

Making a Difference, Making It Happen

On May 2, 1978, before the break of day, a tornado almost demolished my church as it roared through Selma causing much destruction and damage in the area. At the same time, I was blessed with a vision—“that the church must be restored.” This was the church of my birth and foreparents, the place that nurtured my religious belief, fueled my racial pride and culture, inspired my educational aspirations, and cultivated the love for my people and country.

Although the building looked “lost” and members of the congregation talked about bulldozing the remaining structure, I knew in my heart and believed the voice in my dream that the church could and must be saved not just for me, but for future generations. Our successors must see these stones and learn the great history of their fore parents and be inspired to make their contributions to the community and their country. I speak of the First Colored Baptist Church of Selma, Alabama, chartered in 1845. In 1894, the congregation constructed a new building constructed on Sylvan Street (Martin Luther King Street), designed and built by Dave West, the son of an ex-slave and church member. On its completion, the church was hailed a “the finest colored church edifice in Alabama.”

It was not easy convincing the congregation to restore and preserve our great church. Almost none of them had knowledge of the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) and what it meant to be listed in a state register and/or National Register of Historic Places. A week later, the congregation met to decide what to do. Filled with passion and intensity, I pleaded for the church because it was too important to our history to let go. The congregation agreed to hire a construction engineer/architectural firm with experience in preservation to evaluate the damaged building. If the firm was negative about the building’s prospects, I would give up my plea. If the firm was positive, we would begin plans for restoration. The firm’s answer was not only yes, but the employees were amazed at how well the church was constructed and impressed by the design and fine interior and the remaining stain

glass windows. This firm also referred to the church as one of the finest church edifices they had surveyed.

I became the Preservation Officer for the church restoration. The congregation initiated the pledge card method to raise the building fund. Peoples Bank and Trust Company established a First Baptist Church tornado fund for public donations and a Small Business Administration loan was made available. In June 1978, I went to the Alabama Historical Commission and was assigned to Ellen Mertins, a staff member, to get technical assistance and advice needed to complete the National Register nomination. In 1979, the church was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This site possesses national significance in that it was the first black church in the free black neighborhood, and played a role in the history of the National Voting Rights Bill of 1965 and the Civil Rights Movement for the black belt counties in Alabama. It was the exclusive venue for mass meetings and training conducted by the Dallas County Voters League, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the local distribution for food and clothing of the unemployed. Because of the preponderance of activities related to the voting rights struggle, First Baptist Church became known throughout the region as “The Movement Church.” It marks the beginning of the National Historic Selma to Montgomery Voters Rights Trail. During this time, I met several black people working to preserve places they thought too important to let go as well. We came together as a “Black Caucus” to speak for the preservation of more black sites in the State of Alabama.

Early in 1980, Larry Oakes was hired as the Executive Director/SHPO of AHC. He listened to our concerns and being a visionary leader, in 1983, invited a few key African-American preservationists to hold a workshop at the AHC’s annual preservation conference. Out of that meeting, a task force headed by Richard Dozier, the first chairperson, voted to form a council to advise the AHC. The commission, which is an

The First Annual Conference of the SRAAPA in Birmingham, AL, was hosted by the Black Heritage Council-Alabama Historical Commission. From left to right are Louretta Wimberly, BHC chairperson, J. White Sykes, Georgia Black Heritage Council, and Sierra Neal, State Coordinator, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Southeast Regional Office, Charleston, SC. Photo courtesy the author.



independent state agency, has a number of councils to advise it on a wide variety of issues.

Once we were organized, with bylaws and officers, the interested group was chartered in 1984 as the Black Heritage Council (BHC) of the AHC in order to ensure that the buildings, sites, and districts associated with the history of African Americans are preserved for future generations. What did we do? We went around the state and met with local groups, providing them with advice and assistance in organizing local preservation efforts. The best example of grassroots preservationists' success was hearing it first hand from the BHC, the first of its kind to be established by a state historic preservation office.

At the request of the BHC, the commission immediately employed an African-American preservation professional, Shirley Quallis Range, as a National Register Coordinator from 1983 to 1988. Because historic preservation is not a field that has attracted African-American students, the BHC worked with AHC to create an internship program to provide black students with exposure to historic preservation. In the years that followed eight students have participated in paid opportunities to learn about historic preservation by working with preservationists in the work place. Dorothy Taylor, who worked two summers as an intern, has returned as a full-time employee appointed the Black Heritage Coordinator. She coordinates all the BHC activities, programs, including all other office administrative services, and internship supervision.

