

REPAIRING ROOTS:

Historic Black Towns and Spatial Reclamation

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PolicyLink

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Foreword by Dr. Danielle Purifoy

Time moves differently in a Black town, or at least, in the Black towns I've visited. My first memory was visiting my dad at the HealthCo Clinic in Soul City, North Carolina. It was my dad's first position as a physician, and I was about six or seven years old. I can remember days off school watching out of the car window as the giant rushing steel and asphalt highways of the urbanized Piedmont gave way to slower stretches of narrow paved byways intercepted here and there with dirt roads made of red clay. This clay was the kind that an elder, now ancestor of mine, once told me her mother used to dye their white living room curtains a vibrant orange, a process that could take days, but you couldn't rush that kind of beauty. The clay dust clung to everything you wore—tights, pants legs, your new white sneakers—as if insisting you never forget you were there.

The Soul City limits were marked with a sign that announced the place much like a 70s groove, a disco-house-blues vibe with a slow, but steady tempo, the kind that gives the body time to breathe through every motion, time to focus the senses. A child like me was welcome to sit and listen and ask questions in a medical setting where patients would linger and laugh and maybe slip you some purse candy normally reserved for church service or give their doctor some homemade cake or freshly cured sausage. Because going to the clinic was as much a social visit as a health appointment, and it was proper to come with an offering.

Soul City—much like other Black towns like White Hall, Alabama; Princeville, North Carolina; or Rentiesville, Oklahoma (the birthplace of historian John Hope Franklin)—had (and has) aspirations for economic development, growth, and time-speeding technologies. Indeed, Floyd McKissick Sr., the founder of Soul City, saw the place as a Black-led, multiracial city that would demonstrate to the world the possibilities of Black capitalism and Black governance. And yet in reality, these places, after years of spatial violence, state deprivation, and theft, remain largely intact, if dwindled in size and population, carried forward through time not because of those aspirations, but despite them. The slower, iterative processes of protecting and tending to the land, sharing resources, creating beauty

at home and in community, worshiping at church, advanced the complex technologies of human ecology over time. What is necessary for these important places to enliven our vision of the future? What lessons can they teach us about sustainable placemaking beyond the boom-and-bust cycles of unending capitalist expansionism? What is owed to these places that have suffered from vast forms of extraction?

Repairing Roots: Historic Black Towns and Spatial Reclamation grants us a detailed history of the fate of Black places in the US since before Emancipation. The status of Black places intersects entirely with the fate of Black people, as their lived environments are an extension of themselves and their aspirations. From landownership to independent schools to mutual aid societies to business districts, Black towns have been a model of spatial practice defying the legal, political, and social logics of the US municipality. Many, if not most, Black towns existed for years (and still exist) without legal recognition by the states in which they are geographically located. This means they may never show up on your maps, much less in your imagination. This is not only because of state malfeasance and imposed barriers to various forms of development, but also because of the insistence by many Black places that they exist beyond, even if not fully outside, the strictures and vagaries of US legal and political systems. But the formality of a legal municipal charter or other forms of political recognition of Black towns never fully dictates how they organize and govern themselves.

In Tamina, Texas, an unincorporated Black town dating back to at least 1836, governance occurs through meetings at the community center, where residents make collective decisions about the town's future without a mayor or city council. In Princeville, North Carolina, which was incorporated in 1885, the elected government has been forced to prove the very existence of the town at least twice, despite 139 years of legal recognition by the state.

Living beyond, or in excess of the state, has tremendous consequences such as those outlined in this report, from the slow violence of denial of basic water and sewer infrastructures to the swift violence of mass expulsions by white supremacist mobs. And, living beyond the state also means that Black towns are not entirely subsumed by its rules. Take, for example, the work of Freedom, a nonprofit community development corporation founded by three Black people with ties to Princeville and Pinetops, North Carolina. Freedom's vision for Princeville, Pinetops, East Tarboro, and other Black geographies in Edgecombe County has taken the collective wisdom of the founders' ancestors and their relationships to lands ever threatened by floodwaters and exacerbated by climate change, to forge a future for that region that every geography in the US should be learning from today.

Repair has a temporal scale that doesn't neatly coincide with quick financial compensation or policy reforms, though these are likely necessary tools along the journey. It requires a reorientation to our collective conceptualization of place, to our human relationship with the ecosystems to which we belong, and our relationships with each other. The versions of place that I have been fortunate to witness and experience in Black towns like Soul City, Princeville, White Hall, and Tamina already have many of the building blocks to the social and ecological relations necessary for repair, which is never quick, never linear, and never "done."

I believe this report is a major step toward our collective reckoning with the histories of spatial violence enacted upon Black geographies, and will help guide our way together to learn from these places and their placemaking practices, more durable, nonextractive modes of living on the Earth.

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Executive Summary

Historically Black towns and settlements, known by various names, such as Freedmen’s settlements or Freedmen’s colonies, have endured significant economic, environmental, and social challenges to secure their place in the future. Continued economic, environmental, and climate threats jeopardize their ability to thrive for generations to come. What if a future were guaranteed for these communities? What would it take to achieve this? *Repairing Roots: Historic Black Towns and Spatial Reclamation* explores how these communities can guide national and local efforts for reparative spatial justice and emphasizes that their preservation and prosperity should be a top priority for policymakers, philanthropic organizations, and public officials. It calls for an approach led by these communities themselves, centering their voices in shaping the path to lasting repair and renewal.

A Brief History of Black Towns and Settlements

More than 1,200 historically Black towns were founded during the years of Reconstruction and at the end of the 19th century continuing into the early 20th century, but several were established long before the Civil War. **Historic Black towns** (both incorporated and unincorporated) can be understood as settlements that are predominantly inhabited and governed by Black people and were established to create safe and autonomous communities amidst widespread racial discrimination and violence. From coast to coast and in each pocket of the US, Black entrepreneurs, farmers, and professionals broke ground in new locations throughout Florida, California, Oklahoma, Texas, and beyond. In places like Oklahoma, for example, Black families and individuals thrived economically and politically without the violent oversight and control of white supremacist culture and policies.

Elsewhere, like Tamina, Texas, Black communities were able to create havens of economic and educational opportunities as a result of cheap land sales or state-sponsored promises of land allocation. For many other communities like Blackdom, New Mexico, however, escaping white supremacy was a driving motivation to find new pastures that held promises of safety

and community stability. Today, more than 30 historic Black towns are documented to remain across the country, and they continue to serve as important spaces of living history, culture, tradition, and ancestral memories for local, state, and national communities. The exact number is not known—because of prominent challenges related to town archives, documentation processes, and constant threats of erasure—and is likely to be higher.

The profound threats confronting these communities require an approach that enables stakeholders to grapple with the conditions endangering their survival and actively support their future resilience and thriving. **Reparative spatial justice** provides a vital framework for addressing historical harms while forging inclusive, equitable spatial futures that encompass housing and land rights.

Root Causes of Existing Challenges and Systemic Dispossession

Employing a reparative spatial justice framework for Black towns and settlements requires a deep examination of the conditions that have hindered their survival and growth. By critically analyzing issues such as “underdevelopment” and embracing the deep metaphysical connections that Black towns and settlements have to land, place, and history, we can better grasp their significance in shaping policy, planning, and investment decisions. However, this work demands an honest reckoning with the historical processes that have pushed these homelands to the brink of erasure.

The dramatic loss of Black towns and settlements is far from accidental—a host of systemic challenges and mechanisms of dispossession have enabled the erasure of these spaces.

- **Tactics of direct violence:** Though often viewed as a tactic of the past, state-sanctioned mob violence—strategically employed to suppress Black progress and autonomy in service of white supremacy—has left enduring generational impacts. This violence was often coordinated with explicit state approval or tacit allowance and sought to dismantle Black autonomy, economic growth, and community stability.

- **Racist planning regimes:** Municipal boundary and zoning law manipulations, like extraterritorial jurisdictions, long impeded Black communities from accessing resources, economic and educational opportunities, essential services, and political representation.
- **Forced sales and land loss:** Our current property tax and legal system exploits the ambiguity of Black land titles by allowing legal proceedings (such as heirs' property and partition sales) to involuntarily strip Black property owners of their land.
- **Property assessments:** Rampant tax assessment disparities for Black households have led to a significant overvaluation of properties, or an imposition of a "Black tax" in gentrifying communities, causing families to pay higher tax bills and experience increased financial strain or even land loss and displacement.
- **Environmental injustice:** Regulatory neglect and the exclusion of Black towns from land use decision-making processes have severely undermined their ability to protect themselves from environmental injustices and climate change-induced natural disasters. This lack of agency leaves these communities disproportionately vulnerable to harmful environmental impacts.

Reparative Spatial Justice: A Forward-Looking Perspective

Historic Black towns and settlements across the country demonstrate that the economic, physical, natural, and social threats they face do not mark the end of time for these communities or their futures. These communities are constantly innovating tools and strategies to carve their place in the future and rise above powerful oppressive forces, charting pathways of resilience and resistance. The following sections outline key tools and approaches that can further support the healing, flourishing, and growth of Black towns, settlements, and communities.

- **Recognition, acknowledgment, and apologies** are symbolic, yet important, steps that can bring communities together in shared understandings of history and drive collective action toward other meaningful reparative actions.
- **Compensation and restitution** aim to address the economic harms that have occurred as a result of acts of violence, exploitation, exclusion, or neglect that have caused loss of life, property, and livelihood.
- **Renewed relationships to land** by recognizing the land's intersection with ancestral stories, movements, and traditions, and the significance of natural landmarks for their community's story, can help reinvigorate these relationships.
- **Participatory planning** can address long-standing disparate power dynamics in local, regional, or state-wide planning decisions to provide more opportunities for various stakeholders, especially community members, to direct the usage of resources in an area.
- **Planning and zoning tools**, like safety zone redistricting and cultural district overlays, can transform the systems that enabled past harms to occur and recur by wielding these tools in pursuit of spatial justice.
- **Heirs' property and collective ownership** mechanisms can shield communities from predatory property acquisition practices, help families see economic benefit from their land, and support community retention of land.
- **Cultural and historic preservation** through federal, state, and local reforms to establish and maintain historic sites and heritage districts can be one step to sustain cultural identities and history while also creating avenues for cultural tourism and economic development.

Recommendations

Policymakers, philanthropy, and public officials at all levels of government must embrace a more comprehensive understanding of the role that historic Black towns and settlements play in national housing and land justice movements. However, any solutions pursued must be guided by and implemented with the direct leadership of community members—especially the descendants of the community and formerly enslaved people—to ensure that initiatives, programs, and policies are community-led and are not co-opted, thereby avoiding further economic, cultural, or social harm. The following concepts are recommendations for various stakeholders engaging in these areas:

- **Policymakers and public officials:** Reckon with previous current and ongoing harm, consider the future impacts of policy and investment decisions, equitably distribute financial infrastructure costs, and ensure planning and zoning tools are used with shared decision-making authority.
- **Advocates and organizers:** Build coalitions and networks to amplify the education and awareness campaigns and legislative agendas of historic Black towns, and support community-led planning and development by creating streamlined processes for community members to engage in advocacy.
- **Academics and researchers:** Conduct research in partnership with communities and that aligns with community priorities, use the research findings to support reparative spatial justice policy changes, and facilitate more equitable relationships between institutions of higher education and the surrounding communities.
- **Funders:** Embed justice-oriented and flexible granting principles into funding opportunities, and provide expansive funding to community engagement activities.
- **Developers, architects, and urban planners:** Embed reparative planning and development practices into ongoing work, and cultivate long-term partnerships to ensure that planning and development decisions continue to meet community needs in the present and over time.

Introduction

“Our history is interconnected in all we do today.”

Michael McAfee, CEO, PolicyLink

Imagine an alternative future where hundreds of Black towns, settlements, and Freedmen’s colonies established across the United States not only survived but thrived, receiving the investment, respect, and recognition they have long deserved. Envision communities where the rich cultural heritage and resilient spirit of Black Americans flourished and was sustained, ensuring that these enclaves remained vibrant hubs of innovation, cultural preservation, and economic prosperity. This is not just a flight of fancy, but a vision of what could have been—and what still can be.

In the pantheon of American history, the narratives of historically Black towns, settlements, communities, and Freedmen’s colonies occupy a crucial yet often overshadowed and underlooked space. According to Black feminist theorist Katherine McKittrick, these spaces can be understood through the lens of Black geographies, which emphasize the ways in which Black people produce and inhabit spaces that affirm their existence and counteract systemic oppression. McKittrick’s work, particularly in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*,¹ underscores how Black spatial practices challenge and reconfigure dominant geographies that often erase or marginalize Black experiences. These communities, formed out of necessity, resilience, and a quest for self-determination, have contributed significantly to the historical and cultural fabric of the United States. Yet, despite their invaluable contributions and profound legacies, they continue to face existential threats from systemic adversities that not only erode their stability but also jeopardize their very survival.

Moving toward Reparative Spatial Justice

The present moment has witnessed a growing recognition of the need to redress and repair these historical injustices. Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib and Sydney Kamlager-Dove’s [resolution on Juneteenth to honor, preserve, and invest in Freedmen’s settlements](#), introduced on June 18, 2024, is a vital step forward by the federal government to acknowledge the invaluable role that historically Black towns and Freedmen’s settlements play in the very growth of reparative spatial justice and our understanding of it.² As Michael McAfee noted in the endorsement by PolicyLink of the resolution:

As we commemorate Juneteenth this year, let us not forget the rich history of Freedmen’s Settlements in the US. They were places that our ancestors called home and built communities that still exist today. To honor their legacy, we must designate Freedmen’s Settlements as historic communities and greatly invest in these places. Our history is interconnected in all we do today. It is only by acknowledging the difficulties of our nation’s past, we can create a society in which all people—particularly those who face the burdens of structural racism—can participate in a flourishing multiracial democracy, prosper in an equitable economy, and live in thriving communities of opportunity.³

