

## **Important Note from the Writers**

**THIS DOCUMENT CONTAINS INFORMATION FROM MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE. WE ADVISE THAT ALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS COMMUNICATE THOROUGHLY AND EXERCISE DISCRETION WHEN DECIDING WHO TO SHARE THIS INFORMATION WITH.**

In our previous correspondence, we informed all interviewees of the nature of our work and our plan to share this document with the Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF). We deemed it necessary for all community members who participated in this project to sign an agreement outlining the informed consent to participate in such a project. We also deemed it necessary for HCF to sign similar informed confidentiality agreements to protect the information provided to them by community leaders.

Unfortunately, HCF was unwilling to commit in writing to terms of confidentiality and outlined that such a process would be too strenuous for them to commit to. Given this, we did not feel comfortable sharing the personal and community information confided to us. We are sending a modified version of this document to HCF that only includes our own analysis and commentary but withholds all information gathered from interviews. We have heard from many community members about the harmful history of nonprofits and academics, ranging from carelessness to active malice. We wanted to ensure to the best of our abilities that we would not perpetuate this extraction and exploitation of intellectual and cultural property. We hope that HCF and other preservation organizations can grow to recognize the importance of this work and show historic African American communities the respect they deserve.

Our team would like to share a few pieces of advice collected from our interviews on the best ways to protect the information privacy included in this document.

1. Readers should be careful and intentional with whom they share this document. The movement of this document affects multiple communities, not just one.
2. Historic African American Communities are fully entitled to demand legal commitments to confidentiality before working with historic preservation groups. The burden is on organizations to prove they should be trusted, not vice versa.
3. Suggesting or requesting to work with a black person within an organization should be the community's prerogative.
4. We urge continuing cross-community collaboration to support, inform, and build one another. This point feels especially important as the information gathered exists together in this document.

## **Positionality Statement and Limitations**

The writers are a group of rising college sophomores at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, varying in gender identity and racial makeup (self-identified White Jewish-American Man, White Woman, Mexican-American Man, African-American Woman, and Black-British Woman), economic status, and rural/urban backgrounds. Over the past eight weeks, our team has strived to include each member's diverse opinions and perspectives to strengthen our collective work. While working in diverse groups can sometimes be challenging, we see our differences as valuable assets rather than liabilities. We hope to do stronger and more comprehensive work by embracing and wrestling with our different perspectives.

The product of that work is this somewhat non-traditional document. We have broken it into two broad sections: our own analysis and critiques of historic preservation and transcriptions of ethnographic interviews. The first section is the product of deep learning and thinking that we have done over the last two months as we spend more time in conversation with historic preservation groups and historic African American communities. The views expressed are exclusively our own, and we do not intend to speak for anyone else. The second section is our most faithful attempt to write about the histories and futures of a number of communities throughout the greater Charleston area, as told to us by community leaders. While we have dedicated extensive time and care to not misrepresent anyone's views, we would like to establish some clear limitations to our work.

First and foremost, we are not natives to Charleston or these communities. As much as we try, we will inevitably bring the bias and blindspots of outsiders. Secondly, our time in these communities has been quite limited. We are extremely grateful to have been

welcomed into communities to learn about their history, culture and plans for the future but recognize that our knowledge is limited by the short time we have been here.

Additionally, we are not professionals in the field of historic preservation; our perspective is that of curious students, not seasoned experts. As a team, we believe this is a strength, a way to critique a system and build a new framework primarily shaped by the communities we have been privileged to work with. Still, we advise readers to consider our professional and educational backgrounds when engaging with our work.

We would also like to clarify that the views below belong to individual people and not entire communities. Even though we met with trusted community leaders, we do not want to imply that they must perfectly represent the views of their communities. These historic African American communities are not monolithic; a comprehensive understanding would require speaking to more than just a few leaders. As opinions vary greatly within communities, we have seen clear divides in views and approaches between communities. If one individual from a specific community says something, it should not be taken as a consensus across communities.

One clear shortcoming is that the leaders we spoke with are overwhelmingly from older generations. Their experience and wisdom are invaluable, but no generation can speak with absolute authority about another. The perspective of young people must also be considered in any work preserving the past and planning for the future. The omission of youth from our report should not be understood as a dismissal of their voices but rather a failure of outreach and communication from us. We greatly encourage future preservation work to seek out young people's voices to fill in these gaps.

