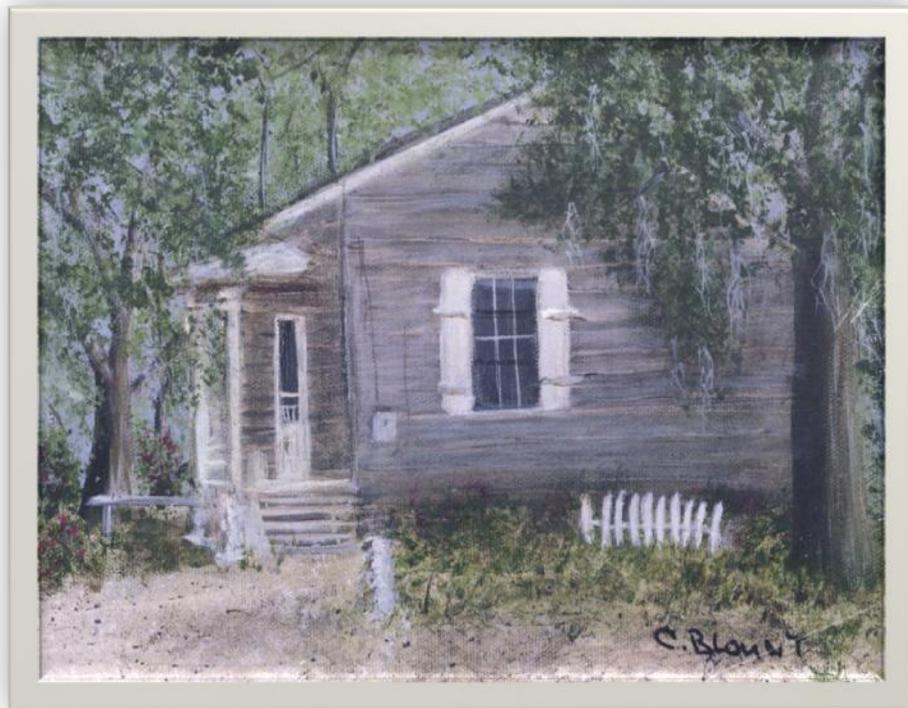


# The Founding of LePageville:

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A Legacy to African American Railroad Workers

By Elaine Jolly



The Founding of the Village of LePageville:  
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Immediately following the Civil War the railroad brought great wealth, prosperity and much needed commerce into the poorest, and most devastated, areas of the country. In the South railroad companies used African American workers almost exclusively both before and after the war because they were both a source of cheap labor and efficient workers; however, the years after the Civil War saw a drastic increase in African Americans working in railroad related jobs.<sup>1</sup> The history of the railroad in the south and the many benefits it brought to African American society and culture show evidence of a close symbiotic relationship.<sup>2</sup> In 1879 Henry B. Plant purchased the bankrupted Atlantic and Gulf Railroad. With this rail company the planned a massive expansion into Florida, using Savannah as the headquarters the newly formed Savannah, Florida and Western Railway began expansion in Savannah and the surrounding areas by the early 1880s. This expansion lead to the need of additional wharves, a new depot and homes for their workers to live. In 1884 the Savannah, Florida and Western Railway Company purchased two parcels of land, both in the northwest portion of Brewton Hill, one of Savannah's old river plantations and built the LePageville community. It is believed that the founding and growth of the LePageville community fits the typical pattern of this mutually beneficial relationship between railroad workers and the prosperity of the railroad.

