



# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL



Boyhood home of author Alex Haley in Henning, Tenn. The grave in the yard is where Haley is buried.

## Building up

*Interpretive center is in the works for the place Alex Haley called home*

**BY FREDRIC KOEPPPEL**

NEXT YEAR, PILGRIMS to Henning, Tenn., childhood home of Alex Haley, will have a new visitors' center to guide them through the author's life and career.

The local firm of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects has charge of the 6,500-square-foot building; project designer is Louis R. Pounders.

Haley's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Roots," published in 1976, changed the way that millions of black Americans looked at their family heritages and their ties to Africa. The story of Haley's search for his ancestor Kunta Kinte, sparked by tales told by his grandmother on the porch of a 10-room bungalow in Henning, inspired a pioneering and hugely successful eight-night television series in 1977. Eighty-five percent of homes with television sets tuned in to all or part of the drama.

The house where Haley (1921-1992) lived with his grandparents from 1921 to 1929 and during subsequent summers is operated as a state historic site by the Tennessee Historical Commission and is open to the public. The Alex Haley Interpretive Center will be erected on a 1-acre site behind the house; it is scheduled to open in the fall of 2007. The expected cost is \$850,000 to \$900,000.

Henning is about 46 miles northeast of Memphis in Lauderdale County. The population in 2000 was 970.

The Tennessee Historical Commission took over the house in 1987, said Jerry Wooten, director of state historic sites.

"Even that far back, we thought about building a facility," Wooten said. "People wanted to have tours, and groups would show up at the house. They would have to wait on the porch. Bad weather was a factor. We thought there needed to be a

facility that was more like a real museum, with places for interpretive exhibitions and multimedia presentations, room for buses to park, a gift shop. The money was approved in 1994.”

The Alex Haley House Museum receives about 10,000 visitors a year, said executive director Baris Douglas.

“There has always been interest in Alex Haley and the house,” Douglas said, “though attendance does go up and down. We think the interpretive center will be good for the house and good for the town. In fact, we’re in the process of a marketing campaign not only for the museum but for the town of Henning. It’s a historical town that deserves to be seen and experienced.”

Louis Pounders, architect for the Alex Haley Interpretive Center, is well-known for designing seven Wonders exhibitions, from “Catherine the Great” to “Eternal Egypt,” and for high-profile buildings such as Lichterman Nature Center, the Assisi Foundation headquarters, the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts and the Tunica RiverPark.

(Pounders and partner James Williamson dissolved their architectural firm and joined Askew Nixon Ferguson at the beginning of June.)

“The state historical commission had been lobbying for the project for quite a while,” Pounders said, “and it was actually included in the state budget. Our firm was selected at that time, and we produced a preliminary design, but the state budget got reduced and the project had been sitting on hold ever since.”



**Alex Haley**

When the state renewed interest in the project this year, Pounders said, “they came back to us, and we all agreed that the scheme we developed 12 or 13 years ago shouldn’t be pursued, and I was delighted. I wanted

to go back and revisit the idea and reconstitute the building and produce a whole new design. For one thing, the project had gotten a bit smaller.”

The important elements in the new design, Pounders said, were the original Haley house and the town where it stands.

“After looking at the site and the surroundings, we realized that the building should be clean and crisp and reflect the small town, the houses and farms around the area. We wanted a vernacular style significant to those aspects of the environment.”

The project “is on the verge of getting out for bids,” said Pounders. “We think it should take about 10 months to complete, so maybe it will be open next September.”

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**Rendering of the Alex Haley Interpretive Center, by Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects**