

~~OCT 6 1992~~

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in "Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms" (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name RAINEY, GERTRUDE "MA" PRIDGETT, HOUSE
other names/site number "Ma" Rainey House

2. Location

street & number 805 5th Ave.
city, town Columbus (N/A) vicinity of
county MUSCOGEE code GA 215
state Georgia code GA zip code 31993

(N/A) not for publication

3. Classification

Ownership of Property:

- private
- public-local
- public-state
- public-federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property:

	<u>Contributing</u>	<u>Noncontributing</u>
buildings	1	0
sites	0	0
structures	0	0
objects	0	0
total	1	0

Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets the National Register criteria. () See continuation sheet.

Elizabeth A. Lyon
Signature of certifying official

9/28/92
Date

Elizabeth A. Lyon
State Historic Preservation Officer,
Georgia Department of Natural Resources

In my opinion, the property () meets () does not meet the National Register criteria. () See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency or bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register

determined eligible for the National Register

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other, explain:

see continuation sheet

Patrick Andrews 11/18/92

Signature, Keeper of the National Register Date

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions:

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

Current Functions:

WORK IN PROGRESS

7. Description

Architectural Classification:

LATE 19th-EARLY 20th CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Bungalow/Craftsman

Materials:

foundation	brick
walls	wood
roof	asphalt shingles
other	N/A

Description of present and historic physical appearance:

The "Ma" Rainey House is located in Columbus, Georgia, a county-seat city in central west Georgia. It is located within a primarily black historic area near significant black churches as well as other community landmarks and only one block from 4th Avenue, a major thoroughfare.

The "Ma" Rainey House is a two-story, frame house with a two-story front porch, whose lower columns are of brick. The exterior is painted weatherboard, with exposed rafter eaves, and end gables. The floor plan is that of a side hall with three rooms on each floor. The ends of the halls on each floor were converted to kitchens. The walls are plaster with wood wainscot and trim. One mantel is more recent brick, others are historic. Decorative material is at a minimum, but includes shaped brackets and other decorations on the mantels. There are no outbuildings. The house sits on a city lot only one block from a major city thoroughfare. Changes include the doubling in size of the house by adding the second floor around 1920, addition of kitchen and bathrooms in more recent times, and the recent restoration of the roof and the on-going rehabilitation of the entire house to use it as a museum.

At this writing, the exterior has been stabilized and rehabilitated, but work is ongoing to rehabilitate the interior in order to use it as a house museum commemorating the life of "Ma" Rainey.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): N/A

A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions):

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
PERFORMING ARTS
ETHNIC HERITAGE/BLACK
WOMEN'S HISTORY

Period of Significance:

1920-1939

Significant Dates:

1935-1939

Significant Person(s):

Rainey, Gertrude "MA" Pridgett (This is her correct name; her entries in the Dictionary of American Biography and the Dictionary of Georgia Biography each have a slight error as to her proper name.)

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect(s)/Builder(s):

UNKNOWN

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8

Significance of property, justification of criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above:

Narrative statement of significance (areas of significance)

The "Ma" Rainey House is significant in entertainment/recreation and performing arts, ethnic heritage/black or black history and women's history because it is the only home remaining associated with Gertrude "Ma" Rainey (1886-1939), the Columbus-born, nationally recognized "Mother of the Blues." Her contributions to American music continue to be studied both in American and abroad. With her career beginning early in the 20th century at Columbus, Georgia's Springer Opera House, she gained much of her fame on the circuit that took her to the Midwest and primarily Chicago. After her heyday in the 1920s, changes in music, the advent of other forms of music, and the depression all contributed to the end of her national touring career. On the death of her mother in 1935, she returned to Columbus and lived in this house, which her mother had owned, until her own death in 1939. A historic marker was erected on the property by the Historic Chattahoochee Commission in honor of her 100th birthday in 1986. The house was recently purchased by the City of Columbus and is undergoing restoration.

National Register Criteria

The "Ma" Rainey House meets National Register Criterion B because of its association with Gertrude "Ma" Pridgett Rainey who had a national career as a musician, song writer, and performer.

