

Yamacraw Village Section 106 Review



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Photos from cover:

“Yamacraw.” Photograph. Savannah:1936. From Georgia Historical Society: GHS 1361-PH-14-01-2896, Georgia Historical Society Collection of Photographs

Introduction

Yamacraw Village is a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded housing project established in 1941, consisting of several blocks of multi-family housing units. The Housing Authority of Savannah (HAS) is applying to HUD to demolish Yamacraw Village in its entirety, stating that it would take \$40 million to bring the current 315 apartments up to a quality standard.¹ When the amount of rehabilitation and restoration reach that point, HUD can justify demolition, through Section 18.²

The Yamacraw Village Housing Project is significant in that it was the second Federally funded housing project in Savannah³ and was among the earliest in the United States. Federal public housing was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, within the Housing Act of 1937.⁴

Currently, there are several vacant properties within Yamacraw Village, many dilapidated and boarded up. Yet, there are still many residents living there; residents in some apartments have reported incidents of mold, broken appliances, and neglected repairs.⁵

One dedicated green space exists within the community. In January 2022, the existing park was renamed from Yamacraw Art Park to Yamacraw Square.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to provide a Section 106 Review of the proposed Yamacraw Village Public Housing demolition and disposition, initiated by the Housing Authority of Savannah (HAS). The goal is to identify historic properties that may be affected by the demolition of Yamacraw Village and to outline mitigation measures.

Through a Programmatic Agreement for Various HUD-Funded Programs Among the City of Savannah and The Georgia State Historic Preservation Officer (HP-090925-002), hereafter referred to as PA, Historic Preservation Department staff at the Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC) are designated to act on behalf of the Georgia State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) to perform the Section 106 review.

This report outlines the following:

- Sections of the PA that MPC is responsible for addressing
- Boundaries of Yamacraw Village
- The Area of Potential Effect (APE)

¹ WSAV, "Savannah Housing Authority could demolish Yamacraw Village if application is approved," WSAV.com, May 18, 2021. (accessed August 17, 2022).

² *Ibid.*

³ United States Congress, *Joint Committee on Housing: Study and Investigation of Housing*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1948) 1215.

⁴ National Low Income Housing Coalition, "Public Housing History," <https://nlihc.org/resource/public-housing-history>, Oct 17, 2019. (accessed on August 17, 2022).

⁵ Katie Nussbaum, "'I just want to be prepared:' Yamacraw Residents uncertain about future as demo considered," Savannah Morning News, May 19, 2021. www.savannahnow.com (accessed August 17, 2022).

- Identification and description of the historical, archaeological, and cultural resources within the APE
- Determining threats to historic integrity and archaeological data
- A historical overview of the area
- Mitigation strategies

The Section 106 Review Process

In accordance with the PA, MPC staff have performed research and analyzed the site and the context from prehistoric times through the present day. There is a rich history associated with the area, covering topics including Native American, African American, the Revolutionary War, and Federally funded housing projects. Due to the extent and complexity of the history associated with the site, an in-depth review process created a timeline that exceeded the typical thirty-day review period.

This document provides an assessment of adverse effects of demolition of Yamacraw Village based on research of the significant historical background and archaeological data of the property from prehistoric eras to the mid-twentieth century.

For the purposes of this review, MPC is not responsible for assessing the impact of redevelopment for this project unless and until there are detailed and specific redevelopment and construction plans and the MPC is contracted to perform such work, as mentioned in the PA, referenced below.

Section V. TREATMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES

B. New Construction:

Whenever the City is planning to do new construction, including in-fill, or additions to existing buildings in NRHP eligible or listed historic districts, the Preservation Professional shall:

3. Review final plans and specifications and provide comment prior to the initiation of construction activities. If feasible the City shall consult with the Preservation Professional to develop a set of historically compatible model replacement house plans in advance of any planned reconstruction activities, which shall be shared with the public. If such standard replacement house plans are developed they will be sent to the SHPO for review and comment.

