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Beyond Rust and Rockefeller: Preserving Cleveland’s African American Heritage

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BEYOND RUST AND ROCKEFELLER: PRESERVING CLEVELAND’S AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE

STEPHANIE RYBERG-WEBSTER

ABSTRACT — The preservation of African American heritage sites holds a tenuous place in the historic preservation field. On one hand, preservationists recognize that under-designation is rampant and work to engage communities of color. On the other hand, the field has high standards of architectural merit and integrity for local or national designation, which disadvantages many African American sites that suffer from years of deterioration and neglect—particularly in urban areas. This research uses a qualitative case study the Cleveland Restoration Society’s Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience project to question how contemporary preservationists address African American heritage and the tensions and opportunities in preserving African American communities. Additionally, the article draws conclusions for future preservation efforts in African American (or other underrepresented) communities. The article adds to a growing body of scholarship about preservation in minority neighborhoods and finds a pressing need to question the applicability and usefulness of long-standing preservation tools when working in communities that lack high architectural value and material integrity but have a rich cultural heritage and historic significance.

INTRODUCTION

Preserving African American and other underrepresented groups’ heritages is a central focus for contemporary preservationists (Dubrow 1998; Hodder 1999; Dwyer 2000; Foley and Lauria 2000; Lee 2003; Harris 2004; Kaufman 2004; Nieves and Alexander 2008; Kaufman 2009; Lee 2012; Leggs, Rubman, and Wood 2012). The National Park Service (NPS), National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP), and others have identified, documented, and designated places associated with African American heritage, while seeking ways to engage communities of color. Scholars have noted that only a small fraction of all properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places are affiliated with African American communities and that there is significant work needed to make the profession diverse and inclusive (Lee 2003; Kaufman 2004; Kaufman 2009; Lee 2012). Among the barriers to engaging African American communities are perceptions that the practice is costly.
and elitist, that high-style architecture is valued more than everyday landscapes, and that material integrity trumps social or cultural significance.

Historic preservation in urban, African American communities is particularly tenuous due to the complex urban history in these neighborhoods. Although African American history is still an emerging field (Kusmer 1995; Lewis 1995; Troltter 1995; Goings and Mohl 1996; Nieves 2008; Kusmer and Trotter 2009), scholars have documented the early twentieth-century migration of African Americans to northern industrial cities and subsequent housing, economic, and social conditions for African Americans, including intense discrimination, segregation, and the formation of contemporary ghettos (Hirsch 1983; Sugrue 1996; Hillier 2003; Boger 2009). In the post-WWII era, urban renewal and highway building devastated African American neighborhoods, resulting in the indiscriminate demolition of large swaths of African American communities, the social upheaval of forced displacement, and grassroots protest (Thomas and Ritzdorf 1997; Thomas 2004; Teaford 2000; Fullilove 2001; Bradley 2008; Avila and Rose 2009; Spiers 2009; Hanlon 2011; Michney 2011). In the 1960s, the struggle for civil rights brought popular attention to the conditions of African American communities, while protests and civil unrest in cities across the nation, including Cleveland (in 1966 and 1968), further exacerbated property destruction, vacancy, and urban abandonment (Adams 1972; Upton 1985; Michney 2006; Collins and Smith 2007). By the turn of the twenty-first century, many cities had a landscape rich in African American heritage but facing extreme poverty, vacancy, abandonment, and physical deterioration (Katz 2012). For preservationists, this presents a tenuous situation. On one hand, the field recognizes that under-designation in African American communities is rampant and it is working to recognize these historic resources and engaging communities of color. On the other hand, preservationists hold high standards of architectural merit and material integrity for local or national designation, which disadvantages many African American sites that have suffered from years of deterioration and neglect.

