

# The tireless Dora Finley leaves a lasting legacy

By **Scotty E. Kirkland**  
Special to the Press-Register

Mobile has lost one of its strongest advocates of historic preservation. Dora Franklin Finley died earlier this month after a long illness.

## Your Word

For more than a decade, Dora worked tirelessly to present a more diverse history of the city that she loved so much, a history that recognizes the many contributions of African-Americans to Mobile's prosperity. She was a cherished friend and a devoted mother, a lector at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, and an advocate who leaves behind a legacy and a body of work that will not soon be forgotten.

Dora's devotion to history began with the remarkable story of her own family. Her extended family includes physicians, lawyers, activists and educators. Her grandfather, James A. Franklin, was the first black physician to graduate from the University of Michigan's medical school. He moved to Mobile in 1919 and served the community for more than 50 years.

Dora's parents were active in Mobile's civil rights movement. The late James Finley, a Mobile pharmacist, was the vice president of the Neighborhood Organized Workers. As a young woman, Dora marched alongside her parents and thousands of other Mobilians, black and white, standing up to intolerance and advocating for equality.

She and her mother, Jocelyn Franklin Finley, a longtime educator and the first to teach black history in Mobile public schools, were both arrested along with hundreds of other activists during NOW's demonstrations in 1969. Dora was proud of her family's long history of activism, as she should have been.

Several years ago, shortly after I had begun my research on Mobile's civil rights movement, Dora invited me into her home to talk about her family. We talked for more than four hours that night.

From the steps of her well-appointed, Chicago-brick home, Dora could point out the exact spot where she had been arrested near the Civic Center. She told me about her experience in a Mobile jail cell.

When she was released from jail, she recalled, her father was there waiting for her. "Wipe your eyes," he told her when she began to cry. "Don't ever let them know that they can break your spirit."

It was advice that she took to heart. In a way, Dora Finley never stopped

marching, never stopped advocating for equality. She believed that Mobile's rich past had neglected the courageous contributions of countless men and women like her grandfather and parents.

She was the driving force and the tireless energy behind the creation of Mobile's African-American Heritage Trail. Her activist spirit was genetic, but it was also contagious.

Through countless presentations, phone calls and just the right amount of arm-twisting, she built around her a coterie of supporters and launched the Trail, which today has placed more than 40 historic markers throughout Mobile County.

Several times during her well-rehearsed Tour narratives, she would gently remind the participants of the simple, but profound, theme behind the Trail: "You can't know where you're going until you know where you've been."

Dora's last project was no less ambitious. Last October, she announced the beginning of the Cook's House Restoration Project, a joint effort by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society and the Mobile African-American Heritage Trail to restore the detached kitchen and servants' quarters located on the Oakleigh Historic Complex.

Once completed next year, the Cook's House will serve as the first house museum in Mobile dedicated to the African-American experience and will provide a more inclusive — and historically accurate — presentation of the families who lived and worked at Oakleigh.

The Cook's House Restoration Project is another fruit of Dora's labor. One of her last requests was that after her death, in lieu of flowers, her friends would donate to the Cook's House project. For those who had the privilege to know her, this came as no surprise.

May all of us carry on with the work that Dora began many years ago, in honor of her memory as a mentor, a preservationist and a friend.

For more information on the Mobile African-American Heritage Trail, visit [www.maaht.org](http://www.maaht.org). To donate to the Cook's House Restoration Project, contact the Historic Mobile Preservation Society at 251.432.6161 or visit [www.historicmobile.org](http://www.historicmobile.org)

*Scotty E. Kirkland is curator of history at the History Museum of Mobile and a member of the Friends of the African-American Heritage Trail. He may be reached at [sekirkland@yahoo.com](mailto:sekirkland@yahoo.com). Send submissions to "Your Word," P.O. Box 2488, Mobile, Ala. 36652; email to [letters@press-register.com](mailto:letters@press-register.com).*



# OPINION

## PRESS-REGISTER

Ricky R. Mathews, President and Publisher  
Michael Marshall, Editor  
Dewey W. English Jr., Managing Editor  
Frances Coleman, Editorial Page Editor

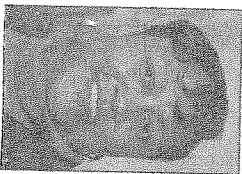
# Farewell to a keeper of local African-American history

## EDITORIAL

Dora Finley devoted her life to applauding, continuing the efforts of civil rights pioneers

if she didn't.

