Preserving **African American Settlement Patterns** in Indiana

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Larger cities like Evansville, Gary, and Indianapolis retain much of their 20th century African American structural heritage due to significant strides in historic preservation that have helped preserve these important resources. Many of the state's other older and predominantly rural African American heritage sites have not fared so well and encountered significant preservation challenges for descendent groups and rural municipalities. Phases of settlement, emigration, and consolidation of African American communities have left an abundance of cemeteries, which contrasts with the disappearance of many rural historically Black settlements.

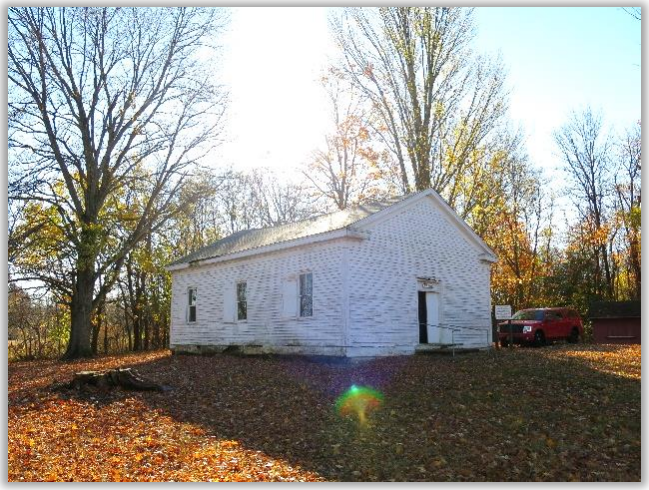

Figure 1: Mt. Pleasant Beech Church, Carthage (Rush County), NR-2512

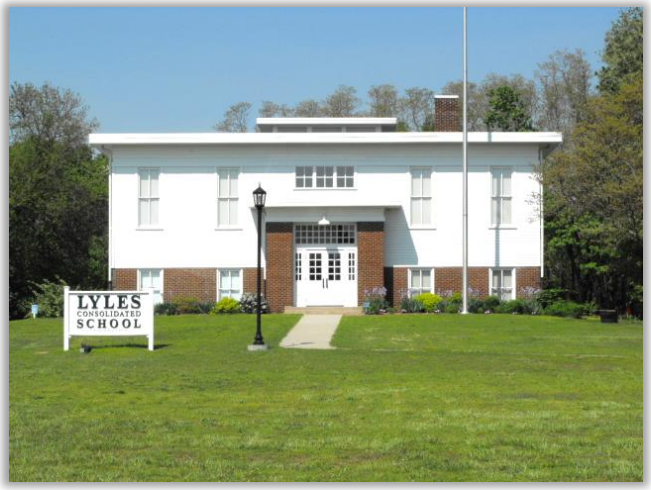

Figure 2: Lyles Consolidated School, Lyles Station (Gibson County), NR-1422 & NR-1476

In 2014, the Indiana Historical Society's Early Black Settlements Project identified more than 60 former rural African American settlements in Indiana across 43 counties.[1] Although only one of these communities, Lyles Station in Gibson County, remains, at least three others—including Beech in Rush County, Greenville in Randolph County, and Lick Creek in Orange County, have descendent or advocacy groups.[2] Some structures, including the museum in Lyles Station and the remains of the Randolph County Union Literary Institute, still stand, yet cemeteries make up the vast majority of African American historic sites in rural Indiana. Approximately 80 cemeteries listed in the DHPA's State Historic Architectural and Archaeological Research Database (SHAARD) are predominately or exclusively African American, out of which 53 are either sparsely documented or known to be in poor condition. Further research into these overlooked heritage sites, backed by an understanding of Indiana's 19th century African American history will be critical for preserving and documenting the breadth and impact of African American settlement in the state.

[1] "Early Black Settlements by County," Indiana Historical Society, January 26, 2018, https://indianahistory.org/research/research-materials/early-black-settlements/early-black-settlements-by-county/.
[2] Moore, Wilma L. "A Treasure Hunt: Black Rural Settlements in Indiana by 1870." *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 27, no. 1 (2015).

