



Reflections

Volume X, No. 2

December 2011

INTERPRETING AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE ON OSSABAW ISLAND AND COMMUNITY FORMATION ON THE MAINLAND

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Ossabaw Island is the third largest of Georgia's barrier islands. Its nearly 26,000 acres include tidal marsh, forests and wildlife that comprise Georgia's first Heritage Preserve. Ossabaw has 225 known archaeological sites that document continuous human habitation for 4,000 years. Native Americans occupied Ossabaw until the Spanish occupation of the Georgia coast in the mid-16th century. In 1733, the British founded the Georgia colony in nearby Savannah. In 1760, Ossabaw Island was auctioned to a private citizen and eventually acquired by John Morel. He established an indigo plantation.

After Morel's death in 1776, the island was divided into three plantations for his heirs: North End, Middle Place, and South End. After John Morel Jr. died, his share was sub-divided into two plantations: South End and Buckhead. There are remains of three tabby structures that were probably slave quarters and an overseer's house at Middle Place. Buckhead and South End still have archaeological remains. Also, South End has temporary structures for the annual deer hunt.

Today, almost all remaining historic structures on Ossabaw Island lie at North End and the Main House complex. The Main House was constructed from 1924-1926 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. It was built by Dr. Henry N. Torrey of Detroit for his winter residence. Notable architectural features include a red-tile roof, tile and

terracotta ornament, and pink stucco walls. The Main House has 15 bedrooms, 16 bathrooms and a large great room with an exposed wooden beam ceiling and fireplace, with a map of the island above it. The dining room features tiles imported from Europe and a bay window. The house is surrounded by formal gardens, a patio and wrought iron balconies. Several sculptures exist in a rock garden behind the house, including Peter Pan and Tinker Bell. Behind the Main House there is a stable and studio.

North End includes the 1880s Clubhouse, the two-story, frame, Boarding House, a single-story tabby smokehouse near the Clubhouse and three extant tabby slave dwellings that evolved into tenant houses after emancipation. The complex of buildings lies near the Main Road that dates from the 1760s. This sandy, unpaved road is the transportation spine on the island that leads from Torrey's Landing on the north end of the island to the southern end. It has a series of mile markers along the way that date from the 18th century.

Eleanor Torrey West is the sole permanent resident of Ossabaw Island. She and her husband Clifford B. West founded the Ossabaw Foundation and implemented four programs from 1961-1983: the Ossabaw Island Project, the Genesis Project, the Professional Research Program and the Public Use and Education Program. The Ossabaw Island Project invited scholars in the arts, humanities and



Three tabby cabins remain on Ossabaw Island's North End that are the focal point for interpretation of African American life from enslavement through emancipation.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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sciences to visit the island to pursue their work. The Genesis Project invited participants for botanical, zoological and ecological investigations. The Professional Research Program allowed scientists to study the Ossabaw natural wilderness environment, and the Public Use and Education Program provided a similar experience for environmental education.

Mrs. West, who is now 98, has lived on Ossabaw Island full-time since 1986. She was the catalyst in her family's decision to sell Ossabaw Island to the State of Georgia in 1978. Ossabaw Island became Georgia's first Heritage Preserve, to be used solely for "natural, scientific and cultural study, research, education and environmentally sound preservation of the island's ecosystem." The island is managed by the Wildlife Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

In 1995, the National Trust for Historic Preservation included Ossabaw Island in its annual list of the most endangered places in America. The following year, it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



The Main Road on Ossabaw Island is unpaved with live oak and palm trees providing a backdrop for the walking visitor.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Eleanor "Sandy" West deposited four original inventories of enslaved people recorded in 1812 at the Georgia Historical Society. These people lived on the Morel plantations. Similarly, the Kollock plantation journals documented 56-68 slaves who lived at South End. Kollock's 1860 journal indicates he had 71 slaves living in nine houses on the island. The overseer's journals recorded task assignments from 1850-1861 and reveal how the plantation slaves raised cotton and food for consumption. None of the main houses remain from the plantation era. After the Civil War, absentee planters Kollock and McDonald abandoned the island.

