

Steven A. Davis

# Civil Rights in Orangeburg County, South Carolina

**T**he civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is one of the most important chapters in the history of African Americans. Therefore, as the nation's preservation community identifies properties for their associational value to African-American heritage, civil rights sites should be included.

Orangeburg County, South Carolina, provides an excellent case study concerning resources that played a role at the grassroots level of the of the state's civil rights activities, including the Orangeburg Massacre in 1968. Orangeburg County's civil rights sites reveal much about the types of properties associated with the movement as well as the preservation issues and problems presented by such resources.

Due to its rich agricultural heritage and African-American majority, Orangeburg County was a significant part of South Carolina's black belt during the 1950s and 1960s. Two historically African-American colleges, South Carolina State and Claflin, were located in the city of Orangeburg, the state's principal center of higher education for blacks. The county's civil rights campaigns followed the patterns of the national movement: school desegregation efforts during the 1950s, sit-ins in 1960, large-scale protest movements during the early 1960s, and disillusionment mixed with violence in the late 1960s.

*All Star Bowling Lanes, Orangeburg. The whites-only policy of the bowling alley sparked the civil rights protests that culminated with the Orangeburg Massacre. Photo by the author.*

In 1955 following the Brown decision, two Orangeburg County school districts received desegregation petitions from African-American parents. The reaction in the Ellore district of the county was quick: whites formed the state's first citizens council to pressure blacks who advocated desegregation. When whites in the Orangeburg district organized a citizens council, blacks responded by boycotting white-owned businesses and creating a relief fund. This school desegregation effort ended in a stalemate during 1956. In 1960, the national civil rights movement turned to direct action as African Americans, especially college students, staged lunchcounter sit-ins. After several sit-ins at Orangeburg's Kress Department Store, black college students held South Carolina's largest demonstration of the year. Inspired by Martin Luther King's successful Birmingham campaign, local blacks picketed downtown stores, staged mass demonstrations, and boycotted the school system in 1963 and 1964. Despite mass arrests, protest activities ended only with the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

By 1968, Orangeburg's African-American college students were irritated by the whites-only policy of All Star Bowling Lanes. On the night of February 6, several hundred students arrived at a demonstration in the parking lot of the shopping center that included the bowling alley; around one hundred law enforcement officers were present. A disturbance broke out and officers with riot batons began beating students. Cars and shop windows between the bowling alley and the colleges were damaged by retreating students. The following day, city officials unsuccessfully tried to calm the situation as state highway patrolmen and national guardsmen were deployed. On the night of February 8, a group of students gathered at the edge of South Carolina State's campus to build a bonfire; some students hurled objects at nearby law enforcement officers. Patrolmen accompanied a firetruck to the bonfire as the students moved into an open field. As tensions mounted, a group of patrolmen at the edge of the field suddenly opened fire into the crowd of students. The results were devastating: three students dead and twenty-seven others wounded.

The controversy over the campus shooting, known as the Orangeburg Massacre, began imme-



diately as state officials and civil rights activists outlined different versions of the event. The impact of the Orangeburg Massacre on the nation was limited due to inaccurate reporting by the media, which claimed that students had fired at the patrolmen immediately before the shooting. The event is significant as one episode in the string of violent campus confrontations that culminated with the anti-war protests at Kent State University in 1970, and in Orangeburg County, the Orangeburg Massacre was a dramatic climax for the civil rights movement.

As the scene of important civil rights activities, Orangeburg County possesses many buildings and structures associated with the movement, and a civil rights site typology is a useful tool for evaluating these resources. Based on a property's role in the movement, Orangeburg County's civil rights sites may be grouped into four types: African-American organizing sites, confrontation sites, white resistance sites, and commemorative sites. This typology was recently used by the author in a successful National Register of Historic Places multiple property submission for Orangeburg County's civil rights resources.

African-American organizing sites are buildings where civil rights activities were planned and mass rallies were held. Since blacks were denied the use of publicly-owned and white-owned facilities, African-American organizing sites were usually black-owned properties, especially churches. The most significant of these sites in Orangeburg is Trinity Methodist Church, which served as the principal meeting place for local blacks throughout the civil rights movement.

The second civil rights site type is the confrontation site, a property associated with protest activities and conflict. Since many demonstrations targeted whites-only business practices, confrontation sites may be commercial structures. For exam-

ple, Orangeburg's Kress Department Store was the target of sit-ins during 1960; All Star Bowling Lanes was the focus of protests that led to the Orangeburg Massacre in 1968. In addition, confrontation sites may include segregated publicly-owned facilities where demonstrations occurred. In 1964, African Americans staged wade-ins at Orangeburg's swimming area for whites. Lastly, black schools may be confrontation sites. School officials fired the African-American teaching staff at the Ellore Training School in 1956; black students boycotted Whittaker Elementary School in 1963 following the firing of a black teacher.