- NOTE: HUD Section 18 regulations prohibits engaging with architects, engineers or development partners prior to HUD approval of the demolition. Although HAS submitted a general redevelopment plan, HUD has not approved the demolition at this time and thus MPC will not review this as part of the Section 106 process.

Section VIII. RESOLUTION OF ADVERSE EFFECTS

- A. *In the case of a project determined by the Preservation Professional to have adverse effects on historic properties, the City and the SHPO will consult on ways to avoid, reduce or mitigate the adverse effects, and specified in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in accordance with 36 CFR Section 800.6 (c) and filed with the ACHP upon execution. The City should also provide records of the mitigation to a local repository as designated in the MOA.*

Section VI. TREATMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

- A. *The City shall request the SHPO's opinion regarding the potential effect of such activities on archaeological properties prior to initiation of project activities. If the SHPO can document that there is a high probability for the presence of significant archaeological sites or cultural remains within the project area, the City shall contract SOI qualified archaeologists to conduct archaeological surveys. The City shall forward the scope of work for the archaeological survey to the SHPO for review and approval.*
- B. *If the City and the SHPO determine that there is the potential for archaeological properties listed on or eligible for listing on the NRHP to be affected by the undertaking, the SHPO shall advise the City of the appropriate treatment for archaeological properties*

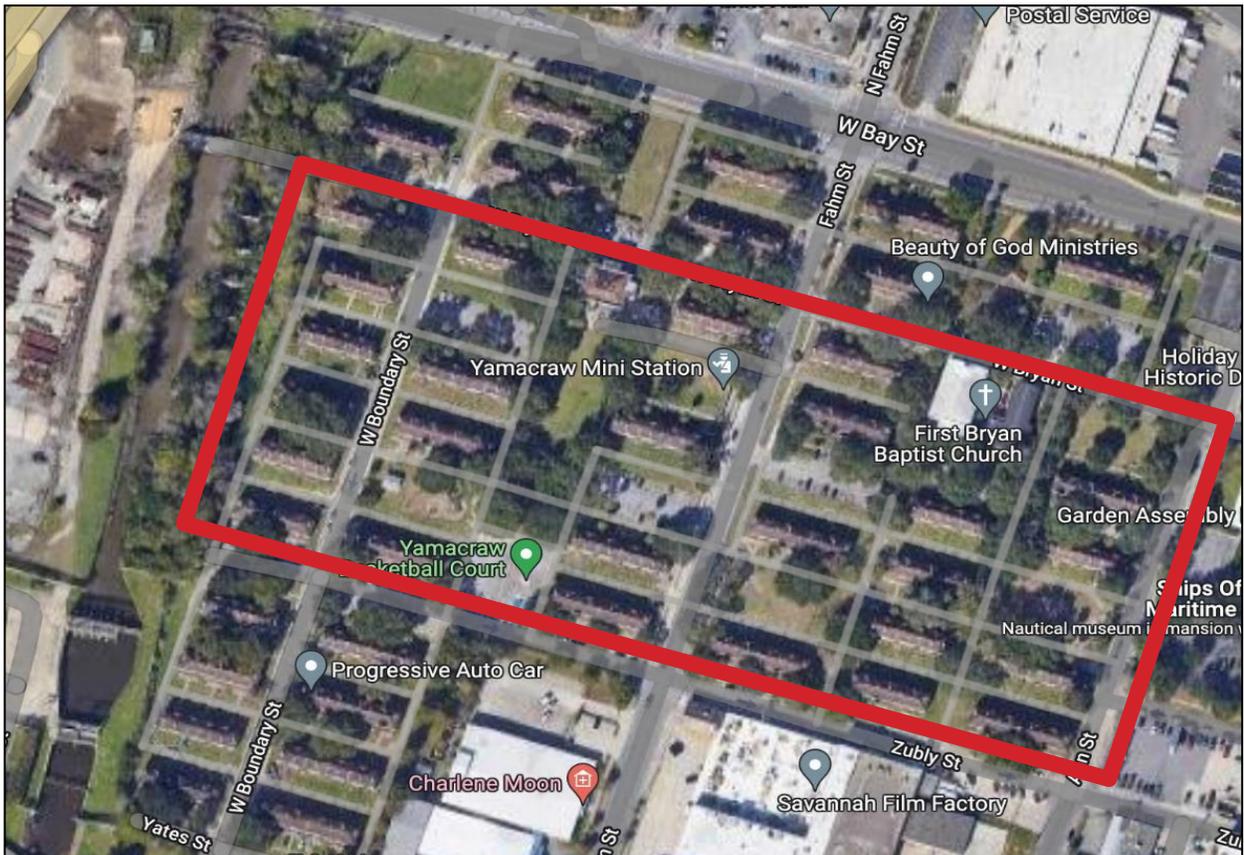
In a letter from the SHPO, referred to as the Historic Preservation Division (HPD) in the letter, to AEI Consultants, dated November 24, 2020, it was determined that Yamacraw Village is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), and that “the NRHP-listed Savannah Historic District National Historic Landmark and First Bryan Baptist Church, as well as multiple other historic resources, some of which may be eligible for listing in the NRHP, are within the proposed project’s area of potential effect (APE). Therefore, HPD finds that the project, as currently proposed, constitutes an **adverse effect** to historic properties located within the subject project’s APE, as defined in 36 CFR Part 800.5 (a) (2). The demolition of a NRHP-eligible resource is not consistent with the Secretary of the Interior’s *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.”⁶

