

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name Kiah Museum
other names/site number Kiah House Museum

2. Location

street & number 505 West 36th Street not for publication
city or town Savannah vicinity
state Georgia code _____ county Chatham code 51 zip code 31415

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility 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 X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:
___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Signature of certifying official/Title: Jennifer Dixon/Historic Preservation Division Director/Deputy SHPO Date _____
Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official _____ Date _____
Title _____
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. 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:) _____

Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- private
- public - Local
- public - State
- public - Federal

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box.)

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

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
		Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/Single Dwelling

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Museum

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN/Queen Anne

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS/Craftsman

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: BRICK

walls: WOOD/Weatherboard

roof: ASPHALT

other: _____

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

Located at 505 West 36th Street, the two-story side hall residence occupies the eastern three-quarters of Lot 24 in Duncan Ward. The rectangular lot maintains a slight setback from a sidewalk and tree lawn, and features a two-story accessory building at the southeast corner of the lot along the lane. The surrounding context is characterized by early 20th century middle-class African American residential neighborhoods featuring one and two-story detached houses and early-to-mid-20th century commercial, institutional, and religious buildings along Martin Luther King, Junior, Boulevard immediately to its east. The building is currently a non-contributing building within the Cuyler-Brownville National Register Historic District, designated in 1998 (NRHP 1998). The building was significantly altered in 1959 during its conversion to a museum, and some of its exterior character-defining features fall outside of the district's period of significance (1867-1937). Despite the loss of some of its original interior and exterior features during the 1959 alternations, it maintains a high level of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association as the Kiah Museum from this time through the historic period, 1973. In fact, the mid-20th century alterations are themselves significant and character-defining as they were crucial to creating the museum space and represent the beginning date for the property's period of significance. Significant exterior alterations appear to include the removal of a large first-floor porch, the addition of brick porch columns with wrought iron railings, a very large two-story window opening at the east side of the north façade, and the enclosure of a small porch at the southeast corner of the building.

Narrative Description

The two-story building is raised roughly three feet above grade, supported by a foundation of square brick piers and is wood-frame construction with narrow wood clapboard siding. The building is currently in a deteriorated state and its window and door openings are obscured by plywood coverings. The house was significantly altered in 1959 when it was converted from a home into a combination home and museum and is missing its original porch and windows at the east end of the north (front) facade. Lavinia Jenkins, resident at 504 West 36th Street, reports that the house originally featured a curved, one-story wraparound porch similar to its existing porch. Its architectural style does not follow a single formal precedent, but includes elements of Prairie and Queen Anne styles. Prairie elements include wide, overhanging eaves with a flat soffit, hipped roof, and centralized attic dormer. Queen Anne elements include a bay window at the first floor of the east façade, side-lights and transom at the primary entrance, and the no longer extant one-story curved porch with Doric round columns that formerly extended along the north and east facades. The building's form is asymmetrical and features an offset primary entrance, characteristic of the Queen Anne style. The two-story accessory building features similar siding to that on the main house, has a hipped roof, and wide, overhanging eaves with exposed rafters. The current roofing material is painted metal and is in poor condition.

The primary entrance of the building is offset and lies at the west side of the north (front) façade and features sidelights with wide, vertically-ribbed glass panels and a leaded-glass transom featuring a floral motif. The door panel appears to be a modern solid-panel wood door with no decoration. Concrete steps lead from the sidewalk to a concrete slab porch with concrete-capped brick posts and decorative wrought iron railing, wrapping around the side of the building to the east. The majority of the original windows appear to be one-over-one double hung wood sash. A very large two-story window opening created in 1959 features at the east side of the north (front) façade and has 24 square lights, four across and six high. A single one-over-one (1/1) double-hung wood sash frame window features above the primary entrance. A dormer roof projection features at the center of the attic and has three leaded-glass window panels. At the east façade, one-over-one (1/1) double-hung wood sash frame windows feature at the first and second floors in the front and rear rooms, while a one-story bay window with a three-panel window projects from the façade at the first floor. A door opening with transom provides access to the interior at the northern bay of the bay window. At the rear of the building, a previously open porch on the first floor has been enclosed and features a concrete step with wrought iron railing leading to a rear door. At the south (rear) façade, one-over-one (1/1) double hung sash wood frame windows feature at the second floor, while a small square window opening serves the room located at the southeast corner of the building. A large three-panel fixed sash window is located at the southwest room (kitchen) of the first floor. It is clear that a two-story porch formerly featured at the southeast corner of the building, which was later enclosed and clad with lap siding to match the rest of the house. The east façade has one-over-one (1/1) double-hung sash wood frame windows at the majority of openings on the first and second floors, with the

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exception of a rectangular stained glass fixed panel with a pond-themed botanical motif in the center of a projecting rectangular bay at the first floor dining room. The roof is mainly hipped, with two small cross-hipped areas where the attic dormer and bay window feature. The exterior of the house is in poor condition, with large portions of the soffit missing due to moisture intrusion at the roof level. The accessory building at the rear of the building is not currently accessible, but appears to have a garage at the first floor and living space at the second floor. A metal staircase leads to the upstairs space which features similarly-sized window openings to the main house. The window and door openings at both floors are obscured by plywood coverings. An ornate fountain with colorful glazed tiles is situated in the rear yard between the main house and accessory building. The fountain was saved by Virginia Kiah from the Bijou Theatre on Broughton Street in downtown Savannah when it was demolished. Some tiles are deteriorated and spalling, but the overall structure of the fountain appears intact.

