

2005 Georgia History Festival Featured Historical Figure Teacher Guide

Mother Mathilda Beasley
(1832-1903)

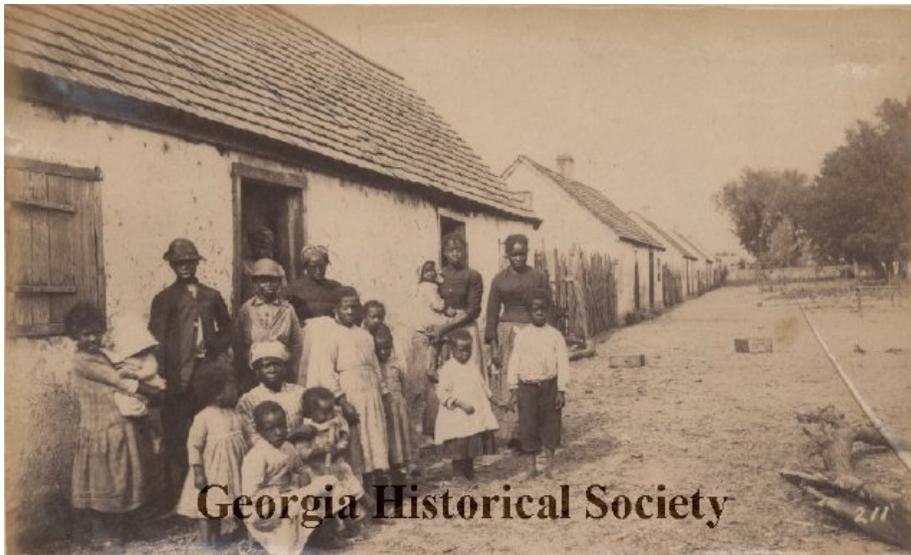


Mathilda Beasley, date unknown.

From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of Photographs, 1870-1960, 1361PH-26-05-4987.

Explanation: Mathilda Taylor Beasley was named a Georgia Woman of Achievement in 2004 by Georgia Women of Achievement, a private, not-for-profit organization headquartered in Atlanta. The ceremony was held at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia on March 11, 2004. In 2005, the Georgia Historical Society names “Mother” Mathilda Beasley its Georgia Heritage Celebration Honoree.

Invisible History



Slave Cabins on St. Catherines Island, #211, 1883.

From the Georgia Historical Society William E. Wilson Photographs, 1883-1892, MS 1375-076.

The task of compiling a history can be a daunting one. A good historian is one who is careful to examine all available resources, both primary sources and secondary sources.

It is easy to become discouraged, though, when little material evidence remains with which a historian can properly document the life of an individual from the past.

This task becomes even more difficult when researching someone who was not born to a position of privilege. After all, the wealthy tend to be well educated and to leave behind a more complete record of their lives: items range from journals and diaries, to household accounts and inventories, to silhouettes and portraits.

Sometimes there is very little documentation to be found related to persons born into the lower socioeconomic classes, especially to persons born into slavery. Such is the case with the early years of Mathilde (later spelled Mathilda) Taylor Beasley. Fortunately, however, this important figure in Savannah history made many contributions in her adult life—despite her humble beginnings—and consequently there remains enough resource material with which to tell a story.

From Slavery to Savannah



Mathilda Beasley, date unknown.

From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of Photographs, 1870-1960, 1361PH-26-05-4987.

It is generally believed that Mathilde (later spelled Mathilda) Taylor's birth date was November 14, 1832, although some sources list 1834 as the year of her birth. She was born in New Orleans. Her mother, Caroline, was a slave owned by James C. Taylor. Some historians believe that her birth father may have been Native American.