White resistance sites are the third civil rights site type and include two subtypes: sites associated with official white resistance and sites associated with private white resistance. Official white resistance sites include buildings used by authorities as holding facilities or trial locations for protesters, like Orangeburg County's jail, courthouse, and armory. Private white resistance sites are properties that served as meeting places or rally sites for the citizens councils and the organizers of private schools, which were a response to desegregated public schools. White resistance groups frequently used lodge halls. For example, Orangeburg's citizens council was founded in 1955 at a Woodmen of the World hall. Additionally, white resistance groups had access to publicly-owned facilities. Orangeburg's citizens council held a mass rally at the city's ballpark in 1955.

The last civil rights site type is the commemorative site, a structure built as a memorial to people or events associated with the movement. Orangeburg's only example of a commemorative site is a simple granite monument in a landscaped square on the South Carolina State campus. Dedicated in 1969, this commemorative site honors the three students killed in the Orangeburg Massacre.

Steps should be taken in the near future to preserve the various types of civil rights sites across the United States. Why should preservationists worry about resources with recent periods of significance? The answer is simple: resources of recent significance may be threatened. Orangeburg County has already lost a number of its civil rights sites, including the open field where the Orangeburg Massacre occurred and the American Legion hall where South Carolina's first citizens council was formed. In addition, the physical integrity of some local civil rights resources has been compromised by alterations.

Two issues may hamper efforts to preserve the nation's civil rights sites: nontraditional properties and properties that are associated with controversial events. Nontraditional properties are resources that would typically not be the objects of

*Trinity Methodist Church in Orangeburg is an African-American organizing site. The church served as a meeting place for local black activists during the civil rights movement. Photo by the author*



preservation efforts. Civil rights sites acquired their significance during modern times. Furthermore, many of these resources are vernacular buildings constructed after the Second World War. The quintessential nontraditional site in Orangeburg is All Star Bowling Lanes, part of a 1960s strip shopping center. Such resources are worthy of preservation not for their architecture or aesthetics, but for their association with important modern events.

A second preservation problem for Civil Rights sites is their association with controversial events of modern history. For example, the Orangeburg Massacre occurred only 28 years ago and remains among the most controversial events in the state's history. The local community may feel uncomfortable dealing with the Orangeburg Massacre, in part because some of the participants are still living. Another potentially controversial issue involves targeting for preservation sites associated with white resistance. Opponents of recognizing these sites may argue that such actions would honor the individuals who tried to maintain a society based on white supremacy and racial segregation. However, select white resistance sites should be preserved in order to tell the entire story of the civil rights movement. White resistance was a formidable barrier to the goals of the civil rights movement, especially in majority-black counties like Orangeburg. The movement can not be fully understood without some knowledge concerning white resistance.

Despite potential problems, preservation steps are available for the nation's civil rights sites. The first priority should be to educate the public about the significance of civil rights resources. The National Register is a useful tool in recognizing such sites. This past August, Orangeburg's All Star Bowling Lanes was listed on the National Register at the national level of significance as part of the author's multiple property submission. In addition, communities like Selma, Alabama, have marketed civil rights resources for heritage tourism. The developing South Carolina Heritage Corridor could include Orangeburg County's civil rights sites. Such efforts are necessary in order to provide future generations with a complete material record of the African-American experience.

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## **African-American Sailors' Project**

Applicants had to authenticate their service, demonstrate their debility did not result from vicious habits, and undergo examination by a board of surgeons who would attest to the degree of disability. Given that a surviving dependent became eligible for the veteran's pension upon his death, the files of widows and minor children contain even more detailed accounts of marriages, births, and deaths, and of family and community relationships generally, than the files of the veterans do.

The pension files of black sailors (together with the much more voluminous record of their counterparts who served in the U.S. Colored Troops) provide a rich and largely untapped source of first person testimony into late-19th-century African-American history. The picture is a mixed one that included cases of duplicity and greed as well as generosity and self-sacrifice.

Among the myriad details that emerge from the files is a clear sense that the sacrifices of the veterans and their families merited the thanks of the nation and that the modest pension payments were the least form that the thanks might take.

Certainly at the dawn of the 20th century in the cities and the neighborhoods where naval veterans lived, knowledge of the African-American contribution to the naval history of the Civil War lived too. But as the veterans died and their children themselves had children, that understanding grew less and less distinct. What persists in the considerable numbers of families where photographs, papers, or artifacts survive is the knowledge that great-grandfather served in the Civil War Navy. But the broader pattern of service that he and his comrades configured has largely been lost.

The prospects for restoring the balance have never looked brighter that they do at present. As the recent events marking the dedication of the African-American Civil War Memorial make clear, descendants of the sailors are every bit as proud of their ancestors as are the descendants of soldiers.

Although the public at large may not fully appreciate the Civil War at sea, the descendants have no doubt that the navy contributed as mightily as the army to saving the Union and destroying slavery. As scholars, the researchers of the African-American Sailors' Project operate with a clear sense of shared purpose to understand the experience of African-American sailors in all its diversity and complexity. For despite all that is known about the Civil War, there is still much to learn.

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