8 Places Across the U.S. That Illuminate Black History

Over the years, many important African American landmarks have disappeared or fallen into disrepair. An effort to restore them promises a fuller understanding of American history as a whole.

By Shayla Martin
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The Sun-n-Sand Motor Hotel in Jackson, Miss., where civil rights activists gathered in the 1960s. The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem in New York City, where Ella Fitzgerald and the Count Basie Orchestra performed. These, along with many other sites that are integral to Black culture, no longer exist, while others have fallen into disrepair, with little hope of survival. Often the loss or degradation was by design — many were systematically destroyed through racially coded policies like “urban renewal.” Others fell apart because of a lack of financial resources and public support.

Their loss is part of a larger problem: When these African American sites no longer exist, we run the risk of losing a full understanding of American history as a whole.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund is trying to prevent this from happening. Launched in 2017, the fund has raised more than $80 million through partnerships with the philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, the Ford Foundation and others, supporting more than 200 preservation projects across the country. Last month, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the team announced a $4 million investment in preserving 35 historic Black churches that continue to drive change in American society.

“The idea is to create financially sustainable cultural institutions that steward these physical assets, because we have not had representation in the American landscape that tells the Black lived experience,” said Brent Leggs, the executive director of the fund.

“Increasing that recognition and representation is a form of cultural equity, and ensuring that these organizations are endowed ensures that these communities have a Black future.”

Here are eight African American historical sites, all grantees of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.

The Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Houston is home to one of the largest private collections of African American military artifacts in the country.
Buffalo Soldiers National Museum

Houston

The Buffalo Soldiers are among the most storied soldiers in American military history. Formed in 1866 just after the Civil War, the soldiers — who included the Black 9th and 10th Cavalries and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments — served mainly on the Western frontier. Many were former slaves and veterans from the Civil War. They represented the first Black professional soldiers in a peacetime army. Though no one knows for certain how they came to be called “Buffalo Soldiers,” the name is said to have been granted by Native Americans who acknowledged their fierce fighting.

Housed in the 1925 Houston Light Guard Armory building, the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum is home to one of the largest private collections of African American military artifacts in the country. The collection spans the American Revolution to the Persian Gulf War, with exhibits dedicated to military inspired art, Buffalo Soldier uniforms, and Cathay Williams, a woman who posed as a man under the pseudonym William Cathay, and served with the Buffalo soldiers for two years before her gender was discovered. Visitors can also experience a Buffalo Soldier re-enactment with expert storytellers by reservation.

Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., $10 admission. Free admission on Thursdays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Louis Armstrong House & Museum

Queens, New York City

One of the most famous jazz musicians in the world, Louis Armstrong, along with his wife, Lucille, moved into a modest home in Corona, Queens, in New York City, in 1943. Armstrong lived there until his death in 1971.

In 1983, Lucille Armstrong willed the home and its contents to the City of New York to create a museum and study center dedicated to Armstrong’s career and the history of jazz. The impeccably maintained midcentury modern home feels frozen in time, complete with botanical print wallpaper, teal lacquered kitchen cabinets and a reel-to-reel machine in Armstrong’s den.

The vast museum collection includes 1,600 recordings, 86 scrapbooks, 5,000 photographs and 120 awards — and that’s just from the couple’s personal collection. There’s also a wide variety of materials donated by friends, fans and collectors, such as the 1934 Selmer trumpet given to Armstrong by King George V of England, and nearly every commercially released Armstrong recording collected by his friend, the photographer Jack Bradley. The museum offers daily guided tours and a variety of programs, concerts and seminars throughout the year.

Open Thursday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; $15 admission. Tickets must be purchased in advance.
16th Street Baptist Church

Birmingham, Ala.

The 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the 1963 bombing that tragically killed four little girls attending Sunday school, is one of the most well-known civil rights-era sites in the United States. Through all the danger and chaos that preceded and followed the attack, which was carried out by Ku Klux Klan members, the church — an early 20th-century, red-brick building with two towers — was the backbone of Birmingham's Black community. It hosted civil rights meetings, rallies and social events, and served as a refuge for the people dedicated to ending segregation in Alabama.

The church and its congregation are integral to the Birmingham community today, and welcome visitors from around the world for tours and events. Last fall, the new $2.5 million Wallace A. Rayfield Museum (named after the church's architect) opened inside the former church parsonage. The new museum honors Black civic leaders of the 1880s to the 1920s, including the 16th Street Baptist pastor, the Rev. William R. Pettiford, who founded the Alabama Penny Savings Bank, and Thomas C. Windham, a contractor and church trustee chairman who oversaw construction.

Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; $10 admission. Tickets must be purchased in advance.

African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard

Martha's Vineyard, Mass.