The primary entrance of the museum and house opens into a large two-story gallery space. A formal wood staircase with a landing leads to the second floor where a narrow catwalk balcony featuring the same decorative wrought iron panels found on the front porch overlooks the gallery. Virginia Kiah's upright piano sits in an recessed area along the balcony's wall. The newel posts, railings and balusters are missing from the stairs. An exposed brick firebox is all that remains of a fireplace that formerly featured at the east wall of the gallery. The walls and ceilings throughout the first floor are plaster and the floors are narrow tongue-and-groove wood. The plaster and wood floors are in poor condition, and a large hole has formed in the northeast corner of the room where water has clearly entered from the roof. Most doors throughout the first floor are simple solid two-panel wood doors, and the window and door trim and baseboards are of a simple design, typical of the early 20th century period of construction. A large plaster ceiling medallion lies at the center of the room and is likely one of the architectural elements Virginia Kiah saved from demolished buildings in Savannah and incorporated in her redesign of the house and museum. To the south of the gallery is another open space that was likely an extension of the gallery during the operation of the museum. A fireplace with glazed ceramic tile features along the south wall of this room, and an Art Deco glass chandelier, likely another salvaged architectural element, hangs from the center of the ceiling. To its south lies an office room with wall-to-wall shelving on its west and north walls. Wood pocket doors lead west from the gallery extension into a formal dining room. A butler's pantry to the south of the dining room leads to the kitchen featuring a mixture of original built-in cabinetry and mid-20th Century décor, appliances, and fixtures, along with a small storage closet. A small room with a clothes closet lies to the east of the kitchen and is only accessible on the interior from the kitchen via a wood screen door. The screen door may be a vestige of the open porch prior to its enclosure. An exterior door provides egress along the east wall of the small room. A small bathroom lies under the staircase and features mid-20th century pink corner pedestal sink, toilet, and bath fixtures that were likely added during the 1959 renovations.

The second floor features a central hallway at the top of the stairs flanked by a bathroom, closets, and three bedrooms. The bathroom is the larger of the two and likely was privately used by the Kiahs in their upstairs residence. The bathroom features mid-20th century finishes and fixtures and includes an opening with a rectangular aquarium in the back wall of the bath. The aquarium sits on a platform in the closet space to the south of the bathroom. A large linen closet with shelving lies at the right side of the end of the hallway and another bedroom with small closet features at the southwest corner of the second floor. Another, larger bedroom is at the southeast corner of the second floor and appears to have originally been a porch that was enclosed at some point in the past. This bedroom features a small pedestal sink in its northeast corner, a small closet, and the attic stairs are accessible in this room. A third bedroom located at the east side of the north end of the hall near the balcony features a fireplace with a similar glazed tile surround like the one below it, and built-in shelves and cabinetry. Like the first floor, the floors on the second level are all wood tongue-and-groove and the walls and ceilings appear to all be plaster. The ceilings in the rooms along the eastern side of the rooms at the second floor have been compromised by water intrusion and many areas of plaster have fallen onto the floor.

The building maintains a high level of integrity associated with the Kiah Museum (1959-1973) in the survival of much of its original 1913 floorplan, architectural materials, and finishes, along with the character-defining features from the era of the Kiah Museum. The combined survival of architectural details from both eras of its history provide a unique and significant example of mid-20th century adaptive reuse.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL HISTORY: Black Ethnic Heritage

ART

EDUCATION

Period of Significance

1959-1973

Significant Dates

1913 – Original Construction Date

1959 – Conversion to a Museum Space

2001 – Structure Becomes Vacant

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Virginia Jackson Kiah

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

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Period of Significance (justification)