Indiana's rural African American settlements date back to the state's first three decades, prior to the 1851 rewrite of the Indiana constitution barring the settlement of African Americans in the state. Some were Revolutionary War veterans claiming land grants, settling in Southern Indiana prior to statehood.[3] Settlement often occurred alongside Quakers, who were generally more welcoming of their neighbors and furnished journeys for freed slaves from Kentucky and North Carolina into the state. Areas of Quaker settlement in Randolph, Orange, and Rush Counties were home to some of Indiana's largest and longest lived rural African American communities, including Greenville, Lick Creek, and Lyles Station.[4] Land ownership and settlement alongside other African Americans and more tolerant white settlers helped establish this early wave of settlers as prosperous communities with stable institutions like schools and churches that have endured as some of the last remaining structures in these settlements.

Indiana's African American population has grown consistently since statehood in 1816. The same push and pull factors that brought African Americans to Indiana; persecution, economic opportunities, and the search for community, also drove migration north and into cities. In Indiana, these trends were already apparent in the decade preceding the Civil War. As a free state with pro-Confederate leanings and growing animosity toward formerly enslaved Africans migrating from the South, Indiana's antebellum racial climate somewhat resembled southern states after the Civil War. In the 1850s, the African American populations of many southern Indiana counties shrunk significantly. Decatur County's African American population no longer appears in the 1860 census, and Washington County's African American population was reported in the single digits by 1880, down from an 1850 high of 252.[5] The state constitution's bar of entry to African Americans, the danger posed by the 1850 Federal Fugitive Slave Act, and increasing racial violence have all been suggested as factors driving African American Hoosiers from the rural south. At the same time, the state's urban African American population grew at an increasing pace, with freedmen settling in southern towns like Evansville and New Albany and native-born Hoosiers moving to Indianapolis or leaving the state.[6]

The Civil War and Emancipation mark an inflection point for Indiana's African American population. By 1870, the state's African American population had more than doubled from 11,428 in 1860 to 24,560.[7] In census records, Kentucky replaced Indiana as the leading birthplace for the state's Black residents.[8] Evansville, a port-of-entry for southern migrants, saw its African American population increase by 1,400% during this period, though for most of these new arrivals, the city was a stopover on a longer journey to destinations like Indianapolis and the cities of the Great Lakes. The end of reconstruction brought another major wave of immigration that would continue into the 20th century, with Indiana's African American population growing to 39,228 in 1880, 45,215 in 1890, and 57,505 by 1900.[9]

Though immigration from the South continued to fuel the growth of Indiana's African American population, an increasingly fierce reaction drove longtime residents to leave the state or consolidate in more accommodating cities. Between 1871 and 1930, at least 20 African Americans were killed in 10 lynching incidents.[10] A wave of coercive violence, legal persecution, and riots in several cities including Salem and Evansville had earned Indiana an unwelcoming reputation even before the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. In 1870, 14% of Indiana-born African Americans resided outside of the State; by 1930, the proportion had increased to 44%.[11] These rates were comparable to Kentucky at the same time, the main point of origin for African American immigrants to Indiana and outpaced the rates of migration from some former slave states.

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[3] Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana before 1900: A Study of a Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
[4] Thornbrough, 1993.
[5] "Early Black Settlements by County."
[6] Thornbrough, 1993.
[7] Thornbrough, 1993.
[8] James Gregory, "Black Migration History for individual states 1850-2017." America's Great Migrations Project. University of Washington, 2017, https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/black_migration_states.shtml.
[9] Thornbrough, 1993.
[10] "Map of White Supremacy's mob violence." Plain Talk History, 2016, plaintalkhistory.com/monroeandflorencework.
[11] Gregory, 2017.

Figure 3: Roberts Chapel, Atlanta (Hamilton County), NR-0882 & NR-1309

Figure 4: William Anderson Home, Madison (Jefferson County), located within the Georgetown Neighborhood of the Madison Historic District, NR-2038 & NR-2163

Among former free states, Indiana was not uniquely racist. Ohio and Illinois had more incidents of racial violence.[12] Remaining relatively rural, Indiana was slow to industrialize and job opportunities were for the most part concentrated in a few urban areas. Rocked by agricultural depressions and dwindling social opportunities, Indiana's African American farming communities had largely disappeared by the early 20th century with young people seeking work in nearby cities like Muncie and Indianapolis or otherwise leaving the state.[13] By 1900, Indiana's African American population had become predominantly urban. Indianapolis ranked behind Kansas City as the second most proportionately African American city in the northern states, accounting for 9.4% of the city's population.[14] Former African American population centers like New Albany and Randolph County lost most of their younger residents to the economic lure of nearby cities, leading older residents to sell their farms and move after retirement.[15] From the late 19th century through the early 20th century, Indiana's rural African American population continued to decline while the total population increased.[16]

