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Reflections

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The Woman Who Birthed A City: The Story of A South Georgia Midwife

Denise Messick, National Register Historian
Historic Preservation Division

Georgia's National Register program always strives to recognize a diversity of important places from our past. Occasionally there are historic properties with stories so astounding that they surprise even long-time Historic Preservation Division staff. Such is the case with the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home in the small town of Camilla in southwest Georgia. This building is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, not for its architecture, but rather for historical events and accomplishments related to the amazing life of its owner Beatrice Borders (1892-1971).

The Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home was the private residence and workplace of an African American midwife. The nursing home was housed in a bungalow that is located in a historically black residential area of Camilla known as "The Hill." From the outside it looks like an ordinary home from circa 1935. A passerby might never know that it was also a maternity shelter where Beatrice Borders delivered thousands of babies between 1941 and 1971. According to Camilla Mayor Mary Jo Haywood, "This place virtually birthed a city."

While the practice of midwifery was once widespread, a facility like the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home appears to be unusual in many respects. Beatrice Borders (also known as "Miss Bea"), the founder and operator of the home, ran the only known commercial birthing center available to black women in Mitchell County and surrounding counties for at least three decades. She was a trained and licensed midwife who began her career around 1918 under the guidance of her mother, for whom the shelter was named. Borders' mother and her mother's sister were also midwives.

Over a period of 30 years beginning in 1941, Borders and her assistants delivered more than 6,000 babies, mostly at the nursing home, but also in the mothers' own homes when necessary. Before the maternity shelter opened, Borders' midwife career had been confined to making house calls, which was the usual practice for the profession at the time. While her patients were almost all African Americans, Borders also willingly extended her expertise to any white women who needed her.

The exterior of the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home is similar to other nearby houses, while the interior was modified to include a birthing

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This portrait of midwife Beatrice Borders (1892-1971) hangs in the living room of the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home.
Photo by Charlie Miller

The exterior of the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home looks very much like the neighboring houses. The front door opended into Ms. Borders' living quarters, while maternity patients and their families used the side door. *Photo by Charlie Miller*

Denise Messick, continued from page 1

room, recovery rooms, nursery, small office, laundry room, and side lobby entrance for expectant mothers. These medical rooms are in the rear of the house. The front rooms include the owner's living room, bedroom, and dining room. A kitchen and breakfast room, plus one full bath (shared by all) and two half baths, are also located in the back section of the house.

The entrance for mothers was located on a side street near the rear of the house. Photo by Charlie Miller

Patients came to Beatrice Borders from all over Mitchell County and the surrounding region. No other place in the area fulfilled this need. Transportation to the nursing home was sometimes difficult. Mothers stayed an average of three days, while meals were prepared for them and babies were cared for. Borders employed assistants to help with cooking and cleaning, as well as delivering the babies. Sometimes three or four patients were staying there overnight, either before or after delivery. If complications arose, a doctor in Camilla was always on call.

The house interior was separated into private and public spaces, although some areas were also shared. This is the lobby (parlor) in the rear section where patients entered from a side door. Photo by Charlie Miller

Women often preferred the type of care provided by midwives. They also relied on them for survival. Access to major medical facilities was limited, and many African Americans (as well as other poor, rural women) could not afford hospital fees. Over the years Borders charged between $25 and $55 for a delivery, but also accepted time payments and barter goods, such as farm products. No one was turned away for lack of money, though Borders sometimes had to borrow funds from the local bank to keep the operation going.

The nursing home was licensed by the state. Midwives who worked in Georgia were required to take a test given by the Georgia Health Department at the public health clinic in Camilla. Women had to be declared healthy enough by the white doctors in Camilla in order to have a baby delivered by midwife. These certifications, called "green cards," would only be signed by the doctor after the seventh month of pregnancy.

This was once a recovery room, and infant cribs were located in a separate nursery. Photo by Charlie Miller

Some background information on midwifery can help put Beatrice Borders' practice into its historical context. The "medical model" of childbirth is a relatively recent one. As long as women have been having babies, other women have been assisting with this as a natural process. In the U.S. in 1900, 50 percent of all women used midwives. As the field of obstetrics became a specialty in medical school, upper-class women began using doctors, who were more likely to treat pregnancy and childbirth as inherently dangerous. The major decline in midwifery began in early 20th century with a campaign of opposition by doctors (then always male).

In remote areas of the rural South, and particularly among African Americans, the practice of midwifery had a strong tradition and remained a viable and respected vocation even past the middle of the 20th century. There was widespread use in Georgia of what were affectionately known as "granny" midwives, older black women who had learned from their mothers or other relatives, and who had a central and esteemed role in their community. Southern lay midwives sometimes described their job as "catching babies," and in many cases there were ritual traditional practices involved. Some cultural traditions served a purpose related to the emotional support that midwives gave to the mothers.

The nursery had three newborns in this image, including one in an incubator. Beatrice Borders is seen on the right. Surgical caps and masks, such as that worn by the woman on the left, were sometimes handmade. *Photo courtesy of Hilda Inman*

In 1921 a coalition of women's activists and progressive social reformers supported the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, which was signed by President Warren G. Harding. This was the nation's first federally funded social welfare program, and it directly addressed the needs of women and babies by providing money to the states to fund midwife training programs. The American Medical Association opposed the legislation on several grounds, and federal funds only lasted until 1929. However, the act had a big impact as a public health initiative.

The proponents of the Sheppard-Towner Act hoped to reduce maternal and infant mortality. If midwives were to continue practicing, they had to enroll in government-run classes at their county health departments. In many cases in Georgia, nurses from Atlanta were sent to teach rural women about aseptic practices, hygiene, medical principles, and compliance with state regulations. The nurses inspected the midwives' medical bags to ensure they were clean and properly equipped. There was a special emphasis on prenatal care. The teachers were mostly highly trained white nurses, but ironically many had never delivered babies when they were sent to instruct experienced African American midwives.

Since new mothers were encouraged to stay until fully recuperated, the recovery room could have several patients at once. Some may have traveled a long distance, and needed the break from family responsibilities. *Photo courtesy of Hilda Inman*

Even after federal funds were withdrawn from states, health departments continued to educate and license midwives on a reduced level. Statewide in Georgia, 42 percent of babies were delivered by a midwife in 1936, and the number was reduced to 26 percent by 1946. In rural areas, the numbers remained higher.

In the December 3, 1951 issue, *Life Magazine* included a 12-page photo essay by renowned photographer W. Eugene Smith on the topic of African American midwives. It featured an article entitled "Nurse Midwife Maude Callen Eases Pain of Birth and Death." The woman in the photographs was a graduate of Tuskegee's midwifery program in Alabama (which had been partially supported by the Julius Rosenwald Fund). Black midwives received additional publicity in 1953 with the educational film *All My Babies*, produced by the Georgia Department of Public Health. The film (which is still available) follows midwife Mary Coley as she delivers babies in Albany, Georgia.

The Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home is now listed in the Georgia Register of Historic Places for its associations with Borders' accomplishments as an African American female entrepreneur. In addition to her medical expertise, Beatrice Borders was recognized as one of the most successful black businesswomen in Camilla. The house is a very rare surviving example of a birthing center that operated during the years of segregation. Members of an entire generation and their countless progeny originated from this place.

Christine Collier (left) and Arilla Smiley (right) both worked at the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home. Smiley was employed as a midwife from 1948 to 1971. Some of the medical equipment (scales, sterilizer, scissors, and stethoscope) is on the table. *Photo by Charlie Miller*

The nomination was accepted by the Georgia National Register Review Board at its June 2010 meeting. It is currently a pending National Register nomination in the areas of black ethnic heritage, commerce, health/medicine, women's history, and social history. The National Register is the official federal list of places that are considered worthy of preservation. It provides formal recognition of a property's historical, architectural, or archaeological significance based on national standards. The sponsors of the nomination, property owner Brenda Smiley and her sister Jacquelyn Briscoe, hope to honor the memory of Beatrice Borders by eventually opening interpretive exhibits in the house. ■

Albany Civil Rights Institute Celebrates Miss Bea's

Jeanne Cyriaque, African American Programs Coordinator
Historic Preservation Division

The Albany Civil Rights Institute hosted their "community night" forum on July 29, 2010. The monthly forum featured viewing of the *All My Babies* film that focused on African American midwifery in Albany and a special presentation by Mary Jo Haywood, mayor of Camilla, and Jacquelyn Briscoe, co-owner of Miss Bea's. Racquel Henry of Albany State University moderated the forum.

Daffamie Johnson proudly displays her birth certificate as the youngest Miss Bea's baby at the forum. *Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

Numerous community members who were descendants of Mary Coley, the midwife who was featured in *All My Babies* attended, as well as many residents who were Miss Bea's babies. Lee Formwalt, executive director of the Albany Civil Rights Institute (ACRI), introduced the film that was produced in the early 1950s and was converted to DVD format. The video is available in the gift shop, and information about ACRI exhibits and other "community night" programs and speakers are available at www.albanycivilrightsinstitute.com. The film provided a glimpse into the living conditions for expectant Albany mothers in the early 1950s, as it portrayed Mary Coley and her intervention in many of their homes. The film also emphasized the training and certification process that midwifes and expectant mothers mutually sought to ensure safety before deliveries.