During Reconstruction, the island was managed by Freedmen's Bureau agent Tunis G. Campbell, who was also the military governor of Sapelo and St. Catherines' Islands. Campbell's report in 1865 indicated there were 78 freedmen on Ossabaw, while much larger settlements existed on Sapelo (352) and St. Catherines (369). The Freedmen's Bureau role ended on Ossabaw Island in 1867, when an Act of Congress returned the four plantations to their owners.

Though they had not acquired land of their own, African Americans continued to live and farm on Ossabaw, and established the Hinder Me Not Baptist Church there in the 1870s. The Zion Baptist Association minutes indicate this church was established on Ossabaw Island as early as 1878. The minister was Rev. B.O. Butler and the church representative in the association was Thomas Bond. There were 68 members in 1878 and the church membership was 61 as late as 1885. The 1880 Census documented 160 people who lived on the island in 40 houses. Middle Place still had cabins occupied by freed people as late as 1896.

Three slave/tenant cabins stand in a row just off the Main Road where the North End plantation once existed. These cabins were constructed of tabby, an aggregate form of concrete made from a mixture of lime, shell, water and sand. These vernacular houses each had a main, interior room that is separated by a fireplace. These two-room structures built c. 1845 are intact. A tabby building is on the North End of the island that was constructed in the 19th century for agricultural purposes.



The Clubhouse was originally constructed for the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Later, it was purchased by John Wanamaker and shipped to Ossabaw Island.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



The Boarding House, located northwest of the Clubhouse, is an early 20th century, Craftsman-style bungalow that was used to house workers. Today, it provides lodging for island visitors.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The Ossabaw Island Foundation (TOIF) developed a number of archaeological initiatives and partnerships to assist with preservation of the island's resources and interpretation of its rich, Lowcountry history. In 2004, TOIF received a "Save America's Treasures" grant with additional support from the Woodruff Foundation, the Charles Evans Hughes Foundation, and actress Sandra Bullock. Dave Crass, who is the DNR Historic Preservation Division (HPD) director and state archaeologist, provided additional public support. Dan Elliott of Lamar Associates conducted archaeological field studies resulting in over 17,000 artifacts that provided valuable information about life in the cabins and the surrounding North End site. This study provided information about cooking hardware, clothing, ammunition and recreation of the enslaved people who lived in the cabins.



Tabby cabin #2 features dual front entrances and a central fireplace.
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

In 2011, the archaeology section at HPD partnered with the University of Tennessee Chattanooga (UTC) in a field school on Ossabaw Island. Dr. Nick Honerkamp, students and HPD archaeologists complimented Elliott's earlier excavation and identified additional field observations of historical occupations on the North End. They found additional archaeological evidence that two additional cabins may have existed near the extant three, but further testing is necessary.

While the archaeology study was underway, six people came to visit from Pin Point, the African American community five miles away just outside of Savannah. They shared their memories of living in the three tabby cabins while children in the 1940s with Paul Pressly, director of the Ossabaw Island Education Alliance. They told Pressly about their parents' lives as servants, handymen and gardeners who worked for the Torrey family. That visit inspired the Pin Point residents to form Ossabaw Heritage, Inc. to capture the oral histories of residents and document their ancestral ties to Ossabaw. Community residents are working closely with Barbara Fertig, a history professor at Armstrong Atlantic State University on this oral history initiative. The visit also inspired Pressly to



A visit by these six former Ossabaw Island residents was the catalyst for a series of interpretive grants.
Photo courtesy of the Ossabaw Island Education Alliance

enhance his efforts to interpret African American life on Ossabaw and its continuity on the mainland.



A tabby smokehouse dating from the 19th century lies near the agricultural fields adjacent to the three cabins.
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

In 2007, TOIF received a Consultation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to convene two roundtables focusing on interpreting the African American community that existed for over two centuries on Ossabaw Island and the mainland. Paul Pressly and anthropologist/museum consultant Deborah Mack are the co-directors of the interpretive initiative. The first roundtable identified two humanities themes: continuity and change of the African American community from enslavement through emancipation and into the 20th century; and, continuity and change of this community in relocating from a barrier island to the mainland.

