

# Flat Rock's role

## Heritage written on hearts, but not records

By JEFFRY SCOTT  
jlscott@ajc.com

The heart and soul of the old community, its memory, the traces of the lives that have come and gone over the last 200 years — all of that rests atop a hill, in woods, at the end of a long dirt path.

The Flat Rock cemetery is overgrown, many of its 250 or so plots unmarked. The headstones of others are disintegrating into the soil.

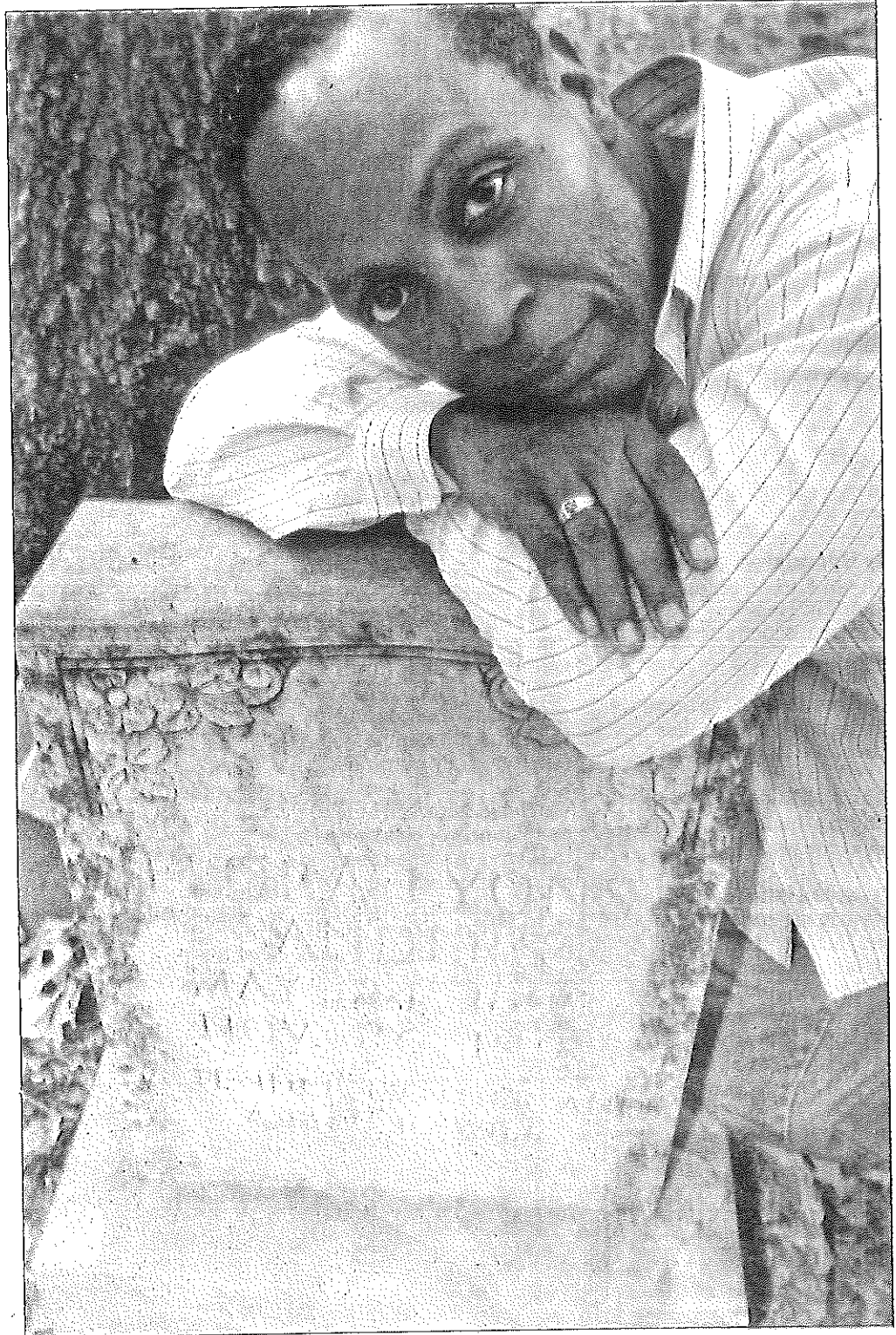
Since he was a young boy, Johnny Waits has made the trek up here hundreds of times to visit the hallowed ground of his ancestors buried in a corner of southeast DeKalb County.

He is 46 — a slight man, of boundless energy — who says the pilgrimage has gotten more difficult in recent years because he is one of the few witnesses to a history that is unrecorded and, he fears, may be erased.

The cemetery is bordered on one side by Sandstone Estates, the affluent subdivision where NFL star Terrell Owens has his house on the market for \$4.5 million. The property of one home in the subdivision extends a few feet into the graveyard.

More menacing are plans to build another subdivision with hundreds of homes on the 30 acres of woods that surround the cemetery.