**D**ORA FINLEY's legacy will be her role in preserving Mobile's African-American history. Ms. Finley, the founder of the African-American Heritage Trail and an active volunteer in many other preservation projects, died June 8 at age 59. Her funeral is today.



**Finley**

A woman who lived the civil rights movement, Ms. Finley was a go-to source for people with questions about local African-American history. She'd been there herself, or knew all about it, or knew who had the answer

Ms. Finley participated in civil rights marches to the Mobile Civic Center. When she was 16, she and her mother were arrested and jailed as result of one of the marches, eventually being placed in an 8-by-8 room with 11 other women, no toilet and no windows.

In 2008, she and her mother recorded the story as part of an oral history project paid for by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Ms. Finley was in charge of logistics at Kimberly-Clark when she retired, giving her more time for her volunteer work. In 2006, City Councilman William Carroll asked her to help establish the heritage trail, which today marks some 35 sites for their roles in African-American history.

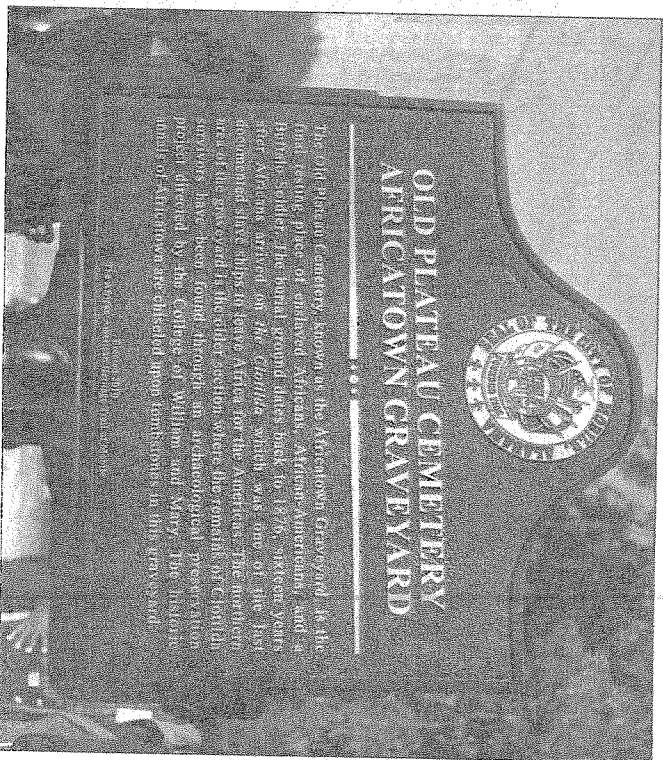
"Without Dora, the African-American Heritage Trail would have never been," said Councilman Carroll.

Most recently she was working to help restore the Cook's House, housing the detached kitchen and servant's quarters, on the grounds of Oakeigh mansion.

To remember Ms. Finley, the family has asked that donations be made to the Friends of the African-American Heritage Trail or to the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, earmarked for the Cook's House restoration project. Somewhere in Mobile, Dora Finley deserves a historic marker of her own.

**"Without Dora, the African-American Heritage Trail would have never been."**

— *Mobile City Councilman William Carroll*



This historical marker pays tribute to those who were laid to rest in Old Plateau Cemetery/Africatown Graveyard. It's one of about three dozen markers on Mobile County's African-American Heritage Trail, a labor of love by the late Dora Franklin Finley. (Press-Register, Kate Mercier)

# LETTERS

## HOW TO WRITE

ORLANDO SANTANA SUMMERS