It is the only house that she ever owned and the only one surviving to represent her career. Ma Rainey was, in the field of music, the first in a long-line of black women blues singers. She opened the doors for others to follow as she and Pa Rainey, her then-husband and promoter, toured the country in the early 20th century. They made their mark on the music circuit playing at all levels of music houses, from open tents to opera houses, to both (but separate, and sometimes joint) all-black and all-white audiences in the decades before integration. She is noted in women's history because she wrote many of the songs she sung, coordinated her own booking agency to ward off the graft and corruption that had crept in to the others of the era and was the first woman to do so. She also had as the subject of many of her songs the poignant plight of many women, not just black women, in their relationships with men, something many people of the era were not willing to talk about. As a black entertainer with a national touring company, nationally-distributed recordings, and national following, she was definitely a forerunner in the music field. Her

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8

performances are legendary, although none were captured on film, only in the memories of those who attended.

As the only property known to survive that was owned and occupied by Ma Rainey, this house is deeply significant. While she did not live here full-time until after she had retired, it was this property she purchased for her mother in 1920, and assisted her mother in expanding so other family members could live here (including, no doubt herself on the infrequent stops she made during her years of touring). When her career dwindled in the height of the Depression and family illnesses forced her to come home, it was to this house she came and in this house she remained until her death.

Ma Rainey has been recognized in many national biographical compendia, most notably the Dictionary of American Biography in 1958 and the Dictionary of Georgia Biography in 1982. The DAB is one of the foremost biographical listings of Americans. To have been chosen for inclusion within twenty years of her death shows her significance even then, well before the current interest in women's history, black history, and blues history.

As the leading female blues performer of the early 20th century, and an early recording artist, she became known as the "Mother of the Blues" by the 1920s, a name that has never been challenged. It was to this house that the Mother of the Blues retired in 1935 and where she died in 1939.

Criteria Considerations (if applicable)

N/A

Period of significance (justification)

The period of significance covers the period of time from the purchase of the original house by Ma Rainey for her mother (1920) until the death of Ma Rainey in 1939.

Contributing/Noncontributing Resources (explanation, if necessary)

N/A

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8

Developmental history/historic context (if applicable)

"Ma" Rainey, the "Mother of the Blues", was associated with Columbus, Georgia, all her life, even though due to the type of career she had, she was destined to spend a majority of her professional life outside of her native environs, and literally "on the road". This house was her home at end of her career, and before that her mother's home in which she visited during what few vacations she took.

Gertrude Pridgett was born in 1886 in Columbus. In 1904, in Columbus, she married William "Pa" Rainey whom she met shortly after she began her singing career. It was due to her marriage and her husband's nickname that she became "Ma Rainey". Those that knew her said that the name fit, long after "Pa" Rainey had left the scene because she had a commanding presence and mothered many of the people who worked with her.

This house commemorates neither where she was born, nor where she spent most of her career, but where she lived in her retirement. This house is the only physical place (other than her grave in nearby Porterdale Cemetery) in which can be commemorated her life's achievements and the recognition she brought through her life to her home town of Columbus, Georgia.

While she was honored in 1986 on the centennial of her birth with a historical marker, fifty years earlier, in 1937, the Columbus City Directory simply reported that at this address lived: "Rainey, Gertrude, colored, 805 5th Avenue". This entry gave no hint to her previous occupation.

Ma Rainey was also not mentioned in any of the earlier histories of Columbus (1928, 1950) even though she was a nationally recognized figure. Only in the most recent histories of Columbus (1970s, 1980s) has she appeared. Many Columbusites, both black and white, have never heard of her, yet others around the nation have long been well-aware of her.

The Ma Rainey house is considered nationally significant because of her role in the national blues movement where she was an extremely significant figure and yet remarkably came from Columbus, Georgia, a city not noted for its music orientation.

Money for the Pridgett family's purchase of this property came from Ma Rainey's successful national career as a blues singer which began in 1904 when she married "Pa" Rainey and joined the singing and performing circuit, first in the southeast, and then nationally, eventually working out of Chicago where she kept an apartment.

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8

This house was bought in the name of Ma Rainey's widowed mother, Ella Pridgett, who lived here from the early 1920s until her death in 1935. It was at this point--1935--in Ma Rainey's career that she moved back to Columbus and lived here for the remainder of her life, dying here in 1939.

The location of the house shows its proximity to other areas of her life--the nearby Friendship Baptist Church (where she was a member) at 831 6th Avenue, and Porterdale Cemetery where her mother and sister were both buried in 1935 and where she would be buried in 1939.

As we look at the house, we see in the sidewalk cement the name of Thomas Pridgett--Ma Rainey's brother who lived here from her death until his own in 1975.