MPC staff review of this project agrees with the SHPO assessment and finds that there is the potential for archaeological properties eligible for listing in the NRHP which will be affected by the undertaking.

⁶ David Crass, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer to Lindsey Garrard, AEI Consultants. Atlanta, GA, November 24, 2020.

Description and Boundaries

Yamacraw Village is located within the Savannah Downtown Historic Overlay District and is part of the North Oglethorpe, Middle Oglethorpe, and South Oglethorpe Wards. It covers roughly 21.63 acres across seven (7) city blocks consisting of 43 multi-family residential buildings with 315 apartment units. The below map shows the boundaries of the neighborhood.

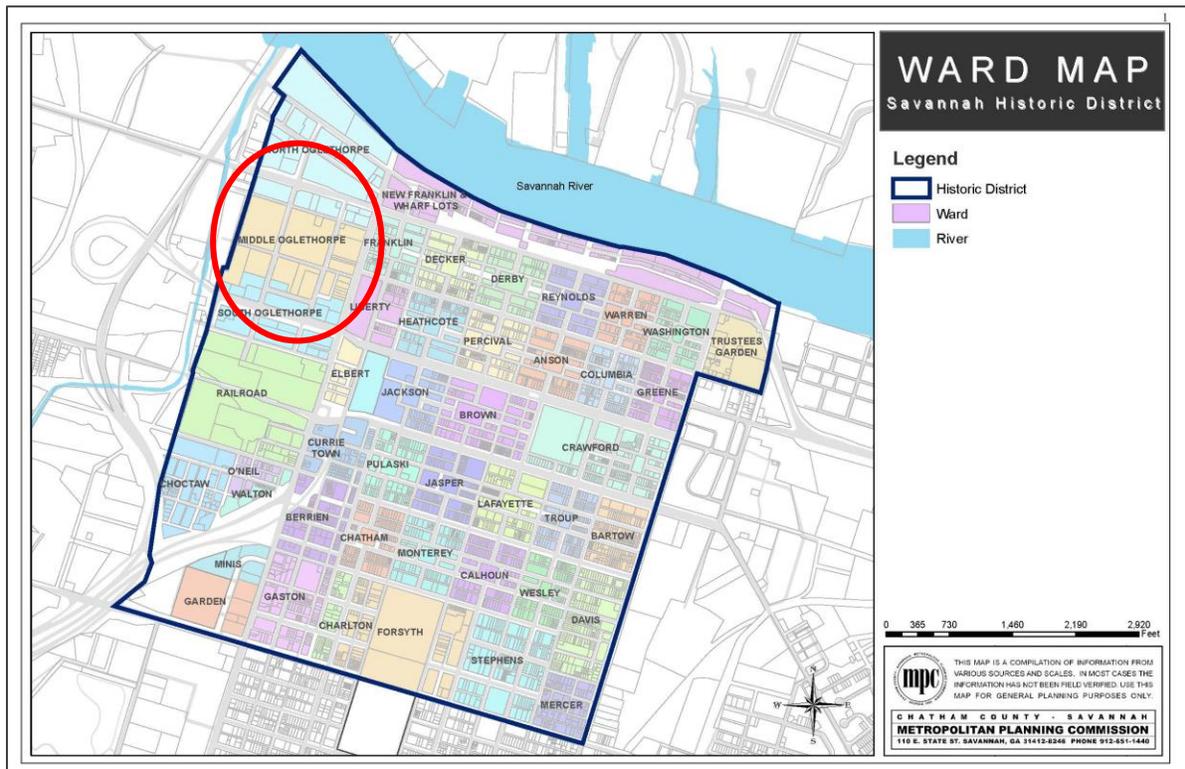


Area of Potential Effect

The Area of Potential Effect (APE) was not defined by HAS, thus MPC staff used the historic district boundary and ward map to examine the area and determine the APE based on the area itself and nearby contributing historic resources that may be impacted by a large-scale demolition project. Yamacraw Village spans across three wards: North Oglethorpe, Middle Oglethorpe, and South Oglethorpe. Those wards are included in the APE, as well as portions of surrounding wards in the viewshed of Yamacraw Village. The side of Franklin Ward that faces Yamacraw Village across Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard is part of the APE. Liberty Ward is within the radius of the APE but does not have any contributing resources facing Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard.

There are two contributing resources within the boundaries of Yamacraw Village: the First Bryan Baptist Church (575 West Bryan Street) and the building that houses the Curtis V. Cooper Primary Health Care (349 West Bryan Street) HAS stated that these two resources will not be part of the demolition.

There are additional contributing buildings within the Area of Potential Effect (APE). The following list details the contributing resources by ward. The two contributing resources within the boundaries of Yamacraw Village are noted with an asterisk.



North Oglethorpe Ward

The following properties is the North Oglethorpe Ward face Yamacraw Village from across Bay Street and fall in the viewshed.

- 528-532 Indian Street (1900)
- 528 Indian Street (1920)
- 522 Indian Street (1894)
- 3 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1939)

Middle Oglethorpe Ward

The majority of the Yamacraw Village housing units exist within this ward.

- First Bryan Baptist Church (built 1888) – 575 West Bryan Street*
- Curtis V. Cooper Primary Health Care, Inc. (1941)- 349 West Bryan Street*
- 101 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1926)
- 105-109 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1939)
- The Scarborough House (1819)- 41 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard

South Oglethorpe Ward

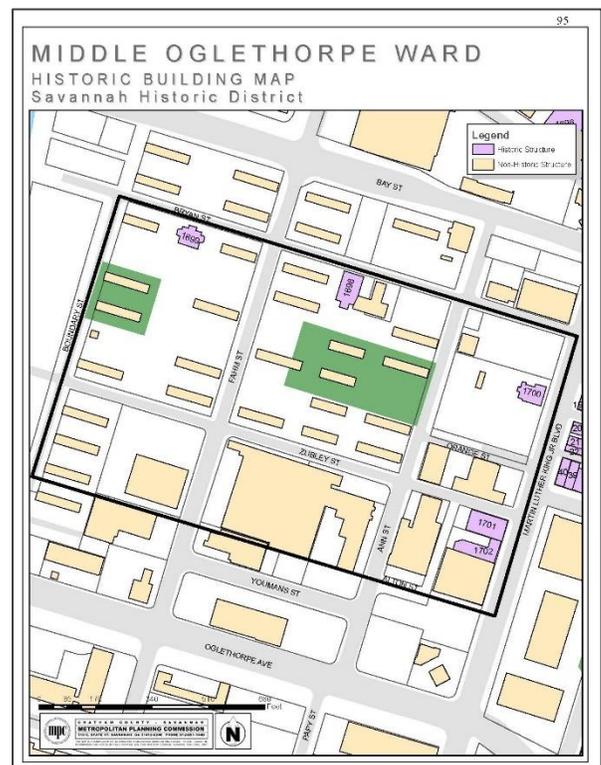
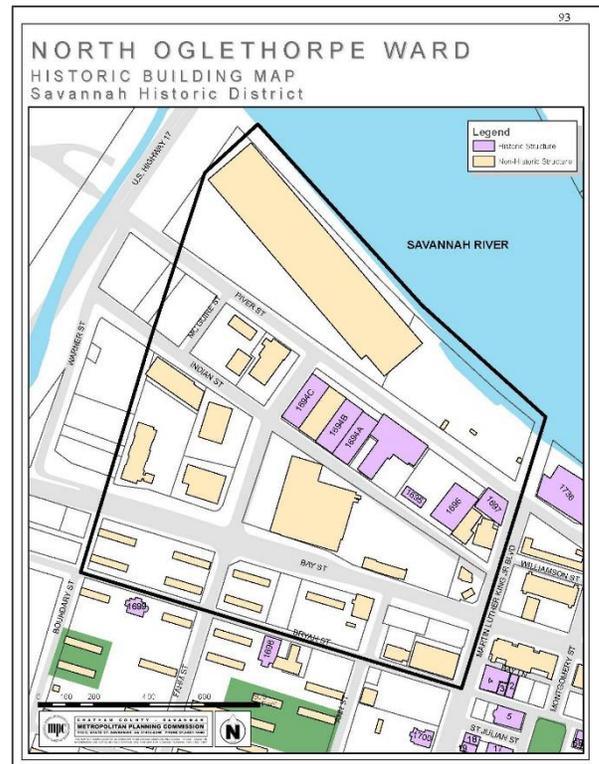
A small portion of housing units exist in the rear portion of this ward between Boundary Street and Fahm Street.

- Greyhound Station (1965)- 610 West Oglethorpe Ave
- Thunderbird Motel (1964)- 611 West Oglethorpe Ave
- 217 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1906)

Franklin Ward

Several of the properties in Franklin Ward sit directly across Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard facing Yamacraw Village.

- 418 West Bryan St (1910)
- 420 West Bryan Street (1912)
- 141 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (422 West Bryan St) (1891/1924)



- 23 Montgomery Street (1859)
- 27 Montgomery Street (405-415 West Saint Julian Street) (1891)
- 30 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1883)
- 32 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1883)
- 419-423 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1875/1906)
- 38 & 40 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (pre-1898)
- 42 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (1916/1955)
- 411 West Congress Street (1872)
- 409 West Congress Street (1872)
- 405 West Congress Street (1914)
- 401-403 West Congress Street (1867)
- 37-39 Montgomery Street (1916)
- 408-410 West Broughton Street (1869)
- 414 West Broughton Street (1871)
- 416-418 West Broughton Street (1872)
- 420 West Broughton Street (1905)
- 424 West Bryan Street (1956)



Historic and Archaeological Context

Yamacraw Origins and Native American History

Yamacraw origins are documented as early as the 1550s when French Huguenot explorers, Jean Ribault and Rene Laudon, came to the area. The explorers' destination was initially Florida, but Ribault also sailed north to Port Royal, South Carolina in 1562.⁷ Ribault's maps of the area showed what later scholars determined to be the Savannah River area, including a Native American settlement called Maccou, which scholars determined was the earlier Yamacraw province of the Creek Nation.⁸

The Yamacraw were a Native American tribe founded by Tomochichi in circa 1728 with members of the Lower Creek and Yamasee Tribes who disagreed about relations with the English colonists. The Yamacraw Chief, Tomochichi, asked the South Carolina government for permission to settle on the bluff in 1732. There were 17 or 18 families and approximately 40 men in the tribe at the time of settlement.⁹

