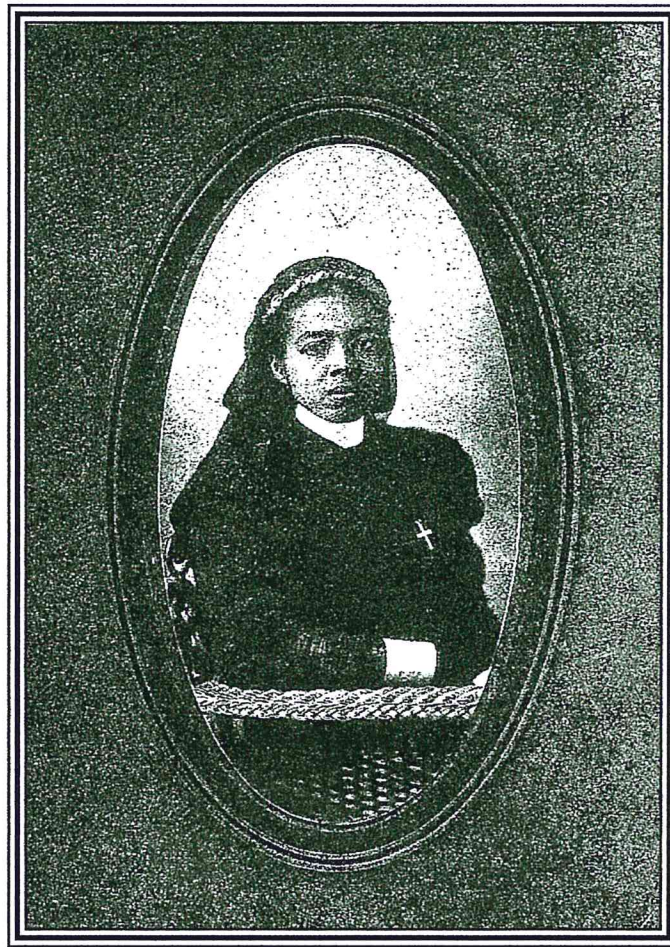


# A Saint in Georgia:

a brief narrative of the life and work of the

## Deaconess

Anna Ellison Butler Alexander.



Anna Alexander as a young woman, newly consecrated as  
Deaconess.

The following article first appeared in the journal *Diakoneo* in May, 2001. It relates, in a summary and narrative form, the broad outline of the life and times of Anna Ellison Butler Alexander. Anna Alexander, we now know, was the first African-American woman consecrated as a Deaconess (later, posthumously, understood as an ordained Deacon) in the Episcopal Church of the United States. It is based on an "historical dialogue" commissioned by the Rector of Christ Church, Frederica, the Reverend Canon Douglas Renegar, and written by Jan McM. Saltzgaber and founded upon his research into the life of a Anna Alexander.



### **“A DEVOUT, GODLY AND RESPECTED COLORED WOMAN . . .”**

On a hot and muggy day in May of 1907, Georgia’s Bishop C. K. Nelson so described Anna Alexander. It was the second annual meeting of the Council of Colored Churchmen held in a modest building housing Good Shepherd Mission, Thomasville, Georgia. High on the Bishop’s agenda was the consecration of Anna to the Order of Deaconesses. Possibly the first African-American Deaconess in the United States, she was certainly the first “set aside” in the South. In a calling of sixty years or more, her indomitable spirit and fierce devotion to God still illuminates our understanding of ministry. The present Bishop, Henry Louttit, naming her one of the “Saints of Georgia,” designated September 24th as a day to meditate on the life and times of Deaconess Alexander.

But why her? Why did Bishop Nelson take so controversial a step, one violating the mores of white congregants and even disturbing many black clergymen? And what inspired Bishop Louttit to choose this long forgotten figure, departed nearly a half century, as a paradigm for contemporary *panton diakonos*, service to all? As we shall see, she was a humble but determined woman of remarkable religious conviction. Her example animates the spiritual life of the contemporary Church in Georgia and beyond. Her history offers a model of faith translated into active love. She gave herself in service to God by serving her community and Church, a Church whose ministry she accepted as vital to a sinful and regressive society. She lived

and worked within a culture of bigotry. Her own people were often maligned and ill-treated. And people of any race, if ensnared in the trammels of poverty, were despised and exploited by entrenched political and economic interests.

Even her Church manifested precious little concern for its African-American members and willingly mirrored the culture in which it nested. It was, after all, a human institution and feared to encourage black or needy members lest it alienate hidebound white supporters. Still, if Anna Alexander lived in a society that was often hateful, she eschewed hate. Though shrewdly aware of realities, for her the burden of race in a racist society was secondary to the values of work and learning. Anger she rejected as a wasteful emotion. Love energized. Convinced that application would be rewarded by accomplishment, she set an example for her pupils by both demanding and giving respect. Fundamentally a Christian educator, she taught Christian values and hope in a world where faith was all too easily eroded and dreams destroyed. Perhaps her strength was sourced in family and upbringing.



A view over the marshes from Anna's birth place on St. Simons Island.

Anna Ellison Butler Alexander was born on Georgia's Saint Simons Island, the youngest of eleven children. Having ten older siblings was likely to toughen anyone! Her parents, James and Daphne Alexander had been slaves on the plantations of Pierce Butler [1810 - 1867]. In 1841 James and Daphne married.

The year of Anna's birth is a mystery she herself perpetuated. Deaconess Madeline Dunlap of Chicago worked in Georgia during the Depression years and

knew Anna. Writing to inquire about her age, Anna begged her not to ask. She could not lie, Anna explained, but if she told the truth “they’ll make me stop [work].” Her death certificate had her born in 1881; Diocesan records claim 1878. Both are clearly wrong. Other calculations suggest she was born soon after the end of the Civil War. At her death in 1947, she was probably in her late seventies or early eighties.

James Alexander - nicknamed “Aleck” by his owner, Pierce Butler - was a man of strength, spirit and intelligence. Trained as a house servant, he became Butler’s personal aide and was responsible for virtually all arrangements when Butler traveled or resided on his Georgia plantations. As Anna proudly wrote, “. . . he was not disputed in hotels in Savannah and Charleston . . . he saw to everything.” Yet, Anna’s father was no mere *factotum*. As a youth he defied Georgia’s draconian law against educating slaves and taught himself to read and write fluently, a thirst for education he transmitted to his wife and children. His talents were many -- he was a skilled builder, much in demand by both races -- and he gave of them generously.