Most all of Ma Rainey's professional career was spent outside of her home town, although some local people recall having heard her perform in Columbus on a few occasions. Documenting these events in Columbus has been difficult due to the lack of extant issues of the black newspaper of the era (if it was even published), and the general presumed bias of the white newspaper, as well as the total lack of any real idea as to when these local performances occurred. Others also recall that during her retirement, she often sang from this front porch: not the blues, but rather hymns, anthems, spirituals, and patriotic songs.

When she retired here in 1935, she joined the Friendship Baptist Church and essentially quit her professional singing career, since the Baptist church did not approve. She could not do both.

Ma Rainey's return to Columbus, while triggered by family events, was also the result of several events that brought her amazing singing, performing and composing career to a halt. First, American music tastes had changed by the mid-1930s. Combined with the depression that began with the 1930s, people were no longer as interested in the so-called depressing music of the Blues, but more in jazz and other livelier tunes. These two factors brought financial ruin to Ma Rainey and she was forced to sell many of her possessions, including her famous gold-coin necklace, made of \$20 gold pieces.

Ma Rainey has been the subject of many articles in professional and popular magazines and journals as well as biographical sketches in who's who type dictionaries that recognize her national significance.

She has been the subject so far of one full-length book:

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8

The Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey by Sandra R. Lieb of Chicago. Begun as graduate work, it was published in 1981 by the University of Massachusetts Press. In a recent interview, the author stressed that she studied only Ma Rainey's national career, not her roots in Columbus or any of her early work in Georgia (such as playing on Atlanta's Sweet Auburn Avenue in 1911 with the Rabbit Foot Show, or owning/managing two theaters in Rome, Georgia)--that area is open for further study and analysis.

To illustrate her book, Ms. Lieb used the advertisements of the Paramount Recording studio taken from the Chicago Defender, the leading black newspaper of the day. These advertisements show the recognition Ma Rainey was receiving during the 1920s when her recordings were being made and distributed.

Ms. Lieb's major contribution in her book is the proof through research at the Library of Congress in the copyright files that of the 92 recordings done by Rainey from 1923 to 1928, she actually wrote 38 or 40 per cent of these recorded songs. We do not know how many she may have written earlier which were never recorded, but we can now add songwriter to her other attributes.

When Rainey began recording for Paramount in 1923, her career as a singer and performer had already spanned twenty years and she was well-known. But she had to go to New York in order to record and had to do so indoors, in a recording studio. Her great stage presence, one of her greatest attributes, could not be captured on a record of that era, nor her interaction with her live audiences.

It is also important to note that on many of these 92 recordings Ma Rainey was accompanied by men and women who would themselves become national figures in music including Georgia's own Fletcher Henderson, Georgia Tom Dorsey, and Louis Armstrong.

Some of her most memorable recordings have titles which strongly suggest her background and that of the audiences to which she would be singing, such as "Boll-Weevil Blues", "Slave to the Blues", "Prove it on me Blues", "Blame it on the Blues", and her most memorable, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom".

Those still alive who remember seeing Ma Rainey on stage recall that the most memorable of her performances began with her arrival on stage incased in a fake-Victrola, a large music cabinet. She emerged dressed in gold from head to toe. One person has said that she put a spell on the audience, so intense was her performance.

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8

Many of the people who saw her and recall her place in Blues History are interviewed in the remarkable video Wild Women Don't Sing the Blues (California newsreel, 1989). The people interviewed made several points about her career. Stressing that the blues already existed, they point out that she created a new performing art, the Vaudeville Blues, and that women were newcomers to this type of singing until she made a hit with this type of singing and performing. The recordings that she and others created in the 1920s also showed that blacks could indeed sell records, even if they had to appear under black labels. It was the conclusion of the people interviewed that the blues ended due to the rejection of the sad, tired songs since people wanted livelier tunes, such as jazz, that they wanted more cabaret type songs, and that with the Depression, vaudeville jobs were some of the first to go.

Recordings of Ma Rainey's records can today be found through the public library system. But given the times they were made, the 1920s, they are poor by today's standards. It is due to these poor recordings and the end of her career within a few years after the last recording in 1928, that she has not been as well remembered as she should have been until recently.

It is in a Paramount music company add for 1924 that we see Ma Rainey advertized as:

"Discovered at Last-Ma Rainey-the Mother of the Blues",

a title that was never challenged in her lifetime or later, so great was her contribution to the blues movement.