By the late 1880s the number of African American railroad workers more than doubled white workers in Savannah.<sup>3</sup> Founded by Robert LePage, Superintendent of the Warf in Savannah, LePageville was built in 1885 to house the African American workers of the Savannah, Florida and Western Railway Company. LePage envisioned the idea of providing housing at an inexpensive rent to the “colored employees” of the wharf.<sup>4</sup> Robert LePage’s original concept for LePageville was to set aside 10 acres of land and build a village of 108 houses on an as needed basis.<sup>5</sup> On June 13, 1888 *The Savannah Morning News* reported that thirty five houses have been completed and that five more were in construction. In addition to the 108 houses, LePage set aside twenty acres to be set up as seven individual truck farms, and rented to the employees at \$12 a year. This ideology adopted by Robert LePage was decades before its time, as many companies today believe that providing good benefits of their employees helps to create happy workers which in returns makes more productive workers.

LePage died six months and six days after this article, on December 7, 1888, and it believed that any future construction in LePageville died with him. Even though LePageville did not grow as large as it was designed to it was still a prosperous community well into the twentieth century. The community was named after Mr. LePage, and the streets were named after the Savannah, Florida & Western railroad officials. Plant Street for Henry B. Plant, President; Haynes Street for H. S. Haines, General Manager; Owens Street for C. D. Owens, Traffic Manager; Fleming Street for R. C. Fleming, General Superintendent; McKee Street Mr. William B. McKee, the comptroller general<sup>6</sup> and Chisholm Street for W. S. Chisholm, Vice President.<sup>7</sup> Other

streets were proposed, also to be named after railroad officials, but they were never built.

In 1947 LePageville was described as “rows of well-kept small houses, all painted gray.”<sup>8</sup> The houses in LePageville were built using “saltbox” style architecture each with two rooms that utilized fireplaces for heating and cooking, a front porch and yard. Each house cost the railroad \$850 to build<sup>9</sup>. The houses rented for \$6 a month to married employees only, a very reasonable price when African American railroad



Figure 1-Picture of house in LePageville taken in 1967 by local photographer Charles Henry. Provided by Jack D. Lee of Southern State Phosphate and Fertilizer Company.

workers during this time earned an average of \$.60 to \$1.50 a day.<sup>10</sup> LePageville residents lived significantly better than that of African Americans who lived elsewhere in Savannah and the surrounding areas; whose jobs as tenant farmers or laborers paid an average of \$2 a month forcing them to live in poverty in run down shacks. On the whole urban areas, like LePageville, provided better pay, greater educational

opportunities, and generally less hostility from whites than rural areas.<sup>11</sup> LePage wanted to show that the Savannah Florida & Western Railway was looking after their colored employees. LePageville even had its own storehouse where its residents could go to purchase groceries and supplies and prices comparable to the prices in Savannah, without having to actually go into the city. Mr. LePage’s vision gave hard working men and their families something they could be proud of. In an interview dated June 13, 1888 LePage said, “the project has proved a very happy one. The colored employees

are contented.” Around August 1888 LePage also oversaw the construction of a church for the community.<sup>12</sup>

In the early days of the LePageville church both the Methodists and Baptists worshiped in one building but by 1895 the church became known as the LePageville Baptist Church, which has relocated but still exists today. As the only institution controlled solely by African Americans in the post-war South, churches created a sense of cohesion bonding communities together. The LePageville Baptist Church played a significant role in the success of the community. As African Americans churches often



Figure 2-Original Piano from the LePageville Baptist Church, moved the St. Thomas Missionary Baptist Church in 1967. This piano is still being used today in the social hall. Picture courtesy of Patricia Jenkins.

are, LePageville’s church was the social and religious center of the community. The message delivered in African American churches of the day centered on religion; however, churches also emphasized “importance of education, racial pride, self respect and living a Christian life.”<sup>13</sup> The church also served as a community bulletin board that kept

everyone informed of local, state and national issues, and it gave each member his or her own voice to be heard in a world that did not particularly care what African Americans had to say. In addition African American churches were used as a method of social control over their community; members who disobeyed church rules or doctrines, or who acted outside of the cultural norms, were ostracized and shunned. Jack Lee, a white man who visited LePageville in the 1950s & 1960s, tells a story of going to the community on the weekends when the church was in session looking for day laborers.