Tomochichi reportedly stated a desire to be buried with his ancestors, referring to the Irene mounds, formerly located on Pipemaker's Creek and currently part of the Savannah ports. It is believed that a multi-period Native American settlement was at the nearby Irene Mound site and inhabited as early as the Middle to Late Mississippian period (AD 1100-1600).¹⁰ Archaeological excavations in the 1930s uncovered artifacts and human remains from different eras and due to its proximity to the present-day Yamacraw Village site, it is possible that the Yamacraws had used this land as well.

Revolutionary War Era

There is also potential Revolutionary War history associated with the site. According to *Savannah Under Fire*, a report published by the Coastal Heritage Society in 2011, archaeologists with the LAMAR Institute sought to identify twelve battlefield areas associated with the 1779 Battle of Savannah. A map from 1779 shows that at least one of the three western-most British redoubts (temporary military fortifications) may have been within the current Yamacraw Village area.¹¹

Archaeologists with the Lamar Institute located an anomaly while using ground penetrating radar (GPR) in Yamacraw Village but were not able to perform shovel testing or further investigation.¹² However, the archaeologists on the project were able to examine the profile of a utility ditch being dug for the installation of new pipes. Mid-nineteenth century artifacts were found throughout the entire depth of approximately six (6) feet, suggesting that there could be even older artifacts deeper below the surface.¹³

⁷ John Reed Swanton, "Early History of the Creek Indians and their Neighbors," *Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, Vol. 73, no. 1 (1922), 34-41.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Trowelblazers, "Irene Mound," <https://trowelblazers.com/2020/07/26/irene-mound/>, July 26, 2020 (accessed August 5, 2022).

¹¹ Rita Elliott and Daniel T. Elliott, *Savannah Under Fire, 1779: Expanding the Boundaries*, (Savannah: Coastal Heritage Society, 2011) 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67

¹³ *Ibid.*

Old Yamacraw Community

Another housing project existed on the site prior to the construction of Yamacraw Village, and consisted primarily of African Americans, and Irish and German immigrants, but was largely considered a thriving African American community. The neighborhood was included in the oral history interviews published in the book *Drums and Shadows*, where some residents referred to the area as Old Yamacraw.¹⁴

There were 784 dwellings and approximately 3,000 residents in Yamacraw.¹⁵ By the late 1930s, HAS Chairman Fred Wessels declared Yamacraw to be “the worst slum in Savannah” and felt the only solution was to demolish the dilapidated houses to make way for the new Yamacraw Village Public Housing Project.¹⁶

Yamacraw Village Public Housing Project

In 1938, the newly established Housing Authority of Savannah was granted funds from President Franklin D. Roosevelt for land acquisition and construction of three public housing projects – two for African American residents (Fellwood Homes and Yamacraw Village) and one for white residents (Garden Homes Estate).¹⁷

Fellwood Homes and Yamacraw Village were both intended to house displaced residents of the old Yamacraw neighborhood. Fellwood Homes was completed in July 1940 with 176 units, and the first family moved into the 480-unit Yamacraw Village on May 1, 1941.¹⁸

The apartments of Yamacraw Village were constructed with Superrock concrete blocks with slag aggregate and painted white. The homes were built by a local crew with locally purchased materials.¹⁹ The architects were The Associated Architects of Savannah: Cletus W. Bergen, Morton H. Levy, William B. Clarke, Walter P. Marshall, and John C. LeBey.²⁰

The same architects handled building renovations in 1946, and the blueprints for this project are stored at the Georgia Historical Society archives. In 1986 the dwelling units were updated by the firm Haynes Robinson. MPC staff attempted to obtain the 1986 blueprints but were unsuccessful.

¹⁴ Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press: 1986) 22.

