

Reflections



Georgia African American
Historic Preservation Network



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

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THE LAST ROSENWALD SCHOOL

Warm Springs, a town in Meriwether County, is famous for the water and nearby Pine Mountain. Creek Indians once used these mineral waters for their healing properties, but white settlers preferred the area for recreation, as the pine forest and 1,200 ft. elevation of Pine Mountain provided pleasant temperatures during hot Georgia summer days. The town emerged as a resort community, and was incorporated as Bullochville in 1896. The boom period ended by the end of World War I, and new investment was needed to revitalize the Warm Springs economy.

In 1923, George Foster Peabody invited Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Bullochville to meet Louis Joseph, a young man who was cured of polio by swimming in the springs. Joseph told Roosevelt his story, and soon Roosevelt could stand and walk in four feet of freshwater. During this first visit, Roosevelt attended the ceremony that officially changed the name of Bullochville to Warm Springs. He was so impressed with the healing powers of Warm Springs that he began annual visits each year. Peabody, Roosevelt and other investors founded the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation, Inc. By 1928, Roosevelt reentered politics, and became governor of New York. He purchased over 1,000 acres of farmland and built a cottage near the foundation that would be his place for relaxation and therapy while governor. When Roosevelt became the President of the United States, the cottage became known as the Little White House.

In 1929, during one of his annual trips to Warm Springs during Thanksgiving, Roosevelt contacted Samuel L. Smith, director of the southern office of the Julius Rosenwald Fund in Nashville. He told Smith that

“we voted to spend \$15,000 for a white school and a Negro school, but they used all the money on the white school. We still plan to build the Negro school. Will you give us Rosenwald aid?” Smith informed the governor that the Fund would contribute \$2,500 but the local school board and the community would have to raise the bulk of the funds. Shortly after this conversation, the stock market crashed, and the nation entered the depression.

Smith did not hear from Roosevelt again for almost five years. In 1933, while spending Thanksgiving in Warm Springs, President Roosevelt convened a meeting of local businessmen to discuss “a matter of great importance.” He told them “I’m just embarrassed every time any of my friends comes down here from the North and goes out here and looks at that Negro school building.” Following this meeting, Roosevelt telegraphed Smith, inviting him to the White House to discuss the matter “we started in 1929, but the depression stopped it all.”

When Smith visited the President, he reminded him of his promise, but Smith informed him that the Julius Rosenwald Fund had closed its school building program in 1932. “But you promised me!” Roosevelt remarked. He asked Smith to come to the Little White House to work out the details. Smith and Curtis Dixon, state agent of the Georgia Department of Education, attended the meeting, and President Roosevelt drove them to the site of the Negro school in his open top Plymouth. In *Builders of Goodwill*, his book about the state agents for Negro education in the South, Smith described the condition of the old school as “one of the worst I had ever seen. The second



The windows and front entrance of the Eleanor Roosevelt School were covered with brick to prevent vandalism. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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THE LAST ROSENWALD SCHOOL

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Each side of the building features entrances to two classrooms.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

story was used as a lodge hall and the first floor was petitioned off for a two-room school."

Following this site visit, they selected a six-acre site for the new school on an elevation overlooking the Warm Springs pools. Roosevelt reminded Smith that the Fund submitted plans for a brick, seven-teacher white school in 1929, and said "we want one just as nice for the Negroes." He knew of a brick kiln nearby that was closed since the depression, and he and Peabody were certain the owner would be glad to make the bricks. Next, they discussed the total construction costs. Smith reiterated the Fund would authorize up to one fourth of the costs, and the Warm Springs School Board, at the request of President Roosevelt, voted to provide \$8,000 to qualify for the \$2,500 Fund grant. Because of the economic conditions in Warm Springs at the time, the school board could not borrow the necessary funds, and the project again appeared stalled.



The cornerstone for the Eleanor Roosevelt School, circa 1936.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The Warm Springs board applied for \$12,000 in WPA aid to build and equip the school, and the \$500 contributed by the Negro community paid for the site. Peabody contributed \$500 and

the Fund allocated \$2,500. When the WPA director indicated they needed an additional \$1,000 on deposit to begin work, Roosevelt sent his personal check to build the four-classroom building with an auditorium and library, the 5,358th Rosenwald school.



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The crowd anxiously awaits the arrival of President Franklin D. Roosevelt before dedication exercises on March 18, 1937. This photo appeared in Samuel L. Smith's Builders of Goodwill.