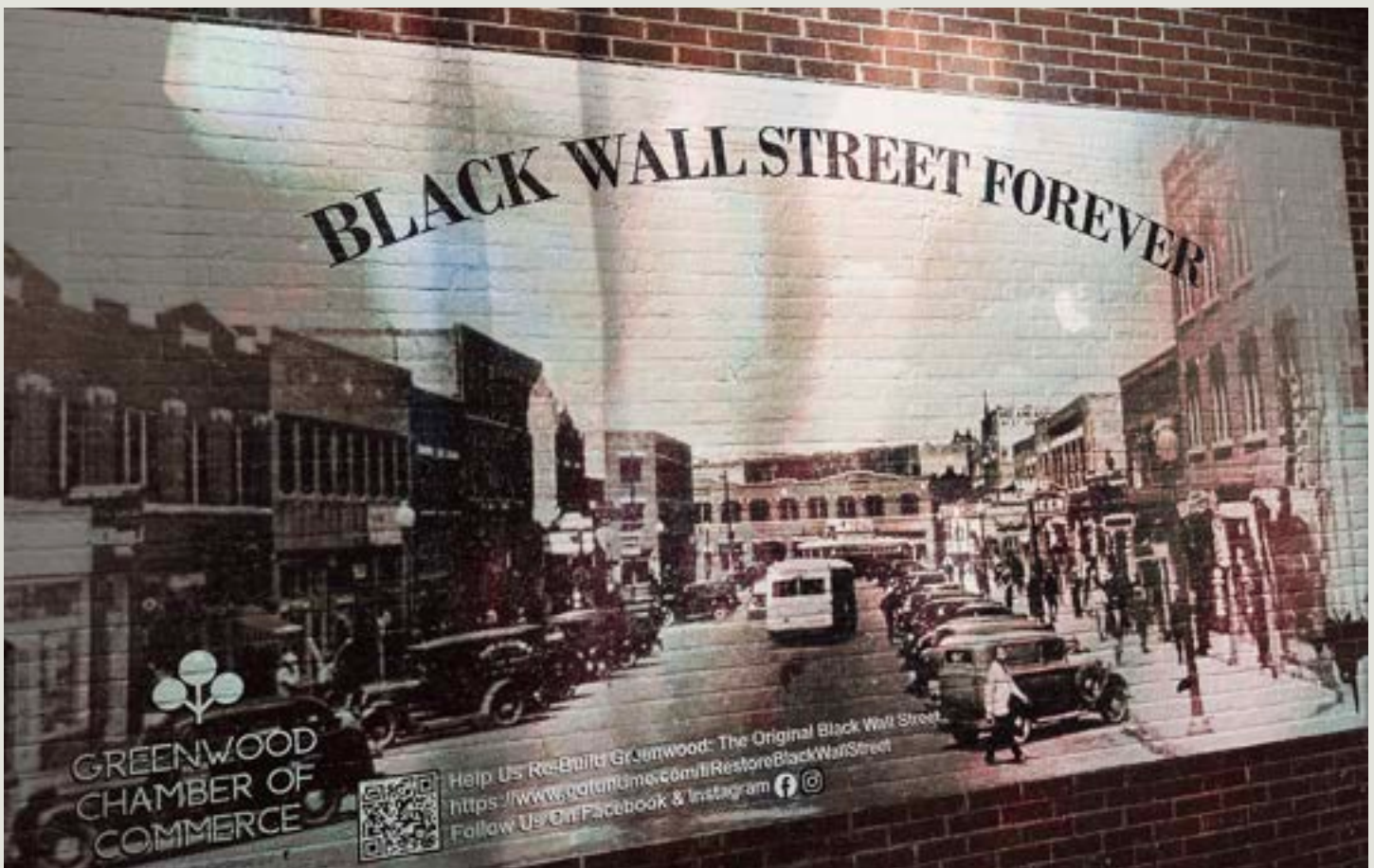
These specific sites of resistance and liberation, suffering from decades of neglect, disinvestment, and direct harm, must be preserved so that their founding ancestors’ visions for the future can benefit generations to come. Historic Black towns such as Tulsa, Oklahoma—tragically marked by the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre—stand as stark reminders of the systemic violence and economic sabotage these communities have faced. Similarly, St. John the Baptist Parish in Louisiana, part of the region known as “Cancer Alley,” has been ravaged by industrial pollution, leading to severe health crises among its predominantly Black population. These examples underscore the need for reparative measures that address both past atrocities and ongoing injustices.

As part of the Spatial Futures Initiative at PolicyLink, *Repairing Roots* aims to amplify the call to preserve the enduring legacy and built environments of historic Black towns, settlements, and communities throughout the United States and US Territories and to lift up their significant contributions to the cultural and historical fabric of the nation, while simultaneously highlighting the persistent challenges they face amid systemic adversities that jeopardize their survival. This work critically examines the complex matrix of discriminatory development policies, unfair mortgage lending practices, exploitative property tax assessments, as well as direct tactics of violence and neglect that has collectively exposed these communities to the threats of mass displacement, predatory development and gentrification, undermining their stability and continuity. In spite of these obstacles, these communities have endured. In the end, *Repairing Roots* calls on actors across the spectrum—policymakers, philanthropy, advocates, academics, urban planners, to name a few—to lean into the history and lessons from these towns in order to create new possibilities for Black and marginalized communities and for housing justice nationwide.

Reparative spatial justice refers to intentional efforts to address and rectify the historic and ongoing spatial inequities experienced by marginalized Black, Indigenous, and Brown communities. This involves recognizing and repairing the damages caused by systemic racism, discriminatory policies, and exploitative practices that have historically devalued and dispossessed these communities. This approach seeks to transform planning and development frameworks to ones that emphasize sustainability and resilience, ensuring that the voices, needs, and cultural norms of historically marginalized groups are central to the planning processes. Reparative spatial justice builds on the broader concept of reparations for Black Americans, connecting the need for financial and material restitution with the necessity to transform the spatial and structural conditions that perpetuate inequality.

The connection between reparative spatial justice and reparations is fundamental. While reparations often focus on direct financial compensation and acknowledgment of past harms and historical wrongs, reparative spatial justice extends this concept to the physical and social landscapes inhabited by Black communities. It emphasizes the importance of land and

Greenwood Chamber of Commerce “Black Wall Street Forever” mural in the historic Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, a testament to Greenwood’s enduring legacy of Black economic empowerment and resilience. (Rasheedah Phillips)



spatial equity as crucial components of repair and reparations as one strategy toward achieving such repair, recognizing that the dispossession and marginalization of Black communities has been economic, spatial, psychological, cultural, and spiritual. By addressing the spatial dimensions of injustice, reparative spatial justice seeks to create environments where Black communities can thrive, preserving their cultural heritage and ensuring their long-term stability.

In this context of reparative spatial justice and reparations, *Repairing Roots* situates these communities as pivotal arenas in the struggle for equitable land and housing policies, aiming to rectify historical injustices and foster sustainability and resilience. This work advocates for a paradigm shift toward community-driven initiatives and collective land stewardship as foundational pillars for reimagining planning. Through a reparative lens, urban planning, anti-displacement, and preservation tactics are envisioned not just as technical endeavors but as transformative vehicles and actions for cultivating reparative and inclusive spaces that honor the contributions and aspirations of Black communities and Black placemaking.

Safeguarding Narratives, Memories, and Futures

Today, preserving and revitalizing these towns can stimulate economic development, community-owned tourism (owned and operated by descendants and residents of Black towns), and cultural preservation. These communities are invaluable to Black culture, providing spaces where Black heritage and traditions are preserved and celebrated. The landscapes, structures, and communal spaces of these towns are repositories of Black temporalities, layered timelines that entangle past, present, and future experiences. Time, experience, and episodic memory are deeply intertwined with the places we call home. In these spaces, time is understood as cyclical, overlapping, and deeply connected to memory and place. It is not simply the passage of days or the progression of years but the ongoing interplay of lived experiences and episodic memory that shape the community's collective narrative.

However, the dominant progressive timelines imposed by state forces often demand relentless growth, rapid change, and assimilation into capitalist frameworks. This pressure to conform to linear, accelerated time frequently marginalizes Black communities, effectively confining them to a narrow temporal present. This imposed temporal stasis disconnects them from their deep-rooted histories and limits their ability to imagine and construct future possibilities on their own terms.

By evading linear progressive histories and resisting the spatial displacement of Black communities, the preservation of historic Black towns and settlements demonstrates potent possibilities for Black land sovereignty, self-governance, temporal autonomy, and spatial agency. These communities stand as testaments to the resilience and ingenuity of Black people, offering a blueprint for reclaiming space and time in ways that honor and uplift their heritage.

The work to sustain and celebrate these towns is not just about preserving buildings; it is about safeguarding the narratives, memories, and futures of Black Americans. It is about maintaining a link to the histories that state forces have sought to erase or rewrite. Furthermore, it offers a blueprint for reclaiming space and time in ways that honor and uplift Black heritage, allowing these communities to operate within their own temporalities—those that are nonlinear, regenerative, and deeply tied to land, memory, and cultural practices.

Repairing Roots also underscores the imperative of integrating reparative spatial justice principles, strategies, and approaches into urban policy and planning frameworks. It celebrates the resilience of these communities and the innovative strategies they have employed to safeguard their heritage and land. Moreover, it champions a forward-looking perspective that sees reparative spatial justice as an opportunity to heal historical wounds, bridge divides, and create equitable, vibrant, and inclusive communities for future generations. This approach not only acknowledges the significance of historic Black towns and communities in the American narrative, but also elevates their role as stewards of cultural preservation, community power, and spatial justice.

A Brief History of Historic Black Towns and Settlements

By definition, a historic Black town is a settlement, town, or colony established, and predominantly inhabited and governed, by Black people; these places were typically established to create a safe and autonomous community amidst widespread racial discrimination and violence. Historian Norman L. Crockett defined the term Black town as “a separate community containing a population of at least 90 percent black in which the residents attempted to determine their own political destiny.”⁴

Black towns and Freedmen’s settlements emerged primarily during the Reconstruction era and at the end of the 19th century continuing into the early 20th century as safe havens for formerly enslaved Black people and their descendants, providing a space for self-governance, social cohesion, cultural preservation, economic development and independence in an era of intense racial discrimination and violence. It is estimated that over 1,200 Black towns were established across the United States.⁵ However, this estimate is conservative. As urban planning and historic preservation scholar and activist Andrea Roberts notes, “normative planning and preservation practices operating assumptions about African American communities”⁶ has significantly constrained the ability to fully map all of these communities. When accounting for smaller unincorporated communities and settlements, that number swells into the thousands. Examples include New Philadelphia, Illinois; Malaga Island, Maine; Dearfield, Connecticut; Allensworth, California; Blackdom, New Mexico; Nicodemus, Kansas; Blackville, Arkansas; Liberia, South Carolina; Star Hill, Delaware; Fort Mose and Eatonville, Florida; Princeville, North Carolina; Brownsville, Maryland; and Mound Bayou, Mississippi. For more information on the locations of historic Black towns and settlements, see Appendix A: Maps of Historic All-Black Towns.

By the early 20th century, at least 50 notable Black towns were in Oklahoma alone, reflecting a broader trend across the United States where Black entrepreneurs, farmers, and professionals built thriving, self-sufficient communities.⁷ Oklahoma became a focal point for Black settlement due to the availability of land following the Land Run and subsequent land openings. The state was considered for the site of an all-Black

state, a proposal that garnered significant support. Legislation was introduced in favor of this all-Black state by Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire, reflecting the aspirations of many Black leaders and settlers who sought a safe haven where they could exercise political and economic autonomy without the daily interference of white supremacy.⁸

However, these towns faced persistent threats from white supremacist violence, economic disenfranchisement, and discriminatory policies such as redlining and urban renewal programs, which systematically undermined their growth and stability. Crockett also observed that forces in local, regional, and national economies, such as modernization, played a role in the deterioration and eventual destruction of many small Black towns.⁹

The significant lack of documentation and active erasure of these legacies is compounded by the neglect of historians in preserving the histories of Black towns. The rural Black settlement reality, along with the unique political alliances and socioeconomic networks that sustained these communities, often remain illegible in mainstream historical narratives.¹⁰ This erasure not only obscures the past but also diminishes the understanding of the resilience and contributions of Black Americans in shaping the nation’s history.

Even before the Civil War, Black people established settlements as a means of finding refuge and building independent communities. These early settlements often arose in regions where free African Americans could acquire land and form self-sustaining communities. These towns may have different names or classifications depending on their geographical location and the specific sociohistorical context that led to their founding. For example, Black towns and settlements in Texas are known as Freedom colonies or Freedmen’s settlements. These were dispersed communities throughout the South established by formerly enslaved Black people, many unincorporated or not formally sanctioned, and “individually unified only by church and school and residents’ collective belief that a community existed.”¹¹

Fort Mose, Florida

Fort Mose, in what is now Florida, was established by escaped enslaved people from the Carolinas, and is recognized as the first legally sanctioned free Black community in what is now the United States. This community for enslaved Africans fleeing bondage offered a haven under Spanish rule, though it required membership to the Catholic Church and allegiance to the King of Spain.¹² In 1738, the Spanish governor of Florida officially chartered the settlement as Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, or Fort Mose, for about 100 Black people. Fort Mose's residents established homesteads on the land and the community survived for 25 years until the land was conquered by the British.¹³

These colonies often arose from land grants or cheap land purchases made by emancipated Black people and those who settled on neglected land, settled without legal sanction, or settled in the wilderness, seeking to create independent and self-sustaining communities; hundreds of Texas Freedmen's settlements popped up around Texas between 1870 and 1890.¹⁴ Places like Tamina, Texas, founded in 1871 and standing as the oldest Freedmen's town in Texas, fostered environments where Black people could exercise autonomy and cultivate economic and educational opportunities for its residents.¹⁵ Over 550 historic Black settlements and Freedom colonies founded between 1865 and 1930 have been documented across Texas by urban planning and preservation scholars and activists like Andrea Roberts and the Texas Freedom Colonies Project™.¹⁶ Thad Sitton and James Conrad note that these communities formed throughout the South in pursuit of the "40 acres and a mule" promise, and spread across western South Carolina, southwest Georgia, north Florida, and Alabama, among other places.¹⁷

Allensworth, California

States like California and New Mexico also saw the establishment of Black towns, often by settlers seeking opportunities in the West. Allensworth, California, was a notable attempt to create a self-sufficient Black community. Founded in 1909 by Colonel Allen Allensworth, a formerly enslaved person who served as a Union nurse and chaplain, along with other Buffalo Soldiers, Allensworth was a pioneering movement of Black settlers in California.¹⁸ This town flourished as an economic utopia, known as the first Black town in California that was fully financed, governed, and populated by Black people. Colonel Allensworth and his followers envisioned the community as a place where "African Americans would settle upon the bare desert and cause it to blossom as a rose," where its residents would be educated, sustained, and supported through autonomous enterprise.¹⁹



Colonel Allensworth State Historical Park, Tulare County, California. (Colonel Allensworth State Historical Park by J. Stephen Conn is licensed under CC BY 2.0)

However, after Colonel Allensworth's death in 1914, the town faced significant challenges. Neighboring white towns, business owners, and politicians began exploiting the land, seizing much of it and withholding water rights, leading to severe droughts and crop failures.²⁰ These actions contributed to the town's economic decline. Despite continued leadership from figures such as the Justice of the Peace, and the school principal, Allensworth's prosperity peaked in 1925 and began to wane due to the persistent lack of irrigation water and lack of adequate political power. The Pacific Farming Company, which handled the original land purchase, failed to deliver sufficient water

as promised, leading to prolonged and costly legal battles that depleted the town's financial resources.²¹ By 1930, the US Census Bureau recorded fewer than 300 residents as people left in search of better opportunities. Those who remained tried to sustain the town with new farming methods and businesses. In 1966, high levels of arsenic in the drinking water forced all but 34 families out of the town. However, on May 14, 1976, the California State Parks and Recreation Commission approved plans to develop the Colonel Allensworth Historic Park, preserving the legacy of the town and its founders.²²

Current residents of the area, in collaboration with descendants of Colonel Allensworth, former residents, and preservation groups such as Friends of Allensworth and the Allensworth Progressive Association, are working collaboratively to drive economic revitalization and growth for the community. Their initiatives include developing a farm, establishing an innovation lab, offering agricultural education programs, and other cultural and historic education events. There have also been recent efforts to bring Allensworth into conversations about reparations.²³

Blackdom, New Mexico

Similarly, Blackdom, New Mexico, was an agricultural colony founded in 1901 by Black homesteaders seeking to escape the racism of the Southern states. Led by Frank Boyer and his wife Ella, the settlers were inspired by the promises of the Homestead Act. Boyer aimed to create a self-sustaining community free from Southern racial constraints. The Homestead Act, enacted in 1862, was a pivotal piece of legislation that allowed American citizens to claim up to 160 acres of public land. To secure ownership, claimants were required to improve the land by building a dwelling and cultivating crops for at least five years. This act aimed to encourage westward expansion and settlement, offering opportunities for land ownership to many, including freed slaves and immigrants, albeit often with significant hardships, challenges, and the mass dispossession of land from Indigenous communities.²⁴

Boyer, a professor based in Georgia, was driven by the desire to challenge Jim Crow abuses in the South. His father, freedman Henry Boyer, who had often shared stories of New Mexico when Frank was a child, had served as a wagoner for the US Army there in 1846. Threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, Frank's father urged him to move West for safety. In 1896,

Frank, along with two of his students, traveled to New Mexico on foot, taking day labor jobs along the way, and his wife and children joined him there five years later.²⁵ They established Blackdom around Frank and Ella's house and advertised for African American homesteaders. By 1908, Blackdom had grown to include 25 families, 300 people, and various businesses, including a blacksmith shop, hotel, newspaper, and Baptist church, spanning 15,000 acres. However, despite initial success, Blackdom faced severe challenges such as crop infestations, soil alkali buildup, and depletion of the aquifer. Many settlers left for nearby towns, and the Boyers relocated to Vado in 1921 due to their house being foreclosed upon.