Anna stated that her mother’s kin came from “Madigasker Island” and were sold in North Carolina but later carried to Georgia to help settle St. Simons Island. Daphne was the child of “Minda,” a slave woman raped by Butler’s overseer, Roswell King Jr.,. Such vile acts were rare on Butler’s properties but all too common elsewhere, Anna’s mother became a trusted housekeeper and imparted to Anna the dignity and the calm assurance that characterized her life. Daphne’s example proved useful when, as a girl too young to qualify as a teacher, she appeared before authorities “. . . sedate like mother . . .” and was appointed a public school teacher in Pennick, Georgia, one of several enclaves formed by self-sufficient, land-owning Freedmen after the Civil War.

Coastal and island plantations abandoned during the war recovered slowly and the Alexander family settled in Pennick where James became a leading figure. It was a tract of "Piney Woods" south of the Altamaha River previously occupied by a "poorer class of white people." The whites fled to take advantage of the Southern Homestead Act and claim free land in Florida. What they abandoned was a lowland of numerous "branches" or creeks, swampy and pocked by countless ponds (little changed today). Its soil was exhausted by years of primitive subsistence farming. Poor land but all former slaves could afford. Pooling resources, they shared it out among themselves. Poor land but *their* land!

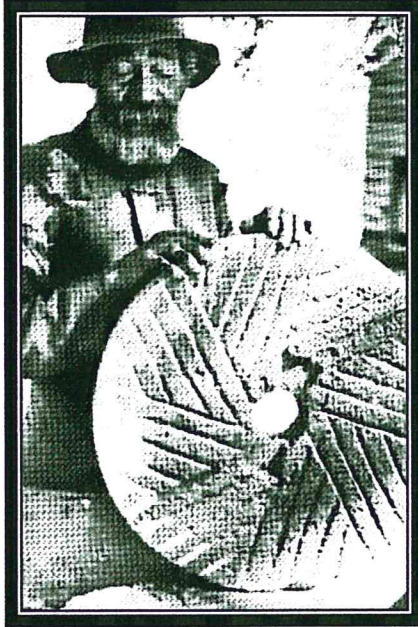
Most Freedmen were woefully ignorant of construction and rarely possessed more than a single, all-purpose tool, an axe. Anna's father, a skillful carpenter-builder, shared his talents with those less knowledgeable. He encouraged the building of a school and his homestead was an experimental farm to teach others. With a substantial house, the farm combined orchards, crops and animal husbandry. "[It was] from this center the unfortunate people . . . see and learn to do likewise," Anna reported with some pride. James Alexander's sense of communal responsibility was not lost on his children, especially Anna and her sisters.

Anna, a confirmed Episcopalian, was dissatisfied with *public* education. "I pitied the poor little ones," she recalled, "but cannot teach the church in school." She left Pennick's public school to join her two sisters, Mary and Dora, in the school founded by Mary and affiliated with St. Cyprians Church in Darien at the mouth of the Altamaha River. There she offered her charges a Christian education and honed her already formidable skills as a teacher. At this time -- given the state of Georgia's roads -- Darien was Pennick's closest town, readily accessible by boat. Such accessibility proved important.

By one of those providential “coincidences,” she attended a service at St. Athanasius Church in Brunswick and fell into conversation with a lay reader, Charles A. Shaw. Their talk gave rise to a dream. She would establish a mission in Pennick. A dream, indeed! Anna had no more than Shaw’s promise to “hold service.” St. Athanasius’ priest, the Reverend J. J. Perry, agreed to baptize “any that I can present for baptism.” One suspects he did not take her too seriously and hardly expected to make the difficult journey to Pennick with any frequency!

Too inexperienced to know what cannot be done and convinced that God would provide, she began to organize her mission. It first met in the open on a fall morning in 1894 on a slight rise near “Sapp’s Still” close to a small Baptist Church. A week or two later, Reverend Perry found himself making the weary journey to Pennick to baptize the first six children of the new congregation! He was joined by two mission-minded “white ladies” with cornets to make a joyful sound and accompany the hymns. Music drew the Baptist congregation to the “hill” and their preacher proclaimed that Reverend Perry “brought light to the woods.” Other Baptist preachers were not so sure. After a hasty consultation, they warned their members that they would be “turned out” if they attended any more of Anna’s meetings. A young woman told the Baptist preachers to go ahead and turn her out! Her five children were baptized as Episcopalians a few weeks later.

Anna hoped to “borrow” the Baptist’s Church after they completed their Sunday worship. While the rank-and-file were happy to lend the facility, the leadership saw her as a threat and refused. This led to a long struggle to find a permanent site for the mission. At first, a white landowner gave Anna use of a tumbled-down house until he could rent or sell it. It was in terrible condition. Anna wrote that “you can throw a small cat or dog through the top of the house!” But she and her brother Charles cleaned and repaired it as best they could. It offered a rough but functional



Charles Alexander at his mill in Pennick.

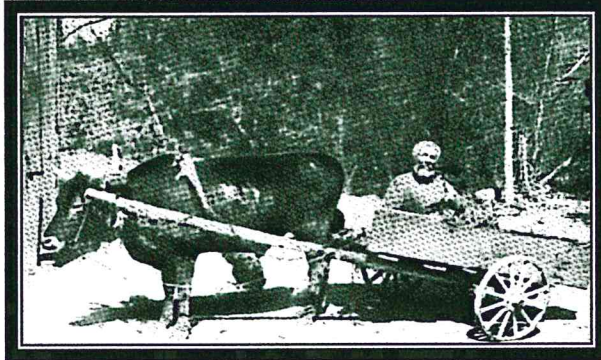
place of worship. If it rained they protected the priest's vestments with umbrellas. Even this make-shift mission did not last. Local Baptist leaders hatched a plot to deprive them of the house and they began all over in an ancient "store" where they transformed the rickety old "whiskey bar" into an altar. The problem was that land bordering a road was considered too valuable for a church: "let them go in the swamp and build a log house for a church."

Throughout this whole desperate period Anna continued to teach in Darien. Each Sunday she made a round trip of forty miles or more by boat and afoot.

In 1897, however, Anna was accepted at St. Paul's School [now College] in Virginia. Without her guidance and leadership, the mission faltered. She returned three years later and Archdeacon Harry Castle and Reverend Perry (acting for the Bishop) set her a daunting task: revive the fledgling mission which she renamed "The Church of the Good Shepherd" and, equally important, establish a church-based school in Pennick. Such a school was vital to her community. Under "Jim Crow," educating rural black children mattered little. What the state denied, the Church must provide. Bishop Nelson saw Anna as a means to realize what *he* could not achieve. Frustrated by the tide of segregation at the turn of the century, he reluctantly bowed to societal pressure.