The Eleanor Roosevelt School was dedicated on March 18, 1937. The keynote speaker was President Roosevelt. Edwin R. Embree, president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, addressed the crowd, along with M.L. Collins, state superintendent of education. Robert L. Cousins, director of Negro education, accepted the building. S.L. Smith introduced the President as "your friend and good neighbor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt!" Roosevelt remarked that he began to learn economics at Warm Springs in 1924 through discussions with his neighbors about teachers' salaries and the price of cotton.



A walkway was added in the 1950s to connect the school to restrooms and a cafeteria. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Until the mid 1960s, the Eleanor Roosevelt School served grades one through eight. As school consolidation plans were implemented, the school held elementary classes until it closed in 1972 with integration. The school housed an Adult Education Center for three years, and a Day Care Center until it was sold to the present owner in 1977, who cuts and stores carpet there.

The Eleanor Roosevelt School Task Force, a partnership of tourism, government representatives, and the present owner are working on plans to preserve the last Rosenwald school. They are developing strategies to adaptively use this historic resource as a heritage museum. The Eleanor Roosevelt School is located at the corner of Hunter and Alexander Streets, near the Leverett Hill Church.

RECLAIMING ROSENWALD SCHOOLS

Tracy Hayes, Program Assistant
Southern Office, National Trust for Historic Preservation

Mark your calendars for *Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools: Preserving a Legacy*, a conference to be held May 21-22, 2004 at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Rosenwald Schools Initiative, and hosted by Fisk, the conference will feature educational sessions, tours, an exhibit and resource room, and time to network with other Rosenwald school preservationists. *Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools* will bring together preservation professionals, community activists, scholars and individuals interested in finding out more about Rosenwald schools and how to preserve them.



Jubilee Hall was constructed in 1876, and was one of the first brick buildings on the Fisk University campus. This National Historic Landmark was named in honor of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The historic campus of Fisk University is home to the Rosenwald Fund's archives. Housed in Special Collections at the John Hope and Aurelia Franklin Library on campus, the collection is invaluable to anyone researching a particular school, or the Rosenwald school building program in general. A session featuring the collection's contents will be held at *Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools*. Research times will be scheduled before and after the conference.



Vienna High & Industrial School (Dooly County) was built in 1926. The building was continuously used as a school by the Dooly County Board of Education, and Pre-School classes were held in this building until the end of the 2003 academic year. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The National Trust's Rosenwald Schools Initiative grew out of a need across the southern and southwest regions to provide assistance and help to coordinate efforts of a growing number of individuals and organizations interested in preserving Rosenwald schools. Built between 1918 and 1932 for African American children across fifteen states using seed money from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the schools are now aging, and most were abandoned after desegregation. It remains unclear how many of the 5,358 structures built still exist, though survey efforts in several states, including Georgia, are underway.

Administered out of the Trust's Southern office in Charleston, SC, the Rosenwald Schools Initiative has been instrumental in networking preservationists from across the nation, and providing technical assistance to dozens of groups and individuals seeking help. Over \$20,000 in Preservation Services Fund planning grants were awarded to Rosenwald school preservation projects over the past several years, including one to Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center in Cassville, Georgia. The National Trust has helped to raise national awareness of the fragility of these historic resources by placing Rosenwald schools on its *11 Most Endangered Historic Places* list in 2002. The Rosenwald Schools Initiative has developed a web site that will be kept updated with current information, resources and links, and has coordinated the National Trust publication *Preserving Rosenwald Schools*, by Mary Hoffschwelle.



A case study of the Noble Hill School in Cassville (Bartow County) is featured in *Preserving Rosenwald Schools*. The school was listed in the *National Register of Historic Places* in July 1987. The school is adaptively used as the Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center, a heritage museum. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools: Preserving a Legacy represents a major effort by the National Trust's Rosenwald Schools Initiative to continue networking, educating, and providing assistance to the growing numbers of people involved in preserving Rosenwald schools across the South and Southwest. To learn more about the history of the schools or the Rosenwald Schools Initiative, or to learn more about the upcoming *Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools* conference visit www.rosenwaldschools.com. Email tracy_hayes@nthp.org to be placed on the conference mailing list, or call the Southern office of the National Trust at 843-722-8552. Conference registration materials are currently available.

DEVELOPMENT TOOLS FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Martha Gravely, Tax Incentives Coordinator
Historic Preservation Division

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) administers three tax incentive programs for the rehabilitation of historic buildings: 1) The Federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit (RITC); 2) the Georgia Preferential Property Tax Assessment Freeze; and 3) the Georgia State Income Tax Credit for Rehabilitated Historic Property. The state income tax credit is the newest program. It became effective January 1, 2004. These programs serve as valuable financial incentives encouraging the rehabilitation and preservation of Georgia's resources.