A further mark of her national significance, and one of the most important, is that in 1958 she was selected for inclusion in the Dictionary of American Biography.

This multi-volume set of encyclopedias, which can be found at any major library in the United States, has always been since it began in 1928 the standard reference on "who was who" in American life and history. Ma Rainey's inclusion 35 years ago shows that even then her career was being properly recognized.

Later, in 1982 she was similarly recognized in a similar work, the first ever done on a comprehensive basis for our state, in the Dictionary of Georgia Biography. The editors' goal then was to select 1,000 Georgians of all eras, races, professions, etc., making it the first comprehensive look at Georgia's citizens.

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8

And thus we are brought to current events and the most recent recognition pending for "Ma" Rainey: the proposal to have this house nominated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places at the National Level of Significance because Ma Rainey has been evaluated at a national level and judged to be a person whose life was of national significance.

It is one of three properties in Columbus, Georgia ever proposed to the National Register for the national level due to the national significance of the **person** who lived there. [The others being the Dr. John S. Pemberton House (actually at the international level) and the Peabody-Warner House for George Foster Peabody, the philanthropist.]

Here at the corner of 5th Avenue and 8th St. on the centennial of Ma Rainey's birth in 1986, the Historic Chattahoochee Commission, headquartered in Eufaula, Alabama, dedicated a historical marker in her honor.

The house is being nominated also in the areas of music history; black history; and woman's history---this last category has been added due to the fact that in discussing her career with historians and archivists around the country- such as the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University- that Ma Rainey is being appreciated more and more in women's history because she advanced women's causes as an artist, a manager, and especially her role as her own booking agent, a rarity in the 1920s, and the fact that so many of her blues songs related to the life of women, any woman, and the men in their lives.

Another honor- just discovered- has also recently come to "Ma" Rainey. The West African nation of The Gambia has recently announced the issuance of a series of stamps honoring the "History of the Blues". Among those honored on these twelve stamps will be MA Rainey. She may be the first Columbus-born person ever honored with a stamp.

A plaque in her memory/honor was recently placed in Columbus' Springer Opera House (a National Historic Landmark) by the National Federation of Music Clubs.

The house, owned by Ma Rainey's brother, Thomas Pridgett, until his death in 1975, and by members of his widow's family until recently, was sold in 1991 to the City of Columbus. They appropriated money to save the house from total destruction and it was restored in 1992. The first phase of the restoration/rehabilitation of the Ma Rainey house was dedicated in a public ceremony on June 14, 1992.

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8

"Ma" Rainey will also be inducted in to the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in the fall of 1992.

9. Major Bibliographic References

Mahan, Joseph B. "Ma Rainey House", Historic Property Information Form, March 6, 1987 and major update Dec. 12, 1992. On file at the Office of Historic Preservation, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Atlanta.

Lieb, Sandra. Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey. University of Mass., 1981.

California newsreel. Wild Women Don't Have the Blues. Video, 1989.

Numerous biographical sketches found in any major public library, most notably of which are:

Stearns, Marshall W. "Rainey, Gertrude ...Pridgett." Dictionary of American Biography Supplement Two (1958): 547-548.

Orr, N. Lee. "Rainey, Gertrude ...Pridgett ("MA")." Dictionary of Georgia Biography 2 (1982): 820-821.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): () N/A

- () preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- () previously listed in the National Register
- () previously determined eligible by the National Register
- () designated a National Historic Landmark
- () recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- () recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- (X) State historic preservation office
- () Other State Agency
- () Federal agency
- () Local government
- () University
- () Other, Specify Repository:

Georgia Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre.

UTM References

A) Zone 16 Easting 689220 Northing 3593170

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is all that city parcel marked on the enclosed city tax map.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property is the city lot which has always been associated with this house.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., Historian
organization Office of Historic Preservation, Georgia Department of Natural Resources
street & number 205 Butler Street, S.E., Suite 1462
city or town Atlanta **state** Georgia **zip code** 30334
telephone (404) 656-2840 **date** September 17, 1992