This research adds to the growing body of scholarship about preserving African American communities. Using a qualitative case study of a project in Cleveland, Ohio, the article questions how contemporary preservationists address African American heritage and the tensions in and opportunities for preserving African American communities. The article adds complexity to the dominant heritage discourses in former industrial cities, such as Cleveland, where nostalgia for the wealth of the industrial era (i.e., the age of Rockefeller in Cleveland), narratives of immigrant success, and fascination with the rusted ruins of industry overshadow the complex history of marginalized groups including African Americans. Additionally, the article draws conclusions for future preservation efforts in African American (or other underrepresented) communities. Beginning in 2012, the Cleveland Restoration Society (CRS)—a nationally recognized nonprofit preservation organization—spearheaded the Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience project. Analyzing this ongoing effort via participant observation, key participant interviews, and document analysis reveals that, while preservationists have made great strides towards inclusiveness, preservation tools and techniques lack applicability and usefulness for communities without high architectural value and material integrity but with rich cultural heritage and historic significance. The research is especially timely as cities strategize about the future of African American neighborhoods plagued by high levels of vacancy and abandonment resulting from years of disinvestment and escalated by the recent foreclosure crisis. With demolition as a leading strategy, the threat of losing significant historic resources is imminent and the physical heritage of entire urban communities hangs in the balance.

The article first reviews scholarly and professional literature addressing the intersection of race and historic preservation. After reviewing the research approach, data sources, and past efforts to preserve Cleveland’s African American heritage, the article provides an in-depth description and analysis of CRS’s African American heritage project. Finally, the article summarizes lessons learned from the CRS project, including the need to remove architectural bias, reduce structural barriers, value quality over quantity, meaningfully engage communities, and balance revitalization and preservation goals.

**Preserving African American Heritage**

Preservation scholars and practitioners have paid particular interest to African American heritage, especially over the past two decades (Dwyer 2000; Kaufman 2004; Nieves and Alexander 2008; Kaufman 2009; Lee 2012; Leggs, Rubman, and Wood 2012). The field recognizes that African American heritage sites are profoundly underrepresented. As Kaufman (2004, 1) notes, “out of
over 76,000 properties currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a computer search turns up approximately 823 associated with African American heritage—this translates into just about 1 percent of all National Register listings. By the early 1990s, Lee (2012, 33) and others noted that preservationists were building partnerships with ethnographers, planners, and others to reach out to ethnic communities, “to discern how historic preservation tools can work for” them, and to update preservation practices when needed. Despite this positive portrayal of the profession’s movement towards inclusion, preservationists continue to struggle to recognize minority heritage sites and engage communities of color.

Existing research on preserving African American heritage focuses on high-profile events or sites such as the civil rights movement (Dwyer 2000; Dwyer 2008; Dwyer and Alderman 2008), the Underground Railroad (Wellman 2002), Rosenwald Schools (Hoffschwelle 2003; Hoffschwelle 2008), and New York City’s African Burial Ground (LaRoche and Blakely 1997; Blakely 1998; Frohne 2008), to name a few. Other studies focus on marketing African American heritage for tourism purposes (Greenbaum 1990; Hoffman 2003). While these studies add valuable narratives and a deeper understanding of African American historic places, they do not address typical African American neighborhoods, or what Upton (1986) refers to as experiential landscapes. A few studies and reports do venture into this territory, highlighting past efforts to preserve urban African American communities, including Brooklyn’s Weeksville Society (Lee 2003; Kaufman 2004), Pittsburgh’s Manchester neighborhood (Ryberg 2011), Cincinnati’s Mt. Auburn community (Ryberg 2011), Atlanta’s Auburn Avenue (Newman 2001), and Richmond’s Jackson Ward (Harris 2004). These narratives tell of a preservation history in these communities that began in the late 1960s or early 1970s, often led by African Americans and tied to the era’s growing community development movement. As Kaufman (2004, 9) states, “preserving Pittsburgh’s African American heritage was inseparable from the efforts of the city’s African Americans to secure decent homes and neighborhoods.”

