

Freedom Trail now leads to Meriden

► A Hillside Avenue house is the only building left that's associated with a pioneering black leader.

Page B1



CONNECTICUT HISTORICAL COMMISSION

al & Stat

Sunday, December 2

From Pa

Record-Journal

□ Hou

who was very prin-
forceful ... He spok
quently and very fo
very dynamically."

McCain, a Durha
gave nearly all the
for carrying out ex
search over the pas
which she is continui

George Jeffrey mo
den in 1852, workin
and buying the shop
He sold it in 1878 ar
devoted himself mai
cal and social cause
maining 28 years of

His wife, Martha
tinue to own a succ
parlor in downtown
attracted a raciall
clientele. Real es
show that in the ear
purchased the land
tion of their home on
ene. The couple en
cult family life — fi
children died as chil
adults, before their p

George Jeffrey w
member of the Rep
traveling to Chicago
to the national pres
nating convention in
necticut, he served f
ing the 1880s as a do
state Senate in Harf
of honor to which he
the Republican mem

In addition to ci
blacks, he campaign
of the anti-alcohol
movement and in fa
ng women the right

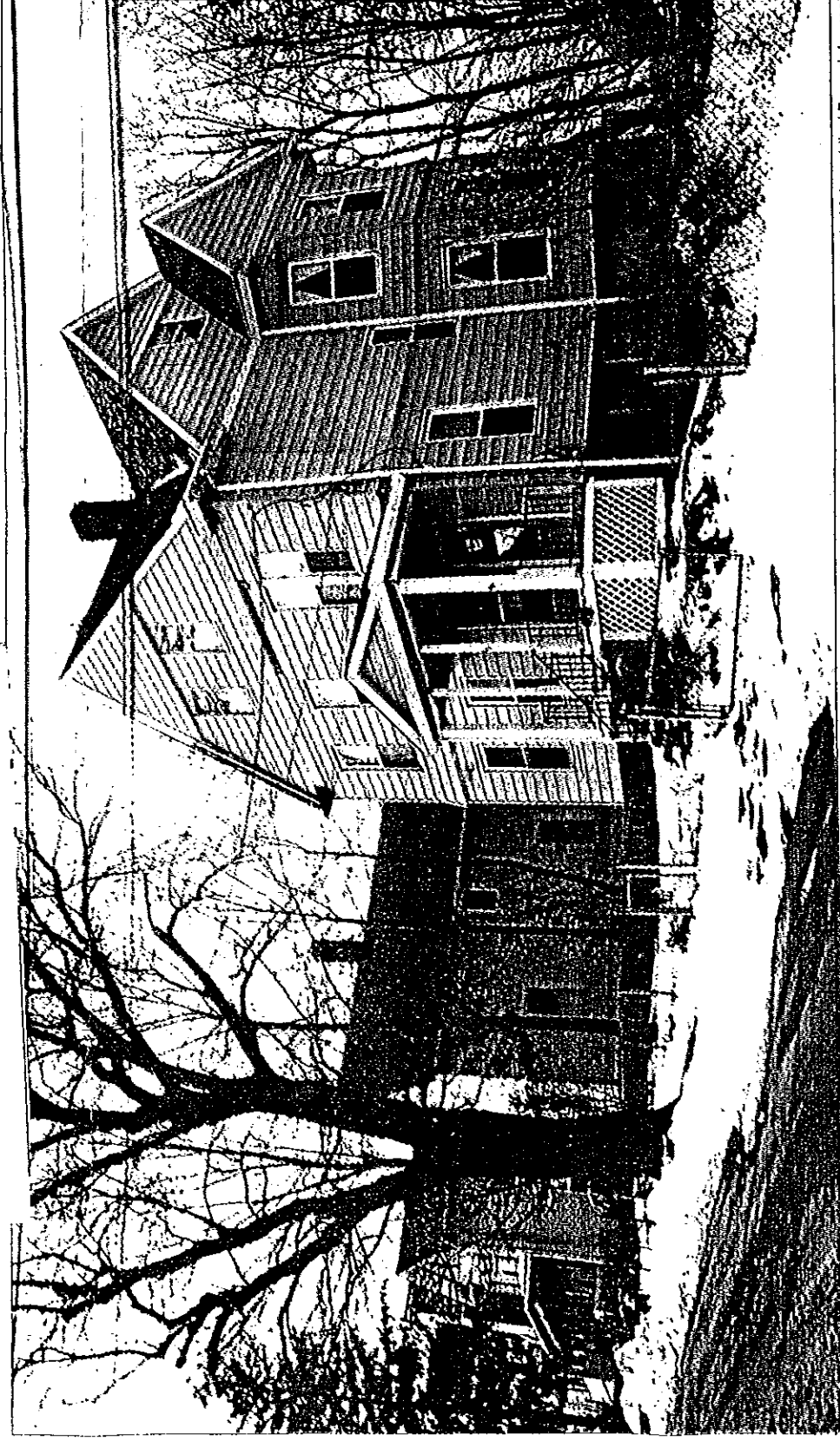
Accounts of Jeffr
and texts of his s
were printed in the
pers, rare for a bla
One article said he
for his rhetorical ab
who probably atten
years of elementar
was a newspaper
some years servin

Capitol correspon
Meriden Daily. R
changed its name i

Morning Record
today as the Record

Published accou
nual Lincoln Day d
a glimpse into
prominent place in
community and th
ticeable beginning
in the public life
the state. Many l
and at least four si
of Connecticut at
ners. In the late 1
or 300 blacks liv
according to old
frey's funeral, the
cluded a former g
necticut, a forr
Meriden and the
Meriden bank.