Today, renewed efforts aim to preserve and honor Blackdom's history and legacy through art, events, and cultural initiatives, while also seeking to restore land access for descendants of its former residents. Many heirs, including those of Lloyd E. Allen Sr., who was granted 160 acres through a Homestead Act patent, have faced prolonged barriers to accessing their land due to it being landlocked, with neighboring property owners denying easement. The Allen family, alongside state senator Cliff Pirtle, is advocating for increased recognition of Blackdom's historical importance and calling for a task force to explore solutions for access to their ancestral lands and the site of the Blackdom town center.²⁶



A Blackdom family posing in front of their home, circa 1910. (National Park Service)

Eatonville, Florida

States in the Southeast, such as Florida and North Carolina, are home to some of the earliest Black settlements, including Eatonville and Princeville. Eatonville, Florida, founded in 1887, is notable for being one of the first self-governing all-Black municipalities in the United States. Led by Joe Clarke and other Black leaders, the town was established on the principles of self-determination and community governance. Eatonville flourished as a center of Black culture and education, most famously known as the hometown of writer Zora Neale Hurston, whose literary and anthropological works brought national attention to the cultural richness of Eatonville and highlighted its significance in Black history. The town's commitment to education and cultural heritage made it a beacon in the South, attracting scholars and visitors interested in its unique heritage and contributions to Black American culture.

Eatonville was recently named one of America's most endangered historic sites by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, marking a major achievement for the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community (P.E.C.). This designation, alongside a \$200,000 grant from the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, will support Eatonville's efforts to develop a cultural and educational center aimed at revitalizing the town's heritage. Additionally, Eatonville has secured federal infrastructure funds and has been shortlisted for a Florida Museum of Black History, further advancing its preservation and economic development goals.²⁷



Eatonville, Florida, "The Town That Freedom Built" is known as the oldest incorporated African American Municipality in America. (Eatonville, Florida by Lorie Shaull is licensed under CC BY 2.0)

Princeville, North Carolina

Princeville, North Carolina, established in 1865 by African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War, is recognized as the oldest town chartered by African Americans in the United States.²⁸ Originally known as Freedom Hill, the town's name was changed to Princeville when it was incorporated in 1885; it was named for Turner Prince, who helped build housing in the community. The town's founders, driven by a desire for autonomy and community, built homes, schools, and churches, creating a vibrant and resilient community. Despite facing numerous challenges, including devastating floods, Princeville's legacy endures as a symbol of Black resilience and self-governance. Efforts to preserve and revitalize Princeville continue today and are being driven by current residents and Princeville descendants, ensuring that its history and contributions to African American heritage are remembered and celebrated for generations to come. Residents and descendants are also grappling with recent federal efforts to relocate the community due to continuous flooding.²⁹



Originally known as "Freedom Hill," Princeville was settled by freed slaves on an unwanted floodplain. (2006, Public Domain)

These towns fostered strong social bonds and networks of mutual aid, providing a sense of identity and belonging that has endured through generations. Historically, they were vibrant centers of economic activity, development, and innovation, showcasing the potential of Black communities when allowed to operate free from systemic oppression. Black-owned businesses and cooperative economic practices flourished, creating self-sustaining economies.

Today, many historic Black towns and Freedmen's colonies have either disappeared or are struggling to survive. For articles, videos, and books on historic Black towns, see Appendix B: Learn More about Historic Black Towns and Settlements. The implications for land and social justice are profound. Restoring and revitalizing historic Black towns can serve as powerful symbols of reclaiming Black space and history. This revitalization can foster economic growth, strengthen community bonds, and provide a model for other communities seeking to address historical injustices. **Moreover, it highlights the centrality of land and space in the struggle for racial and spatial justice, emphasizing that true reparations must include restoring both the physical and economic foundations of Black communities.**

The next section explores in more depth some of the root causes of the dramatic loss of Black towns and settlements. This erasure did not occur by chance—it resulted from a series of systemic and structural pressures and mechanisms of dispossession. By understanding these factors, we underscore the necessity of a reparative spatial justice approach to address these historical and ongoing injustices.

Understanding the Root Causes of Existing Challenges

Historic Black towns and settlements offer fertile ground for envisioning and enacting reparative spatial justice. A reparative spatial justice approach involves rectifying past wrongs and shaping inclusive, equitable spatial futures, with a focus on communities' active participation and agency in creating their own spatial environments. These towns, founded in the shadows of slavery and Jim Crow, are both reminders of the crimes of America's past, as well as prefigurations of spatial futures beyond white supremacy. Materially and symbolically, historic Black towns represent the continuity of Black communities through space and time, allowing for the clear articulation of reparative demands—from direct restitution for past harms to transformative interventions in the very structures that enabled those harms. The framework of reparative spatial justice unites these demands, guiding efforts to reckon with, repair, and transform the conditions that have made it so difficult for these towns to survive. By rooting these interventions in the lived experiences and aspirations of Black communities, reparative spatial justice paves the way for more just and enduring spatial futures.

This reparative lens is key, because leaving the systematic erasure of these towns unchallenged enables the normalization of Black land loss, displacement, and dispossession. Too often, white supremacy deems the dispossession of Black communities as an unfortunate inevitability—the result of inherent failings rather than of systemic racism and its accompanying assaults on the political and economic viability of these communities.³⁰ When we are attentive to ongoing legacies of racist land and housing policies, it becomes clear that the socioeconomic and environmental hardships of Black towns are not a product of their own policy failures, but rather that these towns have been subjected to exploitation and extraction by surrounding white spaces. In fact, the history of Freedmen's colonies and other Black-founded communities shows that the development of white America has been dependent on the exploitation of Black community resources.

Problematizing “Underdevelopment”

Dominant frameworks tend to characterize the challenges faced by historic Black towns as stemming from the underdevelopment of their economies. However, this characterization depoliticizes the structural conditions that have produced economic hardship in these spaces. Scholars of historic Black towns have problematized the underdevelopment of these towns, and have given us tools to understanding them in relation to white supremacy's influence on the town's founding, erasure, resistance, and survival.

The theory of uneven development is a way to understand the economic challenges that historic Black towns have faced. This theory holds that capitalism inherently generates disparities in wealth, power, and development between different geographical areas, and that these disparities are co-productive of each other—accumulation in one place is a result of exploitation in another and vice versa. In the context of racial capitalism, the intrinsic contradiction of uneven development is inherently racialized, and economic and spatial disparities are not only driven by capitalist processes, they are also deeply influenced by racial hierarchies and systemic racism.³¹ The economies of historic Black towns and their white neighbors are co-productive of each other in the sense that “value for white spaces is predicated on the devaluation of Black places.”³²

Danielle Purifoy and Louise Seamster call this process “**creative extraction**” and note that race-relational development “enables the routine extraction of resources to white places,” by deploying planning, property, and land use decision-making structures to devalue Black places and allowing white places to recapture that value as their own.³³ They identify a “pattern of white towns controlling land value in Black towns as part of a longer term effort to literally or figuratively take land, whether as new territory or containment spaces to externalize the toxic burdens of white town development.”³⁴ This process manifests in different ways, but is consistent across time and space: in Seneca Village, this

extraction looked like the destruction of the largest pre-Civil War community of Black property owners to make way for New York City's Central Park in the 1850s.³⁵ In contemporary times, it looks like the extraction of resources by high-polluting petrochemical industries in Mossville, Louisiana, which once provided a safe haven for Black families after the Civil War, but has been inundated by extractive industries since World War II. The process is "creative" in that it demands a continual innovation and dynamism in seemingly unbiased laws and policies that adapt to and respond to Black strategies of survival; in Seneca Village, the mechanism of displacement was eminent domain, while in Mossville, it was environmental hazards and the eventual buy-out of Black homeowners by the local petrochemical company.

Creative extraction occurs through the leveraging of ostensibly race-neutral structures of political geography, property ownership, planning, and public finance decisions, in ways that re-entrench and maintain existing inequalities. Economic value for dominant white space is literally produced through the extraction of Black space in ways that reproduce profit for some and displacement for others. New York's Central Park, where Seneca Village once stood, now adds an estimated \$26 billion to the market value of real estate properties on surrounding blocks, including the infamous Billionaires' Row.³⁶ The costs of the \$68 billion petrochemical industry are disproportionately borne by Mossville, where a 1998 EPA study found that the town's air carried chemical toxins 100 times higher than the national standard, and another study found that 84 percent of residents displayed central nervous system disorders.³⁷ The dwindling population and the gradual disappearance of Mossville serve as a stark reminder of how creative extraction can decimate

Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Mitchelville is known as America's first self-governing community of freed slaves. (Rasheedah Phillips)



historic Black towns, and have real life-and-death impacts on their residents.³⁸ On the other hand, as in the case of Central Park, the dispossession of Black communities can continue to generate wealth and shape entire economies for generations, without ever accounting for the ways that Black land, lives, and economies were lost in the process.

Black Survival and a Black Sense of Place

Yet, while racialized uneven development and creative extraction give us tools for interrogating the systematic erasure of historic Black towns, understanding the experience of historic Black towns in purely economic terms falls short of capturing the significance of these places and their survival. Historic Black towns hold such meaning because they refute white supremacist assumptions of space and time through their deep connection to land, place, and history, while embodying the practice of cultural norms and values that reflect Indigenous African, Afrodiasporan, and Black American communal ways of being.

America's property regime has its foundations in the racist and dehumanizing legacies of chattel slavery, which viewed Black bodies as property to be owned, and thus as barred from owning property themselves.³⁹ In contrast, whiteness became a form of property in that it comes with rights, entitlements, and the power to define and determine who has access to whiteness itself.⁴⁰ As Katherine McKittrick writes, "In the Americas, free labour under bondage thus marked black working bodies as those 'without'—without legible-Eurocentric history narratives, without land or home, without ownership of self—as this system forcibly secured black peoples to the geographic mechanics of the plantation economy."⁴¹

White supremacy enforces the idea of Black placelessness in order to justify a system that forced Black people to labor on the land while denying that they had any claim to belonging. The maintenance of whiteness and capitalism across space is dependent upon the denial of a Black sense of space and the alternative spatial futures it represents. McKittrick continues, "The annihilation of black geographies in the Americas is deeply connected to an economy of race, and thus capitalism, wherein the process of uneven development calcifies the seemingly natural links between blackness, underdevelopment, poverty, and place within differing global contexts."⁴²

Freedmen's colonies and other Black settlements and towns assert a rich sense of place, and because of this they have always been a threat to a spatial order that was designed to

uphold white claims to land, property, place, and personhood. These towns and settlements were also not merely reactions to white supremacy; they were embodiments of the dynamism of Black cultural norms, values, and relationships to land that are rooted in Indigenous African communal ways of being. In surviving the heinous human trafficking and forced labor camps, these communities were recreating and practicing their own cultural identities and connections to the land. As Andrea Roberts writes, these towns and settlements challenge conventional narratives around Black migration and settlement that emphasize sharecropping, migration, and placelessness, and instead, highlight “cunning and tactical place-making on abandoned land.”⁴³

When communities like Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; and Oscarville, Georgia created thriving Black spaces and Black economies in the early 1900s, their very existence disrupted the spatial order set by their white neighbors, and they were violently disciplined through the use of lynchings, state-sanctioned mob violence, and terrorism. Each of these spaces was destroyed by racist violence that sought to reassert white supremacy by eradicating Black space.

Historical marker recognizing Sullivan’s Island as the arrival point for tens of thousands of Africans forcibly taken from West Africa and sold into slavery between 1700 and 1775. Many were ancestors of the Gullah-Geechee community, a cultural group with traditions, language, and heritage deeply rooted in practices from West Africa, preserved in the Lowcountry of the southeastern US. Sullivan’s Island serves as a reminder of their endurance and profound contributions to American culture and history. (Rasheedah Phillips)



Both the systemic erasure and the persistent survival of historic Black towns remind us of the transgressive power of a Black sense of place. They stand as a body of evidence of Black America’s refusal to abide by the limits of white supremacy. While “historic” implies the past, these Black towns are also prefiguring spatial futures beyond white supremacy, demonstrating the enduring significance of Black geographies in shaping alternative and liberated spatial realities.

Systemic Efforts to Erase Black Towns

Historic Black towns and settlements have faced multifaceted and targeted efforts to erase their existence. Processes of creative extraction and uneven development, ranging from direct violence and discriminatory planning regimes to forced sales and unfair property tax assessments have contributed to the erosion of Black autonomy, and its economic, social, and cultural stability, and have perpetuated a legacy of inequality and oppression. While the tactics described in this section are by no means exhaustive, they illustrate the structural conditions that have existed to produce precarity in historic Black towns and settlements and why new approaches are needed.

Tactics of Direct Violence

Though often viewed as a tactic of the past, state-sanctioned mob violence—intentionally deployed to suppress Black progress and autonomy in service of white supremacy—has left lasting generational impacts that continue to resonate today.

The Tulsa Race Massacre is one of the most infamous of these violent episodes. In the early 20th century, Tulsa, Oklahoma's Greenwood District, also known as Black Wall Street, was a thriving hub of Black prosperity, boasting numerous businesses, schools, and cultural institutions. However, on May 31, 1921, a false accusation against a Black man led to a white mob descending on Greenwood. Over the course of two days, the mob razed the district, killing hundreds of Black residents, leaving thousands homeless, and eradicating the economic foundation of the community.⁴⁴ While systemic racism and decades of disinvestment have hindered Greenwood's full return to its former prosperity, residents and descendants have successfully restored or created new small businesses and economic ventures. They have preserved and celebrated Greenwood's culture and history, honoring the legacy of the community while continuing the relentless fight for justice for survivors and the victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Mob violence similarly brought about the destruction of Rosewood, Florida, and Oscarville, Georgia, which was later submerged to create Lake Lanier—compounding the loss and violence that took place by literally drowning the history and contributions of the Black community that once thrived there.⁴⁵ It is important to remember this history, and to honor the many Freedmen's colonies and Black settlements that did not survive violent assaults from white supremacy.

Racist Planning Regimes

Planning systems in the United States have systematically undermined the survival of historic Black towns through a variety of discriminatory practices. As Andrea Roberts writes, “the dominant white sociolegal constructions of place (and the public history that reinforces their power) negate Black epistemologies of planning and preservation, and they obscure hidden Black agency in past and current descendant communities.”⁴⁶ Notably, the manipulation of municipal boundaries and zoning laws has prevented communities of color from gaining equitable access to resources, essential services, economic and educational opportunities, and political representation.



A historical marker in front of the historic Vernon AME Church in Greenwood District, honoring the victims of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre and victims of lynchings in Oklahoma. (Rasheedah Phillips)

In the South, **extraterritorial jurisdictions** (ETJs) have played a significant role in this process. Municipalities are granted extraterritorial jurisdiction to lands immediately outside their boundaries to facilitate future expansion through annexation. However, these ETJs have been exploited to maintain racial segregation and limit the inclusion of Black populations within predominantly white municipalities. This practice, known as “racial underbunding,” ensures that predominantly white town councils retain control over adjacent Black communities without extending necessary municipal services or political representation to them.⁴⁷

The negative impacts of these planning systems are evident in numerous examples across the United States, but their use in North Carolina has been the subject of several studies.⁴⁸ There, Black communities are often excluded from bigger townships but included in ETJs, allowing majority-white town councils to maintain control over land use decisions without providing equitable services, while limiting the growth of historic Black towns by encroaching on their jurisdictional boundaries.

