



# Reflections

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## THE DOUGLASS THEATRE CELEBRATES 90 YEARS: A HIDDEN TREASURE NO MORE

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

Charles H. Douglass was an African American businessman who recognized the need for African Americans to have their own entertainment venue and a decent place to stay during segregation. Douglass lived in Macon during Jim Crow, when separating the races was a part of southern culture. Just one generation from slavery, Douglass quickly grasped the real estate business, and realized there was a need for blacks to have their own businesses.

By 1906, he opened the Colonial Hotel, Macon's first hotel for African American travelers, and in 1911 he opened his first theatre. At that time, Macon had four "nickelodeons" that were movie houses where white patrons could see movies for a nickel. Charles Douglass saw the opportunity to augment his vaudeville acts and minstrel shows with the emerging movie industry. Douglass also kept a steady stream of African American entertainers coming to his theatre through his association with the Theatre Operators Booking Agency (TOBA). Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith got their start in TOBA's minstrel circuit. Ma Rainey, a Columbus native, performed at the Douglass Theatre with the Black Bottom Band and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels.

With growing interest from Macon's

African American community, as well as greater opportunities for African Americans in vaudeville, Douglass opened a second theatre for a few years. By the end of World War I, Douglass envisioned a grander facility and opened the New Douglass Theatre in 1921. He built the theatre in the Classical Revival design, and decided to build it when he and his wife were ushered to the segregated balcony at Macon's Grand Opera House. The Douglass Theatre, then considered a state-of-the-art movie house, expanded its seating capacity to approximately 750-800 seats with a balcony trimmed with Nubian masks.

After his death in 1940, his son Charles continued to operate the Douglass Theatre through the 1950s. At that time, the Douglass Theatre hosted talent shows and Otis Redding was discovered when he performed there. It became a venue for local talent like Macon's own Little Richard and James Brown. The Douglass family used offices on the front of the theatre for other businesses. When integration came and other facilities were open to blacks, the theatre closed its doors in 1972.

The Douglass Theatre remained vacant until concerned citizens approached the City of Macon to rescue it from the wrecking ball in 1978.



*The Douglass Theatre is a contributing resource in the Macon Historic District, and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Photo by James R. Lockhart*

## THE DOUGLASS THEATRE CELEBRATES 90 YEARS: A HIDDEN TREASURE NO MORE

*Jeanne Cyriaque, continued from page 1*



*Ma Rainey was a frequent performer at the Douglass Theatre while she toured many southern venues on the "Chitlin Circuit".*

IMAX capability, a performance/lecture stage, and a modern sound system. An annex was added to the theatre for special events, receptions and a gift shop. All this was done while maintaining the Nubian masks and original African-influenced design elements of the historic theater that Douglass had established.



*Otis Redding was discovered at the Douglass Theatre in 1958 by local disc jockey Hamp Swain on a talent show called "The Teenage Party".*

*Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

preservation through public/private partnerships.

The Friends of the Douglass Theatre Complex, Inc. sponsored the 90th anniversary of the Douglass Theatre on July

Former state representative David Lucas contacted the Historic Preservation Division (HPD) for technical assistance. The following year HPD contributed a \$40,000 Historic Preservation Fund grant for a feasibility study that led to stabilizing the building and exploring its possible adaptive reuse as a performing arts facility. The city sought other funding streams for several years, and the Douglass Theatre finally reopened in 1997 with seating capacity of nearly 400, and technology that improved the theater with

When comparing the Douglass Theatre to other African American theatres, Charles Douglass's original vision is similar to two other black, early 20<sup>th</sup> century entrepreneurs, Madam CJ Walker and Monroe "Pink" Morton of Athens. Madam CJ Walker did not live to open her theatre complex in Indianapolis, but her daughter continued her dream and opened her theatre in 1927. Today, it is a National Historic Landmark. Monroe Morton opened his theatre and business complex in 1910, and today it is the only surviving, intact 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre in Athens. All three theaters are recognized and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but more importantly, they say a lot about these cities recognizing diversity and

30, 2011 in partnership with the City of Macon and the business community. Kenneth Rollins, vice chair of the Friends organization, chaired the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary committee. Inaugural awards were given to partners who support the Douglass in the name of Mattie Dunn and James Wimberly, two community advocates who saved the Douglass. Awards were presented to the Peyton Anderson Foundation, Bill Lucado, Dr. Thelma Dillard and the family of Charles Henry Douglass.

