

Creating the Foundation for Turning an Historic African American Community Imprint into a Cultural Attraction

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This technical leaflet will give insight to grassroots organizations, historical societies or small museums on how to get started in the process, of transforming an historic African American property, into a cultural attraction that can appeal to broad and diverse audiences. This approach is specifically geared towards organizations (hereafter known as “Project Groups”) with an annual budget between \$100,000 and \$500,000, operated with a small staff with multiple responsibilities, and employing volunteers to perform key staff functions. The goal is to use the story of Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park (HMFP), whose mission is: To preserve, promote, and honor Historic Mitchelville as the first town of self-governing formerly enslaved people in the United States, and other important stories around the country as a template for elevating the stories of African American communities and landscapes. Mitchelville’s significance in American history is profound. The courage, perseverance, and resourcefulness of the formerly enslaved population on Hilton Head Island, ushered in the dawn of freedom. Their experiences during an era of war and the Reconstruction Period, exposed a culture that had survived from its roots in Africa, demonstrating how deeply the ideas of self-dependence and freedom were embedded in the minds of the African Americans.

On November 7, 1861, Union forces attacked two Confederate forts and the Sea Islands of South Carolina near Port Royal. “The Battle of Port Royal” later drove the Confederate forces to retreat to the mainland. One island, Hilton Head Island, immediately became the headquarters for the Union Army. Due to overcrowding in the barracks in the Union camp, General Ormsby Mitchel dedicated a large parcel of the land, near the old Drayton Plantation, to the formerly enslaved population, that they would be able to cultivate and govern. Individuals and families were given a quarter acre lot and material to build a home. The residents elected their own officials, created their own system of law, built four churches, four stores and established the first compulsory school system in the state of South Carolina.

At its height, Mitchelville boasted over 3,000 residents, but after the Union army left the area in 1868, the population began to decrease. Many residents began farming and engaging in local commerce to sustain themselves and the town would maintain until the end of the century. Eventually, the residents took apart their homes and moved inland towards the area of Squire Pope, Bayard and Chaplain. Even though the citizens of this important community moved on from the physical property, their connection to the town endures through their descendants and the impact of the first taste of African American independence.



Figure 1 Image of Mitchelville homes - Photograph by Samuel Cooley, 1864

The preservation of important African American sites, like Mitchelville have been of paramount importance over the past ten to fifteen years. Preservation is uniquely positioned to strengthen our national culture and identity through the protection, conservation, and recognition of the places and Figure 1 Image of Mitchelville homes - Photograph by Samuel Cooley, 1864 cultural assets that speak to centuries of Black life and activism.⁽¹⁾ Groundbreaking funding opportunities such as the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation have allowed organizations to use necessary resources to undergird and, in some cases, rescue these sites. For entities that are interested in preserving an important site, there are a few key steps that need to take place early in the process

Understanding The History of Your Site

One of the key issues with elevating an historic African American community to a cultural heritage site or attraction is the knowledge of said community. There is a myriad of incredible stories in the African American fabric that are unknown to the public. Unfortunately, the history of this country illustrates that the dearth of information was a purposeful act, or the history was deemed “unnecessary” to the public discourse. The notion that a pivotal event such as the Tulsa Massacre was not widely known until a couple of popular cable series placed a spotlight on it, is problematic at best. Organizations who are trying to highlight the history of lesser-known sites will potentially have an uphill climb in finding all the “pieces to the puzzle.”

In Mitchelville’s case, The Mitchelville Preservation Project (the grassroots arm that started the ball rolling back in the mid-2000’s – now the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park) had the benefit of documents from The Heritage Library (a non-profit library offering research assistance on ancestry in addition to classes and tours focused on Hilton Head Island's history), Colored Troop records from the U.S. Army, archaeological research dating back to the 1980’s and a small collection of photographs taken in 1864, by Samuel A. Cooley, that reside in the collection of The Library of Congress and the National Archives.