Waits points to the un-



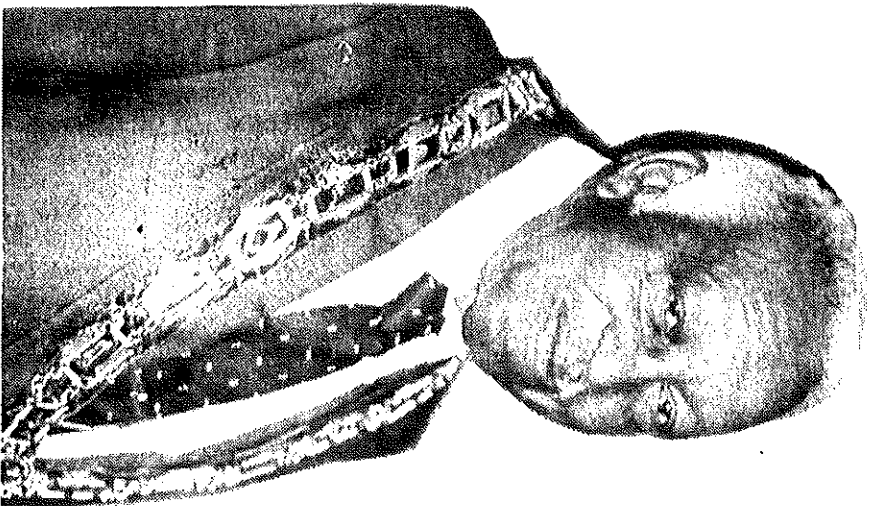
RENÉE HANNANS HENRY / Staff

Slave descendant **Johnny Waits** rests on the headstone of Flora Lyons, a possible slave of the Lyon family in Flat Rock. The cemetery is near Arabia Mountain in south DeKalb.

# Home Going Services

for

Theodore Arthur Bryant, Sr.  
(1894-1987)



SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 1987  
1:00 P.M.

Flat Rock United Methodist Church  
4250 Flat Rock Road  
Lithonia Georgia

Rev. Leon Hollinshead, *Pastor*

FLOWER BEARERS

Lithonia District  
Heroines of Jericho

PALIBEARERS

Masonic Lodge #454

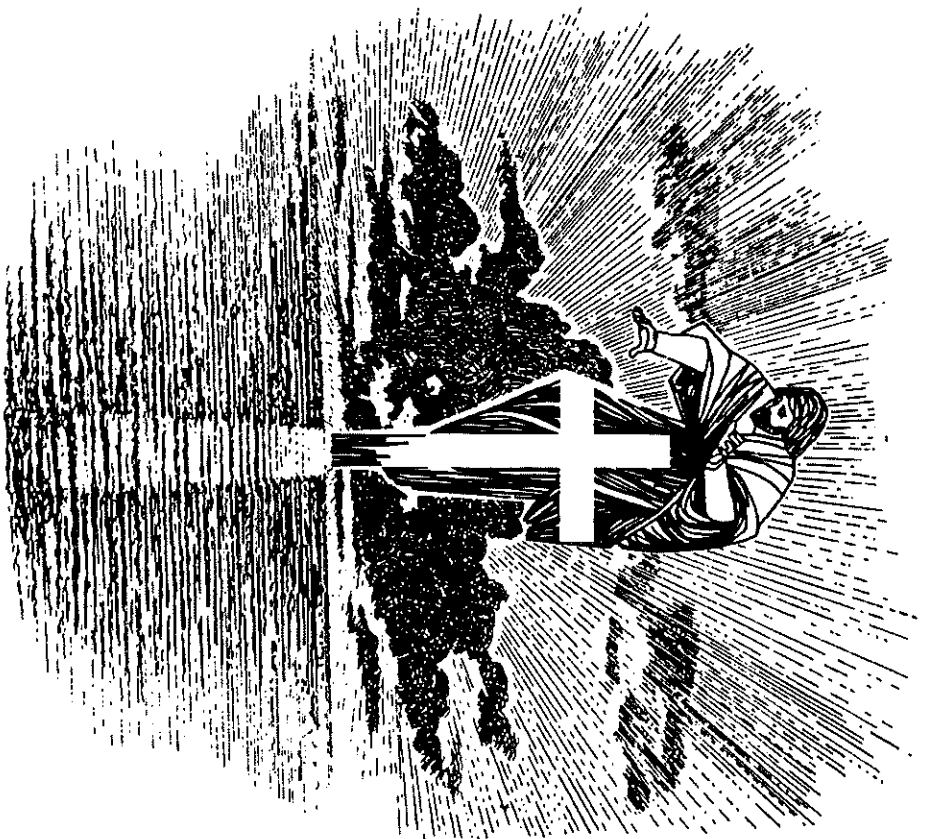


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Perhaps you sent a lovely card or sat quietly in a chair  
Perhaps you sent a funeral spray  
If so we saw it there  
Perhaps you spoke the kind words  
As any friend could say;  
Perhaps you were not there at all  
Just thought of us that day  
Whatever you did to console our hearts  
We thank you so much whatever the part.

— *The Family*

Our sincere thanks to Tri-Cities Funeral Home, Inc.  
Lithonia, Georgia for their superb services.

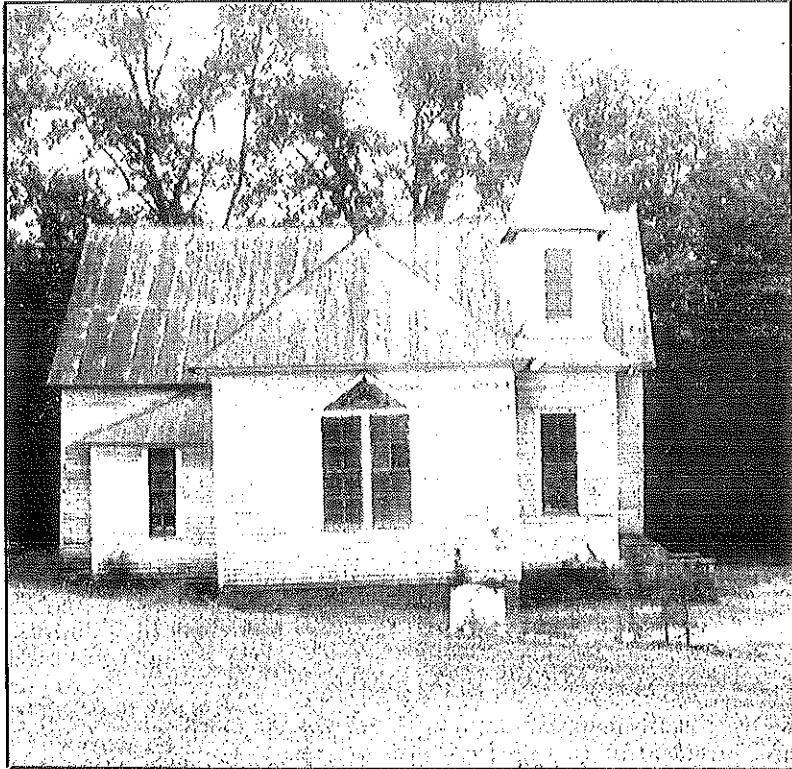


### *A Psalm of David*

The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall. Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

