological Survey of the Proposed Effingham Parkway, Effingham and Chatham Counties, Georgia*, Moreland Altobelli Associates, Inc. for Georgia Department of Transportation, 2018.



View of a quarter ditch (center) from the raised causeway.  
Courtesy of Georgia Department of Transportation

Systematic shovel testing, surface collection, and ground penetrating radar (GPR) surveys were performed in compliance with Section 106 of National Historic Preservation Act, which mandates the identification and evaluation of historic properties before such project can receive their federal permits. The proposed Effingham Parkway project entails the construction of a 6.36 mile, two-lane roadway from State Route (SR) 30 to Blue Jay Road in Effingham County, Georgia.

Even though field investigations were ongoing, presence of a defined rice system has been confirmed. Most of the early documentation of inland rice production in the Southeast region shows that it began being cultivated on upland soil in South Carolina in 1720s.<sup>2</sup> The rice fields were identified through aerial imagery and archival research which reveal that rice was cultivated at this Effingham County from at least the early 1790s until the 1860s. Being able to use water not only to irrigate the rice, but also to reduce weed growth would require the draining of swamp land, dividing land into sections bounded by ditches, and surrounding the fields with banks to avert flooding. European investors forcibly retained populations of West African men, women and children, who knew these irrigation procedures intimately.

<sup>2</sup> Chaplin, Joyce, *Tidal Rice Cultivation and the Problem of Slavery in South Carolina and Georgia, 1760-1815*. The William and Mary Quarterly Vol. 49 Issue 1, pp. 29-61, 1992.

There would be no rice cultivation here, and most other agricultural staples in the Americas, without the ability and knowledge of these forcibly transplanted African groups.<sup>3</sup>

This study of Coldbrook Plantation aims to better understand inland rice lifestyle in a broader context in Georgia. While there have been some archeological investigations and interpretations of inland rice cultivation in our neighboring state to the north, it has been quiet here in Georgia. There are many questions related to this site such as how did rice production at Coldbrook differ from tidal systems on the coast, and how did the lives of those enslaved Africans differ when toiling on inland rice plantations. We also would like to know what other cultivars were grown at Coldbrook and what archeological evidence of the rice varieties might exist.



Marble headstone fragment uncovered during site survey.  
Courtesy of Georgia Department of Transportation

Even before the planting could even be considered in locations, substantial manipulation of the landscape was required. The arduous tasks of clearing, grading, and leveling of the fields was performed to ensure adequate draining of water. The construction of water control structures to ensure flow of water both in and out of fields was an essential engineering component to successful rice cultivation. Similar to the use of hollow palm logs as water control gates in West Africa, enslaved populations would utilize local counterparts, such as hollow cypress logs to achieve same results.<sup>4</sup> Most, if not all, of these techniques were developed in Africa by Africans.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Hayden Ros, Rich "Swamps and Rice Grounds: The Specialization of Inland Rice Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1670-1861." PhD Dissertation, Department of History, University of Georgia, Athens, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Coldbrook Plantation was part of a 325-acre tract purchased on January 25, 1785 and established as an inland summer home by Philip Ulmer II. Ulmer was a part of the affluent Salzburger Luther family that immigrated from Germany to Effingham and Chatham counties. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Philip and brother Charles owned over 2,000 acres in both these counties, including extensive tidal rice operations at Drakes and Mulberry Grove.<sup>5</sup> The humid temperatures of the tidal environment proved intolerable for early Europeans settlers who would seek refuge farther inland, leaving those enslaved on site. This is yet another harrowing aspect of the institution of slavery, as enslaved Africans were tasked with engineering these agricultural feats in terrible conditions. Unfortunately, many ancestors would pay--with their life--to develop these successful, complex rice systems while faced with yellow fever, malaria, insects, and animals, in addition to horrific living situations which cannot be emphasized enough.<sup>6</sup>

Early this spring archeological data recovery will commence at Coldbrook to help us learn what we can from the landscape and cultural materials of those who toiled and died to build it.



Archaeologist Rodney Parker discusses African irrigation technology at Harrington School St. Simons Island.  
Photo credit: Melissa Jest/Georgia HPD

Rodney D. Parker has a Master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Mississippi, and a Bachelor's in History from Salisbury University.

<sup>5</sup> Hulsey, Joe, A Biography of Philip Ulmer. *The Savannah Biographies* Vol. 14. Minis Collection, Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah, 1986  
<sup>6</sup> Wood, Betty, *Slavery in Costal Georgia 1730-1775*. University of Georgia Press, Georgia, 1984.

## ASHBY ST. SHOTGUNS & DISMUKE STOREHOUSE: JEWELS OF MCCOY HILLS HISTORIC DISTRICT

Deniseya Hall, Contributor

Graduate Student in Heritage Preservation, Georgia State University

I first heard the term “shotgun house” in an undergraduate African American art history class where I viewed the 1966 John Biggers painting Shotgun, Third Ward #1. The painting comments on the 1963 Birmingham Church bombing and reflects Black resilience through loss and violence as they watch their church burn in their shotgun neighborhood. In the McCoy Hill community of Americus, shotgun houses were a common home type for African Americans throughout time. Built by freed people during the Reconstruction Era (1863-1877), these homes provided “a safe comfortable way of life for many residents”.<sup>1</sup> Historians describe McCoy Hill as an affluent community of black working class and professionals. They owned homes, churches, and stores with a hospital and school in the area. This “well-to-do” way of life carried on until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when urban renewal practices and loss of residence overtook the black community.<sup>2</sup>

