



Former Flat Rock School students (from left) Lillian Walton Waites, Alice Waits Bailey, Thelma Wilson Roberts, Bertha Sanders Clark, Martha Wise Williams, Zilla Bryant Guthrie and Eugene Nolden received honorary diplomas recently from the DeKalb County school system. Photos by Phil Skinner pskinner@ajc.com

# Black students get diplomas years late

**Flat Rock recognizes eight after 60 years.**

**DeKalb community working to preserve its history.**

By **Jeffry Scott**  
jlsconfig@ajc.com

Recognition has been hard-earned and incremental for the Flat Rock community in south DeKalb County near Lithonia where residents are descendants of one of the oldest slave settlements in America.

For the past five years, the county, residents, historians, archaeologists and anthropologists have made a concerted effort to recapture the once lost history of Flat Rock and make amends for decades of oversight and neglect.

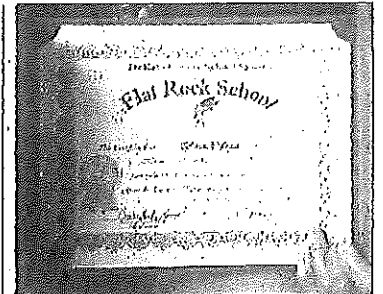
On a Saturday in February in a ceremony at Arabia Mountain High School, eight elders

— black students now in their 70s, 80s and 90s — were given honorary high school diplomas from the DeKalb County school system that six decades ago did not give high school diplomas to blacks.

The students all attended Flat Rock School in the 1930s and 1940s, a time when there was such hostility to educating blacks three schools in the district — Flat Rock, Miller Grove, and County Line — burned down in a single night, likely the acts of arson.

The oldest of the former Flat Rock students, Zilla Guthrie, 93, recalled her childhood days in the one-room schoolhouse in the 1930s, where two teachers taught the first through seventh grade, which was as high as the curriculum went.

After the seventh grade, she said, “they let you out and you went to work in the fields” of the many farms in the area tending vegetables and cotton. Others found jobs as domestics working for white families. Others went into the military.



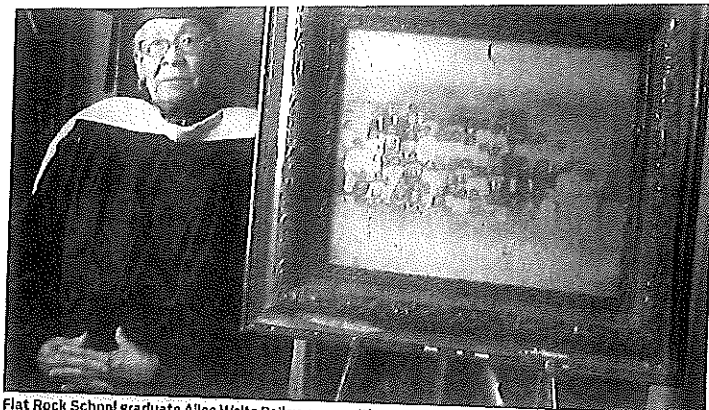
Thelma Wilson Roberts shows her diploma. The county didn't award diplomas to black students in the 1930s and 1940s.

Guthrie was thrilled to finally get the diploma that has eluded her for 78 years. “I always wanted to go to college,” she said. “I guess I could now.”

Activist Johnny Waits helped found the Flat Rock Archive two years ago and has spearheaded efforts to chronicle Flat Rock's history by compiling oral histories from descendants, written family and

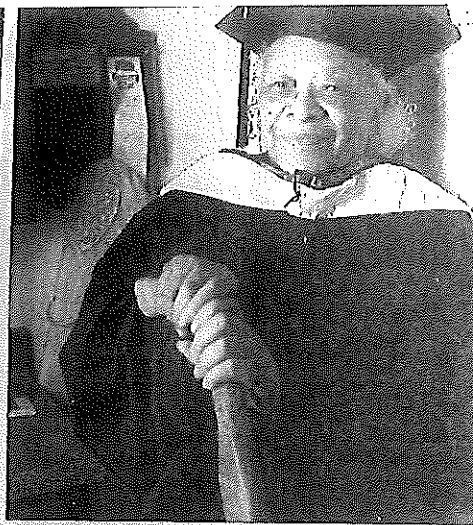
Students continued on B5

Atlanta  
Journal - Constitution  
4/12/10



Flat Rock School graduate Alice Walts Bailey poses with an old photograph of the community in the Flat Rock Archive building. She left school in the 11th grade but said she was happy to finally get her diploma. "I wanted to go back to school, but I never could," she said at the ceremony. "It feels strange and real, but late, but it's OK." Eight former students, ages 70 to 93, got honorary diplomas.

Photos by PHILL SKINNER pskinner@ajc.com



Bertha Sanders Clark attended the all-black school from first to seventh grade. "It was like family because everybody knew everybody," she said. "We were living with Granddaddy on the farm. We'd go to school, come home, eat, then we were back out in the fields to work." She left in 1947 when she was promoted to the eighth grade and went to Bruce Street High School in Lithonia.

## Diplomas come 60 years late.

### Students

continued from B1

church histories and genealogical research into the 250 buried in a nearby Flat Rock slave graveyard.

