

# Reflections



A Program of the Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources



Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network

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## PLACE MATTERS IN AN ATHENS NEIGHBORHOOD: THE EVOLUTION OF THE REESE STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

Jeanne Cyriaque, African American Programs Coordinator  
Historic Preservation Division

Just three blocks west of downtown Athens in Clarke County is the Reese Street Historic District, one of Georgia's oldest African American neighborhoods. This neighborhood's evolution began in 1868, when African Americans began to settle in an area of Athens that was undesirable to whites, as the terrain was hilly and the streets were unpaved and narrow. The population gradually increased throughout Reconstruction, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of Athens' 5,000 African Americans lived in the Reese Street neighborhood.

As the community emerged and "Jim Crow" laws enforced segregation of the races, commercial buildings, churches and schools were soon established and residences of all types reflected the varied economic status of the residents. Most of the houses were constructed on narrow lots facing the street. The residences that were built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were simple, one-story vernacular houses that were occupied by laborers. Eleven house types existed in the district. Some of the predominant types were: Bungalow, Shotgun, Central Hallway, Hall-Parlor, Saddlebag, American Foursquare and Georgian Cottage. Two commercial structures that were neighborhood corner stores still exist in the community. Some of the Reese Street residents were

Dr. W.H. Harris, a physician and Drs. Ida Mae and Lace Hiram, who were dentists. Their homes occupied spacious lots along Hancock Avenue and were typically larger, and in some cases they were two-story.

The Hiram house is a significant building associated with the African American medical profession in the Reese Street Historic District. The home is a one-story frame, pyramidal cottage that was built by Dr. William H. Harris in 1910. Dr. Harris was a co-founder of the Georgia State Medical Association in Augusta and the Improved Order of Samaritans, an Athens fraternal organization that assisted with burial expenses. He was one of the largest stockholders in the E.D. Harris Drug Company that was located in the Morton Building in downtown Athens.



Hill First Baptist Church was built in 1893. The brick structure is a community landmark building in the Reese Street Historic District. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Dr. Ida Mae Hiram, who was Georgia's first African American female dentist, began renting the cottage from Dr. Harris around 1918. Dr. Hiram purchased the cottage in 1934 and lived there with her daughter, Alice Hiram Wimberly, who was a dental hygienist that assisted her. Dr. Hiram practiced dentistry for 55 years until she was 83 years old. Both Dr. Ida Mae Hiram and her daughter sang in the choir at the First A.M.E. Church on Hull Street. The church purchased the cottage from

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## PLACE MATTERS IN AN ATHENS NEIGHBORHOOD: THE EVOLUTION OF THE REESE STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

*Jeanne Cyriaque, continued from page 1*

the estate of Alice Wimberly in 1985. Project Renew, Inc. rehabilitated the cottage and it provides geriatric care today.

Hill First Baptist Church is a community landmark building in the Reese Street Historic District. It is the oldest African American Baptist church in Athens, and was founded in 1867 when freedmen, desiring their own churches, began to separate from the white churches that they attended during enslavement. The church building was constructed in 1893 with Gothic detailing. Architectural features of the brick building include a gable roof and a two-and-one-half story tower with a steeple. Reverend Benjamin Rivers, pastor, is proud of the recent renovations to the historic church.



*This pyramidal cottage was the home of Dr. Ida Mae Hiram. She was the first African American woman to practice dentistry in Georgia. Her home was purchased by First A.M.E. Church. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

One of the earliest schools in the neighborhood was the Knox School. The Freedmen's Bureau founded the Knox School in 1868, and named it in honor of Major John J. Knox, who was the director of Reconstruction programs in Athens. It later received philanthropic support through the American Missionary Association and became known as Knox Institute. This private



*This building is one of the commercial structures in the Reese Street Historic District. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

boarding school existed until 1928. The J. Thomas Heard University was another private school that once existed in the neighborhood. It was named in honor of a prominent African American attorney who lived on Reese Street.