In the 1990s and 2000s, preservation continued to become a more inclusive profession and build stronger ties to residents, neighborhood groups, and community development efforts (Hayden 1995). At the state and local level, nonprofit organizations launched efforts to document and preserve African American communities. For instance, the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans launched their Ethnic Heritage Preservation initiative in 1997 with the goal of preserving the city’s African American heritage “through education, community awareness and advocacy” (PRC 2015, n.p.). More recently, Preservation Durham (North Carolina) completed the Durham Documentation of African American Historic Sites project, identifying approximately sixty sites grouped into one of four tiers: high-priority, medium-priority, low-priority, and potentially significant in the future (Johnson 2009). Additionally, local preservation initiatives began to incorporate African American heritage into broader efforts. Los Angeles’ SurveyLA project, which exemplifies this approach, outlined a number of themes including “Civil Unrest, 1939–1965” (SurveyLA 2013, 17) and “African-American Civil Rights Movement, 1955–1968” (SurveyLA 2013, 18), among others. State historic preservation offices also launched programs focused on African American heritage, including the Maryland Historical Trust’s African American Heritage Preservation program, which offers grants (MHT 2015), and Indiana Landmarks’ African American Landmarks Committee, which provides survey, technical assistance, outreach, and grants for African American heritage sites (Indiana Landmarks 2015). Preservation Virginia, a statewide nonprofit organization, has partnered on a number of projects with the goal of “honoring and protecting African American heritage” (Preservation Virginia 2015). Additionally, a few African American–specific preservation organizations formed, including the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network and the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society (FAAHPN 2016; RIBHS 2015).

While these state, local, and nonprofit initiatives are an important step forward, preservationists recognize that minority participation in preservation still needs to be improved through connections with residents, community developers, and other neighborhood activists. One of the key challenges of inclusivity, at times, is that cultural groups vary in how they define heritage and in their prioritization of such pillars of preservation as material integrity and architectural merit (Hayden 1995; Green 1998; Mason 2003; Mason 2006; Lee 2012). Federal policy and National Register criteria create a very top-down, expert-oriented profession wherein making decisions based on multiple voices requires significant structural change to the profession (Mason 2003). There is an inherent assertion of power in preservation decision-making (Reichl 1997; Schneider 2001; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Jenks 2008; Zhang 2011), wherein...
“individuals and groups recall the past not for its own sake, but as a tool to bolster different aims and agendas” (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 349). In other words, preservation outcomes depend on who gets to determine what is significant and how to preserve tangible elements of the past. Additionally, perceptions about elitism and gentrification are a barrier to preservation in African American communities (Listokin et al. 1998; Smith 1998; Foley and Lauria 2000; Bures 2001; Boyd 2005), as preservation is often “portrayed as causing expulsion of poor and minority people” (Foley and Lauria 2000, 3). The perceived causal relationship with gentrification creates an uphill battle for preservationists who may have the best of intentions but insufficient tools to address the needs of minority communities.

The NPS and NTHP have both recognized a need to better address African American historic sites (Harris 2004; Kaufman 2004; Leggs, Rubman, and Wood 2012). The NTHP called for a “concerted effort to go out into the field to identify African American historic sites and determine their significance” (Harris 2004, 8). In a simple yet profound conclusion, the NPS found that much progress in the area of African American historic preservation has been made, but even more work remains (Kaufman 2004). The authors of a more recent NTHP publication concluded that “the preservation of African American sites often happens on an informal basis” (Leggs, Rubman, and Wood 2012, 1) and called for more structured and broad initiatives. The NTHP also argues that the work of preserving African American heritage is imperative as it “empowers black youth” and conveys stories that “might otherwise be lost because urban renewal and the out-migration of blacks destroyed or led to the abandonment of many African American communities” (Leggs, Rubman, and Wood 2012, 2).

Existing studies find that preservation processes and tools are insufficient when focusing on African American heritage sites (Van West 1998; Harris 2004; Lee 2012). For instance, Lee (2012, 28) argues that “cultural layering,’ which results when cultural diversity and demographic mobility are combined, presents particular dilemmas in interpretation and rehabilitation.” In other words, many urban African American neighborhoods were not built by African Americans and thus have complex and layered histories. The NTHP found that “some of the current standards that are required for designation do not allow a sufficient number of African American historic sites to receive designation” (Harris 2004, 8), recognizing that many African American neighborhoods have suffered decades of decline, neglect, and disinvestment resulting in material changes to the historic fabric. Even a simple process such as the windshield survey, a common first step for preservationists (Lee 2012), is problematic as it relies on expert eyes, with little to no community input.

