

SITE REPORT

Margaret's Grocery, Vicksburg, Mississippi

The following quote is copied from the Mississippi Arts Commission's online *Mississippi Folk Artist and Folk Artist Directory*

(http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/artist.php?dirname=margarets_grocery)

Located north of downtown Vicksburg on old Highway 61, Margaret's Grocery is a unique vernacular art environment created by Reverend H.D. Dennis. Margaret Rogers Dennis ran the former country store for years. When she met and married Reverend Dennis in the early 1980s, he promised her that he would transform her simple store into a place that the world would come to see. Although the site is no longer open as a store, the Grocery has attracted visitors from around the world to experience Reverend Dennis' creation.

Dennis, who was born in Rolling Fork (about 40 miles north of Vicksburg in the Delta) in 1916, has been preaching since the age of nineteen. He views his work on the Grocery as part of his ministry, a place that he has created where people can come to worship. Visitors to the site can receive lengthy sermons from Dennis. He most often focuses on the evils of the modern world, reserving special condemnation for the casinos operating just south of the Grocery.

The site, described as a "theological park" by vernacular art scholar Stephen Young, is crowded with signs, gates, towers, and other items created by Dennis. The Reverend is constantly making changes and modifications to the site, adding new signs, repainting items with new designs, and adding more details to existing structures. In addition to the external work, the interior of the grocery is also ornately decorated. Dennis has used beads, Christmas lights, artificial flowers, and other inexpensive items to create a unique worship space inside the grocery.

INTRODUCTION

The information in this report is based on a site visit made on December 10, 2009, by Fred C. Fussell as part of a consultancy conducted on behalf of the Mississippi Arts Commission and under the auspices of the American Folklore Society. The site visit was conducted for the purpose of assisting the Mississippi Arts Commission and others who have an interest in the possibility of developing plans for the preservation and interpretation of an eccentric folk art environment located in Vicksburg, Mississippi, known as Margaret's Grocery.

SITE DESCRIPTION

With its front-most elements situated only thirty-five or so feet off the asphalt roadway of famed U.S. Highway 61, the brightly painted and whimsically constructed eccentric art complex known as Margaret's Grocery regularly catches the eyes of many surprised travelers and casual passersby. Located several miles north of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the original small building known as Margaret's Grocery once housed a neighborhood store and a sometimes "juke." It was owned and operated by a Vicksburg native named Margaret Rogers. Reverend H.D. Dennis, who came to Vicksburg and married Ms. Rogers in 1979, spent the following three decades of his life converting the old store building into, in his words, *a palace* for Mrs. Dennis. Due to his failing health and advanced age, Reverend Dennis is now confined to an assisted living facility in Vicksburg.

The original small frame structure at Margaret's Grocery that once served as a store is now scarcely discernable beneath the elaborately fabricated additions that were applied and attached to it over the years since 1979 by Reverend Dennis. Colorfully painted shades of red, blue, yellow, and, notably, pink decorate the exterior complex of walls, towers, walkways, chairs, tables, platforms, signs, posts, poles, sculptures, exhibits, and meandering buildings. These features surround and contain a series of equally complex and colorfully appointed interior spaces – six rooms in all. Positioned outside, near the northernmost side of the complex, sits an elaborately decorated school bus that Reverend Dennis converted into what is perhaps one of the most unusual worship sanctuaries anywhere in the country. Throughout the complex, Reverend Dennis's principal themes of religion and the Masonic Order are reflected through his artistic creations. Hand painted and manufactured signs bear welcoming messages, admonitions

regarding personal behavior and responsibility, directions about where and where not to park, invitations to worship, and declarations of Reverend Dennis's intentions to create an interdenominational church and a free place of worship. A lofty arched gateway tower made of brightly painted brick and concrete blocks serves as a formal entranceway to the complex. Mounted on the roadside face of this entrance tower is a large sign declaring:

Margarets

The Home of the Double Headed Eagle

Rev. H.D. Dennis

Rt. 4, Box 219 Vicksburg, MS

Another nearby sign displays an oversized rendering of a multi-colored five-pointed star, the distinctive symbol for the Order of the Eastern Star. Numerous other symbols and quotations related to the Masonic Order are exhibited throughout the site.

The interior rooms of the complex are filled with additional brightly painted structural elements, furnishings, containers for contributions, thousands of strung beads and other small objects, toys, magazine and newspaper clippings, photographs of the Reverend and Margaret Dennis, mounted and framed sermons, printed Bible passages, religious prints, strings of electrical lights, and scores of assorted other colorful objects made of wood, paper, fabric, plastic, glass, ceramic, and metal. Dozens of Styrofoam supermarket meat trays, mounted to walls and ceilings, have been decorated with arrangements of plastic trinkets and glass beads, painted thread spools, jar lids, bottle caps, buttons, tape, magazine and newspaper clippings, and a variety of other materials. Similar creations also decorate the interior of the nearby school bus sanctuary. An unused soft drink cooler stands empty against an interior wall, the sole remaining reminder of the original function of the little building as a community store place.

