



Reflections

Volume IX, No. 1

December 2009

THE COLLIER HEIGHTS HISTORIC DISTRICT: ATLANTA'S PREMIER AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBURB

*Jeanne Cyriaque, African American Programs Coordinator
Historic Preservation Division*

Collier Heights Historic District is located just six miles west of downtown Atlanta. Collier Heights was Atlanta's largest African American suburb that was built by and for African Americans during the mid-20th century development and expansion of the city. This historic district encompasses over 1,700 residences. The district was developed into 54 interrelated subdivisions totaling 1,000 acres from World War II through 1979. The subdivisions were developed along curvilinear streets without sidewalks that incorporated the natural terrain and trees. The district's housing stock represents virtually every type of Ranch House that was built in Georgia in the mid-20th century, Split-Level houses, and some two-story houses. Several community landmark buildings are located on the edges of the district and include churches, schools and two parks.

Collier Heights is unique among black suburbs. In most communities when African Americans moved in, these communities were "transitioned" into black neighborhoods due to "white flight." Collier Heights is a planned suburb that evolved due to African-American initiative and it was built specifically to serve the African-American middle class of Atlanta. Early advertisements for Collier Heights were published in the mid-1950s in the *Atlanta Daily World*, one of Atlanta's leading African-American tabloids. By the early 1960s,

Collier Heights was featured in national publications including the *New York Times*, *Ebony* and *Time* magazines.

Collier Heights lies between four quadrants of interstate highways. The boundaries of the district are I-20 and I-285, Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway (formerly Bankhead Highway) and Hamilton E. Holmes Drive (formerly Hightower Road). The district is primarily single-family residential development. The terrain is hilly, which often resulted in steep slopes and uneven lots interspersed throughout the district's subdivisions.

The oldest part of the district contains some Bungalow-type houses dating from 1915-1930. These houses were built for whites when the area was primarily rural. Small subdivisions of American Small Houses are interspersed in the district while

Ranch and Split-Level Houses characterize the vast amount of subdivisions in Collier Heights.

While most of the Collier Heights subdivisions were platted by 1951, the community became designated as an African-American development exclusively when the City of Atlanta annexed the area in 1952. That year the West Side Mutual Development Committee was formed. It was a consortium of African-American and white land developers. Simultaneously, African Americans formed their own land-bank company. It was called the National Development Corporation. These initiatives resulted in acquisitions of



The most popular house type in the Collier Heights Historic District is the Ranch House. Originating in California, the Ranch House was the most popular house type in the country in the 1950s. This "Courtyard" Ranch House features a semi-circular entrance to the garage that is partially hidden by brick ornamentation that matches the house. Photo by James R. Lockhart

THE COLLIER HEIGHTS HISTORIC DISTRICT: ATLANTA'S PREMIER AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBURB

Jeanne Cyriaque, continued from page 1

existing white-owned homes through agreements by 1954. After that time, the developments were platted exclusively for African-American occupancy. From 1955-1959, over 24 new subdivisions were platted, mostly in the northwest and southeast areas. This pattern continued into the mid-1960s, when another 19 subdivisions were platted.



There are a few Bungalows in the oldest part of the Collier Heights Historic District. They date from the period when the present community was rural. Bungalows were popular in Georgia from 1900 to the 1940s, This Bungalow features the Craftsman style and a detached garage.

Photo by James R. Lockhart

American Small Houses in the district are set back evenly from the street but the arrangement of Ranch and Split-Level Houses vary according to the topography and tastes of the owners. More affluent owners built their homes on lots with larger setbacks that take advantage of natural features.

All of the Collier Heights community landmark buildings are located on the periphery of the district and the district contains



American Small Houses exist side-by-side in the eastern section of Collier Heights. These houses consist of five rooms, a bathroom, and lack unused space such as hallways. Most were built in Collier Heights after World War II.

Photo by James R. Lockhart

virtually no historic commercial buildings. The landmark buildings include three historic schools: the Collier Heights Elementary School, Frederick Douglass High School and Bazoline E. Usher Elementary School (formerly Drexel High School). Churches include: St. Paul of the Cross Catholic Church and Imhotep School, Radcliffe Presbyterian Church, Union Baptist Church and Berean Seventh-Day Adventist Church. These community landmark buildings represent architectural styles including Modern, International, A-Frame and Brutalism as well as more traditional or revival architectural design.