The period 1959-1973 represents the establishment of the Kiah Museum in 1959 and the conversion of the residence into a museum space, while 1973 is the end date of the historic period.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The Kiah Museum at 505 West 36th Street is significant at the local level under Criterion A for Social History and Black Ethnic Heritage as the first African American museum in Savannah and under Criterion B in the areas of Art, and Education for its association with its founder, Virginia West Jackson Kiah. Constructed in 1913, the large two-story Queen Anne residential building was remodeled in 1959 into a combined residence and museum for the community by its owners, Virginia and Dr. Calvin Kiah, recognized as “pioneers in the Black cultural and museum movement (ADMI 2021).” Located within the historically Black West Savannah neighborhood of Cuyler-Brownville, the nationally-recognized Kiah Museum was the first African American museum in Savannah. The informal museum offered local youth the opportunity to visit a public and admission-free museum within a familiar and comfortable context during a significant period of racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. A skilled, nationally-recognized portrait painter, Virginia Kiah was inspired to open a “museum for the masses” based upon her own experience of being excluded from visiting museums as a Black child during the era of Jim Crow in Baltimore, Maryland. A naturally gifted artist, Virginia developed her talent and developed as a successful artist in spite of the challenges facing her as a Black artist during the period of Jim Crow segregation. She was recognized during her active artistic period as being the only Black woman portrait painter in Maryland, and possibly the in the country (Chico). Virginia and Calvin Kiah were passionate community activists who used art and education as their contribution to local civil rights efforts, opening up their own home to give “African American youth a window into a world of imagination and artistic acceptance that was not allowed anywhere else in the city (ADMI).” The museum featured paintings, drawings, sculptures, furniture, china, fossils, architectural elements, and other diverse collections appealing to a broad range of interests (ADMI). The Kiah Museum served the local community until Virginia’s death in 2001 and remains a revered community landmark that many Black Savannahians credit with having a significant impact on their lives as young people (ADMI).

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Criterion A

The Kiah Museum opened in 1959, representing the realization of Virginia Kiah’s lifelong dream of creating a museum that people from all backgrounds and ethnicities could experience. As a child in Baltimore, Maryland, she was discouraged from entering museums such as the Baltimore Museum of Art. Although not necessarily legally barred from entering, she recalled in a 1975 interview that “well, if you’d go to a museum, they would -- I mean there would be somebody at the door who would ask, ‘what do you want?’ And we’d explain what we wanted to do. They should have known definitely why we would be going to a museum and find that they would let us come in. But they didn’t encourage it. There was an icy attitude. And the same in the deep south. This is the first state south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and of course, in the deep south, you know, until recently you couldn’t even attend a museum either (Mitchell 1975).” Her mother encouraged her childhood dream of one day opening a museum by helping Virginia collect artifacts to display in her future museum. She recalled: “She said, ‘Virginia, one of these days you will have a museum. I will help you. Don’t pay attention to these people who are laughing at you.’” Her mother also recognized Virginia’s innate talent as an artist at a young age, and encouraged her to create art where she could and strongly supported her education as a developing artist during her youth. Her mother owned property, including apartments, and some of Virginia’s early collection pieces were items left behind by white tenants like furniture, china, and glass (Mitchell). She continued to collect eclectic items for her future museum throughout her life, even after marrying her husband, Calvin Kiah, in 1932. As an adult, she worked as a portrait artist for many years in Maryland and Georgia, and taught art at high schools in Savannah, Georgia after moving to the city in 1951. Throughout this time, she held on to her dream of having her own museum one day. She recalled that “my husband had promised me that the next

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time we moved, we'd get a house large enough for me to have a museum for little children to come and enjoy. It would be a learning museum, my kind of museum, with animals, Indian artifacts, Civil War relics, antique furniture, and artwork. And it should be free for everyone. This all came about, with Calvin paying all expenses (Smith 1974)."

Virginia and Calvin Kiah purchased the house at 505 West 36th Street in 1959 and immediately began converting the house into a combination museum and residence. The couple intentionally chose the traditionally Black neighborhood of Cuyler-Brownsville as the location so that the museum would serve as a community landmark and beacon of pride for the neighborhood (ADMI). Virginia designed the renovation plans herself and she and Dr. Kiah oversaw the construction (COS). Neighbor Lavinia Jenkins recalled in a video interview about the museum how, as a child, she watched the activity from her house across the street. She was "intrigued" by what they were going to do with the house after watching workers remove the porch and front two bedrooms (YouTube 2017). In addition to the removal of the porch, the Kiahs removed windows from the eastern side of the front façade and cut a large two-story window with divided lights into the wall, presumably to make the front façade look more modern. On the interior, the front two bedrooms on the second floor were removed to open up the front interior space into an open, two-story space lit by the large window. The wood balusters and handrails were removed from the stairs, and were replaced with modern wrought iron railings that extended to a catwalk balcony overlooking the open two-story space. The bathrooms were remodeled, including the second floor master bathroom which included an aquarium embedded in the wall of the shower/bathtub. The alterations allowed the museum space to occupy the first floor, stairwell, and balcony, reserving the second floor spaces for the Kiah's private residence. Her eclectic collections included architectural elements from the "remains of old savannah buildings," including a cast iron bracket from the City Market, a ceiling medallion from the Nurses Chapel of the Cathedral of Saint John the Devine, a tile fountain from the Bijou Theatre, and items from the Pape School, the old DeSoto Hotel, and other pieces from private homes (YouTube 2017; Chico; COS). Other notable items included African carvings, Native American artifacts, the Howard J. Morrison, Jr. Osteological exhibit, sea life specimens, a 15 million-year-old fossil, paintings by Harlem Renaissance painter, William Johnson, Louis XV and XVI period chairs, and an original wood block print by Albrecht Dürer (COS).

