

SOUTHERN ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

PRESERVING AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC PLACES: ALABAMA'S BLACK HERITAGE COUNCIL

By Frazine Taylor and Dorothy Walker

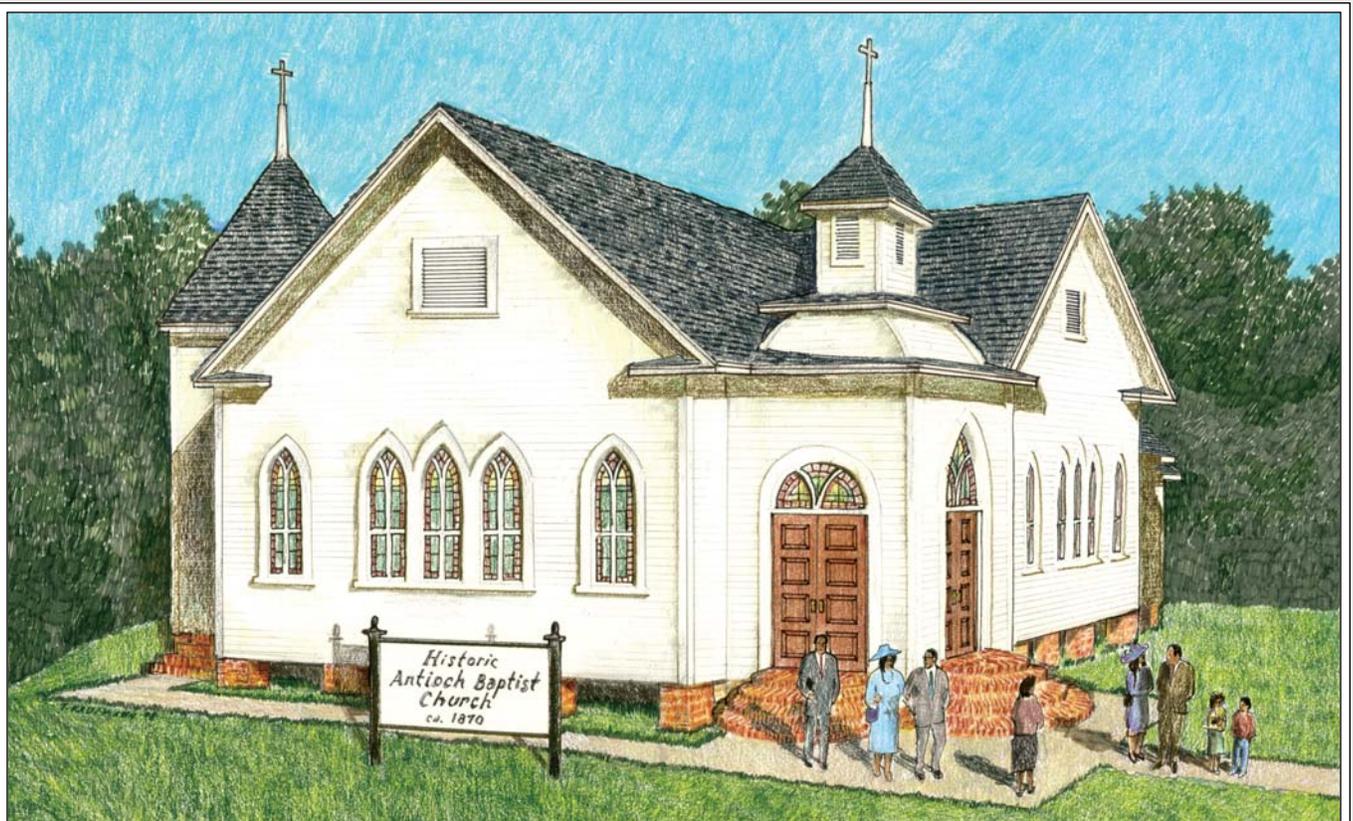
THE STORY OF ALABAMA is to no small degree one about the interplay of three distinct cultures: indigenous, European American, and African American. Only in recent decades, however, has a broad-based concerted effort been made to identify and preserve places that reflect the diversity of the African American experience. The Black Heritage Council of the Alabama Historical Commission is playing a critical role in this effort.