Jasmine Guy was the evening's hostess for the performance and awards ceremony. Ms. Guy learned her dancing skills at Atlanta's Northside High School and the Atlanta Ballet before she emerged on Broadway as a singer and actress. Her television career resulted in numerous awards for her role as Whitley Gilbert in *A Different World*. Georgia writer Tina McElroy Ansa, a Macon native, shared memories of the Douglass from her mom and neighbors, and signed her newest novel, *Taking After Mudear*. The Douglass Youth Jazz Ensemble provided a concert with tunes from the big band era of Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington.



*Lily Douglass Hatchett is the daughter of Charles H. Douglass. She operated a beauty salon in the offices above the theatre. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*



*Tina McElroy Ansa stands in front of a watercolor painting of Little Richard in the theatre annex that is currently used for receptions and exhibits.*

*Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

The Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network congratulates the Douglass Theatre on its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We applaud the City of Macon in ensuring the physical remembrance of this place, its significance to Georgia's African American past, and its continuous use as a downtown performance facility for all of Macon's citizens.

## NEW HARMONIES: CELEBRATING AMERICAN ROOTS MUSIC THE SMITHSONIAN COMES TO GEORGIA

Arden Williams, Senior Program Officer  
Georgia Humanities Council

Georgia's musical traditions are a great reason to celebrate! The Georgia Humanities Council is hosting a traveling Smithsonian exhibition, *New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music*. The exhibition will tour the state for the next two years, stopping in 12 Georgia communities, each place hosting the exhibit for six weeks.



*New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music* has traveled to Georgia through a partnership between the Georgia Humanities Council, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Center for Public History at the University of West Georgia, Georgia Council for the Arts, and the Georgia Department of Economic Development.

The exhibition is part of *Museum on Main Street*, a Smithsonian Institution collaboration with state humanities councils nationwide. Support for *Museum on Main Street* has been provided by the U.S. Congress.

The Georgia tour of *New Harmonies* is led by Honorary Chair Sandra Deal, First Lady of Georgia, and Chair Rose Lane White Leavell.



First Lady Sandra Deal welcomes the Calhoun community to *New Harmonies* at the Harris Arts Center.

Photo courtesy of the Georgia Humanities Council

*New Harmonies* highlights traditional American roots music through a series of exhibit panels that highlight musical themes. Themes include the blues, sacred, country, folk, and popular music, with examples of notable performers, types of musical instruments, and an interactive visitor listening station. Those who visit the exhibit will notice that Georgia figures prominently in each musical category. Georgians can be proud of the musical legacies represented in the exhibition; some of the legacies were originated in our state.

There is a lasting legacy of African-American musical performers highlighted in the exhibition. A few of those who are showcased are Thomas Dorsey, James Brown, Blind Willie McTell and Ma Rainey. All of these notable performers impacted American music and influenced generations of musicians who followed.

*New Harmonies* kicked off in Calhoun, on April 14th with First Lady Sandra Deal cutting the ribbon at the grand opening, and area performers entertaining the crowd at the Harris Arts Center. The exhibition will remain in Calhoun until May 24th, before heading to the next stop on the tour, Madison. The tour will eventually make its way to: Darien, Perry, Moultrie, Toccoa, Bremen, Thomson, Nashville, Americus, Waycross and LaGrange.



Jamil Zainaldin, president of the Georgia Humanities Council, First Lady Sandra Deal and Stanley Romanstein, president of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, are partners in bringing *New Harmonies* to Georgia.  
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Each host community, along with displaying the exhibition, has organized a series of programs centered on the theme of roots music. Check the *New Harmonies* website for related programs and performances. Visitors to the exhibition can also read about the history of Georgia roots music and musical traditions in the exhibition catalog that is free to every *New Harmonies* visitor.

The Georgia Humanities Council hopes that visitors will bring the family to see the exhibit and then stay for at least one of the scheduled events.

For a complete list of exhibit locations, featured events, musical samples, partner organizations and additional details consult the *New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music* website at: <http://www.georgiahumanities.org/newharmonies>. ■

## JEANNE CYRIAQUE RECEIVES HIGHEST PRESERVATION AWARD

Patricia Carter Deveau, Board of Trustees  
The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation

Last summer I exited I-95 and was idling at the traffic light on the GA 25 Connector in Brunswick when to my left I spotted Jeanne Cyriaque in her bright blue Nissan Cube. We waved and laughed, as neither one of us was surprised that 350+ miles from our homes we would be side-by-side in coastal Georgia. As a volunteer working with African American communities in coastal Georgia, I have been lucky to have Jeanne at my side often. No person has traveled to more places in our state than Jeanne. And no one has done more to give recognition, hope and encouragement to people across the state when others did not see the value of “that old place.” Thanks to her efforts, countless historic homes, schools, churches, and farms have been documented and communities have rallied to save them. That is why I was delighted when at our annual meeting last month, The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation gave Jeanne Cyriaque the *Mary Gregory Jewett Award* for Lifetime Preservation Service.