On Hillside A
ing Lewis Aven
the east, the Jef
2,200-square-foot
floor house. It st
steeply sloping lo
walk-in basemen



Michelle McLoughlin / Record-Journal

Above: 66 Hillside Ave., Meriden, has been added to the Connecticut Freedom Trail, a roster of places associated with black history in the state. **Below:** This 1892 photo shows a four-floor downtown Meriden block, left, where George Jeffrey lived with his family in an upstairs apartment. (Courtesy of Colleen Cyr)

House of city man prominent in civil rights efforts on map

By Martin J. Waters
Record-Journal staff

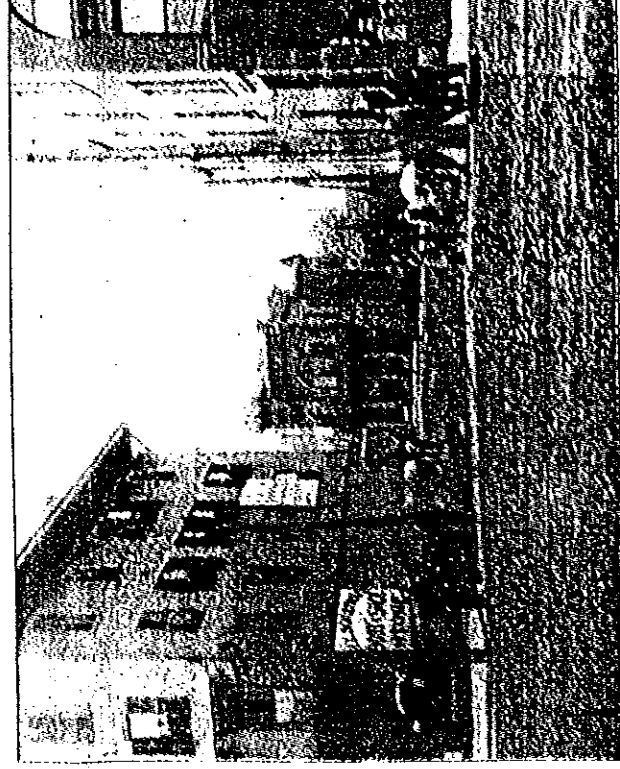
MERIDEN — Connecticut's Freedom Trail now leads to one of Meriden's narrowest back streets — and to a house that once was the home of George S. Jeffrey, a pioneering 19th-century black leader.

The nine-room wood-frame house at 66 Hillside Ave. is the only surviving building associated with Jeffrey. Built around 1895 by the Jeffrey family, it was his home until he died in 1906 at age 76.

Jeffrey was little known until recently, even among historians. But research in the past few years is developing a picture of an important state-level post-Civil War social and political activist.

Thanks mainly to the work of Meriden resident Colleen Cyr, the Connecticut Historical Commission made the Jeffrey house the latest addition to its Freedom Trail earlier this year. The trail is a roster of sites throughout the state that hold significance in black history. It now includes 62 sites in 33 cities and towns.

Jeffrey, who owned a barbershop in downtown Meriden, helped found a trailblazing civil rights organization, the Lincoln Colored People's Association of Meriden, around 1877. Building on connections he made with white legislative leaders in



Hartford, he gained enactment of a state law in 1887 that was aimed against anti-black discrimination by the life insurance industry.

The law is considered a spectacular civil rights success for its era, although later press reports said some insurers were trying to use loopholes to avoid the requirements. The law attempted to stop insurers from charging higher premiums to blacks or refusing to sell them life insurance.

Cyr, an avid genealogist and amateur historian who often researches the local black community, spotted a reference to the Lincoln Association in an obscure, newly-published academic history book in 2001. She went to work.

Jeffrey was an activist for political and social change throughout his adult life. Born in 1830, one of five children, he was raised in Middletown. He grew up in a prominent family of mixed black and Indian heritage where activism was all around him.

"He was a very complex man," said Cyr, who serves as historian for the Meriden-Wallingford chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "He was involved in many things. You can't just pigeonhole him."

Historian Diana Ross McCain, who worked on the Jeffrey case for the state Historical Commission, said he commanded respect from the white community through the force of his personality at a time when blacks, at best, usually still were treated as second-class citizens.

"The Lincoln club was remarkable, that they would meet every year, that it was an integrated group," she said. "They saw that this was a guy

Please see House / B7