Descendants and supporters of Miss Bea's included, from left to right: Dr. Monica Merritt-Gilbert (Mrs. Smiley's granddaughter), Jacquelyn Briscoe, William Coley Jr (Mrs. Coley's grandson) and Mayor Mary Jo Haywood.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Jacquelyn Briscoe showed the participants birth certificates and "green cards" that the expectant mothers received when white doctors approved their health condition and readiness to use the services of a midwife. Briscoe and her sister, Brenda Smiley, sponsored the nomination of the Georgia B. Williams Nursing Home to the National Register of Historic Places. She displayed some of the instruments used for deliveries at Miss Bea's, and shared photos with the audience. Briscoe hopes that listing the building will inspire future generations of the importance of this place to the Camilla community. As she pointed out, the birthing home was the only facility of its type in southwest Georgia between the 1940s to the 1970s. During that time, the average stay at Miss Bea's was three days. Women traveled from surrounding counties because her home was more convenient and sanitary.

Jacquelyn Briscoe displays some of the documents that were required for mothers to use a midwife to deliver their child. *Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

Mary Jo Haywood, who is the first African American and the first woman to be elected mayor of Camilla, is one of Miss Bea's leading supporters. The Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative (SRBWI) recognized Mayor Haywood by inducting her into the 2007 Hall of Fame, a project that emerged when SRBWI hosted a *Share Your Heritage* workshop in Albany several years ago. Mayor Haywood advocated for greater participation among African Americans in Mitchell County boards and led the effort for the first regulated countywide Day Care facility, a viable community service in Camilla.

Mayor Haywood spoke about the importance of Miss Bea's to Camilla by comparing the number of babies born there to the current population of Camilla, about 6,000 people. Mayor Haywood is excited about the National Register designation "...because this place survived and strived against great odds to become a place at which the equivalence of the population of this city was born. The designation would bring renewed appreciation and recognition for the past accomplishments of people who used obstacles as stepping stones to success." ■

Mary Jo Haywood
Mayor of Camilla

Two King Brothers Continued Their Father's Legacy

Joy Melton, African American Programs Assistant
Historic Preservation Division

John T. King was the son of Horace King, the famous bridge designer and builder. (*See The Legacy of Horace King and the Bridges of Washington King in Reflections,* March 2003 at www.gashpo.org). John King was born in Girard (now Phenix City) Alabama, to Horace and Frances Thomas King in 1846, the same year that Horace was emancipated. John King continued his father's legacy in construction chiefly in LaGrange, Georgia, where he formed his own company. John and his brothers, Washington, George and Marshall worked in the family business to design and construct bridges, houses, churches and commercial buildings. John King also actively served as a church and educational leader.

John T. King was a builder, entrepreneur and community leader who made many contributions to education, religious institutions and the built environment in LaGrange.

In 1860, while most African Americans were still enslaved, John King began his career as bridge keeper at the Dillingham Bridge in Columbus, Georgia. He was only fourteen years old. In 1871, one year before the King family moved to LaGrange, John married Julia Sanders. They had eight daughters and one son, who they named after his grandfather Horace. Horace personally taught his sons to build covered bridges and transferred his stock in the Arizona Bridge Company to his children and his second wife, Sarah Jane. After the Civil War, the Kings started the King Brothers Bridge Company that John headed after his father's health began to fail.

John King aided in the early development of commerce in LaGrange. In 1883, he developed a co-partnership with Dallis & Edmundson for a $10,000 investment to start a new manufacturing enterprise administered by King & Company. It was ideally located by the railroad on East Depot Street and was housed in a 36 ft. by 100 ft. wooden board and batten structure. The business produced and sold doors, sashes, blinds, chairs, mantels and inexpensive furniture. John literally built on his father's work when he supervised the addition of a third story to E.R. Bradfield's store that his father erected on East Court Square. The upper story was embellished with protruding brickwork and vents in the Italianate Style.

John King was the architect and contractor for the Loyd Building in 1897 on the southeast corner of the square with detailing similar to the E.R. Bradfield store including a cast iron storefront and decorative cornice. Hotel Andrews was a three- story building on Main Street built under the leadership of John King as superintendent of construction. It burned in 1931.

NOW

The Loyd Building is an Italianate Style retail structure that is located within the LaGrange Commercial Historic District. Photo by Joy Melton

In 1897, John King was the designer and construction superintendent for the Loyd building that is located on the southeast corner of East Court Square in LaGrange.
Courtesy of the Troup County Archives

John King contributed to LaGrange in multiple roles throughout his career. His letterhead in the 1920s not only described him as a contractor and builder, but also noted that he specialized in bridges, carefully prepared plans, and was an agent for water supplies, including pump gasoline engines and hydraulic water pumps for country homes. He built a bridge over Long Cane Creek on Sulphur Springs Road in 1888. John erected a two-story foursquare house with craftsman style columns that still stands at 603 Greenville Street. Horace King lived with John and his family here prior to his death. John King also built houses for prominent clients including Professor Alwyn M. Smith, the Director of Music at LaGrange College.