¹⁵ *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1216

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1215

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1216

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1217

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1217

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1216

Historic, Archaeological, and Cultural Resources in the Area of Potential Effect (APE)

Historic Buildings and Sites

First Bryan Baptist Church, 575 West Bryan Street

The current church building onsite was completed in 1888 but this congregation was established a century earlier and is considered the oldest Black Baptist congregation in the United States.²¹ The first church building was a wooden structure in the vicinity of the Fahm Street United States Post Office. Deeds show that the land was sold to Reverend Andrew Bryan, a freed slave and first pastor of the congregation, on September 4, 1793.²² On the church website a brief historical writeup suggests that the area where the current church sits may be the oldest continuously Black-owned parcel of land in the United States.²³

The 1794 wooden meetinghouse consecrated by Reverend Bryan remained in use until 1873, when the congregation decided to construct a modern church building. The cornerstone was laid in 1873 and was filled with a copper box containing items from parishioners such as jewelry, coins, newspaper clippings, and other church records.²⁴ The Classical Revival structure was designed free of charge by John B. Hogg, a white civil engineer and city surveyor but the church was constructed by a crew of African American workers. Hogg was also the architect of Wesley Chapel in London, England and Trinity Methodist Church in Savannah.²⁵

The church exterior is white stucco over masonry with a pediment over the columned portico. There is a small wooden steeple on the roof above the pediment. Highlights of the interior church features include a six-paneled stained glass central window, pressed tin ceiling and a large pipe organ installed in 1889. When Yamacraw Village was being constructed, a wooden prayer house behind the main church was demolished. It is unclear whether that was in use during the construction period of 1873-1888. Between 1951-1953 an annex building was constructed next to the church and is also still in use by the church today.²⁶

349 West Bryan Street

At present, this building serves as one of the locations of the Curtis V. Cooper Primary Health Care, a local network of health care facilities that receive funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The building was originally constructed as the administration building of the Yamacraw Village Public Housing Project in 1941. The architect, Cletus Bergen, designed it to look like a miniature replica of the main house of the Hermitage Plantation. Whether intentional or not, this may be perceived in a way that

²¹ Reverend James M. Simms, *The First Colored Baptist Church in North America*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co.: 1888).

²² First Bryan Baptist Church, "Our History," <https://www.fbbsav.org/our-history> (accessed September 9, 2022)

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Steve Henson, *National Register of Historic Places Nomination: First Bryan Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia*, Atlanta, GA: Department of Natural Resources, 1977.

suggests if it was modeled after a plantation house where African Americans were forced into slavery, then the apartment homes are equivalent to the slave quarters at the Hermitage Plantation. This is a modern interpretation of the site, and it cannot be discounted that the administration building may have also served a positive role as a community center for the residents of Yamacraw Village as well. For this reason, community input on the future use of this building is critical.

41 Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (The Scarborough House)

The Scarborough House is presently the Ships of the Sea Museum, but in 1878 the building opened as a public school for African American students, ordered by the Savannah Board of Education, and named the West Broad Street Negro School. Prior to the Civil War ending, it was illegal to educate African Americans and thus teaching African American children was not offered by the public school system. The first school in Savannah for African American students was the Beach Institute, built with funding from The Freedmen's Bureau and other donors, which opened in 1865.²⁷ For a short time The Beach Institute was publicly funded but the building was shut down and the school relocated to The Scarborough House. This highlights a turning point of providing public school for the African American population. Although this site currently operates as a museum and is not in jeopardy of demolition, this lesser-known facet of the site's history is significant and worth noting.

Cultural Resources

Birthplace of John Fremont, Yamacraw Village vicinity

There is a historical marker in Yamacraw Square detailing the information about John Fremont's birthplace in the vicinity of the present-day housing project. Fremont was one of two native Georgians to serve in the U.S. Army during the Civil War.²⁸

Springfield Canal

Springfield Canal is a National Register eligible cultural resource that runs parallel to West Boundary Street, adjacent to the Yamacraw Village property. In 1984, a Cultural Resource Survey was undertaken at the request of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It was discovered that the canal was built over a 100-year period. Construction began in 1812 to drain stagnant waters from the western edge of Savannah and the project evolved as new needs arose. Cultural resources identified from the survey include two brick locks constructed between 1824 and 1831, and two brick Central of Georgia Railroad viaducts, built in 1852 and 1859.²⁹

Archaeological Resources

There is a potential for various archaeological resources on the property. Based on previous historical research and field work by the LAMAR Institute, there is a strong possibility of resources related to the Battle of Savannah in 1779. Additionally, mid-

²⁷ The Beach Institute African American Cultural Center, www.beachinstitute.org, (accessed August 24, 2022).

