

The Mary Church Terrell Building Served Valdosta's Black Women and The Phyllis Wheatley Club Convened There A story by James Edward Alexander

LISTEN BUT SHUT UP

When the old ladies assembled I was the only child allowed to sit and listen to their discussions. I did not know why, until many decades later. They had detected my gift of good memory and took a chance that I would someday use it constructively to share memories of their time. (Valdosta, GA. Circa 1939-1949)

Grandmama Mariah was a member of an inner circle of colored ladies whose wisdom, temperament, and engagement stabilized colored communities. They did what women are noted for; they are the keepers and carriers of the culture.

As the wife of an African Methodist Episcopal minister, her membership in some organizations was expected. If an invitation was extended to Sister Mariah Alexander, it was understood that her companion would probably be little James Edward. Between the ages of four and ten, I accompanied my grandmother to meetings of her church Missionary Board, Stewardess Board, quilting bees, gatherings to harvest and preserve fruits and vegetables, and more than enough assemblies for what they called "just for social fellowship." I was not consulted about whether I wanted to attend, I was simply told when to wash my face and feet, which pair of overalls to put on, and if necessary, which pair of pajamas to pack.

Many of their meetings were held in member homes, because "The Women's Building" was built by whites for white women only. So Mama, her niece, and other colored matrons of the community decided to build their own meeting place. They named it the Mary Church Terrell Building, honoring one of the most active contemporary fighters for equal rights for women and Negroes. It was in that special place that colored women convened for the Phyllis Wheatley Club, to honor the slave girl who became a poet, and whose works were praised by President George Washington and King George III.

One day Mama told me I would attend another meeting of the Phyllis Wheatley Club to meet a special guest. When a very dark lady with smiling eyes entered the building, one could see a special presence. Such was the aura of Mrs. Mary Jane McLeod Bethune, the notable educator, author and civil rights activist. It was during the period of World War II, but Mrs. Bethune reminded the colored ladies that they were on the front line of another battle we could not afford to lose: the battle for the survival and advancement of colored people. She prefaced her sentences with the pronoun "we," to emphasize that every woman there was her equal in the struggle. Furthermore, she promised to remind President Franklin Roosevelt that

Editor's Note: An historic structure on West Hill Avenue was lost in December 2020. Fortunately its story had been recorded and remnants of building were salvaged and donated to the museum.

The story beginning at left is included in James Edward Alexander's third book **I Wish You Had Been There**, cover *below*. He did just what the ladies hoped, he told their story.

When particular interest arose about the Valdosta visit from Mary McLeod Bethune, Alexander re-released the article in 2017 in his "Story of the Month" series he sends by email.

Of note in Valdosta, the two main thoroughfares in the Lincoln Park subdivision are Bunche Drive and Bethune Drive.

I Wish You Had Been There

Sharing Memories of an Exciting Life

James Edward Alexander

the unity and resolve of colored women was unshakeable. He was awaiting her visit at Warm Springs, Georgia, where he found some comfort from the crippling illness of polio. She was among a group of colored advisors who were called his "Black Cabinet." But it was through her special relationship with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt that Mrs. Bethune was able to constantly reinforce colored aspirations, leading many colored ladies to call Mrs. Bethune, "Our First Colored Lady."

Most of the gatherings we attended that were related to religion followed reasonably predictable formats. Before any conversation or business was conducted, they prayed and thanked God for bringing us together. Those ladies identified me as the boy-child recipient of their special pampering, hoping that I would glean from their conversations and mannerism some values they wanted preserved. Another purpose for my presence was to recite the 23d Psalm. I critiqued my performance by the number of times I heard, "Yes, Lord." Then I settled into my position on the floor in the most distant corner, where I read a book, realizing that if I uttered one word of what was discussed, their next gathering would be at my funeral.

When those old ladies assembled otherwise, their agenda was whatever was on their minds. Some things were always on their minds: men, how young people were going to hell-in- a- hurry, and loose women. They knew for certain that they were the appointed keepers of God's word, and it was their divinely inspired duty to prevent this world from becoming a den of sin and iniquity. Those who most threatened the community were the women whose morals and behavior justified them to be low rated to the status of hussies, or worse, strumpets. My ears still remember their words: "She's a strumpet, a purveyor of perdition and damnation, and she ought to be washed with lye soap, and then rinsed in the blood of the Lord." That always evoked the chorus of "amen's." On more than a few occasions I almost shouted something to urge them to tell me more about those women. Furthermore, those married ladies issued fewer social invitations to those clearly identified as "widow women," a not too subtle reference that translated into, "Since she ain't got a husband; she ain't gonna get mine."