Taxpayer savings for each program are different. The Federal RITC provides historic property owners who complete a certified rehabilitation the opportunity to take 20% of the rehabilitation cost as a federal income tax credit. The Georgia Preferential Property Tax Assessment program provides an opportunity to freeze a historic property's tax assessment for 8 1/2 years for the substantial rehabilitation of a certified historic structure. The Georgia State Income Tax Credit provides historic property owners the opportunity to apply for a state income tax credit equal to 10%, 15%, or 20% of rehabilitation expenses, up to \$5,000, depending on the building's use and location.

An income-producing property may be eligible to participate in all three programs if it meets the following criteria: It must be eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places; rehabilitation work must be reviewed by HPD and certified by the National Park Service as meeting the Secretary of Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation*, and the total rehabilitation cost must exceed the value of the building.



For many years, the childhood home of Alma Woodsey Thomas, an African American artist, stood abandoned in the Rose Hill community of Columbus (Muscookee County). A preservationist purchased the home, and participated in the Federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit and the Georgia Preferential Property Tax Assessment Freeze. HPD File Photo

Residential property owners may apply for the Georgia Preferential Property Tax Assessment Freeze program and the Georgia State Income Tax Credit program, but not the Federal RITC. A residential property must be eligible for or listed in the Georgia Register of Historic Places, and rehabilitation work must be reviewed and certified by HPD as meeting the Department of Natural



Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Today, the Alma Thomas childhood home is included in the Columbus Black Heritage Trail. A law firm now occupies the parlors where the Thomas family once resided. The final certification was approved in August 2003.

Resources Standards for Rehabilitation. Additionally, the Georgia Preferential Property Tax Assessment Freeze program requires that the rehabilitation increase the fair market value of the building by 50%, and the Georgia State Income Tax Credit program requires rehabilitation costs exceed the lesser of \$25,000 or 50% of the fair market value of the home. For historic properties used as a principal residence in a qualified census tract designated by HUD, the homeowner must spend only \$5,000 to qualify for the state income tax credit program.

Individuals who wish to take advantage of the tax incentive programs for the rehabilitation of a historic building must submit a formal application to HPD. The Historic Preservation Division and the National Park Service review applications for the federal tax credit; however the Historic Preservation Division is the only agency that reviews applications for the two state programs. Each program has a separate application that must be accompanied with photographs, plans, and a location map. Once an application is submitted, HPD has 30 days to review the material and issue an approval of the project. All program applications and instructions can be found on the HPD web-site www.gashpo.org under the Financial and Technical Assistance menu item "Tax Incentives." For additional information, please contact Martha Gravely, Tax Incentives Coordinator, at 404-651-5566. Or, reach me by email: martha_gravely@dnr.state.ga.us.



An ADA-accessible ramp was added to the rear entrance of the Alma Thomas childhood home.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

COLUMBUS REMEMBERS ALMA THOMAS

In the late 19th century, few economic opportunities were available to African Americans in Columbus, but John Harris Thomas managed to develop successful business ventures. He co-owned a saloon as late as 1897, when prevalent Jim Crow practices prohibited renewal of a liquor license. Undaunted, John Thomas achieved successful employment as a bookkeeper, bartender, and porter at the Muscogee Club, an exclusive club for whites in Columbus. As the city expanded, Thomas purchased a lot from Sallie May Markham in the Rose Hill community and built a one story Queen Anne-style home for his family. He married Amelia Cantey, who was a dress designer from nearby Fort Mitchell, Alabama. Alma Woodsey was the oldest of four Thomas daughters. She was born in Columbus on September 22, 1891.

As Alma and her three sisters grew up, they frequently visited their maternal grandparents at their 330-acre farm in Alabama. The Cantey farm provided a setting where Alma Thomas first developed her lifelong affinity with nature and the environment. At her childhood home, John Thomas planted numerous varieties of trees, flowers, and shrubs in the family garden. These nature-color-influenced environments would become sources of inspiration for Alma's ultimate career as an artist.