Thanks to its pristine beaches and rugged natural beauty, Martha's Vineyard has long been a popular destination for millions of vacationers, among them former presidents like Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. But the island is also widely celebrated for being one of the first beach destinations where Black families could vacation and purchase property, mainly in the town of Oak Bluffs, beginning in the late 19th century. Though prominent Black artists, musicians and leaders visited the island for decades (many staying at Shearer Cottage in Oak Bluffs, the first Black-owned lodging on the island) or purchased homes, no comprehensive collection of this history was documented until 1998, with the founding of the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard.

Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the 36-stop trail crisscrosses the island, covering African American history from the 18th century to the present. Stops include Shearer Cottage; Powell Cottage, the home of Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York; the home of the Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West; Villa Rosa, the house where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once stayed; and Dunmere by the Sea, an inn that was a stop in "The Negro Motorist Green Book," a travel guide published between 1936 and 1967 to help African Americans travel the United States safely in the Jim Crow era.

Heritage Trail team members offer guided walking and driving tours throughout the summer. Walking tours: Wednesday and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., $40. Driving tours: daily, price varies.
Hayti Heritage Center

Durham, N.C.

From the 1880s to the 1940s, the Hayti District in Durham, N.C., was a thriving Black community before it was demolished as part of an urban renewal plan to build what's now known as North Carolina Highway 147. African Americans migrated to Durham to work in tobacco factories near Fayetteville Road, and some purchased the land where the neighborhood emerged. Durham was also home to more than 200 Black-owned businesses on nearby Parrish Street, known as Black Wall Street, and the community was anchored by St. Joseph's African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Today, St. Joseph's AME Church (the only building in Hayti to survive urban renewal) houses the Hayti Heritage Center, where Black culture is celebrated through song, dance, film and conversation. Constructed in 1891, 24 stained glass windows provide a beautiful setting for an art walk and gallery exhibition of local artists every third Friday. There are also African dance and twerk yoga classes, and the Black American Music Series features performances every second Sunday of the month.

*Hours vary based on events and programming. Classes are $10, music series tickets are $15.*

The Hayti Heritage Center in Durham, N.C., is housed inside the St. Joseph's AME Church, the only building in the Hayti District that survived urban renewal. Bill Erwin
Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum
Lynchburg, Va.

The poet, civil rights activist and Harlem Renaissance figure Anne Spencer was a key part of the Black literary and cultural movement of the 1920s. Her poetic talents were discovered somewhat by chance as a result of her work as an activist in Lynchburg. In 1913, she and her husband founded the Lynchburg chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), and when James Weldon Johnson visited in 1919 to help reestablish the chapter, he discovered her writings and published her poem “Before the Feast of Shushan” in The Crisis, the N.A.A.C.P. journal. The poem caught the attention of the renowned poet Langston Hughes and Spencer's career as a poet was born.

The poet’s Queen Anne-style home and garden became a gathering space for African American leaders, scientists and creative types, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington Carver and Zora Neale Hurston. The home features almost all of the original furnishings.

The garden is open daily, free of charge from dawn to dusk. House and garden tours are $15. Tickets must be booked in advance.
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Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park
Hilton Head, S.C.

Founded in 1862, Mitchelville was the first self-governed town of free Black people in the United States. At its height, 3,000 formerly enslaved residents lived on 200 acres. The residents elected their own officials and had compulsory education and their own system of laws — rights that had previously been denied to them. Their West African heritage is the foundation for the region's Gullah Geechee culture, a distinct blend of West African art, crafts, cuisine, music and language influenced by life on the Sea Islands and the coastal plains of the Southeast.

Today, Mitchelville is a park and archaeological site where visitors can embark on self-guided tours to understand a time when newly freed African Americans successfully pursued self-governance. Visitors can also explore several reconstructed buildings from that era, including a homestead house, and see a bateau riverboat. Future plans include a commemorative park with an 18,000-square-foot visitors’ center, event lawn and up to 10 reconstructed houses that represent the cluster of homes during the 1800s.

The park is open daily from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.; guided tours are available on select dates for $8.

South Side Community Arts Center
Chicago

Founded in 1940, the South Side Community Art Center is the oldest African American art center in the United States. Established under President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, it's the only art center of the more than 100 established by the Works Progress Administration still operating in its original building, and features classrooms, lecture and performance halls and a gallery space. The pioneering center was instrumental in the careers of many nationally known African American artists at a time when few art galleries would show African American work. Among those artists were the sculptors Elizabeth Catlett and Richmond Barthé; the photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks; the painter Jacob Lawrence; the poet Gwendolyn Brooks and the visual artist Archibald J. Motley Jr.

Today, the center continues its legacy of nurturing African American artists by showcasing established artists and emerging creators in both gallery exhibitions and permanent collections. The space also hosts educational programs, exhibitions, talks, tours and more.

Throughout February and March, “The Promised Land” exhibition features the work of 11 contemporary artists as they interpret the Great Migration, a movement of more than half a million Black Southern Americans to major Northern and Western cities, including Chicago, Detroit and New York. The exhibition reimagines stories of city life through Southern influences, family archives and portraits.

Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.; admission is free.

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