Nelson, who was to be Bishop of the new Diocese of Atlanta in 1907, was forced to deny African-Americans a voice in Diocesan governance. However muted, they had exercised such a voice since 1872. But in 1906, as the Diocese of Georgia was

preparing to yield its northern and central parishes to the new Diocese of Atlanta, and for over three decades, black churchmen were segregated and wielded meager influence through the “Council of Colored Churchmen,” excluded from Diocese of



Brother Charles' oxcart was a sometime school bus.

Georgia Conferences and merely “represented” on Committees. Bishop Reese replaced Nelson as Bishop of Georgia in 1908 and led the Diocese until 1936, further eroding support for black ministries. Despite pious verbal support, Reese hoped to avoid using Diocesan funds for black education. He succeeded famously. Virtually no building or maintenance costs and only

3% of salaries in black Episcopal schools derived from the Diocese of Georgia. Whatever Anna accomplished, she must garner the resources herself.

For the first year, Anna taught at home and supported herself by taking in sewing. The next year, 1902, marked a decided turn for the better. A landowner on Pennick Road sold his land to Anna. Drawing on the local community’s slim means, small donations by black church groups and appealing to national philanthropic organizations and individuals, Anna raised funds to buy the land and purchase lumber for the school. Local men, led by her brother Charles, subscribed their labor to raise a tin-roofed “pole house” of smoothed logs enclosed in clapboards. The Good Shepherd School opened on the first Monday of September. On Sundays it served as the church. Bishop Nelson, nearing retirement, gave money to add a small room and help with expenses. She not only added a room but bought land for a future church. During his last year, visiting the mission and deeply impressed by Anna’s achievements, Bishop Nelson told Anna he intended to consecrate her as



Deaconess.

The need for the school was great. Between 1902 and 1914 the Deaconess averaged forty day students and over sixty Sunday School enrollments. Still, this was a transitional time for Southern blacks and a northern migration, already underway, was accelerated by the insatiable demands of the "Great War" of 1914 - 1918. Young families fled the segregated South for the broader horizons of Northern industrial cities. By war's end, enrollments had fallen but remained steady in the twenties and thirties. In theory, the school charged tuition. But no student was ever turned away for lack of funds. In 1934 only two of the thirty pupils paid their nickel-a-week fee.

Throughout the years, Deaconess Alexander was active in Diocesan affairs though always centered on her mission church. Unassertive but quietly effective, one of her students recalled:

"This Church was her life, this school. She was very persuasive and went to all the meetings but she lived for this church. . . . She influenced people all over the world . . . but here was her center. Everybody respected Deaconess Alexander . . . whites and blacks took off their hats to her."

In 1919 she decided it was time to build a church apart from the school, a more "becoming" edifice. The Diocese offered no help, so for almost a decade she gleaned pennies and nickels from the congregation. She added to the building fund bit by agonizingly slow bit: "The congregation is very willing and trying to do what they can." Good Shepherd's corner stone was laid in 1929 but the work often stopped for lack of funds. In 1934, the national Church Building Fund, not the Diocese, provided the few hundred dollars needed to finish Good Shepherd, Pennick. It has stood now for nearly seventy years.

Pennick was dirt poor. But Deaconess Alexander never let her flock forget those even less fortunate. She taught her pupils about the world and Christian responsibility to all peoples. Proportionately, Good Shepherd gave more support to needy folk throughout the world than any church in the Diocese. When more than 200,000 people died during an earthquake that devastated Tokyo-Yokohama in 1923, Anna's mission diverted building funds to aid the victims. Sunday school pupils regularly contributed their pennies and nickels to victims of hunger and hardship.



Anna Alexander, as she appeared in the 1920s.

Hardship was never distant or abstract in the rural south. Hunger and illness stalked the lives of black and white alike. The end of the 19th century saw a collapse of farm prices and land values coupled with rising costs. There was a brief respite until the 1920s and then more hard times culminated in the worst depression in the nation's history, scourging plain folk until a second war's voracious appetites restored prosperity. The Depression expanded Deaconess Alexander's ministry exponentially. Her years of service won her the trust of all, those in authority as well as those in need. Already in her fifties, she not only had a school and church to keep alive but a broken community.

With an intimate and compassionate knowledge of a region whose roads she trod for more than three decades, Anna became the agent for government and private aid and Good Shepherd Mission its distribution center. No one questioned her objectivity as she served the needs of both races.

“I am to see everyone gets what they need . . . some folk don’t need help now and I know who they are. The old people and the children, they need the most. . . . when I tell some they can’t get help just now . . . that others come first, they get mad, a little, but I don’t pay no mind and soon they forget to be mad.”

Meticulous records and old accounts attest to the scope and character of her ministry. She forgot no one. Among hundreds receiving help one finds an elderly blind woman and a young girl expecting her first child. She provided for a motherless boy and a “1 legged” women in her seventieth year. A white father, his wife and five children stood in line for flour beside a black father with his wife and four children. A 79 year-old white neighbor delivered “rations” to an 87 year-old black farmer, too weak pick them up himself.

The decade of the thirties was a period of intense strain for Anna. Her’s was a community confronting calamity, perhaps more unified because of common distress and quickened by the example of one who made no distinctions of race or condition. Whatever added burdens imposed by the times, she did not neglect her other ministries. The school continued, often short of textbooks but never lacking the Prayer Book and Bible. Good Shepherd Church flourished under her leadership and the help of priests and committed laymen from St. Athanasius and other African-American parishes. She conscientiously attended Diocesan meetings as a firm but patient advocate of black Episcopalian interests. Each summer, to supplement her meager salary as teacher, she cooked for Camp Reese, the Diocesan summer camp on St. Simons Island. To help, she brought small groups of African-American boys and girls who, though barred as campers, at least informally shared in the joys of the shore and the beauty of the island. Her quiet dignity, devotion and wise counsel so inspired the campers that *they* demanded a cabin named in her honor. [Her work at Camp Reese may have led her to worship at St. Ignatius Church though there is no documentary evidence of this. There is a window in the church dedicated to her memory.]