He says he could hear "some serious preaching and gospel singing."<sup>14</sup> Based on the cultural impact of African American churches to African American societies in general it is reasonable to presume that the LePageville Church was a bonding agent that kept the community intact for almost 70 years.

Another important element of the LePageville Community was its emphasis on family. LePage stated in this 1888 interview that houses in LePageville were available to "married couples only" indicated the family structure of the workers was a vital element in the community. Family structure for African Americans in the post-war South posed a problem for black society as a whole. Before the Civil War laws prohibited legal marriages between slaves; therefore illegitimacy was extremely high in black societies. As African Americans became accustomed to life as freed men and women leaders in the black communities started to emphasize "family" and "family stability;" as a result, but the 1880s there was a shift in black societies where men now headed 75% of families and the number of non-working wives and one family dwellings in black society grew and became more stable.<sup>15</sup> The building of the LePageville was a visionary concept for its day. LePage created a stable family-oriented environment in which the Savannah, Florida and Western Railway workers could live, work and play; therefore creating happy and more efficient workers.

Minnie Lou Robinson, affectionately called Miss Minnie Lou, moved to LePageville in 1938 with her family. Living in LePageville for 12 years, Miss Minnie Lou has fond memories of the place she describes as a “big community of family.” She describes her family’s house as having 2 rooms, divided up for privacy. She adds that she lived in a home with her grandfather, grandmother, an aunt, and 2 cousins and “everybody was happy.” Miss Minnie Lou recalls walking down the railroad tracks into the city to shop and the kids of LePageville gathering to play “half-rubber,” a baseball like game where a broom stick is used for a bat and a rubber balls is cut in half, and used one half piece for the baseball, in the streets.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 3-Picture of house in LePageville taken in 1967 by local photographer Charles Henry. Provided by Jack D. Lee of Southern State Phosphate and Fertilizer Company.

Oddly enough the prosperity of the railroad industry that built LePageville plays a role in its decline as well. By the late 1930s the railroad had major competition in transportation industry that led to its decline. These competitors who completed with the railroad industry did not typically employ blacks, forcing a reduction in black railroad workers.<sup>17</sup> According to Miss Minnie Lou, by World War II most of the residents who lived in LePageville now worked for Southeastern Ship Yards building Liberty Ships, and not the railroad.<sup>18</sup> By the 1950s Southern State Phosphate and Fertilizer Company leased LePageville from the railroad and sub-let the houses to their employees.<sup>19</sup> Jack D. Lee, manager of Southern State Phosphate and Fertilizer Company, says that most employees of Southern State paid between \$5-\$7 a

month, and that some of the elderly or disabled residents did not pay anything. He remembers that the people living in LePageville were "hardworking, fine, upstanding people."<sup>20</sup> Through the years the land changed hands many time, and although each new owner, or leasee, allowed LePageville to stay intact and the residents to remain in their homes, no maintenance, upkeep, renovations or improvements were done to the homes. By 1967 the number of houses in LePageville had dwindled to twenty-five, and sixteen of those twenty-five still did not have power.<sup>21</sup> Government officials gave Southern Phosphate the choice of renovating LePageville to bring it up to code, or condemning it. Jack Lee says that upon careful review the management of Southern Phosphate did not consider this a good investment, as they did not own the land and the expense would have been significant for homes that rented for an average of \$6 a month.<sup>22</sup>

As a result the houses the community was deemed to be "substandard living conditions" and torn down. Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, sub-titled "Slum Clearance and Community Development and Redevelopment," was set up to create new, more modern and permanent settlements for African Americans who currently lived in sub-standard housing. These so called "slums" are described as "Negro-occupied areas" that are "usually the oldest sections of the city, strong natural advantages for residential use." As well as "near lakes or rivers, have good elevation" and are "close upon or in the central business district."<sup>23</sup> In addition these areas "have long since become too run-down for corrective measures short of clearance."<sup>24</sup>

Coincidentally these “slum” areas are typically on land that is the most coveted by developers for redevelopment into industrial centers or higher priced residential areas, both of which now surround the area that was once LePageville.

