

Reflections

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The February 2024 issue of *Reflections*, a publication of the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN), is now available. It is available in PDF format on the Georgia Historic Preservation Division website. It's easy to become a subscriber; just click [here](#).

You may view the issue here, titled [2024-02 reflections](#). This month you will find:

"A Taste of Struggle" combines food, fellowship, and education into a day-long celebration of the formerly enslaved foodways and folkways in Bulloch County. Learn about this local event from GAAHPN's current President, Dr. Alvin Jackson.

The Historic Old Stone Church in Candler Park is taking on a new designation. Reflect on churches and gospel music, and their significance to African American life.

Learn how Gwinnett County is repurposing and adapting Hooper Renwick, an equalization school from the 1950s, into a themed-library and museum honoring the only Black public high school in the county.

Questions or comments? Please Contact:

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Georgia Historic Preservation Division



Georgia African American
Historic Preservation Network

Reflections

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A TASTE OF STRUGGLE: FOODWAYS AND FOLKWAYS OF A FORMERLY ENSLAVED PEOPLE

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In 2005, the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center (WHHRC) was organized to preserve a piece of African American history and to address gaps in the historical record and history books, a concept known today as *archival silence*. Once a year with the coming of spring, WHHRC hosts a cultural and educational event open to the public commemorating the foods and customs of our formerly enslaved ancestors during the era of slavery, called “A Taste of Struggle.”

This idea was the brainchild of the late Dr. Gayle Martin Jackson, Ph.D. (1950-2023), the former Development Director for WHHRC, who wanted to share the history and struggles of our ancestors and to demonstrate the impact of the food and cooking techniques used during slavery on soul food in the South. The setting for “A Taste of Struggle” takes place on the nine-acre grounds of the historic Willow Hill school in the Willow Hill community at 4235 Willow Hill Road, Portal, GA.

150 years ago, in 1874, nine years after the American Civil War, a group of formerly enslaved families of the Riggs, Donaldson, Parrish, and Hall families founded the Willow Hill School in an old

turpentine shanty. The Willow Hill school was one of the first schools for African Americans in Bulloch County, GA with a 15-year-old formerly enslaved Georgiana Riggs as the first teacher. Since its inception in 1874, there have been six Willow Hill school buildings. The current

building, now known as an Equalization School, was constructed in 1954 after the United States Supreme Court decision *Brown vs Board of Education*, to delay integration in Bulloch County schools. The Willow Hill school was integrated in 1971. In 1999 Willow Hill school closed after 125 years and at that time it was Bulloch County’s oldest continuous school.

April 27, 2024 will represent the third edition of “A Taste of Struggle,” first held in 2019 after a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic. Last year, “A Taste of

Struggle” was held on April 29th and was truly the talk of the community. This event featured historian Clarissa Clifton from Atlanta, GA, chef Cheryl Henry originally from Trinidad and Tobago now residing in North Carolina, pitmasters John “Bobbie” Robinson and Curtis Clifton from Bulloch, County GA, and Jelani and Nikki Jackson, owners of Richie’s’ Chicken and Soul restaurants in Cincinnati, Ohio. Together they created a full meal outdoors over an open pit in cast iron pots, as was the custom during slavery.



Food Historian Clarissa Clifton tends to her cast iron pots. Outdoor cooking reenactments are an integral part of the “A Taste of Struggle” annual event. Portal, GA 2019. Photo courtesy of Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center.

