



**SAVANNAH-CHATHAM COUNTY HISTORIC SITE AND MONUMENT
COMMISSION
HISTORICAL MARKER RECOMMENDATION**

PETITIONER: AFRICAN DIASPORA MUSEOLOGY INSTITUTE
P.O. BOX 5261
Savannah, Ga 31414

FILE No.: 21-005657-HM

LOCATION: 505 WEST 36TH STREET

DATE: November 4, 2021

NATURE OF REQUEST:

The applicant is requesting that the Historic Site and Monument Commission recommend approval to City Council for the installation of a historical marker on public property, within the tree lawn, for the property located at 505 West 36th Street. The marker proposes to recognize the significance of the Kiah House Museum.

The marker is proposed to read:

*The Kiah House Museum
(1959-2001)*

On November 28, 1959, the residence of Dr. Calvin and Virginia Kiah at 505 W. 36th Street in Savannah GA was opened to the public as the Kiah Museum. The Kiah's were pioneers in the black cultural and museum movement and created the first African American-founded museum in Savannah. The museum was always free to its visitors who included those from the historic Cuyler Brownville Neighborhood as well as civil rights activists and artists national and international. It served as the headquarters for the National Conference of Artists and hosted the International Students Art Show, a traveling exhibition of student art from 20 US states, including Hawaii and 12 foreign countries, including Ghana. Virginia Kiah began her museum collection in the 1930s. The collection included her own world recognized portraits, antique furniture, artwork of local youth and adults, fossils, animals, exotic plants, African carvings, and Native American artifacts. In 1974, the Kiah Museum was listed in Readers' Digest Treasures of American. The museum closed to the public in 2001 upon the death of its founder, portrait artist and educator, Virginia Kiah.

Erected by the African Diaspora Museology Institute, Friends of the Kiah Museum, Savannah Archaeological Alliance and Ethos Preservation.

Staff recommends the following changes to the proposed marker text:

*The Kiah House Museum
(1959-2001)*

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On November 28, 1959, the residence of Dr. Calvin and Virginia Kiah at 505 West 36th Street in Savannah, GA was opened to the public as the Kiah Museum. The Kiah's were pioneers in the black cultural and museum movement and created the first African American-founded museum in Savannah. The museum was always free to its visitors who included those from the historic Cuyler-Brownville neighborhood as well as civil rights activists and artists, both national and international. It served as the headquarters for the National Conference of Artists and hosted the International Students Art Show, a traveling exhibition of student art from 20 US states, including Hawaii, and 12 foreign countries, including Ghana. Virginia Kiah began her museum collection in the 1930s. The collection included her own world-recognized portraits, antique furniture, the artwork of local youth and adults, fossils, animals, exotic plants, African carvings, and Native American artifacts. In 1974, the Kiah Museum was listed in Readers' Digest Treasures of American. The museum closed to the public in 2001 upon the death of its founder, portrait artist and educator, Virginia Kiah.

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FINDINGS:

The following standards from the Historic Site and Monument Commission Guidelines for Markers, Monuments and Public Art apply:

***Evaluating Themes for Markers and Monuments.** New markers and monuments commemorate and honor people, places, and/or events.*

Proposed themes should fall into one or more of the following categories.

Civil and Institutional.

Social and Humanitarian.

Industry and Commerce. Includes economics, agriculture, transportation, etc.

Local History. Includes folklore and/or local heroes.

Cultural and Ethnic History.

The proposed theme should have documented significant, clear and direct local relevance to the history and development of Chatham County. The local focus should be the predominant theme of the marker.

The level of significance should be high enough to warrant a public presence.

The person, place or event commemorated should not have been sufficiently commemorated elsewhere in the County. The theme should be distinct and original, and not be duplicated in other existing markers or monuments.

The theme should reflect a larger connection to the community as a whole, and not only to one distinct group.

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There should be significant documented evidence (written or oral) of the commemorated event, person, or place.

The standard is met.

The petitioner provided the following statement regarding the theme of the historical marker:

Social and Humanitarian: The Kiahs were a significant force in education and civil rights, but not as commonly understood by organizing marches and protests. While other family members were deeply involved as NAACP leaders, Virginia and Calvin chose education and art, rather than legal means, to make positive changes in their community. The Kiahs used their professional position as educator/activists to teach the next generation of teachers as well as mentor young people in the soft skills of navigating and contesting the Jim Crow South. From 1865 until today, education remains a priority in the African American community. First, education was a critical means toward full citizenship, including voting and opportunities to be candidates for elected office. Today, education is a means to economic improvement, increased job prospects, and the still on-going fight for civil rights and freedom from harm (Williams 2005).