One surviving school building in the Reese Street Historic District is Athens High and Industrial School. The two-story wood building that became Athens' first public school for African Americans was constructed in 1913. The school was a two-story frame building with eight classrooms. At the time of its construction, Athens High and Industrial School was steam heated. The building had a brick foundation and a manual training shop in the basement. By 1916, Athens High and Industrial School was the only black public high school in the state of Georgia. Professor Samuel F. Harris was the principal of the school and supervisor of all black schools in Athens. Dr. Charles Haynes founded the nursing department at Athens High and Industrial School in 1918. It was one of the first African American schools that received accreditation by the state in 1922.

Athens High and Industrial School moved into a new building in 1955 and the old school building was sold to the Athens Masonic Association, Inc. in 1960. Today, the Masons and Eastern Stars are stewards of the building and it is used for meetings and church services. Christine Weaver Howard, a community resident, attended Athens High and Industrial School. Her family owns several houses and a commercial building in the district.



*Athens High and Industrial School is a community landmark building in the Reese Street Historic District. The building is owned by the Athens Masonic Association, Inc. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

The Reese Street Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on November 10, 1987. At the time of the listing, the Reese Street Historic District encompassed a six-block area that was primarily residential with two commercial structures and two community landmark buildings: Athens High and Industrial School and Hill First Baptist Church. While the designation recognized the significance of this historic district in architecture, community planning and ethnic heritage, it did not protect it from development.



*The Reese Street Historic District's residences represent eleven different Georgia house types.*

*Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*



*Some houses along Reese Street face a vacant lot where Knox Institute once stood.*

*Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

While listing in the National Register of Historic Places achieved recognition by the National Park Service of the Reese Street Historic District's significance as an intact African American neighborhood, a local designation complements the National Register listing by implementing a design review process. This process ensures that future changes in the character of the district are approved before building permits are issued. The design review process also prevents demolitions unless necessary due to a building's condition.

Over the ensuing 20 years since the district was listed, many community residents sold their houses or began to rent to students from the expanding University of Georgia campus. In 2006 the Kappa Alpha fraternity purchased an apartment complex in the district. At the time, Athens-Clarke County zoning regulations allowed fraternities and sororities to locate on multi-family zoned property. Since the acquisition, the county has passed an ordinance that makes fraternities and sororities a "special use" that requires a different process for such a move, but the ordinance was not in place at the time. The fraternity demolished one of three existing apartment buildings and built a new fraternity house on West

Hancock Avenue. Kappa Alpha also purchased two historic houses that were adjacent to the fraternity house and subsequently demolished them in March 2007 for parking.

The original move by Kappa Alpha in 2006 prompted the Reese Street/West Hancock neighborhoods to contact the Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation (ACHF) to seek protection from further insensitive development in the Reese Street Historic District. The neighborhoods formed an association and with ACHF initiated a local designation process. ACHF conducted a historic resource survey that documented 51 contributing historic buildings in the Reese Street Historic District and also prepared a Local Historic District Designation Report.

The Neighborhood Association held public meetings and provided input to the consultant who prepared the designation report. Several community meetings were held before the report was presented to the Historic Preservation Commission for approval in the spring of 2008. The Athens-Clarke County Commission approved local historic designation of the Reese Street Historic District on July 1, 2008 thus ensuring that future development in Reese Street complements the historic character of the neighborhood.

Hope Iglehart, a long-time community resident, is excited about the local designation. "It gives my future children and others like them a sense of belonging and an opportunity to see people like us are part of the fabric of which Athens-Clarke County is built." ■



*This house is a two-story structure that sits on a spacious lot in the Reese Street Historic District.*

*Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*



*The Morton Building in downtown Athens provided office space for many African American physicians who lived in the Reese Street neighborhood.*

*Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

## MARTIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Keith S. Hébert, Historian  
Historic Preservation Division

Creating an adaptive use for an old school building often requires the construction of an extensive network of public and private partnerships. In Terrell County, Herbert and Dorothy Tomlin recently purchased the Martin Elementary School in the hopes of rehabilitating the historic building to be used as a community center for the residents of Bronwood. Since the school's closure in 1970, the building has remained largely vacant and today requires extensive repairs before the 1956 building reopens. As the property owners search for funding sources and build new partnerships, the time has come to highlight the Martin Elementary School's significance in Georgia history.

