Historic Augusta Purchases Historic C. T. Walker House

On November 11, 2016 Historic Augusta, Inc. purchased the historic home of the Rev. C.T. Walker at 1011 Laney-Walker Boulevard. Although it long ago passed out of the ownership of the Walker Family, Historic Augusta worked with heirs of a later owner for several years in order to purchase the property for preservation. With the purchase now complete, planning can move forward to rehabilitate the house and help in stabilizing the neighborhood. The home was listed to the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation’s 2017 list of 10 Places in Peril on November 17, 2016. The list is designed to raise awareness to Georgia’s historic resources threatened by demolition, neglect, and lack of maintenance and to encourage building owners, local organizations and communities to utilize preservation tools, financial resources and partnerships to restore them.

The house served as Walker’s residence in Augusta from about 1905 until his death in 1921 when the street was known as Gwinnett Street. His widow, Mrs. Violet Q. Franklin Walker, remained there until her death in 1928. The modest two-story frame house has survived in spite of surrounding blight and demolition. Considered a contributing structure within the National Register of Historic Places listed Laney-Walker North Historic District, Historic Augusta intends to stabilize and secure the long-vacant house, and move forward with plans that will lead to its preservation and reuse in partnership with interested community organizations, including the Laney-Walker Development Corporation. It is anticipated that rehabilitation of the house could be a catalyst for further historic preservation activities in the historic Laney-Walker neighborhood.

Born into slavery near Hephzibah, Georgia, the Reverend Charles Thomas Walker (1858-1921) was one of the early enrollees at the Augusta Baptist Institute (now Morehouse College in Atlanta) and became one of the most prolific ministers of his era. He was the founder in 1885, and first pastor, of Augusta’s Tabernacle Baptist Church. Originally located on Ellis Street, the church moved to its current location on Laney-Walker Boulevard in 1915, just a few blocks from
Rev. Walker’s home. Tabernacle became the largest congregation in Augusta, and remained so for many years.

As a captivating orator, Rev. Walker gained worldwide recognition as the “Black Spurgeon,” a reference to British evangelist Charles Haddon Spurgeon, whose fame in his day was similar to Billy Graham’s in the second half of the 20th Century. Like Spurgeon, Walker commanded international standing within the evangelical world of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

Walker established the “Colored Old Folks Home,” in Augusta, primarily for the comfort of elderly former slaves. He served as moderator of the region-wide Walker Baptist Association for many years. Through the auspices of the association he spearheaded the founding of a private boarding school, Walker Baptist Institute, which spawned a number of pioneering leaders in education, religious ministry, journalism, politics, medicine, social work, and business.

After serving as a U.S. Army Chaplain in Cuba in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, he relocated to New York City to serve as Pastor of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, 1900-1902, and founded the first YMCA for African-Americans in Harlem, New York. Back in Augusta, Reverend Walker also demonstrated his executive leadership abilities as a manager for the Pilgrim Health and Life Insurance Company in Augusta, as well as a myriad of other local organizations. The first American Legion Chapter for blacks in Augusta was named in his honor.

Walker attracted a following from many Northern tourists who frequented Augusta’s winter season hotels during its tourist era in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many attending Tabernacle Baptist Church to hear him preach. Notable among visitors to hear Walker’s sermons were John D. Rockefeller and President William Howard Taft. Walker appealed to many Northern congregations and individuals when he was raising funds to build the present Tabernacle edifice between 1913 and 1915.

In 1934 the newly constructed C.T. Walker Elementary School in Augusta was named in his honor, and still exists as the C.T. Walker Traditional Magnet School, now one of Georgia’s highest ranking public schools. In 1976 Gwinnett Street, where both the church and the Walker home are located, was renamed Laney-Walker Boulevard for famed educator Lucy Craft Laney, and renowned evangelist and civic leader, the Reverend Charles T. Walker. Gwinnett Street had been Augusta’s main business and institutional corridor during the days of segregation and is now the focus of revitalization efforts by the City of Augusta.