²⁸ Georgia Historical Society. *Birthplace of John C. Fremont*, 2013. Historical Marker Sign.

²⁹ Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, "Using Canals as Greenway Corridors in Chatham County," 2001, 1.

nineteenth century artifacts were discovered as far as six (6) feet below the surface, leaving room for a theory that some of Savannah's earliest history may be further below the surface.³⁰

Intangible Heritage

- *Drums and Shadows book interviews* in the 1940 publication *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, a chapter is dedicated to interviews that took place in Yamacraw. Most of this took place in 1939, one year prior to the construction of the Yamacraw Village Housing Project. The interviews captured by the authors provide insight into some of the intangible heritage of the neighborhood; cultural traditions of the African diaspora, including wood carving and spiritual practices such as root work and conjure, were noted.³¹
- Early African American public education (41 MLK, Jr. Blvd).
- Sense of community/sense of place.
- Potential Native American significance.

Considerations and Concerns

- Wealth disparity disproportionately affecting African Americans.
- Demolition and redevelopment of this area without safe and affordable housing to suit the needs of those living at or below the poverty line.
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (if Native graves are disturbed).
- Tribe consultation if any pre-historic or Native American artifacts or remains are recovered during archaeological excavations.

Proximity to National Historic Landmark District

- Yamacraw Village is just outside the boundary of the Savannah National Historic Landmark District.
- Yamacraw Village is National Register eligible.

Mitigation Strategies

Mitigation strategies have been determined based on historic and archaeological significance but must also include public safety measures and community input. Mitigation strategies are based on information provided by HAS to the MPC staff, which is that HUD intends to demolish the housing project except for the First Bryan Baptist Church and the Curtis V. Cooper Primary Healthcare building.

Historic Preservation and Archaeology

- Preserve an in-tact portion of the apartments as an interpretive historic area. This must be done with community input to determine importance to community.

³⁰ *Savannah Under Fire*, 65-74.

³¹ *Drums and Shadows*, 23-31.

- Preservation of 349 West Bryan Street, currently the Curtis V. Cooper medical center. This must be done with community input to determine importance to community and potential future uses. This site was built as the administration building for Yamacraw Village and was designed by architect Cletus Bergen as a smaller version of the main plantation house at the Hermitage Plantation.
 - Over the course of its history, there were approximately 200 enslaved persons at the Hermitage Plantation.
- Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) level documentation of the entire area prior to demolition.
 - Include a historic structures report on at least one row of houses in good condition.
- Consult with First Bryan Baptist Church regarding what their needs are, for example more parking options for the congregation.
- Complete and submit a National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the Yamacraw Village boundaries.
- Allow LAMAR institute to continue the archaeological field work started in 2010-2011.
- Archaeological monitoring of the site during any ground disturbing work.
- Retain the Yamacraw name in any future development plans.
- Retain Yamacraw Square and current interpretive signage about the history of the area.
- Complete an Oral History documentation project with current and former residents.

Community

- Ensure realistic housing relocation for all displaced residents that does not put them at the bottom of a housing waiting list or lead to homelessness.
- Ensure that true affordable and safe housing options are created to avoid gentrification and systemic inequality through unrealistically priced housing.
- When considering replacing the demolished buildings with new, updated affordable housing, refer to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) Policy Statement on Affordable Housing and Historic Preservation. This states “The ACHP considers affordable housing for the purpose of this policy to be Federally-subsidized, single- and multi-family housing for individuals and families that make less than 80% of the area median income.”

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