An important feature of southern life at this time was that black slaves furnished most of the labor supply both in cities and on plantations. Even though we do not know for certain whether Caroline, Mathilda's mother, lived in the city of New Orleans or on a plantation near the city, we do know that many problems existed in a society based on slavery. There were many widespread illnesses and once a slave became too old to work, his or her life became even more difficult because the slave was no longer of value to

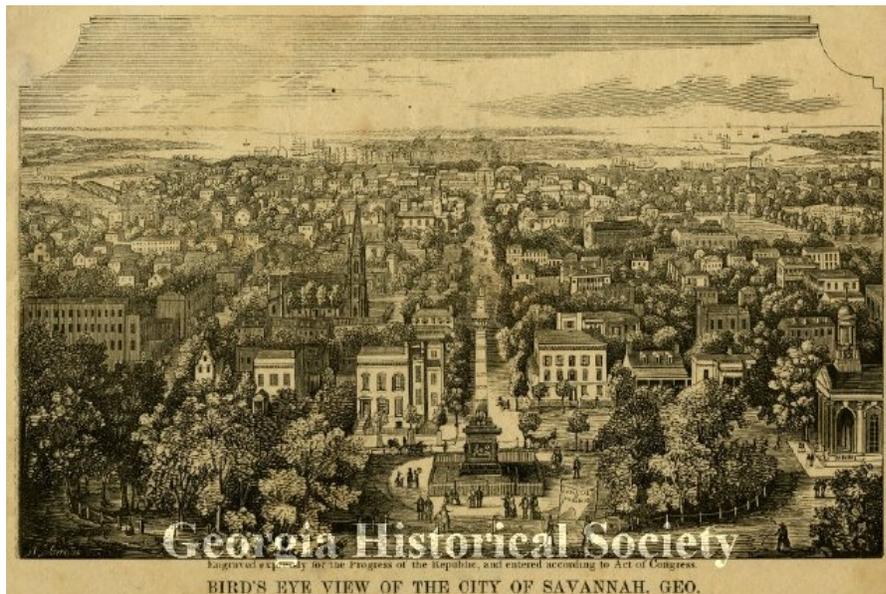
the master.

It is speculated that Mathilda became an orphan at an early age. We do not know when this happened nor can we be certain how or why she obtained her freedom. We do know, however, that she had made her way to Savannah in the 1850s.

Before Mathilda moved to Savannah, this city had survived hurricanes, fires, yellow fever epidemics, and economic depression. But in the 1850s there were more opportunities to achieve success and acquire wealth, especially for upper-class white citizens. The port was active with shipping, and the railroad had expanded, providing links to other cities. New businesses were beginning and old businesses were doing better.

Mathilda was not the only free person of color in Savannah. The city census lists seven hundred five free Negroes in 1860. They had certain rights and privileges that slave did not have. He or

she could choose a trade to enter and earn a living. Free persons of color were, however, forced to wear a badge indicating that they were indeed free.



Bird's Eye View of the City of Savannah, Geo. (looking North), 1855.

From the Georgia Historical Society Collection, MS 1361PR-03-10A-02.

Free persons of color who were males often worked as porters, wagoners, and house servants. Many poor white males resented the presence of these African-American workers because of the competition for jobs they

represented. Free women did much of the same work as poorer white women. They most often worked as seamstresses, domestics, washerwomen, and cooks.

The 1860 census shows Mathilda Taylor worked as a seamstress. The census lists her as 21 years old. The term seamstress was later changed to seamstress-dressmaker. There was not yet a large garment industry in Savannah, but Savannah citizens wanted fine, fashionable clothing; therefore, many free black females were drawn to this work.

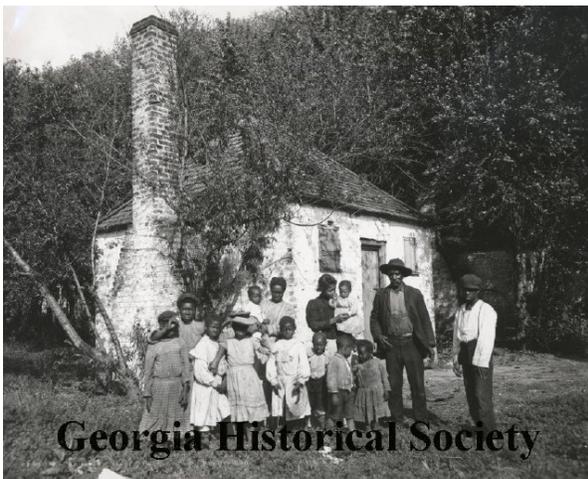
Her work as a seamstress was the way that Mathilda earned her living, but she worked in many other ways in her spare time.

