



MEDIA MATTERS

A NEWSLETTER FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT LIBRARY MEDIA PROGRAMS

DORCHESTER ACADEMY: THIS PLACE MATTERS

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Have a safe, restful, happy summer and I will see you when school begins again.

Read, rest, and enjoy your well deserved vacation.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has placed Dorchester Academy (located in Liberty County) on the list of the **11 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2009**. The academy was established after the Civil War as a school for freed slaves and was used in this capacity until the 1940s.

The story of Dorchester Academy, one of the earliest schools for African Americans in the state of Georgia and a National Historic Landmark, is forever linked to the cultural and political forces that shaped our nation's history. Founded in 1871 as a school for freed slaves, Dorchester started humbly in a one-room schoolhouse with a student body ranging in age from eight to 80. As the school grew, boarders joined day students, many of whom walked miles to fulfill their dream of learning how to read. In later years, the school played a pivotal role in voter-registration drives and as a center of activity for the civil rights movement.

Dorchester Academy was established by the American Missionary Association (AMA) at the urging of William A. Golding, a former slave who became a state legislator. By the 1920s, school enrollment fluctuated between 220 and 300 students, and by the 1930s, the school housed the Dorchester Cooperative Center store and credit union, which helped local residents buy homes and open businesses. When the Academy ceased operating as a school in 1940, the innovative spirit of the institution continued with the opening of a community center housed in the old boys' dormitory.

During the 1940s, the school was the site of African-American voter registrations. At the height of the civil rights movement, Dorchester Academy hosted Citizen Education Workshops sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to train grassroots leaders from all over the South and to send these leaders home to instruct their neighbors about their legal rights and responsibilities. Later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Ralph Abernathy, and Dr. Joseph Lowery spent time at the Academy preparing for the Birmingham march, and Dr. King also wrote and practiced portions of his "I Have a Dream", speech at Dorchester Academy.

Updates

April 2009: Today, the only remaining building on the Dorchester campus, a red brick, Greek Revival structure built in 1934 as a boys' dormitory, is deteriorating and structurally compromised. The community that has done its best to nurture and sustain the academy since its earliest days does not have the financial resources to rescue the building.

While some repair and stabilization work has been completed through the combined efforts of community donations and a \$50,000 grant from the state, damage to the dormitory still extends from the roof to the basement, and is compromising the structural support beams and foundation.

The cost of completely restoring the building has been estimated at \$1-1.5 million. The vision of the Dorchester Improvement Association is to complete this task and create a world-class museum and community facility.

From the National Trust for Historic Preservation website:

<http://www.preservationnation.org/travel-and-sites/sites/southern-region/dorchester-academy.html>