He said official records of Flat Rock all but vanished after it was last identified on a state map in 1865, and the community isn't even mentioned in the official history of DeKalb County.

That area of the county was largely rural into the early 1980s (when some roads were paved for the first time). Flat Rock, Walts said, didn't have county water, electricity or telephone service until the 1950s.

With funding and assistance from the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, the Archive commissioned Atlanta filmmaker Edward Anderson to produce his recently completed short documentary on the community, "Flat Rock - Where Home Is."

The Atlanta Archaeological Society and the anthropology department of Georgia State University continue to scour what records can be found to chronicle the lives of those buried in the slave cemetery.

The graves date to 1834, including Johnny Walts' great-great-great-grandmother, Eliza Walts, who was born into slavery in 1823, died in 1870, and has 61 descendants.

Georgia State anthropology professor Jeffrey Glover said of the many slave cemeteries in Georgia, Flat Rock is singular because so many descendants still live there.

By the fall, Glover and students plan to complete a computer map of the graveyard that will be linked to the Flat Rock Archives Web site ([www.flatrockarchives.org](http://www.flatrockarchives.org)).

Visitors to the site will be able to click on each grave and get pictures and biographical information about those buried there.

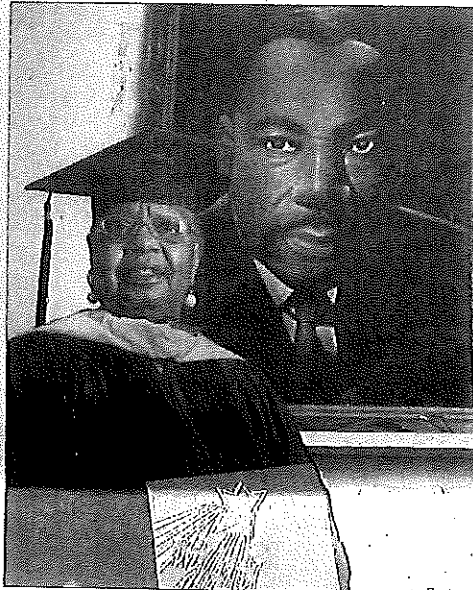
In the meantime, filmmaker Anderson is working on an expanded documentary of Flat Rock to preserve as much history as he can gather from the memories of descendants.

**"I was determined that I was going to live to see this day."**

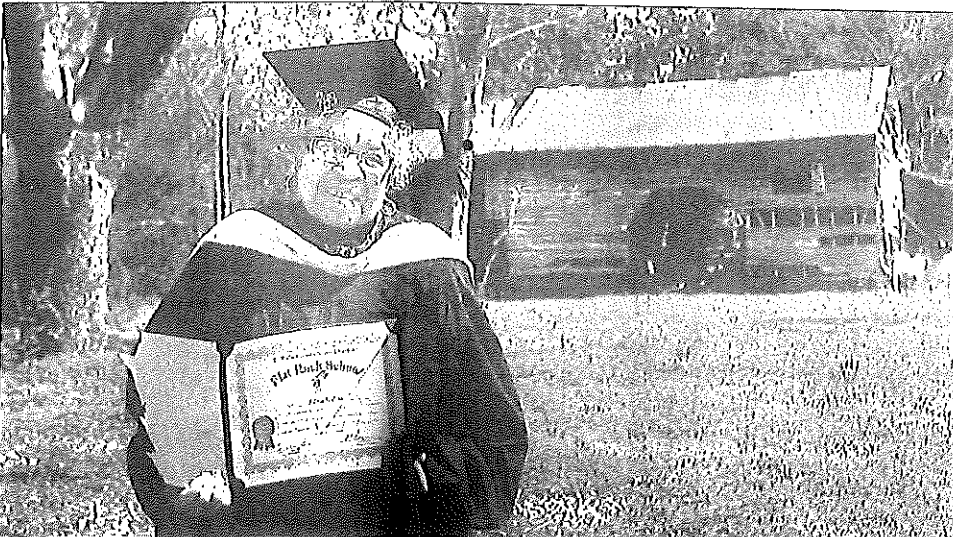
Martha Wise Williams



In 1946, when Martha Wise Williams was in the 10th grade, she dropped out of school to help her mother, who was raising six children on her own. "I was determined that I was going to live to see this day," Williams said. On Feb. 20, Williams, now a great-grandmother, got her high school diploma during a ceremony at the Flat Rock Archives.



Lillian Walton Waltes' late husband, Johnny Walts Sr., was awarded his diploma posthumously. According to Flat Rock Archives, an "E" was mysteriously added to his original slave name after the family was freed from slavery. Waltes said they had no choice but to drop out of school in the 1940s. "I had to pick cotton and corn," she said.



Thelma Wilson Roberts shows her diploma in front of an old barn in Lithonia. According to Flat Rock Archives, Roberts was pulled out of school at a young age by her grandfather, who needed her to work in the fields of his farm. She never got an opportunity to go back to school. In the 1940s, blacks who attended the segregated Flat Rock School — where first through seventh grade were taught in a single classroom — couldn't, by law, be given high school diplomas.