Twenty years after her death, the Lambeth Conference recognized as ordained to the Diaconate all those many women consecrated as Deaconesses. In 1970, the decision was confirmed by the General Convention and Anna Ellison Butler Alexander was posthumously ordained in the Episcopal Church. Anna's life is an unfinished book. The depth of her contribution to the Episcopal Church of Georgia and perhaps beyond, lies hidden in Church archives and as yet undiscovered manuscripts in private hands. Scattered like chaff over the floor of her old school are the envelopes of letters from friends all over the United States and Europe. Yet even a fragmentary account of her life-long ministry provides an archetype of diaconal service. An irresistible vocation, her devotion to God and His children discredit the prejudices of time and place, defy even her Church's indifference. Resting now in an unmarked grave, she carried out His will humbly without expectation of reward or honors. [In 2004, Deaconess Alexander was disinterred from her grave in the Camp Cemetery and re-interred at Good Shepherd Church.] Unwaveringly loyal but reliant on her own resourcefulness, indefatigable energy and the scanty means of an impoverished community, she praised the Lord in loving action, a builder of tabernacles and character.

*Jan McM. Saltzgeber, Ph.D.*

The following script was prepared at the behest of the Rector of Christ Church, Frederica as one of a series of programs during the Lenten period in the year 2000. It was presented to the congregation of Christ Church on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2000 and, subsequently, on numerous occasions to churches, schools and libraries in Savannah and elsewhere. It is written in the form of an “historical dialogue” in which the narration is juxtaposed to the words of Anna Alexander, drawn from surviving letters, and the stories of several of her now elderly students collected in an oral history project in 1999-2000.

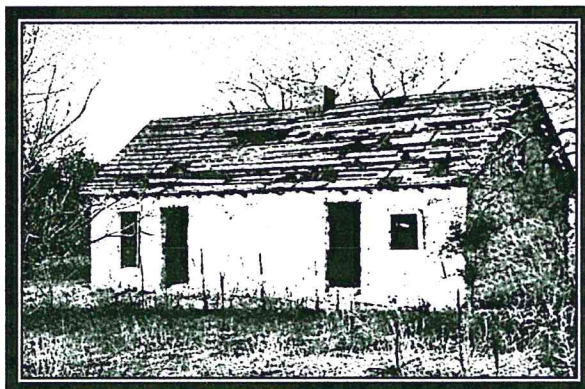


## “An Impression of Deaconess Alexander”

**NARRATOR:** She was probably born on St. Simons Island . . . a child of former slaves.

Her death certificate has her born in 1881 . . . other records claim 1878 . . . on the monument before the school she founded there *is* no birth year . . . 19th-century Georgia midwives seldom recorded births . . .

some people may simply conceal their age.



A “tabby” slave cabin on St. Simons Island designed to accommodate two families.



Anna's father, James/Aleck.

**READER:** “Please don’t tell them how old I am, they could stop me working! You *musn’t* ask when I was born . . . if they find out they’ll make me stop . . . .”

**NARRATOR:** She died in 1947 . . . that we *do* know . . . and was buried in Camp Cemetery . . . her grave marked by a bit of rusty fence.

For many, Deaconess Anna Alexander is an Icon . . . a two-dimensional symbol of religiosity.

But the first African-American Deaconess consecrated in the



Episcopal Diocese of Georgia . . . perhaps in *all* America . . . was no lifeless image . . . but an energetic, vibrant woman who invested her life in others . . . bringing God’s word to an isolated rural community . . . meeting material needs when there was want . . . above all, teaching the young . . . preparing them for productive lives . . . without hate in a world that was often hateful.

Tough and feisty . . . some thought her *too* pushy . . . resenting her womanhood in a church where men expected to lead. Listen to what she wrote:

**READER:** “I thought at least the colored ministers in this Diocese would but encourage me if nothing else. But they tried to block every movement I made. The laymen seems to treat me nicely, but these ministers thought I am bossy . . . they don’t mind telling strangers that . . . .”

**NARRATOR:** Roswell King, Jr. managed Butler’s properties . . . he raped a slave woman named Minda who bore his child in 1824 . . . Anna’s mother, *Daphne*.



Daphne Alexander, Anna's mother.

Anna inherited great strength and spirit. Her father was James Alexander . . . everyone called him “Aleck” . . . one of the Butler household’s most important members:

**READER:** “My daddy was born on St. Simons Island . . . He was a butler, carpenter, coachman, cook and an oarsman . . . at the helm of Mr. Butler’s boat . . . His clothes were bought from stores where Mr. Butler got some of his . . . Everything around his master was in his care . . . what he said was *not* disputed in Hotels in Savannah and Charleston . . . he *saw* to everything . . . .”

“[Father] and mother got married in 1841. They have 11 children, 6 boys & 5 girls, of them I am the youngest . . . her folks came from New Bern, North Carolina. Their ancestor came from the *Madigasker Island*, East of Africa in the early days. Some of mother’s people helped settle St. Simons Island.”

**NARRATOR:** Anna Alexander was born into a tradition of ministry. Aleck Alexander was accounted the best builder in several counties . . . much in demand by both races.

After Emancipation when Butler’s daughter, Frances Kemble Leigh, and her husband needed him . . . Anna’s father came to their aid. . . more significantly . . .

her father gave of *his* time and skill serving friends and neighbors in the difficult post-war era . . . helping to establish Pennick . . . a community of land-owning, self-reliant freedmen.

Pennick was south of the Altamaha . . . in a tract known as “Honeygall” . . . flat land . . . filled with “branches” or creeks and countless ponds and swamps . . . it isn’t much changed today.

“Piney woods,” it belonged to the “poorer class of white people” who skedaddled after the war . . . many fled to Florida to get free land from the Yankee government.

Butler’s “people” . . . formerly slaves . . . chiefly from the Altamaha Rice Plantation . . . pooled their resources to buy the land abandoned by whites . . . sharing it out among themselves . . . poor land, but all they could afford . . . and it *belonged* to them!

They built log cabins with stick-and-clay chimneys and fenced the land to graze cattle and grow crops . . . corn and “field pease” . . . rice and sugar cane . . . and sweet potatoes.

They farmed their *own* land and slept in their *own* homes . . . but the land was tuckered out and grudgingly rewarded their labor . . . so they worked by day on the Butler Plantation . . . starvation wages . . . but much needed cash.

There were few whites and blacks were “hungry poor” . . . but . . . depended on no one but themselves. Hear what Anna Alexander said of Pennick:

**READER:** “My daddy moved here rather than going to a town . . . to avoid the jail with his family of six boys. He bought fifteen acres of land, built a frame house for us and opened a small farm for the boys . . . encouraged the Negroes whom he met there to build a log house for a school, where my brothers went . . . his influence was great in the community!

“In after years, the other Negroes built frame houses too, but very rough structure. They must be have only *one* tool . . . in making a house. . . an ‘ax.’ They measured the board with the helf and nailed it with the head. I oft heard my daddy said, if I can teach the Negroes how to use some tools they would improve their places so much.