Classroom Suggestions

- Discuss birth certificates. Ask students if they have ever seen their birth certificates. Suggest that the students ask their parents to let them see this document. Explain that birth certificates are kept on file at Chatham County's Health Department. Explain that during the time that Mathilde was born, the government would not necessarily have kept birth records, particularly not for children born into slavery. Explain that James C. Taylor may have kept household records on his slaves, their births, deaths, and even their monetary values. Household inventories that include slaves are common in the records of antebellum, slave-holding families and can be found at the Georgia Historical Society.
- Discuss the fact that Mathilda's last name was the name of the master who owned her mother, Caroline. Tell students that it was not unusual for slaves to take the last names of their owners.
- Locate New Orleans on a map. Explore books and online sources to get a sense of life in this port city at the mouth of the Mississippi River during the 1830s.

- Discuss what type of clothing a slave like Caroline, Mathilda’s mother, may have worn if she worked on a plantation. What type of clothing would she have worn iff she worked as a house slave in the city?
- What type of work might have been assigned to her if she had worked on a plantation? What type of work might have been assigned to her if she had worked in a house in the city of New Orleans?
- Who might have cared for baby Mathilda while her mother worked?
- Discuss health and illness and sanitary of the time period, i.e. yellow fever, lack of clean water, absence of vaccinations, antibiotics, other vitamins and medications.
- For an entirely realistic view of the life of a slave in the antebellum South, have students read portions of Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of an American Slave.
- Find Savannah on a map. Calculate the number of miles from New Orleans to Savannah.
- Discuss the similarities between the two cities: (a) both had ports for shipping, (b) both were in the South, (c) climate was about the same, (d) both had large black populations, (e) both had slaves and free persons of color.
- Look at a map of Savannah. Talk about the importance of a port. Talk about the importance of shipping to the economy in the past and today. The Georgia Historical Society has maps of the city at various times in its past. Use particularly the Peter Gordon view of Savannah (1734), the Firmin Cerveau view (1837), and the Augustus Koch view (1891). All of these are available for sale as prints at Hodgson Hall, the headquarters of the Georgia Historical Society. The Gordon view can be seen in the “On-line Exhibit” section of the education page of the Society’s web site.
- Discuss why railroad service would be important to Savannah. Find evidence of railroad activity on the Koch view of Savannah.
- Discuss the importance of a census and what kinds of information a census includes. Ask students if their families took part in the 1990 census. Look at a recent city census and discuss the detailed that is found there. The Georgia Historical Society holds census records beginning with the first census taken in the United States in 1790.
- Discuss the work of a porter, a wagoner, and house servant. Discuss the work of a seamstress, female domestic, washerwoman, and cook. Discuss the fact that today we have machines to do much of our household work. Ask students what types of household work they do to help at home.

Educator of Slave Children



Hermitage Plantation – Slave Quarters, date unknown.
From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of
Photographs, 1870-1960, 1361PH-01-14-0125.

It is difficult to image risking severe punishment for daring to teach children to read and write. Mathilda Taylor dared to teach at a time when doing so could have cost her dearly. Among Mathilda Taylor’s many acts of charity, she will be remembered for the small, secret school she