10x

Dell Harris Saw  
7/25/90



### **Church Celebrating 130 Years**

One of the oldest churches in south DeKalb, Flat Rock United Methodist Church at 4250 Flat Rock Road in Lithonia, will celebrate 130 years on its anniversary Sunday, July 29. Services will be held at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. This photograph shows the second church, built in 1904, after fire destroyed the first building. It has since been replaced by a brick church attended by approximately 50 members. From 1860 to 1971 the church was known as Flat Rock Methodist Episcopal Church. After the central jurisdiction and the southeastern jurisdiction Methodist churches merged in 1971, Flat Rock became a part of the Atlanta-Decatur-Oxford district of the North Georgia Conference. Many present members are descendants of the Waits and Bryant families who were founders, according to member Vera L. Whitaker. The Rev. Joseph McAllister Jr. is the present minister.

According to the United Methodist book of Discipline, "from 1784 through 1884, black people were included in the membership of the white churches. Black people persuaded the Church to organize them into their own churches. In 1794, the African Zion Society was organized in Philadelphia. It was the first black society in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1884, the General Conference authorized the organization of Mission Conferences among black people. The first black Mission Conference to be organized was the Delaware Conference which was held that same year.

Flat Rock was founded in 1861. The founding forefathers were Sam Ford, John McKnight, Alex Henderson, Edward & Nathan Bryant, and members of the Reed and Whit families.

In 1870, the leaders of Flat Rock purchased a parcel of land on Parula Road to build a community church. Construction took several years to complete. Meanwhile, the Flat Rock community began to show signs of growth. The Hellum, Christians, Sykes, and Shunabe families moved here from Morgan County. Several years later, during the 1880's, the Waita and Wise families moved here from Butts County and they too planted their roots.

Years later, Flat Rock moved from Parula Road to Flat Rock Road, and several years thereafter, in 1973 moved into our present edifice. The opening consecrating ceremony took place on August 26th of that same year.

Much growth has taken place in the Flat Rock church and community. Several inspirational ministers and strong church leaders have been vital to our spiritual growth.

Flat Rock has a very unique history and heritage. As a result of strong pioneering men and women in this community, our church was founded upon a rock. Consequently, the name "FLAT ROCK" carries a dual meaning. Just as this physical edifice was founded upon a rock, we as members of the body of Christ should stand upon the rock of our salvation. Jesus in the rock of our salvation - unmovable, unshakable, solid, durable and powerful.

May God share his blessings upon Flat Rock as we continue to do his will on our 126th anniversary.

TRUSTEES OF THE 1900'S:

- Rance Bailey
- Spencer Bryant
- Tom Christian
- Hill Lyon
- Henry Shunabe
- Henry Sykes
- Will Tanner
- Andrew Waita
- Jim Wise

TRUSTEES OF THE 50'S, 60'S & 70'S:

- Goodman Bryant
  - Tom Handy
  - Dave Marshall
  - Dave Ward
  - Johnny Waita, Sr.
- Waites

TRUSTEES OF 1987:

- Luther Banea
- Ralph Clark
- Lamar Guthrie
- Willie Jackson
- Eugene Oglesby
- Bobby Smith

- Clarence Town
- Andrew Waita
- James Waita
- Johnny Waita, Jr.
- Thomas Waita
- Aldine Walker

By Johnny F. Waita  
7-20-87



1987 Directory  
of  
*Flat Rock*  
*United Methodist Church*  
4250 Flat Rock Road  
Lithonia, Georgia

Reverend Leon Hollinshed, Pastor  
Church Telephone 981-3617



*Flat Rock United Methodist Church*  
*Lithonia, Georgia*

2-4-88 Johnny Waites Jr

2-4-88 Johnny Waites Jr



MESSAGE FROM THE PASTOR

Many thanks to the Flat Rock United Methodist Church family and to those who worked so diligently toward the completion of this magnificent Church Directory.

Flat Rock United Methodist Church has a very unique history and heritage. As a result of strong pioneering men and women in this community, our church was founded upon a rock. Subsequently, the name Flat Rock carries a dual meaning; the name of our church and the name of the head of our church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus told Peter . . . "upon this Rock I will build my Church . . .". Interestingly enough, many who have not properly exegeted this passage interpret it to mean that Jesus was talking about building His Church on Peter. This is far from the truth, as Peter at that time was quite weak and unstable. Evidence of this is proven moments later in Matthew 16:23. Jesus is the Rock of my salvation; durable, solid and powerful.

I would like to think, and receive by faith, that Flat Rock is made of that same substance as the head of our church, even Jesus Christ - unshakable and unmovable.

Flat Rock, may God continue his richest blessings upon you, as you pursue higher heights, climbing up the King's Highway -- working for the Lord.