Frederick Douglass High School opened in the fall of 1968 in the southeast periphery of Collier Heights. The school features the Brutalism style of architecture that is monolithic in massing and features minimum windows. The 2004 auditorium and gymnasium (on the left) were not contributing resources in the Collier Heights nomination. Photo by James R. Lockhart

The period of significance for the Collier Heights Historic District begins around 1915 with the oldest existing development and ends in 1979 when development of the area was completed. It is an intact, post-World War II mid-century development and more than 95% of the houses contribute to its period of significance. It is significant in the area of architecture due to its large collection of mid-20th-century houses including examples of American Small Houses, Ranch and Split-Level Houses. The majority of homes in Collier Heights are a mixture of brick and wood veneers. Owners personalized these houses through design elements including wrought iron, columns and stone ornament. Earlier houses have detached garages while most of the Ranch Houses have carports.



These "compact" Ranch Houses were constructed with brick veneer, the most popular building material in Georgia.

Photo by James R. Lockhart



The First Missionary Baptist Church moved to Collier Heights in the 1960s. This church is a Contemporary-style A-Frame with an elongated T-shaped plan.
Photo by James R. Lockhart

Collier Heights is also significant for its community planning and development. It was one of Atlanta's first suburbs that adopted the elements of subdivision development that were preferred by the Federal Housing Administration. The lots throughout the subdivisions feature mixed lot sizes and both landscaped lots with mature trees as well as heavily wooded lots. Collier Heights also broke away from gridiron patterns of street design to curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs that made the community safer for children.



The Ranch house on the left uses metal shutters for ornamentation. The house on the right is a Split-Foyer. Its distinctive characteristics are an entrance at grade level with the main living area on the upper level while the lower level provides ample space for a recreation area.
Photo by James R. Lockhart

African-American ethnic heritage and social history are other areas of significance that make the Collier Heights Historic District unique. It attracted a significant number of African-American middle class owners, builders and developers. Some of the residents of Collier Heights included Herman Russell, a nationally prominent contractor, and the parents of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Other notable residents included Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, who succeeded Dr. King as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and William L. Calloway of the Alexander-Calloway Realty Company, one of Atlanta's African-American

realtors. Geneva Moton Haugabrooks, one of Atlanta's most successful funeral directors, and Donald B. Hollowell, a civil rights attorney, also lived in Collier Heights. Dr. Asa Yancey, Sr., best known for his work as Medical Director of Atlanta's Grady Hospital, is a Collier Heights resident.

Collier Heights Historic District is significant at both the state and national level. It is not only the premier African-American suburb in Atlanta, but also in all of Georgia. When the suburb was being developed, it achieved national coverage in newspapers and magazines and was promoted as the best place for middle class African Americans to live in Atlanta. In a *Time* magazine article in 1959, it was listed with other African-American suburbs as great places to live. White developers had built these other communities for African Americans, but the article failed to mention one fact that made Collier Heights unique: it was developed by and for blacks. More recently, Andrew Wiese characterized Collier Heights as "the premier black residential district in the country" in *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. In his landmark study, Wiese found that the majority of African American suburbs in the North, Midwest and West were "transitioned" while those in the South, especially Collier Heights, were developments created specifically for African Americans.



This Split-Level house is Contemporary-style. It features exposed roof beams and nontraditional windows.
Photo by James R. Lockhart

At the end of World War II, there was a severe housing shortage for African Americans in Atlanta. This was due to the city's strict segregation zoning ordinances. A number of organizations and lending institutions emerged during that time to address this issue. The Empire Real Estate Board, with members representing real estate brokers and financiers, was formed in 1939 to respond to discrimination. Walter "Chief" Aiken was one of the founding members. He developed alliances with other organizations that focused on civil rights issues in real estate. Other Empire Real Estate Board members were John Calhoun and Quentin V. Williamson. Calhoun was stripped of his real estate license for arranging purchases of homes by African Americans in Mozley Park, a previously "white only" area on Atlanta's west side. Williamson, who would eventually become a Collier Heights resident, quietly began purchasing tracts outside the city limits to avoid the racially restrictive zoning. Atlanta's black financial institutions, including Citizens Trust Bank, Atlanta Mutual Savings and Loan and the Atlanta Life Insurance Company began to earmark funds for community reinvestment, thus providing funds for land acquisition to members of the Empire Real Estate Board.

