



# Reflections

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## WATCH NIGHT: GULLAH TRADITION REENACTS TRANSITION TO FREEDOM

*Ieshia Hall, African American Programs Assistant  
Historic Preservation Division*

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was recognized by the enslaved as a turning point in their history. They saw it as the fulfillment of their hope to no longer be bound and treated as objects but as free human beings in a country founded on freedom and liberty for the common man.

With the issuance of the preliminary proclamation in September 1862, the news of freedom spread quickly. On December 31, 1862 enslaved Africans gathered in cabins, praise houses, churches, and meeting halls to pray.<sup>1</sup>

Some historians report that those enslaved on Georgia's coast were some of the first to receive news of emancipation. They gathered that night to witness to the coming of a freedom for which they hoped for hundreds of years.

1 Smith, Frank O. & Donna Healey, Ph.D., *Watch Night & The Emancipation Proclamation: Gullah Geechee Culture Heritage Corridor Commission Lays Plans for Linked Observances*, (John Island: *Waiting for the Hour*, 2012), p.1.



*Watch Night Meeting, Dec. 31, 1862: Waiting for the Hour*  
Source: *Library of Congress*

Once the Civil War ended and freedom had been granted, the newly freed Africans began to create their own communities and congregations that continue to participate in Watch Night. Over the decades these celebrations have become a part of the rich Gullah Geechee heritage that black churches and institutions have kept alive.<sup>2</sup>

Gullah Geechee families and congregations still celebrate Watch Night as a way to remember their ancestors and to celebrate renewal. Charlotte Dunn grew up within the Gullah Geechee (GUGE) Culture Heritage Corridor of

the southeast. She witnessed Watch Night as a child and participates in the annual service now as an adult. Mrs. Dunn explains the tradition: "[W]hen four men would go to each corner of the church, the pastor would call out, 'Watchman, Watchman, tell me the hour.' And the watchmen would call out the time. During this period, the congregation is on its knees in the dark praying."<sup>3</sup> When it is close to midnight, Mrs. Dunn said the lights are turned off and the congregation is silent until the passing of midnight. At midnight, the lights are turned on marking

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

## WATCH NIGHT: GULLAH TRADITION REENACTS TRANSITION TO HISTORY

*Ieshia Hall, continued from page 1*

the congregation's passage from the darkness into the light, from the old year to the new." While the ritual of turning on and off the lights symbolizes the changing of a year, it also reenacts the final moments when ancestors watched quietly, through the night for word of the Emancipation Proclamation, for when they would pass from being slaves to being free in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Watch Night is celebrated on New Year's Eve by many church congregations in the South as well as black churches across the United States; however, its association with enslavement and the Emancipation Proclamation have been lost for many. The oral transfer of traditions allows the Gullah Geechee to understand the origin of Watch Night and its significance to African American culture.

So this year, the GUGE commission is calling on leaders and individuals from the faith communities of all denominations throughout the corridor to sponsor Watch Night and/or Emancipation Day Celebrations within churches and communities and to tell the story of the ancestors emerging from the darkness of bondage into the light of freedom.

The GUGE Culture Heritage Corridor-wide celebration of the 155th anniversary of the first Emancipation day (January 1, 1863) is set for Sunday, December 31, 2017 and/or Monday, January 1, 2018. This effort will facilitate wider acknowledgement, engagement, appreciation, and application of tradition and history in our modern world, while strengthening the interconnectedness of communities from which these customs and traditions flow.

"Today, we have all sorts of challenges as we seek

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to reconcile our history." said Dr. Herman Blake, outgoing GUGE Commission Executive Director. "And understanding how a people who couldn't read rejoiced that they were going into a new era is an important part of understanding how significant it is today that we can see visions and make them come true."<sup>5</sup>

The GUGE Cultural Heritage Corridor extends from Pender County, NC, to St. Johns County, FL, and 30 miles inland. It is home to one of America's most unique cultures, shaped by captive Africans brought to the southern United States from West Africa and continued in later generations by their descendants.<sup>6</sup> The corridor is a National Heritage Area designated by Congress in 2006 to recognize the important contributions made by African Americans known as Gullah Geechee to American culture and history.

The 12-member GUGE Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission administers the corridor management plan and assists governments, and public and private entities with interpreting the Gullah Geechee story, promoting the living culture, as well as preserving associated sites and artifacts for the education and benefit of the public. Heather Hodges is the new Executive Director for the GUGE Corridor. She assumed her duties this fall.