The first place for groups to start would be their local libraries, historical societies or Town / City Hall’s where records of the histories of their respective towns would live. Enlisting the assistance of volunteers or industrious undergraduate / graduate students from local universities would be a costeffective way of conducting this research. If there is a connection of the local site to the Revolutionary or Civil War, there may be a way to connect the dots to material about the site. If organizations are not fortunate enough for there to be existing archaeology at the site, there also may be an opportunity to benefit from a local university or archaeologist that are doing work in the area. Michael Trinkley, who conducted the groundbreaking research at Mitchelville in the 1980’s was asked to come to the area by a property owner named John Krago who found some items near the site. Trinkley’s work would get Mitchelville placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988 (as the Fish Haul Archaeological Site), making the site important to preserving and understanding the nation’s difficulties during Reconstruction.

(1) Preserving African American Places; National Trust for Historic Preservation. Page 18

Archaeology of the site could set the tone for the story you will tell in your interpretation. This research can be an expensive proposition for smaller Project Groups, so making connections with universities with archaeology programs could be a viable option. HMFP was fortunate to make connections with an archaeologist named Matthew Sanger, who was researching Indigenous Shell Rings on Hilton Head Island with a team of students from Binghamton University. Early in my tenure, we approached Sanger about researching an area in the Park site, where HMFP believed one of the historic churches of Mitchelville may have been located. The subsequent fieldwork, conducted during summer 2017 and spring 2018, had Sanger, PhD. In Public Archaeology candidate, Katherine Seeber and their students conducting geophysical survey work with Ground Penetrating Radar, Magnetic Gradiometry, and Resistivity to locate subsurface anomalies within the park boundaries. This research located an “imprint” of one of the churches and additional fieldwork conducted in 2019 with Seeber leading the charge confirmed the location. In 2020, HMFP partnered with Seeber to submit a grant to the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation to fund a mapping project that would map the space of our existing Master Plan. Throughout the course of this project, Seeber compiled images and records from The National Archives and Library of Congress. In addition, she conducted interviews with local members of the “Descendent Community” about the history of the area and how it relates



Figure 2: Archaeologists Katherine Seeber and Benjamin Heckman explain their findings to a HMFP visitor

funding opportunity is that no cost sharing is required for applications requesting amounts from \$5,000-\$50,000.

We must consider that none of these named resources in this section may be available for the Project Group trying to preserve the site. In that case, it would be vital for said group to elicit the assistance of a larger entity such as the Association of African American Museums for help with securing resources to solidify the history. Getting scholarship of the respective area of interest will be important throughout the process of building the site. The Library of Congress, National Archives and your local State Department of Archives will serve as a valuable tool to first create the chronology of the story and firm up what themes you want to focus on for interpretation.

to Mitchelville. This leaflet will discuss the importance of connecting with the descendent community in the next section.

Archaeological research has made a definitive impact on the implementation of the Mitchelville project. If this option seems difficult for Project Groups due to funding, there are certain grant opportunities that may be available to help provide support. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (<https://www.imls.gov/>) offers grants such as [INSPIRE! Grants for Small Museums](#), [Museums for America \(MFA\)](#), and especially the [Museum Grants for African American History and Culture](#) that will prove beneficial. An important note about the latter

Often, the groups that would be in the position to preserve one of these communities are offshoots of the community or concerned citizens that learned about the history and wanted to get involved. Because we are dealing with historic African American sites, there are bound to be descendant communities that still live in or around the area. It is vitally important that the Project Group engage with this community as soon as possible and with as much transparency as possible. Project Groups cannot assume that the descendant community is well-versed or even remotely aware that the historic community ever existed, so the background work needs to happen so that the people can learn in ways that are comfortable to them.

In the case of Mitchelville, the descendant community call themselves “Native Islanders” and are part of the Gullah culture. We had to make sure to completely understand not only Gullah culture, but also the inherent issues that the culture has faced in the area. My first contract was paid for by the Town of Hilton Head, and there was a palatable mistrust of government, due to past occurrences. Therefore, some of that mistrust extended to me. I spent the first three years of my time in the area attending the local Native Islander churches, programs, cookouts, community events, etc., just so they could get to know me personally and get an idea of the vision. We pledged to keep them involved in the process the entire time and give them insight into everything we planned to do. It will be imperative to EARN the trust of the community because this is their history that the Project Groups are endeavoring to highlight. They need to know that you will honor it.