Williams, Heather Andrea. "Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom." Chapel Hill, Nc: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

***Evaluating Sites for Markers, Monuments, or Public Art.** Certain factors should be taken into consideration when evaluating whether a site is the appropriate location for a marker, monument or public art [hereto referred to as "object" to indicate the inclusion of all three types]. These factors include:*

The installation of an object should not cause overcrowding of the site if there are existing objects. Objects should be sited far enough away from other objects as to allow the visitor proper appreciation of each individually.

The standard is met. The site currently does not have any "objects", and there are no visually related examples of historical markers.

The proposed object should not damage or disturb existing established vegetation on the site including low tree limbs, or significant tree roots.

The marker is proposed to be adjacent to a large Live Oak tree. Staff recommends that the applicant confirm with the City's Greenscapes Department that the marker will not damage or disturb significant tree roots.

The proposed object should not require the removal or alteration of existing above or below ground utilities.

Information on the location of ground utilities was not provided; staff recommends that the applicant confirm with the appropriate City Departments that the below ground utilities will not require removal or alteration.

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The proposed site should be large enough to accommodate an object, and should not encroach on other existing object sites, buildings, or designated green space.

The standard is met. The marker will be located in the tree lawn in front of the Kiah Museum house and will not encroach.

The proposed site should not be utilized for special events (such as sports, festivals, ceremonies, etc) on a regular basis which an object would disrupt.

The tree lawn in front of the Kiah Museum house is not utilized for special events.

The proposed site should not be prone to frequent automobile accidents which could damage the proposed object.

The standard is met. The City's Traffic Engineering Department provided comment that they do not have concerns with the proposed marker location.

The proposed site should be easily accessible to pedestrians and the physically challenged (excluding marker sites).

The proposed site should be visible and accessible from a public right of way.
The standards are met. The marker is to be visible from the public street.

The proposed site should be easy to maintain.

The marker is proposed within a City-owned tree lawn.

The installation of the object should enhance the space and character of the surrounding neighborhood.

The historical marker will shed light on a story of the neighborhood and enhances the character of the surrounding neighborhood.

The installation of the object should not require the alteration or removal of existing signage (traffic, street, etc).

The installation of the object should not significantly affect automobile traffic sight lines.

The standards are met. No alterations of signage are required and The City's Traffic Engineering Department provided comment that they do not have concerns with the proposed marker location.

The installation of the object should enhance the design of the overall site.

The historical marker will enhance an empty portion of the tree lawn.

Site in Relation to Theme for Markers or Monuments. *The relationship between site and theme for a marker or monument is critical in determining the appropriate site for a particular theme.*

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Marker. *A marker should be erected in as close proximity to the site to which it is related as possible and be clearly visible from a public right-of-way.*

A marker commemorating a place, such as a significant piece of architecture, should be located within 100 feet of the place or adjacent to the nearest public right-of-way.

The standard is met. The historical marker is proposed to be less than 100 feet from the property which its' content represents.

Design. *The design of a marker, monument, or public work of art should be of the highest quality and caliber, and enhance public space. In order to promote the high standards the City of Savannah has historically enjoyed in its markers, monuments, and public art, the following guidelines should be observed.*

Markers. *Markers may be mounted on a freestanding pole, wall-mounted, or embedded in the ground. As the primary purpose is to inform the public about an event, place or person, the aesthetic significance of a marker is generally minimal.*

Markers on a freestanding pole should be the standard Georgia Historical Society (GHS) Marker style: two-sided, cast aluminum with a 30" x 42" plate size. The shape should match the GHS marker shape. The marker should have a black background with white, silver or gold text.

Except the marker title, the marker text should be not more than 1" in height, and not less than 1/2".

Marker text should be created in a manner that, to the extent possible, prevents fading and erosion.

Markers should be made of an enduring, non-corroding material.

Markers should be considered permanent and designed accordingly.

The marker is proposed to have a black background with "satin finish" lettering. Although the marker is not sponsored by GHS it has the same design; the GHS logo on the top is replaced with the logo from the Kiah Museum. Staff recommends that the letters be changed to white or gold so as to differentiate it from some GHS markers which have a black background with silver lettering.

Funding.