Although some residents who had lived in LePageville did not consider their community “slums,” LePageville was occupied mostly by African Americans, it was in an old section of the county, near the river and only two miles from the central business district of Savannah; and by the 1960s these houses were in poor shape. Jack Lee states that calling LePageville “slums” is an unfair assessment. He goes on to add that some of the residents lived there for free, who could not afford any place else and had nowhere else to go. He admits that the community had no running water and limited electricity, but says that it was shelter from the rain and cold. It is believed that the passage of this law in 1949, along with the successes of the Civil Rights legislations in the 1960’s and the lack of upkeep in LePageville through the years are all factors that played key roles in the fate of LePageville, and were ultimately responsible for disbanding the community.

The twenty-seven remaining families living in LePageville were forced to leave the community in 1967 and the homes were torn down. As a result the congregation of the LePageville Baptist Church was relocated across town, into another building and changed its name to St. Thomas Missionary Baptist Church; this church still exists to this day. Interestingly enough lumber from the old LePageville Baptist Church was used in the remodeling of the new church; and the piano from the old LePageville Baptist

Church is still being used in St. Thomas Missionary Church social hall today. Sadly the residents leaving LePageville had no choice but to leave their deceased loved one behind in the area of LePageville deemed as the community cemetery.

By the 1970's the railroad had again leased this land but this time to the International Little League of Savannah for a new sports complex.<sup>25</sup> During construction of the sports complex an elderly African American man named Alexander Milton came upon Mrs. Patricia Jenkins, signing agent for the Little League Association, and told her there was a 100 year old cemetery on the land and asked her not to build over it. "There weren't a lot of markers left, but he (Mr. Milton) told me the burials started at this one big oak tree," Patricia Jenkins told reporter Jane Fishman in a 2001 article in the Savannah Morning News. She goes on to say, "It (the big oak tree) would be the boundary."<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Jenkins promised Mr. Milton on that day in 1978 that she would make sure the International Little League would not expand past that "big oak" and disrupt the cemetery.

In 1978 Mrs. Jenkins contacted W.W. Law, a prominent Civil Rights Leader in Savannah, and Jim Golden, Director of the Chatham County Recreation Department, to make them aware of the LePageville Cemetery and to ask for their guidance in protecting this land. W. W. Law and Jim Golden did respond and met Jimmy and Patricia Jenkins. Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Law and Mr. Golden all walked the woods together where Mr. Jenkins conveyed the entire conversation he had with Alexander Milton and his hopes for protecting the cemetery. However, no plans for preserving the land

were made.<sup>27</sup> The Wessel's-Downing Sports Complex opened in 1979 and for many years hundreds of Savannah's youth played softball, and baseball, within yards of the forgotten cemetery.

In 1996 Mrs. Jenkins learned from her father, Edward Lennox, Sr., of a building that had been constructed behind the cemetery and decided it was time to keep her promise and do whatever it took to have the remaining portion of the cemetery protected. Her research found that the cemetery belonged to the community of LePageville, a community she had known existed when she was a child, however, she adds, she never knew about the cemetery.<sup>28</sup> Again, she contacted W. W. Law and Jim Golden, who for a second time met with Mr. Jenkins to walk through the woods; this time, for a second time, no decisive plans were made to try and preserve the land.<sup>29</sup> Neither the City of Savannah nor Chatham County had any records that proved this cemetery ever legally existed in the LePageville area. Various interoffice memorandums between City and County officials indicate that "burials were made in LaPageville<sup>30</sup> (*sic*) Cemetery for over 100 years," and goes on to say "with no records to our knowledge,"<sup>31</sup> and that "the cemetery does not appear on any plat"<sup>32</sup> of land in the County Engineer's Office.