We hope, above all else, that this report can be a small contribution to a much larger journey of liberation and progress. It should not be taken as a comprehensive or definitive account of communities' histories and futures.

## A Note on Word Choice

We began our research for this project by learning about the history of “settlement communities” in Charleston. As we spent more time visiting different communities, we quickly learned that the term “settlement community” is imprecise and actively contested. The name describes many different communities with diverse histories and contemporary challenges: some who settled organically, others who were planned; original tracts of land were purchased in some and granted in others; some survive more or less in their original geographic form, and others have morphed and shrunk in response to development.

Opinions ranged among the community members we spoke with about the meaning and significance of the term. Some, like Mr. John Wright, president of the *African American Settlement Historic Commission*, supported using the word settlement because it legitimizes the historical importance of these communities. Mr. Wright explained that before the term settlement was introduced, people used “donut holes”: a dismissive and derogatory term to describe small communities unincorporated into the surrounding city or town. In his view, the term “settlement community” was a sign of respect and recognition of history.

Others like Mr. Richard Habersham of the Philips community and Ms. Pleshette Grant of the Snowden community expressed skepticism about the term. They explained that city agencies had introduced the word settlement without consultation, and it still doesn’t feel authentic to their communities. Mr. Habersham argued that the word “settlement” is inappropriate because it implies the layout of a community is messy or uncoordinated. That description leaves out his community and several others in Charleston, which were carefully planned and parceled rather than settled. Ms. Pearl Vanderhorst Ascue of the Ten Mile community was also critical of the word settlement and supported

two alternative terms: Ancestral Communities and Historical African American Cultural Communities. These terms, she felt, more accurately described her community and emphasized their land's familial and cultural heritage.

As a group of scholars, we understand that the use of language is extremely powerful. A choice of words can be the difference between inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and marginalization, recognition and invisibility. With that in mind, we want to acknowledge the diverse and sometimes conflicting views of different community members we spoke with and leave space for an ongoing discussion and debate. In the following report, we will refer to the communities in question in two ways: whenever possible, we will simply use their individual proper name (Philips, Scanlonville, Ferguson Village, etc). When speaking generally about collections of communities, we will use the term “historic African American community.” We decided on this term in part to remain neutral and prevent prioritizing the desires of one community over another. But we also wanted to ensure that our language would emphasize the rich and beautiful history we have been privileged to witness and learn about.

We understand that language is often imperfect and limiting, and developing terms that feel appropriate and authentic to everyone is challenging. The terminology we use should not be considered a final or definitive claim about the best or most accurate words. We welcome disagreement and critique and encourage further discussion on this issue.

## Introduction

The history of Charleston is, in many ways, the history of Black people. The city has always been a critical landmark in the African American experience: at least 50% of all enslaved Africans were brought through the port of Charleston, and 95% of all African Americans can trace their history back to an ancestor in Charleston. Out of the legacy of slavery and its aftermath grew tight-knit Black communities. These historic communities, founded by formerly enslaved people, are some of the first examples of Black land ownership in the South. After emancipation, individuals considered property could own property themselves, generate wealth, and provide for their families.

Beyond the material benefits of property, these new Black communities developed value systems still firmly held today. Land is intimately tied up with questions of citizenship and equality. As Reconstruction fundamentally reshaped the American political landscape, free Black people claimed their newfound political rights through land ownership, community building, and financial independence. Emancipation also allowed Black people to think of themselves fully as human. Purchasing land was a physical manifestation and affirmation of Black humanity and a demand for recognition. Black people's shared values of self-determination and respect in their new communities forced the South's white political and economic systems to reckon with Black equality. Put simply, Black community actualization challenged the balance of power.

By and large, these communities were self-sufficient. Even though they were no longer enslaved, Black people were not welcomed into Jim Crow white society and did not have access to white commercial and financial resources. This led to the landmark creation of Black alternatives: a thriving ecosystem of banks, restaurants, entertainment venues,



craftsmen, and vendors sprang up to fill the needs of Charleston area communities. There was an important psychological dimension to this self-sufficiency beyond material independence. Contrary to dehumanizing beliefs about enslaved people, Black communities proved they could provide for and sustain themselves. Creating prosperity and independence from white society allowed freed Black folks to preserve cultural practices suppressed during captivity. This significant mental shift forged a new path forward, giving voice to silenced generations and allowing Black people to pursue a greater future.