McCoy Hill is located east of Lee Street in Americus and north of the city’s downtown district. Herein lies the Ashby Street Shotgun Row Historic

District comprised of three shotgun homes. This small district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997. The Encyclopedia Britannica states that shotgun homes were a staple in Southern communities from the 1870s to the 1910s comprise of a front porch, no hallways, and two or more rooms with a back door. They were inexpensive to build and provided ventilation when the front and back doors opened, supplying a comforting breeze during the hot summer months.<sup>3</sup> It was sometimes said that “a bullet shot from the front door would pass through the house without hitting anything and exit through the back door” thus the name “shotgun.”<sup>4</sup>

1 Ashby Street Shotgun Row Historic District, National Register of Historic Places nomination, 9700620, 1997 p. 5.

2 Ibid, p 7.

3 Serratore, Angela. “What Is a Shotgun House?” Hunker.com, July 12 2019. Accessed September 30, 2019.

4 “Shotgun house”, Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/shotgun-house>. Accessed August 30, 2019.

Other evidence suggests that this name is actually a corruption of the word “shogon”, a West Africa word meaning “God’s House.”<sup>5</sup>

According to City housing officials, the three Ashby Shotgun houses are still occupied, serving their original purpose as working class housing as well as representing living history there on Ashby Street.



207, 209, and 211 Ashby Street, Americus  
Photo credit: Melissa Jest/HPD



Dismuke Storehouse. built 1899  
Photo credit: Melissa Jest/HPD

Also in the McCoy Hill Historic District is the Dismuke Storehouse at North Lee and Ashby Streets. Described as “one of the last historic corner stores remaining in [this] neighborhood”, the commercial property was built in 1899 by Joseph H. Dismuke, a businessman and a carpenter.<sup>6</sup> Dismuke acquired the corner lot from his uncle, Elbert Head. Head was a successful farmer and philanthropist, donating land to the Campbell Chapel AME church to build their church. Head’s Alley, which stretches from Wynn Street to the intersection of Prince and Lee Streets was named in his honor.<sup>7</sup> With each generation, the store was repurposed to meet the community’s need.<sup>8</sup>

The storehouse originally sat at the edge of the property line near the streets of Ashby and Lee. The vernacular building was moved back 20 feet in 1987 for a public street widening and drainage project.<sup>9</sup> Today, the historic store houses a barbershop and a take-out restaurant. ■

5 “Shotgun Houses”, <http://www.datacenterresearch.org/pre-katrina/tertiary/shotgun.html>. September 30, 2019. Accessed October 9, 2019.

6 Ashby Street Shotgun Row Historic District, National Register of Historic Places nomination, 9700620, 1997, p. 5.

7 Dismuke Storehouse, National Register of Historic places nomination, 96000247, 1996, pp. 8-9.

8 “Dismuke Storehouse, 1899, Americus.” Vanishing South Georgia Post by Brian Brown, 21 Aug. 2018, <https://vanishingsouthgeorgia.com/2018/08/20/dismuke-storehouse-1899-americus/>. Accessed 13 Sep. 2019.

9 Dismuke Storehouse, National Register of Historic places nomination, 96000247, 1996, p. 4.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### GAAHPN steering board hosts Community Forum in LaGrange March 13

Come share your heritage preservation project at the GAAHPN Community Forum in LaGrange Friday March 13 from 1pm to 3pm at LaGrange Memorial Library, 115 Alford Street.

The GAAHPN steering welcomes colleagues working in the **Three Rivers Region and surrounding West Georgia area**. The Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN) celebrates 30 years of connecting constituents and heritage groups statewide.

To RSVP/Request speaking time, contact Melissa Jest  
[melissa.jest@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:melissa.jest@dnr.ga.gov) | 770 389 7870

**Georgia Historic Preservation Division**  
2610 Georgia Highway 155 SW  
Stockbridge, Georgia 30281  
[www.georgiashpo.org](http://www.georgiashpo.org) | 770 389 7844

Image credit: Georgia HPD



**Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network**

### CLG Training in Hogansville includes free 'Historic Preservation 101' Workshop



Local and state Historic Preservation professionals present on the basics of historic preservation as part of a joint training workshop.  
And learn about the revitalization of historic Royal Theater.  
Bring your preservation questions to the Hogansville Public Library March 25.

The workshop runs from 9a to 1:30p, concluding with a tour of Downtown Hogansville. \* **Reservations are required by March 20.**  
\* Scholarships are available through GAAHPN.

To RSVP, contact Melissa Jest, African American programs coordinator  
[melissa.jest@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:melissa.jest@dnr.ga.gov) | 770 389 7870 | fax 770 389 7878

**Georgia Historic Preservation Division**  
2610 Georgia Highway 155 SW  
Stockbridge, Georgia 30281  
[www.georgiashpo.org](http://www.georgiashpo.org) | 770 389 7844

Image credit: Georgia HPD

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**Melissa Jest**  
*African American  
Programs Coordinator  
Reflections Editor*  
Voice 770/389-7870  
Fax 770/389-7878  
melissa.jest@dnr.ga.gov



**Nedra Deadwyler**  
*African American  
Programs Assistant*  
Voice 770/389-7876  
Fax 770/389-7878  
nedra.deadwyler@dnr.ga.gov

## ABOUT GAAHPN



Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network

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 built 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 plans and implements 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 3,000 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.georgiashpo.org](http://www.georgiashpo.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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