

Preserving the Legacy

Georgia's Historic African American Resources

Richard Cloues

In Georgia, as in many states, the National Register has helped preserve historic properties. Nowhere is this more evident than in the growing field of minority preservation, where the National Register has played key roles in preserving the state's historic African American resources.

How has the National Register—ostensibly just a list of historic properties—helped preserve Georgia's African American heritage? How has it served the preservation interests of the state's largest and historically most important minority group?

First and foremost, the National Register has helped document the history of Georgia's African Americans and the historic properties associated with them. Historic buildings and structures, landscapes, and archeological sites—many first brought to light through the National Register—are tangible reminders of Georgia's African American history. They serve as physical links to a past that too often has been ignored, misinterpreted, even devalued. They present undeniable evidence of the presence and accomplishments of African Americans in Georgia.

Indeed, Georgia's National Register listings represent the broad patterns of African American history in the state. Constituting approximately 10% of the state's 1,400 listings, historic properties associated with Georgia's African Americans include entire urban communities like Macon's Pleasant Hill, residential neighborhoods in numerous towns and cities, portions of commercial districts and individual commercial buildings, landmark community buildings including churches, schools, theaters, hospitals, and lodges, and the homes of black Georgians from laborers and railroad workers to musicians, educators, doctors, and businessmen. Also included are cemeteries ranging from unmarked slave burial grounds to elaborate designed landscapes, archeological

sites associated with former African American settlements, an experimental Depression-era self-help community in rural Hancock County, and sites associated with the mid-20th-century civil rights movement. Representing many of these National Register listings is a wide variety of both vernacular and high-style buildings and structures designed and built by black architects, craftsmen, and laborers. National Register nominations like these, sponsored in large part by a steadily growing number of black preservationists, have helped bring Georgia's African American history to life.

Second, the National Register has provided a focus and a framework for African American preservation activities. For example, Georgia's National Register listings have served as the basis for a statewide tour guide of African American historic sites, a series of posters illustrating African American landmark buildings, and a slide show and video tape about historic African American properties. In 1984 the State Historic Preservation Office published *Historic Black Resources*, a handbook on the identification, documentation, and evaluation of historic properties, to promote interest in minority preservation by increasing the number of African American properties on the National Register in Georgia. In 1993, in response

to the growing interest on the part of African Americans and others in preserving listed and eligible properties, the State Historic Preservation Office published *African American Historic Places and Culture*, a comprehensive resource guide for minority preservation in the state. To augment the state's preservation infrastructure, the Georgia National Register Review Board formed a minority historic preservation committee to promote the preservation of African American and other minority properties

through special projects and the creation of a statewide minority preservation network. And, of course, the National Register played a critical role as the starting point for many worthwhile minority preservation projects—undoubtedly because it is the most widely known preservation program in the state!

Finally, the National Register has served as a catalyst for African American preservation projects through the benefits and incentives of National Register listing. For example, preservation tax incentives (both federal and state) made available through National Register designation have encouraged the rehabilitation and continued use of numerous historic African American buildings across Georgia. Houses, especially in larger urban neigh-



Many African American historic resources in Georgia are concentrated in neighborhoods like the Reese Street Historic District in Athens with its historic school, church, community stores, and variety of houses. Photo by James R. Lockhart, Georgia Office of Historic Preservation.

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The King-Tisdell Cottage in the Savannah Historic District is valued not only for its Victorian architecture but also for the many stories it tells about Savannah's African American history. Photo by James R. Lockhart, Georgia Office of Historic Preservation.

borhoods like Macon's Pleasant Hill and Tindall Heights, have been rehabilitated to provide low- and middle-income, rental and owner-occupied housing, while commercial buildings in traditional black business districts like Atlanta's Sweet Auburn or Macon's Cotton Avenue have been put back into productive service. Community development block grant projects in some communities, facilitated by National Register listings, have strengthened neighborhood conservation and downtown revitalization efforts by improving infrastructure and rehabilitating buildings. And Historic Preservation Fund grants have assisted non-profit community preservation projects like the restoration of the Sallie Ellis Davis house in Milledgeville, the home of a historic black educator, and its conversion into a museum and cultural center for local African American heritage activities.

Beyond economic incentives, the National Register has encouraged preservation projects in other important ways. For example, listing African American properties in the National Register draws public attention to them in ways that invariably promote their preservation. Individuals or organizations who invest research time in the preparation of National Register nominations gain a keener appreciation of the historic properties being nominated and a stronger commitment to their preservation as well. And the National Register nomination process brings minority property owners and others into contact with traditional preservation organizations and the growing world of preservation technology and technical assistance, often for the first time, and to their mutual benefit. A good Georgia example is the Noble Hill School in rural Bartow County, whose award-winning restoration and adaptive use as a community heritage center began with a National Register nomination followed by technical assistance from the State Historic Preservation Office.

Clearly, the National Register has helped preserve Georgia's historic African American properties in a variety of ways. In return, the National Register in Georgia has benefited from this increased minority preservation activity. Through National Register nomi-

nations, African Americans have fostered an interpretation of the state's history from the point of view of its largest and historically most important minority group; in doing so, they have helped open the National Register's doors to historic properties valued by African Americans. These nominations have broadened the application of the National Register criteria by emphasizing the historical and cultural associations of properties over their physical or architectural attributes. And these properties have presented some challenging historical associations relating to controversial aspects of history—slavery, segregation, and civil rights, for example—which give them a uniquely “bittersweet” nature now being recognized as a distinctive aspect of African American history in Georgia and across the South.

These are some of the ways in which the National Register has helped preserve Georgia's diverse historic resources.

What the National Register has done for Georgia's historic African American properties it can do—indeed it has been doing—for all the state's historic properties.



The restoration of the Noble Hill School and its conversion to a rural African American heritage center began with its nomination to the National Register. Photo by James R. Lockhart, Georgia Office of Historic Preservation.

Without a doubt, the National Register in Georgia is much more than just a list—it is an effective agent for the preservation of our state's historic resources.

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