For more information on the corridor-wide celebration or to share your Gullah Geechee traditions, visit [www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org](http://www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org) or call 843 818 4587. ■

<sup>5</sup> [EK Productions] (2016) Gullah Geechee Watch Night/Emancipation Day Celebration—Herman Blake Interview (3:34 to 4:07) [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Gullah Geechee: A Unique African American Culture, National Park Service website, accessed November 21 2017 <https://www.nps.gov/guge/index.htm>



## THE THOMPSON FARMS: AN AUGUSTA-RICHMOND COUNTY TREASURE DISCOVERED

Joyce Law, Program Manager

Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History, Augusta

Imagine carving out a life of hope, filled with new political and economic opportunities after Emancipation. Charles Crosby migrated to Augusta from South Carolina. In 1866 he purchased the horse named “Stonewall” from the federal government. Crosby’s assets as a property owner appear as early as 1870 in the Georgia Tax Digest and the federal census. Family history states he took a wife, Cherry Crosby. In 1875 Georgia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals awarded drayman Charles Crosby the first prize of \$10.00 for Best Kept Horse. And so, a family legacy began.

John Ann Crosby (also recorded as JoAnn), niece of Charles Crosby born in 1862, was reared in Charles Crosby’s home since early childhood. Miss Crosby and her descendants helped establish a larger farming property in a more distant sector of the county.



John Ann Crosby  
Thompson, 1862-1947  
Courtesy of Thompson  
Family

Miss Crosby married John Thompson, a semi-professional baseball player who migrated from Atlanta to Augusta on May 27, 1884. By 1898, the former athlete had garnered a sterling business reputation as a drayman/farmer and, according to family history, was known to “speak his mind.” From his capital resources in dray transportation, he began Thompson Farms approximately nine miles from the city center.



John S. Thompson  
1857-1927  
Courtesy of Thompson  
Family

The city of Augusta experienced a series of devastating floods in the late 19th century and early 20th century. In 1908, John Thompson was one of three black men appointed to serve on the special committee for swamp relief. <sup>7</sup> Well-known community leaders Rev. C.T. Walker and Rev. Silas X. Floyd were the other appointees.

In a 1921 article, The Augusta Chronicle described John Thompson as “a worthy colored farmer.... ‘clearing’ up

<sup>7</sup> “CAPT Hugué Helps Down the River”, *The Augusta Chronicle* (Augusta GA), September 15, 1908, p.3.

some land, nine miles out... the first time any land has been cleared in this vicinity since slavery times.” <sup>8</sup> This virgin land, now wholly productive, in the easternmost sector of the county becomes the domain of the Thompson legacy.

Family records report John and John Ann had four children: Beatrice Thompson Oliver (1885-1959), Charles (1890-1941), Harold D. (1893-1963) and brother Edwin Fletcher Thompson (1895-1976). Mrs. Thompson astutely served as general business manager of Thompson Farms; their sons Charles and Harold divided responsibilities between the dray and farm operations. Their older daughter Beatrice and youngest son Edwin pursued medical careers in the northeast.

John Thompson was a member of the now-defunct Congregational Church on Gwinnett Street (now Laney-Walker Blvd) in Augusta. He also was a charter members of the Augusta Chapter of the NAACP along with other business and community leaders such as Rev. Thomas Dwelle, pastor of Union Baptist Church.

Mrs. Thompson is noted as a member of Union Baptist Church, a daughter congregation of historic Springfield Baptist Church.

Harold D. Thompson married Sara Evans and had two sons, Harold Jr. and Charles A. (named in honor of his paternal uncle) to whom they passed the farming tradition. Harold Sr. passed in 1963; Sara passed in 2009. Through an unbroken succession of family ownership and steady acquisition of new tracts, Thompson Farms encompass more than 1,700 acres. In 1984, the Augusta Black History Committee honored Harold Jr. and Charles A. Thompson for continuing “the same profession or business as their ancestors.”

Thompson Farms is recognized by the Augusta-Richmond County Georgia Extension Service as the largest commercial commodity farm operation in Augusta-Richmond County, producing corn, oats, rye, wheat, and peas in the region. ■

<sup>8</sup> “Talking It Over”, *The Augusta Chronicle*, March 6, 1921, p.6.



