

The Augusta Chronicle

Augusta's African-American landmarks get attention

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There's an abandoned two-story house at 1011 Laney-Walker Boulevard with a porch roof that seems ready to collapse off its columns.

Most driving by would not realize this was the home of a man whom *The New York Times* declared the greatest African-American preacher of his time when it published his obituary in 1921.

The Rev. C.T. Walker's home and seven other endangered historic properties will be featured in This Place Matters: Preserving Augusta's African-American Communities on Friday and Saturday. The conference includes a bus tour of African-American historic sites and is being co-sponsored by Historic Augusta and the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History.

Though Historic Augusta has previously listed all eight properties as places that ought to be saved, funding for historic rehabilitation in Augusta's African-American neighborhoods so far has lagged. The challenge has been to attract private investment.

"Often African-American neighborhoods are places that have had disinvestment over the years. It's difficult to get an investor willing to take a risk there," said Erick Montgomery, the executive director of Historic Augusta. "Our role is to tell investors these places have value."

African-Americans want to preserve their historic buildings just like any other community, said Christine Miller-Betts, the executive director of the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History, but oftentimes don't know how to do it.

"Even if a person has the money, they might not have the knowledge," said Miller-Betts. "A person might take out windows and walls and by the time they're done, they've practically destroyed all of the building's historic components."

Augusta's black history is reflected in buildings spread throughout the city, but the structures on the tour are centered in or near the Laney-Walker historic district.

The Laney-Walker neighborhood began in the mid-19th century as a multi-ethnic working-class neighborhood that housed Irish, Chinese and African-American laborers who were employed by the Georgia Railroad and the Augusta Canal.

In the early 20th century, Jim Crow zoning laws required that people settle in blocks designated by race. Laney-Walker grew into the city's principal black district and served as the main business and cultural center for the black community. As a result, many of the city's iconic African-American structures were built there.

Trinity CME Church, at 731 Taylor St., was home to the oldest African-American Methodist congregation in Augusta in 1840.

The W.S. Hornsby House, at 1518 Twiggs St., was the home in 1916 of one of the co-founders of the Pilgrim Health and Life Insurance Co., the first insurance provider for African-Americans in Georgia and one of the largest employers of African-Americans in Augusta.

C.T. Walker was born into slavery and was a lifetime champion of racial tolerance. He founded Tabernacle Baptist Church, which was visited by Booker T. Washington, John D. Rockefeller and President William Howard Taft. When Martin Luther King Jr. first introduced himself to Augusta, he did so at Tabernacle.

Some buildings on the tour reflect the district's earlier immigrant population. Lam's corner store at 1024-1026 D'Antignac, for instance, was part of an early Irish district.

It's not just the buildings that are worth remembering, but the people who once lived there. Augusta was a leader during the African-American community's rise from slavery.

"I can walk out my front door and envision what it was like during the days of C.T. Walker and Ms. Laney," Miller-Betts said. "I think about people right after slavery and how they made this community, and they didn't have any money."

Corey Rogers, the historian at the Lucy Craft Laney Museum, said too much of Augusta's black history has been demolished. Among those buildings was Lenox Theater, which once was called one of the greatest showcases for colored people in the Southeast.

"I'm tired of people saying 'I wish.' I'm tired of regret," said Rogers. "It's time to do something proactive instead of reactive -- to wake up the community to the importance of what we still have here."

"I think the black experience is part of the human experience. It's an American experience," Rogers said. "It's difficult to talk about the black experience without talking about the rest of the community. Everyone's history is intertwined."

Links:

[1] <http://historicaugusta.org>

[2] <http://LucyCraftLaneyMuseum.com>

[3] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4496487.jpg>

[4] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4490166.jpg>

[5] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4490322.jpg>

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