The second NEH-funded roundtable focused on interpretive strategies, identifying benchmark sites and exemplary methods to engage audiences. In 2008, TOIF sponsored a symposium with over 400 participants that featured the work of nine scholars. The University of Georgia Press subsequently produced a book featuring their essays: *The Atlantic World and African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: Origins of the Gullah/Geechee*. A subsequent NEH planning grant, awarded in 2010, developed the vision for a long-term outdoor interpretive exhibit that focuses on three tabby cabins as the focal point.

The three tabby slave/tenant cabins and surrounding buildings comprise a ten-acre site that sits on the North End of Ossabaw Island. The cabins, constructed from 1820-1840, were lived in as late as 1991. They provide a starting point for interpreting three stories over time: enslaved people who worked there throughout the colonial and antebellum periods, freedmen who lived there during the second half of the 19th century, and the community who relocated to the mainland in the 1890s.

In 1898, a major hurricane hit the Georgia coast, and the African Americans resettled on the mainland just south of Savannah in Chatham County in a community known as Pin Point. Members of the old church established a new church in Pin Point called Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church. The church and cemetery are still standing today.

Hanif Haynes, president of the Pin Point Betterment Association, a consortium of community members, partnered with the Georgia Conservancy to develop a blueprint initiative and pursued designation as a local historic district. The association applied for the designation with the Chatham County Historic Preservation Commission. Ellen Harris, cultural resource and urban

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planning manager with the Metropolitan Planning Commission, worked with the association to achieve its designation.

The Pin Point Historic District was Chatham County's first locally designated district. The Pin Point community began around 1896, when freedmen from Ossabaw Island purchased land from Judge Henry McAlpin. The following year, a parcel was purchased for the Sweetfield Church. The 1961 building remains at the site today. In the late 1920s, a Rosenwald School



Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church is a community landmark building in Pin Point. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

was constructed at Pin Point, though that building has not survived. The district includes 60 residences, and community landmark buildings.

On November 19, 2011 the Georgia Historical Society (GHS) erected a historic marker at the edge of the community cemetery next to Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church. The Pin Point Betterment Association sponsored the marker, and welcomed home Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, their native-born keynote speaker. Justice Thomas spent his formative years in Pin Point,



Pin Point Hall is a community meeting facility. Photo courtesy of the Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission

and his mother still lives in the community. He moved to Savannah in his youth, but still recalled playing on Pin Point Road when it was unpaved. When he was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1991, he "always hoped when he left to bring honor to Pin Point." He thanked Barbara Fertig for her work as the "devoted recorder of the community" and Emily Owens for spearheading the opening of the Pin Point Heritage Museum.



U. S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas returns home to Pin Point to dedicate the Georgia Historical Society marker. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

When African Americans re-established their community in Pin Point, their skills in shrimping, crabbing and oyster processing came with them, as the community provided a workforce for seafood factories that emerged there. One oyster factory, A.S. Varn and Son, operated in Pin Point almost 60 years from 1926-1985. It employed most of the Pin Point community. Workers were engaged in processing/canning oysters and deviled crabs for delivery to restaurants on the east coast. Over the years the Varn complex fell into disrepair until a year ago when restoration began.

The Pin Point Heritage Museum was unveiled after the GHS marker dedication on November 19th. The museum features several small buildings that interpret oyster harvesting. One building has a mural that portrays community activities. Posters in every building depict community members with accompanying audio clips.

Both Ossabaw Island and the Pin Point community are important resources in the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor that was designated by Congress in 2006. These places, their significant stories, and current preservation initiatives, will provide a viable and tangible link to Georgia's Gullah/Geechee heritage. ■



These are two of the buildings in the Pin Point Heritage Museum that interpret community life and work in the oyster industry. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

ATLANTA'S SOUTH-VIEW CEMETERY IMPLEMENTS "AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES" TOURS

*LaVonne Williams, African American Programs Assistant
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South-View Cemetery was founded in February, 1886, by six black businessmen including Jacob McKinley, George W. Graham and Albert Watts. They petitioned the State of Georgia for a charter to establish a respectable place to lay their loved ones to rest. Before the creation of South-View, African Americans were buried at Oakland Cemetery in the segregated section designated for blacks. Originally 25 acres, the cemetery presently includes over 100 acres and is home to some of Georgia's most prominent men and women. South-View Cemetery is near the Lakewood Heights, Norwood Manor and Thomasville communities. Still providing burial services, the cemetery operates on its 1886 premise that a dignified burial place should be available to all regardless of race, creed or religious affiliation.