They also used many euphemisms. No woman was ever pregnant – she was "in the family way." Menopause and hot flashes translated into "the change of life." When their husbands had urinary problems, they announced that he was "having trouble making water." [The men described their problem otherwise.] No wonder the ladies called them heathens.

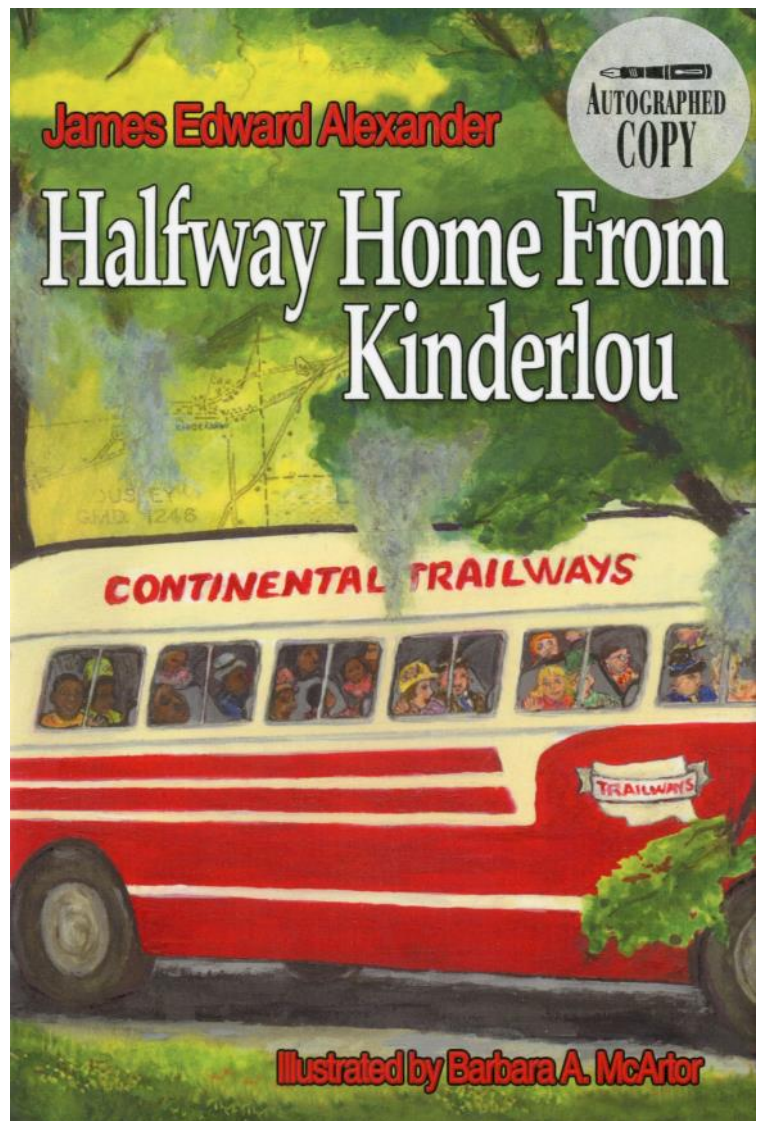
Having exhausted or tired of the subjects of sin, trifling men, and general social decay, these prim pillars of the community turned to other gossip. When one sister hesitated, cleared her throat, and said, "God knows I shouldn't mention this, but...." I became alert, because I was about to hear the details of somebody's business. I dared not change my position on the floor, for any movement might have suggested shifting to hear or for clearer understanding. I was trained to hear and understand without display or utter-



Left; Mary McLeod Bethune. The photo is from the Bethune-Cookman University, Daytona Beach, Florida. website. Mrs. Bethune would have been older when she visited the Valdosta club house, probably age 65-70. James Edward Alexander told she was on her way to Warm Springs, Georgia to see the Roosevelts. **Below** is the book cover of Alexander's first publication **Halfway Home From Kinderlou**. A very well attended program and book signing was held at the museum.

It is a worthy historical record of growing up in

Valdosta. His title reflects his childhood on West Hill Avenue and having grandparents living in Ousley. At Kinderlou he was either halfway home to his parents or halfway home to his grandparents.



ance. Those ladies who didn't initiate the gossip listened intently and rolled their eyes, and fanned a little faster with the cardboard fans that the funeral homes donated to the church. When the gossip was really scandalous, they shouted, "Oh my God," and grunted as though being pierced by the spear of the crucifixion. I never heard one word of contrition for stealing the fans from the church.