The town of Pinehurst, North Carolina, for instance, has consistently used these methods to limit the growth of neighboring historic Black towns like Jackson Hamlet and Monroe Town.⁴⁹ It has refused to annex these neighboring towns in order to avoid providing access to municipal services like water and sanitation and to exclude them from participating in municipal elections, while simultaneously using its ETJ to prevent its Black neighbors from pursuing their own development, independent of those services. The result is reliance on expensive private sanitation services and dependence on septic systems that lower the value of homes. This exclusion is deliberate, as wealthier developments like the Abington Square condominium development in Jackson Hamlet are quickly annexed by the city of Pinehurst as “cut-outs” and delivered water and sewer services.⁵⁰

Similarly, in Texas, three different majority-white towns hold extraterritorial jurisdiction over parts of the historic Black town of Tamina. They have denied Tamina’s ongoing attempts to contract their sewer services, thereby preventing Tamina from developing the infrastructure it needs to participate in the region’s economic development.⁵¹ Even more destructively, they have used this power to influence land use decisions and dump environmental hazards in Tamina, thereby avoiding political liability and health impacts to their own residents. As Purifoy and Seamster note, municipal underbounding has left Tamina residents dependent on water wells that are adjacent to an industrial oil field sited immediately north of the town. The company that owns the oil field is headquartered in neighboring Woodlands, which reaps the economic benefits of oil production, while leaving Tamina residents to bear the environmental and health burdens.⁵²

Extraterritorial jurisdiction is ostensibly a race-neutral planning mechanism. Yet, when historic Black towns attempt to use ETJs to advance their own economic development and survival, they are often unsuccessful. For instance, in Green Level, North Carolina, efforts to diversify and expand the town through the extension of ETJs have been thwarted by all-white county commissioners, who block the town from exercising zoning and annexation rights that other towns routinely use.⁵³ This double standard underscores the systemic barriers faced by Black communities.

The denial of basic infrastructure to historic Black towns within ETJs then feeds into a narrative that incorporation or takeover is “less a land grab and more as a normative adoption of ‘underutilized territory.’”⁵⁴ Yet, when incorporation and annexation does occur, they have not resulted in more equitable development. The case of Africatown, Alabama,

further illustrates the adverse effects of annexation on Black communities. Founded by a group of West Africans who were brought to the United States on the last known illegal trafficking ship of enslaved people, Africatown holds immense historical significance.⁵⁵ In 1960, Africatown residents voted for annexation into Mobile, partly to gain access to the municipal water system. However, the annexation led to further environmental degradation, as the city zoned more land for industrial use, resulting in the construction of petrochemical storage tank farms and exacerbating environmental hazards.⁵⁶

Forced Sales and Land Loss

Black land loss and forced sales have significantly contributed to the erasure of historic Black towns, largely due to a property system that exploits the ambiguity of Black land titles. Legal proceedings such as partition sales, tax sales, foreclosures, adverse possessions, and governmental takings have systematically and involuntarily stripped Black property owners of their land. A central issue is **heirs’ property**, which arises when landowners die without a formally documented will, resulting in their land being passed down without clear legal title. This situation creates a complex web of undivided interests among numerous heirs, often without their knowledge. Some estimates suggest that nearly half of the real property owned by Black Americans is heirs’ property. A study of heirs’ property in 385 rural Black Belt counties estimated a total of 1.6 million acres of land with an economic value of \$6.6 billion entangled in unresolved ownership.⁵⁷ In addition, recent research has found that inherited or gifted homes are more likely to be in substandard condition (e.g., lacking hot/cold running water, basic plumbing, or electricity). These issues are especially pronounced in historic Black towns, which have been systematically deprived of access to the legal system and capital for home repairs.⁵⁸

Historically, heirs’ property allowed for kinship-based management systems that gave more flexibility to extended family networks, while also removing parcels from circuits of capital and preventing heirs from entering into mortgages or loans that could often lead to dispossession.⁵⁹ However, heirs’ property also hampers individual wealth accumulation and stifles community development, as unclear title makes it difficult to invest in infrastructure, attract businesses, or secure government assistance for improvements. Without clear ownership, families often lack the ability to leverage their land for economic development or access traditional forms of financing. The Biden Administration estimates that nearly 60

percent of Black-owned land in the South is heirs' property that has left its owners ineligible for US Department of Agriculture finance and lending programs, as well as Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance.⁶⁰

Heirs' property compounds the impacts of other financial vulnerabilities. The absence of a clear chain of ownership makes it challenging for families to defend their property rights in legal disputes, leaving them vulnerable to predatory behavior. Speculative developers exploit the lack of clear title to acquire parcels of land at below-market prices, leading to the displacement of long-time residents, gentrification, and the erasure of cultural heritage. They closely monitor tax delinquency notices, pay outstanding taxes to obtain tax liens, and, after a period (typically three years), foreclose to assume legal ownership. Heirs' property owners, some of whom may live far away, are often unaware of this entire process, from their delinquency, to their redemption rights, which allow them to reclaim their land if they act within the stipulated time.⁶¹

In South Carolina, counties themselves can put delinquent properties on auction. One woman in South Carolina lost her family's heirs' property when the county put it up for auction over just \$965 in unpaid property taxes according to an article in *The Guardian*.⁶² Once a bidder buys a property at auction, the owner has a year to pay their outstanding taxes to "redeem" their property, but in places like Hilton Head, where resort development has driven up property taxes, many Gullah-Geechee owners do not have enough capital to save their properties, according to the same article in *The Guardian*.

A sticker saying "Keep Sapelo Geechee" is worn on the shirt of George Grovner, a resident of the Hogg Hummock community on Sapelo Island, during a meeting of McIntosh County commissioners. (AP Photo/Ross Bynum, File)



Partition sales also pose a substantial threat to land retention in historically Black towns. These occur when heirs' property is sold in an attempt to resolve competing interests by dividing proceeds among the heirs. Heirs with limited financial resources frequently cannot outbid others, leading to the loss of property that has been in the family for generations.⁶³ Predatory or forced partition sales occur when outsiders purchase an heir's share and then petition the court for a sale, exploiting the tenancies-in-common structure prevalent in heirs' property to purchase the property themselves. According to *The Nation*, a 2001 report from the US Agricultural Census estimated that about half of all Black-owned farms lost since 1969 was lost through partition sales.⁶⁴ Partition sale proceedings focus entirely on the economic value of land, ignoring the cultural, familiar, and spiritual value that the land may hold for heirs. For instance, in Cainhoy, South Carolina, one heir filed a motion for a rehearing to challenge the partition sale of his property, highlighting his "emotional and economic attachment" to the land. He told the local newspaper, "Got five girls and two boys who were born on this land and who grew up here. It's the only home they know. I kept the long grass cut, kept the high bushes cut, and the longest I was away from this property in 69 years was nine days when I was in the hospital."⁶⁵ His motion was dismissed by the court and his claims were determined to be "directly contrary to established legal principles."⁶⁶ The refusal of many courts to account for these culturally specific orientations toward land and property further facilitate displacement and dispossession while inflicting ongoing trauma and harm to historic Black towns and their communities.

Property Assessments

Unfair property tax assessments have played a significant role in the loss of land in Black towns, exacerbating the vulnerability of these communities. Nationwide studies reveal that Black homeowners face higher property tax assessments compared to their white counterparts, even when controlling for the actual market value of homes. Black households typically pay 10 percent to 13 percent more in property taxes than white households for similar properties. This disparity, often referred to as the "Black tax," is not limited to any single region but is a pervasive issue across the United States.⁶⁷ Research by property law scholars such as Bernadette Atuahene has demonstrated how the inflated tax burden stems from systemic, racialized biases in property assessments, where homes in Black-majority neighborhoods are frequently overvalued by assessors. This overvaluation results in higher tax bills, contributing to financial strain and eventual land loss as

owners struggle to keep up with payments. Paradoxically, when Black owners do sell, they are often faced with a contradictory undervaluation of their property. “When we own something it doesn’t have value,” explains Taiwan Scott, a Gullah-Geechee activist and entrepreneur from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, “but when someone else does....” Scott’s voice trails off, implying a wearying, unspoken truth.⁶⁸

In historic Black towns facing gentrification and displacement pressures, the impacts of the “Black tax” are profound. For instance, in the Gullah-Geechee community, property values associated with the development of resorts and luxury homes often drive-up property taxes, placing further pressure on Gullah-Geechee owners of heirs’ property. Many of these owners live on limited incomes derived from small-scale farming and fishing operations.⁶⁹ On Georgia’s Sapelo Island, appraised property values in the predominantly Gullah-Geechee community of Hog Hummock increased by more than 1,000 percent in 2022, despite the fact that the island did not benefit from county schools, police, fire, or trash services. After a lawsuit was filed, the county agreed to provide services and freeze property taxes for some residents, but several Gullah-Geechee families lost their land due to delinquent property taxes before the county eventually reverted the values to their original rates in 2015.⁷⁰

These unfair property tax assessments lead to land loss as owners, unable to keep up with the exorbitant taxes, fall delinquent. This situation is particularly acute for heirs’ property, where the lack of a clear chain of title can make it difficult for families to defend their property rights. Consequently, the land, which holds significant cultural, communal and familial value, is often lost to foreclosure or forced sales. Addressing these challenges requires recognizing the multifaceted value of land to these communities and implementing tax policies that protect rather than prey upon historically marginalized people.

Environmental Injustice and Climate Crisis

Regulatory neglect and the exclusion of Black towns from land use decision-making processes have severely undermined their ability to protect themselves from environmental injustices and climate change-induced natural disasters. This lack of agency leaves these communities disproportionately vulnerable to harmful environmental impacts.

Communities like Mossville, Louisiana, and Africatown, Alabama—steeped in rich cultural and historical significance—face severe environmental degradation due to industrial pollution and the subsequent neglect from regulatory bodies. Mossville, a small town founded by formerly enslaved African Americans in the 1790s, has faced relentless industrial pollution over the decades. The five-square-mile town was surrounded on all sides by petrochemical plants, resulting in residents demonstrating elevated rates of cancer, respiratory problems, and other health conditions linked to exposure to pollution and contamination.



A utility pole stands in the middle of a marsh at sunset on Sapelo Island, Georgia, a Gullah-Geechee community. (AP Photo/David Goldman, File)

This environmental exploitation has led to a substantial population decrease of over 54 percent in Mossville from 1990 to 2010.⁷¹ Mossville was eventually largely dismantled when the petrochemical company SASOL developed the largest chemical plant in Louisiana history. The plant was projected to contribute \$46.2 billion to Louisiana’s economy, but it demanded the buy-out of neighboring communities.⁷² The University Network for Human Rights found that property owners in Mossville were paid nearly 40 percent less than those in the surrounding predominantly white communities.⁷³ Residents of mostly white towns were allowed to negotiate the value of their estates, while Mossville residents were presented with a set formula that did not allow for negotiation and largely underassessed the values of their properties.⁷⁴



City Council members and jail, Eatonville, Florida, 1907. (Courtesy New York Public Library, 1157788)

Similarly, Africatown faces its own battle against environmental injustices as the town is now surrounded by industrial facilities that contribute to air and water pollution.⁷⁵ The construction of rail yards and expansion of port activities have exacerbated the environmental burden on Africatown's residents, leading to health crises and a diminishing quality of life. Although no governmental studies or statistics have been gathered about the health impacts of a paper company's chemical emissions, community-led surveys have confirmed what community members already knew. The cancer long associated with the chemical byproducts of the paper mill company has become a normal and even expected life occurrence for community members.⁷⁶ The combination of environmental injustices and loss of economic opportunities when the paper company closed has also led to a substantial population decrease in Africatown from 12,000 in the mid-20th century to 1,881 people in 2010.⁷⁷ Despite the community's significant history and cultural importance, it struggles for recognition and protection from further environmental harm.

As the climate crisis intensifies, these legacies of environmental injustices leave historic Black towns even more at risk to climate-related displacement. Princeville, North Carolina, the country's oldest existing Black-chartered town, was founded on

lands that plantation owners sold at cheap rates, specifically because they were too flood-prone to produce cotton. The community has always dealt with flood episodes, but now they have grown so frequent and so severe that community members are caught between rebuilding or accepting relocation funds from the federal government.⁷⁸ Many community members held out hope that the Army Corps of Engineers would repair and expand the levee that offers limited flood protection to the town. In 2020, funding for levee improvements was secured. But shortly after, the Army Corps announced it was revisiting the plans because it discovered that expanding the levee would increase flood risk in neighboring Tarboro.⁷⁹ This complication highlights the enduring spatial legacies of racism, as the founders of Princeville were only able to purchase the town's land because the white residents of Tarboro had deemed it too flood prone.

In the following section, we survey the diverse strategies that historic Black towns are using to fight erasure to build thriving futures rooted in reparative spatial justice.

Reparative Spatial Justice: A Forward-Looking Perspective

As an aspirational, world-building orientation, reparative spatial justice asks us what it would look like to not only repair and seek restitution for the generations of injustice that have led to the erasure and destruction of hundreds of historic Black towns, settlements, and Freedmen's colonies, but also to work toward a world in which the conditions that led to these erasures are transformed and replaced with systems that allow these communities to thrive, flourish, and proliferate.

Reparative spatial justice is deeply connected to the broader framework of Black reparations, which seeks to address the historical and ongoing injustices faced by Black communities through material compensation and systemic change. Scholars such as William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen argue that Black reparations should encompass direct payments to descendants of enslaved people, investments in Black communities, and structural reforms to eliminate racial disparities.⁸⁰

The United Nations has identified the five components of reparations as restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of nonrepetition.⁸¹ Restitution involves restoring rights and property unjustly taken, while compensation provides financial payments for harm suffered, including loss of property. Rehabilitation includes social and legal services, and psychological and medical care for victims. Satisfaction encompasses public apologies, commemorations, recovery and reburial of remains, truth-seeking commissions, memorials, and educational reforms to acknowledge and address past injustices. Guarantees of nonrepetition focus on systemic, societal, and individual changes to prevent future occurrences of such injustices.⁸²



A mural of author Zora Neale Hurston, who grew up in Eatonville, Florida, and depicted a fictionalized version of the historic Black town in her work. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

Reparative spatial justice builds on this framework by focusing on the spatial dimensions of reparations. While not all reparative spatial justice measures meet each element of the United Nations reparations components, they play a crucial role in addressing the multifaceted impact of spatial and racial inequalities. Reparative spatial justice ranges from reclaiming and restoring land, to addressing the legacy of discriminatory housing policies, and creating equitable urban and rural spaces where Black communities can thrive.

Reparative spatial justice strategies also align with the principles of reckon, repair, and transform, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and systemic response to spatial and racial injustices. Specifically, the reckon, repair, and transform framework outlined here calls on us to adopt equity-minded approaches, tactics, and strategies, including the following:

- **Reckon:** Confront and acknowledge the historical and ongoing injustices that have shaped current spatial inequities to understand the context, root causes, and power dynamics of existing and persistent issues that inform decisions. This involves a deep examination of policies and practices that have contributed to land dispossession, segregation, and economic disenfranchisement.

- **Repair:** Address harms, remove barriers, and pursue solutions for people who are most impacted by existing issues. This includes implementing policies and practices that actively redress past injustices, such as providing financial compensation, restoring land ownership, and ensuring access to affordable and quality housing. Repairing the damage requires targeted efforts to dismantle discriminatory structures and create opportunities for economic and social mobility.
- **Transform:** Build deep solidarity to ensure partners and movements can conduct aligned and sustained work for wide-sweeping equitable outcomes. Transformation requires reimagining and restructuring societal systems to promote equity and justice. This involves creating inclusive urban planning processes; ensuring equitable access to resources and services; and fostering environments where cultural, social, and economic life can flourish.