If the Project Group is unsure how to effectively approach this community, there are tools available to help. In partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, James Madison’s Montpelier convened the inaugural National Summit on Teaching Slavery in February 2018. This convening led to the creation of the Engaging Descendant Communities In the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites Rubric for Best Practices. <https://montpelier-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/Interpreting%20Slavery%2011-12-19.pdf> The Rubric is comprised of three pillars upon which to build descendant engagement: historical research, relationship building, and interpretation. This leaflet has already addressed the importance of historical research, but relationship building is the area where the real work must take place.

BENCHMARKS FOR ENGAGING DESCENDANT COMMUNITIES AT HISTORIC SITES

| | EXEMPLARY | PROFICIENT | DEVELOPING | AMBIVALENT | UNSATISFACTORY |
|---|-----------|------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH | | | | | |
| Sources and Methodology | | | | | |
| Multi-vocality | | | | | |
| Collaboration | | | | | |
| Transparency and Accountability | | | | | |
| Accessibility | | | | | |
| RELATIONSHIP BUILDING | | | | | |
| High Standards | | | | | |
| Expressed Commitment | | | | | |
| Structural Parity | | | | | |
| Institutionalization | | | | | |
| Proactive Evaluation | | | | | |
| INTERPRETATION | | | | | |
| Multi-Dimensional Representations of People | | | | | |
| Descendant Community Engagement | | | | | |
| Institutional Commitment | | | | | |
| Tools/Interpretive Techniques | | | | | |
| Inclusive and equitable narratives | | | | | |
| Audience | | | | | |

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Figure 3 Checklist for Engaging Descendant Communities Rubric

The rubric evaluates the success of the institution in meeting the criteria through a ranking of 0-4 (0 being unsatisfactory and 4 being exemplary). In devising the rubric, Summit participants wanted to bring an organization through a staged analysis of its ability to engage with the descendant community. The rubric assumes that participants are already engaged with a descendant community and want to improve the relationships. As such, institutions engaging this rubric start at their current level and build from there.⁽²⁾

Even though this rubric was designed for existing sites needing to amend their proficiencies in the three pillars, it can be especially useful for upstart projects who want to start with the end in mind. Mitchelville is using the rubric during its implementation process to have this “connectivity” in place on the front end of the project. For Project Groups who are working to form these connections, the “Relationship Building section of the Rubric could inform the approach by helping to put the necessary parameters in place. The section calls for existing organizations to issue an apology if there is no relationship, or if there is a negative relationship in place. There should be a realization from the Project Group that some of the descendant community will not want to foster a relationship with them or the Project. The Project Group should still endeavor to center the descendant experience in their planning with the hopes that they will be able to engage in the future. Examples of positive engagement would be inviting the descendant community to be a part of focus groups or planning meetings around the site, inviting the community to speak to board members or staff about their experiences and inviting members to sit on the board or be part of an advisory council.

Determining the Story and Scope of the Site

Project groups will have to develop a game plan on what form the interpretation of the site will take. If there are historic structures that are still in place in the community, Project Groups are already armed with a powerful piece of the story. Renovation of that site could be the main goal for the project and would give potential donors an easy target for support. In certain cases, a whole community might still be in place and in need of preservation. The historic community of Norwood, in Indianapolis, IN is a perfect example.

Norwood is a small 5 x 7 block neighborhood, that according to preliminary oral history interviews and subsequent research, is one of the oldest descendant led “Freetowns” in the United States, having just turned 150 years old in 2022. Norwood was founded by members of the 28th U.S. Colored Troops, Indiana’s only Black Civil War regiment. The training grounds for the 28th Regiment were at Camp Freemont, a plot of land near the intersection of Shelby Street, Prospect Street and Virginia Avenue, owned by prominent Indiana lawyer and civic leader Calvin Fletcher. Survivors of the Civil War from the 28th Regiment returned to Indianapolis in 1866 as newly freed slaves, and they settled further east along Prospect Street, eventually expanding into what became known as Norwood.⁽³⁾

Kaila Austin, a museum professional who grew up less than a mile away from this community has spearheaded the research that is bringing the history of Norwood into the light. Her research has led to the discovery of hundreds of documents that chronicle the full history of the town, down to the first church and the first school. Residents of the area have fought encroachment into their neighborhood, which has been besieged by the construction of a jail that towers

⁽²⁾ Engaging Descendant Communities In the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites Rubric for Best Practices. Page 3