If the gathering lasted too long, I often fell asleep where I sat. Almost routinely I awoke on the lap of a lady in a rocking chair, deliberately chosen to rock my lower torso, while my head bobbed between her full bosoms. It was a most unusual sensation. She would then give me a kiss on both cheeks and say, "Here you are, sugar baby," then reach into her apron pocket and present me a tea cake or a piece of candy.

Just as they started, they also ended their sessions with a tribute to God. And only God knew what else they would discuss before we meet again. End

**Georgia DOT research on historic structures affected by the US 84 Railroad overpass
provided much information and the gift of permanent exhibit materials
for the museum on this area of West Hill Avenue.**



Above: The West Hill Avenue clubhouse that was recently lost. It was surrounded by the homes of club founders' Ella Mae Alexander on the left and Marietta Gaines on the right. These two latter structures are in the photo at right in the exhibit panel. The Gaines home still stands currently used by a church.

Right: A portion of one of the six mobile exhibit panels prepared by the Georgia DOT. They also prepared stationary display items.

In October 2013 a Program/Reception, as listed below, was held at the museum.


**Georgia DOT Historical Exhibits
In Observance of
Community Planning Month**

sponsored by
**Lowndes County Historical Society
City of Valdosta and
Valdosta Heritage Foundation.**

Topics of the event included;
**Thomas Family House and Estate,
Including the Evolution of
West Valdosta.**

**Valdosta's Phyllis Wheatley
Club House
Historic Structures at the new U.S. 84
RR Overpass**

LOWNDES COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
AND MUSEUM
VALDOSTA, GEORGIA




PHYLLIS

WHEATLEY

CLUB

A GATHERING PLACE FOR
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN



A

small frame building located on a busy road in Valdosta, Georgia, the Phyllis Wheatley Club has a history that belies its modest appearance. Passersby might be surprised to learn of its role in African American women's empowerment during the mid-twentieth century in this small South Georgia city. This building is significant as one of the few African American women's clubs in Georgia with a dedicated clubhouse. This exhibit shares its story as well as the fascinating history of black women's clubs in American history.

2021 New & Renewal Memberships

(Received by April 30, 2021)

Place of residence listed for those
Outside of Lowndes County

**The Historical Society Trustees
and Museum Staff greatly appreciate
your memberships as they affirm our
place as an important cultural entity
in Lowndes County and help us to
fulfill our mission—**

**To collect, preserve and present
the history of Lowndes County**

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The photo **above**, from the museum archives, shows Moody AFB Commander Harris, C.W. 'Slim' Warner and Mayor Maxwell Oliver in 1961 at the presentation ceremony of the Moody F-86 jet to the City of Valdosta at the former Coca-Cola Bottling plant on N. Ashley Street. The plane would later be transferred to public property at Mathis Auditorium, Major Lyn McIntosh Park, and in 2012 to Moody for the George W. Bush Air Park.

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FAMILY GIFT MEMORIAL

Claire Wiggins Wilson
1934-2020

by
John Russell Wilson
Leawood, KS

MEMORIAL

In Tribute To

**Warrington
Maxwell Oliver, Jr.**
1905-1990

Valdosta Mayor
1960-1964

by
James Edward Alexander
Bluffton, SC



Above center: James Edward Alexander at the Lowndes County Historical Museum in 2008 for his book signing and program on **Halfway Home from Kinderlou**. Maxwell Oliver was a mentor and friend to young James Edward Alexander. In recognition of this, Maxwell Oliver gifted Alexander one of his golf trophies, which Alexander displayed at the event. The trophy is thus engraved: "Glen Arvin Country Club, Thomasville, Ga., Seventh Annual Invitational Tournament, July 1925, Doctor's Cup." Alexander and the Oliver nephews have continued the association.

2021 Membership Application, Lowndes County Historical Society, P.O. Box 56, Valdosta, GA 31603

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Membership Category

Individual \$25. ____

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MUSEUM CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Officers and Executive Committee

Interim President and 1st Vice President, Sally S. Kurrie; 2nd Vice President, Mary Young Manning; Secretary; Treasurer, Edward Hightower; John Bennett, Ron Irwin; Past President, In Memory, Patsy Giles.

January thru April.....Annual Membership Campaign

The museum staff continues to work daily. Researchers are served and Acquisitions continue to be accepted and processed.

The County is beginning repair work on the Carnegie Building.

Newsletters beginning in 2011 are also online with many having color images

Lowndes County Historical Society & Museum

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Fax: (229) 247-2840

E-mail: research.lchs@gmail.com & ddavis.lchs@gmail.com

Web page:

<http://www.valdostamuseum.com>

YESTERDAY & TODAY

Newsletter of

Lowndes County Historical Society

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