The Historical Marker Review Committee  
The Georgia Historical Society  
501 Whitaker St.  
Savannah, GA 31401  
August 18, 2007

Dear Members of the Historical Marker Review Committee:

I am writing in support of the East Athens Development Corporation's resubmission of its application for a Georgia Historical Marker to be placed at the Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery in Athens, Clarke County. My research and publications of the past twenty-five years have focused on continuities between burial customs and iconography in African American cemeteries of the American South and the region's exceptionally vibrant and celebrated vernacular art. I have presented much of this research in *No Space Hidden: the Spirit of African American Yard Work* (University of Tennessee Press, 2005), a book co-authored with Dr. Grey Gundaker of the department of anthropology at the College of William and Mary. The state of Georgia is featured more prominently than any other in the book because of its unusual abundance of available narratives, photographs, art, and other forms of documentation of Afro Atlantic tradition in the early twentieth century. Publications such as *Drums and Shadows* of the Georgia Writers' Project and *Early Days of Coastal Georgia* by Orrin Sage Wightman and Margaret Davis Cate are but two examples of these resources.

Scholars have studied Georgia's traditional African American cemeteries for over eighty years and it is ironic that several sites, in particular the cemetery of the Sunbury Missionary Baptist Church in Liberty County, are less known in our state than in lecture halls in Britain and New England. In studies of African American burial practices, prayer and "seeking" rituals, religious beliefs, iconography, and art history the Sunbury cemetery is considered to be the fountainhead. These studies usually begin with images of the Bowens family graves with spectacular home-made markers by Cyrus Bowens, a deacon of the church, photographed by Malcolm Bell in 1939. While, in this letter, I can only generalize about the quality and continuity of Afro Atlantic cemeteries in Georgia I wish nevertheless to make a simple case for why Gospel Pilgrim is particularly significant and why we should acknowledge it in a special way.

Briefly, it has all of the traits of traditional cemeteries such as the one in Sunbury - graves marked with sea shells and inverted broken pottery or personal effects of the deceased, evidence of trees planted at the foot of graves, significant iconography in home-made markers, white quartz or reflective glass on headstones, references to celestial events in carvings and markings on trees, candle votives left by contemporary visitors, specific types of grave enclosures - all of which link Gospel Pilgrim with other Afro Atlantic gravesites in the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa. But, very significantly, along with these continuities, Gospel Pilgrim also contains graves of prominent Georgians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Samuel F. Harris, Monroe B. Morton, Madison Davis, William A. Pledger, and Harriet Powers. I know of no other cemetery in the state with such range and depth of documentation and representation. This may have something to do with the fact that most African American cemeteries were once very localized and almost always associated with specific community churches like the one in Sunbury. However, Gospel Pilgrim was founded during reconstruction by a group of Athenians interested in bringing large numbers of African Americans together to create a well educated, economically viable extended community. Thus, along with these other distinctions, Gospel Pilgrim is a monument to the spiritual and social aspirations of African Americans in the United States. Georgia has always taken the lead in these matters and the grass-roots preservation of Gospel Pilgrim is an extension of this legacy.
Historians studying the cemetery have found solid data on its founding during reconstruction, on the graves of former captives at least one of whom was born in the 18th century, on the relationship between families buried there and fraternal organizations such as Burial Societies, and documentation of prominent African American legislators and other professionals entombed there.

The cemetery is already on the National Register of Historic Places. But besides its historical and academic importance it is a home going destination and a place of rest for many Georgia families who still count their loved ones among the 3,000 to 3,500 buried there.

The time has come to build on these rich dimensions of Georgia’s history. The many citizens who have come together to clean, revive, study, and develop the cemetery have done so because of their love of the legacy it represents and encouragement of its initial purposes. It is somehow fitting and perhaps also prescient that community events such as concerts and performances are beginning to be held nearby. This says that it is time for us to bring the global into the local and celebrate with honor the communities close at hand that have given us so much. The citizens of Athens deserve the dignity of knowing that their histories and cultures, so acknowledged on the national scale, have come home to stay.

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to one of the most prominent Georgians buried in Gospel Pilgrim, Harriet Powers. She is so significant that histories of African American vernacular art and material culture often begin with her. A former slave, Mrs. Powers created, in 1886 and 1898, America’s most famous picture quilts—now on display at the Smithsonian Institution and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. I invite you to google her name and get some sense of her importance in terms of American visual culture and identity. The two Powers quilts are a tapestry of local Georgia history, religious praise, cosmological record keeping, and community life that tell the story of a the same rich American heritage also told, in another form and at somewhat greater length, in the Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery. Thanks to the tenacious cleaning of the cemetery detailed in the initial application, a homemade headstone marking Harriet Powers’ grave has now been found. This will make Gospel Pilgrim an increasingly important destination for scholars and others who wish to honor African American masters of community life and, in the process, bring so much rich local history into alignment with the reverence, dedication, and gratitude of those who have loved it from afar.

Sincerely,

Judith McWillie
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