Yours In Christ Jesus,

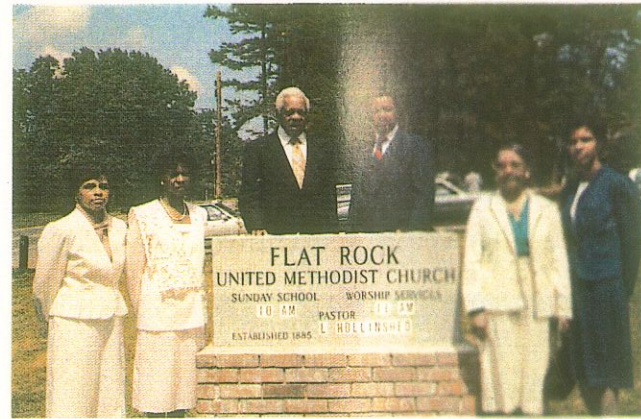


Rev. Leon Hollinshed  
and Family

THE PASTOR AND HIS FAMILY



2-4-88 Johnny Waiton



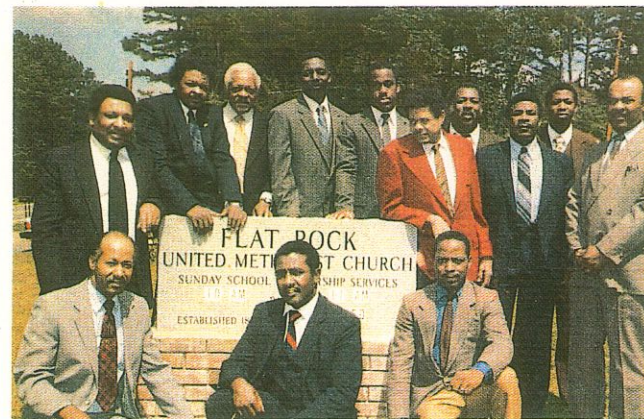
Flat Rock Church School Teachers



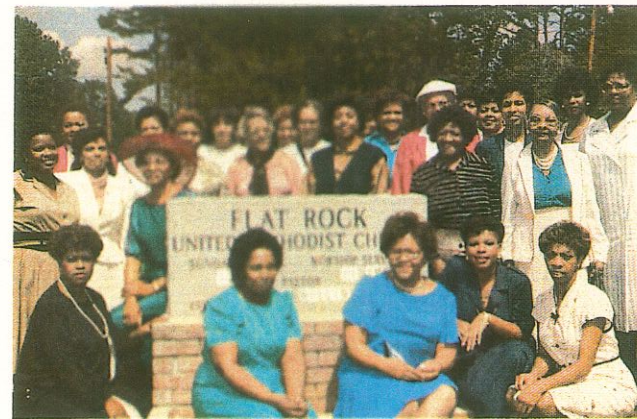
The Senior Choir



The Junior Choir



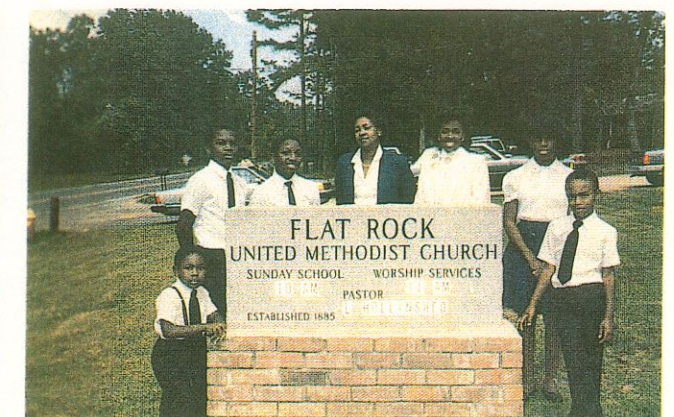
Methodist Men



Methodist Women



Usher Board #1



Usher Board #2

2-4-88 Johnny Fulwaker



Frankie Hardy



Richard Hearn



Rev. Leon Hollinshed & Family



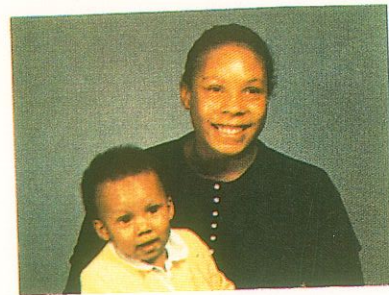
Eugene Oglesby



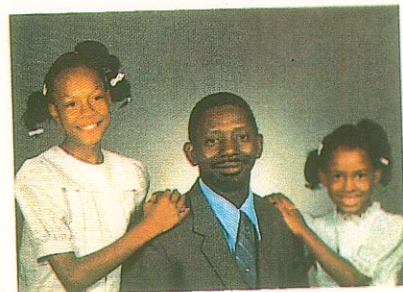
Terence & Stephanie Phillips,  
Terence & Tamar