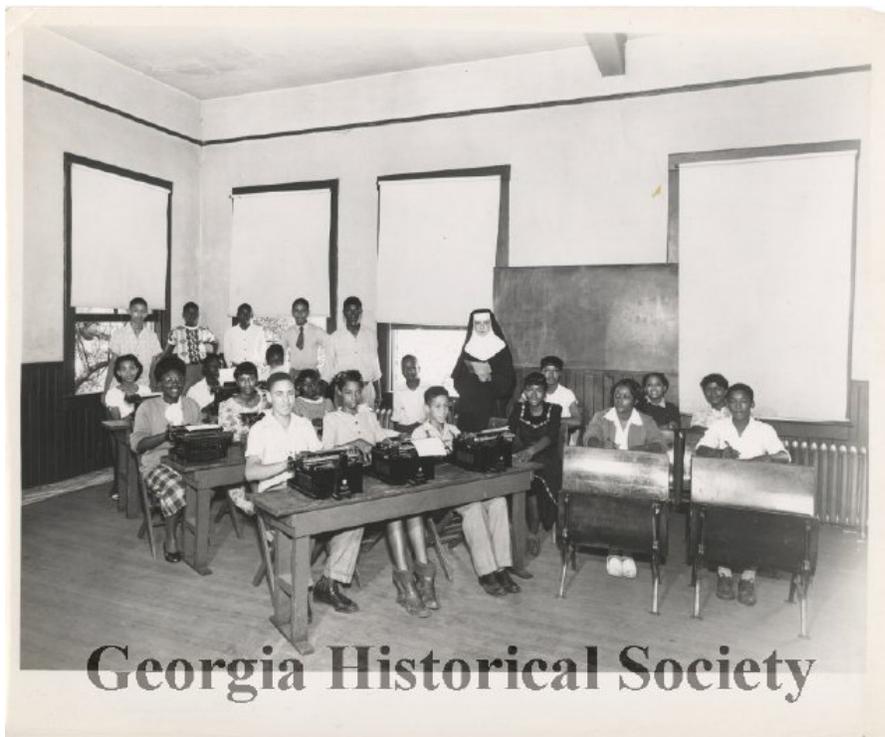
Georgia Historical Society

ran from approximately 1850 to 1860. She remembered the “kindnesses that had been done in her childhood by Negroes” and taught slave and freed black children in her home in Savannah at a time when it was forbidden to do so. There are no school records left to document the details of her little school. There is, however, a plethora of information about the education of blacks during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Savannah had a rich heritage of education both before and after the American Civil War.

Federal authorities who came to Savannah after Sherman took the city remarked about the “hunger” blacks seemed to have for learning. The local press at the time wrote that it was “as refreshing as wonderful to see with what earnestness and eager avidity these liberated people seek for information. All manifest a great desire to learn.” Indeed this “hunger” for education was manifested long before this time. In 1751, Christ Church (the mother church of Georgia) in Savannah opened a school for slave children.

The education of children at the time that Mathilda Taylor taught was an open secret. From time to time, city and state laws were passed forbidding such teaching. In 1817 the city of Savannah passed an ordinance forbidding the education of black children by black and white teachers. In 1829, a similar state law was passed but was “discreetly ignored.”

The punishment for teaching slaves, if the perpetrators were caught by the authorities, was \$500 for whites. For black teachers, slave or freedmen, the punishment was a \$100 fine and up to thirty-two lashes with a whip in the public square.



St. Benedict's School, 1948. From the Georgia Historical Society, Foltz Photography Studio Collection (Savannah, Ga.), photographs, 1899-1960, 1360-03-10-01.

Records indicate that there were at least six or seven illegal schools for slaves in operation in Savannah in 1860. Aside from Mathilda Taylor, some of the brave teachers were Julien Fromatin, James Porter, Mary Woodhouse, Jane Deveaux, and James Sims. Mr. Porter was a freedman who was educated in Charleston,

South Carolina, under a much more liberal and structured educational system for blacks. In Savannah, he taught a more advanced curriculum that included “grammar, ancient and modern history, orthography, geology, arithmetic, elocution and music.”

Despite the fact that these schools were an “open secret,” students had to contrive new and ever more inventive ways to deceive the authorities. They would wrap their books in newspapers, find circuitous routes to and from school, and put their books in baskets and cover them with the chips that the poor of the area typically used for fuel. The secret schools would often have hiding places in them in case they were raided by the authorities.

Defying conventional wisdom, some slave-owners wanted to teach their black slaves to read and write. Some did so when literacy for their slaves would behoove them financially. If a slave knew basic arithmetic, for example, he could keep a ledger for the day’s work. One southern congressman justified allowing his slave to be educated because “the slave needed skills to know the titles of books, superscription of letters, and other things in performing errands or reading written orders.” Mother Mathilda devoted her life to service. Much is known about her work for the church. Less is known about her small, secret school. We are able to glean, however, her dedication to her students without concern for herself. This is the hallmark of a true heroine.

Classroom Suggestion

The following vignette is from Sister Charlene Walsh’s 1980s play about Mathilda Taylor’s life and sets the scene in Mathildaher slave school. Have students act out this opening vignette. Ask them to compose additional scenes and act them out as well.

Scene I

Kitchen of Mathilda Taylor’s Home

Mathilda is in the kitchen with reading material and numbers written on cardboard boxes and paper bags so that they can be hidden hurriedly if necessary. Two boys (Sam and Tom) enter and greet Miss Taylor

Children: Good morning Miss Taylor.