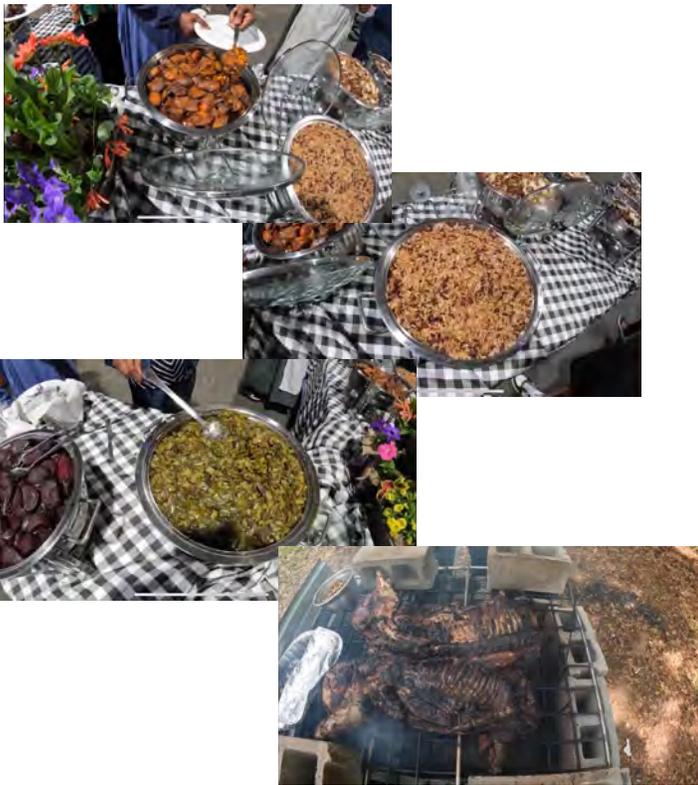
A TASTE OF STRUGGLE, *continued*

The menu included a whole roasted hog slow cooked over 12 hours, a whole goat (roasted and curried), smoked chicken on a grill and smoked fish. The main food courses were supplemented with many delicious side dishes including Hoppin' John (rice and peas), roasted beet root, collard and mustard greens, candied yams, old fashioned hoe cakes, smoked boiled peanuts, coconut, and sweet potato pies. Local cooks provided pound and red velvet cakes and homemade churned ice cream. The food was served with down home lemonade and southern sweet tea.

Pitmaster John "Bobbie" Robinson learned the art of pit cooking from his uncle Moses Jackson (1905-1992), who learned it from his father Arnold Jackson (1851 - 1953), a formerly enslaved individual. Pitmaster Robinson demonstrated the technique of getting flavor in his meats with slow cooking and seasoning over a day.



The Saltwata Playas perform at "A Taste of Struggle" on the porch of Bennett Grove School, 2023. Portal, GA. Photo courtesy of Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center.



Candied yams, rice and peas (or Hoppin' John), collard and mustard greens, smoked beets, and smoked meats are enjoyed by the crowd at "A Taste of Struggle" in Portal, GA, 2023. These foods are integral to African American cuisine, with ties to West Africa. Photos courtesy of Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center.

He personally dug and constructed his pit a day prior to the start of the cooking. Chef Cheryl Henry shared the secrets of some, but not all, her spices in preparing her tasty yams, curried goat, collard and mustard greens and smoked beets cooked to perfection.

Food historian Clarissa Clifton, who has worked and taught at Roswell's Archibald Smith Plantation, gave historical background on the history of cooking during slavery and its connection to soul food. Dressed in period clothing with a long dress, apron, and head rag, she guarded her stews and Hoppin' John cooked in old cast iron pots over an open fire. The smell and flavors of her food permeated the grounds at WHHRC.

The air was filled with storytelling, songs, dancing, and reenactments by local and area artists including storyteller Lillian Grant-Baptiste, blues man Sirdeepy Frazier, the great Patt Gunn, Rosalyn Rouse and Bruce Ingram of the Saltwata Players from Savannah, Georgia, and noted historical educator Dr. Jamal Toure, whose ancestry came from the Gullah Geechee people, all performing on the front porch of the historic Bennett Grove School, the last standing one room schoolhouse in the county established circa 1918. The schoolhouse was reconstructed and placed on the Willow Hill School property in 2022. The day also included cooking demonstrations, churning ice cream, basket sewing, museum tours, and vending by Roy Mosely, a local Black farmer and owner of Mosely Farms.

A TASTE OF STRUGGLE, *continued*

This event allows the public to experience Bulloch County's rich African American history. The WHHRC includes an exhibit on slavery and the slave trade, a history of African American churches and schools, an archive of over 20,000 African American funeral programs, and 500 oral recordings of African Americans covering history from 1880 to the present.