THE COLLIER HEIGHTS HISTORIC DISTRICT: ATLANTA'S PREMIER AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBURB

Jeanne Cyriaque, continued from page 3

Political and demographic changes in Atlanta also set the stage for the Collier Heights suburb. Voter drives in the city had successfully resulted in blacks accounting for 27% of the electorate by 1946. Mayor William Hartsfield developed an annexation plan for the city. In 1952, the city annexed vast tracts of both developed and undeveloped land to the west where Collier Heights would be built. The Metropolitan Planning Commission also predicted that by 1980, the population would increase by 320,000 persons, and "... about 90,000 will be colored."



This Modern Split-Level house incorporates International Style elements with a flat roof and stones interspersed with the brick for ornamentation. Photo by James R. Lockhart

In 1954, plans were publicized for the African American residential development. The National Development Company, with assistance from the West Side Mutual Development Committee, quietly bought out the relatively few white homeowners in what is now the oldest subdivision of Collier Heights. Between 1955-1957, eight subdivisions were developed, and 15 new subdivisions were developed in 1958 and 1959. By the middle of the 1960s, another 17 were developed, and the final two Collier Heights subdivisions were started in 1966.



Split-Level houses are common in this subdivision. Photo by James R. Lockhart

Collier Heights' homes followed the same trend as the nation with Ranch Houses and Split-Levels as the predominant house type. Some of the designs in Collier Heights were modeled from plan books. W.D. Farmer, a white architect, developed plan books where buyers could design their own home. A number of African-American draftsmen and contractors also designed Collier Heights' homes.

Joseph W. Robinson, an African-American architect, designed homes in Collier Heights. Robinson had completed his architecture degree at Hampton Institute in 1949. When he moved to Atlanta he did not receive his license due to segregation, so Robinson taught at Booker T. Washington High School until 1968. In the early 1950s, he began designing homes because a license was not required at that time. By 1970, he had designed over 200 houses when he established his firm, J.W. Robinson & Associates. Robinson was a charter member of the National Organization of Minority Architects and was a fellow in the American Institute of Architects. Edward C. Miller, considered to be the first licensed African-American architect in Atlanta, designed the Contemporary-style Radcliffe Presbyterian Church, one of the community landmark buildings in the Collier Heights Historic District. Whatley Bros. Construction, a black-owned firm, built many houses in Collier Heights.



This "Alphabet" Ranch House is round. It was designed by African-American architect Joseph W. Robinson. Photo by James R. Lockhart

The Collier Heights Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on June 23, 2009. The Collier Heights Neighborhood Association sponsored the nomination following an extensive study and documentation of the neighborhood by graduate students from the Georgia State University (GSU) Heritage Preservation program. Seven graduate students prepared the Historic District Information Form in 2008 as a class project. The students surveyed nearly 1,800 properties in the district for the project. They were: Emilie Arnold, Neil Bowen, Renee Brown-Bryant, Stephanie Cherry, Parinya Chukaew, Erica Danylchak, Emily Eigel, Hilary Morrish, Melina Vasquez and Lillie Ward. The students received a *Preservation Achievement Award* from the Historic Preservation Division in 2009. The Atlanta Urban Design Commission also honored the GSU program for their outstanding project this year.

The Collier Heights Community Association celebrated the National Register designation at a community event in October 2009. Antavius Weems, who is president of the association, thanked hundreds of community supporters, city officials and legislators who packed Berean Seventh Day Adventist Church for the program. The association and residents are stewards for maintaining this treasured residential development on Atlanta's west side that is known as Collier Heights. ■

NEW HOPE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH STANDS IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

*Joy Melton, African American Programs Assistant
Historic Preservation Division*

New Hope African Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery is located on Arden Road in Atlanta's Buckhead community. Although New Hope A.M.E. has withstood a number of challenges over the years, it remains significant as one of the first A.M.E. churches built in Atlanta. The New Hope congregation was founded in 1869. At that time, it was known as the New Hope Camp Ground because the congregation met in the open under shade trees.

The congregation gained ownership of the church property less than a decade after the end of slavery. On May 29, 1872, James H. "Whispering" Smith, a white Buckhead resident, donated the land in his will to the congregation for use as a church and school. Today, the congregation believes that Smith was inspired by God to conceive such an act, for he died eight days



New Hope A.M.E. Church and Cemetery were built on a three-acre site on land donated to the congregation after the Civil War. The 1926 parsonage next to the church was altered and is not part of the contributing properties. The cemetery is located across the street in the Buckhead community of Atlanta. Photo by James R. Lockhart

later. Reverend Roland Wishum was caretaker of the property and Reverend Joseph Woods was the first pastor. Under Pastor Woods' leadership, the congregation joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first African-American denomination that separated from white churches. When the church gained ownership of the property they constructed a gable-front, wood church. It was built before 1900 and served as a church and school until it burned in 1927. New Hope sponsored a camp meeting each August until the middle of the 20th century.

In 1926, during Reverend J.F. Moses tenure, a parsonage was built. The basement of the present church was completed in 1928, under the leadership of Reverend R.E. Lee. Under Reverend

W.W. Stephens, the congregation completed the church in 1936 during the hardships of the Great Depression with personal contributions and gifts from white friends and employers. General contractor Alex Milt, a white man, was instrumental in securing a loan to help the congregation build the remainder of the sanctuary. Two members of the congregation secured loans on their personal property to aid in the construction.

The landscape surrounding the church began to change in the 1930s when middle-to-upper income whites moved into the neighborhood. The school burned in 1942, but classes continued to be held in the fellowship hall of the church for class grades 1-7. In 1975, a tornado struck the church and parsonage. Both buildings were repaired, but the parsonage was renovated and was classified as a non-contributing resource for the nomination.

New Hope A.M.E. Church is a rectangular, front-gable, wood-framed structure that was completed from 1928-1936. It was built on a granite foundation. There are two asymmetrical towers on the main façade, one with a gable roof and the other with a steeple and cross. Two round Doric columns support the portico. On the main façade, stained glass windows highlight the towers and transom windows above the entrance. Wood and granite buttresses support the side walls of the church.

The cemetery, with two stone pillars and an ornamental gate at the entrance, is located on the east side of Arden Road across from the church. The earliest grave dates to 1889, yet unmarked graves suggest earlier burials. Cemetery markers indicate that early families belonging to the church bore surnames of prominent white families in the Buckhead area. Many of the



New Hope Cemetery's oldest burial dates from 1889. The cemetery has grave markers that vary from simple stones or flat markers to more elaborate obelisks. Photo by James R. Lockhart

founding church members retained these names from slavery. The New Hope A.M.E. Church and Cemetery was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on January 9, 2009. Rev. Philip Chisholm, the current pastor, conducted a church service in May 2009 celebrating the completion of the cemetery restoration. ■

VIDALIA'S J.D. DICKERSON SCHOOL REPRESENTS THE TRANSFORMATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

*Joy Melton, African American Programs Assistant
Historic Preservation Division*

Vidalia is located in the heart of Georgia in Toombs County and is home to the world-renowned Vidalia Sweet Onion. Professor James Dewitt Dickerson came to Vidalia after graduating from Morehouse College in September 1904. His goal was to teach in an African-American school. Dickerson was born on June 22, 1876, in Louisville, Georgia. Upon arriving in Vidalia, Dickerson began a grassroots effort to educate 24 students in a one-room schoolhouse. In January 1905, his wife, Gussie P. Hart Dickerson joined him in educating the students at the



Professor Dickerson was a visionary for educating African American youth in Vidalia. Photo courtesy of 1996 J.D. Dickerson High School Reunion Program

to older boys and girls that had practical applications to community life. Two teachers, preferably a husband and wife, typically taught at Central schools, where they resided on the premises. A 1924 Sanborn Map indicates that the school was named Industrial High School. The buildings had electricity and were heated by stoves. The two-story high school had two large classrooms on each floor, an industrial room and an office.



*The Vidalia High and Industrial School was a two-story school built according to plans developed by architects at Tuskegee Institute. These plans were used until the Julius Rosenwald Fund developed **Community School Plans** in 1920. Source: Georgia Dept. of Education 1918 Annual Report*

new school. Mrs. Dickerson was a graduate of Spelman College in Atlanta. Together, they educated African American children in Vidalia for 40 years.

Working with existing resources, Dickerson converted the dilapidated Odd Fellow Hall on the west side of McIntosh Street into a school.

By 1907, the school curriculum had expanded to include first through seventh grades with four students in the graduating class. Land was purchased on Third Avenue for a new school.

Meanwhile, in 1912, Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in



Mrs. Gussie Dickerson taught alongside J.D. Dickerson for over 40 years. Photo courtesy of 1996 J.D. Dickerson High School Reunion Program

Alabama (now Tuskegee University), influenced Julius Rosenwald, philanthropist and president of Sears Roebuck and Company, to implement the Julius Rosenwald Fund to support the construction of rural schools for African Americans. The fund was chartered in 1917 and Professor Dickerson, as he was affectionately called, took advantage of this opportunity. Dickerson petitioned for support from blacks and whites in the community for the two-story school that was constructed in 1918-1919. According to the Fisk University Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives, the school resembled a Central School, a plan style designed by Tuskegee architects that included a library. Central schools were designed to offer vocational training

The school continued to grow. By 1922, the Vidalia High and Industrial School had added ninth grade. The Dickersons developed the students not only academically, but also socially, religiously, and ethically. Mr. Dickerson was an active deacon in the First African Baptist Church, as his name appears on the cornerstone erected on the church in 1925. Also, the church added a J.D. Dickerson educational wing in 1939. The school was recognized by the Georgia Department of Education as "Toombs County Training School," a prestigious designation in the early 1930s. Only effective rural black schools that offered industrial training were designated "Training Schools." They received financial assistance from the John F. Slater Fund, established in 1882 to aid southern rural black schools.

In 1937, the Rosenwald School was moved across Third Avenue and a T-shape plan, brick veneer, Works Progress Administration (WPA) building was erected. The WPA was



The J.D. Dickerson Training School was constructed in 1937 through funds provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Photo courtesy of 1996 J.D. Dickerson High School Reunion Program

founded in 1935 as an outcome of the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration created jobs that resulted in the construction of public buildings and schools through the WPA. Dickerson personally helped to raise some of the funds that were needed for the WPA school, and it was named the Dickerson Training School in his honor. The building had 13 classrooms, an auditorium, a dining room, principal's office, library, lavatories, dressing rooms and a basement. This was the most contemporary school building for African Americans in this region of Georgia at the time. Students from the surrounding area flocked to the newly state-accredited Dickerson Training School. Some students boarded in homes near the school. Professor J.D. Dickerson died on September 15, 1947 after 42 years as the school's principal.



*A row of classrooms behind the elementary school served the high school population until desegregation.
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*



The J.D. Dickerson Elementary School was erected in 1963 after a fire destroyed the WPA building. Portions of the two buildings were used for elementary and high school classes until desegregation in 1970. Today, the school is the J.D. Dickerson Primary School.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

In 1951, the state School Building Authority was developed to construct modern school buildings that were "separate but equal." A 3% retail tax was created that same year to finance the construction of hundreds of school in Georgia. By 1958, the cannery/shop building was demolished and the equalization school addition was constructed on the eastern section of the property facing Third Avenue. In 1960, faculty and students requested that the Vidalia Board of Education change the name from Dickerson Training to J.D. Dickerson High School. On January 25, 1963, a fire destroyed the 1937 WPA building and two people were killed. In February of that same year, a request was approved to build a gymnasium and elementary school to replace the WPA building.



The gymnasium that was constructed in 1963 provides recreation for the student population at J.D. Dickerson.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The last graduating class completed their studies at J.D. Dickerson High School in 1970 due to the desegregation of schools in Georgia. The school name was changed to J.D. Dickerson School housing grades first-third in the elementary school and fifth-sixth in the high school facility. This school closed in 1974. Today the school is known as the J.D. Dickerson Primary School, and still provides an education for Vidalia students. ■



Isaac Johnson
Chairman

Isaac Johnson, Chair
706/738-1901
Linda Cooks, Vice-Chair
404/936-2614
Velmon Allen, Vice-Chair
GAAHPN Network
912/261-1898



**STEERING
COMMITTEE**

Lillian Davis
Dr. Gerald C. & Barbara Golden
Terry & Cynthia Hayes
Richard Laub
Christine Miller-Betts
Kenneth Rollins

STAFF



Jeanne Cyriaque
*African American
Programs Coordinator
Reflections Editor*
Voice 404/656-4768
Fax 404/657-1040

jeanne.cyriaque@dnr.state.ga.us



Joy Melton
*African American
Programs Assistant*
Voice 404/657-1054
Fax 404/657-1040
joy.melton@dnr.state.ga.us

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 2,700 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

Published quarterly by the
Historic Preservation Division
Georgia Department of Natural Resources

Dr. David Crass, Acting Division Director
Jeanne Cyriaque, Editor

This publication has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, through the Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products or consultants constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior or the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, or disability in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility, or if you desire more information, write to: Office for Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.



A Program of the
Historic Preservation Division
Georgia Department of Natural Resources
254 Washington Street SW
Ground Level
Atlanta, GA 30334