The historic section of South-View Cemetery is the final resting place for many notable men and women of Atlanta, including Reverend and Mrs. Martin Luther King, Sr., Geneva Haugabrooks, Grace Towns Hamilton and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Unlike many historic cemeteries, South-View remains active, holding hundreds of funerals each year. Families around the world have ties to the grounds, including the current president of South-View, Winifred Watts Hemphill. Her familial ties to the cemetery span back many generations starting with her great-grandfather Albert Watts and her uncle, Albert H. Watts. Albert Watts was one of the pioneers of South-View and a prominent businessman in Atlanta. Mrs. Hemphill's uncle Albert H. Watts began working at South-View in 1931 when he was still a teenager. By 1961, Watts became manager of the cemetery and was president and treasurer of South-View in 1977. Carrying forward the principals of the founders and her family, Mrs. Hemphill and staff continue to provide a respectable burial place for all people.

South-View has both perpetual care and non-perpetual care areas. All cemetery lots today are sold with perpetual care provisions but the historic, non-perpetual section was originally maintained by families. Today, the Historic South-View Preservation Foundation, a non-profit organization, augments the cemetery's preservation through fundraising and interpretive projects. Since

2004, the foundation, whose board of directors include historians, preservationists and individuals with family connections to South-View Cemetery, has received grant support. The Mary Allen Lindsey Branan Foundation aided the development of a preservation plan while the Watson Brown Foundation helped to restore monuments and graves. Other preservation funders include the Price Gilbert Jr. Charitable Fund and the David, Helen and Marian Woodward Fund-Atlanta.

Since its inception the foundation has been active in preserving African American history throughout the city by collaborating with other organizations. As part of the *Coalition to Remember the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot*, services were held at South-View in conjunction with the centennial commemoration.

They have also become a preservation partner in *Phoenix Flies, A Citywide Celebration of Living Landmarks*. As part of the *Sacred Spaces* tour organized by the Atlanta Preservation Center, South-View joined five other Atlanta venues including Ahavath Achim Synagogue, Paces Ferry UMC, Al-Farooq Masjid, Big Bethel A.M.E. Church, and North Avenue Presbyterian Church in guided tours of their facilities.

Dr. D.L. Henderson conducted the South-View Cemetery *Sacred Spaces* tour which featured ministers from historic African American churches in Atlanta. All of these denominations have significant church leaders who are buried at South-View. Other historians provided anecdotes and personal recollections about loved ones who were ministers or discussed the communities that surround the cemetery.



William 'Bill' Allison is the president of Historic South-View Preservation Foundation. Allison has led the organization since 2004.



Winifred Watts Hemphill and board member Dr. D.L. Henderson partner to preserve South-View Cemetery and interpret its importance to Atlanta's African-American past.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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Reverend Dr. Michael Harris, pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church, discusses the legacy of Reverend Dr. William Holmes Borders, Sr. on the *Sacred Spaces* tour. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



The pedestal of the angel lists the names of the founders of South-View: Jacob McKinley, Robert Grant, Albert Watts, George Graham, Charles Morgan and John Render.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



Dr. Pearlle Dove is one of the board members of Historic South-View Preservation Foundation. She attended the cemetery's 125th Charter Day ceremony. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The South-View 125th anniversary celebration was a recent accomplishment. South-View Cemetery received the Phoenix Award from the office of Mayor Kasim Reed for outstanding contributions to the city and citizens of Atlanta. Foundation board member and historian Dr. D. L. Henderson increases public awareness about South-View's historic past through guided walking tours and, more recently, cell phone tours.