(HPS form version 10-29-91)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

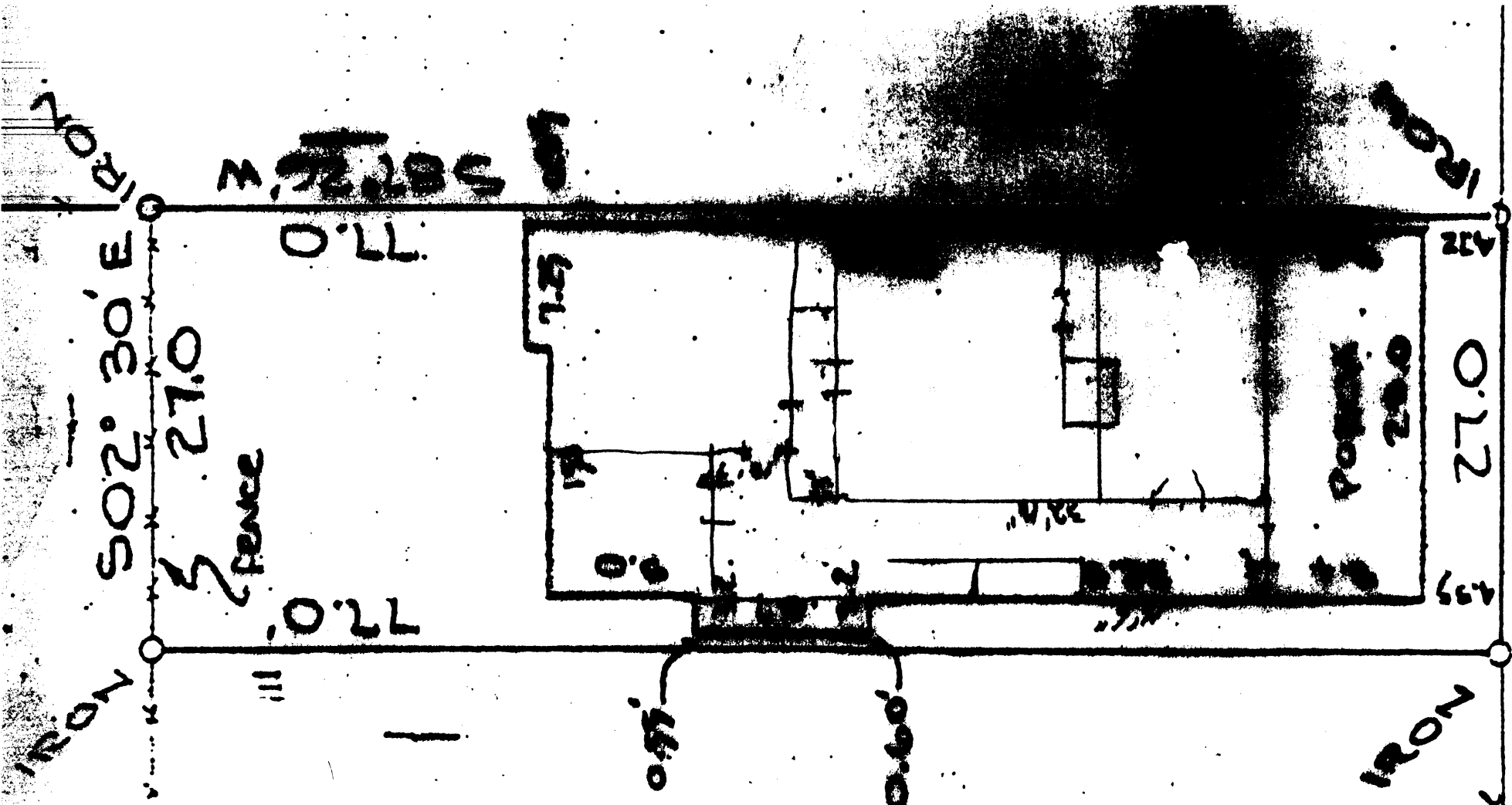
**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Photographs

Name of Property: Rainey, Gertrude Pridgett "Ma"
City or Vicinity: Columbus
County: Muscogee
State: Georgia
Photographer: James R. Lockhart
Negative Filed: Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Date Photographed: April, 1992

Description of Photograph(s):