The Kiah Museum opened on November 28th, 1959 with guests including Louis B. Toomer, the Register of the U.S. Treasury and founder of Carver State Bank, the first African American bank in Savannah (COS). In an undated video interview, Dr. Kiah describes the museum: "This museum has been a teaching museum. All of these different pieces of artwork that you see on the walls are not segregated as they are in most museums. Oil paintings together, graphics together, sculpture together. You may see a painting and then beside it, a graphic piece of work, which could be pen and ink, or it could be a gouache drawing. It could be a watercolor (YouTube 2016)." Neighbor Lavinia Jenkins described the museum as a "bit of sunshine" in the neighborhood, recalling fond memories of the fish aquarium in the bathroom, paintings on every wall surface, and tropical plants outside (YouTube 2017). A piano was located on the balcony above the main gallery and neighbors recall Virginia playing the piano and singing often (Johnson-Simon 2022). The creation and success of the museum enabled the Kiahs to provide a tangible and invaluable contribution to the community through their own unique form of activism. As described in the recent application for a historical marker for the museum, "Public historians Mack and Welch noted, 'In creating their own organizations and institutions, African Americans historically have developed ways to address both needs and aspiration that fostered values of community, service, and mutual support. In this vein, museums were among the institutions established to both serve Black communities and serve as vehicles for social change. (ADMI).'"

The Kiah Museum was a pioneer in the city of Savannah, serving not only as the first museum welcoming everyone, but also as one of the first museums in the city. When the Kiah Museum opened in 1959, only six museums were featured in the Savannah City Directory for that year: the Davenport House Museum; the Juliet Gordon Low Birthplace; the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences; the Owens-Thomas House Museum; the Old Fork Museum at 121 East 31st Street; the Colonial Dames House at 329 Abercorn Street. Many of these institutions and organizations were and remain well-attended and well-funded, due to their historic affiliation with wealthy white Savannahians. The house at 505 West 36th Street is not listed in the 1959 or 1960 city directories as a museum, but only as the residence of Calvin and Virginia Kiah. The Youth Museum of Savannah, later known as the Savannah Science Museum, was incorporated as a non-profit in 1954 and opened its doors in 1960. Located at 4405 Paulsen Street, the museum offered a live animal experience, a planetarium, natural life exhibits, and classes in astronomy and other science-related topics. Early 1960s brochures from the museum feature many photographs of young white people enjoying various activities at the museum, but no Black children are represented. There is no explicit language in the brochures indicating that Black children were not welcome, but segregation of such a facility is consistent with that of other institutions and public spaces within the city at that time. It is likely that Virginia was very

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familiar with this peer museum and sought to offer similar experiences to a more inclusive audience within her own museum, including live animals and other natural specimens (GHS).

The museum was listed in the Museum Association of Savannah guides during the 1970s and Virginia was one of the first members of color of the association, now known as the Coastal Museums Association (CMA). Virginia and the museum were also listed in the African American Museums Association's (AAMA) first directory (Bull Street; ADMI). In the early 1970s, Reader's Digest included the museum in its *Treasures of America* book, giving the museum national recognition through an ubiquitous American publication known to and accessible by all Americans (ADMI). Closing in 2001 upon Virginia's death, the Kiah Museum would remain the only museum located within or focusing on Savannah's Black community until the establishment of the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum in 1996.

The success of the museum was made possible by the strong partnership between Virginia and Calvin, who supported each other throughout their education and careers, often traveling between New York City, Maryland, Atlanta, and Savannah during their marriage to support their varied interests and commitments. The museum they established to deliver their special form of activism through education and inspiration was funded by Calvin's salary, proceeds from the sale of Virginia's artwork, and income from several rental properties in Savannah owned by the Kiah's (Johnson-Simon). The acquisition of property for the purposes of creating a steady rental income was likely learned by Virginia from her mother, who earned income from several rental properties in Baltimore that enabled her to dedicate her life to service. The Kiah's were staunch community activists and used their positions to support local preservation activities and establish advocacy groups like the 36th Street Neighborhood Improvement Association. For example, neighbor Lavinia Jenkins recalled in a video interview that the Kiah's were responsible for successfully encouraging the City of Savannah to leave the brick surface of 36th Street instead of paving it over (YouTube 2017). The museum embodied the Kiah's' unique contribution to the civil rights movement through education and the arts, and the legacy of the Kiah Museum lives on in the memories of many Savannahians. The Kiah Museum maintains a high level of historic integrity through the retention of its floor plan as configured during its time as a museum, and maintains many of its historic features and materials.