Kathleen Thompkins  
& Family



Carol Houston  
& Tristan



Willie Jackson,  
Tamega & Kattie



Teresa Johnson



Clarence & Barbara Towns,  
Marnique & Shawn



Andrew & Martha Waites



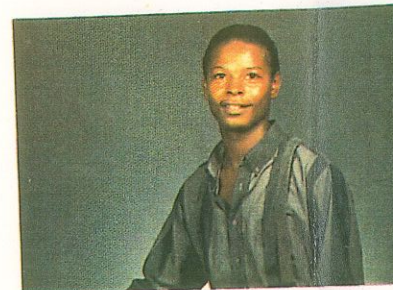
Audrey Waites



Cheryl Lipscomb,  
Summer & Frazier



Alvin Mackey



Darrel Mackey



Cynthia Waites



Deborah Waites



James & Diane Waites



Judson & Josie Maddox,  
Fernando & Antonio



Sonya Mahone



Nathaniel & Debra Malcome



Jewel Waites



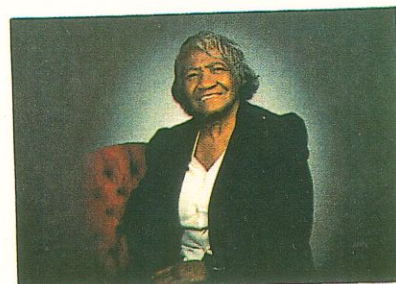
Lillian Waites



Thomas & Linda Waites



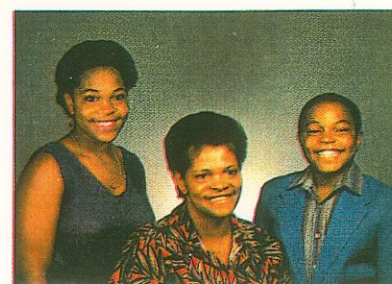
Maudel Marshall



Arrie Nolden



Aldine & Dorothy Walker,  
Clifton, Cloris, Celesta & Ivory



Kathy Walker,  
Carlethia & Dontrale



Willie Ward

2-4-88 Johnny Waites J<sup>3</sup>



Bannie Whitaker



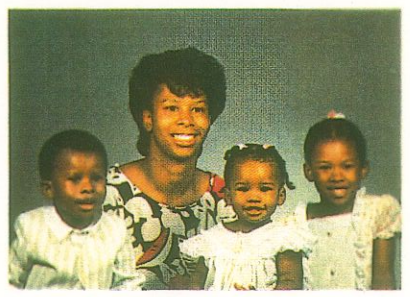
Minnie Whitaker & Jarrett



Vera Whitaker



Helen Williams & Scott



Brenda Woods, Tiffany, Bernard & Christy



Jessie Wright



Arlanda Allen



Mary Arnold



Alice Bailey



Luther & Roberta Barnes



Dorothy Bigsby



Authur Bryant, Sr.



Spencer & Annie Bryant, Sr.



Dana Clark & Tory



Mary Clark, Tory & Kelvin



Ralph & Connie Clark & Phyllis



Veneshia Eberhart



Joyce Ethridge, Teneshia & Tamara



Betty Guthrie, Tivius, Veda & Thilenius



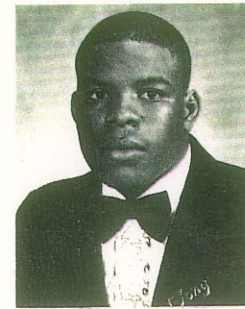
Lamar & Geneva Guthrie



Zella Guthrie

2-4-88 Johnny F. Walters

THOSE NOT AVAILABLE FOR PICTURES



Tony Clark



Frazier Guthrie



The Mackey Family



Kathy Thompkins

2-4-88 *John J. Walters, Jr.*

T

TOMPKINS, Ms. Kathleen  
Michael  
930 Columbia Drive  
Decatur, GA 30030  
288-5813

TOWNS, Mr. & Mrs. Clarence  
3941 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 981-8679

TUGGLE, Eli & Naomi  
7170 Center St.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 482-6849

W

WAITES, Mr. & Mrs. Andrew  
3188 Sandusky Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 284-5119

WAITES, Audrey  
4242 Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9856

WAITES, Ms. Cynthia  
College Park, GA

*The Hunters*  
WAITES, Mrs. Debra  
40 Canler Rd., N. E.  
Atlanta, GA 30317  
(404) 378-3230

WAITES, Mr. & Mrs. James  
2233 Madrea Pl.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 243-1683

WAITES, Ms. Jewel

WAITES, Mr. Johnny, Jr.  
410 Felton Dr., N. E.  
Atlanta, GA  
(404) 879-0557

WAITES, Mrs. Lillian  
4242 Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9856

WAITES, Mr. & Mrs. Thomas  
2849 Knollview Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30034  
(404) 289-4566

WALKER, Mr. & Mrs. Aldine  
5640 Miller Grove Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 981-1853

WALKER, Mrs. Cathy  
4015 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 981-5774

WARD, Mrs. Willie  
4205 Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9847

WHITAKER, Mrs. Bannie & Minnie  
327 Reed St.  
Scottsdale, GA 30079  
(404) 292-7156

WHITAKER, Mrs. Vera  
3290 White Castle Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30034  
(404) 987-1017

WOODS, Mrs. Brenda  
Lithonia, GA 30058

WRIGHT, Mr. & Mrs. Clemmie  
3419 Boring Rd.  
Decatur, GA 30034  
(404) 243-3598

ROSTER

B

BAILEY, Mrs. Alice  
1519 Rena Ct.  
Conyers, GA 30207  
(404) 922-5357

BARNES, Mr. & Mrs. Luther  
3705 Salem Trail  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9694

BIGSBY, Mrs. Dorothy  
3991 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

BRYANT, Mr. Spencer, Sr.  
3991 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-0390

BRYANT, Mr. T. A., Sr.  
3979 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

C

CLARK, Mrs. Mary Lois  
1857 Hillsdale Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 284-8108

CLARK, Mr. & Mrs. Ralph  
2599 Preston Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 243-3851

CLARK, Mr. & Mrs. Willie  
3974 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

COFFEA, Mrs. Mary  
3488 Valley Chase Ct.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 981-8700

E

EBERHART, Ms. Veneshia  
330 Reed St.  
Scottsdale, GA 30079  
(404) 294-5714

ETHRIDGE, Ms. Joyce  
4242 Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

G

GARLINGTON, Mr. Emma  
7170 Center St., #19  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 482-6849

GIBSON, Tommy  
Decatur, GA

GUTHRIE, Mrs. Betty  
2143 Kilgarney Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 288-1358

GUTHRIE, Mr. & Mrs. Charles  
4008 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-0164

GUTHRIE, Mr. & Mrs. Lamar  
3994 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

GUTHRIE, Theodis  
Decatur, GA

GUTHRIE, Mrs. Zella & Frazier  
614 Daniel Ave.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 377-3246

H

HARDY, Mrs. Frankie  
4232 Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9856

HEARNS, Mrs. Drew Willis  
3918 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-0209

HOLLINSHED, Rev. & Mrs. Leon  
3892 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-0212

