

'God's Amen'

Marker for famed Vinings folk artist unveiled

By Isabelle Manders imanders@mdjonline.com

The Georgia Historical Society, in partnership with Vinings Village Homeowners Association and the Judith Alexander Foundation, has unveiled a historical marker honoring the life of self-taught African-American artist Nellie Mae Rowe, whose work has been displayed in collections around the world.

The marker, titled "Nellie Mae Rowe and her Playhouse," is located outside of the Hotel Indigo at 2857 Paces Ferry Road.

In 1930, Rowe moved from Fayette County to Vinings where she and her husband, Henry Rowe, eventually built a home on Paces Ferry Road. When her husband died, Rowe devoted herself to making the art she had always been drawn to, said Woodie Wisebram, a Vinings Village Homeowners Association board member.

The home became known as her "Playhouse," where Rowe could freely express herself through artmaking, which she associated with childlike play.



From left, Breana James, historical marker coordinator for the Georgia Historical Society, unveils the "Nellie Mae Rowe and her Playhouse" marker at the dedication in Vinings, as Rowe's great-grandnieces Cheryl Mashack, with granddaughter Ella, and Cathi Perry celebrate the occasion. (Photo: Ross Henderson)



Nellie Mae Rowe stands outside of her "Playhouse" in 1971. (Photo: Melinda Blauvelt)

From A1

The dedicated marker was erected near where Rowe's Playhouse once stood. Her home of 45 years, was demolished a few years after Rowe's death in 1982 and turned into a commercial lot.

'GOD'S AMEN'

"Many people from Vinings still remember the house because she made it so memorable," Wisebram said.

Rowe adorned the Playhouse with colorful drawings, installations, chewing gum sculptures, handmade dolls and more that allowed her to explore politics, race, her faith and experience as a woman, said Wisebram. At the dedication, a crepe myrtle tree was decorated with brightly colored beads, flowers and plastic containers in the style of Rowe's Playhouse.

Cathi Bates Perry, Rowe's great-grandniece and president of the Judith Alexander Foundation, fondly remembers going to visit her great aunt every Sunday after church and being greeted by ice cream and a pound cake Rowe called "sweet bread."

"Nothing (at her Playhouse) was ever untouchable. If you wanted to play with something or see something, she'd always take it down and allow you the opportunity to do so," Perry said. "It was magical, always a fun place to go... She brought that positive energy to everything and everybody."

Perry said her favorite part of Rowe's art was how free and welcome it made her feel.

"We can no longer audibly hear her voice, but she does still speak," Perry said. "Her space was a place to create refuge and strength, a place to dream and believe that you could accomplish all things with God's amen."

According to Elyse Butler, manager of programs and special projects at the Georgia Historical Society, the marker is one of over 2,100 across the state. The Vinings Village HOA and the Judith Alexander Foundation submitted a comprehensive application for the GHS's annual review and was approved in 2023, Butler said. "This application round was actually quite interesting because we received two applications for Nellie Mae Rowe, which is very rare," Butler said. "(The other) was specifically about her biographical information and was installed in Fayette County, which is where she was born."

Butler believes that the dedication of not one, but two markers to Rowe creates a broader story detailing her life as well as the impact of her art and how it helped shape American folk art.

Approximately 100 people attended the dedication, 10 to 15 being living relatives of Rowe, according to Wisebram. This was one of the more well-attended marker dedications, thanks to the sponsoring organizations' community engagement, Butler said.

Among those in attendance were Perry's mother and Rowe's oldest known living relative, Roberta Bates, and WWE Hall of Fame inductee and inspiration to Rowe, Thunderbolt Patterson.

Rowe's Playhouse was never short of visitors. In fact, from May 1973 to March 1975 alone, Rowe welcomed more than 800 visitors to tour her home. Despite this, she still experienced harassment and vandalization because of racial prejudice and a lack of understanding of her art.

PUSH FOR RECOGNITION

"She did have things to stand in her way but she kept moving," Perry said. "Of course, she had the push behind her from Judith Alexander."

In the late 1970s, gallery owner Judith Alexander discovered Rowe's art and the two became good friends. Alexander recognized the potential in her art and started displaying and selling Rowe's art in her gallery, making her known not just in Atlanta but around the world, Wisebram said.

"It was quite a story for a woman who was born in Fayetteville, Georgia in 1900, the daughter of sharecroppers, who eventually found her way through, largely, Judith Alexander, to becoming one of the most well known folk artists in existence," Wisebram said.

Rowe continued to make art and live in her Playhouse until her death in 1982. Since her death, Rowe's art has been exhibited worldwide, including in collections at Atlanta's High Museum of Art, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and

Sweden's Moderna Museet. A documentary based on her life, "This World Is Not My Own," premiered at the SXSW Film Festival in Austin, Texas last year and was recently screened at The Tara theater in Atlanta.

Judith Alexander Augustine, cousin of Judith Alexander and director of the foundation, was one of several people to speak about Rowe at the dedication, following an invocation by Minister Ray Tiyamiyu. Other speakers included Xenia Zed, JAF board member, Perry and Patterson. Before the official unveiling and reading of the marker, done by Breana James of the GHS, Cheryl Mashack, great-grandniece of Rowe and JAF board member, recited a spoken word about Rowe.

After the event, the Hotel Indigo hosted an indoor reception featuring music by Marie Emerson of Zion Baptist Church, refreshments and a cupcake cake designed to look like Rowe's Playhouse.

In a continued effort to honor Rowe, Wisebram said they have been working with Kennesaw State University professor James Newberry and his art history class to create four permanent storyboards with more details about Rowe and her history. These weatherproof storyboards will be installed, along with a few benches, near the site next spring.

"As a resident living here it's always interesting to me to know what happened before us and to make sure that it's not forgotten," Wisebram said. "It's a way to stop and take a breath and think about those before us and those that contributed to where we are today."



Nellie Mae Rowe Signature with Snake, 1978 (Judith Alexander Augustine, The Judith Alexander Foundation)



Nellie Mae Rowe's "Playhouse" in 1971. (Photo: Lucinda Bunnan, High Museum of Art)



Untitled (Nellie's Playhouse) circa 1980. (Barbara Archer Gallery)



From left: Nellie Mae Rowe's oldest living relative, Roberta Bates, with Judith Alexander Augustine, executive director of the Judith Alexander Foundation, and Thunderbolt Patterson, WWE Hall of Fame wrestler and inspiration to Rowe, at the historical marker dedication.

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