Criterion B

Virginia Kiah was a remarkable individual, both as a nationally-recognized artist and as a dedicated educator. Despite growing up without access to museums and other resources available to white citizens, she persevered in her objective to become an artist and share art with others. In addition to developing her own artistic skills throughout her life, she was instrumental in educating, encouraging, supporting, and promoting other Black artists within her own communities and all over the United States. A prolific portrait painter, she is described in the 1977 book *Notable Maryland Women* as being the "only noted woman Negro portrait painter in the state of Maryland (Chico)." Throughout her career, she painted many portraits of Black community leaders, along with other subjects ranging from neighborhood children to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Her works have been exhibited in or remain in the collections of many museums and galleries, including the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Eggleston Galleries in New York City, Morgan State College, in several Baltimore churches, and the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia (Chico; Art and Object). She realized her dream of opening her own "museum for the masses" in Savannah, Georgia in 1959, where anyone of any age or ethnicity could visit an informal museum space filled with art, furniture, natural specimens, and other eclectic items for free. She also established the Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, dedicated to preserving the legacy of the Baltimore civil rights movement, within which her mother, Lillie Mae, was a significant figure. Committed to promoting Black art and ensuring that access to art was open to everyone, she also helped establish the National Conference of Artists and a traveling international United Nations art show to expose youth all over the world to art from other countries. Her achievements as a Black woman artist in an era of institutional segregation are extraordinary, and her passion for art, education, and community lend additional support to recognizing her significance as an individual under Criterion B in the areas of Art and Education.

Virginia West Jackson was born in 1911 in East St. Louis, Missouri to Kieffer and Lillie May Jackson and grew up in Baltimore, Maryland (Chico). Her parents were both very active and well-known leaders in the civil rights movement in Baltimore and both held degrees from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Lillie May from Morgan State and Kieffer from Alcorn College. Her mother, locally known as "Ma Jackson" in Baltimore, served as president of the local

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National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for 34 years (Chico), and her daughters Virginia and Juanita led the first NAACP youth division (ADMI). Her mother instilled the importance of education as paramount to overcoming segregation, with one of her mottos being “one must judge people by their actions, not by the way they look (Chico).” She advanced quickly through school and was a natural artist at a very young age, often drawing her classmates in pencil and carving figures out of wood (Mitchell). As a child, she was extremely frustrated that she was not allowed to visit museums in Baltimore because of her race, and asked her mother to promise her that she would have a museum one day “where everyone could go (YouTube 2016).” Her mother helped her collect items for her museum beginning in 1936 (Chico), and many of those items went on to be displayed in the Kiah Museum many years later (YouTube 2016). She applied to the Maryland Institute of Art in the 1920s and was denied admission due to the discriminatory practices common at the time (Hathaway 1977). Virginia ultimately gained admission to The Philadelphia Museum School of Art and was its only Black female student, studying portraiture and graduating in 1931 with a bachelor’s degree. Having no formal art training prior to attending the prestigious art school, she struggled early on due to her limited experience. She persevered, however, earning a scholarship in her second year and prizes for drawing in her third year (Chico). After graduation, she obtained a teaching certification from the State of Pennsylvania. In 1936-37, she studied under artists at the Art Students League in New York City and won fourth prize for a portrait of actress Paulette Goddard in a national contest sponsored by Columbia Motion Pictures (Chico). Virginia was most passionate about portraiture painting and this became the discipline for which she is most well-known. She married Calvin Lycurgus Kiah, a high school educator, in 1932, and the couple moved to the Eastern Shore of Maryland (Chico).

Virginia’s career as a portrait artist blossomed during the early 1930s. In 1939, a portrait in pencil titled “Boy with the Open Mouth” was featured in the 1939 Annual Exhibition of Maryland Artists, and was the only artwork from the exhibit that traveled around the country. During this period, she often traveled to New York City from Maryland to paint portraits of Black ministers and pastors of churches, many of which she had visited as a child with her parents. She worked prolifically through the 1930s and 1940s, painting numerous church, community, and civil rights leaders in New York and Maryland, including Carl Murphy, the President of the Afro-American Newspaper in Baltimore, and Mrs. Susie Love, the first woman graduate of Morgan State College, an HBCU. Author Beverly Berghaus Chico interviewed Virginia in 1977 for the book *Notable Maryland Women*, capturing Virginia’s artistic ethos and process in this passage: “...Virginia would show samples of her work, and point out the importance of paintings as contributions to the community. She would also point out that paintings, if treated properly, could be guaranteed to last much longer than photographs. She also explained that a painting allowed the character of the subject to be depicted. Further, she indicated that the artist first completes research on the life of the individual to be painted, and then on canvas the dominant qualities which distinguish this person from all others are brought out. She explained that a face is worked to show kindness, intellectual power or maybe concern for others; while the hands can express strength or weakness (Chico).” During this prolific time in her professional life as a painter, she also earned a B.A. and an M.A from Columbia University (Chico).

In 1951, Virginia and Calvin Kiah moved to Savannah, Georgia, where Calvin was appointed as the Chairman of the Education Division at the Historically Black Savannah State College, now Savannah State University. Between 1951 and 1963, Virginia taught art at Beach High School in Savannah and dedicated herself to helping young artists develop their skills and find opportunities through scholarships and exhibits (SCAD). During this period, she also continued to paint portraits of individuals throughout the Eastern United States in her home studio. In 1959, Virginia and Calvin purchased a house at 505 West 36th Street in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Cuyler-Brownville, developing the space as a combined home and museum known as the Kiah Museum. The establishment of this museum was the culmination of a lifelong dream of Virginia’s to create a free museum where anyone could enjoy and learn about art, history, science, and other topics. When Calvin moved to Atlanta in 1967 to take a position at another university, she commuted between Savannah and Atlanta so she could continue to operate the museum. As the first museum operated by and dedicated to serving the Black community, the small but unique Kiah Museum stood in stark contrast to the majority of other museums in the city of Savannah which were comprised of historic homes of wealthy white families and traditional art museums. The museum served as a community landmark within Cuyler-Brownville and the surrounding Black neighborhoods, while also attracting a number of out-of-town tourists.