The year 2024 represents 150 years since the founding of the Willow Hill school. In addition to celebrating "A Taste of Struggle" there will be commemorative events throughout the year. Beginning in January the monthly series, "If These Cemeteries Could Talk, Oh the Stories They Would Tell" will resume. The series hosts tours of the thirty-eight identified African American cemeteries in Bulloch County, GA. The tours started in 2019 as part of WHHRC's participation in the *400 years of African American History, 1619-2019*. The tours focus on the burials of the formerly enslaved, those who served in the armed forces, teachers, and ministers of the gospel. The invitation is open to the public. Family members and friends of the deceased are encouraged to participate in the tours by sharing their stories and memories of those buried in the cemetery. The tours are recorded, and a survey of each cemetery is completed. So far, sixteen have been completed. Each tour program is available online through Digital Commons at the Georgia Southern University Zach Henderson Library at <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/willowhill-cemeteries/>.



Willow Hill School, 2014. Photo courtesy of Jeanne Cyriaque/Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center.



The crowd at "A Taste of Struggle" event, 2023. Photo courtesy of Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center

Labor Day Weekend (September 2024), there will be a homecoming celebration with an invitation extended to former students, teachers, and patrons of the Willow Hill School and community. A picnic, banquet, lectures, tours, and time to document memories of the school and community will be held. The year of celebration will end in December with a community celebration of Kwanzaa at WHHRC honoring the Seven principles: Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith) in the context of 150 years of history of the Willow Hill school. These events are to encourage the next generation to preserve the stories, history, and customs of the formerly enslaved individuals who started the Willow Hill school and community.

Save the date for April 27th, 2024. Come out to the Historic Willow Hill school to enjoy, learn, and appreciate the foodways and customs of a formerly enslaved people as we seek to tell their stories and our stories.

For more information visit our website at www.willowhillheritage.org

- Brooks, F. Eric. *Defining Their Destiny: The Story of the Willow Hill School*, 2011.
- Cyranique, Jeanne. *Reflections Newsletter* Volume XII, No. 2, "Preserving the Spirit of Willow Hill", 2014.
- "A Taste of Struggle" video by Jelani Jackson Richie's *Chicken and Soul*, 2023. www.RichiesChicken.com.
- Georgia Historical Society, *Georgia Historical Marker: Willow Hill school for Negroes: A Georgia Equalization School*, 2014.
- Digital Commons at Georgia Southern African American Funeral Programs collection.
- Bulloch County Historical Marker-Willow Hill School and community, 2011.
- "A Taste of Struggle at Willow Hill," *Statesboro Herald*, May 3, 2023.

COMING BACK: SPIRITUAL REFLECTIONS IN A HISTORIC STONE CHURCH

Anthony Knight

African American Heritage Coordinator Historic Preservation Studio, Office of Design, Atlanta Department of City Planning



Antioch East Baptist Church members on the steps of their hand-built sanctuary-The Old Stone Church in Candler Park, 1948. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Sophie Carey/BiRacial History Project.

For many African Americans, the Church is central to their existence—it is the prism through which are refracted the dimensions of their being and how they interpret reality.

Everything, it seems, comes back to the Church and to Christ. He is the “reason for the season” — and not only during Christmas.

Others of us, however, do not come from this orthodox tradition. Our relationship with the Church and with Christ is more fluid, sometimes even antagonistic—the Bible and its teachings are suspect; after all, didn’t humans translate it numerous times and delete and add stuff at other times? How can it still be the word of God? And while I did not go to church every Sunday, what captured my young imagination was the music.

From as early as age 6, I sang in a choir. First, in a Catholic elementary and Lutheran middle school. I continued singing in my high school chorus. And, in college, I joined the Gospel Lyres—the university’s Black gospel choir created four years after Dr. King’s assassination. In the decade following King’s death, Black students on predominantly White college campuses were demanding more and better representation on all fronts—academic, administrative, and cultural. What made singing with the Gospel Lyres particularly meaningful is that it was an extension of my cultural heritage — the centuries-long evolution of the amalgamation of

African and European spiritual, religious and cultural practices, and rituals.

