

## The Preservation of African American Heritage Sites

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MSTD-A 517: Preventative Conservation

1 December 2025

## Introduction

By definition, a historic site refers to a specific location such as a building, structure, area, or piece of property that is officially recognized as having profound importance to the history, architectural heritage, archaeological understanding, or cultural identity of a country, state, or city (LSD Law, n.d.). This means, by definition, there is no reason African American historic sites should not be preserved like any other one in America. Like any other historic site, the structures hold a significant history and can tell people more about what life was like in the past through the perspective of an African American person. These historical sites provide a better understanding of African American culture. It also adds more context to the buildings, its surroundings, and what it means for it to exist in a space. There have not been any modern-day burnings, but there is still the continual destruction of their physical culture.

It is no coincidence that African American historical heritage sites are difficult to come by. It feels as though everyone else in America can trace their cultural histories back hundreds of years to a house or building of some sort, or they can see it preserved with the utmost care with the best preservation methods the world has to offer. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about African Americans. Throughout America's history there have been countless violent acts against African Americans and their homes. This includes their towns, businesses as well, resulting in the erasure of African American heritage sites. The constant destruction of African American communities has made it increasingly difficult to accurately depict the entirety of their history. They have found their own ways of preserving their cultural history, but it is not a method of preservation that can be done forever. There is still an inaccurate representation of African Americans in history. And because there is no physical evidence to show they were truly a part of history, they are viewed negatively and constantly must defend their culture. To better

understand the full story of African Americans and their journey, one must also understand why preserving their historical sites are important in the first place.

### **Preserving African American History**

#### *The Concerning Lack of Historical Evidence of African Americans*

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a thriving community of African American people in Forsyth County Oscarville, Georgia. At the time of its creation, racial tensions in the south were becoming increasingly concerning. “The year 1912 was also a time of continued racial violence in the South... whites regularly used lynchings to control the Black population” (Dodd and Harte, 2023). It was common for white supremacist groups to find an African American person to target, usually a male, and terrorize them to the point of death. Moreover, African Americans were often the ones to take the blame for any wrongdoings, especially if they did not commit it. For example, Oscarville was a town for African Americans to have families, businesses, and an education safely. The city was thriving and on its way to growing larger every year. However, in 1912 woman named Mae Crow was found sexually assaulted near the town. Three African American men — Rob Edwards, Ernest Knox, and Oscar Daniel — were accused of the crime. Their trials were swift with an all-white juror, and the three men were promptly lynched soon after.

After the lynchings of the three men, Oscarville was now on the state’s radar, and white supremacists wanted to get rid of every African American living there by any means necessary. The white residents of Forsyth County begin terrorizing Black families who live there (Dodd and Harte, 2023) by setting their homes and businesses on fire. They did not care about who or what was inside when they set the buildings aflame. By the end of 1912, over 1, 000 African

Americans had moved away from Oscarville and been displaced due to the harassment. Oscarville was originally home to about 250 families. The citizens sold their businesses and homes and picked up whatever they could carry to find another place to live. Other Oscarville citizens simply got their things and abandoned everything else. To make matters worse, everyone was forced to leave their deceased loved ones behind as well. People had built their lives around Oscarville, Georgia and now they had to leave it all behind because a woman accused three African American men of a crime they did not commit.

It was not until years later in 1956-57 that the infamous Lake Lanier was formed. Lake Lanier was a 10-year process that has resulted in the body of water seen and used by the public today. Visitors are able to do various activities on and near the water according to the Lake Lanier website. This includes sunbathing, shopping, hiking, jet skiing, dancing, and having a vacation with family (Discover Lake Lanier, n.d.). There is an entire lively community around this lake and the joyous ventures anyone of all ages can go on. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, Lake Lanier had caused a glaring issue. Its creation had completely flooded the town of Oscarville. Which is why, one would assume, there is no mention of Oscarville on the first website mentioned. To find out more information about the lake and its ramifications on Oscarville, there is another website buried on the second page of Google with a similar name. "As part of the eminent domain justification, the town of Oscarville was effectively erased" (Lake Lanier, n.d.). This is meant both literally and figuratively. Oscarville now sits at the bottom of Lake Lanier, unable to be touched or studied by scholars and historians; its history is completely washed away. For quite some time, their history was washed away as well and replaced with a vacation spot for visitors to relax and explore. This kind of treatment of African American spaces and histories is quite common. Their lives and homes are viewed as inferior to

everyone else's, never interesting or important enough to be mentioned unless one is actively searching for it. The truth of the matter is, though, even without the sexual assault of Mae Crow, Oscarville was more than likely always going to be flooded into ruin.