The former Martin Elementary School is a one-story brick International-style building designed by architect Edward Vason Jones, a native of Albany, Georgia. Timing was a critical part of the school's *raison d'être*. This racially segregated school was built in 1956 as part of the Terrell County Board of Education's school building program and as a defiant effort to resist impending federal mandates stemming from the recent *Brown v. Board* (1954) decision. The county's white leaders hoped that by constructing new state-of-the-art school buildings for African American students they might delay integration. School representatives argued that their building program fulfilled the stipulations imposed by the *de jure* racial segregation stemming from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which legitimated "separate but equal."



Each classroom in the school has one wall of windows for optimum lighting.  
Photo by James R. Lockhart

enhanced the learning experience. By funding a state-of-the-art, architect-designed, school building that met the period's most advanced standards the Terrell County school board tried to persuade observers that the existing "separate but equal" status-quo had benefited African Americans.

After experiencing several problems related to funding and construction delays, the Martin Elementary School opened in September of 1956. For the next 14 years, the school served as the major educational institution for African American schoolchildren in the town of Bronwood as well as a central location for community gatherings. The school held classes for kindergarten through the eighth grade. While African Americans in Bronwood welcomed the new school, they continued to protest the injustices of racially segregated schools. Finally, in 1970, the Terrell County Board of Education integrated its local school district. Terrell County was one of the last counties in the state to desegregate its public schools. Integration was a major victory for local civil rights advocates, but the monumental change spelled the end for Martin Elementary. When most counties integrated they chose to close existing black schools and relocate its students to extant white schools. In Bronwood, the school closed in 1970 as its students were bused to a former all-white school located in the county seat of Dawson.



Martin Elementary School was built in 1956 in response to the *Brown v. Board* decision. The school was listed in the *National Register of Historic Places* on May 12, 2008.  
Photo by James R. Lockhart

"Equalization" schools—a term that identifies segregated schools constructed in the South following the *Brown v. Board* decision—were built using the latest modern construction techniques and architectural designs. The exterior façade of the Martin Elementary School, for example, has elongated walls of glass windows that provided abundant lighting for each classroom. Every classroom also had additional interior transom light windows that opened out into the school's long central hallway. During the 1950s, educators believed that a student's educational environment (particularly the availability of fresh air and natural lighting)



This room served as the school's auditorium and cafeteria.  
Photo by James R. Lockhart

Today, property owners Herbert and Dorothy Tomlin hope to breathe new life into a building that had once been a focal point of the local community of Bronwood. ■

## ST. PAUL RURAL-LIFE GILLESPIE-SELDEN COMMUNITY CENTER WINDOW RESTORATION PROJECT

Emily Eigel, Grants Intern  
Historic Preservation Division

The Georgia Heritage Grant Program, created in 1994 and funded annually by the Georgia legislature, provides much needed seed money for historic preservation projects throughout the state. The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Department of Natural Resources administers these grants. Groups that support the preservation of African American properties are often among the applicants for the Georgia Heritage Grant Program.

In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2008, the St. Paul Rural-Life Gillespie-Selden Community Center in Cordele was among the recipients of a Georgia Heritage Grant when it was awarded \$12,000 to complete its window restoration project. These repairs will allow the building to re-open and serve as a learning center with administrative offices and programs for the youth and senior citizens of the community. Repairs began in January 2008 and should be completed by the fall.



St. Paul Presbyterian Church is a community landmark building in the historic district.  
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque



The administrative building is a contributing resource in the Gillespie-Selden Historic District that was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on December 2, 1998.  
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The Administrative Building, constructed in 1937, is part of a complex that makes up the Gillespie-Selden Institute. The Institute began in 1902, with its founder Dr. Augustus Clark teaching elementary and Sunday school classes to the African American community of Cordele in the basement of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church. By 1904, enough money had been raised to construct three buildings that would form the Gillespie Normal School. They would serve as a school, a hospital, a nursing school, boarding houses/dorms, and recreational facilities. A hospital, which became the first to serve the African American community in that region of the state, opened in 1925 on the second floor of the school building. The Gillespie-Selden Institute remained open until 1956, when the city consolidated its schools because of desegregation.