HOUSTON, Carol  
1519 Rena Ct.  
Conyers, GA 30207  
(404) 922-5357

J

JACKSON, Mr. Willie  
1974 Camille Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 378-2409

JOHNSON, Mrs. Teresa  
1345 Covington Hwy.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

*The Mackey Family*  
MACKEY, Mr. Alvin  
4185 Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9733

MACKEY, Darrell  
Flat Rock Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

MADDOX, Mrs. Josie  
7120 Maddox Dr.  
Covington, GA 30209

MALCOME, Mr. & Mrs. Nathaniel  
Evansmill Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

MARSHALL, Mrs. Maudale  
4088 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-3806

Mc LEAN, Mr. & Mrs. Alfred  
Lithonia, GA 30058

MITCHELL, Mr. & Mrs. Nancy  
Decatur, GA

N

NOLDEN, Mrs. Arrie  
4018 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058  
(404) 987-9447

NOLDEN, Ms. Elenor  
3974 Crossvale Rd.  
Lithonia, GA 30058

O

OGLESBY, Mr. Eugene  
4418 Lincoln Jones Rd.  
Ellenwood, GA 30049  
(404) 243-5861

OSBORNE, Mrs. Gloria  
2842 Chimney Mill Trail  
Ellenwood, GA 30049  
244-0789

P

PHILLIPS, Mr. & Mrs. Terence  
2318 Pebble Rock Way  
Decatur, GA 30035  
(404) 987-1359

R

RAY, Lillian  
Sandra James  
Stone Mountain, GA

S

SMITH, Mr. & Mrs. Bobby  
3527 Spring Valley Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
288-2574

SULLIVAN, Mr. Donald  
2165 Holly Hill Dr.  
Decatur, GA 30032  
(404) 284-9051

2-4-88 Johnny J. Wade J

## FLAT ROCK CHURCH HISTORY

According to the United Methodist book of Discipline, "from 1784 through 1864, black people were included in the membership of the white churches. Black people persuaded the Church to organize them into their own churches. In 1794, the African Zion Society was organized in Philadelphia. It was the first black society in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1864, the General Conference authorized the organization of Mission Conferences among black people. The first black Mission Conference to be organized was the Delaware Conference which was held that same year.

Flat Rock was founded in 1861. The founding forefathers were Sam Ford, Yoke McKnight, Alex Henderson, Edmond & Nathan Bryant, and members of the Reed and Holt families.

In 1870, the leaders of Flat Rock purchased a parcel of land on Parola Road to build a community church. Construction took several years to complete. Meanwhile, the Flat Rock community began to show signs of growth. The Hellums, Christians, Syphos, and Shumake families moved here from Morgan County. Several years later, during the 1880's, the Waits and Wise families moved here from Butts County and they too planted their roots.

Years later, Flat Rock moved from Parola Road to Flat Rock Road, and several years thereafter, in 1973 moved into our present edifice. The opening consecrating ceremony took place on August 26th of that same year.

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Flat Rock has a very unique history and heritage. As a result of strong pioneering men and women in this community, our church was founded upon a rock. Consequently, the name "FLAT ROCK" carries a dual meaning. Just as this physical edifice was founded upon a rock, we as members of the body of Christ should stand upon the rock of our salvation. Jesus is the rock of our salvation - unmovable, unshakeable, solid, durable and powerful.

May God share his blessings upon Flat Rock as we continue to do his will on our 126th anniversary.

### TRUSTEES OF THE 1900'S:

Rance Bailey  
Spencer Bryant  
Tom Christian  
Hill Lyons  
Henry Shumake  
Jerry Sypho  
Will Tanner  
Andrew Waits  
Jim Wise

### TRUSTEES OF THE 50'S, 60'S & 70'S:

Goodman Bryant  
Tom Hardy  
Dave Marshall  
Dave Ward  
Johnny Waits, Sr.  
Waits

### TRUSTEES OF 1987:

Luther Barnes  
Ralph Clark  
Lamar Guthrie  
Willie Jackson  
Eugene Oglesby  
Bobby Smith

Clarence Towns  
Andrew Waits  
James Waits  
Johnny Waits, Jr.  
Thomas Waits  
Aldine Walker

By Johnny F. Waits

7-20-87





State of Georgia }  
Deeds County }  
                    } in the year Eighteen hundred and Eighty five

Between N. S. Evans of the County and State of Georgia and Samuel Fells and George Hest and Ely Reed Successors of Flat Rock Methodist Church of the same County that whereas of the one part with the said N. S. Evans for and in consideration of the sum of Five Dollars to him in hand paid at and before the making and delivery of the presents the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged and granted bargained and sold and conveyed and sold in these presents convey bargain sell and convey unto the said Samuel Fells and George Hest and Ely Reed Successors of Flat Rock Episcopal Methodist Church and to their successors as Successors All that tract or parcel of land situate lying and being in the County aforesaid as originally Henry County now DeKalb County in the Sixteenth 16<sup>th</sup> Dist of said County containing one fourth of an Acre of land being lot (89) eight Mrs and heirs on the South side by N. S. Evans and next wife by Mrs Hulley place

It have and had said tract or parcel of land unto Samuel Fells and George Hest & Ely Reed Successors for Flat Rock Church of the Methodist Episcopal of the United States of America and their successors as Successors of said Church they claim All the right members Appellances due to the same in any manner belonging to them as Successors of the Episcopal Methodist of the United States of America together with all and in any manner belonging to them and their heirs proper and lawful and behoof and said N. S. Evans for himself his heirs Executors and Administrators the said bargained premises unto the said Samuel Fells and George Hest and Ely Reed as Successors of the above named Church with warrant forever signed the said title there against themselves and against the claim of all other persons whatsoever.