⁽³⁾ <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/local/indianapolis/2022/03/15/indianapolisnorwood-neighborhood-fights-systemic-racism-southeast-neighborhooddevelopment/6812142001/>

over the community and the possible construction of a morgue, which was halted by a public outcry after Austin and the residents were able to get a story about Norwood in the Indianapolis Star. Austin's plan is to raise funds to create a space in the community that can serve as an official museum to the history of Norwood. Austin and the residents are working to secure the necessary capital to preserve the community, but their efforts to save the community by going to the press and getting outside forces involved have given them a clear course. Resources will complicate most efforts to create historic sites/cultural attractions from the ground up, but a groundswell of public support like Norwood can help turn the tide. The discovery of those documents gives Austin and her team a foundation for their interpretation.

The use of oral histories is a vital tool in the creation of "the story." Although Mitchelville's residents have long passed away, the stories of Mitchelville have been passed down through the generations and there are descendants that are assisting with the aspects of the story. The important thing is to capture the stories of the older members of the descendant community so there is a record. Even if the Project Group cannot afford high quality video cameras, smartphones across the board have been outfitted with quality video capabilities that allow for high-resolution recording that can be enhanced after the fact. This is another opportunity to engage undergraduate or graduate students to capture these stories.

Once the Project Group has the "story" together, it is prudent to workshop it through focus groups and presentations with the now-engaged descendant community, local/national scholars, local government officials and the public. Because the Project Group has made it a priority to center the descendant community, they should be exposed to the preliminary material before organized group sessions.

HMFP was fortunate to secure \$250,000 from the Beaufort County (SC) Council in 2018, to underwrite the Master Plan that will govern the interpretation of the site. The elements specified previously in this leaflet, were key elements in fostering the necessary political support for the project. Project Groups should engage local and state government while building the project, to coordinate widespread buy-in of the effort and gain staunch supporters that can lead the way to funding. WLA Studio served as the Landscape Architect of the project and Proun Design located in Somerville, MA served as the Interpretive Design firm. Their team, in conjunction with HMFP coordinated several conversations with stakeholders connected with the project including a "Scholars Summit," in February of 2019 to review, discuss, and brainstorm ideas for the new park. The workshop activity focused on three different exercises.

Exercise A: Community Needs/Wants

Objective is to gather a better understanding of what the participants are really interested in Mitchelville having in terms of potential assets.

Participants were asked to write down (in their groups) what they thought the new site needed (on pink post-it notes) and what they wanted (on blue post-it notes) for the new site. While the pink post-its were “needs” and the blue post-its were “wants,” there was a recognition that, for individuals and for groups, what one thought was a need another might think was a want. -its were orange.



Figure 4 Participants in the Scholars Summit discuss HMFP "needs and wants."

Exercise B: Audiences

Objective was to gather a better understanding of where Mitchelville might be able to get the most “bang for its buck” in terms of considering where there might be aligned items that serve both the local people (as described by the participants) and those who are not local.

Participants were asked to take their top 10 post-its (the ones they felt most strongly about regardless of color) and place those post-its within a Venn Diagram based on whether the post-its focused “internal audiences” (for the local community) or “external audiences” (for tourists, etc.). Once this was done and each group had presented, the groups were allowed to add asterisks/stars by the postits that they wanted to emphasize based on the conversation that had ensued.

Exercise C: Next Steps

Objective was to remind participants of their personal responsibility and opportunity to help make change happen. As a final activity, the participants were asked to go around and voice what they could do to help move this project forward. This was a verbal exercise, and the answers were not transcribed.

The exercises gave the project team insight into the main ideas and concepts that should appear in the completed Master Plan. Data is going to be the foundation of the Project Group’s effort. Focus group activities will not only inform the approach, but it will also create the “cheerleaders” that the project will need to get over the finish line. The Mitchelville Master Plan was completed in the Fall of 2019 and serves as the blueprint for implementation of the future cultural attraction and a key tool in fundraising for the site. Project Groups should work towards a plan for their respective site including drawings, a defined story and demonstrated connections to the descendent community and their stakeholders at-large. This can be an arduous process, but it allows the Project Group to be in a prime position to attract funders to complete the project.