SITE ACCESSIBILITY and STRUCTURAL CONDITION

Margaret's Grocery is located directly beside U.S. Highway 61 on the outskirts of Vicksburg. The residents of the semi-rural neighborhood in which it lies are predominately African American. The site is directly accessible from the adjacent two-lane highway and the sights and sounds of passing traffic on the highway are nearly

constant. The roadway frontage occupied by the complex is approximately one hundred feet wide, including a space that is occupied by an adjacent mobile home that is also on the property. The main structure at Margaret's Grocery is actually a ragtag assemblage of various add-ons that were constructed and attached to the main building over the years by Reverend Dennis following his arrival on the scene. The majority of the "non-functional" structural elements at the site – the colorful walls, the lofty towers, the elaborately configured signage – are positioned between the front of the main building and the highway and continues to the northward side of the main building. The unoccupied and unadorned mobile home is located directly to its south. There is ample parking space between the main structures of the complex and the highway's edge to accommodate approximately twenty automobiles or possibly three average-sized tour- or school buses. Passing traffic appears to be fairly constant, but light, on the adjacent roadway. The relatively flat property on which the major parts of the art complex are situated quickly slopes radically downhill just behind the rearward side of the main building.

Structurally, the various components of the complex are in varying states of disrepair and instability. A large part of the outdoor structures show increasingly progressive damage and disintegration from the effects of weather and time. There have been several break-ins and resulting thefts of property in recent months -- not of any artwork to speak of -- but of a gas heater, several framed photographs, and a number of additional common household items. Even though the front entrance to the building has sturdy lockable doors and a lockable burglar grill, and the front windows can be securely shuttered, there are several much less protected and hidden access points on the sides and in the rear of the building. And while there is active electrical service at the site, there are no climate control or intrusion and fire alarm systems. Neither is there an onsite occupant. There is evidence of rodent infestation around the interior of the main building and also inside the adjacent school bus chapel. The outdoor assemblages and other works of art that are out-of-doors are continuously exposed to the damaging effects of heat, sunlight, rain, wind, ice, burrowing and nesting animals and insects, theft, vandalism, and other hazards. Several very large pecan trees form a canopy over much of the structures and the constantly falling leaves, dropping limbs, and other debris create an additional potential hazard. The eaves on the north side of the main building are hosts to several colonies of resurrection fern which, while interesting as a species and

pretty to look at, promote damaging moisture intrusion, insect infestations, and root damage to the building. Much of the building materials that were employed by Reverend Dennis in creating the site are not impervious to the effects of the elements. Even though the lofty and complex outdoor structures at Margaret's Grocery are a testimony to Reverend Dennis's remarkable and creative skills as a brick mason and carpenter, often there are elements of plywood, Styrofoam, plastics, untreated wood, and other such potentially degenerative materials employed in weight-bearing positions, thus creating present and future structural weaknesses all around the site.

SITE UPKEEP and MANAGEMENT

Reportedly Reverend H.D. Dennis is the rightful and current owner of the Margaret's Grocery complex and, as such, possesses the right of lifetime tenure there. However, health issues have made it necessary for him to assume residence in an assisted living facility in Vicksburg, so the house and premises at Margaret's Grocery are unoccupied and have been since shortly after Margaret Dennis's death in October, 2009. A longtime and trusted friend and neighbor of the Dennis's, Mr. Sam Union, serves as a part time volunteer caretaker of the site. Mr. Union checks the security and wellbeing of the place on a daily basis and makes any small repairs and minor items of upkeep that he deems to be necessary. Otherwise the property is basically vacant. Two area community volunteers and arts patrons are also actively involved in the effort to preserve the complex. Leslie Silver is the owner of the Attic Gallery in Vicksburg and was a longtime friend of Reverend and Mrs. Dennis. Ms. Silver has long been an advocate for the preservation of Margaret's Grocery. Suzi Altman, a freelance photographer who is based in Jackson, Mississippi, befriended Reverend and Mrs. Dennis many years ago and was a particularly good friend of Margaret Dennis for the last ten years of Mrs. Dennis's life. Ms. Altman generously serves as a liaison between the Mississippi Arts Commission and the Cool Springs Missionary Baptist Church, the entity that will gain ownership of the Margaret's Grocery land and complex upon the death of Reverend H.D. Dennis. Margaret Dennis was an ardent member of the Cool Springs Church and it was her wish that the church be the inheritor of the Margaret's Grocery site. The general membership of the Cool Springs Missionary Baptist Church, which occupies a property that is directly adjacent to and behind Margaret's Grocery, has expressed a strong interest in preserving what Reverend Dennis created at the property. And even though the Cool Springs congregants are not inclined to manage or to oversee the preservation of Reverend