From birth, European music traditions had been deeply ingrained in my psyche—both in school and at home, as my mother is a trained opera singer. That music permeated our home environment as much as any other. On Sundays, though, our home was a spiritual sanctuary. The live recording of Mahalia Jackson’s 1958 Newport Jazz Festival performance began the day: “Ladies and gentlemen, it is Sunday, and it is time for the world’s greatest gospel singer, Ms. Mahalia Jackson.” Church would officially begin.

This mix of cultures, the African/African American and the European, was so seamlessly a part of who I was that it was difficult to tease out the individual threads. For me, joining my college gospel choir began that process. And while I was familiar with the Black Church experience through music, my direct knowledge of church and religious practices was limited, as my paternal grandparents, the folks who grew up in South Georgia and central Florida, left many of those traditions behind when they migrated to New York City in the late 1930s. They were not regular churchgoers either.



Old Stone Church, brought from Candler Park Improvement Corp. by Phoenix Unitarian Fellowship and renovated, 1977-1980. Photo courtesy of First Existentialist Congregation/BiRacial History Project.

Those facts aside, a recent gospel concert of sorts brought many of these divergent memories and experiences flooding back into my body. *A Come Back Musical*, as it was billed, featured the choir of Antioch East Baptist Church, and was presented by the BiRacial History Project. The event took place on June 24, 2023, at the Old Stone Church in Candler Park.

COMING BACK, *continued*

Built between 1918 and 1922, the Old Stone Church was home to the Antioch congregation until the early 1950s. Established in 1874, the Antioch Baptist Church (now Antioch East Baptist Church) congregation built the Old Stone Church to replace a wooden structure that was destroyed by a suspicious fire in 1916. Constructed with granite hauled by mule and buggy from Stone Mountain, the Old Stone Church was the center of the African American Rose Hill community (now part of Candler Park). As the City of Atlanta expanded, Black families were forced from the area.

The last vestige of a once-vibrant community, Antioch trustees faced few alternatives but to deed the property to the Candler Park Civic Club in October 1950. The Civic Club owned the property until 1977. From 1977 until 1981, the Old Stone Church was home to Phoenix Unitarian Fellowship. Since 1981, the structure has been home to the First Existentialist Congregation. Under their stewardship, the structure has been lovingly cared for and a strong relationship established with the original owners. As I sat in the sanctuary last June, my religious upbringing, such as it was, joined forces with the voices and spirits of the Antioch choir members—often overwhelming me with feelings of intense gratitude for a cultural legacy so deeply rooted in the power of belief—belief that we, as a people, will endure regardless.



Old Stone Church today, currently housing the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta since 1980. Photo courtesy of First Existentialist Congregation.

For while my understanding of religion has evolved, I continue to respect the Black Church and how it sustained (and continues to sustain) generations of enslaved African Americans and their descendants. Sitting in the Old Stone Church that early summer afternoon, I was reminded how while traditional religion is not a part of my life, the music of the Black Church is. It has kept, and keeps me, still.

There are few things on earth that parallel the richness and depth of emotion conveyed by Black voices singing from and to the collective experience of Black people in the United States. It is a singular cultural phenomenon that at once embodies the pain, struggle, hope, spirituality, and endurance of a people. I am at once humbled by and honored to be part of the tradition that built the Old Stone Church. This year, the City of Atlanta's Department of City Planning will designate it a local historic site.

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- <https://firstexistentialist.org/bi-racial-history-project/services/>
 - <https://biracialhistoryproject.org/a-come-back-musical>

RECLAIMING COMMUNAL SPACE: THE RESTORATION AND REUSE OF HOOPER RENWICK HIGH SCHOOL

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Campus of Hooper Renwick beautified by planting trees and shrubbery around the building, 1952-53. Photo courtesy of Gwinnett County Historical Society.