Today, although some buildings are in poor condition, the Gillespie-Selden Institute continues to serve the community by hosting community events and providing youth activities and various services for the African American community of Cordele. The St. Paul Rural-Life Gillespie-Selden Community Center has

received funding from other organizations, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to make repairs to buildings in the complex. Georgia Heritage Grant funding will be used to make repairs to the historic wooden windows of the Administrative Building.

The Georgia Heritage Grant awards, which in recent years have varied from seven to fifteen grants per year depending on funds available, is based on various criteria including need, degree of threat to the resource, project planning, and community benefit. Grants are available for both development and predevelopment projects. The St. Paul Rural-Life Gillespie-Selden Community Center is an example of a development project – a type of project that can include stabilization, preservation, rehabilitation and restoration activities. Predevelopment projects can include plans and specifications, feasibility studies, historic structure reports, or other building-specific or site-specific preservation plans. The maximum grant amount that can be requested is \$40,000 for development projects and \$20,000 for predevelopment projects.

In order to be eligible for funding, applicants must be a local government or private, secular, nonprofit organization and have documentation of matching funds. The matching funds must equal to at least 40% of the project cost. The property for which funds are being requested must also be listed in, or eligible for listing in, the Georgia Register of Historic Places. Listing must be completed before reimbursement of funds. All grant-assisted work must meet the applicable Secretary of the Interior's "Standards for Archaeology and Historic Preservation."

This year's grant applications are now available; completed applications must be submitted to HPD by July 13<sup>th</sup>. For further information about the grant program, please contact Carole Moore, Grants Coordinator, Historic Preservation Division, Department of Natural Resources at 404-463-8434, or e-mail her at [carole.moore@dnr.state.ga.us](mailto:carole.moore@dnr.state.ga.us). Electronic versions of the grant applications are also available online at [www.gashpo.org](http://www.gashpo.org). ■

## HONORING GEORGIA'S WOMEN OF ACHIEVEMENT

*Hermina Glass-Avery, African American Programs Assistant  
Historic Preservation Division*

Georgia Women of Achievement (GWA) is a non-profit organization founded in 1990 by concerned individuals who believed that it was high time to honor and celebrate the great achievements of women of Georgia who, otherwise would go relatively unnoticed in Georgia's history. First Lady Rosalynn Carter conceived of the original idea in 1988 and was among the founding committee members. The goals of the organization are to publicize the outstanding achievements of women, encourage and support research and development of information about important women in Georgia, provide information about inspirational role models for Georgia's youth, and advocate inclusion of women's achievement in educational material. GWA accomplished these goals by 1992 when it celebrated its first induction ceremony at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia.



The ceremonies are held annually in March to correspond with Women's History Month programs that are held across the country. Nomination criteria state that nominees: must be clearly identified with Georgia; must have made extraordinary contributions in her field of endeavor; and, there must be at least ten years between the time of her death and a nomination. Basic criteria for nominating a woman of achievement include historical significance, highest character and enduring legacy.

The GWA honorees include a diverse group of women who have been influential in many areas of society including education, government, politics, law, religion, and civil rights. They hail from all regions of the state, and they represent various ethnic groups. African American women are well represented among GWA's contingent of distinguished honorees. As testament to their enduring legacies, their accomplishments have been literally and figuratively etched in stone. Two historic female figures whose pioneering work continues to impact Georgia are Sarah McLendon Murphy of Cedartown and Mother Mathilda Beasley of Savannah.

In north Georgia, Sarah McLendon Murphy, daughter of former slaves, focused her desires on education and entrepreneurship. At an early age, she envisioned the establishment of a school for black children. The challenges of life at the time did not prevent her from accomplishing her dreams. Around 1914, she traveled the countryside in Floyd and Polk counties helping to establish four schools. Eventually, she made her way to Atlanta where she attended Spelman Seminary (presently Spelman College) in the early 1920s.



