



# Reflections

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## PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF WILLOW HILL

*Jeanne Cyriaque, African American Programs Coordinator  
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**W**illow Hill is a rural African American community near Portal, Georgia. While driving along U.S. Highway 80 west from Savannah to Hopeulikit, motorists come upon a fork in the road to head towards Portal. Along this road is an additional sign called Willow Hill Road. The Bulloch County Historical Society erected a historic marker at the entrance into the Willow Hill community. African Americans have lived in this area since enslavement, and most people in the community are landowners today. During Reconstruction, the first priority for this Bulloch County community was to ensure their children had a decent education, so a group of community members, led by the Donaldson, Parrish and Riggs families, started the first Willow Hill School in 1874. The initial building was a turpentine shanty and the children's first teacher was Georgiana Riggs Parrish, who began instructing other children at age fifteen. Gradually, the shanty was replaced by a one-room log schoolhouse.

As school enrollment increased, Moses Parrish, one of the school founders, sold the building to the Bulloch County Board of Education for eighteen dollars, and Willow Hill became a public school in 1920. For the next 30 years, buildings were added as needed. The Julius Rosenwald Fund provided a \$250 grant to Willow Hill, public funds totaled \$150 and the African American community contributed \$1,107 towards the school's Rosenwald building that cost \$1,507. Additionally, African Americans provided land and sweat equity, just as they had during the school's

private era. During this period, Willow Hill staff were also supported by Jeanes Supervisors, teachers who directed curriculum activities, led industrial training initiatives and leveraged county support for books and supplies. Their salaries were financed through the philanthropy of Anna T. Jeanes, who left her estate to support African American teachers. Julia P. Armstrong Bryant was the Jeanes Supervisor for Bulloch County with the longest tenure, working from 1913-1923 and 1926-1939.

The Rosenwald building at Willow Hill survived until 1954, when a new, modern building replaced it. This building would be the sixth and current building in the school's history. The "new" Willow Hill School was one of Georgia's 500 African American schools that emerged as equalization schools following the 1954 *Brown vs. Board* U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision that was intended to end segregation in public schools. The school building was designed by Hudson and Jenkins of Atlanta. Willow Hill was one of five

equalization schools that were constructed in Bulloch County, replacing approximately 25 one-room schoolhouses. The school had indoor restrooms, a cafeteria equipped with a stage/auditorium, a teacher's lounge, clinic, library and 14 classrooms.

Equalization schools, built from the 1950s to 1970, represented the first period in African American education in Georgia when public schools were financed through the State School Building Authority. The buildings were part of a strategy to respond to the integration directive by running



*The 1954 Willow Hill School was saved by alumni who purchased it at auction. Today, the building is known as the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center.  
Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque*

## PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF WILLOW HILL

Jeanne Cyriaque, continued from page 1



Faculty and students assembled in front of the Rosenwald building on Willow Hill's campus for class photos until that building was demolished to construct the equalization school in 1954.

Photo courtesy of the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center

two racially separate, yet equal school systems. Though these schools were not equal to their white counterparts, they provided jobs for African American educators, libraries, science and sports programs that had not existed before and extended the school to the larger community around them. Equalization schools were designed to include cafeteriums, for example, that were multi-purpose spaces that functioned as the cafeteria and auditorium alike with their stages, eating and meeting facilities. Recreational space was another equalization school characteristic, as the land surrounding these schools provided athletic fields and, in some cases, gymnasiums on the campus.



The 1918 Bennett Grove School is the last remaining African American one-room schoolhouse in Bulloch County. It was a feeder school for Willow Hill. Georgia Southern University faculty helped to document the site based upon Willow Hill oral histories from former students and Bennett family descendants.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The current Willow Hill school building, constructed in 1954, operated throughout the equalization school era as the Bulloch County Board of Education, like many county school systems, fiercely fought integration by implementing tactics like *Freedom of Choice* plans. This option did not work because only the African

American students chose to attend previously all-white schools. By 1968, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare canceled federal appropriations to the county. Ultimately, by 1971, Willow Hill was downsized to grades four through seven, and a white administrator, Jerry Brown, became the principal of Willow Hill. Brown was the former principal of the all-white Portal High School. He remained the Willow Hill principal from 1971-1992. The school closed in 1999. For the next five years, Willow Hill's future use remained uncertain while the community continued to use the building. Finally, Bulloch County put the dreaded "For Sale" sign on the property. A group of Willow Hill descendants pooled their resources and attended the auction, hoping to acquire it. This committee of twelve people bought the school in 2005 for \$112,000. They formed a board of directors, achieved 501(c) 3 nonprofit status, and began a new era to preserve the spirit of Willow Hill.