In this section, we provide a high-level view of a range of strategies that historic Black towns and settlements are using to fight off ongoing displacement pressures. These strategies advance reparative spatial justice by reckoning with, repairing, and transforming the conditions of uneven development, racialized disinvestment, and racial violence that have put historic Black towns under threat in the first place.

Recognition, Acknowledgment, and Apologies

Central to the concept of reparative spatial justice is the recognition and acknowledgment of the historical and ongoing injustices faced by Black towns and settlements. Recognition involves formally identifying the wrongs committed and the impacts these have had on Black communities. Acknowledgment goes a step further by publicly admitting the harm done and the responsibility borne by those in power.

Apologies, as a form of acknowledgment, are crucial steps in the process of reparative justice. Apologies can foster a sense of reconciliation and healing, paving the way for meaningful dialogue and collaboration between Black communities and governmental bodies. They can also serve as a catalyst for broader societal changes, challenging the narratives that have perpetuated the marginalization of Black towns. Formal apologies to Black towns and settlements for their destruction, disinvestment, and deterioration are rare but vital. These apologies must be unequivocal and sincere, addressing the specific harms inflicted upon these communities. They should

not only express regret but also take responsibility for the policies and actions that led to the displacement and erasure of Black towns.

Importantly, as the International Center for Transitional Justice highlights, acts of recognition, acknowledgment, and apology should never foreclose or diminish the likelihood of other acts of repair.⁸³ Instead, these symbolic forms of reparative justice should be used as tools to create narratives that can bring communities together in shared understandings of history, and drive collective action toward other meaningful reparative actions. For instance, in 2021, during the 100th anniversary of the destruction of Greenwood, the city of Tulsa issued a formal apology for the erasure of the Black Wall Street.⁸⁴ The apology resolution included a commitment from the City Council to support a community engagement process that would inform the implementation of reparative policies. The process includes four components for further action and repair: communal education and listening, research, community feedback, and a final report with recommended actions.⁸⁵ Similarly, the apology to Rosewood, Florida, from the state legislature in 1994 was part of a reparations package acknowledging the 1923 massacre and its aftermath.⁸⁶

A plaque honoring Zora Neale Hurston is viewed on an archway during a Martin Luther King Jr. Day Parade in Eatonville, Florida. (Phelan M. Ebenhack via AP)



Compensation and Restitution

Addressing the harms created by decades of uneven development and extraction demands addressing the economic losses that occurred as a result of racist systems. Ideally, victims of displacement and dispossession would receive restitution, meaning that they would be restored to the condition they were in prior to experiencing injustices or the harms through financial compensation, land return, and public acknowledgment, among others. And while true restitution is rare, some survivors and descendants have received financial compensation for their losses. For instance, the state of Florida passed a \$2 million compensation plan in 1994 and paid reparations to survivors of the 1923 Rosewood Massacre.⁸⁷ Survivors who could prove that they lost property during the massacre received \$150,000 in restitution, and the state created a scholarship fund for descendants to attend in-state colleges.⁸⁸

However, many other communities that experienced similar acts of violence have never been compensated for the loss of life and property. As the national movement for reparations experiences a resurgence, renewed demands are emerging, with varied success. In Oklahoma, three survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre filed a 2020 suit seeking reparations. However, in June 2024, their claim was struck down by the Oklahoma Supreme Court, which argued that their grievances did not entitle them to compensation from the state. The DOJ is currently investigating the case.⁸⁹

Scholars working in historic Black towns have also underscored the necessity for targeted and context-specific approaches to reparations. Conner Bailey and Ryan Thomson make the case that reparations should be made to Gullah-Geechee communities for the court-sanctioned dispossession of their lands.⁹⁰ They argue that because the tourism industry continues to profit off of those lands, a tax could be imposed on hotels, resorts, and short-term rentals in the Gullah-Geechee Historical Corridor to fund reparative public investments, such as the purchase and preservation of Gullah-Geechee lands, accessible heirs' property education, and the maintenance of cultural heritage sites.



U.S. Rep. Shelia Jackson Lee (D-TX) listens at a rally during commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre on June 01, 2021 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (Brandon Bell)

Renewed Relationships to Land

Many historic Black towns and settlements have cultivated a deep relationship to the lands and waters that have sustained their communities, establishing a profound bond that transcends mere occupation. For these communities, the land was not only a source of sustenance but also a cornerstone of identity and spiritual grounding. In many African cultures, land is revered as sacred, and this reverence was carried into the establishment of Black towns in America. Agricultural practices, land ownership, and stewardship in these towns were characterized by a deep respect for the natural environment and a commitment to sustainable living. This relationship reflects a broader ethos of interconnectedness and reverence for the earth, a legacy that continues to inspire contemporary efforts for spatial justice and environmental stewardship.

Recognizing, strengthening, and renewing these relationships is a key strategy for advancing spatial justice and repair. In her work with the Texas Freedom Colonies Project™, activist-scholar Andrea Roberts has highlighted the need to recognize the abundant cultural landscapes of Black settlements to create more expansive understandings of these relationships. Referring to her collaboration with community members in Shankleville, Texas, she discusses how the central place within the town is not necessarily the historic church, but a stream where descendants hold a ceremony to commemorate the towns' founders who built their Black town out of fugitivity.⁹¹ This stream, a symbol of resilience and continuity, highlights the vital connection between cultural practices and the natural environment.

Similarly, in Africatown, Alabama, decades of industrial development have cut off Africatown from the surrounding rivers and bayous that once helped the towns' founders survive and maintain their West African linguistic and cultural traditions. Today, environmental justice organizations like Africatown C.H.E.S.S. are working to reconnect their community to the waterways that are so central to the community's cultural landscape and heritage. In partnership with the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, community members have established the Africatown Connections Blueway. This initiative aims to reconnect their community to the surrounding waterways, reaffirming the integral role of these natural features in Africatown's cultural landscape.⁹²

Participatory and Fair Housing Planning

For many years, government decision makers have used the community planning process to direct the future of a community, city, or region's physical (both constructed and natural) environment. They have done this by documenting existing conditions, and making choices on how to move capital, implement policies, and allocate land toward specific goals and priorities. Planning processes are also not always restricted to just the future of land use or housing, as many have continued to incorporate employment, infrastructure, and environmental justice goals, to name a few. However, planning processes, and the public officials who facilitate the process, have notoriously failed to incorporate a wide range of perspectives from local residents and business owners into the critical conversations that inform community-changing decisions. The power imbalances between the facilitators of processes, decision makers, and community members have led to policy and capital interventions that continuously threaten the longevity and preservation of historically Black towns and settlements.

Shifting and Sharing Power through Participatory Planning

Participatory planning aims to incorporate a wide range of stakeholders into decision-making processes about public projects. These stakeholders include community members from professions and backgrounds who come together and elevate their concerns, experiences, and visions for the future. In many spaces, participatory planning means the intentional and prioritized inclusion of an entire community to direct community development decisions. This shift in planning processes prevents centralized decision-making from happening, where one entity proposes interventions that do not address various groups' concerns or interests and do not expand power to community members. Participatory planning—when done right—allows community members to exercise increased power by directly having the space, time, and resources to influence decisions. But when local governments do not consider the need for sustained engagement, transparency, accountability, and relationship building, there lies a high likelihood for this process to further bifurcate communities, increasing tensions and distrust.

On Sapelo Island, Georgia, the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society initiated its own land use planning project to “address systemic threats to the survival of the community through land retention strategies, land use planning, and policy reform.”⁹³ On Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, the Gullah-Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force was created in 2017 as an ad hoc committee to the town planning commission. The task force identified three priorities (cultural preservation, public policy surrounding land ownership and development, and land loss through heirs' property disputes) and carried out extensive public engagement with the Gullah-Geechee community.⁹⁴ The result was a report that included a broad range of recommendations, including the establishment of a Gullah-Geechee Zoning Overlay, the creation of a fund to help heirs' property owners address delinquent taxes, and the implementation of “family compound” provisions that would allow Gullah-Geechee families to develop multiple family dwellings on one property without subdividing parcels.⁹⁵ The task force's recommendations are now being considered by the town council, and several of the recommendations seem poised for adoption. It is here that the strengths and limitations of participatory planning may be tested, particularly because there is only one Gullah-Geechee member on the Hilton Head Island Town Council.

Leveraging Fair Housing Planning to Support Housing Development and Access

The federal Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule may also offer an opportunity to support preservation and antidisplacement efforts in remaining historic Black towns.⁹⁶ The AFFH rule provides a powerful framework for local governments to engage in fair housing planning processes that can preserve existing historic Black towns. The AFFH rule, initially established by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2015, required jurisdictions receiving federal housing funds to identify and address barriers to fair housing. The 2015 AFFH rule mandated a comprehensive analysis of local housing conditions and the implementation of strategic plans to promote fair housing choice, combat discrimination, and foster inclusive communities. In 2021, the Biden-Harris Administration reinstated certain provisions and definitions of the 2015 AFFH rule under the Interim Final Rule (IFR). While the IFR did not revert back to the mandated planning process from the 2015 AFFH Rule, many jurisdictions still utilize the AFFH process to meet their obligations to certify to affirmatively furthering fair housing under the IFR. When approached through a reparative spatial justice lens, the 2015 AFFH rule's fair housing planning framework can play a critical role in safeguarding the heritage and continuity of historic Black towns and their residents, which have long been centers of cultural, economic, and social significance.

The AFFH rule provides a framework for local governments to conduct thorough assessments of fair housing issues, including an analysis of segregation patterns, disparities in access to opportunity, and disproportionate housing needs. This process is typically called an assessment of fair housing or an analysis of impediments. Community participation is critical in this phase, including public meetings, surveys, and focus groups to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by these towns. Once data is gathered, jurisdictions must use it to identify barriers to fair housing, taking into account both historical injustices and systemic barriers that have affected their community. The assessment should also consider and develop strategies to address current challenges, including gentrification, displacement, inadequate infrastructure, and limited economic opportunities.

Within this process, jurisdictions can prioritize the preservation of historic Black towns by identifying these areas as critical to the cultural fabric and historical narrative of their regions. Strategies may include zoning reforms to prevent displacement, investment in infrastructure and public services, and the creation of housing programs that cater to the needs of current residents while encouraging the return of displaced community members. Jurisdictions conducting assessments of fair housing or analyses of impediments typically include entitlement jurisdictions, such as cities and counties that receive direct allocations of federal housing funds, public housing authorities that manage public housing and receive federal funding, and

The Cochran-Africatown USA Bridge crossing the Mobile River located just north of downtown Mobile, Alabama.



states and consortia that jointly apply for federal funds. Many historic Black towns are situated within these jurisdictions. In May 2023, for example, Mobile, Alabama, completed an analysis of impediments and included nearby Africatown in its analysis. A community needs survey identified a lack of economic opportunity in Africatown and a need for new housing to be built.⁹⁷

Andrea Roberts extends the fair housing concept of “affirmatively further” to inclusive preservation outreach, advocating for its application to “concerted, measurable, and intentional efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity in preservation outreach, leadership, and access to resources.” She argues that this term can serve as a broader framework for actions and preservation policies that mandate consultation with, and active participation by, underrepresented groups—ensuring these efforts are not only fostered but also monitored and enforceable.⁹⁸

It is important to note that there are times when participatory planning is not well executed and leads to increased harm and distrust between community members and government officials. Cities and local governments may frequently request input from community members on projects, developments, and initiatives, but rarely implement or consider the feedback that they receive, or take into account that the local officials do not have transparent processes to facilitate better relations. Continuing this pattern ultimately can leave community members too fatigued to engage in the long run, knowing that they are not harnessing the power needed to make the changes they want to see in their neighborhoods. It is therefore vital for public officials to take a much more intentional approach when engaging in participatory planning.

Zoning Tools

Historically, zoning has been a tool of systemic racism, often used to segregate and disenfranchise Black communities. Discriminatory zoning laws have facilitated redlining, the placement of hazardous industrial sites near Black neighborhoods, and the neglect of infrastructure and services in these areas. This legacy has left enduring scars on the spatial and social fabric of Black communities, contributing to economic disparities and health inequities.

To undermine this imprint, communities are mobilizing to create tactical planning and zoning tools that they can leverage in their fights for autonomy, preservation, and self-determination.

Equitable planning and zoning policies are essential in reparative measures to protect and preserve historic Black towns. While these policies do not necessarily seek restitution for past harms, they actively aim to transform the systems that enabled those harms to occur and recur over generations. These policies demonstrate that while planning instruments are never race-neutral or apolitical tools, they can be wielded in the pursuit of spatial justice.

In Africatown, Alabama, community organizers successfully fought for the Africatown Safety Zone, which was established as an amendment to the City of Mobile’s Unified Development Code in July 2022. This amendment restricts new industrial businesses from being built near residential areas, safeguarding the community from industrial encroachment.⁹⁹ While the passage of the amendment was soon followed by petrochemical industry attempts to add exemptions, the safety zone provides a powerful tool for the Africatown community to challenge new industrial developments.

Zoning can also be used as a tool to assess the distinct cultural context of historic Black communities within broader municipalities, and to facilitate land use decision-making and development that is attentive to the unique needs of these communities. In South Carolina, Beaufort County’s Cultural Protection Overlay zoning law prohibits golf courses, gated communities, and resort developments on St. Helena Island, a community that is a cultural anchor for the Gullah-Geechee people. The overlay has been in effect since the 1990s, and while it faces challenges by predatory developers, it serves as a model for other Gullah-Geechee communities.¹⁰⁰ In Hilton Head, South Carolina, the community-led Gullah Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force has recommended a similar cultural overlay that would enable Gullah-Geechee families to develop their lands according to their culturally specific needs.

Historic Black towns are also confronting rezoning efforts that threaten their existence. Residents of Hogg Hummock (also known as Hog Hammock), one of the last intact Gullah-Geechee communities on Sapelo Island, Georgia, with fewer than 50 Black residents remaining, successfully petitioned for a referendum to challenge recent rezoning changes.¹⁰¹ This community, comprising descendants of enslaved plantation workers, faces the threat of displacement due to zoning changes implemented by McIntosh County commissioners in 2023, which could lead to increased property taxes and potentially force them to sell their land.¹⁰² As Southern Poverty Law Center Attorney Crystal McElrath, representing members of the community, notes “Stripping families of their land that their

families have owned for generations is one of the most common ways that Black and Brown communities are systematically looted for their wealth.¹⁰³ The community acknowledges “that this is not just a zoning ordinance. This is not just about a number of square feet. This is about preserving both the historic nature of the land and preserving the ability to live on the land for this community.”¹⁰⁴

The petition, which garnered over 1,800 signatures—more than the required 20 percent of registered county voters—prompted the court to approve a special election on October 1, 2024, to decide on reversing the zoning changes.¹⁰⁵ However, McIntosh County officials are attempting to block the referendum, arguing that Georgia’s constitution does not allow for referendums on zoning issues. While the Georgia Supreme Court upheld a similar referendum in Camden County, where residents vetoed plans for a commercial rocket launchpad, McIntosh County’s lawyers contend that the state constitution’s referendum provision does not apply to zoning laws, a point contested by the referendum organizers’ attorney. In parallel, Hogg Hummock residents are challenging the new zoning ordinance in Georgia Supreme Court based on a claim that the ordinance “discriminates against the historically and culturally important Gullah-Geechee community on Sapelo Island on the basis of race, and that it is therefore unconstitutional, null, and void.”¹⁰⁶ In November 2024, a judge temporarily prohibited county officials from approving new building permits under the revised zoning policy until the state Supreme Court renders a decision on the residents’ case.¹⁰⁷

The outcome of this legal battle will be pivotal in determining whether the Gullah-Geechee community on Sapelo Island can retain its historical land and cultural heritage. This fight also underscores the broader struggle for spatial justice in historic Black communities. Rezoning efforts that ignore the unique cultural and historical contexts of these areas risk erasing vital links to the past and displacing the very people who have preserved these legacies. Therefore, it is crucial to support policies and legal actions that protect and sustain these communities, ensuring that zoning laws serve as instruments of preservation and resilience rather than displacement and disenfranchisement.