Miss T: Good morning children, warm yourselves by the stove. Were you careful coming through the yard?

Sam: Yes, Ma’am, we know it would mean big trouble if white folks caught us comin’ to learn any readin’ and numbers.

Miss T: Good! You two look over this list of words while we wait for Susie, Katie, and the other boys.

A moment later, Susie and Katie enter from a back door and begin taking their books out of paper bags.

Susie: Miss Taylor, I couldn’t wait to come for lessons today! I love reading and writing!

Tom: Me too, but numbers are my favorites!

Miss T: Learning is exciting, isn't it!

A Working Partnership



Abraham Beasley, 1868.

From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of Photographs, 1870-1960, 1361PH-24-02-4601.

While Mathilda was working as a seamstress and a teacher, she also worked in a restaurant on Bryan Street. Her name was listed in a restaurant ad published in 1865. The name of the restaurant was The Railroad House, and it was owned by a wealthy free black man named Abraham Beasley. In addition to the restaurant, he owned land, a produce market, a saloon, and a boarding house. He earned some of his money in the slave trade. It was probably while she was working in Beasley's restaurant that Mathilda met him. He was soon to become her husband.

In 1869, an entry in the St. John the Baptist Cathedral ledger tells us that Mathilda Beasley (listed as Bisley) received a conditional baptism into the Catholic Church. She may have been baptized to prepare for her marriage to Abraham Beasley soon afterwards on February 9, 1869.

Following their marriage, Mathilda and Abraham Beasley lived at 48 Harris Street. The address numbers of houses and other buildings on east-west streets in Savannah changed in the late nineteenth century. Before that time, addresses began with small numbers at East Broad Street and became larger as they moved west. Therefore, the Harris Street home of Mathilda and Abraham Beasley was located between Price and Habersham Streets in the area of Troup Square.



Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, before the spires, #491, 1883.

From the Georgia Historical Society William E. Wilson Photographs, 1883-1892, MS 1375-229.

Although Mathilda and Abraham did not have children of their own, Abraham had a son from

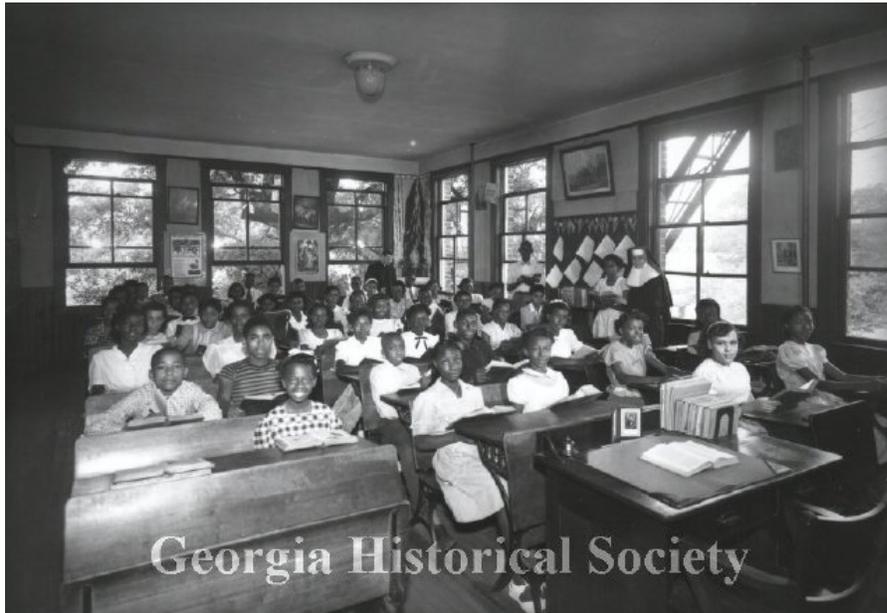
his first marriage who was also named Abraham. They remained married until his death on September 3, 1877. He is buried in Savannah's Catholic Cemetery on Wheaton Street.

Abraham left all of his money, property, and businesses to Mathilda. Mathilda in turn donated all of her wealth to the Roman Catholic Church. While we do not have documents to prove this, most historians believe that Mathilda was attempting to atone for her late husband's financial gain from the slave trade.

