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## Springfield, Georgia: A Free African American Community

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## December 2009 Newsletter

### Springfield, Georgia: A Free African American Community

By J. W. Joseph\*

Antebellum-era, free African American communities in the southern United States are an enigma, supporting groups of African Americans who had gained their freedom during the era of slavery in a social environment that challenged and limited African American liberties on multiple fronts. Despite these challenges, free African American communities existed in a number of southern cities and the history and archaeology of these communities provide insights to the roles they played in African American life and culture.

Springfield, Georgia is an important free African American community. The origins of this community are associated with the formation of a religious congregation that worshipped near a spring in a field, located north of colonial Augusta. Reverend Jesse Peters, a freedman



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from the Silver Bluff, South Carolina, plantation of George Galphin, preached at Springfield and other locations in the Central Savannah River Area beginning around 1783 and between 1787 and 1793 a church was formally established in the community. The land that the church was built on had been owned by Lieutenant Colonel James Grierson, a Tory who was killed in the Battle of Augusta during the Revolutionary War. The uncertain ownership status of this land after the war may have been a factor in the development of the free African American community at Springfield in the post war years. The war itself was also a factor in the increase of the free African American population, as many African Americans gained their freedom during the British occupation and were left on their own when the British abandoned Georgia. The free African American community of Richmond County and Springfield grew in the post-Revolutionary War years, increasing from 72 in 1810 to 235 by 1830 to 490 in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War. This was Georgia's second largest free African American population, trailing only Chatham County and Savannah, which totaled 795 in 1860.

Free African Americans survived and in some instances prospered in antebellum southern cities because of the employment they were able to find in those urban areas. In Augusta, free African Americans found jobs in the shipping trade, moving produce and goods to the docks along the Savannah River and loading and unloading cargo. African American craftsmen found employment in the building trades, as carpenters and masons, as well as employment as ship pilots and furniture makers. Free African American women were vital to household income, working as seamstresses, cooks, washers, sewers, and as domestic servants. Records indicate that children as young as five years of age worked alongside their mothers in domestic industries.

The Springfield Baptist Church served as the heart of this community. The church provided opportunities for religious instruction as well as a source of information about the outside world. It also provided an interface between Springfield and European-American Augusta through the interactions of church pastors. After the Civil War, it served as the first home of the Augusta Baptist Institute, established in 1866, which was renamed Morehouse College following its relocation to Atlanta in 1879. Springfield Baptist was also home to the Georgia Equal Rights Association. Springfield Baptist is the nation's oldest continually operating African American church, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Archaeological excavations in Springfield have occurred in response to two projects. Excavations conducted prior to the construction of the Augusta Civic Center, in the late 1980s,

identified an antebellum-era occupation consisting of a post-in-ground structure and surrounding pit features containing domestic refuse. The location of this structure, on the riverbank and crossing lot lines, as well as its architecture, suggest it was a squatter residence. As Augusta



Archaeological Excavation Taking Place at the St. Sebastian Way Project in Augusta, Georgia in 2006, with the Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church in the Background. This study provided information about the historic landscapes and housing conditions associated with Springfield during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Photo: Brad Botwick, New South Associates, Inc.).

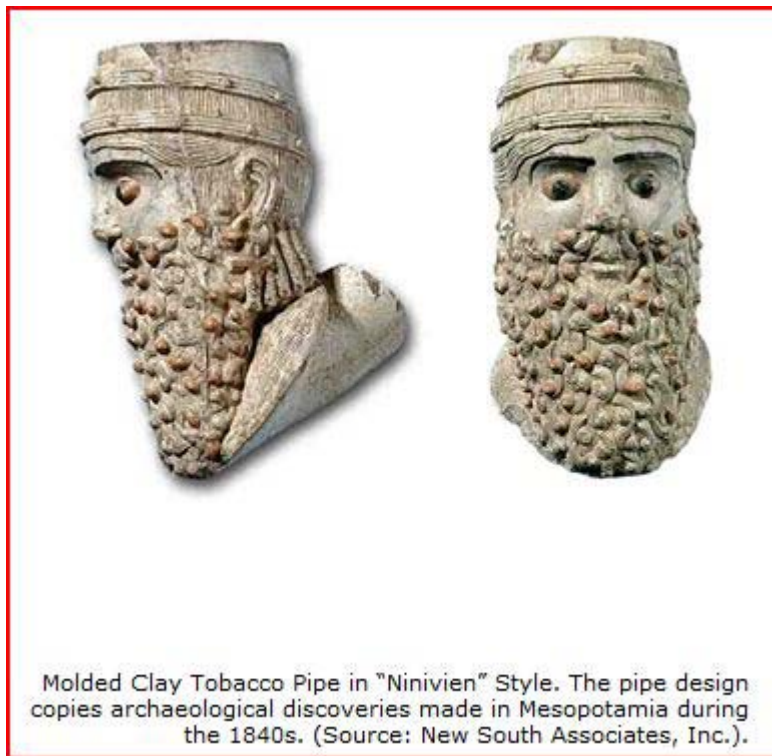
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Brick Pier from a Nineteenth-Century House on Jones Street, Augusta. Archaeological excavations at the St. Sebastian Way project indicated that at least some houses in the predominantly African American Jones Street area were built in an informal way, with mismatched footings instead of well-made, full foundations. (Photo: Brad Botwick, New South Associates, Inc.).

ordinances of the era restricted African Americans' ability to purchase property, this was likely the case for the majority of Springfield's early residences. Domestic artifacts from the site

include an anthropomorphic pipe representing a Middle Eastern figure with potential Biblical associations. Excavations conducted in 2006 in advance of the St. Sebastian Street Extension recovered deposits from the latter nineteenth century reflecting the era when Augusta's city limits had expanded across this location, and when the neighborhood had become culturally integrated. This project provided information on the postbellum transformation of the cultural landscape.



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In recognition of the importance of the Springfield site as a public resource, the City of Augusta, the Georgia Department of Transportation, and the Federal Highway Administration have funded the creation of a website on Springfield's history and archaeology. Readers are encouraged to visit this website – [www.africanamericanspringfield.org](http://www.africanamericanspringfield.org) – to learn more about this important place in the African American past.

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