Budget. *The Mayor and Aldermen do not fund new markers, monuments, or works of art. The applicant is fully responsible for funding the design, construction, installation, and any necessary landscaping, paving, or lighting involved with a new marker, monument, or work of art.*

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The applicant must provide a realistic budget. The budget should be based on cost estimates provided by the manufacturer, artist, installer and/or contractor, as appropriate. The budget should include funding goals and deadlines. Should funding goals and deadlines fail to be met, the HSMC may, at its sole discretion, reconsider the application. The applicant must be capable of raising the necessary funding. Construction of the monument or installation of the work of art will not begin until all of the funding has been secured.

The applicant stated that the African Diaspora Museology Institute has already raised \$5,290.00 through a dedicated fundraiser to erect the marker. Additionally, the applicant states: *The African Diaspora Institute (ADMI) recognized that part of the request for a historical marker ... being placed on public property requires us to take responsibility for future maintenance of the marker.*

Escrow Payment. *All markers, monuments and public art erected on public property become the property of the Mayor and Aldermen. The Mayor and Aldermen assume responsibility for the future maintenance and upkeep of the marker, monument or artwork. Therefore, an initial Escrow Payment is required of the applicant subsequent to approval of the application. The Mayor and Aldermen, or their designee, will determine the appropriate Escrow Payment and will notify the applicant. The Escrow Payment must be paid prior to construction/installation of the monument or public art. Any marker, monument or artwork erected on private property is the responsibility of the property owner.*

The applicant stated: *An initial escrow payment is also required of us prior to construction and installation. Please be assured that funds will be set aside by ADMI for this purpose. We were made aware of the escrow when we applied for a marker through the Georgia Historical Society and that we could anticipate a cost range is generally between \$250 and \$500. This amount has already been budgeted.*

PUBLIC NOTICE:

Public Notice: *As required in the Master Plan and Guidelines, written notice was sent to all property owners, and the neighborhood association, within 200 feet of the subject property.*

A sign was posted on the property fifteen days prior to the meeting.

A letter of support was received from Mayor Van Johnson and Council Persons of the City of Savannah. 152 letters of support were received from the public.

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RECOMMENDATION TO CITY COUNCIL:

The Historic Site and Monument Commission recommends approval to City Council for the installation of a historical marker on public property, within the tree lawn, for the property located at 505 West 36th Street with the following conditions because the proposed marker otherwise meets the Master Plan and Guidelines:

1. **Revise the text as described in the meeting (as follows):**

*The Kiah House Museum
(1959-2001)*

On November 28, 1959, the residence of Dr. Calvin and Virginia Kiah at 505 W. 36th Street ~~in Savannah GA was~~ opened to the public as the Kiah Museum. The Kiah's were pioneers in the black cultural and museum movement and created the first African American-founded museum in Savannah. The museum was ~~always~~ free to its visitors who included those from the historic Cuyler-Brownville Neighborhood as well as ~~national and international~~ civil rights activists and artists. ~~national and international~~. It served as the ~~youth~~ headquarters for the National Conference of Artists and hosted the International Students Art Show, a traveling exhibition of student art from 20 ~~US~~ states, including Hawaii, and 12 foreign countries, including Ghana. Virginia Kiah began her museum collection in the 1930s. The collection included her own world-recognized portraits, antique furniture, ~~the~~ artwork of local youth and adults, fossils, animals, exotic plants, African carvings, and Native American artifacts. In 1974, the Kiah Museum was listed in Readers' Digest Treasures of America~~n~~. The museum closed to the public in 2001 upon the death of its founder, portrait artist and educator, Virginia Kiah.

Erected by the African Diaspora Museology Institute, Friends of the Kiah Museum, Savannah Archaeological Alliance and Ethos Preservation.

2. **Change the marker text from “satin finish” to white or gold so as to differentiate from GHS markers.**
3. **Confirm with the City's Greenscapes Department that the marker will not damage or disturb significant tree roots.**

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4. Confirm with the appropriate City Departments that the below ground utilities will not require removal or alteration.

DocuSigned by:

Kristopher Monroe

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November 4, 2021

**Mr. Kristofer Monroe, Chairman
Historic Site and Monument Commission**

Date

DocuSigned by:

Melanie Wilson

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November 4, 2021

**Melanie Wilson, Executive Director
Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission**

Date

DocuSigned by:

Leah G. Michalak

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November 4, 2021

**Leah G. Michalak, Director of Urban Planning and Historic Preservation
Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission**

Date

MW: LGM