The *Mary Gregory Jewett Award* is the Georgia Trust’s top honor given to an individual “whose dedication and service to the field of historic preservation in the state of Georgia is paramount.” Mary Gregory Jewett was the director of the Georgia Historical Commission and the founding president of the Georgia Trust. Under her leadership the commission gained national recognition as a pioneer in state historic preservation.



Jeanne Cyriaque accepts the *Mary Gregory Jewett Award* from Georgia Trust chairman Nat Hansford and president/CEO Mark McDonald. Photo by Althea Sumpter

Elizabeth Lyon, former director and state historic preservation officer of Georgia’s Historic Preservation Division (HPD), recalled the early days when she convened a meeting in Macon to consider preservation of Georgia’s African American heritage. This meeting resulted in the establishment of the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN) in 1989. “Some significant public awareness projects were done, but it was not until state funding was obtained for a staff coordinator that a fuller technical assistance, research and public information program could be established. Jeanne Cyriaque was the ideal person to become the program coordinator. It has been most rewarding for those of us who were there at the beginning to see what she has accomplished. She is well-deserving of this award,

as well as of the national recognition that has occurred under her leadership,” said Lyon.

Since 2000 Jeanne Cyriaque has served as the coordinator of African American programs at HPD. She is the staff liaison to GAAHPN and editor/writer of *Reflections*, an award-winning publication “that has added greatly to our understanding and awareness of African American cultural resources,” stated Tom Wight, treasurer of the Georgia Trust, who presided at the awards ceremony. “She has brought attention to many threatened resources, leading strong local, state, and national efforts to preserve sites.”

Jeanne has built her reputation as a leader in the preservation of African American sites, attending countless church suppers, commission meetings, local historical society events, regional and national conferences, and by-the-side-of-the road meetings with former students next to their kudzu covered old schoolhouses. Jeanne is a founding member of the *Initiative to Save Rosenwald Schools*, a southern state consortium convened by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In June 2012 she will lead several educational sessions at the National Rosenwald Schools Conference at Tuskegee University. She was nominated by the National Park Service to serve as a commissioner of the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. During her four-year term, she served as the commission’s first secretary and aided the development of a management plan for the corridor. She wrote articles for Georgia’s *African American Heritage Guide* and the *Guide to the Civil War* – both valuable contributions to our state’s heritage tourism efforts. In 2012, she began service to the Georgia Humanities Council as a member of their board of directors.

In summary, the Georgia Trust *Rambler* stated, “Her impact on our awareness, understanding, and preservation of this important cultural presence in our state is incomparable.”



Jeanne Cyriaque is an advocate for the preservation of the Harrington School on St. Simons Island. Photo by Susan Durkes

We agree! Thank you, Jeanne! Founded in 1973, the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation is one of the country’s largest statewide, non-profit preservation organizations. To learn more about the Georgia Trust and the Preservation Awards, visit [www.georgiatruster.org](http://www.georgiatruster.org). ■

## DECATUR'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

David S. Rotenstein, Ph.D.  
Historian

Elizabeth Wilson has lived in Decatur for most of her life. The Decatur she remembers sometimes is at odds with the city portrayed in the official historical record: published books and other documents that discount and distort the city's African American contributions to Decatur's development. As Decatur's first African American mayor and a key participant in the city's civil rights history, she recalls a city torn apart by urban renewal and divided by discrimination.



Elizabeth Wilson stands in front of the remaining portion of the old Herring Street School.  
Photo by David S. Rotenstein

In Wilson's Decatur, African Americans lived in wood shotgun shacks, duplexes, apartments, and cottages in a segregated part of the city's northwest quadrant. City garbage trucks rolled through the neighborhood to the municipal trash incinerator which was sandwiched between the backyards of single-family residences and the "City of Decatur Colored School."

Like many urban African American neighborhoods, Decatur's was centered in a low-lying area on the city's periphery. Blacks lived, worked, learned, played, and worshipped in the community known first as the "Bottom" and, later, the Beacon Community. Located southwest of the DeKalb County Courthouse, the City declared the area a slum and urban renewal began in 1938; it was expanded again in the 1960s; and, it is continuing in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

One afternoon in February 2012, I interviewed Wilson as she took me on a tour of Decatur's former African American community. "We are going over to the Beacon community where I used to live," she said as we pulled out of her Decatur driveway. "I moved there in 1949."