“My daddy’s place was the outstanding place in this part of the country, a house with four large rooms , a spacious hall running through it, quite a few orange trees,

plums, peaches, figs and grapes, a yard of flowers of different kinds . . . a horse, mule wagon, buggy and plows, cows and hogs, turkeys and ducks, chickens and Guinea-fowls.

“It was from this center that the unfortunate people from the rice plantation of Mr. Couper see and learn to do likewise. My parents befriend everyone regardless of their condition. *It must be through this source that we inherited our missionary spirit.*”

**NARRATOR:** Anna did *inherit* a missionary zeal! Also a thirst for education and a will to educate others.

When a boy, Anna’s father risked harsh punishment by learning to read and write. Despite Georgia’s *antebellum* slave code and his master’s wishes, he was fully literate and passed his skills on to his wife and older children.

Pennick’s public school ran but two months in a year . . . when it closed, Anna and her sister Dora, attended school in Darien, living with her brother and his wife. Anna was soon licensed to teach in Glynn County’s black public schools.

**READER:** “. . . I applied as a teacher for one of the schools in Glynn County, “Pennick.” If the Superintendent did ask my age, I would have been too young to teach a school, but . . . always I try to be sedate like mother . . . .”

**NARRATOR:** This new teacher was also confirmed by Bishop John W. Beckwith. These events defined her life for more than half a century. Her teaching was always anchored on the holding-ground of religious and moral conviction.

**READER:** “I like to help others who are less fortunate than I. I pitied the poor little ones with whom I come in contact -- but *cannot teach the church* in school, . . . after teaching for a few years, I gave up the work here [in Pennick] and was going to Darien . . . .”

**NARRATOR:** Anna *did* go to Darien . . . she and her sister Dora . . . where she could “teach the church” . . . where she could offer her charges a Christian education.

Built of tabby by former slaves, St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church was completed in 1876. The workers were craftsmen from Darien and Butler’s Island Plantation. Its first African-American priest was the Reverend Ferdinand Mann whose wife, Mary, was the Alexanders’ eldest daughter and, of course, one of Anna’s sisters. black



children, no school *then* existed in Darien, but when the Mann's established the mission school . . . for the first time . . . African-American boys and girls . . . many the children of workers in the rice fields of the Altamaha . . . had a chance to learn. Here, Anna Alexander honed the skills of her vocation . . . but also assumed a greater challenge.

**READER:** "Just as I was leaving [to go to Darien], I went to St. Athanasius, Brunswick, for service. There I met C. A. Shaw, one of the layreaders. In a conversation with him, I thought that I can go back home and start a mission station, he promised to come and have service and the priest, the Reverend J. J. Perry, will come out and baptize for me if they are any that I can present for baptism."

**NARRATOR:** Possibly, Anna was little older than her pupils . . . perhaps sixteen . . . less than twenty? Too young to know what *cannot* be done, she established a church! Her Mission Station . . . eventually Good Shepherd Church . . . first gathered on a September morning in 1894 close to a little Baptist Church on Honeygall Road. They met in the open on a hill near Sapp's Still. Charles Shaw led the service.

Later that month . . . the Reverend Perry came out to baptize three boys and three girls. Two white ladies brought cornets to accompany hymns . . . and the first hymn sung was *Nearer My God to Thee*.

**READER:** ". . . when the members of the [Baptist Church] heard the music, they all run out of their building and come to us. The old man who was having the service said that Mr. Perry 'brought light to the woods.' An old woman who was sold from S[outh] C[arolina] said 'that *is* the church. Our Baptist [Church] is [just a] meeting-house.'

"There and then the Baptist Preachers . . . five of them . . . have a meeting and forbade any of their members to go back there any more with threats to turn them out of the Baptist Church. One young woman told them to turn her out . . . they wouldn't have any more trouble with her! Her five little children were baptized later."

**NARRATOR:** Anna hoped the Baptists would lend *her* their church when they did not need it.

**READER:** ". . . all of them was glad to let me have it . . . since I was such a help to everyone in this section . . . but one Brother Deacon got up and said we don't want them in here! The old man who said about the light that come in the woods told him if the priest come here . . . why, *he* will teach you what *you* don't know about God!

[The Deacon] said he knows as much as any man in the county. . . . I saw that it was useless to ask for [the] building . . . .”

**NARRATOR:** Anna’s brother carried a note to Malachi Green, an “old white gentleman,” who lent her a tumble-down house until he could rent or sell it. Windows were broken, some supports rotted and the shingles worn.

**READER:** “. . . you can throw a small dog or a cat through the top of the house!”

**NARRATOR:** Brother and sister cleaned and fixed the house as best they could. If it rained when the priest came, they held umbrellas over him to protect his vestments. The pulpit was two boards with a brace between them. The altar, a shelf nailed to the back wall. An earthenware dish served as a font . . . still in use in 1932.

**READER:** “. . . a strip about 5 x 2 in[ches] and about five feet long was the railing where [we] knelt for the communion. Mrs. Hettie Forester . . . my little nephew, Pierce Butler Alexander, 13 years old, and I.

[and] C. A. Shaw . . . the four of us were the founder. I was the live wire . . . doing every thing.”

**NARRATOR:** Anna was a “live wire” all right . . . still she soon lost her miserable hovel.

**READER:** “After a short while, my friends . . . [the] Baptist people determined to put us out of business. They get a man from somewhere to go to Mr. Green pretending to rent and fix up the place and farm. We were permitted to use an old shop just as decayed as the old house, anything worst if it can be such thing as worst. The old counter that they were selling whiskey on, we converted it into a chancel on which an altar was placed.

“All this time we cannot get a suitable place to buy a piece of land . . . the Negroes won’t sell for love or money, saying ‘let them go in the swamp and build a log house for a church. We don’t want them with us on the road . . . .”

**NARRATOR:** While Anna sought a permanent site for Pennick Mission, she taught in Darien, traveling by rowboat each Sunday. Landing on the south shore of the river, she trudged five miles carrying groceries for the priest or layreader’s lunch. Needed in Darien the following morning, she retraced her path at night.

In the fall of 1897, for the first time in her life Anna Alexander left home, accepted at St. Paul's School in Lawrenceville, Virginia. Such schools reflected the commitment to educating bright young African-American students by private philanthropists or by various religious denominations . . . the Episcopal Church was exceptionally prominent in this work.

Well into the 20th century, Booker T. Washington and like-minded educators conciliated white benefactors, deflected Southern opposition and tried to serve the black community while catering to white prejudices. They stressed the practical rather than the academic. St. Paul's Principal, Archdeacon Dr. James Russell, provided Anna a solid foundation of practical knowledge, reinforced her already powerful religious beliefs and sent her home with a relentless devotion to service.