Visitors view exhibits in the Willow Hill library. The library contains interior transom windows that provide additional light to the hallways.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Dr. Alvin D. Jackson is the president of the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center today. He was one of the first African American students to integrate Bulloch County schools. The board of directors of Willow Hill includes four physicians, a Florida state representative, teachers, a real estate developer, and a banker. All board members are direct descendants of the school's founders. Dr. Jackson was raised by his grandparents after his mother died in a tragic fire. Growing up around community elders, he recorded their stories, attended services in their places of worship, and amassed volumes of Bulloch County obituaries to document the African Americans who lived there. He attended the Willow Hill School and later became a medical doctor and state health director in Ohio, where he practices today. His oldest daughter, Dr. Nkenge Jackson, who currently is an obstetrician in Savannah, is one of the younger board members. Nkenge inherited her father's love of local history; at age 13 she received the first place award at National History Day for her project on the Willow Hill School.

After the board of trustees purchased the school in 2005, they held a school reunion in 2007 to engage community support for the project. Over 300 people attended. Among the participants were descendants of the Garfield Hall family farm, one of Georgia's





*Heritage programs on the ten-acre Willow Hill campus always include outdoor activities. Clarissa Clifton demonstrates her recipes for cooking on an open hearth after the historic marker dedication.*  
 Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Incoming freshmen at GSU who are enrolled in leadership development projects come to Willow Hill each summer to assist with painting the school's hallways, restrooms and some classrooms. Faculty and students specializing in public health, marketing and interior design contributed to visioning Willow Hill's classrooms for future use. Willow Hill was one of the sites preservationists visited during the 2014 National Trust conference. Field study participants heard about the students' health needs assessment that recommended the need for a community health center housed in one of Willow Hill's wings. Plans were presented for each classroom's future use, as faculty continue their partnership with Willow Hill.



*Willow Hill board member and director of development Dr. Gayle Jackson, and Ray Mosley, alumnus and Bulloch County Commissioner, celebrate the **Willow Hill Elementary School for Negroes** historic marker.*  
 Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

African American Centennial Family Farms located near the school. These descendants were former students and teachers at Willow Hill. Now, each summer on Labor Day weekend, the school hosts a heritage event.

Willow Hill found an invaluable partner in Georgia Southern University (GSU), as faculty from various departments assist them in preserving the school. One of the first contributions was *Defining Their Destiny: The Story of the Willow Hill School*. This history of Willow Hill was written by F. Erik Brooks, a GSU faculty member.



*Georgia Southern University Interior Design professor Diane Phillips analyzed chairs and developed a plan for their use in the primary classrooms at Willow Hill.*  
 Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Willow Hill is also the recipient of a Georgia Historical Society marker. The Georgia Natural Resources Foundation partnered with African American programs to bring greater recognition to equalization schools, and Willow Hill is one of the state's best examples of these schools that were preserved by a nonprofit organization and repurposed for community use. Over 100 people attended the dedication, including alumni and supporters, teachers, Bulloch County officials, and GSU partners. Descendants of principal Jerry Brown attended as well as former principal Julius Abraham. Other equalization school alumni also attended the marker dedication. They included Hunt Educational Center, a gymnasium that was purchased and preserved by alumni and is used for recreation in Fort Valley to alumni from the Springfield Central School in Effingham County, working with public partners to repurpose their school. ■

Georgia Southern University faculty partnered with the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center to host a symposium and exhibit that was funded by the Georgia Humanities Council: *The Past, Present and Future of the Bennett Grove School*. The Bennett Grove School is the last remaining one-room African American schoolhouse in Bulloch County. Once a feeder school to Willow Hill, Bennett Grove School, established in 1918, served grades one-seven until students attended Willow Hill. Faculty and students held a cleanup day to remove debris from the school. They helped with documenting the site based upon Willow Hill oral histories, and published an article about Bennett Grove in *Statesboro Magazine*. GSU created a ten-panel exhibit that was unveiled at the symposium. Dr. Brent Tharp, director of the GSU museum, also participated in an educational session about Bennett Grove and Willow Hill with board members at the Association of African American Museums annual conference in Birmingham.