Although descendent communities have held reunions and commemorated Indiana's 19th century African American heritage for decades, preservation efforts only started taking off in earnest in the 1990s. In 1996, Roberts Chapel in Hamilton County was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NR-0882 & NR-1309),[17] followed by Lyles Station Museum in Gibson County in 1999 (NR-1433 & NR-1476).[18] In 2008, the Union Literary Institute Preservation Society acquired the school building in Randolph County and began work stabilizing what remains of the site (Site #135-603-40021).[19] In Madison, the Georgetown neighborhood remains a remarkably well-preserved example of an early African American urban district—included in the 1973 National Register listing of the Madison Historic District (NR-2038) and the 2006 National Historic Landmarks listing of the Madison NHL Historic District (NR-2163).[20] In 2014, the Indiana Historical Society began compiling information on early Black settlements, and the following year Lyles Station was featured in the permanent exhibit of the Smithsonian

[12] "Map of White Supremacy's mob violence."
[13] Carol O. Rogers. "Black and White in Indiana." *Indiana Business Review* 80, no. 2. (2005).
[14] Thornbrough, 1993.
[15] Rogers, 2005.
[16] Durand, E. Dana. "Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910." Department of Commerce and labor Bureau of the Census, 1913.
[17] Tonja Goodloe. "National Register of Historic Places Form: Roberts Chapel." National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. August 5, 1996.
[18] "About Us," Lyles Station, August 4, 2022, https://lylesstation.org/about-us/.
[19] Jessie Russett. "Union Literary Institute." Indiana Landmarks, April 4th, 2021. https://web.archive.org/web/20210406215414/https://www.indianalandmarks.org/endangered-property/union-literary-institute/
[20] John T. Windle. "National Register of Historic Places Form: Madison Historic District." National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. May 25th, 1973.

National Museum of African American History and Culture.[21] In 2022, Indiana Landmarks hired a director for their Black Heritage Preservation Program, expanding upon their African American Landmarks Committee established in 1992.[22]

Figure 5: Colored Cemetery, Thorntown (Boone County), Site #011-629-15022

Figure 6: Little Africa Cemetery, Hoosier National Forest (Orange County), Site #117-640-40001

The sites that have been preserved represent the tip of an iceberg, and the vast majority have been demolished. Some settlement history may still exist as archaeological sites that need investigated. Increasingly, preservation efforts for rural Black heritage in Indiana have focused on cemeteries. Since most structural evidence of early African American settlements in Indiana are now long gone, cemeteries now constitute much of Indiana's identifiable 19th century African American heritage sites. In recent years, these sites have attracted increasing interest and opportunities for preservation. In 2017, with grant funding from the Indiana Historical Society, volunteers in Boone County restored the Colored Cemetery near Thorntown.[23] Currently, decedents of the settlers at Lick Creek are coordinating with the Hoosier National Forest to restore, interpret, and provide accessibility to the Roberts-Thomas or Little Africa Cemetery located within the bounds of the Forest. In 2023, the group received a Forest Service Chief's Award for the interpretation of the history of underrepresented communities.[24] At the same time, Indiana Landmarks is working to identify missing African American cemeteries in the State's southernmost counties. In December 2022, the United States Congress passed the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act, which authorizes the Department of the Interior to establish a multi-million-dollar grant program for the preservation of African American cemeteries.[25] The implementation of this grant program would open new sources of funding for communities and preservation groups interested in restoring cemeteries across Indiana.

[21] Fleur Paysour. "National Museum of African American History and Culture to Visit Historic Black Indiana Farming Community for Collection Event." National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Smithsonian Institution. April 27, 2016. https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-visit-historic-black-indiana-farming-c

[22] Mindi Woolman, "Eunice Trotter Joins Indiana Landmarks as Director of New Black Heritage Preservation Program," Indiana Landmarks, July 18, 2022, https://www.indianalandmarks.org/2022/07/eunice-trotter-joins-indiana-landmarks-as-director-of-new-black-heritage-preservation-program/.

[23] "Thorntown Colored Cemetery." Genealogy Club, Crawfordsville IN. June, 2019. http://www.cdpl.lib.in.us/genenewsletter/hudson-June2019.pdf

[24] "2022 Chief's Awards." Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture. March 14, 2023. https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/recognition/chiefs-honor-awards-recognize-employee-excellence-delivering-agencys-mission

[25] Congress.gov. "Text - S.3667 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act." December 12, 2022. https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/3667/text.