Established in 1984 to encourage and facilitate greater African American participation in Alabama's

historic preservation programs, the council was a first of its kind nationwide. Several other states soon followed suit, often with direct assistance from long-time chair, now Chair Emeritus, of the council, Louretta Wimberly. In 1989 this groundbreaking initiative earned accolades from both the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices.

With a twenty-member volunteer board and part-time staff at the Alabama Historical Commission, the council has a solid track record of leadership and achievement. It

The council is developing a program that will fund half the cost of preparing architectural illustrations showing how a building would look if it were restored. One pilot project is Camden's 1870 Antioch Baptist Church, which consolidated local support for preservation. A building that did not appear to have a future now has a renovated exterior. (Thomas Kaufmann)



has engaged people across the state in celebrating, appreciating, recording, registering, preserving, and reusing a wide range of African American historic places. An initial mailing list of under one hundred has grown to over eight hundred. In 1983 the Alabama Register and National Register included only forty-two places associated with African Americans. In 2009 the number had grown to 173. The council's internship program is also increasingly popular. Two graduates are currently employed as professional preservationists. Many others have become committed preservationists.

The council holds annual community forums that tackle specific preservation issues, whether involving an old schoolhouse in a rural area like Calhoun County's Choccolocco Valley or a neighborhood in a major urban area like Birmingham or Mobile. A 2001 forum in Birmingham highlighted churches in the city linked with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Last year the gathering—in Hobson City, near Anniston—brought national press attention to preservation issues related to Alabama's oldest African American incorporated community.

Each year the council partners with the Alabama Historical Commission and the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation in a statewide conference. Montgomery will host this year's Annual Preservation Conference, scheduled for October 7–9. Participants will celebrate preservation successes, learn effective strategies and techniques, and tour Montgomery's renovated and revived downtown as well as historic African American sites. The council will present its highest honor, the Idella Childs Distinguished Service Award, at an evening reception. Named for an early board member from Marion who spearheaded the restoration of the 1871 First Congregational United Church, the award recognizes outstanding achievement in the realm of African American historic preservation.

As almost every preservationist recognizes, when people know why places are important, they are more likely to want to keep them. Three of the council's ma-



The council has recently developed its own historical marker to recognize significant African American historic places in Alabama through a more affordable alternative to the current highway markers that dot Alabama's landscape.

(Black Heritage Council)

For public education campaigns brought needed attention to Alabama's African American churches, its historically black colleges and universities, and the 1965 Voting Rights March Trail, a fifty-four-mile section of U.S. Highway 80 between Selma and Montgomery.

"Keepers of the Faith," the council's series of calendars, brought widespread attention to Alabama's historic African American churches in 1989, 1990, and 1991. Next, it developed a poster profiling the state's nine historically black colleges and universities, increasing awareness of the role these schools played in Ala-

bama's segregated world prior to the 1960s.

When a 1993 National Park Service study recommended that the Voting Rights March route be designated a national historic trail, the council went to work. It commissioned an interpretive study of the route and a traveling exhibit with a companion brochure. The exhibit is still available to nonprofit organizations for the cost of shipping. Today the route is designated an All-American Road, a National Scenic Byway, and a National Historic Trail with interpretative signs along the highway. The National Park Service operates a museum at White Hall, midway between Selma and Montgomery.

"All across Alabama, we find African Americans who want to preserve the places that so vividly tell our stories," says Chair Taylor. "Because of the council, these citizens are now plugged into a broader network of like-minded people."

For more about the Black Heritage Council and its programs, see its web site at www.preserveala.org/blackheritagecouncil.aspx or call (334) 242-3184.

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