This is not the first instance of erasing potential African American historical sites due to racism. There are boundless stories throughout American history depicting racial violence against African Americans and their livelihoods, such as the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in Oklahoma. Whether it was caused by a fire, flood, or lynching, African American heritage sites have been carefully removed from history and viewed as flippant and unimportant. The failure to preserve heritage sites has also made it challenging for African Americans to find their cultural origin. Even if the site is preserved, it is not done with the same care and delicacy as other sites. "On the state level, tens of millions in taxpayer dollars has gone to Confederate statues, homes, parks, museums, libraries, and cemeteries over the past decade alone" (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020). The EJI article goes on to explain that there are almost 2,000 Confederate monuments that romanticize and glorify the Confederacy around the U.S. The same cannot be said about monuments discussing slavery, racial violence, or the depiction of African American people in a positive historical light. This also means African Americans' taxpayer money is helping fund the Confederate historical monuments. Without proper support from others, it will be nearly impossible to preserve heritage sites.

Even the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) struggles to understand why it is important to preserve African American historical sites. Despite them opening offices in all 50 states and creating millions of jobs for millions of people, their focus was primarily on white American history. "One of the criteria for preservation is architectural significance, meaning that modest buildings like slave cabins and tenement houses were long excluded from consideration"

(Cep, 2020). The slave cabins were not viewed as important and were simply cast aside. The longer they went without preservation, the faster they were deteriorating. The faster the cabins deteriorated, the easier it would be for the NHPA to continue denying their services to them. Cep explained by the time the preservationists even took notice of the cabins, they lacked the physical integrity to even be considered for protection. African Americans noticed NHPA's lack of initiative and protected the cabins on their own instead. They were determined to preserve these sites, even if it meant they had to do it all on their own. This is an extremely common theme for African Americans. If others will not protect them or their history, they will find a way to preserve it on their own, and with their own means.

#### *Preserving African American History at Home*

This continued deliberate widespread failure to preserve African American history has caused many of them to preserve their objects and histories in their own homes the only ways they know how. As a result of this, they feel extremely protective of their objects, yet they feel their objects hold no value. There have been countless times African American cultural history has been purposely ripped away from them, including their physical possessions. It did not matter if they built their lives from the ground up, racism would always find a way to destroy their communities. African Americans care deeply about their homes, businesses, livelihoods, and families, and they protect them fiercely. Sometimes, though, they no longer see the value in their items. African Americans will often downplay the importance of an object if they have had it for a lengthy amount of time.

For example, in Chapter 5 of *A Fool's Errand* by Lonnie Bunch, he visited the home of an unnamed African American woman in Los Angeles to collect some of her historical objects before the grand opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and

Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. Bunch, having an extensive background in curatorial work in various museums, was told by a trusted colleague this woman would have numerous objects of interest and value to the NMAAHC. Because there was a lack of [historical] objects, the museum was told it should focus its collecting on contemporary cultural productivity (Bunch, 2019). There are so little historically African American heritage objects that Bunch had to settle for contemporary objects and borrowing artifacts from other institutions. Not even a museum backed by the Smithsonian had access to African American objects because they no longer exist in the physical world.

Once Bunch got to the woman's home, he stated he wanted to peruse her objects. She had insisted she had nothing of value to give him. In fact, her exact words after she told him he could look in her garage were, "There is nothing in there" (Bunch, 2019). He wanted to confirm this for himself and started rummaging through all kinds of boxes. Bunch found a plethora of objects, which he stated became the core of his exhibition. He found uniforms and identification cards from when she worked in war industry plants in World War II and materials that documented a boycott of businesses that did not hire African Americans from the 1920s (2019). This unnamed woman had been storing significant African American history in cardboard boxes in her garage, and yet she did not seem to view these objects as important. Over time, to her, the uniforms, identification cards, and boycott documentation materials were just that: objects.