Charles A. Thompson points to his grandfathers name in the 1917 Augusta NAACP charter roster  
Courtesy Lucy Craft Laney Museum

## LEST WE FORGET: IN SEARCH OF GEORGIA'S WW I BLACK SOLDIERS

Lamar Veatch, Ph.D. Heritage Associate  
The Georgia WWI Centennial Commission  
with an introduction and case study from compiled sources

Georgia played a significant role during America's participation in World War I (1917-18). It was home to more training camps than any other state and (by the war's end) it had contributed more than 100,000 men and women to the war effort. Georgia had five major federal military installations when the US entered the war. Georgians also suffered from the effects of the influenza pandemic, the tragic Otranto maritime disaster, local political fights, and wartime home-front restrictions.<sup>1</sup>



Eugene Bullard, native of Columbus Georgia  
Wikipedia.org

Historic records report close to 380,000 African American men would be inducted into the United States army, with 200,000 serving in Europe and a little more than 40,000 seeing combat at the frontlines.<sup>2</sup>

The economic impacts of the war and the domestic politics of the Progressive era of 20th century increased the already odious environment of racial prejudice that empowered white Americans to abuse African Americans at will, further denying the promises of democracy to a segment of the population that lacked the protections guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Responding to the growing popularity of the film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the preeminent historian, William Edward Burghart Du Bois painted a bleak portrait of the future for race relations in America. And Du Bois was correct in his assessment; incidents of racial violence and the lynching of blacks would increase both during and after World War I (WWI).<sup>4</sup>

1 *World War I in Georgia* by Todd Womack, the New Georgia Encyclopedia, original post July 28, 2005; <http://www.world-war1centennial.org/index.php/georgia-ww1-history-page.html>

2 *African American Soldiers (USA)* by Pellom McDaniels III, International Encyclopedia of the first World War 1914-1918 online, updated post October 8, 2014 [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/african\\_american\\_soldiers\\_usa](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/african_american_soldiers_usa)

3 Ibid.

4 Opinions: The Slanderous Film, in: *The Crisis*, Nov 2 (1915),

U.S. Congress voted to declare war on Germany in April 1917. Shortly after, President Wilson approved the Selective Draft Act on May 18, 1917 to sustain an army capable of defeating Germany, requiring all eligible men, ages twenty-one to thirty to register for the draft.

However, many white men in Georgia sought to prevent black men from being drafted. Some land-owning whites in 1917 refused to allow their black sharecroppers to register for the draft or to report for duty once they had been called.

Many black men were arrested and placed in camp stockades for not heeding draft notices that they had never received from landowners. For most of the war, local draft boards "resisted sending healthy and hard-working black males" because they were needed in the cotton fields and by the naval stores industry.<sup>5</sup>



Sharecroppers in Bulloch County  
New Georgia Encyclopedia/ [www.georgiaencyclopedia.org](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org)

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World War I has been called "The Forgotten War," and Black soldiers were truly forgotten participants in this forgotten war one hundred years ago. This article describes efforts during this centennial anniversary of the U.S. involvement in the war (1917-1918) that are being made in Georgia to correct this omission and to remember their names.

pp. 76-77.

5 Ibid.

The Georgia WWI Centennial Commission was established by the Georgia General Assembly in 2015. Affiliated with the United State WWI Centennial Commission that was established by Congress in 2013, this state commission is charged with “honoring, educating, and commemorating” the role that Georgia and Georgian’s played in this war that really changed everything. This year (2017) marks the 100 year anniversary of America’s entrance into the Great War.

Just after World War I officially ended on November 11, 1918, there were efforts to memorialize those that died in service during the war. These took two forms – books and documents that provided a written record and local inscribed stone monuments and brass plaques. The Centennial Commission determined that by “collecting” these items and recording the names for posterity, those that died would be honored and commemorated.

One of the first listings of war dead from Georgia to be published was *The Georgia State Memorial Book – Adopted as the Official Record by the Military Department – State of Georgia – 1921*. This book, published by a company outside of Georgia, provides a photograph and brief notation for some 1,200 Georgia soldiers that died in service during this war. While only white soldiers were included in this “official” 1921 book, this list became the start of the Commission’s “Georgia Memorial Database.”

Fortunately, there were other lists produced soon that did contain the names and information for Black soldiers that died in service. The Georgia Dept. of Veterans Service (GDVS) developed such a listing. An additional 700 names were added to the “Database” from this GDVS list, with many of these being Georgia’s Black soldiers.

Researchers in Augusta were able to confirm the WWI service of Edwin Fletcher Thompson, D.D.S. using the Georgia World War I Service Cards, 1917-1919 and U.S. Army Transport Service Passenger List 1910-1939.