Projects of the Council are educational programs designed to promote awareness in communities and among groups who want to preserve landmarks associated with the history of African Americans. They include producing calendars featuring historically black churches, a poster about Alabama's historical black colleges and universities, three slide shows, and the Selma to Montgomery Historic Trail study booklet. We also sponsored traveling exhibits on black historic churches and Spider Martin's photos that chronicled the Voting Rights march in 1965. We partnered with the Honorable John Lewis to exhibit Spider Martin's Selma to Montgomery Historic March photos in Washington DC.

Board members of the Black Heritage Council do more than just have meetings. Members are asked to speak at local and state preservation meetings, assist with formation of similar groups in other states, appear at national forums as panelists and presenters, and sponsor the annual BHC Conference. In 1999, we sponsored our first State District Forum and hosted the first Southeast Region African American Preservation Alliance conference (SRAAPA).

As the BHC chairperson, I have spoken to the Association for the Study of African American Life and testified before Congress for the designation of the Selma to Montgomery Trail as a National Historic Trail. I was a legislative lobbyist for the 1996 Omnibus Bill that provided for the designation of the trail and for the HBCU Preservation Initiative program. I served as a grassroots community representative at a national scenic byway workshop, a panelist/consultant at the first National Conference on Historic Roads, and worked with the SRAAPA as the point person for nomination of the 103 HBCU's on the National Trust list of Eleven Most Endangered Properties in 1998. These examples demonstrate that grassroots preservationists are key to a good quality and well planned preservation program.

The founders of the BHC believed in proactive efforts and in working with others. And it's true, when we collaborate we get more done. This belief is reflected in our partnerships with a wide range of groups. We serve on local, state, and national preservation committees like the Montgomery Improvement Association's Greyhound Bus Station 1961 Freedom Riders project, partnering with the Alabama Governor and the Alabama Department of Transportation

to seek ISTEA grants for the bus station and the Selma to Montgomery Historic March Trail.

We have developed a working partnership with the State Tourism Office, co-sponsored book lectures, such as the one by David Halberstam on the Nashville students role in the freedom rides, and helped promote preservation activities of many more groups and societies. Membership on the BHC helps us to get involved and help with projects under consideration statewide or nationally and provide responsible leadership.

The BHC founders' "vision" in 1983 is like a single wave turning into a swelling tide of interest and proactive efforts to include all peoples contributions in the preservation system today. The National Trust's and National Park Service's initiatives on race and diversity in preservation are a fitting tribute to the memory of my friends and co-founders who are no longer with us; and that one individual expression of love of "place" in action can be the key to providing equal opportunities for all groups' voices of history and culture to be heard, saved, and interpreted to show how this nation's greatness is directly related to the contributions of all its citizens.

All of the opportunities I have had to represent the BHC in the state, region, and nation is an extension of the founders' vision. It was through God's blessings that we came together and delighted in the privileges to share with others the works of the BHC-AHC as living witnesses to how working together and sharing ideas can become the proving ground for the healing and reconciliation among the races. We bask in the joy afforded all who work to save our historic landmarks and rewrite the history to reflect the totality of the diverse contributors...the legacy of this great nation.

Step by step and day by day we are developing a black heritage network, forming partnerships, and working together with preservation organizations so that when we are gone there will be others to take our place. For more information about our organization, our web page is <www.preserveala.org>. Look us up!

Louretta C. Wimberly is the chairperson of the Black Heritage Council of the Alabama Historical Commission.

Africanisms in America

A Conference on the Shared Heritage of Two Continents

Africanisms in America" is a conference to be held in New Orleans, LA, September 26-30, 2000. Conference sessions and events will explore myriad ways people of African descent have helped shape America. Topics to be covered include African influences on aspects of America's material and social history, and the impact of African traditions on American culture and humanities. One track of the conference will be devoted to how Africans and their traditions shaped the American-built environment. The goal of this track is to assist in the fuller identification, evaluation, documentation, and preservation of buildings, sites, districts, structures, and objects. The conference is expected to draw some 600 to 700 attendees, including preservationists, arts leaders, historians, educators, policy makers, and community leaders from the public and private sectors.

"Africanisms in America" is being organized by the National Association for African American Historic Preservation (NAAAHP) in partnership with the National Park Service, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Association of African American Museums, the National Conference of Mayors, the George Wright Society, and the African Studies Program at Indiana University. The built environment track is a collaborative effort of the National Park Foundation, the National Park Service, NAAAHP, the U.S. Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, Howard University, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Slave Route Project of UNESCO.

For information on this conference, call toll-free 1-888-358-8388 or visit the web site <www.africanismsinamerica.com>.