We drove around visiting the sites she considers most significant in Decatur's African American history. As Wilson drove, I asked questions and recorded our conversation. Elizabeth Wilson had recently turned 80. She and her family came to Decatur from rural Greensboro when she was a teenager. She recalls arriving in the city in the family's truck. Their first encounter with official Decatur came when their truck was stopped for going the wrong way in the one-way streets around the county courthouse square. A night in jail wasn't in the original moving plans.

Her family was bound for Decatur's new African American public housing. Built in the early 1940s in the core of the African American neighborhood, the Allen Wilson Terrace Homes were among the earliest public housing efforts in the United States. Inside this area were the homes owned and rented by Decatur's blacks. These people were construction workers, barbers and hairstylists, and storekeepers. They also cleaned white Decatur residents' homes and raised generations of white Decatur residents' children.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the neighborhood had no formal name. "I've always known it as the Beacon Community," said Wilson. "Even though there are people who don't seem to think that it was always called that."

Wilson's first home in Decatur was in the 300 block of Herring Street. Like many Atlanta area road networks, segments of streets inside African American neighborhoods had different names from other segments in white neighborhoods. In Decatur, once the color line was crossed, Herring Street became Trinity Place.

Wilson explained how folks knew they were crossing from the white part of town into the African American neighborhood. "It was pretty obvious," she said. "Houses dictated it. Streets dictated it."

The people, like Wilson, who lived in Decatur's public housing were envied by their neighbors living in the surrounding black community. "I used to think, personally, that the kids that lived in the project was rich," explained Bobby Pierce, a Decatur native who was raised inside the Bottom. "They had indoor hot and cold running water and a bathroom. I didn't have that. We didn't have that." I had interviewed Pierce, Wilson, and more than two dozen others as part of a research project on housing history in South Decatur.



Sylvia Clark's painting of Decatur's African American community is called "The Bottom."  
Photo by David S. Rotenstein

During our tour, Wilson underscored Pierce's observation: "Whatever their homes were, however other people saw them, it was their home and they was doing the best they could do."

Choice oftentimes wasn't a factor in where Decatur's African Americans lived or even how long they lived in one place. Deed restrictions and Jim Crow laws created the contours for

*continued on page 6*

## DECATUR'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

David S. Rotenstein, continued from page 5

Decatur's black community's geography and public policy was made far from Atlanta Avenue and Herring Street. "We knew we was living in a slum so and we found out we had to move," recalled Pierce, whose family was displaced in the 1960s. "They made decisions at City Hall that we had to get out of there."

As we drove through modern gated subdivisions that were built where African American homes and businesses once were located, Wilson amplified what Pierce had said in an earlier interview:

*I think back in those days that the way the decision-making people saw it is the only way we could fix the problem is we have to demolish the existing structures and build new structures ... That was not anywhere, it seems to me, in the thinking of keeping the town diverse or caring about how many people are displaced because of this.*

And, Wilson added,

*But the landscape really did a good job of erasing all of this... But again, I think in the minds of people who moved out of the community, especially the homeowners, if they moved back, this is what they thought they would be moving back into.*



This is an undated photo of the Herring Street School.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson

Life in Decatur's African American neighborhood was all about segregation's externalities. Mostly these externalities were social costs imposed on the people who lived there. One externality remains raw in Wilson's memory: the municipal trash incinerator's location. "The city dump used to be on part of where this building is," Wilson said as she pointed towards the Park Trace Apartments. "Every day the city trucks would come and they'd call it the crematory and they burned stuff and it was in the back yard, almost the complete back yard of where people lived on Elizabeth Street and Robin Street."

Other externalities were benefits. One was the tight-knit business community and a network of churches and the African American school:

*We all lived here and it just seems to me, everybody strived to sort of have the American dream, homes and good education and you know, just sort of the things that everybody else wanted. You know, safe community for the kids to play in ...*

*We all went to the same churches. You know, you had the Baptist church and the Methodist church and sometimes we would end up going with somebody to their church and especially if they had some social activity ...*

*The church, without a doubt, the church was the gathering place. So we didn't have a lot of places, like the social places. We always had the church and we had the school. The school was central for us, too. And we would have functions that, you know, we would invite people to come.*



Trinity High School and Beacon Elementary School were the schools that replaced the Herring Street School in the 1950s.