Classroom Suggestions

- Discuss why some free persons of color owned slaves and why they would participate in the slave trade.
- Look at a map of the historic district in Savannah and locate Oglethorpe Ward where many free Negroes lived and owned property.
- Locate Troup Square on a map of Savannah.
- Visit Troup Square and get a feel for the neighborhood in which Abraham and Mathilda lived in the 1870s. Ask students how this and other neighborhoods might have changed from one time period to another.

Matilda Beasley and the Catholic Church



St. Benedict's School, 1948. From the Georgia Historical Society Foltz Photography Studio Collection (Savannah, Ga.), photographs, 1899-1960, 1360-03-10-06.

It is unclear how Mathilda first became acquainted with Catholicism. She was born in New Orleans to a French Creole mother. Due to the French Catholic influence in that area, it could be that the family

who originally owned her mother was Catholic. It is also possible that Mathilda spent time in a Catholic orphanage after her mother died. It has been suggested that because of her experiences as a poor, lonely, and persecuted young girl, she had great compassion for those who endured similar circumstances. Perhaps her empathy for others drove her to do the amazing things she did in her life.

Whatever provided the impetus for Mathilda's faith, she embraced Catholicism wholeheartedly upon her husband's death. She gave her entire inheritance to the Roman Catholic Church, and

she requested that part of the funds be used for a home for African-American orphans. She also decided to make her faith her life's work by becoming a nun. In 1885, Mathilda entered a Franciscan novitiate in York, England. When she returned to Savannah, she established an orphanage for African-American children in the vicinity of 31st and 32nd Streets and Habersham Street. The orphanage was named the St. Francis Home for Colored Orphans and the first orphans arrived in the spring of 1887.

There are few clues to determine what encouraged Mathilda Beasley to pursue this path, particularly her choice to attend a convent in York, England. A few facts, however, suggest a possible answer. Mathilda's husband, Abraham, owned property on Skidaway Island. Correspondence with Father Oswald Moosmuller of Sacred Heart Church indicated that Mathilda Beasley lived there at some point. In November of 1884, a group of Franciscan nuns arrived in Savannah to work with the African Americans on Skidaway Island. These nuns were from an order called the "Poor Clares," and one of the nuns had been a member of that order in York. It has never been proven that a connection existed between Mother Mathilda and this group of nuns, but the similarities in time and location are compelling evidence of some contact.

In 1889, Mathilda formed the first community of African-American nuns in Georgia. The group was associated with the Third Order of St. Francis. At that time Mathilda began to be called Mother Mathilda, a title generally given to the senior nun in an order. Her group operated the orphanage for several years. Mother Mathilda had many obstacles to face at the orphanage. Not only was she constantly short of money and staff, but in 1895, several attempts were made to burn the orphanage. Some teenage girls living at the home reportedly started the fires.

In the late 1890s the orphanage moved to East Broad Street. The orphanage shared this site with St. Benedict's Parish Church. Both the church and the orphanage exclusively served the African-American population in Savannah. At this time Mother Mathilda was growing older and decided that she needed more help to operate the orphanage. In 1898, three Franciscan sisters came to help, and Mother Mathilda's original group of African-American nuns disbanded. One sister died and another left Savannah to join an all-black community in the North.

Shortly after the arrival of the Franciscan nuns, Mother Mathilda moved out of the orphanage. Sacred Heart Church gave Mother Mathilda a cottage at 1511 Price Street. She continued to work at the orphanage, however, and took in sewing. She gave the money she earned from her sewing to those in need.

Mother Mathilda died on December 20, 1903. She was engaged in devotions in her private chapel at the time of her death. Located next to her were her burial clothes, her will, and instructions for her funeral. Protestants and Catholics, blacks and whites attended her funeral mass. The Savannah Morning News reported that there were no available seats in the entire church for the service. In accordance with her instructions, no words of eulogy were spoken at the service, but she was memorialized in the press. The newspaper called her "the idol of the poor, especially among the Negroes." She was buried at Savannah's Catholic Cemetery on Wheaton Street.