Dennis's artistic creation themselves, they wish to maintain ownership of the land on which his creation is located. According to Mary Margaret Miller of the Mississippi Arts Commission staff, they are supportive of the preservation of Margaret's Grocery, and would like to see the site saved but they are not interested in incurring any financial burden for its restoration or upkeep. They are also not interested in selling the land on which Margaret's Grocery is located. However, they are interested in and receptive to the idea of allowing an outside group to do the work of preservation and site management. So, therein lies one of the major unresolved dilemmas facing the future of Margaret's Grocery and the artistic legacy of Reverend H.D. Dennis.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the considerable problems that exist at Margaret's Grocery in terms of structural stability, the degradation of many of its exterior components, site security, and other factors, the restoration and conservation of the site and its contents is certainly not beyond hope. Given adequate funding and a carefully and professionally rendered preservation plan, Margaret's Grocery could feasibly be saved and conserved at the location where it stands. But accomplishing that won't be easy or inexpensive. In essence, conditions at Margaret's Grocery typify those of numerous other eccentric art sites and collections all across America. Great and noble intentions can often be compromised or even nullified by inadequate funding, the lack of technical expertise, and a lack of thoughtful planning and management. Margaret's Grocery faces few challenges that are unique and apart from several other like-sized visionary art sites across America. Its unique artistic significance, however, may prove to be its salvation, especially if those who manage it will proceed with care, with thoughtful deliberation, and with informed planning. They have a compelling opportunity to tell a vitally important American story and a unique place in which to tell it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above, the following recommendations are offered:

1. That strong consideration is given to the restoration and maintenance of Margaret's Grocery and the related collection of art.

2. That a “Friends of Margaret’s Grocery” organization be established and become a formalized non-profit organization whose primary purpose and intent is the preservation and interpretation of the Margaret’s Grocery site, related structures, and collection of art.

3. That the “Friends of Margaret’s Grocery” settle any questions of clear ownership of the Margaret’s Grocery site and the related collection by purchasing or otherwise gaining exclusive rights to and control over the property and its contents. This could conceivably be done in collaboration with the Cool Springs Baptist Church provided the “Friends of Margaret’s Grocery” organization has the controlling say-so over all management and conservation issues at and related to the site and collection.

4. That the collection of artwork, buildings, and other contents at Margaret’s Grocery be immediately, thoroughly, and systematically examined, documented, and registered under the supervision of a team of qualified professional art conservators and curators. The work should include recommendations for the repair, conservation, and treatment of the various structures and components at the site. This survey should happen soon and should be conducted by a qualified person or persons familiar with a variety of materials and media that lie outside traditional and standard artistic use. The information that is collected during the inventory process should be entered into a computerized registration database for ease of access and updating.

5. That serious consideration be given to the acquisition of additional property located directly adjacent to the Margaret’s Grocery property in order to provide for the establishment of a visitor/interpretive center and all the necessary support services of additional parking, site maintenance, security, interpretation, visitor and staff accommodations, and so on.

6. That a comprehensive long-range institutional plan for the preservation and upkeep of the site be created based on the following questions, among others: Does the vision for the future operations include a professional staff? A visitor reception and interpretive exhibition facility? Outreach exhibits? Educational programming? An audio/video listening area? An endowment fund for future maintenance and operations? Volunteer recruitment and training? It may be necessary to contract with a qualified museum

planning consultant and/or a preservation architect to assist in developing a viable long-range restoration and preservation plan. Qualified planning consultants, collections management experts, program development consultants, and many other museum specialists can be located through the American Association of Museums (AAM) web site. (<http://www.museummarketplace.com/>)

7. That planning includes the eventual hiring of a professional staff. At first, and at the very least, an experienced and knowledgeable museum curator or art conservator (or a curatorial/conservation team) will be needed, if only on a short-term basis, to systematically conduct a condition assessment. That person or persons will need to work closely with anyone who may have pertinent information about the origin and history of the various parts of the collection. Afterward, as a permanent staff is selected and hired, they should be charged with the duties of managing the day-to-day operations, planning and overseeing site conservation, exhibit design and installation, the creation and implementation of programming, planning and implementing development processes, and managing and securing the site. The presence of a professional staff would leave the “Friends of Margaret’s Grocery” free to establish institutional policy, to fund operations and maintenance, to plan and manage capital and endowment funding campaigns, to create institutional long-range planning, and to set institutional goals.

RELATED SOURCES and RESOURCES for MARGARET'S GROCERY

Photographs of and additional information about Margaret's Grocery may be seen at the following web sites, among others:

<http://www.narrowlarry.com/nlmar.html>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/detourart/sets/72157604059543007/>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/deepfriedkudzu/sets/1054281/>

The following organizations, among others, may be able to supply useful information and other resources for the development of long range planning, the creation and operation of a non-profit organization, the restoration and conservation of artistic and cultural resources, funding for preservation and operations, and other considerations in the effort to restore, conserve, and interpret Margaret's Grocery.

The National Endowment for the Arts	http://www.nea.gov/
Save America's Treasures	http://www.saveameericastreasures.org/
The Foundation Center	http://foundationcenter.org/
American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC)	http://www.conservation-us.org/
The American Association of Museums	http://www.aam-us.org/
The Mississippi Arts Commission	http://www.arts.state.ms.us/
USDA, Rural Development	http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs/cf/cp.htm
USDA, Mississippi	http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ms/
Mississippi Museums Association	http://www.msmuseums.org/
Non-profit guides	http://www.npguides.org/