Education in all its forms was essential in these communities. Segregation meant that Black children learned in crowded and poorly resourced schoolhouses. Many Black schools only provided up to a middle school education because financial realities forced children into agriculture work at a young age. Yet despite these poor academic resources, Black communities found ways to educate their youth outside of the classroom. Many Black families used apprenticeships to prepare the next generation with basket weaving, food cultivation, construction, and stewardship of the land. These educational experiences outside the classroom ensured that families could earn enough to survive and that community values and practices were passed down across generations.

Protectionism was one of these values that became necessary for cultural and material survival. The violent legacy of enslavement loomed large, and the relative social and economic success communities had built felt precarious. Families expressed this protectionism by passing down and evenly dividing land ownership and property among descendants without proper legal documentation. This structure of ownership, known as heir's property, ensured that the selling of land and property was a collective familial process. At one point in history, heir's property was an effective method of protecting

against predatory land speculators, passing down communal values, and ensuring that generations of Black people had access to citizenship. Soon after, however, white real estate buyers began to exploit legal vulnerabilities of heir's property. Many of these communities were excluded from the formal legal system and unaware of the required steps of property inheritance. What was once a strategy to protect family ownership led to the legally sanctioned theft of hundreds of millions across Black communities. Heir's property theft represents a particularly insidious kind of exploitation because, by undermining property rights, it attacks self-determination, self-ownership, and Black communal independence. Furthermore, heir's property is just one example of systemic attacks on community livelihoods and futures. Yet just as the history of these historic African American communities is the story of oppression and adversity, it is also full of redemption and resilience. Despite their contemporary challenges, these communities will not stop fighting for self-preservation.

## **The Future of Preservation**

Writing about preservation in historic African American communities presents a number of challenges. For decades, white homeowners, communities, and organizations have utilized a certain conceptual language and set of material interventions in their preservation work. That work is overwhelmingly focused on the built environment: if the homes, churches, marketplaces, community centers, and other physical structures are maintained and preserved, the history of a place will be as well. While working and learning in historic African American communities, we have found that this foundational assumption—the key to preserving history is found in preserving buildings—is not always true. This is not to say that there are no important physical structures that communities are interested in preserving. Indeed, from the Keith Schoolhouse in Jack Primus and Long Point Schoolhouse in Snowden to the Remley Point Cemetery in Scanlonville, there were several structures that community members expressed a deep desire to maintain and preserve. Furthermore, we encountered great pride among residents when they spoke of the local craftsmen, bricklayers, carpenters, and contractors who built and maintained the physical structures of their communities.

Yet, in our experience, the foundations of these communities depend primarily on land ownership rather than the built environment. Understanding the historical importance of this fact has led us to a number of conclusions about preservation. First and foremost, any preservation approach must ensure the continuation of land ownership and control within the community. These communities are what they are because of the Black ancestral ties to land ownership; the community members are not interchangeable, and preservation work must maintain space for them and their offspring. Second, communities

should maintain leading control over the process and decision-making in preservation. In order to preserve these communities, institutions must genuinely understand and align with the values that these historic African American communities hold. Preservation as a system is about protecting the fabric of history and allowing it to exist in the future: the exact methods must vary across cultures and communities. The only way to ensure that preservation methods are effective and appropriate is for communities to define them themselves.

Third, by placing people—as opposed to just physical structures—at the center of preservation, we broaden the scope and impact of preservation work. Preservation for these historic African American communities means not just cataloging and remembering the past but creating strong and flourishing communities in the future. In this way, community-based, human-focused preservation must necessarily deal with questions of economic development. There is little value in a carefully curated museum or a landmarked building if the surrounding community is collapsing due to inadequate employment and rising property taxes. One recurring challenge we encountered in our interviews is a profound generational gap between community elders and young people. The causes of this disconnection are complex and can not be attributed to any single factor. However, the economic conditions of historically African American communities certainly play a major role. We heard in multiple communities that young people were partly disengaged from their history because they could not imagine a successful or sustainable future there. Many young people choose to leave home to study or work, creating brain drain and stagnation among an aging population. Given this context, creating better economic opportunities for

future generations could be a preservation act, incentivizing people to remain in their communities and maintain ownership of their land.