Heirs’ Property and Collective Ownership

Education and Financial Resources

Heirs’ property is understood as one of the primary challenges that historic Black towns and settlements face. Communities have tackled this entrenched problem by providing increased education and services to protect heirs’ property and clear titles to prevent predatory practices. The Center for Heirs’ Property helps not only to provide legal education for families who own heirs’ property, but also to develop land use programs, such as the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program, to help families see economic benefit from their land. Additionally, the US Department of Agriculture’s Heirs’ Property Relending Program has provided over \$10.6 million in loaned resources for agricultural producers and landowners to find resolution to their heirs’ property issues.¹⁰⁸ In 2021, the Biden Administration announced a \$67 million investment into the program to continue to support the impacts made for resolving land ownership and transition issues.¹⁰⁹ The ability to generate income from heirs’ property can be an incentive for families to retain their land, and the impacts of such economic activity can have ripple effects for economic development in the broader community.

Legal Protections

Beyond increasing education and resources for heirs’ property owners, legal protections are also key to preventing ongoing Black land loss caused by the predatory practices of land speculators. In recent years, 23 states have enacted the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act (UPHPA), which establishes safeguards to protect heirs’ property owners from forced partition sales.¹¹⁰ The Act requires that the heir pursuing a potential partition notify all co-owners. It also requires the courts to provide an independent appraisal of the property, and provides co-owners an opportunity to buy out the interest on the petitioning co-owner. Finally, it requires that courts evaluate the viability of partitioning-in-kind (subdividing the land) rather than partitioning by dividing the proceeds of a sale. In New York, modifications were made to UHPA to provide even stronger safeguards against forced partitions, including allowing courts to consider how non-heirs acquired their ownership interests during settlement negotiations.¹¹¹ Passage and implementation of the UHPA remains a key priority in protecting heirs’ property and historic Black towns.

Collective and Communal Ownership Models

Legal and policy measures can be effectively paired with initiatives to establish community land trusts (CLT) that “can acquire and preserve heirs’ property for community benefit while respecting the rights and interests of the original owners.”¹¹² The CLT model—which originated in 1969 by a Black-led farm collective called New Communities Inc, located in Albany, Georgia—involves a nonprofit organization acquiring and managing land and buildings to guarantee housing with lasting affordability and community control.¹¹³

CLTs offer a way to provide options for heirs who want to sell their land for financial benefit, but would also like to see that land remain in the hands of their community and be used for purposes that contribute to the overall well-being of their community. Additionally, CLTs provide a collective ownership model—one that enables a community or group to control and direct resources, property, or development instead of individuals—that resonates with the familial ownership model underpinning heirs’ property.

Pairing CLTs with heirs’ property retention efforts challenges the exclusionary nature of private property regimes under settler colonialism and racial capitalism. It nurtures relationships to land that are more intimately rooted in forms of communal belonging and kinship-based land management that are essential to the survival of historic Black towns and settlements. This approach draws on ancestral traditions of Black and Indigenous groups, where communities engage with and care for the land in ways that have been overshadowed by contemporary capitalist practices.

CLTs can also be a useful way to preserve community stability in the face of climate change-induced gentrification. For instance, the Houston Community Land Trust has prioritized building homes away from environmentally vulnerable areas, demonstrating how CLTs can be adapted to combat looming economic, climate, and environmental displacement pressures.¹¹⁴

Other community ownership models, such as cooperatives, align with a reparative justice framework and Black cultural norms of land and collective ownership. Housing and land cooperatives, where residents collectively own and manage their housing, empower communities to make decisions that reflect their collective interests and values. Black communities have a long history of using cooperative economics as a means of survival and resistance against systemic economic exclusion. The cooperative model in Black communities dates back to the

1700s, with mutual aid societies providing essential social and economic support.¹¹⁵ The Free African Society, founded in 1787 by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, is an early example of this model.¹¹⁶ Later, organizations like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, founded in 1967, were instrumental in supporting Black farmers and landowners through cooperative development, land retention, and advocacy.¹¹⁷

Cultural and Historic Preservation

Protecting the culture and history of historic Black towns and settlements is key to not only ensuring their survival, but in asserting Black senses of place and celebrating the rich cultural tapestry of America. Structural inequities and racist ideas of what classifies as history worth remembering have long been baked into historic preservation processes. Historic preservation criteria center around the standards of historical significance and integrity. Epistemologically, preservation criteria have valued the historical significance of white narratives, built environments, and archives while neglecting Black historiography, storytelling, and placemaking. Materially, the demand for a certain level of “integrity” has meant that Black spaces that have been subject to disinvestment have typically not had the capital to reinvest in properties for maintenance, preservation, and rehabilitation.¹¹⁸ Andrea Roberts also argues that this systemic bias has created a “preservation apartheid in which African American spaces are disproportionately excluded from legal protections and, as a consequence, are disproportionately subject to demolition.”¹¹⁹ Despite these realities, historic Black towns are leveraging reforms at the federal, state, and local levels to establish and maintain historic sites and heritage districts that help to preserve cultural identity and create pathways for cultural tourism and economic development.

However, cultural preservation in historic Black towns and settlements must be community-led and, more specifically, descendant-led to avoid the risks of co-optation, whitewashing, or paving the way for gentrification that excludes the community from its benefits. By centering the voices and leadership of those directly connected to these spaces, we can ensure that preservation efforts honor the true legacy of these towns. This approach not only safeguards the cultural and historical significance of these areas but also promotes economic opportunities and sustainable development that directly benefit the descendants and residents. Africatown, Alabama; Nicodemus, Kansas; and Eatonville, Florida, are three examples where cultural preservation efforts are being led or stewarded by descendants of the town’s founders.

Descendant-Led Cultural Preservation Efforts

The 2019 discovery of the *Clotilda*, the last known slave trafficking ship to arrive in the United States, has led to a surge of national attention for Africatown, Alabama. The Clotilda Descendants Association is currently working to ensure that their ancestors' histories are honored. Their goal is to "bring all things Clotilda to light ... things infamously, and literally, done in the dark when that illegal ship set sail from Benin on the west coast of Africa with our terrified relatives crammed into overcrowded, filthy cargo holds."¹²⁰ The organization hosts an annual festival and ceremony to honor their ancestors, and is working toward building a museum and performing arts center to nurture cultural production within their community. The Clotilda Descendants Association also partners with others within Africatown to center cultural heritage as the foundation of a sustainable and resilient economy, rather than simply as a commodity for consumption. More importantly, they are



working toward ensuring that this new economy is one that is led by the community, and more specifically, by descendants of original Africatown residents as some practitioners fear that without this decision-making power, the tourism can be extractive. The Africatown Heritage Preservation Foundation leverages funding from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, and other community initiatives are working to ensure that growth of the cultural heritage industry benefits the people who call Africatown home.¹²¹

Founded in 1877, Nicodemus, Kansas, became a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of formerly enslaved Black people who used the Homestead Act to establish themselves as autonomous, self-governing citizens. These individuals, leveraging the skills they were forced to develop on plantations, applied their expertise to build and sustain their town. The residents of Nicodemus faced extraordinary hardships,

including early encampments in dug-outs, near starvation during harsh winters, and the challenges of the Great Depression. Despite these adversities, they opened restaurants, established bands and performance spaces, and built Masonic halls alongside hospitals, churches, and schools. Today, about 25 residents live in Nicodemus, yet the town's legacy endures through a powerful genealogical movement by the descendants of its original settlers.¹²² This movement strives to preserve the rich history of Nicodemus, exemplified by the annual [Homecoming Emancipation Celebration](#). Held each summer since 1877, this event welcomes hundreds of descendants from across the country to honor and celebrate their heritage.

Cultural preservation transcends merely honoring the past; it serves as a powerful tool for shaping future narratives and fostering community resilience, and resisting displacement. In 2023, a developer threatened to buy the site of the former Hungerford School, a historic all-Black school, from the local school system in Eatonville, Florida. In response, the community spoke out in opposition, and the Association to Preserve Eatonville Community won a lawsuit against the school district, halting the \$14.6 million deal on the grounds that it threatened the town's heritage and the displacement of long-time residents. Thanks to these community efforts, the historical site will no longer be subject to bids, and the school system has committed to work with the community to honor Eatonville's cultural heritage as one of the oldest incorporated Black towns in the United States.¹²³ The plaintiff, the Association to Preserve Eatonville, also works proactively to celebrate and preserve the town's cultural heritage. It hosts the annual, ZORA! Festival, honoring Eatonville's homegrown literary icon, Zora Neale Hurston, and celebrates the author's life and the vivid depiction of Eatonville in her work. Since its inception in 1990, the festival has won several awards and has been noted as "the nation's largest running arts and humanities festival celebrating the cultural contributions people of African ancestry have made to the world."¹²⁴

The ZORA! Festival has attracted people from all over the nation to participate in seminars, museum exhibitions, historical tours, performances, and arts education.¹²⁵ According to scholar Julian Chambliss, "[the festival] celebrates Zora Neale Hurston and the vision of Eatonville she created for countless readers across time. The Association to Preserve Eatonville Community wants to leverage that memory to deal with the very real concerns of contemporary folks living in the town."¹²⁶ This depiction underscores the ongoing life and evolution of Eatonville, bridging its historical significance with its contemporary reality. However, festival organizers also use the space to assert an understanding of Eatonville and other historic Black towns

distinctly rooted in **Afrofuturism**,¹²⁷ celebrating the ways that they have not only preserved their cultural heritage, but also envisioned and created alternative futures for themselves. Descendants of Joseph Clark, the founder of Eatonville, have goals to institutionalize Zora Neale Hurston's contributions and memorialization of Eatonville in a museum.¹²⁸

Federal Support of Cultural Preservation Efforts

The federal government, across multiple agencies, has taken various steps to support the preservation of historic Black towns and Freedmen's settlements through grant opportunities. Much of the support that has been provided comes from funding various public education projects assisting museums, historic tourism, historic landmarks, workshops, and capacity building. For example, the National Parks Service (NPS) has announced the availability of \$1.25 million to support jurisdictions across the country that submit nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.¹²⁹ This targeted investment is partially intended to solve the disparity that exists regarding the severe underrepresentation of African American historic sites on the National Register (less than 3 percent). National recognitions of this sort are valuable because they inherently come with protections to encourage preservation of buildings, sites, districts, and structures through tax credits and additional federal resources, for example.¹³⁰ The NPS also offers a History of Equal Rights Grant Opportunity which can be used toward physical preservation and pre-preservation projects on sites, buildings, or structures that are already listed or are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.¹³¹

Some other agency programs, like the Department of Transportation's (DOT) [Past, Present, and Future of Reconnecting Communities program](#), aim to go beyond supporting preservation efforts, and instead, aim to redress harms that were facilitated by the federal government's well-documented instances of discriminatory transportation policies. This program, specifically, with \$1 billion in funding for over five years aims to "remove, retrofit, or mitigate transportation facilities like highways or rail lines that create barriers to mobility, access, or economic development through technical assistance and grant funding for planning and capital construction projects that reconnect communities and improve peoples' lives."¹³² Novel resources like these, and more infrastructure-related grant opportunities from the DOT, have the potential to bolster historically Black towns and settlements to achieve economic and cultural sustainability.¹³³

Elected representatives (Congresswomen Tlaib and Kamlager-Dove) have also taken steps to protect historically Black towns and settlements and ensure their survival for the future through the introduction of the Freedmen's Bureau Resolution.¹³⁴ This resolution, endorsed by the Chisholm Legacy Project, outlines a suite of actions that would strengthen the ability for historically Black towns and settlements, or Freedmen's settlements, to combat encroaching forces like gentrification, climate change, and predatory development that threaten community preservation. Specifically, this resolution seeks to expand identified and known Freedmen's settlements across the country; provide a federal designation and protective preservation measures for towns against development, gentrification, and environmental hazards; set a preferential status for these communities to receive support from federal agencies; and much more. The combination of these actions would set up Black towns and settlements to address existing disparities in their communities and weather the economic, social, and environmental storms of the future. For more information on federal resources, initiatives, and programs available to support the preservation and sustainability of Black towns, refer to Appendix C: Federal Grant Opportunities, Initiatives, and Legislation.

While cultural heritage must be preserved, all too often, Black towns find that their cultural aesthetics are celebrated without accompanying political power, economic resources, and autonomy over land use decision-making. For instance, in 2006, Congress established the Gullah-Geechee Heritage Corridor to preserve the community's folklore, arts, crafts, and music. The corridor is recognized as a National Heritage Area, and spans North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia. It has enabled a heritage tourism industry to grow. However, while the designation supports the economic and commercial development of this cottage industry, the Gullah-Geechee community still struggles to obtain the political power necessary to adequately address issues of land loss, meaning that a key anchor of Gullah-Geechee Afro-Indigenous culture remains continually under threat from gentrification pressures and surrounding resort development. As Taiwan Scott, a Gullah Geechee resident of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, shared in an interview, "How can [the federal government] say that we're so important, but we can still lose our ancestral lands in a day over taxes?"¹³⁵ This frustration demonstrates the importance of ensuring that preservationists "frame conversations with descendants within their current concerns about land access, control, and ecosystem health."¹³⁶

Recommendations

Numerous forces have influenced the long-term preservation of Black towns and settlements. These places hold profound historical significance, but more importantly, the lessons learned from their establishment and survival are crucial for contemporary policymaking, planning, and investment decisions nationwide. Historic Black towns and settlements serve as exemplars of how reparative spatial justice can achieve equitable outcomes. Policymakers, philanthropy, researchers, urban planners, developers, advocates, and public officials must adopt a more comprehensive understanding of the role that these communities play in national housing and land justice movements. Most importantly, all solutions pursued must be implemented with the direct leadership of community members, especially the descendants of the community and formerly enslaved people. Without ensuring this community-led approach, initiatives, programs, and policies risk being co-opted, thereby facilitating further economic, cultural, and social harm. The following sections outline recommendations for various stakeholders and actors engaging in these areas.

Policymakers and Public Officials

Policymakers and public officials must reckon with historical harms by openly acknowledging the past injustices inflicted on historic Black towns and settlements. Recognizing how systemic disparities have threatened these communities' longevity involves formal apologies and public reckonings with historical injustices, coupled with commitments to address ongoing inequities. The City of Evanston, Illinois, established the [Restorative Housing Fund](#) in 2023 and was one of the first local reparations programs in the nation. This program acknowledges the historic harm caused to Black residents of Evanston as a result of discriminatory housing policies and practices and provides funds to descendants of harmed residents to support homeownership attainment, home improvement goals, and mortgage assistance.

In addition to acknowledging past harms, it is essential for policymakers to conduct thorough policy analyses that assess the impacts of past and current policy, planning, and investment decisions on the preservation of historically and culturally

Sign designating the Historic Hog Hammock Community on Sapelo Island, home to a Gullah-Geechee community that preserves African traditions, language, and culture despite ongoing challenges with land ownership, environmental injustice, and preservation. (Tony Arruz)



significant spaces. This should include evaluating both immediate and long-term consequences for marginalized populations, ensuring that new policies do not perpetuate historical injustices. For instance, in Kentucky, the Louisville metro government passed an [Antidisplacement Ordinance](#) that features several tools and mechanisms, such as a displacement vulnerability index and an antidisplacement commission, to ensure that public resources such as money and land do not cause further harm to historically Black neighborhoods in Louisville.