The cell phone tour focuses on the historic non-perpetual care section. It was a collaborative effort with

Oakland Cemetery that jointly provides summaries of the lives and accomplishments of African Americans interred at these sites. Similar to Oakland's cell phone tour, a heritage tourist can stop by the visitors' center at South-View to pick up a site map that provides the phone number needed to begin the tour. Each stop along the tour has a numbered granite marker. The tour begins at the Angel and over the phone you get a great introduction to South-View and its contribution to the community. Once you hear the introduction you are given directions to the next stop and prompted to dial the corresponding number on the granite marker. While walking to the next marker you can enjoy soothing classical music or you can hang-up and re-dial the tour phone number and then dial the corresponding marker number once you reach your stop. Normal cell phone rates apply to the cell phone user while on the tour. Here are some of the influential persons interred at South-View Cemetery that are featured in the 14-stop tour:

Carrie Cunningham owned and operated the Royal Peacock on Auburn Avenue. Opened in 1949, the Royal Peacock provided a stage for several notable African-American artists like B. B. King, Little Richard, Aretha Franklin and Gladys Knight. That same year she opened Hotel Royal for visiting performers who were unable to stay at white hotels.



Carrie Cunningham is buried in a granite mausoleum with three additional family members. She bought the Top Hat on Auburn Avenue in 1948 and renamed it the Royal Peacock. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

John Wesley Dobbs, grandfather of Atlanta's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, was a prominent leader in Atlanta. In 1911 Dobbs was initiated into the Prince Hall Masons, a black fraternal order. He was elected Grand Master in 1935 and was often called the "unofficial mayor of Auburn Avenue." Dobbs was a large proponent of voter registration in the black community. In 1936 he founded the Atlanta Civic and Political League and, along with attorney A. T. Walden, co-founded the Atlanta Negro Voters League in 1946.



The broken column at the gravesite of John Wesley Dobbs represents the fall of a Free Mason leader. Dobbs was the Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons and is credited with naming Auburn Avenue "Sweet Auburn."

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Alonzo Herndon was born into slavery in Walton County on June 26, 1858. He arrived in Atlanta in 1883 where he later purchased half interest in a barber shop on Marietta Street that was owned by William Dougherty Hutchins. By 1904, Herndon owned three barber shops in Atlanta. His prosperous barber shops served an exclusively white clientele composed of the city's leading lawyers, judges, politicians, and businessmen. With much success in barbering, he expanded to real estate where he eventually acquired more than 100 homes and other commercial property. He then turned to insurance. In 1905, he purchased a failing mutual aid association that he incorporated as the Atlanta Mutual Insurance Association. The firm grew rapidly in the 1920's, expanding its operations into a half dozen new states, including Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas. At the time of his death in 1927, he was Atlanta's wealthiest black citizen.



The Herndon family plot has a large, marble marker engraved with the family name.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Martin Luther King, Sr. was born in 1899, and was the second of nine children. He was a native Georgian who was ordained while a teenager because of his preaching abilities. When he came to Atlanta, he married Alberta Williams in 1926, the daughter of Reverend A.D. Williams, who was then pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. King would succeed Williams as Ebenezer's pastor, a post that he held for 44 years. Daddy King, as he was affectionately called, led voter registration drives long before his son, Martin Jr. led the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. King was an accomplished musician who led the Ebenezer choir.



Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. and his wife, Alberta Williams King, are interred at South-View Cemetery. One of his quotes that is embedded in the marble mausoleum is "Still in business, just moved upstairs."

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



*Nasir Muhammad lectures to the participants of the **Sacred Spaces Celebration** at South-View Cemetery. This guided tour featured ministers and community historians who provided additional stories about the pastors who are buried there. At this stop, Muhammad discusses Reverend Charles Hubert and his significance to Morehouse College.*

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Cemeteries like South-View are great historical resources that tell the story of community life, cultural practices and religious beliefs of African Americans. For the last 125 years South-View has been a leader in community service for the citizens of Atlanta. Visit historic South-View and Oakland Cemeteries to learn more about African Americans who impacted the history of Atlanta. Their self-guided cell phone tours are free and open to the public. Walking tours at South-View are also free and open to the public. ■

ABOUT REFLECTIONS

Since its first issue appeared in December 2000, *Reflections* has documented hundreds of Georgia's African American historic resources. Now all of these articles are available on the Historic Preservation Division website www.georgiashpo.org. Search for links to your topic by categories: cemeteries, churches, districts, farms, lodges, medical, people, places, schools, and theatres. You can now subscribe to *Reflections* from the homepage. *Reflections* is a recipient of a Leadership in History Award from the American Association for State and Local History



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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 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. 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, Division Director
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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.