Of course, we must approach any economic development conversation with extreme caution. For many communities, “economic growth” means displacement and extraction, not opportunity. Historic African American communities have faced countless forms of economic exploitation and exclusion for centuries. It is essential to be aware of the most active harm visited upon them, but also the less visible systemic conditions that perpetuate injustice. We heard stories of violent intimidation to coerce Black landowners to sell and white buyers literally erasing Black names off of deeds and titles at County courthouses. In other cases, white academics, writers, and photographers often used Black history, culture, and art to produce lucrative work without a single penny returning to the historic communities themselves. These experiences are a kind of direct theft, where powerful individuals take advantage of Black people’s legal vulnerability and lack of institutional knowledge to extract physical and intellectual property. In other cases, however, the threats to Black communities result more from structural economic conditions. As the Charleston area population grows and property becomes more valuable, many Black folks are simply priced off of their own land because of rising taxes. Many families that are land rich but cash poor can not keep up with the cost of their own assets. Both of these challenges—interpersonal transgression and rapid market growth—make Black wealth more precarious than its white counterpart.

There is another feature of the economic landscape in Charleston with profound impacts on development in historic African American communities. The money that finances preservation work usually comes from nonprofit fundraising and government

grants. As interest in Black historic preservation has risen recently, a slow stream of money—mediated by national and city governments and nonprofits—has begun trickling into African American communities. The problem with this financial arrangement is that the money comes with stipulations and strings attached. Federal grant money, often presented in a preservation framework that emphasizes the built environment, has relatively narrow uses and rarely spreads widely throughout the communities. At the same time, the old nonprofits in Charleston composed of deeply entrenched legacy interests in the city have access to large amounts of capital through their financial holdings and boardrooms. Yet even though they might be nominally interested in promoting preservation in Black communities, these organizations have specific views and values that do not necessarily align with the communities themselves.

In both the case of government grant and nonprofit money, historic African American communities are not in control of the financial resources. In order to access money, these communities have to forfeit ownership over the nature of the preservation work. Historic African American communities are forced into an unfair position: sacrifice their own values and independence in exchange for financial support or remain excluded entirely from important resources. This structural arrangement is so pernicious because it undermines the altruistic intentions of any one individual. Even if nonprofit organizations want to follow communities' lead, true decision making power still lies with moneyed interests and financial gatekeepers.

This imbalance of economic power that makes communities reliant on external interests is part of the same system that has perpetrated mass theft and exploitation for centuries. The same history that bled money and opportunity out of Black communities

consolidated and maintained it for white institutions. Any genuine effort to preserve these communities and promote their future must reckon with this fact and think about its implications. If old prestigious organizations and their donor networks want to preserve Historic African American communities, they must recognize the need to cede decision making and financial control back to the communities themselves. Taking seriously the burden of history means thinking about redistribution, both of wealth and power. These organizations must think creatively and expansively about ways to mobilize their wealth and resources to be controlled by the communities they wish to help.

Just as important as committing financial resources into historic African American communities is welcoming those communities into decision making spaces. Organizations that want to pursue preservation work in Black communities can not expect that centuries of distrust and alienation will be alleviated overnight. Good intentions and a willingness to help are necessary but insufficient to build lasting credibility—real trust should be built through strong relationships and material commitments. Nonprofits have asked historic African American communities to sacrifice the autonomy and self-determination that they have maintained for hundreds of years in order to receive institutional help. Instead, preservation groups should invest in formal, paid positions for members of historic African American communities and bring community leaders and representatives onto their boards.

These financial and administrative changes would unquestionably represent a radical departure from the way most nonprofits view their work. But after centuries of systemic racism, business-as-usual incrementalism will simply recreate existing inequality. For big, legacy organizations in Charleston, thinking honestly about city history is

uncomfortable and difficult. Institutional values and practices are deeply entrenched and hard to change. Enacting institutional reforms at this level often means fighting against decades of systemic inertia. We recognize the magnitude of this task and the many challenges it presents. Yet institutions must also not let precedent and tradition obfuscate their responsibilities. Institutional preservation—with its current values and techniques and donors—has rarely served Black people. If that is to change, organizational leadership must be willing to reject status quo expectations and embrace new and challenging ideas.