While operating the museum, Virginia helped found the National Conference of Artists in 1959 with other Black artists from around the country to bring recognition and organizational support to Black art students and established artists. Virginia served as the national director of student artists for the group, also leading its Savannah chapter (ADMI). Students from the

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group, led by Virginia, embarked on a project to beautify Chatham Square in Savannah in 1963. They designed landscape beds, planted new flowers and plants, and installed a sundial dedicated to community leader, Louis B. Toomer. Their efforts were not welcomed by some white Savannahians who destroyed their work in the dark of night. Virginia and the students were not deterred and completed the project, receiving praise and recognition from Savannah Mayor Malcolm McLean in a ceremony on the square on January 16th, 1964 (YouTube 2016). Virginia also established international art exchanges for student art with the United Nations and schools in Hawaii and Ghana, where artwork would travel between nations all over the world, exposing students to different cultures and expressions (Chico). Dr. Calvin Kiah moved to Atlanta in 1967 when he accepted the position of Vice President of Academic Affairs at Georgia State College (now Georgia State University), desegregating the university's academic staff (FindAGrave). Virginia commuted between Savannah, Atlanta, and Baltimore, Maryland, where she established the Lillie Carroll Jackson Civil Rights Museum in 1978. Her mother willed the family home to Virginia with the direction that she convert the home into a museum dedicated to the Baltimore civil rights movement with a focus on the contribution of women (ADMI). Virginia operated both museums in Baltimore and Savannah concurrently for many years, and the Baltimore museum is still operational. Although she continued to paint and create during the period of the museum's operation, her focus shifted to maintaining the museum, enabling young Black artists to learn and develop, and supporting and engaging the community. Virginia served as a Trustee at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in the 1980s and formed a close relationship with the college (SCAD 2023). SCAD holds a large collection of her artwork and named one of its campus buildings, Kiah Hall, in honor of her. In 1986, SCAD conferred an Honorary Doctor of Humanities degree on Virginia (Johnson-Simon 2022).

She painted and produced art throughout her lifetime, building a large, but indeterminate, body of work. Virginia did not sign much of her artwork, particularly her portraiture, because she disliked the tedium of painting her name in small letters. It is possible that many of her works remain unattributed to her because of this. Dr. Deborah Johnson-Simon of the ADMI has assumed the challenging undertaking of documenting all of Virginia Kiah's surviving works and her work is ongoing. Much of Kiah's portraiture is known to exist throughout the country in private collections and in museums or galleries, but the current location of some of her known work remains unknown. Some of the figures captured by Virginia Kiah include President Dwight D. Eisenhower, President John F. Kennedy, family members, neighborhood children, local business and civic leaders, musicians, pastors, and other individuals Kiah deemed worthy of recognition. Kiah's portraiture work has been exhibited at many institutions and galleries, including the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Eisenhower Museum (Independence, Kansas); the SCAD Museum of Art; Baltimore Women's Civic League; The Carnegie Institute; Eggleston Galleries (New York City); and the National Council of Negro Women's Conference (Chico; SCAD). Kiah mailed her portrait of Dwight D. Eisenhower to the White House in 1956 and received a personal thank you note from the president, now in SCAD's collection of her work (SCAD). Notably, several of her portraits were displayed in a special week-long exhibition in the United States Capitol Rotunda in 1985. The exhibition was arranged by Kiah's brother-in-law, Representative Parren J. Mitchell of Maryland, and Representative Louis Stokes of Ohio. Mr. Mitchell was the first elected Black Congressman to the United States House of Representatives from Maryland and was a founder and Chairman of the Congressional Black Congress (Johnson-Simon 2023; Jet 1985).

Following the passing of her husband, Calvin, Virginia's health declined and she moved into a nursing home in 1999, leaving the museum property and its contents vacant. Virginia passed away on December 28, 2001. The property, its contents, and her entire estate were the subject of legal disputes for many years until the Historic Savannah Foundation (HSF) purchased the property through its Revolving Fund in 2022. The fund enables HSF to save threatened historic properties and offer potential buyers incentives to purchase and restore the buildings. The Friends of the Kiah Museum was formed in 2014 by the Center for the Study of African and African Diaspora Museums and Communities (CFSAADMC), now known as the African Diaspora Museology Institute (ADMI), and is dedicated to leading "a coordinated strategy to secure and preserve the Kiah House Museum, strengthen and advance the Cuyler Brownsville. Neighborhood through long term economic development and community revitalization (Seifert)." In 2021, the Kiah House was included in that year's Georgia Trust Places in Peril list (ADMI). In 2022, the ADMI led the effort to raise funds to fabricate and place a historical marker at the museum site, aided by the Friends of the Kiah Museum, Ethos Preservation, and the Savannah Archeological Alliance (ADMI). The Kiah Museum maintains a high level of historic integrity through the retention of its floor plan as configured during its time as a museum along with many of its historic features and materials.