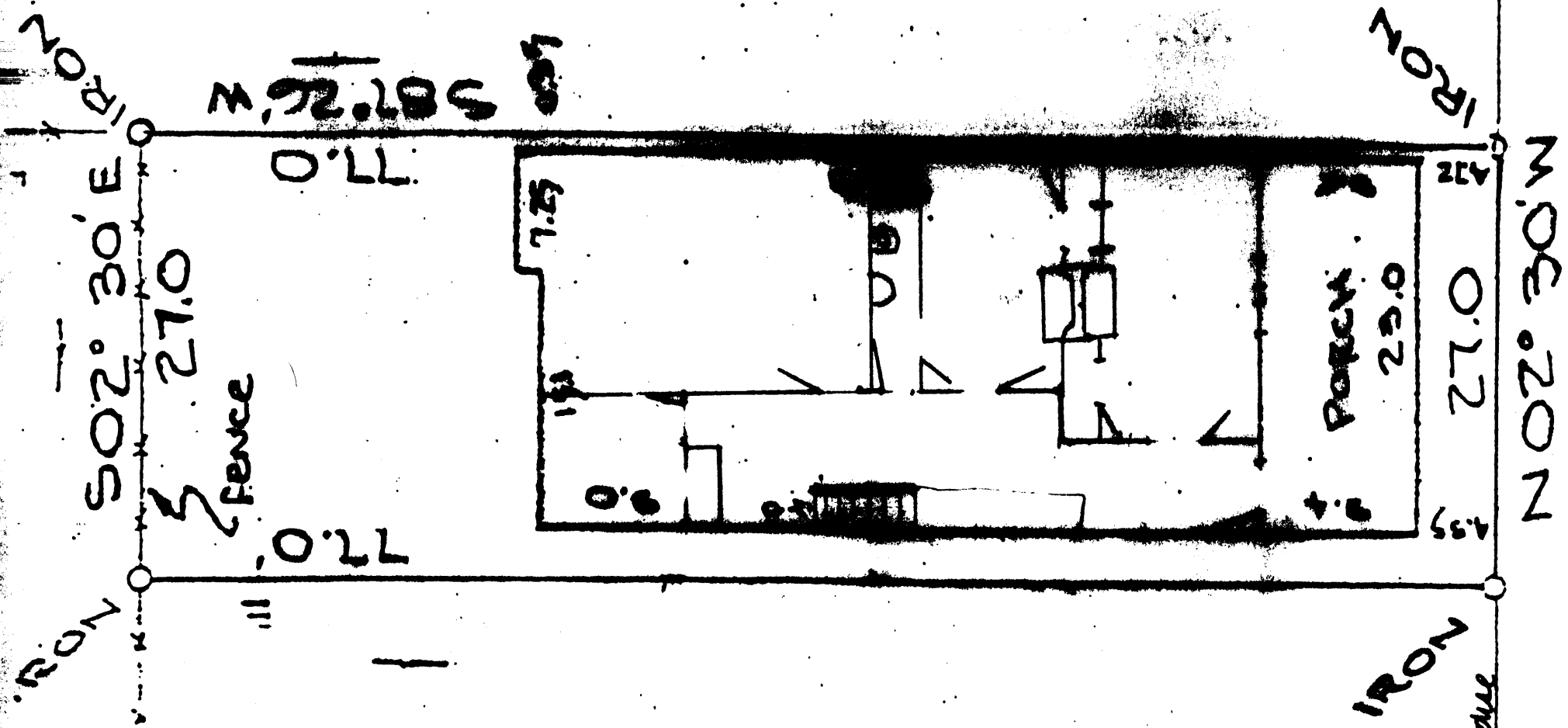
- 1 of 9: Front facade, photographer facing west.
- 2 of 9: Front facade, as seen from the corner, photographer facing northwest.
- 3 of 9: North and rear facades, photographer facing southeast.
- 4 of 9: Front facade, detail of front steps and porch, note name of Thomas Pridgett in sidewalk, photographer facing west.
- 5 of 9: First floor, photographer facing east.
- 6 of 9: First floor, front room, photographer facing north.
- 7 of 9: First floor, rear room, photographer facing east.
- 8 of 9: Second floor, first room overlooking front porch, photographer facing west.
- 9 of 9: Second floor, second or middle room, with view of stair railing, photographer facing southeast.



IRON
N. 02° 30' E
27.0
N. 02° 30' W

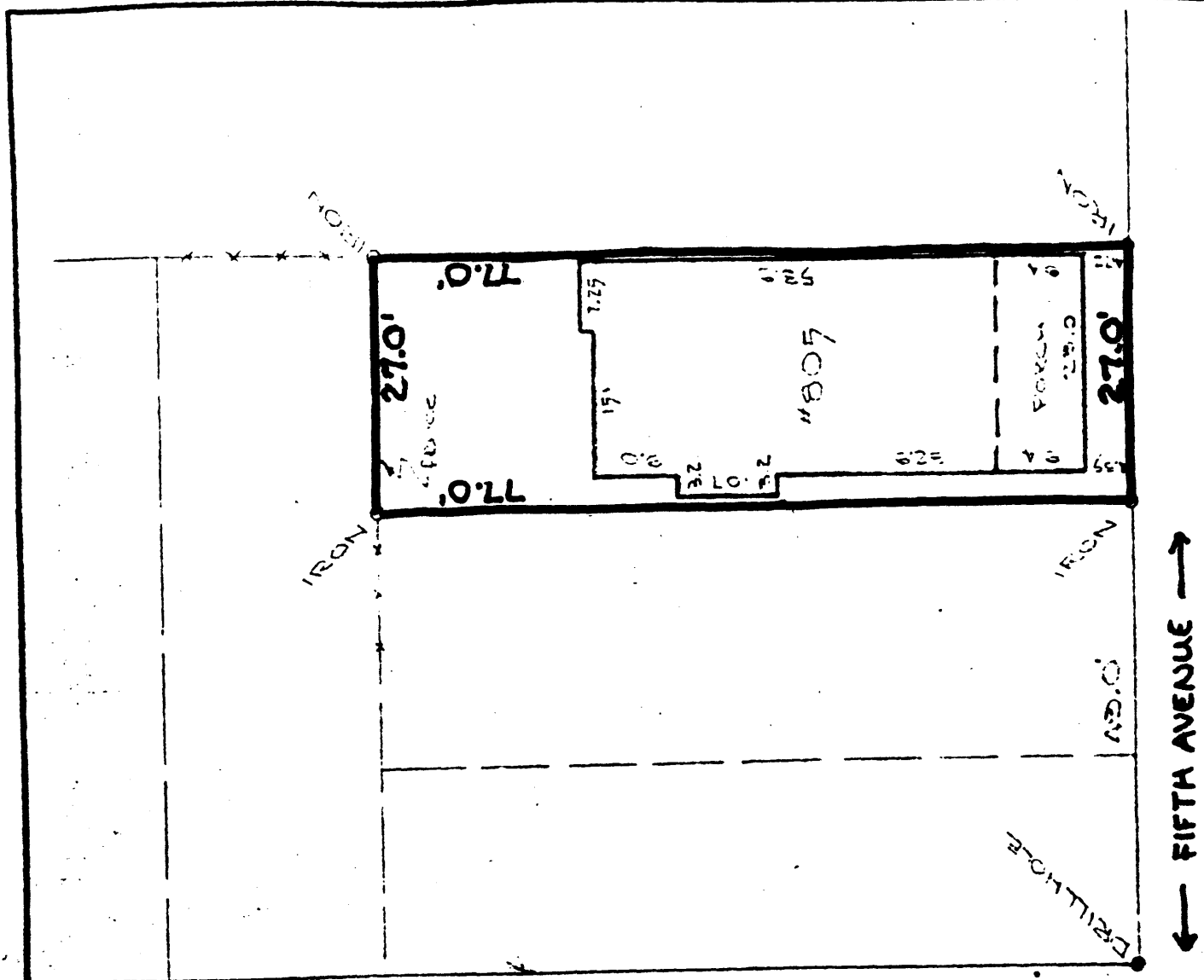
"Ma" Rainey House
First Floor

FLOOR PLAN
 Rainey, Gertrude "Ma" Pridgett, House
 Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia
 Scale: As marked on the plan
 Source: Drawn by Dr. Joe Mahan and superimposed
 on the tax map for the property.
 Date: 1990
 Key: First floor room arrangement



FLOOR PLAN
 Rainey, Gertrude "Ma" Pridgett, House
 Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia
 Scale: As marked on the plan
 Source: Drawn by Dr. Joe Mahan and superimposed
 on the tax map for the property
 Date: 1990
 Key: Second floor room arrangement

"Ma" Rainey House
 Second Floor



← 8TH STREET →

← FIFTH AVENUE →

SKETCH MAP (SITE PLAN)
 Rainey, Gertrude "Ma" Pridgett, House
 Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia
 Scale: As marked on the map
 Source: Columbus Tax Assessors Office
 Date: 1990
 Key: The house outline is marked on the property.
 There are no outbuildings. The property boundary
 is marked by a heavy black line.