There will be individuals that the Project Group will want to include in the stakeholder community that may not be able to readily connect with the intrinsic value of the historic African American site. Project Groups will have to broaden the appeal of the story to include these individuals. The interpretive themes may serve as a connector to this subgroup. HMFP chose the themes of Freedom, Democracy, Citizenship and Opportunity to interpret the historic site because Mitchelville embodies all four of those themes and Americans of all backgrounds can connect to them. In addition, there will be potential funders or “bridge builders” who will want insight in the fiscal impact of the respective site. Project Groups can use data on the contemporary trends in Cultural Heritage tourism to help show that impact. According to a study conducted by Mandela Research in 2018, the economic value of African American travelers has increased in 2018 to \$63 billion from \$48 billion in 2010, an average growth of 3.5% per year. And, African American “cultural” travelers are the highest spenders, averaging \$2,078 per trip versus \$1,345 for all African American travelers. Clearly these numbers have shifted due to Covid restrictions, but the trends should rebound as the world continues to open.

Conclusion

This leaflet is only designed to help think about the starting point, but once Project Groups get there, funding is the next gigantic step. Besides the grants highlighted in the “Understanding the History of your Site” section, there are a few more funding opportunities that can be helpful. The National Park Service offers the [Save America's Treasures Grants \(SAT\)](#) which funds preservation projects. The National Endowment of the Humanities offers [Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions](#) to assist small and mid-size organizations take care of their humanities collections. The American Institute for Conservation <https://www.culturalheritage.org/resources/collectionscare/cap/resource-list/funding-resources/state-grants> offers a listing of grants in respective states that can get Project Groups the assistance they need to move forward.

Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park has benefited from a high level of support over the last few years. This support has the organization in position to start a Capital Campaign to raise \$22.8 Million to create the 33-acre cultural attraction laid out in the Master Plan. That support was not always evident. The organization had to work at the steps laid out in this leaflet to get to this level. Project Groups may have distinct size goals for the interpretation of their respective historical communities. The final purpose could be just to bring awareness of the community to the public through historic markers or preserving historic buildings with accompanying interpretive panels that tell the story. Whatever the end goal is, the Project Groups need to undergird the effort with a clear concise history, involve the descendent community and determine what is a feasible interpretation of their site.

About Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park

The Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park (HMFP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is: To preserve, promote and honor Historic Mitchelville, the first town of self-governing formerly enslaved people in the United States. Mitchelville was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988 (as the Fish Haul Archaeological Site), making the site important to preserving and understanding the nation's difficulties during Reconstruction. HMFP has been formed to act as a steward for the benefit of preserving the rich history of Mitchelville and its connection to local Gullah culture.

HMFP endeavors to educate the public on the compelling story of Mitchelville's inhabitants and their quest for education, self-reliance and inclusion as members of a free society. HMFP is thriving through feature exhibits, signature events and guided tours of Historic Mitchelville. In addition, it continues to enhance knowledge of Mitchelville through a series of learning opportunities including lectures, forums, and related cultural experiences. HMFP, in cooperation with the Town of Hilton Head and Beaufort County, endeavors to establish a cultural attraction in the historic Mitchelville area. Thanks to the generosity of the Beaufort County Council, HMFP has completed a Master Plan for the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park physical plant, which will serve as the blueprint for its transformation. The plan will expand the offerings of the Park to include a 18,000 sq. foot Interpretive Center that will highlight the Mitchelville story and connect it to the 21st Century, as well as replicas of the historic homes, churches, stores and other structures that align with the themes governing the interpretation of the site. Those themes include: the importance of education, the desire for land ownership, laws and citizenship, the power of opportunity, everyday life before Reconstruction, and others.

Ahmad Ward is the Executive Director for the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on Hilton Head Island, SC. Ward is responsible for implementing a master plan that will recreate this historic town as an interpretative site. A 23-year museum professional, Ward's expertise is centered in telling the story of civil and human rights in America, with a focus on historic analysis and application to current social justice issues.

Resources

The Institute for Museum and Library Services - <https://www.ims.gov/>

The National Park Service - <https://www.nps.gov/>

National Endowment For the Humanities - <https://www.neh.gov/>

American Institute for Conservation - <https://www.culturalheritage.org/>

National Trust for Historic Preservation - <https://savingplaces.org/>