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Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

Cuyler-Brownville

The Cuyler-Brownville neighborhood and Historic District consists of historic residential, commercial, and institutional buildings and is one of Savannah's oldest Black communities. Bordered by Ogeechee Road and Hopkins Street to its west, Montgomery Street on the east, Anderson Street to its north, and Victory Drive to its south, the district's name is based upon the Cuyler School District and the Brownville Community. The early development of the area arose from the movement of former enslaved people from rural areas into the more urban area of Savannah after the Civil War. The 160-acre district maintains a variety of sizes, types, and styles dating from the 1880s through the 1930s, including one and two-story rowhouses for laborers in the Folk Victorian style and one and two-story single-family middle-class detached residences in the Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Craftsman, Neoclassical Revival, and Folk Victorian styles (NRHP 1998).

505 West 36th Street

The side hallway house at 505 West 36th Street is representative of the section of the Cuyler-Brownville historic district dating from its peak period of development between 1910-1920 and originally featured elements of the Queen Anne and Prairie styles (NRHP). While Cuyler-Brownville is currently and historically a predominantly a Black neighborhood, the first several residents and owners of the house were notably white, some of whom were members of the Jewish community. In fact, the 1940 census records the entire 500 block of West 36th as having entirely white residents, but with Black residents occupying the next block (Seifert 2018). The first owners of the home were Elliot and Kittie Parrish, who owned and occupied the home between 1913 and 1921. Mr. Parrish worked as an accountant and bookkeeper. Phillip and Frances Kandel purchased the house from the Parrish family in 1921 and the Kandel family occupied the home until 1949. Mr. Kandel worked as a hatter and died in 1923, shortly after moving into the home. Mrs. Kandel continued to live in the home after her husband's death, working as an insurance agent and taking on boarders in the house for extra income. Between 1937 and 1940, city directories list the house as the Sunshine Inn, and Mrs. Kandel continued to live in the house until her death in 1949. The Kandel's sold the home to Joe Rabinowitz in 1949, who owned the house for only a year, apparently as a rental property. In 1951, Henry and Lessie Edenfield purchased the house and lived there until 1955, when Marie F. Kelson purchased the home as a rental property. A series of short-term renters lived in the house during Kelson's ownership, including the home's first Black residents, Tony and Maggie Everhart. The Everharts rented the home between 1955-58, and city directories record that occupants were also renting the carriage house (505 ½) during this period. In 1959, Calvin and Virginia Kiah purchased the home. The first listing for the Kiahs in the city directories record Calvin's occupation as a "Chairman" at Savannah State College, tenants Paul and Cornelia Stevens are listed as occupants in the carriage house. It does not appear the house was altered from its original construction until 1959. Ms. Lavinia Jenkins, a neighbor who lives directly across the street at 504 West 36th street, reported to researchers that the house at 505 West 36th Street had a very similar style and configuration as her home prior to the 1959 renovations. Some apparent missing elements of the Queen Anne style house are a wraparound porch at the first floor and original windows on the north façade (Chatham County; Seifert).

Kiah Family

Virginia Kiah's parents, Keiffer and Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson, were well-known civic and religious leaders in Virginia's hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. Keiffer Albert Jackson was born in Carrollton, Mississippi in 1883 to a purported white father and Black mother. He was so light-skinned that his daughters Virginia and Juanita recalled that he often passed as a white person. He witnessed several lynchings and other violent acts against the Black community as a child and resolved to leave Mississippi and the South, which he did at age 16. Lillie Mae Carroll was born in Baltimore in 1889, and was descended from Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland, and was reportedly the great-granddaughter of a free African chief, John Bowen. She married Kieffer Jackson in 1909 and they shared four children: Virginia, Juanita, Marion, and Bowen (Hathaway). In 1908, Kieffer began a traveling motion picture business where he filmed, produced and screened religious-themed silent films in Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware for mostly rural Black audiences who did not have access to theatres. The films featured Black religious leaders and businessmen, and were intended to provide audiences with a positive illustration of the Black community, countering the prevalent minstrel characters depicted in contemporary mainstream films. An evangelical Baptist, he would often deliver lectures during the silent films, with Lillie Mae singing spiritual songs as an

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accompaniment. He and Lillie took their four children, including daughters Virginia and Juanita, on the road with them through 28 states over many years, performing one-night-stand presentations and shows (Hathaway). The couple settled in Baltimore, Maryland, but Kieffer continued to operate his motion picture business until the 1940s, continuing to provide rural Black audiences with the opportunity to view films (Mitchell; Chico). Lillie Mae was brought up with a strong sense of service and community and committed to teaching her children the same principles. Virginia recalled, “we both were reared—my mother and father used to tell us about racial discrimination and injustice and the cruelties as being ungodly, sinful (Mitchell).” Lillie Mae’s biography in the 1977 book *Notable Maryland Women* states that “she was taught that home, church, and school were the most influential institutions in building one’s character. On that premise, she built her philosophy of life and, in turn, impressed this philosophy on her own children. She firmly believed that everyone had a contribution to make to society, and that everyone should prepare himself for his life’s work through the acquisition of a superior education, for it was that education which would open the doors of opportunity regardless of racial barriers (Hathaway).”