*Participants from the National Trust field study pose for a group photo after lunch and the presentations at Willow Hill.*



## COOPER FAMILY FARM: A CENTENNIAL FAMILY FARM

*Whitney Rooks, African American Programs Assistant  
Historic Preservation Division*

On October 3, 2014 the Cooper Family Farm received a Centennial Family Farm Award in Perry. The Centennial Farm Awards program recognizes farms in Georgia that have remained in the same families for at least 100 years. The Cooper Family Farm is an African American farm located near Sardis in Burke County.



*Clinton Roberts, who is a descendant of Frank Cooper, stands among rows of fields on the Cooper Family Farm. The farm is located in Burke County near Sardis. Photo by Charlie Miller*

The family acquired this land in 1885 when Frank Cooper, Sr., the original owner, purchased 73 acres. Frank Sr. was also the minister at the nearby First McCanaan Baptist Church that was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on June 14, 2001. According to the National Register of Historic Places nomination, “Rev. Frank Cooper organized the McCanaan Missionary Baptist Church in 1875 and a small church was constructed on the site of the existing church. During the 1890s, the earlier church was torn down and a second church constructed. In 1912, the existing church was constructed to replace the 1890s church. The church membership included many families who worked as sharecroppers at the nearby Millhaven Plantation in Screven County. McCanaan Missionary Baptist Church is significant as an African American institution that provided religious, educational, and social autonomy in rural Georgia.” For years McCanaan Baptist was the church, school and cemetery for that African American community. The family is still strongly connected to the church and they remain active members.



*Good fishing is abundant on the lake that divides the agricultural fields on the farm. Photo by Charlie Miller*



*The Cooper family stands in front of their home church, McCanaan Missionary Baptist Church. The church was built in 1912 and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by Charlie Miller*



Over the next hundred years the descendants of Frank Sr. purchased more land giving the family a total sum of 299 acres. The main crops produced were cotton and corn. For a food and income source, they raised cows and pigs. Today the family still owns 295.7 of the original 299 acres. 169 acres are used for growing crops. Ownership through the years has been passed down from Frank Sr. to his son Frank Jr; grandson, Hubert Roberts; and great-great-grandson, Clinton Roberts. Today the major crops are cotton and peanuts.

African American Centennial Farms are extremely rare. Of the approximately 400 Centennial Farms in the state, this is the 12<sup>th</sup> African American Centennial Farm. It is one of the largest African American Centennial farms. The Cooper farm is also the first African American farm in Burke County to receive the Centennial Family Farm Award. ■



## STEPHENS FAMILY FARM: A CENTENNIAL FAMILY FARM

*Whitney Rooks, African American Programs Assistant  
Historic Preservation Division*

On October 3, 2014 the Titus Stephens Farm was recognized at the Centennial Farm Awards in Perry. The Centennial Farms program honors farms in Georgia that have remained in the same families for at least 100 years. The Titus Stephens Farm is an African American farm located in Albany, Dougherty County. Elvie Barlow, a descendant, believes Titus Stephens acquired 100 acres of land on County Line Rd. from his master during enslavement, J. W. Mock. Titus Stephens and his wife had two children Titus, Jr. and Lydia. Titus Jr. moved away but Lydia stayed on the farm. Lydia acquired the farm in 1909 and raised her children: Cherry, Mariah and Clemmie. Clemmie acquired the land in 1949. Clemmie's granddaughter, Virginia Seabrook, still lives on the farm.



*Descendants of Titus Stephens celebrate the Centennial Family Farm Award at the family residence on the farm.*

*Photo by Charlie Miller*

Today the family still owns the original 100 acres that Titus Sr. acquired. Virginia Seabrook and her siblings Shelby Jr. and Pearlie Gholson are the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of Stephens' descendants to own this land. Virginia lives on the land and rents a portion of it to farmers who care for the crops. Crops harvested on this land include: cotton, peanuts, pecans and tobacco. Each crop is rotated

in alternating years. In July 2013 this family was recognized by the *Albany Herald* for their long land ownership. "What amazes me is that, through Reconstruction, through Jim Crow, through lynchings, through the Great Depression, through the upheaval of the Civil Rights era, through drought and through black flight to the north, our family held onto this farm," said Gwen Fuller, Virginia's niece who lives in Lawrenceville.