In the average African American home, it is quite common to find military uniforms, photos, awards, certificates, newspapers, and more inside a box shoved to the back of the closet. These objects to almost anyone in the family are viewed as valuable, important artifacts that tell their family's history. Photographs are especially important as that is one of the few ways anything can be permanently suspended in time. These photographs are often stored in albums

and will only be moved to a new one if they are out of space, but most of the time they are left alone. Nevertheless, African American households will keep their culture safe by storing the history away from prying eyes. These are only smaller objects, though. Objects such as the ones mentioned above can easily be stored away in boxes like the unnamed women in *A Fool's Errand*. However, there must be a way African Americans are preserving larger objects like their homes and neighborhoods.

## **How Can We Properly Preserve African American Historical Sites**

### *Local African American Homes & Neighborhoods*

The racial violence against African American people has created a large gap in their history. There is an obvious lack of historical heritage sites for African American people as of 2025. Of the 95, 000 sites on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), only 2 percent of them discuss the African American experience. Of this 2 percent, most of the heritage sites discuss African Americans and their connection to slavery. *In Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, author James W. Loewen discusses how some African Americans view slavery as a blight on their history. “Those African Americans who take slavery as a stain on the enslaved rather than the enslaver would indeed rather not think about it” (2000). There has been continued debate in the African American community about whether slavery must always go hand in hand with them. To some African Americans, slavery should not be the only topic of discussion. They believe there should also be topics about innovation, education, and the positive impact African Americans have left on the world throughout history. The quickest way to start with this is by looking at the average African American home and neighborhood.

There are historically African American neighborhoods that are only just now receiving acknowledgment of their existence, such as Ransom Place in Indiana. Ransom Place, like many African American neighborhoods in Indiana, was a thriving community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ruined by the displacement of its citizens to build structures on the Indiana University Indianapolis (IUI) college campus. In historical documents, the citizens of Ransom Place were described as living in a “ghetto slum”. The IUI documents depicted Ransom Place as an uncivilized, uncouth, and uneducated neighborhood that needed to be destroyed for the greater good of Indiana. It has not been until recently that Ransom Place’s story has gained more traction and support from its other communities and historical societies. But one must wonder how African Americans preserve their homes so they may not be lost to history

The town of Ransom Place was formed between the 1880s and 1890s (Encyclopedia of Indiana, n.d.). Many of the homes and buildings were constructed by the men living in the neighborhoods. They built these structures to endure the weather and their growing families. Due to expenses and accessibility, the homes were often one floor with no stairs or basement, also known as a ranch home. As time progressed and the original builders of the neighborhood had long died or retired, it was up to a new generation to preserve their history. However, they had no idea how to do that. They could make repairs to the interiors and exteriors all they wanted, but no one truly knew how to preserve a historical site.

### *The Preservation of African American Heritage Sites*

Heritage sites hold immense value to any community, but even more to communities who do not have the privilege of seeing it often. “The elimination of culture and destruction of cultural heritage has always been seen as powerful tools of domination and key for dismissing the values and norms people live by” (Palmer, 2024). The destruction of African American

heritage sites is not just due to racism, although it plays a large part. It is also about power and control. Burning, bombing, flooding, and lynching citizens an African American neighborhood is not just about hatred for someone's skin color, but it is also about controlling them by using fear. It is easy to get someone to do what you want if they are scared enough. Without them there to live, work, and exist in the buildings, it means nothing to destroy it and erase its existence from history. Despite how many times American history has attempted to stifle African American history, it continues to thrive almost everywhere.

There are multiple established African American heritage sites across the US. There are even ones local to Indiana, the state that once had the largest Ku Klux Klan population at one time or another, have been gaining more recognition and appreciation. Artists, such as Zola Lamothe who has displayed her series *Unveiling a Forgotten Legacy* in various galleries around the city, have garnered the attention of historians, community leaders, and other artists. Along with Ransom Place, The Madam J Walker Theater and Crispus Attucks are just a few African American historical sites that are not only being acknowledged but also being well preserved with the help of the city's community members and volunteers. There are various historical sites and neighborhoods around the US that need more work to be done, however.

