

Athens ASALH: A Brief Branch History

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Under the leadership of Dr. Maurice Daniels, a Life Member of ASALH, an Interest Group was formed to take the first steps toward earning a charter from the national organization. The Institute for African American Studies and the Department of History at the University of Georgia became our first Institutional Members, vital elements in our formation.

With much hard work and determination, the Athens-ASALH Branch was chartered a little over a year later.¹ We have hit the ground running. We take pride in presenting programs and lectures each year that follow the national organization's annual themes.

In 2017, under the direction of our founding Historian, Mr. Fred Smith Sr., Athens-ASALH sponsored what has become an ongoing event in Athens, The Crisis in Black Education Forum. This theme reflected the primary mission of Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson, who founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in 1915: to recognize problems and structure solutions for not only children of color in the US, but all children in this country. The Crisis in Black Education Forum has taken place annually since 2017.

Athens-ASALH joined with a number of civic and educational organizations in 2018 to pressure the University of Georgia administration and the Athens government to acknowledge and honor the remains of enslaved persons buried under Baldwin Hall, an academic building on UGA's north campus. The remains were disinterred during the latest renovation of the building, and then reinterred in Oconee Hill Cemetery adjacent to Sanford Stadium with a commemorative marker placed there. Another memorial has been installed in front of Baldwin Hall.

¹ Please take a look at our charter, which includes the list of founding members, in the _____ section of our website.

Yet, much remains undone in this community-wide effort to tell the whole story of enslavement in the construction and development of the University of Georgia, and to remember, honor, and possibly name, those who were enslaved. Athens-ASALH is an active participant in this effort.

One of the highlights of 2019 was an overnight bus trip to Montgomery, Alabama that Athens-ASALH sponsored and supported. Before the trip, Dr. Barbara McCaskill and Dr. Chana Kai Lee, two charter Athens-ASALH members, participated with undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Georgia in a teach-in at the Special Collections Library on lynching and the convict lease system, featuring research from primary archival documents and historic Georgia newspapers. Our primary destination, the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial for Peace and Justice and Legacy Museum, left an indelible impression.

We took a side trip to Selma's iconic Edmund Pettus Bridge, where Rep. John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Dr. King of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and other local and national civil rights activists initiated their marches to Montgomery to demand access to the ballot and an end to the suppression and intimidation of African American voters. Walking across the bridge where those courageous men, women, and children had gone before us, we meditated on the impact and demise of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that resulted from their activism. Groups like ASALH and its local branches have advocated and continue to advocate for Black history education to keep visible their legacies and those of other freedom fighters.

The Founder's Birthday event that took place at the end of 2019 was another major success. At the Athens-Clarke County Public Library, we screened a film and sponsored a discussion of *Talking Black in America* (2017), which explores the many regional varieties of

African American Language and how it has influenced American culture. The film was so warmly received that in 2020 we screened its sequel, *Signing Black in America* (2020), on the history and influence of Black American Sign Language, a dialect of American Sign Language, with an accompanying panel featuring the scholars involved in the film's production and/or who narrate or appear in the film. These screenings were co-sponsored with the Walter J. Brown Media Archives of the University of Georgia's Special Collections Library.

In 2020 Athens-ASALH entered into an agreement with the Athens-Clarke County Library to archive our Branch documents there. We hope that future historians will find value in the documentation of our numerous individual projects and collaborations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic swept over the nation, we held a Black History Month Dinner. Culinary students from the Athens Community Career Academy catered the affair, and we awarded a cash prize to the high school student who won our student essay contest.

Little did we know that we would still be unable to repeat this festive Black History Month event. Yet, we adapted resiliently to the new pandemic conditions and continued our meetings and community involvement online, per national organization instructions. We became heavily involved in the campaign to save the West Broad Street School campus, a highly significant locus for the Black Athenian community from segregation to the present. We also participated in a genealogy conference at the invitation of the Athens Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Dr. Sandra Shannon, founder of the August Wilson Society, lectured on the representation of the Black family in his plays for 2021 Founder's Day.

We ended the 2021 year activities with a Founder's Birthday program on African American Foodways moderated by Athens-ASALH member Ms. Jean Young. The program featured Athenians engaged in the restaurant business and organic gardening who are creating

pathways of access to affordable, locally grown, nourishing whole foods. Courtesy of the Walter J. Brown Media Archives, we streamed Byron Hurt's *Soul Food Junkies* (2013) online in conjunction with this program. Two of our proudest moments came during 2021. We acknowledged Dr. Shirley Mathis McBay, a mathematician and the first African American to earn a PhD at the University of Georgia, with a framed resolution of appreciation, which she warmly received. Mr. Fred Smith Sr., who is still our Branch Historian, received the prestigious Council Award for his service from national ASALH.

Athens ASALH has engaged in even more activities than those described here, including book donations to local schools and community organizations and guest presentations by community members during our monthly Business Meetings. This brief history indicates our dedication to ASALH's mission and to the Athens community that we serve. We welcome all who want to share this mission with us.