On any given weekend in the 1950s or 60s, a pageant, celebration, or concert would be taking place in black communities all over the state of Georgia. These activities would occur in cafeterias or gymnasiums of “equalization schools” and were integral to Black social life. These spaces were not just for students, but also utilized by the community for congregation and fellowship. Gwinnett County was no exception; Hooper Renwick Elementary High School opened in 1951 and was the only Black high school in the county until integration in 1968. After many years of non-use, Hooper Renwick will reclaim its historical, educational roots by becoming the first themed-library in the Southeast as the Lawrenceville branch of the Gwinnett County Public Library. How did Hooper Renwick complete this journey to become an African American museum? Well, the story starts with its humble beginnings on Old Rocky Knob...

Gwinnett County was established in 1818, with over 500 enslaved people as residents per the 1820 US Census.¹ Prior to 1865, it was illegal to teach enslaved and free persons of color to read and write in the South. However, anxious to begin life anew and obtain education for their children after the Civil War, African Americans created schools all over the South, typically in one or two-room buildings or in local churches, as education for African Americans was still not supported by the state.² In 1871, the first one-room, wood-framed school for the recently freed was constructed in Gwinnett and named The Lawrenceville School in Old Rocky Knob. This location would remain in operation until 1924, when a tornado destroyed the building.³

In 1941, M.C. “Uncle Mack” Renwick, a local Black laborer whose wife had taught in the county for over twenty-five years, donated three acres for a “new Negro school” off Neal Boulevard near the Lawrenceville Town Square.

Per local oral history, Renwick and the principal of The Lawrenceville School, Marshall Hooper, disagreed on a new school location for years.⁴ Hooper suggested it remain in the “Old Rocky Knob” location, and Renwick preferred the location on Neal Boulevard where more African American families resided. A boycott was organized at the beginning of the school year in 1941 by Renwick, local parents, and children in protest of the old location. Since no new building was constructed immediately, Black students in the area attended classes at Pleasant Hill Church for the next few years. Renwick spent that time consulting with the Gwinnett County Board of Education and a three-room, wood-framed school was completed in 1945. Renwick Academy, as it was known from 1945-1951, opened with four teachers. With over 100 students that first year, the building was already inadequate and failed to meet the needs of the students and faculty.

After World War II, as Black soldiers returned home after fighting for America, Black people requested better facilities and public spaces based on the “separate but equal” principle in all facets of life, including education. In response to the impending prospect of integration, then Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge initiated the “Minimum Foundation Program for Education,” which charged a three percent state sales tax intended for public school construction, with some of this money going to Black schools.

¹ 1820 United States Federal Census, Gwinnett County, GA. <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~cenfiles/ga/gwinnett/1820/pg0258.txt>

² Steven Moffson. 2010. “Equalization Schools in Georgia’s African American Communities,

1951-1970.” Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Division. https://www.dca.ga.gov/sites/default/files/equalization_schools_in_georgia_0.pdf

³ Gwinnett County Public Schools. “History of Hooper Renwick School.” Accessed October 1, 2022. [https://apps.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/starhand/gcps/mainweb01.nsf/80A5D5E9982C8C6C852572ED004CACB7/\\$file/HooperRenwick.pdf](https://apps.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/starhand/gcps/mainweb01.nsf/80A5D5E9982C8C6C852572ED004CACB7/$file/HooperRenwick.pdf)

⁴ Miley Mae Hemphill. 1957. “A Study of the Negro Public Schools in Gwinnett County, Georgia, 1937-1956.” Master’s Thesis, Atlanta University, 43.

HOOPER RENWICK, *continued*

Under his tutelage beginning in 1951, the Georgia Department of Education mandated the building of hundreds of “colored” schools in resistance to integration, more than any other Southern state.⁵ The expansion of Renwick Academy would be included in this mandate.