Implementing strategies to mitigate negative impacts of development, such as displacement and gentrification, is critical. Mechanisms like community benefits agreements and antidisplacement funds can help. Portland, Oregon's [N/NE Preference Policy](#) aims to address “the harmful impacts of urban renewal” and eminent domain by granting “preference to housing applicants with generational ties to North/Northeast Portland.” Under this policy, applicants who have generational ties to these historically Black areas will be considered for rental housing before applicants without previous histories of residence in the area.

Equitable distribution of financial benefits and burdens must also be prioritized. Considering the socioeconomic status of residents and providing subsidies or financial assistance to those disproportionately affected by infrastructure or development costs is crucial. The City of Chicago, Illinois, recently passed an [ordinance](#) permitting the city to impose a surcharge on permits to demolish residential buildings in an effort to stabilize the existing housing stock and prevent displacement. Funds collected from this surcharge will fund a community land trust and support residents in acquiring homes at a markdown.

To further bolster these efforts, it is important to provide funding specifically for capacity-building initiatives that strengthen community organizations’ ability to plan, implement, and sustain preservation and development projects. An example is the [Equitable Development Initiative \(EDI\)](#), launched by Seattle, Washington, in 2016. The EDI has allocated over \$100 million to 56 projects, uniquely emerging from a coalition of formerly redlined communities with an explicit racial equity focus and with an advisory board composed of community members that ensures that the initiative remains accountable and addresses displacement pressures. This antidisplacement fund supports organizations run by communities of color, financing the construction of cultural and commercial spaces often co-located with affordable housing developments. Organizations like [Wa Na Wari](#) have used these funds to convert residences into cultural spaces that educate the local



Wa Na Wari: Cultivating Black ownership, possibility, and belonging through art, historic preservation, and connection. A vibrant center for Black art and culture in the heart of Seattle's Central District. (Courtesy of Spatial Futures Initiative)

community on Black land ownership in gentrified areas. The EDI also supports projects of Seattle-based Africatown Community Land Trust, which develops affordable housing and culturally relevant businesses and community spaces.

However, the sustainability of such initiatives is not guaranteed. An op-ed in *Next City* recently reported on the alarming reduction in Seattle’s commitment to its EDI.¹³⁷ Recent budget proposals by City Councilmember Maritza Rivera, aiming to cut millions from the EDI, have sparked significant community opposition. Although Rivera has withdrawn her proposal for now, the threat of budget cuts remains, putting many long-term projects at risk and undermining trust between the city and its communities of color. These proposed cuts raise significant concerns, especially as equity initiatives increasingly face more scrutiny and risk of defunding compared to other city programs.

The potential discontinuation of programs like the EDI contributes to systemic harm by perpetuating inequities and destabilizing efforts toward reparative spatial justice. Therefore, it is imperative to establish robust, long-term funding mechanisms that protect such initiatives from political and economic volatility.

Beyond simply creating more of these programs, it is essential to embed them within a broader framework of policy and legislative support that ensures their resilience and sustainability. This could include setting up dedicated trust funds, securing commitments from multiple levels of government, and fostering public-private partnerships that prioritize racial equity and community-led development. Further, having these programs recognize and affirm their reparative nature, and the community benefits of that repair, as part of their mission may help to sustain them and build public support.

Granting communities greater land use decision-making authority is another important step for policymakers and public officials. This involves creating task forces with the power to establish new committees, offices, or policy priorities focused on the preservation and enhancement of historically Black towns and settlements. These task forces should be composed of community members and experts in reparative justice. An example is the [Gullah Geechee Land & Cultural Preservation Project](#), which led to the creation of the [Gullah Geechee Land & Cultural Preservation Task Force](#) and the [Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation](#), both of which are making decisions about the land.

Recognizing that cultural heritage designation alone is insufficient for long-term preservation, policymakers must support comprehensive preservation strategies and land use decision-making authority that includes economic development, affordable housing, and community-led planning initiatives. To this end, providing resources for capacity building and technical assistance to enable communities to effectively manage their preservation efforts is essential. Resourcing historically Black communities will enable them to lead in the creation and implementation of preservation and land retention strategies. The US Department of Agriculture [Heirs' Property Relending program](#) provides access to capital to help producers find a resolution to unclear title transfers that often act as a barrier for farmers to access department funds. By resolving heirs' property issues, the program aims to protect family farm legacies, support economic viability, prevent land loss, and keep agricultural lands in food production.

Finally, transparent governance and supportive policymaking are crucial for the preservation and revitalization of historically Black towns and settlements. This includes providing opportunities for community members to participate in and lead decision-making. An example of this is the establishment of the California City of Hayward's [Russell City Reparative Justice Project](#) as a result of recommendations from the

Community Services Commission. These recommendations called on the city to work with former Russell City residents and descendants to assess appropriate redress and restitution measures for the city's forced relocation of community members in the 1960s. Supportive policymaking also includes implementing policies that support the preservation and revitalization of historically Black towns and settlements, such as tax incentives for preservation and funding for community-led projects. In 2023, the Maryland state legislature passed [HB0241](#) which authorizes the Governor, at the recommendation of the State Secretary of Housing and Community Development, to designate certain areas across the state as Just Communities. This designation is based on certain criteria and allows for the state to prioritize public funding to these locations in an effort to increase racial, economic, and health equity throughout the state.

Advocates and Organizers

Advocates and organizers must focus on building coalitions and networks to amplify the voices of historically Black towns and settlements. By forming coalitions with other advocacy groups, community organizations, and stakeholders, they can share resources, strategies, and support to strengthen advocacy efforts. An example of such a coalition is [First Repair](#), a nonprofit organization founded by Robin Rue Simmons who envisioned and designed the nation's first government-funded reparations program in Evanston, Illinois. First Repair serves a national network of advocates, practitioners, and organizers to share best practices, tools, and research; develop leaders; and create model reparations policy for others advancing local, state, and national reparations. Another notable coalition is the [Historic Black Towns and Settlements Alliance](#), which is a collective of Black leaders across the country who are working to exchange knowledge and strategies for preserving and promoting the history, culture, and economic development of their towns.

Developing partnerships with academic institutions, legal aid organizations, and urban planning experts is also crucial. These partnerships provide access to research, legal support, and technical assistance that can bolster advocacy campaigns and policy initiatives. For instance, [The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation](#) is a nonprofit focused on providing education, legal aid, and assistance to heirs' property owners. Through a partnership with the American Forest Foundation, they also offer forestry education to property owners to support sustainable income generation for heirs.

Policy advocacy remains an essential focus. Supporting and advocating for legislation aligned with the legislative agendas of organizations pushing for necessary protections, resources, and programs is vital. The [Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition \(MEJAC\)](#) is a prime example. MEJAC was established in 2013 by Africatown residents in partnership with various advocates and stakeholders in the community to engage and mobilize with Alabama's most threatened communities. Their work has been centered around ensuring that communities vulnerable to looming environmental injustices can have access to clean air, soil, water, health, and safety through the government, or without.

Finally, community-led planning and development require organizing more streamlined processes and creating accessible engagement opportunities for community members. This approach ensures they feel confident participating in advocacy opportunities at community meetings, town halls, and through public comments. The [Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society \(SICARS\)](#) demonstrates this principle. Founded by Gullah-Geechee residents and descendants of the Hogg Hummock community, SICARS has produced community-determined agricultural programs, land use plans, and restoration projects. By fostering these coalitions, partnerships, and community-led initiatives, advocates can build a robust framework for preserving and promoting the well-being of historically Black towns and settlements.

Academics and Researchers

Community-led research and actions are crucial for ensuring that initiatives are aligned with the priorities and needs of the communities they serve. The erasure of historical Black towns and settlements from public history, planning processes, and cultural heritage discourses demands that scholars and researchers employ participatory research methods to support Black placemaking and autonomy.¹³⁸ Conducting research in partnership with communities is a foundational step, as it ensures that research agendas reflect community priorities and that findings are shared and used in ways that benefit the community. For instance, the [Texas Freedom Colonies Project™](#) is dedicated to activist scholarship that works in partnership with community members to co-create resilience strategies for historic Black towns and settlements.¹³⁹ By involving the community directly in the research process, the findings become more relevant and actionable for addressing local concerns.

The next step is to use these research findings to advocate for policy changes that support reparative spatial justice and address historical and ongoing inequities. A practical example of this is Wa Na Wari's [Central Area Cultural EcoSystem, 21st Century \(CACE 21\)](#), a community organizing initiative that aims to empower Black homeowners in Seattle, Washington's Central District to advocate for land use policies that prevent displacement and create more cultural spaces for the district's Black community.

Furthermore, facilitating more just and equitable relationships between institutions of higher education and surrounding marginalized communities is crucial. This involves lessening extractive practices and ensuring that the benefits of academic research and resources are shared with the community. An example of this approach is [UChicago Against Displacement's Reparations Campaign](#). This campaign is demanding that the University of Chicago redress the negative impacts of its development on the surrounding community by providing a \$20 million fund for rental assistance and STEM programs in schools. They are also demanding that the university uphold agreements to prohibit development into low-income, working-class neighborhoods and establish a \$1 billion grant to support long-term affordable housing.

Funders

Enacting flexible, adaptive, and justice-oriented funding principles is crucial for supporting historically Black towns and settlements. It is essential to embed flexible, justice-oriented granting and funding principles into funding protocols, recognizing that many of these communities require adaptable financial support to achieve their goals. Grant programs must be designed to respond to these unique needs. For instance, the [Wealth Retention and Asset Protection](#) program is designed to reduce land loss among Black and other historically underserved populations through public education about heirs' property, estate planning, intergenerational financial management, conservation easements, and future-oriented options for land use.

Supporting deep community engagement is another critical aspect of justice-oriented funding. Allocating funds for community engagement and organizing activities, such as stipends for meeting attendance, childcare, language access services, and educational materials, is vital. These funds enable deep participatory planning processes and ensure that all community members, regardless of their economic situation, can contribute to decision-making. The Decolonizing Wealth

Project funding initiative, [#Case4Reparations](#), is an excellent example. This initiative aims to rend existing financial institutions that have directed capital in land and housing in a discriminatory or exclusionary manner by supporting movement-building efforts for reparations to Black communities. It resources organizing and advocacy for community-driven efforts.

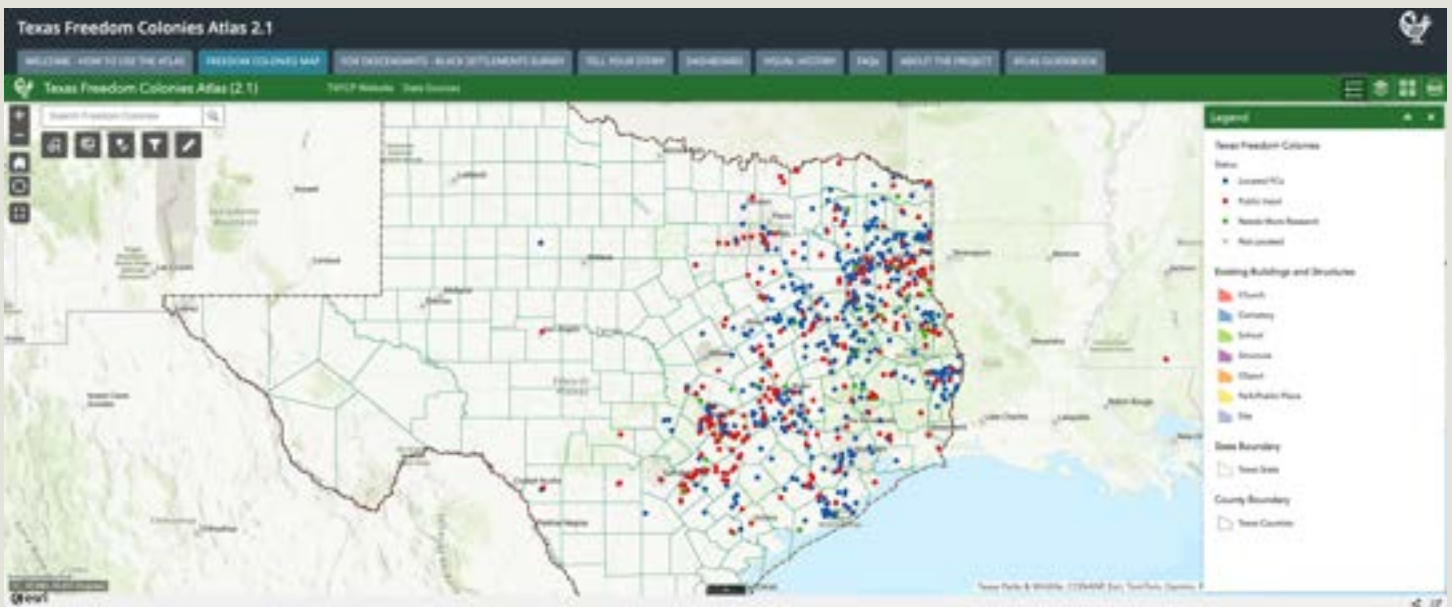
Moreover, supporting and funding processes that enable genuine participatory planning is essential. This includes financing community-led research, visioning sessions, and collaborative planning workshops that center the voices and experiences of residents in historically Black towns and settlements. In Africatown, Alabama, [M.O.V.E. Gulf Coast Community Development Corporation](#) was awarded a \$25,000 design grant by the National Endowment for the Arts to support its Africatown Blueprint Initiative. The initiative will build upon the Africatown International Design Idea Competition to convene a design summit in Mobile to advance community-building strategies for equitable economic development and heritage tourism relating to the history of Africatown and the rediscovery of the *Clotilda*, the last known slave trading ship to enter the United States. This initiative exemplifies the impact of genuine participatory planning supported by adequate funding.

Developers, Architects, and Urban Planners

Developers, architects, and urban planners must prioritize reparative planning and development practices to address past injustices that have harmed historically Black communities. This approach involves correcting unfair gains and losses and ensuring a fair distribution of resources. As Rashad Williams suggests, reparative planning requires a commitment to restoring what was unjustly taken, focusing on fair redistribution and ensuring that historically marginalized communities have access to resources and opportunities.¹⁴⁰ Engaging with community members from the onset of development projects is crucial to ensure their needs and desires are central to planning processes, including holding consultations and participatory design sessions.

The [Texas Freedom Colonies Project™](#) is a prime example of how a multidisciplinary field of planners, historians, architects, and developers have come together to “prevent the erasure, destruction, and decay of cultural properties,” and co-create pathways with community members to become resilient to an ever-changing future.¹⁴¹ The project, founded by urban planning and historic preservation scholar, Andrea Roberts, has been successful in mapping 557 known Texas’ Black settlements, verifying 377 communities through physical structures, while also adding previously unknown settlements to the list through surveys and crowdsourcing.¹⁴² The research has been instrumental in understanding existing planning processes,

The Texas Freedom Colonies Project™ Atlas is a descendant-informed platform supporting communities in preserving and sharing the rich history, origins, and resilience of historic settlements through stories, photos, recordings, and preservation practices.



Source: A. Roberts and M.J. Biazar, [The Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas & Study](#). ESRI ArcGIS StoryMap, 2018.

practices, and patterns of erasure and how policies inhibit and deter the long-term preservation of Black settlements. As a part of their work, the Texas Freedom Colonies Project™ continues to gather information, place-based stories and histories, co-creating community resilience plans and policy priorities based off of the research completed thus far.