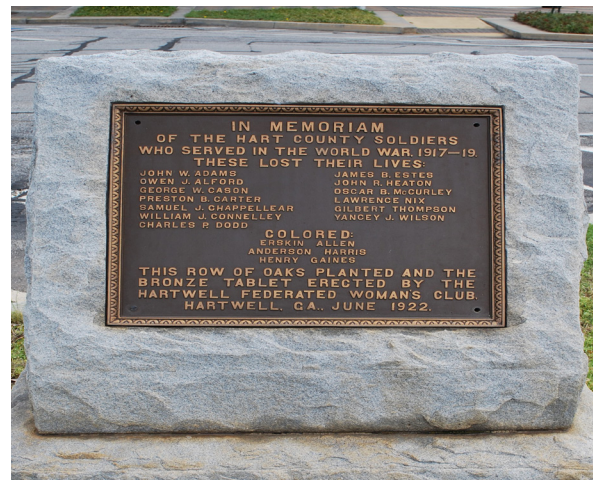


Edwin Fletcher Thompson  
Pennsylvania General Assembly

Dr. Thompson does not have a military tombstone at his final resting place in Cedar Grove Cemetery, however his family tells of his time in the Great War. It was found that Dr. Thompson served in France as a private first class from June 10, 1918 through February 27, 1919.

He was assigned to Company C of the 325th Field Signal Battalion, 92nd Division. The 325th is noted as the first all-Black signal unit in the U.S. Army and the only Black signal unit to serve in World War I. <sup>6</sup> After the war, he graduated from Meharry School of Medicine’s Dental College and practiced in Philadelphia, PA. Thompson also served five non-consecutive terms as a Pennsylvania state representative. Upon news of his father’s failing health, Dr. Thompson closed his private practice and returned to Augusta in the early 1960s to assist with farm operations. There, he died in 1976.

Very significantly, another source of African-American casualty names are the Adjutant General’s Georgia Death Cards. These are the original military records that document soldiers’ deaths, and these provide very accurate historical information that is now being added to this public-access “Database” on the Commission’s website. <http://www.worldwarIcentennial.org/index.php/georgia-memorial-database.html>



Hart County Soldiers Memorial also lists “Colored” soldiers. Erected in June 1922, Hartwell, GA  
Lamar Veatch/ Georgia WWI Centennial Commission

The second source of African-American names are from inscriptions. As part of a national effort to find and document all of the WWI monuments throughout the United States during these Centennial years, the Georgia Commission has been photographing and listing Georgia’s veterans memorials and monuments. These photos and descriptions of over 150 memorials may be found on the Commission’s website.

<http://www.worldwarIcentennial.org/index.php/monuments-memorials-historic-sites.html>

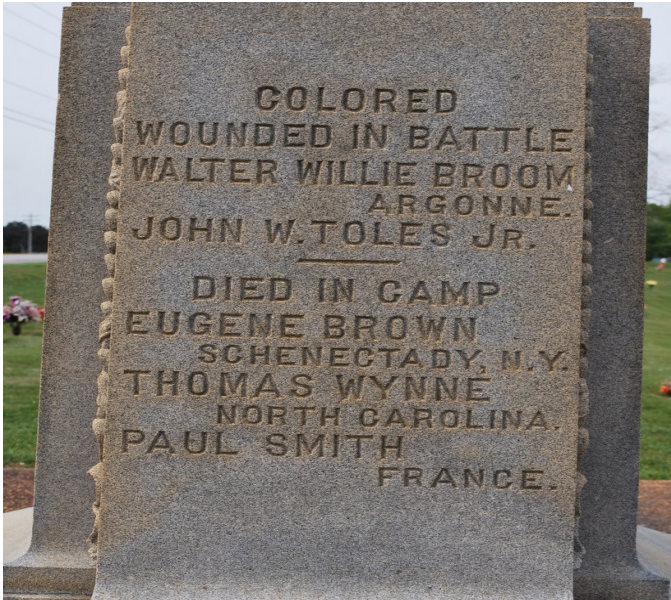
<sup>6</sup> Williams, Charles H. *Sidelights On Negro Soldiers*, B.J. Brimmer Company, Boston 1923.

## LEST WE FORGET: IN SEARCH OF GEORGIA'S WW I BLACK SOLDIERS

Lamar Veatch, continued from page 4

These local monuments, memorials, and plaques are proving to be valuable for names of the African-Americans who died in WWI. This is because some local communities who have honored their war dead with lasting tributes included listings for both white and black soldiers.

One of the earliest monuments erected in Georgia is in Fairburn. Unveiled in May, 1919, it is inscribed with a “Colored” listing of both wounded and killed servicemen.



Fairburn's WWI monument located in Holly Hill Memorial Park  
L.Veatch/Georgia WWI Centennial Commission

Many other communities throughout Georgia followed Fairburn's lead with similar inscribed lists. The bronze plaque on the courthouse square in Hartwell (shown on page 5) is an example. The names listed on this plaque and on all the other recorded and newly located monuments are being added to the Memorial Database.