While away at school, her mission station nearly failed. Yet Anna was recognized as an exceptional leader.

**READER:** "I met a venerable old gentleman in the person of Archdeacon Harry Castle . . . I went to see him, he was very glad to take me in his office . . . and lined out every detail and said what Reverend Perry and he like for me to do.

**NARRATOR:** Archdeacon and priest outlined nothing less than revitalizing the mission station *plus* establishing a church school. Pennick's public school operated sporadically. Under "Jim Crow" . . . educating rural black children mattered little to Glynn County. What the state denied, the church would provide.

**READER:** "I gathered my little [ones] together [and] taught them at home for nothing and sew for folks at night to get a little food to eat. The first Easter met me at home 1901. I hired a double wagon with two mules . . . and took . . . my brother, one man, . . . six girls and one boy and I [to Easter Services in Brunswick]. Just at this time things were looking encouraging."

**NARRATOR:** In 1902, Anna's brother Charles worked for Davis Douberly who planned to build a store or "shop" on some land he owned on Pennick Road. "This good man" . . . as Anna described him . . . changed his mind and offered to sell her the land. Anna's school and church found a home at last.

Good Shepherd's School met first in the "little Baptist Church." The Deacon who earlier barred Anna from his church . . . now eagerly rented it at fifty-cents a month!

St. Athanasius' Boys Choir and others donated money for the school . . . a "pole

house” or frame of smoothed logs wrapped in clapboard and roofed with tin . . . it is almost as sound today as it was in 1902! The first Monday of September . . . Anna moved into the new building . . . a school during the week . . . a church on Sunday. Anna *hoped* to build a separate church . . . a hope long deferred.

**READER:** “The school grew from twenty-seven church children to more. The Bishop offer to join a small room on and gave me help till the children fall off to go to work on their little farm[s] in the spring. This he did.

“When Bishop Nelson came in 1907, and [he] see where the little money that he gave for the room [was spent] . . . [it] was a finished room with dress lumber for ceiling . . . and another piece of land was bought and paid for, and the deed was handed over to him, also the key was given him to open *his* front door.

“Then and there he was moved. Said he . . . after service was out and he had got through eating the lunch that I have . . . that he has a place await me in the Church . . .”

**NARRATOR:** Bishop Nelson described his plan and told her to mull it over. She quickly seized an opportunity to expand the good she could do . . . not just in Pennick, but throughout the Diocese. The Bishop himself instructed her.

It was a pivotal time for Georgia’s African-American Episcopalians. The Diocese marched inexorably down the abyss of racial separation . . . not just segregated parishes . . . but segregation and subordination in the very governance of the Church. Bishop Cleland Kinloch Nelson tried to pursue the Conference of Bishops’ injunction to work within the African-American community . . . a community rapidly abandoning the Southern Episcopal Church. In the mid-1890s . . . nearly 40% of baptized adults in Georgia’s Episcopal Church were black . . . this fell by almost two-thirds after the turn of the century.

Many feared a visible black presence could dilute the Church’s influence among whites. Since 1872, African-American clergy and laity attended Diocesan Conferences. Facing immense pressure, Nelson reluctantly reseggregated the Conference and, in January of 1906, held the first meeting of the separate Council of Colored Church Workers at St. Athanasius’ School.

Barely half the black clergy and a smattering of laity attended the Council. Bishop Nelson instructed Anna to organize a Women’s Auxiliary. With a resentful clergy and disheartened laity, Nelson sought the support of Churchwomen . . . in particular, Anna Alexander’s energy and leadership. When the Council next met,

Nelson performed one of his last major acts as Bishop . . . he consecrated Anna as Deaconess.

This was not altogether popular among the Diocese' handful of African-American clergy. Earlier Anna stated:

**READER:** "I wrote to all the Negro clergy informed them and asked them to let me have a letter about how well they will like to have me be set aside as a Deaconess. Archdeacons Harry Castle and James Russell wrote me very nice and encouraging letters, these the Bishop kept."

**NARRATOR:** Since Anna only mentions two letters, one can speculate that she received precious little encouragement from black clergy. Perhaps a tepid enthusiasm was understandable. The Bishop who diminished their standing . . . elevated *Anna* to a unique role. Further, Anna's charisma and energy may have made her a rival rather than colleague. As Deaconess . . . a title worn with great pride . . . she offered unwavering loyalty to the Diocese's leaders.

**READER:** "The Reverend Mr. [John C.] Dennis [at St. Athanasius] didn't see any use to have a Deaconess . . . this after . . . Bishop [Nelson] leave the Diocese of Georgia [and] Bishop F. F. Reese . . . newly consecrated . . . ."

**NARRATOR:** Under Reese, support for black ministries was further eroded. This Bishop led the Diocese nearly thirty years. He rarely visited the Deaconess' mission. His support was minuscule. The Diocese evaded virtually all costs of black church schools.

Despite such neglect, Good Shepherd Mission flourished as church and school. By its second term, the day school ballooned to forty-four students . . . thirty baptized in the Episcopal Church.

Sunday School enrollments rose from about seventeen children to sixty-two by 1914! Yet, circumstances change. Accelerated by two world wars, many young families moved north seeking jobs and more equitable treatment. After 1914, Sunday School attendance declined by two-thirds. Still, the Deaconess and her assistants taught nearly twenty boys and girls every Sunday in the 1940s.

Day school pupils also declined. The forty-plus of earlier times dropped about one quarter by the 1920s and then remained fairly constant. But in the 1940s, public schools were more accessible and Anna found it difficult to sustain the rigors of teaching. Enrollments fell; the school closed.

Theoretically, the school charged tuition but no child was turned away for lack of means. Tuition was five cents a week . . . two of thirty students could pay. In the first quarter of 1934 she collected twenty-five cents and spent it on cleaning materials. The “balance on hand” to start the next quarter was *zero*. Pennick was poor . . . poorer still during the anguished 1930s. She taught four . . . sometimes five . . . grades. Lack of money never closed the school. Somehow, God provided.

She wrote to people from all over the United States and Europe. They sent her books and clothing and -- sometimes -- a bit of money as well . . . these people from Cazenovia, New York . . . Glendale, California . . . Stamford, Connecticut . . . Gargelles-Gonesse, France . . . East Grinstead, England. Their empty envelopes are scattered like chaff over the floor of the small apartment behind the school.

Donated books still molder in rough bookcases . . . fodder for mice and other varmints who scurry back-and-forth through broken windows. She had other texts as well . . . texts valued more highly than any others . . . the Bible and Book of Common Prayer.