Another effective model of engagement is demonstrated by [Storefront for Community Design](#) in Richmond, Virginia, which aims to disrupt antiquated processes of development and design and instead, support community-based designers to drive their vision for Richmond forward through various programs and resources. As a nonprofit, Storefront supports community partners to advance ideas and projects around environmental and food justice, health and wellness, economic development, and placemaking by using design and planning tools to empower community organizing. Notable examples of their impact include supporting urban mini-farm creations, and gleaning community visions for a historic bank building.

Equally important is the prioritization of affordable housing development to prevent displacement and ensure that existing residents can benefit from new developments. The [Albina Vision Trust \(AVT\)](#) is a community-led nonprofit looking to buy land, rebuild, and reroot the historic community of Albina in Portland, Oregon. The AVT's entire project encompasses a multitude of developments on a 100-acre property, including affordable housing development that broke ground in 2023. This housing development, called Albina One, will “feature culturally-specific, on-site service provision by ... Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center” with “gorgeous, communally accessible balconies, shared community floors, [and] a large, lush courtyard.”¹⁴³ A total of 75 units are set aside to be affordable to residents earning 30 to 60 percent of the area median income and 19 eligible for Section 8 subsidies.

In addition to housing, investing in community infrastructure is vital for ensuring holistic community development. Developing commercial spaces that support local businesses and entrepreneurs is one way to ensure that the economic benefits of development stay within the community. [Destination Crenshaw](#) is a transformative reparative development project that seeks to elevate Black art and culture while facilitating deep investments in the community through economic development, job creation, and environmental healing. Destination Crenshaw looks to transform a 1.3-mile area of Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles, California, into a thriving commercial corridor with community spaces, parks, green spaces, and over 100 commissioned works of art from artists with ties to Los Angeles.

Investing in physical and social infrastructure that benefits the entire community, such as public transportation, green spaces, community centers, community events, and supportive services, is also essential. The [Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community \(PEC\)](#) is a nonprofit organization that is working to support the Eatonville, Florida, community to showcase its heritage, as well as historical and cultural assets for the community's long-term revitalization and economic development goals and aspirations. PEC has been instrumental in the Eatonville community to put on programming, educational, and cultural events that protect the community. Most recently, they [filed a lawsuit](#) with the Southern Poverty Law Center to protect a major historical landmark, the Robert Hungerford Preparatory High School, from being threatened with commercial development.

Lastly, cultivating long-term partnerships involves maintaining long-term relationships with community organizations and residents to ensure that developments continue to meet community needs over time. Exploring models of collective ownership and stewardship, such as community land trusts, is crucial to ensure that communities have control over land and resources. For example, the [Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund](#) is a long-standing coalition of urban farming organizations aiming to rebuild intergenerational land ownership for Black farmers in Detroit. By fostering such partnerships, communities can secure sustainable and equitable futures.

Conclusion

“The present was an egg laid by the past that had the future inside its shell.”

Zora Neale Hurston

The survival of historic Black towns and settlements is not solely about preserving the legacy of these spaces and their histories, but also about building new futures in which communities are equipped to create the spaces that nurture their dreams and desires. After all, historic Black towns and settlements were founded on the most audacious dreams of freedom and self-determination. Since their inception, these spaces have resisted systemic erasure, creative extraction, and racialized uneven development. But they have also prefigured new futures beyond these oppressive systems.

Repairing Roots highlights how employing a reparative spatial justice framework allows us to understand and redress the conditions that have hindered the survival and prosperity of Black towns and settlements. This includes recognizing the impact of direct violence, racist planning regimes, forced sales, property assessment disparities, and environmental injustices. By acknowledging these challenges, we can develop and implement tools that support the healing and flourishing of these communities. Initiatives such as direct reparations, participatory planning, zoning reforms, and cultural preservation are essential in this effort. These strategies, and many more, are being deployed by residents and descendants of these communities, but their success demands support, attention, and solidarity at a much wider scale. And in return, historically marginalized communities around the country have much to learn from these legacies of resistance.

Ultimately, historic Black towns not only connect us to our past but also illuminate the realities of our present, and point us toward more just and equitable futures. Their preservation should be a priority for policymakers, philanthropic organizations, and public officials. By integrating repair and justice-oriented principles into policy and funding decisions, and by fostering renewed relationships to land and community, we can support these towns in carving out futures that honor their legacy and contributions. These communities provide fertile ground for the advancement of reparative spatial justice, demonstrating how we can build inclusive, equitable spatial futures for all.



This sculpture “The Benin King” was placed at Eatonville’s Town Hall when the town celebrated its 130th birthday. (Marjie Lambert/Miami Herald/Tribune News Service via Getty Images)

Appendixes

A. Maps of Historic All-Black Towns

Thousands of well-known and not so well-known Black towns and settlements exist across the United States. The following resources extensively document known locations of historically Black towns and settlements. We encourage readers to learn about their own communities and surrounding areas to understand the extent to which Black founders paved the way for reparative spatial justice.

- [A Map Showing Black Towns and Settlements in Kansas and Oklahoma in 1900](#) from the Digital Public Library of America
- [All-Black Towns of Oklahoma](#) by the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum
- [Black Towns & Settlements: Foundation for the Future](#), a REAL Resilience Initiative Project by Next Leadership Development
- [Community Reparations](#) by the African American Redress Network
- [Early Black Settlements by County](#) by the Indiana Historical Society
- [Illinois Free Black Settlements in 1850](#) by the Colored Conventions Project
- [Mapping Black Towns Project](#) by Dr. Karla Slocum and Dr. Danielle Purifoy
- [Profiles of All-Black Towns](#) by BlackPast.org
- [Texas Freedom Colonies Project Atlas \(2.1\)](#) by Dr. Andrea Roberts

B. Learn More About Historic Black Towns and Settlements

The articles, videos, and books listed below provide in-depth histories and stories about historic Black towns and settlements.

Videos

- *Descendant*, directed by Margaret Brown (2022; Netflix) <https://www.netflix.com/title/81586731>.
- André Chung, *Eroding History* (2023; vimeo), <https://www.ejji.org/film>.
- *Freedom Hill*, directed by Resita Cox (2021; Black Archive Media), <https://www.amazon.com/Freedom-Hill-Marquette-Dickens/dp/B0CVMQ36YB>.
- The Amber Ruffin Show, “Where Are the Missing Black Towns?” in *Every “How Did We Get Here?” Part 3*, (2022; YouTube), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTSRqTZ0EQQ>.
- *Mossville: When Great Trees Fall*, directed by Alexander Glustrom (2019; Fire River Films) <https://www.mossvilleproject.com/>.
- *Uprooted: What a Black Community Lost When a Virginia University Grew*, directed by Brandi Kellam, produced by ProPublica (2023; YouTube), <https://youtu.be/o80ENCqNFAc?si=RnT8dXN3LQCq7ib1>.

Readings

- Alice C. Royal, *Allensworth the Freedom Colony: A California African American Township* (Berkley, CA: Heyday Books, 2008).
- Andrea Roberts, Danielle Purifoy, and Maia L. Butler, “[Stewarding Black Worlds](#),” *Places Journal*, October 2023, <https://doi.org/10.22269/231031>.
- Charlotte Hinger, *Nicodemus: Post-Reconstruction Politics and Racial Justice in Western Kansas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).
- Cheryl A. Coleman, *Before the Land Run: The Historic All-Black Towns of Oklahoma* (independently published, 2019).
- Christopher C. Fennell, *Broken Chains and Subverted Plans: Ethnicity, Race, and Commodities* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2017).
- Gerald A. McWorter and Kate Williams-McWorter, *New Philadelphia – For the New Philadelphia Association New Philadelphia* (Evanston, IL: Path Press, 2018).
- Hannibal B. Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration: The All-Black Towns in Oklahoma* (Forth Worth, TX, Eakin Press, 2003).

- John M. Coggeshall, *Liberia, South Carolina: An African American Appalachian Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).
- Juliet E.K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).
- Karla Slocum, *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of a Black Place in the American West* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
- Paul A. Shackel, *New Philadelphia: An Archaeology of Race in the Heartland* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2010).
- Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
- Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010).
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (New York, NY: Amistad, HarperCollins, 2018).

C. Federal Grant Opportunities, Initiatives, and Legislation

Foundational Laws to Support Antidisplacement Work

1. **Regulations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act** prohibit programs that receive federal resources from discriminating in their operations, both intentional and for actions—regardless of intent—that result in discriminatory, disparate impacts. These obligations also apply to federal agencies and note their responsibility to avoid, prevent, and mitigate the effects of adverse impacts on protected classes. Policies upheld and executed at the federal level that are, at face, race-neutral but result in discriminatory impacts or harm on protected classes are also prohibited cases of discrimination.¹⁴⁴ Title VI, therefore, can provide a basis for ensuring that policies and programs combat the uneven market displacement experienced by protected classes.¹⁴⁵
2. **The Fair Housing Act (FHA) Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule** directs federal actions and standards related to housing and urban development to be conducted in a manner that goes beyond simply ceasing discrimination. The AFFH mandate urges federally funded agencies to proactively end housing inequities and redress the discriminatory impacts of past housing policies. Specifically, the AFFH mandate and the 2021 [interim final rule](#) has made it clear to jurisdictions that housing and development policy

must employ an analysis that considers socioeconomic disparities when meeting their obligations to affirmatively further fair housing.¹⁴⁶

3. **The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** mandates that federal agencies consider the environmental impacts of their programs, funding decisions, and activities.¹⁴⁷ Included in these considerations are displacement pressures that manifest through rising property values, transit access, or physical infrastructure as a result of infrastructure investments. The White House Center for Environmental Quality (CEQ) as well as the Environmental Protection Agency's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council have also made note that environmental justice and displacement concerns are critical considerations for NEPA.¹⁴⁸

Climate Resilience and Infrastructure Investments

1. **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) programs:** *Please note that this is not an expansive list of all available FEMA programs, rather a selection that are most applicable and feasible for historically Black towns to combat severe climate change impacts in their communities.*

a. **FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and**

Communities (BRIC) Grant Program seeks to support projects that aim to reduce a community's vulnerability to various natural disasters and hazards. In an attempt to shift standard federal responses to natural disasters, this program aims to be proactive toward building more resilience in communities across the country. Selections for the BRIC program have been made in accordance with the [Justice40 Initiative](#) to ensure that 40 percent of their investments go to benefit disadvantaged communities experiencing disparate impacts of historic disinvestment and environmental injustices.

- i. In June of 2024, [FEMA announced](#) a historic \$11.2 million investment into the historic Black town of Princeville, North Carolina, to support the town's movement and development on higher ground outside of the nearby floodplain. This project would include funds for stormwater management, wastewater collection, water distribution, and electric power systems to support new development projects, including housing and civic spaces for residents. This investment, however, is "[bittersweet](#)" as this project requires relocation, rather than community members' preference to stay in place and complete an updated levee project.

- ii. For communities interested in engaging with Justice40, PolicyLink and Emerald Cities have authored a [Justice40 Implementation Guide for State and Local Governments](#) to assist state and local-level administrators in optimizing federal investments to benefit underserved communities.

b. FEMA's [Flood Mitigation Assistance Swift Current \(Swift Current\) Program](#) supports projects that mitigate buildings that are insured through the [National Flood Insurance Program](#) after a major disaster declaration following a flood-related disaster event to reduce risk against future flood damage. Projects that are supported through this grant opportunity include property acquisition, demolition, or relocation; structure elevations' dry floodproofing of historical residential structures or nonresidential structures; nonstructural retrofitting of existing structures and facilities; mitigation reconstruction; structural retrofitting of existing structures; and project scoping. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) made \$300 million available for FY2024. Applications are set to be accepted until May 31, 2025 as major disaster declarations of flood-related events occur. *Please note that there may be additional prework necessary to apply and achieve the grant opportunity.*

Land Retention and Preservation

1. US Department of Agriculture (USDA)

- a. The [Heirs' Property Relending Program](#) provides access to capital to support producers seeking resolutions to unclear title transfers that frequently pose barriers for farmers to access USDA funds. This support enables families to protect their farms, land, and legacies by facilitating economic viability, preventing land loss, and keeping agricultural lands in food production. USDA has provided several resources to support application into the program for interested parties, including a [factsheet](#), [program explainer](#), and an [Heirs' Property Toolkit](#). The Uniform Law Commission also maintains a [Map on Heirs Property Act Enactments](#) across the US.

Public Education, Historic Preservation, and Archival Documentation

1. National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)

- a. The [Cultural and Community Resilience Program](#) supports oral history projects, physical archival collections, plans for community documentation, and more. All projects that are funded through this program must address the impacts that either climate change or the Covid-19 pandemic have had on the community.
- b. New **NEH Programs leading up to Juneteenth 2025** will commemorate the 160th anniversary of Juneteenth. NEH will be rolling out additional programs and opportunities for communities to get involved that will support a nationwide celebration of Juneteenth.

2. Institute of Museums and Library Sciences (IMLS)

- a. The **Museum Grants for African American History and Culture (AAHC)** hosts a FY2024 Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) that aims to build the capacity of African American museums and support the growth and development of museum professionals. Funded awards may amount to \$5,000 to \$500,000, last anywhere from one to three years, and—dependent on the funding requests—do not require cost-shares. *FY2025 NOFO will open up in fall 2024.*

3. Department of the Interior (DOI): The DOI offers a host of grant opportunities aimed at preserving physical spaces related to African American experiences and history in the United States. A number of different projects funded through the DOI and administered by the National Park Service (NPS) aim to preserve monuments, trails, and parks. Specific grants that are more aligned with preservation work of historically Black towns and settlements include the following:

- a. The [African American Civil Rights Grant Opportunity](#) aims to document, interpret, and preserve sites and stories telling the full story of the long struggle for African American civil rights from the transatlantic slave trade onwards. A wide range of preservation projects can be supported, such as surveys, inventories, National Register nominations, oral histories, and more. These funds do not require a nonfederal match. Communities interested in these opportunities should apply to the grant most relevant to their project (either “history” projects focused on interpretive and research-focused projects, or “preservation” projects that preserve buildings and conserve structures).

- b. The **Underrepresented Communities Grant Opportunity**, funded by the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF), aims to expand the list of locations identified on the National Register of Historic Places. Projects supported through this opportunity include survey projects and various nominations of historic properties that are associated with underrepresented communities in the National Register. All projects must lead to a new submission into the National Register of Historic Places or National Landmark program, or an amendment to existing National Register/National Historic Landmark nomination that includes an underrepresented community. Additionally, while NPS employs a wide definition of “underrepresented,” applicants must make the case for the underrepresentation of their community in the application. These awards do not require a nonfederal match.
- c. The **History of Equal Rights Grant Opportunity (HER)**, funded by HPF and administered by the NPS, seeks to preserve sites related to the struggle of all Americans to achieve the ideal of equal rights. HER grants support a range of physical preservation work and prepreservation planning activities for historic sites, buildings, and structures that are listed in or determined eligible by the National Register of Historic Places or are a National Historic Landmark. Awarded funds do not require a nonfederal match.

4. Department of Transportation (DOT)

- a. The **Past, Present, and Future of Reconnecting Communities** initiative, launched in 2023, aims to document the various communities—including historically Black neighborhoods—across the country that were negatively impacted by racially discriminatory federal transportation policies, like the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. Over the course of the next five years, the DOT will support this project, and others, with a total of \$1 billion. Specifically, the program funds will work toward removing, retrofitting, or mitigating transportation facilities like highways or rail lines that create barriers to mobility, access, or economic development. Technical assistance and grant funding for planning and capital construction projects will be used to reconnect communities and improve people’s lives. For communities that have been directly impacted by the federal government’s transportation policies, there may be opportunities through this new initiative to redress past harms and pave a way for future economic stability. Communities are also encouraged to stay up-to-date on future announcements from the DOT as they will be publicizing new infrastructure grants and digital resources.

Notes

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