Georgia is the home of one of the very few WWI monuments that is specifically dedicated to African-American soldiers. Erected by the congregation of the Shiloh Baptist Church in the Harrisburg community of Baldwin County, this modest memorial is dedicated “In Memory of the Colored Soldiers of the World War.” Three names – Alex Threat, Willie Warren, and Augustus Austin – are inscribed.

This monument was noted in the *Atlanta Constitution* article on January 18, 1920, as the first war monument to “colored” citizen-soldiers.

According to Rev. Shedrick D. Ellington, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, the monument was crafted by local mason the late Mose Ray and other builders from the surrounding Harrisburg community. Ellington said the small obelisk has become a landmark in Harrisburg and attracts visitors and historians from around the state, and possibly the country.

Shiloh Baptist Church was founded in 1875 in Harrisburg, a nearly-200-year-old enclave within the Midway-Hardwick area of Baldwin County, four miles south of Milledgeville.

In acknowledging the under-recognized role that Georgia's Black community played, the GA Commission adopted a specific goal to: “Explore and honor the role of African

American Georgians in WWI.” Among the many programs and activities targeted at achieving this and the other goals are two related projects that are helping to identify and honor Georgia's Black WWI soldiers that gave their all in the service of their country.

The Centennial Commission's expectation is that these public databases of names and memorials will form the most comprehensive listing of Georgia's fallen soldiers – both Black and White – and be a tribute to them and their families for ultimate sacrifice they made one hundred years ago in World War I – and be forgotten no longer.



The Shiloh WWI Monument  
L. Veatch/Georgia WWI Centennial Commission

To report missing names of African American WW I service personnel, please send emails to [lamar.veatch@usg.edu](mailto:lamar.veatch@usg.edu) .

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### National Trust Launches Action Fund for African American Cultural Heritage

The new African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund is accepting letters of intent from organizations or individuals seeking to preserve a site, landscape or history associated with black cultural heritage.

Grant will range from \$50,000 to \$150,000. For full fund details, including the online form to submit your letter of intent, visit [Forum.SavingPlaces.org/aachactionfund](http://Forum.SavingPlaces.org/aachactionfund). Letters are due January 31, 2018.



### National Trust for Historic Preservation

2600 Virginia Ave NW, Ste 1100 | Washington DC 20037  
202 588 6000 | [www.savingplaces.org](http://www.savingplaces.org)

Image credit: NTHP/www.business.livetalksla.org

### Black Educators, Schools focus of Athens-Clarke 2018 Brown Bag Lecture



Amy Kissane of the Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation to present on “Black Schools: Here and Gone” January 17, 2018 at the Lyndon House Arts Center Community Room in Athens, Georgia. This lecture runs from noon

to 1pm and is free and open to the public. For information or to RSVP, visit online at <http://achfonline.org/brown-bag-lunches/>.

### Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation, Inc.

489 Prince Avenue | Athens, Georgia 30601  
706 353 1801 | [www.achfonline.org](http://www.achfonline.org)

Photo credit: Austin Steele/Flagpole.com

### West GA Famers and Federation of Sothern Cooperartives Mark 50 + Years of Service



The West Farmers Coop, founded in 1966, was influential in creating the Federation of Southern Cooperative/Land Assistance Fund.

These nonprofits organizations support Black farmers in West Georgia and the Southeast, respectively, in accessing training, financial and economic resources. The Federation has administrative offices in East Point, Georgia.

### West Georgia Farmer's Cooperative

7516 US Hwy 27 South | Hamilton, GA. 31833  
[www.facebook.com/westgeorgiafarmerscooperative/](http://www.facebook.com/westgeorgiafarmerscooperative/)  
706 881 1249

Image credit: West Georgia Farmer's Cooperative

### A.E. Beach Institute Celebrates 150 years of Education, Excellence and Leadership

Established in 1867 to teach Savannah's newly-freed Black children, the Beach Insiitute has a legacy of achievement and activism.

Join patrons and alumni in recognizing its influence on the past, present and future of Savannah and beyond on. Contact The Beach Institute office for more information.



### The Beach Institute African-American Cultural Center

502 E Harris Street | Savannah, GA 31401  
912-335-8868 | <http://www.beachinstitute.org/>

Photo credit: KTCF/ [www.facebook.com/Beach-Institute](http://www.facebook.com/Beach-Institute)

## 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.



Georgia African American  
Historic Preservation Network

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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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