This side view of the Alma Thomas childhood home features trees and shrubs that were planted at the end of the 19th century by her father, John Thomas.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Fannie and Winter Cantey, Alma's maternal grandparents, strongly advocated education for their children. The Cantey children attended Tuskegee Institute, and Amelia Cantey's skills as a dress designer probably emerged from early exposure to the Tuskegee industrial arts curriculum. As Amelia and John began to raise their family, Alma Thomas often heard lectures from family and friends who would visit her childhood home. A cousin, Inez Cantey, was the secretary for W.E.B. DuBois from Atlanta University. She typed the manuscript for *The Souls of Black Folk* in the Thomas household.

While the Thomas family lived as middle-class citizens in Columbus, they were affected by racial segregation and Jim Crow practices that were common throughout the South. Four Columbus public schools provided education for African Americans through the ninth grade, and private education was the only option for further studies. In September 1906, on Alma's 15th birthday, the Atlanta race riot prompted John Thomas to move the family to Washington, D.C. Both John and Amelia found work in their new city, and Alma entered the Armstrong Manual Training High School in the fall of 1907.

Armstrong High School advocated the Booker T. Washington model of vocational training and teaching. Once enrolled, Alma Thomas excelled in math and architectural drawing and was the only woman in these classes. She also studied fashion design and received her first formal training in art. By 1911, Alma Thomas was ready to attend Miner Normal School (now the University of the District of Columbia) and received her teaching certificate in 1913.

In 1921, Alma Thomas enrolled at Howard University at the age of 30 to pursue an undergraduate degree. She worked for Howard's theatrical troupe, designed costumes for the drama department, and contributed drawings for several sections of the Howard University *Bison* yearbook. In 1924, she became the first Howard University student to receive a B.A. degree in fine arts. After graduation, she was offered a teaching position in the D.C. colored schools. For the next 35 years, Alma Thomas was an art instructor at Shaw Junior High School.

Alma Thomas spent summers in New York at the Teachers College of Columbia University to pursue a master's degree from 1930-1934. Her thesis topic was marionettes (puppets). Since her students were not allowed to view marionette shows at the segregated National Theatre in Washington, Thomas found alternative locations in the African American community to display marionettes with costumes that she designed.

In 1943, she formed a partnership that led to the first private art gallery in Washington that was open to all races, and became the vice president of the Barnett Aden Gallery. In this capacity, she administered fundraising initiatives to ensure biracial exhibits from leading Washington artists.

Alma Thomas, at age 59, was so inspired by her interaction with other Washington artists that she enrolled at American University in 1950 to continue her studies in painting during the evenings and on weekends. For the next ten years, she developed



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Photograph Not Available

The Columbus Ledger-Enquirer featured this drawing of Alma Thomas in the special series of 100 People to Remember.

COLUMBUS REMEMBERS ALMA THOMAS

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her signature abstract style noted by color and its response to nature. By age 60, Alma Thomas seriously pursued painting on a full-time basis and retired from her teaching career.



(Public Domain)

This 1971 photograph by Ida Jervis shows Alma Thomas working in her kitchen studio. It appeared in *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*.

From 1950-1960, Alma Thomas began to abandon oil as her chief medium in painting and became fascinated with the brilliant, vibrant colors available in acrylic. She was inspired by color and how it seamlessly interacted with the natural environment. Thomas converted part of her kitchen into an art studio and derived many inspirations for her paintings while looking out the window and studying how light interacted with the leaves of a holly tree in her yard. By 1960, she used watercolors as studies for larger paintings and developed a technique characterized by jagged, short, brushstrokes applied in geometric shapes with extensive use of color.

Since Alma Thomas was associated with artists who used color extensively in their paintings, she was believed to be a member of the Washington Color School. These painters stained acrylic into unprimed cotton-duck canvas, but Alma Thomas did not use this process. She painted in her signature, jagged brushstrokes on primed, sized canvases. Thomas differed from the Washington Color School painters in another technique. They used masking tape to ensure flat color stripes while Thomas experimented with a variety of geometric shapes, including vertical, horizontal and circular patterns, and her brushstrokes appeared to literally jump off the edge of the canvas.

In 1972, Alma Thomas emerged as a nationally prominent artist, and her paintings were displayed internationally through the U.S. Department of State's Art in Embassies Program. At the age of 80, she was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and a retrospective exhibition of her work appeared in Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art. In 1974, Alma Thomas, who suffered for years with chronic arthritis, broke her hip. These health impediments challenged her painting for the next two years, but she attended the opening of her last solo exhibition in New York at the Martha Jackson Gallery. Upon her recovery, Thomas experimented with large mural paintings. This was remarkable since she was small in stature. To overcome this challenge, she would assemble canvases across two tables to prevent her from falling.