Witness my hand and official seal this 15<sup>th</sup> day of August 1896  
J. M. Patten }  
John S. Patten }  
N. S. Evans }  
Recorded Sept 15<sup>th</sup> 1896  
W. H. Burgess  
Clerk.

note: have lot no. seems to be in  
error! R. S. Evans shown on 1915 land ownership  
map in CC 79, 16th Dist, church shown on map in  
that lot too.

## Profile Of His Life

Mr. Theodore Arthur Bryant, Sr. was born on December 13, 1894 in Rockdale County to the late Spencer B. Bryant and Mary Ann Shoemake.

He joined Flat Rock United Methodist Church at an early age in the 1900's. He was very active and a pillar of Flat Rock Church. At 12 years old, he was a unit leader. He was a faithful and dedicated Trustee, Steward, Chairman of the Administrative Board, Finance Chairman and an all around member of Flat Rock Church. He has been on the battle field working for the Lord, a long time.

He was a chartered member of the Riverside Lodge in 1917, where he served as W. M. for 50 years, Assistant District Deputy for 8 years, District Deputy for 20 years over Lithonia District, 8 Lodges and 4 Courts. He was Jr. and Senior Warden and served as a Grand Lodge member and a Grand Tyler for the state of Georgia. He was a member of the Royal Arch Lodge.

He joined in holy matrimony to the late Zudia Waits on January 2, 1916. To this marriage, 8 children were born. He is survived by: 2 daughters, Zella Guthrie and Mary L. Arnold; 2 sons, Spencer C. Sr., and T. A. Bryant, Jr.; 2 daughters-in-laws, Annie B. and Lila Mae Bryant, 26 grandchildren, 57 great grandchildren, 14 great-great grandchildren, 3 sisters-in-law, Mrs. Ardalia Waits Toatley, Mrs. Bannie Whitaker and Mrs. Arrie Benton, a host of nieces, nephews, relatives and friends.



*The Gates of Heaven were open  
God knew he needed rest.  
His Garden must be Beautiful  
For He always pick the Best!!*

## Order of Service

Rev. Leon Hollinshed, *Presiding*

ORGAN PRELUDE ..... Mrs. Margaret Hollinshed

PROCESSIONAL

SELECTION ..... Flat Rock Choir

SCRIPTURE ..... Old Testament  
New Testament

SOLO ..... Rev. M. F. Davis

PRAYER

REMARKS (3 mins. each)

SELECTION ..... Flat Rock Choir

Moments of Silence (Read Obituary)

SOLO ..... Larry Robinson

EULOGY ..... Rev. Leon Hollinshed

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... Joyce Ethridge

INTERMENT ..... Flat Rock Cemetery

Masonic Lodge will conduct services at the Grave Site

**ajc.com**  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Flat Rock's role

Heritage written on hearts, but not records

By **JEFFRY SCOTT**

Published on: 11/27/05

The heart and soul of the old community, its memory, the traces of the lives that have come and gone over the last 200 years — all of that rests atop a hill, in woods, at the end of a long dirt path.

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The cemetery is bordered on one side by Sandstone Estates, the affluent subdivision where NFL star Terrell Owens has his house on the market for \$4.5 million. The property of one home in the subdivision extends a few feet into the graveyard.

More menacing are plans to build another subdivision with hundreds of homes on the 30 acres of woods that surround the cemetery.

Waits points to the unmarked grave of Eliza Waits, born into slavery around 1823, probably in South Carolina. The cemetery is about half a mile from the site of the old Lyon plantation, and about about half a mile from Flat Rock United Methodist Church, where Eliza Waits was probably one of the founders in 1860.

She died a free woman, around 1870, the family matriarch for 61 descendants. She was Johnny Waits' great-great-great-grandmother.

Waits stoops and gently touches the soil around his ancestor's grave.

"She was the beginning" he says. "Everything starts with Eliza Waits. Everything."

In February, the nation will become acquainted with Eliza Waits and Flat Rock, a tiny community about five miles southwest of Lithonia that is believed to be among the oldest continuously inhabited black communities in Georgia, founded in the early 1800s.

The unincorporated settlement is in a section of metro Atlanta that has become a magnet for upper middle-class African-Americans moving into subdivisions with multimillion-dollar homes. But the richest story here is backward-looking.

#### **Featured in documentary**

Flat Rock is featured in a forthcoming documentary, "African-American Lives," that traces the lineage of black celebrities back to Africa through their DNA. One of those celebrities — comic movie actor Chris Tucker, Johnny Waits' third cousin — is a descendant of Eliza Waits.

The documentary, in the words of one of its producers, casts Flat Rock as an "epic" American story, picking up where Alex Haley's "Roots" left off three decades ago.

"There are four or five families [in Flat Rock], including the Bryants and Waits, who can trace their ancestors back to emancipation," says Jesse Sweet, episode producer for the documentary, scheduled to air on PBS.

"This is amazing because, at this time African-Americans had been denied basic human rights for generations, and despite all the obstacles they faced, these families created a community, almost from scratch," Sweet says. "The story becomes even more interesting because, during the 20th century, African-Americans were fleeing the South to look for a better life. However, this community held together ? to endure and overcome the brutal conditions of Jim Crow segregation."

The written histories of DeKalb County and Georgia carry few mentions of Flat Rock, which was settled around 1822 by whites who built farms, and plantation owners — the Souths, the Johnsons, the Lyons — who presided over huge acreages of cotton and owned slaves.

The community — probably several hundred people at its peak before the Civil War when it was an agricultural center that shipped cotton on the South River — contained at least two churches (whites attended Salem Presbyterian Church), a post office, a school and a few small stores. Flat Rock remained largely rural until the early 1970s.

The geographic boundaries of Flat Rock, which was never incorporated, are as elusive as a detailed history of the community. Flat Rock appears on a few early maps in Georgia, as late as 1865, next to other obscure communities such as Rough & Ready and Bersheba. But the location moves around. One old map places Flat Rock in Henry County, south of the South River; another map places it north of the river, in DeKalb County.