*Cotton is king on the Stephens farm. This cotton bud is almost ready for harvest.*

*Photo by Charlie Miller*

An African American Centennial Farm is a rarity statewide. Of the approximately 400 Centennial Farms in the state, the Titus Stephens Family Farm is the 13<sup>th</sup> African American Centennial farm in Dougherty County. The push for recognition was initiated by Virginia Seabrook's son, Elvie Barlow. Barlow learned of the Centennial Farms program after the July 2013 article in the *Albany Herald*. Barlow published a book about his family heritage, *Covered by the Blood: An African-American Family's Journey From Slavery*.



*Rows of cotton can be seen on the Titus Stephens Farm that is located off County Line Road in Dougherty County.*

*Photo by Charlie Miller*





## NORTHWEST GEORGIA EVENT HIGHLIGHTS THE 90TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FAIRVIEW COLORED SCHOOL

Michael Weinroth  
Gala Chairman

Like a giant that has been asleep for 60 years, the Fairview-E.S. Brown School in Cave Spring has finally awakened to a different world in 2014. This old school built around 1924 and located some 17 miles from Rome, Georgia was the pride of African American children who once attended. The Fairview School remained active until 1954, when a new elementary school, the E.S. Brown School was constructed. This school was one of Georgia's 500 "equalization schools" that were built as a response to the 1954 landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board*.

Equalization Schools were built as part of massive resistance to school integration and were publicly supported schools for African Americans. The E.S. Brown School was modern and featured indoor plumbing and water, unlike the Fairview School. Following federally mandated desegregation in the mid-1960s, the E.S. Brown School closed in 1968. For a few years the building was used as a community center, but was eventually demolished. Yet the 4.0 acre Fairview School campus survived, covered in kudzu until the alumni formed the Fairview-E.S. Brown Heritage Corporation (FESBHC) to preserve this Cave Spring legacy in education.

What made the Fairview-E.S. Brown School unique was that it was one of 5,300 schools that were built in 15 southeastern states from 1912-1932 through the collaborative efforts of Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, a trustee of Tuskegee and president of Sears Roebuck. These schools served the educational needs of approximately one third of the black children in the southeastern United States.

Today the school, while neglected and scarred is standing upright wearing a new protective coat of Tyvek and sheets of aluminum roofing over its head to keep the interior dry. A campaign that started in 2009 by Joyce Perdue Smith, chairman of FESBHC, to restore the old school, came closer to reality during a special Gala 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Weekend, November 6-8, 2014. Joyce's father, Eugene Perdue, Sr. served as principal between 1952 and 1957. Local citizens, Fairview alumni, historians, and preservationists with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Georgia Trust for

Historic Preservation and the Georgia Humanities Council presented a two day Symposium at Berry College. The weekend culminated with a Gala Dinner Event at the historic Forrest Place Hotel in downtown Rome on Saturday, November 8, at 7:00 p.m. Former Anchor of WSB-TV Monica Pearson served as the evening's emcee. Direct descendants of the Washington and Rosenwald families were in attendance at the Gala Weekend.

This fundraising event supports the mission of the Fairview- E.S. Brown Heritage Corporation to restore the campus. A restored first grade building will anchor the re-envisioned campus and will serve as the primary interpretive center for the



Fairview supporters (from left to right) Ira Levy, Jeanne Cyriaque, Mark McDonald, Sheffield Hale, John Ware, Joyce Perdue Smith, and Wes Ryals discussed the Fairview preservation initiative at a Rome Rotary Club meeting. Photo courtesy of the Rome Rotary Club

site. Fairview's new "living campus" will be the first of this kind in North Georgia interpreting the African American cultural and educational experiences of the 20th century.

Preservation plans will also focus on the rehabilitation of the original Julius Rosenwald building site. While the original building has been lost, the structure's site will be re-interpreted as a community garden, utilizing the original building footprint and layout. Popular garden themes are under consideration, tapping into the growing farm-to-table and local food movements. Camp offerings under consideration target Common Core Georgia Performance Standards for education, including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math).