The Cotton States and International Exposition Negro Building, constructed in 1895, brought him international acclaim.

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Two King Brothers Continued Their Father's Legacy

Joy Melton, continued from page 5

THEN

This historic photo is the two-story foursquare house that John King built for his family in LaGrange. Photo courtesy of the Troup County Archives

NOW

Horace King lived with John and his family at this residence on Greenville Street in LaGrange until his death. The Bethesda Outreach Ministry uses the residence today. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

White architect Bradfield Gilbert of New York City designed the Negro Building for the exposition, and awarded $9,231 for construction to J.T. King and J.W. Smith of Atlanta. *The Atlanta Constitution* described King and Smith as "men of high financial standing and thorough business qualities." Exhibits on African American churches, inventions, and other topics from around the nation were housed in the Negro Building. The wooden structure was well made with large interior spaces supported by wooden trusses. It was built from foundation to roof entirely by African American labor and products. John's work as a sales representative also brought him international notoriety. He received a letter from Valerien Tschernaeff, the Russian Czars's Inspector of Agriculture, asking for more information on the "Monarch Fruit Dryer" that he promoted as an agent for J.G. Truitt and Company.

John King was one of the contractors for the Negro Building at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. Source: ***Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge Worth Reading, 1897***

Education and religion were integral to John King's life as well. He served for fifty years as the Sunday School Superintendent for Warren Temple Methodist Episcopal Church and was a member of the Board of Trustees for LaGrange Academy, the first African American school in LaGrange. The school was at one point named after John King and later called the East Depot High School. John was a trustee at Clark College in Atlanta from 1893-1918 and from 1924-1926. His work on sacred places included raising the steeple for the Presbyterian Church in 1886 on the corner of West Haralson and Church Street, and building a parsonage for First Presbyterian Church in 1903 on North Lewis Street. He constructed Unity Methodist Church in a cruciform plan topped with a cupola on Truitt Avenue. John King's obituary recognized him as a well-known resident of LaGrange having the "confidence of a large circle of white friends." He was known as a "constructive leader and wielded a wholesome influence" among his race. He died on November 9, 1926.

George H. King, John's younger brother, was born in 1850. George was "a bachelor who avoided churches and neckties." Nevertheless, George's body of work ranged from building bridges to stores.

John King built Unity Methodist Church in 1903. Today, the building serves as a Baptist church for a Hispanic congregation. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Similar to his father Horace, newspapers identified George as a champion bridge builder. George was the architect of the Mooty Bridge, was the builder of the Chattahoochee River Bridge, and built a 110 ft. lattice bridge on the Wehadkee Creek. A bridge he built over Blue John Creek on Hamilton Road was described as much needed by the community and was to be a 30 ft. long bridge with stone approaches. In 1886, George was the superintendent of construction for the Thornton Building located on the west side of the LaGrange square. The storefront has been modernized with a brick façade, but the north side of the original building is still visible. His other work included supervising construction on the LaGrange Female College boarding wing in 1887, building a warehouse in 1887 and a speculation building for J.G. Truitt in 1890. George also laid the foundation for a jail in LaGrange in 1892.

George H. King was the youngest of the King brothers. He was best known as a champion bridge builder who erected numerous bridges along the Chattahoochee River.

Although George is better known for his bridges, he and John worked together on a number of projects. In 1886, they received a contract for a courthouse addition in LaGrange and built new ordinary and clerk offices with a vault. That same year they lost the contract for a new bridge in West Point, Georgia to a Chicago firm. The King brothers persevered and won another contract in 1888 to build LaGrange's first cotton factory. George was one of the investors in the cotton mill.

George was a team player who was involved in his community. He served as a volunteer fire fighter and gave money to help public enterprises. As a stock market investor, he acquired funds from railroad stocks to enhance his bridge business. In 1886, George acquired twenty-five acres at Bean Place, an area later incorporated into Dixie Mills, where he and John lived for a time. An 1888 article from the *Cotton Factory* described George as one of the "thriftiest and most industrious colored men in Georgia." George King died in camp in 1899 while working on a bridge for the King Brothers Bridge Company.

THEN

George King built the granite foundation for the Troup County Jail in 1892.

Photo courtesy of the Troup County Archives

NOW

Today, the former Troup County Jail houses the Chattahoochee Valley Art Museum in the LaGrange Commercial Historic District.

Photo by James R. Lockhart

Isaac Johnson
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706/738-1901
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GAAHPN Network
912/261-1898

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 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.gashpo.org**. Preservation information and previous issues of ***Reflections*** are available online. Membership in the Network is free and open to all.

Reflections

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

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