The first step to preserving an African American heritage site is to care about keeping it alive. One must care about its history enough to want its story to be told. Without someone to care about African American history, there will be no history to preserve. Not only must one care about the history, but they must also be willing to find the truth. Too often history is erased or rewritten to make room for a more palatable version that will not ruffle any metaphorical feathers. However, an easy to digest history is not an accurate history, and an accurate history may not be easily digestible. "Another omission takes place at historic homes, which often do

not take their own history seriously enough to bother to tell it like it was” (Loewen, 2000). The author makes a point to mention it is common for historic home guides to discuss anecdotes rather than its historical context. Not only would they talk about anecdotes, but they would also barely acknowledge the African Americans that were enslaved to work there. To care about African American history is to be completely honest about it and cover each side of it. For example, a number of plantation homes in New Orleans have presented more accurate information about the slaves that lived and worked in those places (Linn-Tynen, 2020). Discussing slaves, learning their names, and talking about their families will make them feel more personal to others. People will find relatability in them and certainly not in the silverware people used to eat in the dining hall. To keep African American heritage sites from becoming a footnote in American history, one must care enough about the unseen people and tell their stories. One must also discuss the uncomfortable truth behind the sites.

The second step to preserving historical sites is to know what material the sites are made from and how to handle them in almost any state. Whether a person is a professional museum worker or someone who works in carpentry, one must know what materials a historical heritage site is made of. There are common materials such as wood, brick, stone, and glass. Some of the sites are located outdoors with little to no care put into them beforehand, meaning there will be inevitable issues with structural integrity, and the likeliness of pests increases tenfold. One must be prepared to deal with water, mold, rust, frass, asbestos, and any other hazardous materials they may encounter. Sometimes the site must have changes made to extend its life, but it will likely affect other parts of it. “The potential effect of a change on other elements and systems of the building must be fully understood” (American Institution for Conservation, n.d.). Because African American historical sites are viewed as insignificant by most, the sites are usually left to

rot away. This makes it problematic to preserve it or make any improvements to it, making one decide between telling history or sinking money into a site that truly has no more life left in it. Each modification made to a historical site must be understood to its fullest extent. If one were to better ventilation to a historic site, they must comprehend they risk harming other aspects of the site. Ensuring one understands how the building is structured and what materials were used in its creation will make one well prepared to deal with what may arise.

The last step to preserving African American heritage sites is documentation and record keeping. It may seem like the most obvious answer, but documentation is one of the most important steps one can take to ensure the preservation of a historical site that can be looked over. Documenting a historical site may take many forms, one of the most common being photos and videos. Photos of the interior and exterior of the site should be taken, especially if the home has lived through different eras lived through different eras. For example, the Lilly House on the grounds of Newfields aka Indiana Museum of Art in Indianapolis, Indiana were owned by the Lilly family, and they decorated the home according to different eras. These changes in the house are documented with labels and photos displaying them for visitors to see. They can view what adjustments were made inside the home as they explore it and compare it to what they see now. The public can only realize a heritage site's significance if they have access to it (Staniforth, 2006). Simply put, if it is out of sight then it is out of mind. The public and their opinion on topics add value to heritage sites. Auditory documentation is just as important as visual documentation. It may even be more important in the case of African Americans. Much of their history is told verbally through stories and passed from generation to generation. Capturing these oral histories on tape will seal the myths, stories, and even language vernacular in time. It

is even more meaningful when African Americans have public access to African American heritage sites and can see the value to holds to their history.

Record keeping a site also means there will be written evidence of it long after it is gone, which is why it is important for it to be consistent. It will aid future caretakers in how they can take care of the heritage site and its elements. “This is the only way to ensure that future generations understand why an object is in the condition it is” (Staniforth, 2006). Having written evidence of its existence, especially for African American heritage sites, means that it cannot be bombed, burned, flooded, or lynched away. It is not enough to document it; any changes made to it must be written down and stored in a safe place. Even if those documents are stored safely, they should be scanned in and put on a hard drive as well.

#### *Using African American Heritage Sites*

African American heritage sites are a great opportunity for the public to learn more about American history through the lens of a marginalized community that often had their voices taken away from them. Using the steps mentioned above and one’s own methodology, preserving a heritage site can come with many positive outcomes. One of the best ways to preserve any historical site is by having a clear space for the public to view it. For example, it is common for historical homes to have a designated path for visitors to walk on so they do not harm any of the objects. “Barrier Rope-and-stanchion barriers not only keep visitors away from vulnerable objects, but also allow everyone an uncluttered view of a room” (Staniforth, 2006). This protects the objects but also creates a positive experience for the visitors. It is also done by adding rugs to hardwood floors and tying cords around the seating so people do not use it. Even if all these precautions are taken, African American heritage sites are not well taken care of beforehand, and it takes quite a bit of money to preserve them.