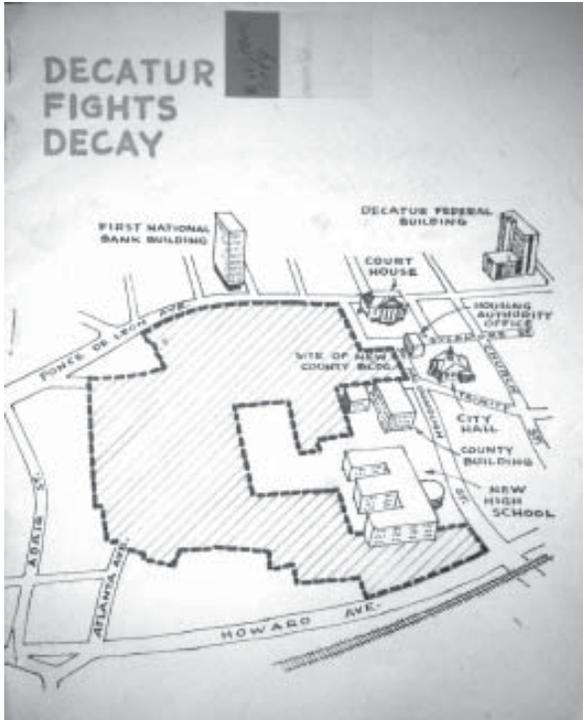
Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson

Decatur's segregated school system put African American children in the Herring Street School, a brick elementary school at the intersection of Herring and Atlanta streets. The old school was replaced in the 1950s by a pair of equalization schools: an elementary school (Beacon) and a high school (Trinity). The 1950s schools and a few churches are the only surviving architectural ties to Decatur's historically black community.

As urban renewal progressed in the 1960s, the area to the west was an established white neighborhood. Wilson recalls an encounter with a young white boy who was moving into the area on the Beacon Community's margins. "Now this, all of this, was the white area," she said. "As a matter of fact, I remember before they built that, this little boy talked about how they was getting rid of N.....town here."\*

## DECATUR'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

Urban renewal tore the community's fabric and scattered its residents to other parts of Decatur and beyond. The neighborhood that Decatur's African Americans called home was called a blighted slum — "Decatur's chief eye-sore" — by city leaders for much of the twentieth century. "This area has unpaved alleys, substandard housing and demands more in police and fire protection than it returns in taxes," wrote the City in a 1960s booklet titled *Decatur Fights Decay*.



"Decatur Fights Decay" is a booklet published by the City of Decatur. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson

Despite her intimacy with the landscape developed over more than half a century of attachment, Wilson struggles in places to connect what exists today to the buildings and spaces she vividly remembers. Throughout our tour, she repeatedly points to places where streets abruptly end in walls and fences. "This street is



The City of Decatur erected a historical marker that describes the Beacon Community in front of the former Trinity High School. Photo by David S. Rotenstein

Atlanta Avenue. It used to go all the way through and I'm going to come around and show you sort of how they chopped it up," she said as we approached Hibernia Avenue, the location of a relocated African American church.



Trinity Presbyterian Church was once located in this building across the street from the apartments that Elizabeth Wilson occupied in the 1960s. Photo by David S. Rotenstein

As Wilson and I spoke about her old neighborhood, the conversation veered towards how Decatur's African American history is preserved — in buildings and landscapes and in the written record. In our earlier interviews she had shared with me narratives written by various government agencies and newspapers that in her opinion failed to capture the true social, economic, and physical characteristics of Decatur's African American community. "I don't think we tell it because I don't think we know it," she said. "We know bits and pieces but I don't think we've ever had anybody to actually do any research or like the interviewing the families who lived here." ■

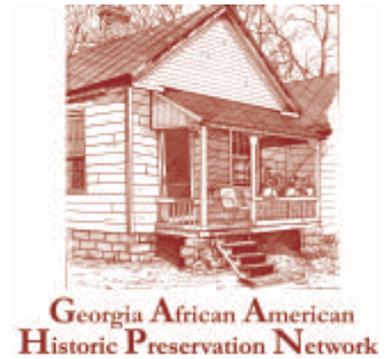
\* The direct quotation from the oral history interview was edited for the publication of this article.



Beacon Elementary School and the City of Decatur received a Historic Preservation Fund grant through the Historic Preservation Division in 2010 that funded a conditions assessment by Rutledge Alcock Architects. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

## 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](http://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](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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