In summary, the preservation profession recognizes a need to better address African American (and other minority) heritage sites and include community members and others in preservation decision making. Professional and scholarly writing acknowledges that standard preservation tools inadequately respond to the history and contemporary challenges of many African American neighborhoods, yet new tools are not widely developed or implemented. Local, state, and federal organizations continue to experiment with historic preservation strategies in African American communities. Often guided by the best of intentions, these efforts have mixed results and merit continued analysis by preservation scholars and reflexive practitioners.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is a qualitative case study of the CRS’s Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience project, which began in the fall of 2012. CRS established a goal to “identify historic resources associated with [African American] history for listing in the Ohio Historic Inventory” (Crowther 2013, 2). The case provides a contemporary example of preservationists’ efforts to address African American heritage, building knowledge about how preservationists are doing so, related tensions and opportunities, and lessons for future efforts.

The qualitative case study relied on participant observation over the course of nearly two years (from fall 2012 through the time of this writing), document analysis, and informal interviews with key participants. The majority of the paper focuses on the project’s first year (from fall 2012 to summer 2013) and the completion of a survey report and a series of Ohio Historic Inventory (OHI) forms.

At the start of the project, CRS convened a task force comprised of local historians, interested preservationists, and African American community leaders. CRS staff leading the project also presented information at various stages to the community and at organizational meetings. On average, there was a meeting every other month throughout the project, and in total, the research involved observing seven meetings. Key documents also provided insight into the African American Experience
project, including the 2012–2013 survey report that CRS prepared for the Ohio Historic Preservation Office (the State Historic Preservation Office, or SHPO); 150 corresponding OHI forms; articles published in CRS’s member newsletter, Façade; six online articles in CRS’s Know our Heritage series; and various meeting minutes, handouts, and project summaries.

PAST EFFORTS TO PRESERVE CLEVELAND’S AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE

Cleveland is the epitome of a shrinking, postindustrial city, with an urban landscape reflecting entrenched economic and physical decline, racially segregated neighborhoods, poverty, and urban redevelopment. The city has suffered from decades of population decline, decentralization, manufacturing losses, and overall economic distress. More recently, the city and region were hit by the foreclosure crisis, resulting in heightened pressure for widespread demolition. Today, the city includes a resurging downtown and revitalized neighborhoods, as well as communities in severe distress where vacancy and abandonment run rampant. The city’s African American heritage is not well documented, while heritage associated with industrialization, epitomized by grand mansions and downtown commercial buildings that boomed during the era of Rockefeller, oil production, and eventually the steel and auto industries, is prioritized. The current, often decaying state of the city’s industrial fabric has garnered popular attention, although the heritage of job loss, economic decline, and painful contraction are not often highlighted in the “rust” aesthetic.

The history of African Americans in Cleveland follows a common pattern in northern and midwestern cities. In the nineteenth century, there were small numbers of African American residents. This population surged in the early twentieth century as southern blacks migrated north during the Great Migration. In 1900, the city had 5,988 African American residents—1.6 percent of the total population. By 1920, this number had grown to 34,451 (4.3 percent), and over the next three decades, the African American population grew by more than four times, totaling 147,847 in 1950 (16.2 percent) (Gibson and Jung 2005). According to the 2010 US Census, 53.3 percent of the city’s residents are African American.