As the Renwicks and Hoopers were instrumental to local education for Black people in Gwinnett, their names were memorialized on the new, 12-classroom Hooper Renwick Elementary High School, erected in 1951 for \$60,000. Blacks were bussed from all over the county to the high school, which was still a challenge as Gwinnett County Public Schools only allotted two buses for Black children for the entire county (for comparison, the county allotted forty buses for White students). Beginning with just three graduates in 1948, by 1953, there were twenty-four students in the Hooper Renwick graduating class.⁶ In 1957, the school transformed into a staple of communal Black life in Gwinnett, due to the new East and West wing additions. Graduations, pageants, and many other forms of entertainment took place in the auditorium that was built into these additions. These changes yet again represented a broader move by many Southern states in response to inevitable integration, by asserting a new “separate but equal” philosophy: renovating existing school buildings, and adding auxiliary buildings that include cafeterias, auditoriums, and libraries to campuses to bring them “up to par” with white institutions. Inevitably, contending with subpar supplies and equipment for the student population, integration was forced on the last resisting Georgia counties under threat of losing school funding. Hooper Renwick closed in 1968,



Construction underway for the new themed-library at Hooper-Renwick School in Lawrenceville, GA, 2023. Photo courtesy of CAS Architecture.



Architectural rendering of entrance to the new library at Hooper-Renwick School, Lawrenceville, GA, 2023. Photo courtesy of CAS Architecture.

with Black students entering Central Gwinnett High School in August 1969. The building was utilized over the next thirty years for various Gwinnett County programs. It reopened for educational purposes in 1995 during Gwinnett’s population boom and served as a public-school facility until its official closure in 2015.⁷

Near demolition for several years, Gwinnett County decided to purchase the school property in 2019 and adapt the space as an African American museum and library as part of the Gwinnett County Public Library system. “The themed library will preserve and honor the legacy of the former Hooper-Renwick School through architectural design elements, exhibits about the school’s history, as well as segregation and desegregation in Gwinnett County. The City and County will fund the construction and operation of the exhibits.”⁸ Details include renovating 11,400 square feet of the existing facility and constructing a new approximately 13,600 square foot addition; restoring twenty original windows on the front facade to their original ribbon appearance; adding architectural design elements from the original Hooper Renwick School, including memorabilia and reclaimed artifacts of the original school incorporated into the library design; and constructing approximately 1,500 square feet of community space. This restoration and reuse effort will give Hooper Renwick new life once more, continuing its legacy of education and Black pride for present and future Gwinnett residents. Construction is currently underway, with completion expected early 2025.

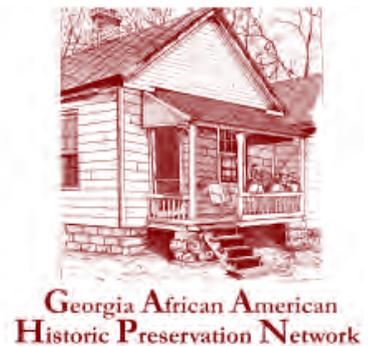
⁷ Gwinnett County Public Schools, “History of Hooper Renwick School.” Accessed October 1, 2022. [https://apps.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/starhand/gcps_mainweb01.nsf/80A5D5E9982C8C6C852572ED004CAB7/\\$file/HooperRenwick.pdf](https://apps.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/starhand/gcps_mainweb01.nsf/80A5D5E9982C8C6C852572ED004CAB7/$file/HooperRenwick.pdf)

⁸ “City of Lawrenceville and Gwinnett County Partner to Preserve Site of Hooper-Renwick School.” Lawrenceville, GA website, Hooper-Renwick Historic School Site | Lawrenceville, GA (lawrencevillega.org).

⁵ Moffson, “Equalization Schools,” 6.

⁶ Miley Mae Hemphill. 1957. “A Study of the Negro Public Schools in Gwinnett County, Georgia, 1937-1956.” Master’s Thesis, Atlanta University, 44. https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/cau.td%3A1957_hemphill_miley_m

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 built 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 plans and implements 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 5,000 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.dca.ga.gov. Preservation information and previous issues of Reflections are available online. Membership in the Network is free and open to all. [Sign up here!](#)

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Reflections

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