**NARRATOR:** Some of Anna’s pupils, thought her brother’s ox-cart a splendid school bus! Hear what these and other pupils recall.

One of her earliest students said:

**[reading with different tonal quality]** “I remember when the first car come . . . . Used to ride horses. We had good time back then . . . all were friendly . . . white folks didn’t treat us right some times . . . they can’t do that now. In Pennick all us boys went around together and swam and played and got along . . . I guess I’m the last of all the boys . . . .

“She was a good teacher. She was hard on us **[he chuckles]** . . . she used a strap on us . . . took us into the vestry room. . . . treated all the children right. But she made sure you behaved . . . she was sure strict. . . . She didn’t let the boys play with the girls . . . .

“. . . she helped lots of people. Yeah . . . yeah . . . she helped *lots* of people. She was good to *all* people. She got help for some of the white people . . . she got on with everybody. No, no, she was never angry at anyone . . . .

“She wanted you to learn your lessons . . . I didn’t do it **[chuckling]** . . . but I go along alright . . . she tried to help but it was hard to learn the lessons . . . she taught us to treat everybody right . . . *that’s* a lesson we learned . . . .

“Pennick seemed like a good community . . . she taught us to treat old folks with respect . . . to obey them . . . had to take your hat off to old folks . . . she taught manners . . . they don’t do that anymore.”

**[resume normal voice]** One man attended the school from 1931 to 1937 and went on to high school and business college . . . owned his own hardware and feed store out in Sterling:

**[different voice]** “. . . bible was a bigger history book than the Georgia History. Deaconess used church books . . . used the Prayer Book as text. She wanted us to know God.

“If you misbehaved she whipped you, she was tough. No nonsense teacher . . . I never got whipped . . . . She switched you if you didn’t do your work, if you disobeyed or was dirty, she was big on cleanliness. . . . She wanted perfection all the time. Now I understand why, ‘cause you got to compete, you had to compete in this white man’s world all the time. And you had to be good to compete. And quite a few of us had success.

“She taught skills. How to make cloths. I had to learn to sew.

“She was not too resentful of the treatment of blacks, she said color wouldn’t keep us back, *preparation* is more important than color. She had no malice. If she felt mad about race problems she never talked about it, she never taught anger. She never talked about race. If she said anything it was don’t worry about it, you’ve got your place in the world and it could be any place from President on down.

“I remember she cried when President Roosevelt died -- she didn’t cry often -- but she cried when *he* died. He was her friend, she knew him.

“She didn’t bother with angry people, she didn’t work with them, it wasted time.”

“This Church was her life, this school. She was very persuasive and went to all the meetings but she lived for this church . . . . She influenced people all over the world . . . but here was her center.”

**[resume normal voice]** Finally . . . listen to a former Glynn County official who completed the Deaconess’ school in 1936 and went on to Risley High, college and graduate school:

**[different voice]** “She encouraged my Daddy to go to school. . . he went to St.

Paul's Polytechnic in Virginia . . . he went there in 1908 and he finished in 1913 . . . he worked his way through . . . came back here to work . . . then went to South Carolina . . . .

"Everybody respected Deaconess Alexander . . . whites and blacks took off their hats to her. She demanded respect and she gave respect back. She was strict and made sure everyone did right. She was born an Episcopalian . . . all her family, all, her grandfather and father. She didn't know any *other* religion. Education was the key factor for her and the Episcopal Church wanted educated folks. There were lots of Episcopalian schools . . . wide-spread in the South . . . ."

**NARRATOR [resume normal voice]:** School and church . . . these focused her life. She made up her mind in 1919 to raise a church apart from the school building . . . a more "becoming" edifice to serve her people's religious needs. For nine years she collected pennies and nickels from the congregation . . . nine years adding bit-by-bit to the building fund . . . waiting impatiently for pennies and nickels to accumulate.

**READER:** ". . . there are 34 communicants [in this year of 1923] . . . many of our church people have gone to the north.

"For years the children learned the Lord's prayer. The Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, and are instructed in other parts of the Catechism. Many of them are married and the children of today are being instructed in the same very way. They learn to clean the homes and plant flowers, good manners are being taught at all times.

"Enclosed please find the pictures of the work at Pennick . . . at this writing we have raised nearly \$80.00 trusting to raise \$100.00 by the early fall. The congregation is *very* willing and trying to do what they can."

**NARRATOR:** In 1928 construction began. Men contributed labor or, when they needed work to feed their families, the Deaconess paid them from her small hoard of coins and bills. Bishop Reese made an infrequent stop in May of 1929 to lay Good Shepherd's cornerstone. If the money ran out, work stopped . . . but in 1934 the Church Building Commission . . . *not* the Diocese . . . contributed the few hundred dollars needed to complete the Church. It stands . . . as for nearly seventy years . . . next to the schoolhouse . . . serving Good Shepherd's congregation.

While struggling to raise a "becoming Church" neither Anna nor her congregation forgot God's poor and suffering. Tokyo and Yokohama were felled by a powerful



earthquake in 1923 . . . 200,000 perished. In an aside . . . a mere *post script* to a letter . . . she stated:

**READER:** “We raised \$6.00 on the 25th of May for the reconstruction of Japan . . . we use the money pledge for [the] church . . . but we wait a while longer for the Church . . . the Japan folk, they *can’t* wait . . . especially, they babies . . .”

**NARRATOR:** Anna felt the suffering of others . . . everyone was a lamb in *her* flock! She trod country roads . . . amid folk she knew well . . . seeing need and seeking remedy.

In rural Georgia . . . throughout the South . . . poverty . . . even hunger and sickness . . . visited black and white alike . . . lean times at century’s turn . . . a brief recovery until the 1920s when farmers were hit by *three* catastrophes in a row . . . with no time to recoup between blows . . . crop prices tumbled . . . the boll weevil invaded Georgia and cotton disappeared from Glynn County . . . finally, the stock market plunged and economic depression scourged the plain folk . . . until a war’s hungry demands restored prosperity.

During hard times . . . Anna carried help and hope to her broken community . . . black and white alike. She was agent for government and private aid . . . the Mission a center for distributing food, clothing and medicine.

People turned to the Deaconess when trouble loomed . . . over thirty years she had earned the trust of *all* . . . those in authority . . . those in need.

**READER:** “Miss Livingston call on me . . . said they government was to give us help and she wanted me to see those who need help get it. I said I would and that they could bring the flour and other things here to the School, that they was a place in back to keep the sacks and they be safe from harm since the school is neat and clean. There wasn’t no mice or other things to bother the flour.