Newly arriving African Americans in Cleveland settled in the Central neighborhood, just southeast of downtown. Throughout the twentieth century, many of the city’s east-side neighborhoods became strong majority African American communities, including Central, Fairfax, Hough, and Glenville (Table 1). These communities have a rich historical legacy, but have suffered from population decline, destructive urban renewal practices, massive disinvestment in the built environment, and increasing vacancies and abandonment. For instance, from the 1930s through the 1960s, the Central neighborhood was the locus of intense urban renewal activity, resulting in an almost entire erasure of the city’s oldest African American neighborhood. Furthermore, the recent foreclosure crisis has hit the city’s traditionally African American neighborhoods particularly hard, making the issues of vacancy, abandonment, and demolition particularly pressing in many of these already-distressed communities.

The City of Cleveland established its Landmarks Commission in 1971, and the nonprofit CRS has worked on behalf of preservation interests since 1972, but there has been relatively little recognition of the city’s significant African American heritage. One exception is the “Black History Thematic Resource,” listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 (Johannesen 1981). The designation included eight properties (two are now demolished), with six in the Central neighborhood. While certainly not comprehensive, the 1982 nomination illustrated the varied nature of Cleveland’s African

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>African American population (%)</th>
<th>Poverty rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hough</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenville</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Cleveland</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: City of Cleveland Planning Commission
American historic sites by recognizing black churches, business enterprises and businessmen, and social and cultural institutions.

THE “LANDMARKS OF CLEVELAND’S AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE”

To honor its fortieth anniversary in 2012, the CRS initiated a “legacy project” entitled Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience.4 The main purpose was “to identify, record and recommend for landmark designation historic buildings and sites associated with Cleveland’s African American community” (CRS 2012, n.p.). To oversee the project CRS convened a task force, which set four project goals:5

1. Identify properties and sites significant to the city’s African American heritage that did not already have historic designation;
2. Promote National Register and/or local designation;
3. Communicate findings as a way to stabilize neighborhoods and attract residents; and
4. Commemorate history with plaques or markers. (CRS 2013, n.p.)

Originally, CRS sought to survey fifty sites (CRS 2012), but the Ohio Historic Preservation Office, which provided funding and an AmeriCorps staff person, required the completion of 150 OHI forms during the first year of the project (fall 2012–summer 2013).6 Subsequently, CRS has continued the project through a public education series and by exploring the purchase and installation of Ohio Historical Markers at key sites (CRS staff, pers. comm.).

CRS first generated a list of potential African American historic sites using three methods. First, they identified famous African American Clevelanders and associated buildings. Second, they reviewed four secondary sources and archival resources for references to potentially significant sites.7 Finally, the AmeriCorps staff person conducted a windshield survey of the city’s African American neighborhoods to locate sites identified via the prior two methods and to note architecturally interesting properties (McDonough n.d.). The primary target neighborhoods for the windshield survey included Hough, Glenville, Central, Fairfax, Mt. Pleasant, Kinsman, University Circle, Buckeye, a cluster of southeast neighborhoods (Lee-Miles, Miles-Seville, Union-Miles, Park/Corlett, Lee-Harvard), and the Ludlow neighborhood in Shaker Heights (Figure 1) (Crowther 2013; McDonough 2013d; McDonough n.d.).8 The team established five

Fig. 1. Distribution of legacy project survey sites within Cleveland, Ohio. (Author, 2013.)
organizing themes: arts and culture, government and community, business and industry, civil rights, and the church (McDonough 2013a).

The result was the identification of 150 historic sites affiliated with Cleveland’s African American community, although two sites were removed from the final report “due to a lack of architectural integrity or historical significance” (McDonough 2013d, 23). The sites are concentrated in four key neighborhoods: Central, Fairfax, Hough, and Glenville (Figure 1). The majority of the properties are houses, followed by religious institutions, with the team identifying a few businesses, schools, and other community institutions (Table 2). Despite the explicit goal of identifying properties without preexisting designation (McDonough n.d.), 59 of the 148 OHI forms (about 40 percent) are for homes in the Ludlow neighborhood, a part of the Shaker Village National Register historic district. The justification for their inclusion was that the preexisting designation did not focus on the neighborhood’s association with integration and the civil rights movement (McDonough 2013d). After reviewing the 148 OHI forms, CRS staff and task force members recommended that seventy-eight sites (just over 50 percent) be considered for future National Register nominations. Discounting the fifty-nine Ludlow properties, the result was nineteen sites with National Register potential (Table 3).

