

History preserved

The Black Heritage Trails of Thomasville and Columbus

BY RANDY SOUTHERLAND

You don't have to go far to find evidence of either the lives or the centuries-long struggles of Georgia's black Americans. The state is a veritable treasure trove of a history that includes schools, churches, homes, museums and other sites that stand in testimony to their strengths, faith, talents and unending resilience, as well as the hardships and challenges they faced.

Two of the best historical examples can be found in the Black Heritage Trails of Columbus and

Thomasville. Each offers guided or self-guided tours of significant, historical locations encompassing the lives of numerous artists, politicians and others whose efforts have left an indelible impression on our state.

Thomasville

In Thomasville, the person to see is Jack Hadley of Black History Memorabilia Inc. The city's passionate and knowledgeable historian, Hadley documented the trail and operates a "step on/step off" tour.

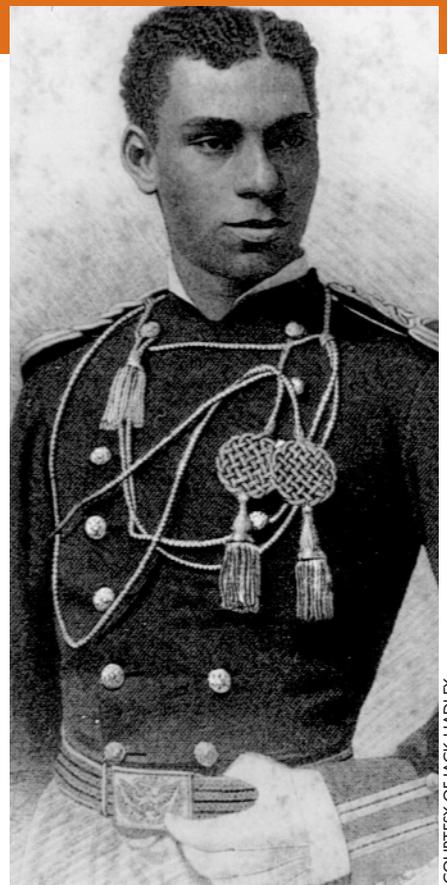
This journey spans the centuries, detailing little-known secrets of the city's rich history.

The tour includes the stately home once owned by the slave master of Lt. Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point, as well as the humble residence of the nation's first black railroad inspector—John W. Glynn. It crosses neighborhoods both white and black and includes cemeteries, churches, schools and the old Imperial

Hotel that has accommodated guests like B.B. King, the King Perry Band and other entertainers who weren't welcome at any of the city's whites-only hotels.

In truth, much of the tour tells a story of the harsh conditions under which black citizens of all ages lived. One stop on the tour, the Midway Old Country Grade School, built in 1907, is a wooden, one-room school that was still in use in the 1950s.

On a drive through a pre-



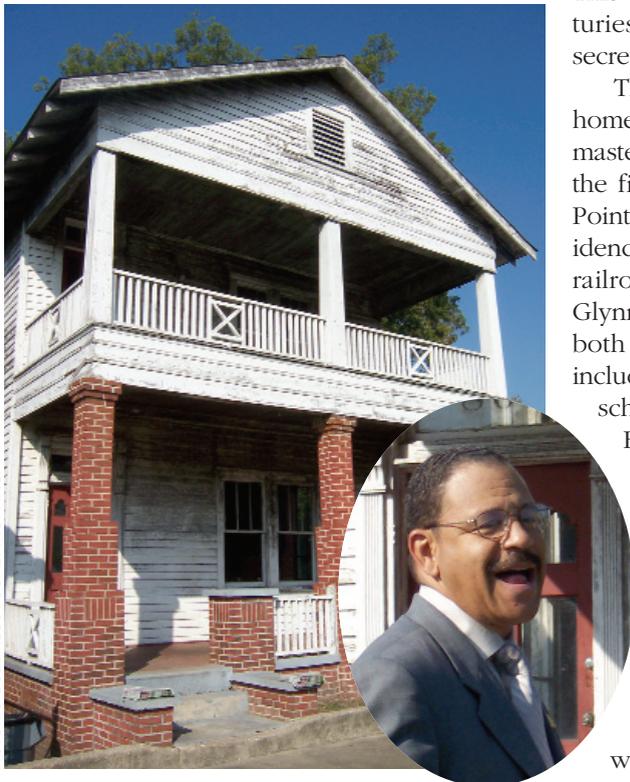
COURTESY OF JACK HADLEY

Thomasville native Lt. Henry O. Flipper was the first black graduate of West Point.