The last surviving building from the circa 1920 Fairview campus is the focus of current preservation initiatives. The Fairview-E.S. Brown Heritage Corporation sponsored a gala for the school's 90th anniversary. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

## JOHN G. RILEY CENTER/MUSEUM UNITES FOUR STATES IN “CASTING THE NET” PROJECT

Marion McGee  
Assistant Director, John G. Riley Center/Museum

On Saturday, November 1, 2014, the John G. Riley Center/Museum officially launched its *Casting the Net* multi-state museum project benefiting African American museums and cultural organizations in four states, inclusive of: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia. The two-year initiative focuses on statewide museum needs assessment, staff training, technology integration, and intergenerational exchange between museum founders and emerging leaders to aid in the development of sustainable statewide networks in these southeastern states.

The John Gilmore Riley Center/Museum for African American Culture (JGRCM), Inc., is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that has provided Tallahassee and the State of Florida with quality historic preservation and conservation programs since 1996. These programs help to foster appreciation of African American history through tours, exhibits, research, education, publications and subsequently led to the creation of the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network (FAAHPN). Recognizing that African American museums were not “in the loop” of mainstream historic preservation initiatives, the JGRCM led the effort to organize a statewide network of museums. This Florida Network or FAAHPN now serves as an informational and technical assistance association that includes proprietary assets such as: A) The Museum Guide to Core Competencies, B) Annual Network Member Progress Report, and C) Administrative Procedures and Management Plans, all of which are valuable, capacity building resources that can and will be replicated within other states.



### JOHN GILMORE RILEY CENTER/MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

*The John Gilmore Riley Center/Museum for African American Culture “JGRCM” is home to the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network. This museum in Tallahassee is dedicated to discovering and recovering the history of African Americans throughout the Big Bend Region in Florida. For more information, visit their website at [www.rileymuseum.org](http://www.rileymuseum.org) or call 850.681.7881.*

The Riley Museum in cooperation with the Florida Network is now charged with responding to growing interest in statewide collaboration among museums and culturally-specific organizations in other states. The *Casting the Net* project partners include the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN); the Center for the Study of African and African American Diaspora Museums & Communities (CFAADMC); the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission (NCAAHC) and Virginia Africana (a Network of Virginia-based Museum, History and Preservation Professionals). Site liaisons in Georgia are Jeanne Cyriaque, African American Programs Coordinator and staff liaison for GAAHPN and Dr. Deborah Johnson-Simon, director of CFAADMC.

The intent of this project is to equip museums in four states to build alliances using a comprehensive approach to statewide network creation. Collaboration is vital to the long-term sustainability of the African American museum in particular and the proliferation of African American led cultural organizations nationwide. The initiative has been touted as a model project by the Executive Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, Dr. Lonnie Bunch.

The *Casting the Net* project includes eight multi-state meetings in each of the four target states over a two-year period. Through on-site training and technical assistance, the four partner organizations will develop the knowledge and skills necessary to serve as community resource centers in their respective states. The project also seeks to increase understanding of the role of museums and cultural centers as places of empowerment, a topic that will be thoroughly explored during the Florida Network’s upcoming Biennial Statewide Museums Conference, taking place in Tallahassee May 18-20, 2015.

This project was generously funded by the Institute of Museum & Library Services (“IMLS”), an independent, federal agency that is the primary source of federal support for the nation’s 123,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The *Casting the Net* project was one of twelve grants awarded nationwide. The mission of the IMLS is to inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement. The IMLS grant making, policy development and research help libraries and museums deliver valuable services that make it possible for communities and individuals to thrive. To learn more about the Institute, please visit [www.ims.gov](http://www.ims.gov) or follow on Twitter @US\_IMLS.



Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network



## ABOUT REFLECTIONS

Since its first issue appeared in December 2000, *Reflections* has documented hundreds of Georgia's African American historic resources. Now all of these articles are available on the Historic Preservation Division website [www.georgiashpo.org](http://www.georgiashpo.org). Search for links to your topic by categories: cemeteries, churches, districts, farms, lodges, medical, people, places, schools, and theatres. You can now subscribe to *Reflections* from the homepage. *Reflections* is a recipient of a *Leadership in History Award* from the American Association for State and Local History.



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## ABOUT GAAHPN



Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network

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 3,000 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.georgiashpo.org](http://www.georgiashpo.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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