Concerned about the cemetery, and led by her convictions, Mrs. Jenkins moved forward, alone, making calls, doing research, writing letter, doing anything she could think of to bring to make people aware of LePageville and the importance of protecting the cemetery. With all avenues of pursuit leading to a dead end, Mrs. Jenkins was told that it would be necessary to prove its existence without the records in order to save

the land from future construction. So she went through old city maps and found the names of the streets in LePageville, then scoured old city directories to find out who lived in these homes in the 1950's and 1960's. After that she contacted as many of the past residents as she could locate and with their help compiled a small list of names of the people who were laid to rest in the LePageville Cemetery. Locating the past residents of LePageville and hearing their stories proved to be the key to moving forward for Mrs. Jenkins.<sup>33</sup>

Along her journey she met three surviving residents of the LePageville community and has been able to document the lives of the residents through oral histories, photographs, county maps, census records, newspaper articles and family records for a period in history that spanned almost a hundred years. Through her years of research Mrs. Jenkins has inadvertently become the resident historian and expert on this bygone community. In June 2002 all her hard work finally paid off when the Engelhard Corporation deeded the 3.85 acres of land to the LePageville Memorial Cemetery Corporation in an effort to preserve what remains of the LePageville Cemetery. Jim Wilson of Engelhard jokingly said in a newspaper interview, "I should get her to teach a seminar in relentless pursuit."<sup>34</sup>



Figure 4-Left to Right: Larry Stuber, Buddy Myers, Ellis Cook, James Holmes, Patricia Jenkins, Minnie Lou Robinson, George Ponder, Pete Likakis and David Blount at Ribbon Cutting Ceremony September 2007. Picture courtesy of Patricia Jenkins.

Mrs. Jenkins also had the assistance of Jerry Fleming, Director of the City of Savannah Cemeteries, in the preservation efforts. Since that time the LePageville Memorial Cemetery Corporation has sponsored many community involved clean-up days of the land, and raised money through various fundraisers. In September 2007 the LePageville Memorial Cemetery Corporation built an arch over the entrance of the cemetery. Presently supporters are raising funds to add additional fencing around the perimeter and to have a historic marker placed out front. Currently Mrs. Jenkins is working with volunteers to research grant proposals in hopes of obtaining a grant to help fund the preservation efforts in the future.

While researchers may never know Robert LePage's inspiration behind LePageville it is clear that the prosperity of the Savannah, Florida and Western Railway was closely tied to the welfare of the LePageville residents. The railroad built this worker village, when the railroad industry declined, so did LePageville, and it was the railroad's lack of upkeep that led to the ultimate destruction of LePageville. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Patricia Jenkins, the late Jesse Ponder, George Ponder, Minnie Lou Robinson, Savannah City Alderman Ellis Cook, and Volunteer David Blount, and countless others LePageville no longer a forgotten community. Today LePageville is listed on the

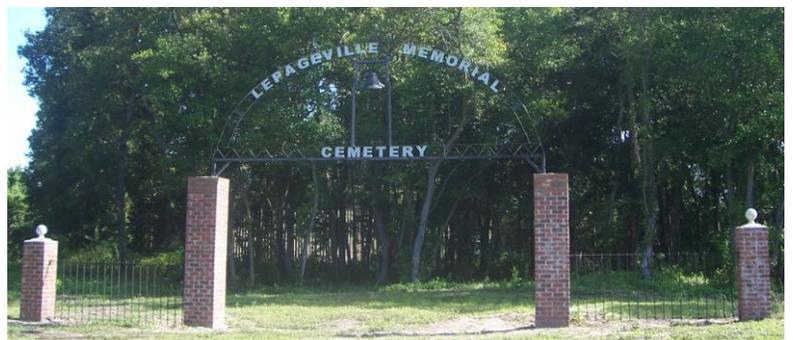


Figure 5-Arch at LePageville Cemetery. Picture courtesy of Patricia Jenkins.