*Sarah McLendon Murphy  
Photo courtesy of  
Murphy-Harpst Children's Home*

After graduation, she returned to Cedartown and opened a school and orphanage in her home. She called it the Sarah Divinia Murphy Home, named for her only daughter who died at the age of nine from blood poisoning. In 1946, she and her husband, Marion Murphy, expanded their home for children with the addition of new buildings, only to be destroyed shortly thereafter by a fire in 1950. Still, they were not deterred and by 1953 they began rebuilding with funds

donated from various sources throughout the state. Prior to the groundbreaking for the new building, Marion passed away. And, Sarah, continuing to move forward, lived long enough to see the realization of a new building.

As the years passed, the Murphy Home fared poorly until 1961 when the Women's Division of the Methodist Church acquired the property and eventually merged the Murphy Children's Home with the Ethel Harpst Home, thereby forming the Murphy-Harpst Children's Center in Cedartown, which continues the tradition of providing quality care for children in north Georgia. (An online video on *The Life of Sarah McLendon Murphy* is available at [www.murphyharpst.org](http://www.murphyharpst.org).)



*The Murphy-Harpst Children's Home is located in Cedartown.*

*Photo courtesy of the Murphy-Harpst Children's Home*



**Mother Mathilda Beasley**  
*Photo courtesy of the  
Georgia Historical Society*

Along the coast, Mathilda Beasley, originally from New Orleans, Louisiana and believed to be of creole (French, African, and Native American) ancestry, directed her life's work toward caring for black children secretly providing education and religious instruction later in her life. There is still a mystery surrounding her migration to Savannah in the late 1850s. However, during her early years in the city she worked various jobs as a free woman of color, a precarious identity that facilitated no guaranteed protection from white enslavers, especially for one who was secretly teaching Negroes to

read and write. She continued her clandestine school through the Civil War.

In 1869, Mathilda met Abraham "Abe" Beasley, also a free person of color, and they married. According to the 1870 census, Abe owned property on Skidaway Island and the Isle of Hope, operated a retail store and restaurant, and owned a few slaves. Upon his death in 1877, Mathilda, now a widow, increased her attention toward earthly and heavenly deeds. In the early 1880s, she traveled to York, England to study as a Catholic nun in the order of St. Francis of Assisi. Having taken the vow of holy poverty, chastity, love, and obedience, she returned to Savannah as Mother Mathilda and bequeathed all of her possessions to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in order to establish the St. Francis Home for Colored Orphans. The orphanage's second location is the site of St. Benedict's Parish.

Mother Beasley, as she was later called, stamped the first imprints of black Catholicism in Savannah when she established the Third Order of St. Francis (Poor Clares) in 1889, the first sisterhood of African American nuns in Georgia. This endeavor did not fair without problems, especially in the Deep South. There were financial setbacks as well as white opposition. However, Mother Beasley persevered with her efforts until December 20, 1903, the day that she passed away. Today, almost 150 years after her arrival in Savannah, Mother Beasley is memorialized with a park that is named in her honor. A historic marker is located at 1707 Bull Street in front of the Mother Mathilda Beasley Society, which continues to champion the causes that were near and dear to her heart.

Inducted among many great women of Georgia, both Mother Mathilda Beasley and Sarah McLendon Murphy were honored by Georgia Women of Achievement in March 2004. For more information on Georgia Women of Achievement, Inc., please visit [www.georgiawomen.org](http://www.georgiawomen.org). ■



*A historic marker in commemoration of Mother Mathilda Beasley lies next to Sacred Heart Church in Savannah. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*



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**Isaac Johnson, Chair**  
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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](mailto:jeanne.cyriaque@dnr.state.ga.us)



**Hermina Glass-Avery**  
*African American  
Programs Assistant*  
Voice 404/657-1054  
Fax 404/657-1040  
[hermina.glass-avery@dnr.state.ga.us](mailto:hermina.glass-avery@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 2,600 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](http://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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W. Ray Luce, Division Director &  
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer  
Jeanne Cyriaque, Editor

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A Program of the  
**Historic Preservation Division**  
**Georgia Department of Natural Resources**  
**34 Peachtree Street, NW**  
**Suite 1600**  
**Atlanta, GA 30303-2316**