So the story of the community becomes a patchwork of fugitive, mostly unwritten, unphotographed recollections.

#### **Memories — and blanks**

Cleveland McMullen, 83 — a slender man with a dignified bearing and a low raspy voice — grew up in Flat Rock and joined the exodus of thousands of Southern blacks who fled north during the Great Depression to find jobs in factories and escape enforced segregation.

A few years ago McMullen moved back home.

He lives on property that was once the center of the community, on Crossvale Road, the site of the old T.A. Bryant homestead, once a 90-acre spread with farmland, pastures and a baseball diamond where black minor league teams would play on hot summer afternoons, bringing entertainment to a place without telephones or electricity and few radios.

Flat Rock had its own "scout" team, which played rivals from nearby communities, such as Lithonia, and, toward Atlanta, Edgewood. But McMullen can't recall the team name of the home nine, just that "it was a big deal, people came from all over. They'd have a barbecue, make a whole day of it."

McMullen was raised by his grandfather, a sharecropper, who split the profits from his crops and livestock with the landowner.

In those days few blacks in Flat Rock owned automobiles, and, without phones and electricity (phones first arrived in Flat Rock in 1946, electricity in 1941), communication was on foot.

"Everywhere people went — church, school, the store — they walked. This was the walkingest place you ever seen in your life," says McMullen, laughing.

As a boy, McMullen made money for candy and snacks and cigarettes (he started smoking at age 7) by picking blackberries until he filled a 2-gallon bucket, and walking, with a friend, five miles to Lithonia.

"As soon as we saw that city limits sign we would holler 'Blackberries! Blackberries!' We never got past the second house."

McMullen attended Flat Rock School, a black-only school that closed in 1948. Classes were held in a single room lighted by oil lamps, heated by a potbellied wood stove. All 12 grades were taught by one teacher, Frankie Bates Hardy, who is still living today.

"There were about 25 of us in that room, and the teacher would block us off in groups, teaching each group at a time," McMullen says. "The only time we would all get together was a spelling test."

#### **Land sold in parcels**

T.A. Bryant Jr., 82, is the grandfather of Chris Tucker, and a former assistant minister at Flat Rock United Methodist Church, during the 1940s. His father, T.A. Bryant Sr., was a trustee in the church.

Bryant remembers how his dad made money selling the vegetables from his farm door-to-door in Atlanta. But mostly he remembers how his father held the community together when so many blacks moved north during the Depression.

In those days blacks were often prevented from buying land from whites. So T.A. Bryant Sr. started selling parcels of his land along Crossvale Road, "to keep people here, and to save the church. He knew if people moved, the church would die."

Today, at least five families related to Bryant live in homes on his old property.

Chris Tucker's mother, Mary, who lives in Henry County, could not be reached for comment, nor could Chris Tucker, who is out of the country, according to his grandfather. Calls to his Los Angeles agent

were not returned.

George Lyon, 82, and Betty Lyon, 75, live about half a mile from the Flat Rock Cemetery on the South River on land that has been in their family since Joseph Emanuel Lyon, a Revolutionary War veteran, received a "bounty grant" of 100 acres from the federal government and settled there around 1800, according to family history.

By the time of the Civil War, his sons had expanded the property into a cotton plantation, with slaves, that ran about two miles west along the banks of the river.

The Lyon family plantation house — a two-story plank building on a granite foundation, with peeling white paint, three red brick chimneys and a metal roof — is a survivor of Sherman's march through Georgia and may be the oldest home in DeKalb County.

Their daughter's family lives in the old house now, which has in its basement perhaps the last extant slave quarters in the county.

In May 2004, DeKalb County purchased 38 acres that the house sits on for \$500,000 to incorporate it into green space expansion of the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area. The county is leasing the home back to the family until 2007.

Eventually the Lyon family home and the Flat Rock Cemetery may be connected by a biking and hiking trail, said Kelly Jordan, chairman of the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, which is pushing for the establishment of the Lyon home as a museum and history center.

"The trail will be a way of pulling all these histories together," Jordan says.

#### **Close, but far removed**

Dorothy Sanders Lindsey, 78, is a self-described "permanent guest" at her nephew's home in an affluent new subdivision with manicured lawns, off Salem Road in Flat Rock — a long way from the recollections of her youth in Flat Rock.

She was about 10 when her grandfather Alec Lyons died in the early 1930s, leaving his wife 50 acres, on each side of Panola Road, bordering the South River.

The white owner of a local grocery store told Alec's widow Alec had purchased groceries in exchange for a lien on his property and the property was now the store owners', unless she could repay him.

Her grandmother couldn't afford to repay the grocer; Lindsey remembers, however, the store owner had no proof of the lien. When her grandmother resisted leaving the property, one night her house was set afire: "They burned us out," Lindsey says. "There wasn't anything left."

Her nephew, Michael Armstrong, 32, bought their current house in Flat Rock about three years ago. He is amazed at how affluent the community has become. "This is like Dunwoody, except it's black," he says.

He says it's important to preserve the old cemetery: "My mother and her grandparents are buried up there," he says. "It's our heritage."

The proposal to build the Flat Rock Hills subdivision, which will surround the Flat Rock Cemetery, goes before the DeKalb County Planning Department December 7. Waits and Jordan have been negotiating with the developer for months to make certain the cemetery is preserved and given a buffer and public access.

DeKalb County Chief Executive Officer Vernon Jones is forming an 18-person committee to devise plans to archive and rewrite the history of the county to include slave stories such as those from Flat Rock.

"You have a lot of undocumented stories, a lot of people who have old artifacts and a lot of old pictures and old memories that nobody knows about," Jones says. "We need to find some way to preserve them — and we need to put money behind that idea."

The keepers of those stories won't be around forever.

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