Chatham County Historic Review Board, and the LePageville Cemetery is protected from all future development.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> John W. Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the African Americans Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880," *Journal of Social History* 6, no. 4 (Summer, 1973): 463-488.
- <sup>2</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: African Americans railroad workers and the struggle for equality* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 5
- <sup>3</sup> Clarence A. Bacote, "Some Aspects of Negro Life in Georgia, 1880-1908," *The Journal of Negro History*, Col. 43 No. 3 (July 1958): 186-213
- <sup>4</sup> "Building Up A Village," *The [Savannah] Morning News*, June 13, 1888
- <sup>5</sup> "Building Up A Village," *The [Savannah] Morning News*, June 13, 1888
- <sup>6</sup> Census of Population, Chatham County, Georgia, 1880
- <sup>7</sup> "Building Up A Village," *The [Savannah] Morning News*, June 13, 1888
- <sup>8</sup> Mary Granger, eds., *Savannah River Plantations* (Savannah: The Oglethorpe Press, 1947), 42-52
- <sup>9</sup> "Building Up A Village," *The [Savannah] Morning News*, June 13, 1888
- <sup>10</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10
- <sup>11</sup> John Kellogg, "Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 67, no. 3 (July 1977): 310-321
- <sup>12</sup> "Building Up A Village," *The [Savannah] Morning News*, June 13, 1888
- <sup>13</sup> John W. Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the African Americans Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880," *Journal of Social History* Vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer, 1973): 463-488.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Jack Lee
- <sup>15</sup> John W. Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the African Americans Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer, 1973): 463-488.
- <sup>16</sup> Minnie Lou Robinson, interview by Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (November 7, 08).
- <sup>17</sup> Charles S. Johnson, "Negroes in the Railway Industry," *Phylon*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1<sup>st</sup> Quarter., 1942): 5-14
- <sup>18</sup> Minnie Lou Robinson, interview by Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (November 7, 08).
- <sup>19</sup> Bert Emke, "Living in Utter Poverty in LaPageville" (sic), *The Savannah Morning News*, March 13, 1966
- <sup>20</sup> Jack D. Lee, interview with Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (October 24, 2008)
- <sup>21</sup> Bert Emke, "Living in Utter Poverty at LaPageville," *The Savannah Morning News*, March 13, 1966.
- <sup>22</sup> Jack D. Lee, interview with Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (October 24, 2008)
- <sup>23</sup> George B. Nesbitt, "Relocating Negroes from Urban Slum Clearance Sites," *Land Economic Volume 25, No. 3* (August, 1949): 275-288
- <sup>24</sup> George B. Nesbitt, "Relocating Negroes from Urban Slum Clearance Sites," *Land Economic Volume 25, No. 3* (August, 1949): 275-288
- <sup>25</sup> Lease between International Little League and the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad Company, March 27, 1978
- <sup>26</sup> Jane Fishman, "Looking out for the lost graves of LaPageville," *The Savannah Morning News*, February 18, 2001.
- <sup>27</sup> Patricia Jenkins, interview with Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (September 11-12, 2008).
- <sup>28</sup> Patricia Jenkins, interview with Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (September 11-12, 2008).
- <sup>29</sup> Patricia Jenkins, interview with Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (September 11-12, 2008).
- <sup>30</sup> LePageville is often misspelled LaPageville.
- <sup>31</sup> Brian Gore, Inter-Department memorandum to Alderman Goodman, November 18, 1996
- <sup>32</sup> George B. Nesbitt, "Relocating Negroes from Urban Slum Clearance Sites," *Land Economic Volume 25, No. 3* (August, 1949): 275-288
- <sup>33</sup> Patricia Jenkins, interview with Elaine Jolly. *LePageville Interview* (September 11-12, 2008).

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<sup>34</sup> Jane Fishman, "LaPageville's (*sic*) Past Finds a Champion, Savior, *The Savannah Morning News*, November 7, 2003.

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