dominately black neighborhood, Hadley summarizes what he's working to overcome. "Most of the people walking the streets have no idea what they're passing by," he sighs.

Hadley has escorted many tourists on the trail and regularly visits schools to spread the word of the city's rich heritage. He's also a tireless campaigner to gain official recognition for Thomasville's great citizens—particularly Flipper. Thanks in large part to Hadley's efforts, the local library dedicated a room to the dashing cavalry officer. A branch post office was also named in Flipper's honor and is now another stop on the tour.

An avid researcher, Hadley has collected thousands of artifacts, documents and photos chronicling black history. This year, those items became part of the permanent collection of a new Black History Museum on the former campus of Douglass High in Thomasville—a black high school that was segregated from 1902 to 1970.



HISTORIC COLUMBUS FOUNDATION INC.

The home of Mother of the Blues "Ma" Rainey Pridget is undergoing renovation in Columbus and will soon open to the public as a museum. Inset: U.S. Congressman Sanford Bishop praises the city's efforts to restore Pridget's final home during a recent groundbreaking ceremony.



Thomasville's Heritage Trail developer Jack Hadley, right, discusses historic preservation with former Congressman and U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young. As a young minister, Young's first parish was in Thomasville and his home is on the Black Heritage Trail.

Columbus

In Columbus, most of the Black Heritage Trail can be found in its historic district. But perhaps the best place to begin your exploration into Columbus' black heritage isn't even officially on the trail, but it's nevertheless a rich repository of the region's history. The Columbus Black History Museum is small—its educational archives and exhibits are housed in just 750 square feet in a low-slung building behind the Rivermarket Antiques and Arts

Center at 3226 Hamilton Road.

The museum's founder and curator is Johnnie Warner Jr., who, two years ago, assembled a fascinating collection, ranging from original tax records listing slaves and their owners to grisly vintage postcards depicting lynchings. Visitors can learn about the Columbus slave market and see archived newspaper ads selling "Real estate and Negroes."

From there, pick up a brochure at the local Visitors Center on Front Street. This self-guided driving tour of 40 historical sites winds through some of the city's most historic areas, documenting a way of life that Columbus is fighting to preserve.

Historic Columbus Foundation Inc. has worked to restore several important sites, such as the home of the acknowledged Mother of the Blues "Ma" Rainey Pridget, and the Liberty Theater. Both are in the Liberty Historic District, and although not individually listed on the National Historic Registry, each enjoys pro-

tection as a "contributing structure."

A number of significant churches, including the First African Baptist Church, founded by slaves in 1830, are also on the tour. There's the old Slave Cemetery and the Kinfolks Corner slave auction site on Tenth Avenue. And some stops are historical markers, like the one at the local airport honoring Eugene Jacques Bullard, the first black aviator who flew for France during World War I.

You can also view the childhood home of Alma Thomas, perhaps the most prominent female black artist in America. Still in private hands like many of the other sites, its continuing existence is contingent upon the good will of its owners.

"In many cases, large portions of that history have been invisible and lost," says Susan Lawhorne, executive director of the foundation. "What remains, we're making great efforts to preserve and interpret so that people of this and future generations will know that aspect of history." 🌱

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For more information:

Thomasville

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Columbus

Columbus Convention & Visitors Bureau; (706) 322-1613; (800) 999-1613

Historic Columbus Foundation Inc.; (706) 322-0756



The Midway Old Country Grade School is a stark reminder of the one-room schoolhouses that were common for blacks in Thomasville.