“She said the school was just the place for these things since everybody could come here so easy . . . I am to see everyone gets what they need . . . some folk don’t need help now and I know *who* they are. The old people and the children, they need the most. . . . when I tell some they can’t get help just now . . . that others come first, they get mad, a little, but I don’t pay no mind and soon they forget to be mad. . . . medicine is very welcome now, many are sick with ague and fever.”

**NARRATOR:** Anna regularly dispensed aid to those in need. Pennick and the surrounding area were in her charge. There were some whites but no question

of her ability to serve all and no record of complaints or resentments. All respected her fairness.

She helped dozens of boys and girls . . . boys got overalls and union suits . . . girls “vests” and bloomers. Men, too, received overalls and their wives dresses or the cloth to make dresses. During 1932, about 150 yards of cloth were distributed along with numerous “ready-mades.”

No one was forgotten . . . along with meticulous distribution lists are descriptions of those receiving aid: an elderly blind lady and a young woman expecting her first child . . . a motherless boy . . . a seventy year old woman, “1 legged” . . . a white father with his wife and five children . . . a black father with *his* wife and four children . . . two young, unmarried men “in poor health” . . . an 87 year-old black farmer whose flour allotment was carried to him by a 79 year-old white neighbor.

The old account books provide a partial but fascinating record of her work among the needy. In the winter of 1932/33, Anna distributed nearly ten tons of flour, quantities of quinine, hundreds of garments and yards of cloth . . . supplied by the government or the broad web of private support she created over the years.

Where can we find a fitting epitaph for Anna Ellison Butler Alexander? One that captures the spirit of a woman devoted to our Church and to *all* its communicants . . . an educator . . . a leader . . . a builder of tabernacles . . . one who carefully gathered meager resources, guarding them from loss to supply all in need and sustain the community to which she surrendered her life?

What better epitaph than these verses from the Tenth Chapter of John . . . ?

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to *this* fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be *one* flock, *one* shepherd.”

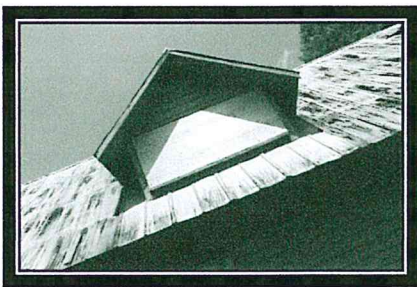
Rest well . . . Anna . . . in your unmarked grave among the tangled woods and weeds . . . known directly by a dwindling few . . . but honored by many . . . who share your vision and know your story . . . rest well, good shepherd . . . rest well.

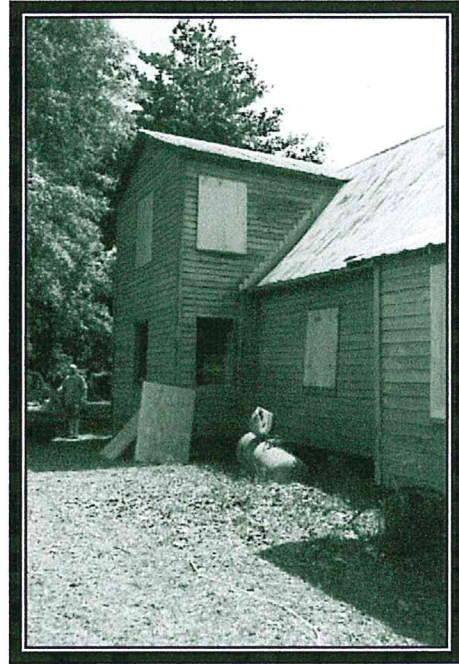
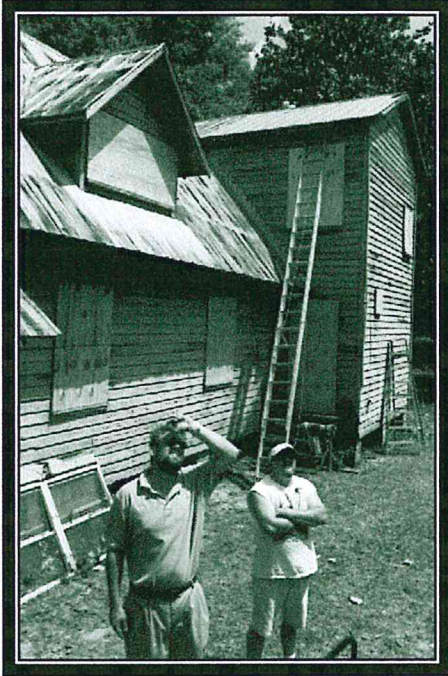
***The End***

Pictured here is the unmarked grave of Dcss. Anna Alexander. The marker had long disappeared. Senior Warden, Mr. William White (pictured with his wife) of Good Shepard Episcopal Church in Pennick, was one of the few who could identify the site based upon fencing and other landmarks. Later, the body was disinterred and re-interred in front of the "old school" building.

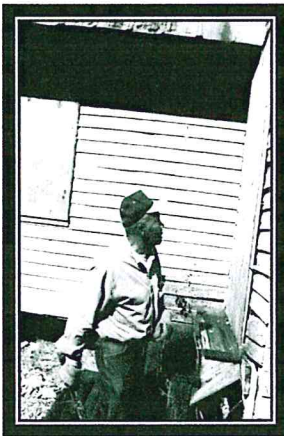


Volunteers under the supervision of the Jekyll Island Authority's historical preservation director join in a stabilization project to prevent further deterioration of Anna's school. Over twenty volunteers from three Episcopal churches, the Historic District of Jekyll Island and several business groups spent several weekends in this very important activity. Stabilized, now the school awaits restoration.





Two views of the school following stabilization. The structure consists of a "pole" framework covered by clapboards and a tin roof. The essential structure is sound but much work is needed to restore it to its original form and adapt it to a public use. It is hoped that it will become a museum and learning center celebrating the life of Anna Alexander and the community she helped to nurture and preserve through more than three decades and much hardship.



Those with construction experience and skills worked to stabilize the structure of the school. Others collected and preserved the contents of the building. Above, a number of volunteers inventory and catalog books, manuscripts and documents found throughout the school. Over twenty cartons of books and other materials were cataloged, freeze-dried to prevent further insect damage and then stored in acid-free containers at the Good Shepherd parish hall. While many books are severely damaged, some too far gone to salvage, a surprising number are still in good shape after more than fifty-five years' exposure to insects, rodents and the weather. These documents - including evidence of Anna's correspondence with people in the United States and abroad - are a legacy and a testament to Anna's long career as an educator, missionary and servant to her community.