Mother Mathilda's legacy of faith and charity continues to this day. Sacred Heart Church established the Mother Mathilda Beasley Society in her honor. This organization promotes charitable programs and raises awareness of African-American contributions to the Roman Catholic Church. The city of Savannah dedicated a park in memory of Mother Mathilda in 1982. The park includes basketball courts, a baseball field, and playgrounds. A historical marker on the site recounts her many accomplishments. Mother Mathilda Beasley's legacy provides a model of faith, courage, determination, and perseverance.

Classroom Suggestions

- Locate York on a map of England. Do an internet or a library search for information about the city of York. Ask students to find out whether or not there is still a Roman Catholic religious order there.
- Locate Habersham Street and 31st and 32nd Streets on a map of Savannah.
- Take a field trip to 1511 Price Street. Ask students to discuss what turns a once-habitable property into a dilapidated property. Ask a representative from Historic Savannah Foundation (232-7787) to meet the class at the property to discuss historic preservation and neighborhood revitalization.
- Take a field trip to Savannah's Catholic Cemetery to find the graves of both Abraham and Mathilda Beasley.
- Take a field trip to Mother Mathilda's historical marker.
- Ask students to compose their own text for a historical marker dedicated to Mother Mathilda. What facts about her life might they include that are not on the existing marker?
- Ask students to write marker text for some other historically important figure from Savannah's rich African-American history.

Additional Resources

Online Resources

[Mother Mathilda Beasley Park](#)

[Georgia Women of Achievement – Mathilda Taylor Beasley](#)

Georgia Performance Standards Correlations

Grade Three

Historical Understandings

SS3H2 The student will discuss the lives of Americans who expanded people's rights and freedoms in a democracy.

- a. Explain social barriers, restrictions, and obstacles that these historical figures had to overcome and describe how they overcame them.

Government/Civic Understandings

SS3CG2 The student will discuss the character of different historical figures in SS3H2a

- a. Describe how the different historical figures in SS3H2a display positive character traits of cooperation, diligence, courage, and leadership.
- b. Explain how the historical figures in SS3H2a used positive character traits to support their beliefs in liberty, justice, tolerance, and freedom of conscience and expression.
- c. Explain how the historical figures in SS3H2a chose when to respect and accept authority.

Grade Four

Historical Understandings

SS4H7 The student will examine the main ideas of the abolitionist and suffrage movements.

Grade Five

Historical Understandings

SS5H1 The student will explain the causes, major events, and consequences of the Civil War.

- a. Discuss how the issues of states' rights and slavery increased tensions between the North and South.
- b. Describe the effects of war on the North and South.

SS5H2 The student will analyze the effects of Reconstruction on American life.

- a. Explain how slavery was replaced by sharecropping and how African-Americans were prevented from exercising their newly won rights; include a discussion of Jim Crow laws and customs.

Grade Eight

Historical Understandings

SS8H6 The student will analyze the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Georgia.

- a. Explain the importance of key issues and events that led to the Civil War; include slavery, states' rights, nullification, Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1850 and the Georgia Platform, Kansas-Nebraska Act, Dred Scott case, election of 1860, the debate over secession in Georgia, and the role of Alexander Stephens.

- b. Analyze the impact of Reconstruction on Georgia and other southern states, emphasizing Freedmen’s Bureau; sharecropping and tenant farming; Reconstruction plans; 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the constitution; Henry McNeal Turner and black legislators; and the Ku Klux Klan.

SS8H7 The student will evaluate key political, social, and economic changes that occurred in Georgia between 1877 and 1918.

- a. Analyze how rights were denied to African-Americans through Jim Crow laws, Plessy v. Ferguson, disenfranchisement, and racial violence.

Grade 9-12 United States History

Historical Understandings

SSUSH7 Students will explain the process of economic growth, its regional and national impact in the first half of the 19th century, and the different responses to it.

- a. Describe reform movements, specifically temperance, abolitionism, and public school.

SSUSH8 The student will explain the relationship between growing north-south divisions and westward expansion.

- a. Explain how slavery became a significant issue in American politics; include the slave rebellion of Nat Turner and the rise of abolitionism.

SSUSH10 The student will identify legal, political, and social dimensions of Reconstruction.

- a. Explain efforts to redistribute land in the South among the former slaves and provide advanced education (Morehouse College) and describe the role of the Freedman’s Bureau.