African American heritage sites do not have the same financial stability as their white counterparts. As stated before, of the 95, 000 heritage sites on NHPA, only 2 percent of them discuss the African American experience while millions of taxpayer dollars go to preserving Confederacy monuments and sites. With the lack of care for African American history, it is going to take a lot of money to properly preserve a heritage site back to its former glory. Depending on the damage, it may be impossible to ever get a site stable enough to be open to the public long-term. It is not as though the community is not doing what they can. Local community members want to help, but that has proven to be difficult. “That kind of vulnerability is typical in marginalized communities, where few historic sites will ever sustain themselves with endowments or entry fees alone” (Cep, 2020). The African American heritage sites have been incredibly open with their communities about their financial instability and how that may affect the community later. The money is not just for the site, but for the staff that must aid in its preservation. Unfortunately, African Americans do not hold the same priority to others. Getting financial support through grants and other various means is difficult, and institutions do not want to have to charge high entry fees for their visitors to get in. Doing that will result in even fewer people visiting the site than ever. Even if local community members aid in the preservation of the heritage site, it more than likely will not be enough to sustain it for longer than a handful of years.

### **Final Thoughts**

When one looks back at America’s history and examines each side of its story, there is the common theme of African Americans creating a safe space for themselves to thrive only to have it stripped away one fateful day due to acts of hatred. Oscarville, Tulsa, Rosewood, East St. Louis, and Memphis are just a few of the many African American neighborhoods that were

destroyed by violent racism and white supremacy throughout history. Each of these violent acts has resulted in the complete destruction of African American homes and lives. Many African Americans were displaced and moved away, bringing only their families and the clothes on their backs. Others have been wrongfully arrested, or worse, shot and lynched by violent mobs. These actions have wiped out the neighborhoods, the people, their stories, and the truth from history books. African Americans have had to endure over 500 years of racial violence against them. So much so that the lack of historical heritage sites is becoming increasingly apparent to them.

The lack of sites has sparked passion in the community, resulting in them taking matters into their own hands and preserving them on their own. But passion does not mean knowledge. To better preserve African American heritage sites, the people preserving them must know how to prolong the site's life by making clear, sound decisions about the materials. One cannot make a change without thinking about how it will affect other elements of the site. Along with physically caring for the heritage site, one must also document it and its history. This can be done by photographing the site, looking through documents, or collecting oral histories from community members. One must also have excellent record keeping so future generations can continue caring for the site for as long as possible. There are also risks that come with preserving African American heritage sites, however. These sites are often on the verge of collapse and may have harmful materials within their buildings, such as asbestos and black mold. These hazardous materials can harm the people encountering them, which is why it is imperative they learn how to protect themselves while they protect the site.

Many neighborhoods may not seem like they hold any historical significance. People drive by them, walk, run, and exist within them, but the most important thing is that people live in them. Some of these historical heritage sites are long gone now, only living as a memory told

through stories to young kids by their elders. Blossoming African American neighborhoods like Oscarville or Rosewood will never be seen in their prime. They will forever exist as a memory in the minds of others and as a horrifying lesson to African American people about the violence racism is capable of.

Yet, there is another lesson embedded in these atrocities: African Americans will always find a way to thrive, no matter what attempts to stop them first. Despite their homes being burned and flooded, despite them being shot, lynched, and hated almost everywhere they go, the African American community continues to flourish and create something out of nothing. They saw NHPA did not prioritize their history, so they took the initiative and began preserving it on their own. Sites that are already well preserved have been informed they must add the whole truth, not just part of it.

### *Conclusion*

There will always be more historic sites for African Americans to defend as they continue to make their mark on this world. African Americans have proven repeatedly they will not let anything hold them back from telling their history the way they experienced it. If there is a hurdle in their way, they will simply find a way around it, and the African American heritage sites are no different. They saw the care and devotion poured into other historic sites and decided to take matters into their own hands, resulting in the acknowledgment of multiple communities that had been erased from history. African Americans know they do not have the same means of disposal as others, yet they make do with what they have by creating a community that lives on through each other, not just the physical buildings. After seeing what has happened in the past, African Americans are doing everything they can to better preserve their histories now so it may not be flooded, or burned, or shot, or lynched without justice again.

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