Howard University awarded Alma Thomas with the "Alumni of Achievement Award" in 1975. In 1977, U.S. President Jimmy Carter invited Alma Thomas to the White House, following

her inclusion in *The 35th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Howard University, Fisk University, and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University exhibited her paintings prior to her death on February 24, 1978.

In 1998, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art organized a retrospective exhibition of 53 Alma Thomas works. The Henry Luce Foundation provided a grant for the exhibition and catalogue, *Alma W. Thomas, A Retrospective of the Paintings*. The exhibition itinerary ended at the Columbus Museum in January 2000.

The Columbus Museum features *Air View of Spring Nursery*, an Alma Thomas painting, in the permanent collection. This painting was donated to the Columbus Museum by the Columbus-Phenix City chapter of the National Association of Negro Business Women. In July 2002, the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network celebrated the legacy of Alma Thomas. The Steering Committee meeting was held at the Columbus Museum, and was organized by Charlotte Frazier, former chair.

Other museums that feature Alma Thomas paintings in their collections include: the Art Institute of Chicago, the Hirshorn Museum, the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Alma Thomas residence in Washington, D.C. is a contributing resource in the Logan Circle Historic District that is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is included in the *African American Heritage Trail*, a recent publication produced by Cultural Tourism DC with grant support from the DC Historic Preservation Office. The trail guide also features the old Shaw Junior High School, where Thomas taught from 1924-1960. In 1982, the Asbury United Methodist Church converted the old Shaw school building into senior citizen housing. For more information, visit www.CulturalTourismDC.org.



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This 1975 photograph by Roland L. Freeman appeared in *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*.

GEORGIA HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

The first annual meeting of the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN) was held at the historic Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta on January 30-31, 2004. Seventy-five preservationists attended *Georgia History Through the Eyes of African Americans*. Glenda Gunn shared her experiences with technical tools she utilizes in historic preservation at the plenary luncheon.



Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Friday workshops included *From Free Black Communities to Historic Districts*, where historian James E. Carter shared the evolution of black communities in Augusta and the historic Springfield Village. Monifa Johnson, Savannah Arts Academy, and Melissa Jest, Historic Savannah Foundation, Inc. provided both historical information and current preservation challenges and initiatives in Savannah. GAAHPN Steering Committee members Karl W. Barnes and M.M. (Peggy) Harper discussed *Technical Tools* they utilize to preserve a spirit of place in urban environments.

The annual meeting banquet was held at the Marbury Inn, a historic firehouse located on Augusta's Broad Street. Georgia Commissioner of Labor Michael Thurmond was the keynote speaker. He discussed *Freedom*, his new book. Thurmond shared anecdotes from his ten-year research project that contributes to Georgia history from its earliest settlement by James Oglethorpe through the end of the Civil War.

Gloria Lucas of the Augusta Genealogical Society opened Saturday workshop sessions with *In Search of Who We Are*, a discussion of available tools in genealogical research. Richard Hunt, sculptor, shared his research in developing both the current and planned sculptures in the Springfield Village Park. At the conclusion of his session on *The Evolution of Springfield Village Park*, participants began their tour of Augusta's African American historic resources.

The tour stopped at the Augusta Canal Interpretive Center in the historic Enterprise Mill, and participants visited the Lucy Craft Laney Museum, the Haines Normal and Industrial Institute Alumni Association building, and other sites in the Laney-Walker Historic District.

Georgia History Through the Eyes of African Americans was sponsored by benefactors from the corporate community, who contributed \$1,000. Springfield Baptist Church hosted the meeting. Patron sponsors from nonprofit organizations contributed \$500. Friends of GAAHPN contributed \$250. These contributions reflect the partnerships and volunteerism that have aided GAAHPN since its inception. We acknowledge your valuable support of African American preservation in Georgia.



Isaac Johnson, GAAHPN chairman, Robert Kirby, chairman of the Springfield Village Park Foundation, Inc. and Richard Hunt, sculptor, celebrate the GAAHPN first annual meeting. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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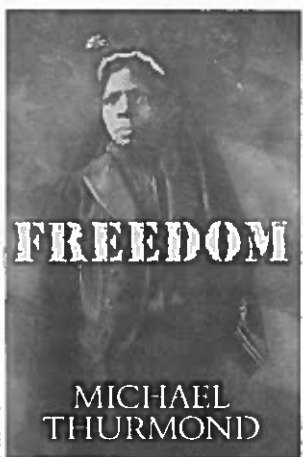
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ABOUT GAAHPN



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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 1,700 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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