In 1931, Lillie Mae formed a committee to campaign against economic discrimination with the Young Peoples’ Forum, led by her daughters Juanita and Virginia. The campaign was titled “Buy Where You Can Work” and was an early iteration of similar campaigns that would be prevalent throughout the 1960s in the United States. In 1935, Lillie Mae became the President of the Baltimore NAACP, one of the largest chapters of the organization in the United States (Johnson-Simon 2023; Hathaway). During her 34-year tenure as President, the membership of the chapter rose from 2,000 members in 1935 to 18,000 in 1946. Beginning in 1942, she led a series of campaigns to register Black voters, ultimately registering 67% of eligible Black voters by 1957 (Hathaway). Lillie Mae became well-known throughout Baltimore as a staunch civil rights and community leader throughout her life, earning the endearing nickname “Ma Jackson.” She was also a member of many important civil-rights organizations, including the National Urban League, the Maryland Council of Churches, the Council of Negro Women, and led the Maryland Conference of the NAACP. She owned several rental properties in Baltimore, allowing her to earn a substantial income while she dedicated the majority of her time to service, retiring at the age of 80 (Hathaway). The Jackson children all became successful adults, including Virginia, Maryland’s first Black woman portrait artist and founder of the Kiah Museum in Savannah, Georgia. Her daughter, Juanita Jackson Mitchell desegregated the University of Maryland Law School, becoming the first Black woman lawyer in the state. Marion became a concert singer, and son Bowen managed the family’s real estate holdings (Hathaway; Johnson-Simon 2023).

Calvin Kiah

Dr. Calvin Lycurgus Kiah was born in 1910 (findagrave.com) in Princess Anne, Maryland. Like Virginia, Calvin was also raised with a strong emphasis on education, and his father, Dr. Thomas H. Kiah, served as the President of the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore. Following his marriage to Virginia in 1932, the couple moved to the Eastern Shore of Maryland where Calvin taught high school science. He became the Principal at F. D. St. Clair High School in Cambridge in the mid-1930s, and received a master’s degree in Education from Columbia University in 1937. The couple lived in Cambridge, Maryland during the 1940s where Calvin’s occupation is recorded in the 1940 US Census as a high school principal and Virginia’s occupation is listed as a hobby artist (Seifert). Calvin served in the US Army between 1943 and 1945, but it is unclear in what capacity he served or if he served overseas. Calvin received a PhD from Columbia University in 1951, and the couple moved to Savannah the same year when Dr. Kiah was hired as the Chairman of the Education Division at Savannah State College (now Savannah State University). With the purchase and remodel of the house at 505 West 36th Street in 1959, he helped Virginia realize her lifelong goal of creating a museum with the establishment of the Kiah Museum. Although the museum was curated and managed by Virginia, the museum was substantially financially supported by Dr. Kiah. In 1967, Dr. Kiah was appointed Vice President of Academic Affairs at Georgia State College in Atlanta, serving as the first to desegregate the university’s administration (FindAGrave). He moved to Atlanta during his tenure at the college, commuting between Savannah and Atlanta. Dr. Calvin Kiah passed away in 1994, leaving a legacy of a lifelong dedication to education and community service. Dr. Kiah served in World War II, was a 33rd degree Mason, served as Secretary and Treasurer of the Toomer Realty Company’s Board of Directors, the Carver State Bank Board of Directors. The Kiahs were active members of Asbury United Methodist Church and donated a stained glass window to the church (ADMI).

9. Major Bibliographical References

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

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 # _____
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre.
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates
Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 32.0574 | Longitude: -81.1057 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	_____	_____	_____	3	_____	_____	_____
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____	_____
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary includes all property and structures within the eastern three fourths of Lot 24, Duncan Ward, Chatham County parcel identification number 2-0066-48-011, including the museum and outbuilding.

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Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary includes the limits of the original property conveyed to Virginia Kiah for the museum.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Becki Harkness
organization Ward Architecture + Preservation date _____
street & number 625 East 44th Street telephone 912-224-7463
city or town Savannah state GA zip code 31405
e-mail bharkness@wardarch.com

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Kiah Musuem
City or Vicinity: Savannah
County: Chatham State: Georgia
Photographer: Susannah Bull
Date Photographed: September 13, 2022

Description of Photograph(s) and number: *(this will be reduced to less than 50 prior to finalization)*

1 of ____.

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Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.