The first year of the Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience project demonstrated many of the complexities involved with identifying, documenting, and preserving African American historic sites. This analysis found that there were clear **success stories**, in which the team found properties with strong ties to Cleveland’s African American heritage and recommended those sites for future research and possible designation. There were also properties with **questionable connections**, which the team recommended for National Register designation, but these connections to Cleveland’s African American heritage were secondary at best. Finally, there were a large number of properties that, despite interesting connections to Cleveland’s African American community, lacked **integrity and provenance** and were not given consideration for future designation.

**SUCCESS STORIES**

Of the nineteen non-Ludlow properties recommended for National Register designation, twelve have strong connections to Cleveland’s African American heritage. These **success stories** demonstrate that there are significant, undesignated African American historic resources and that existing preservation strategies, namely survey work, can generate knowledge and awareness of important African American sites. For example, the team identified and recommended for future designation two historically significant churches in the Central neighborhood: Lane Metropolitan CME (c. 1901, originally the First Church of Christ Scientist) (Figure 2) and St. Andrews Episcopal Church (c. 1916). They determined that both buildings retained architectural integrity, despite widespread demolition in the surrounding community (McDonough 2012f; McDonough 2013b). The support for the designation of these buildings centers on common preservation arguments—they are among the oldest African American congregations in Cleveland and they have strong ties to important national history, namely the civil rights movement (McDonough 2013d). Also located in Central is the Jean Murell-Capers House (c. 1914) (Figure 3). Here, the team recognized strong ties to African American business and political history. In 1949, Jean Murell-Capers was Cleveland’s first African American councilwoman, and her father, Edward Murell, who originally purchased the house, was the original owner of the Call and Post, Cleveland’s only African American–owned newspaper (McDonough 2012f; McDonough 2013d).

In other neighborhoods, CRS identified the Boddie Recording Studio (c. 1920) and the Madison and Madison Professional Building (c. 1962) (Figure 4). The former is a house in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood where Thomas Boddie established “Cleveland’s version of Motown, with

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**Table 2. African American Heritage Sites by Type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property / building use</th>
<th>Number included in survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Houses</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious institutions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apartment buildings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community buildings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cemeteries</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author, 2013, based on data in McDonough (2013)*
Fig. 2. Lane Metropolitan CME, 2131 E. 46th Street, Cleveland, Ohio (ca. 1901). (Author, 2013.)

Fig. 3. Judge Jean Murell-Capers House, 2380 E. 40th Street, Cleveland, Ohio (ca. 1914). (Author, 2013.)

Fig. 4. Madison and Madison Professional Building, 1464 E. 105th Street, Cleveland, Ohio (ca. 1962). (Author, 2013.)
the first Motown recordings coming out of the studio in 1959” (McDonough 2013d, 35; also see McDonough 2012a). The Madison and Madison building, located in University Circle alongside the city’s prominent arts, cultural, educational, and medical institutions, was African American architect Robert P. Madison’s Cleveland office. Madison opened his firm in 1954 and moved into this building upon its completion in 1962 (McDonough 2013c). According to the survey report, the building is significant because Madison’s “firm was the first to be established by an African American in Ohio and the tenth firm to be opened in the United States,” and it “has a connection to the civil rights movement because it was constructed to house African American professionals who were prevented from having offices elsewhere” (McDonough 2013d, 37).

**QUESTIONABLE CONNECTIONS**

Despite the explicit focus on African American historic resources, the team recommended seven properties for possible National Register designation for which the connection to Cleveland’s African American heritage is peripheral at best. These properties illustrate difficulties in African American preservation efforts, including the layering of heritage in dynamic urban neighborhoods and the profession’s continued prioritization of architectural merit. For instance, the recommendations included the Outhwaite Homes Estates and Lakeview Terrace public housing complexes, constructed in 1937 (McDonough 2012g; McDonough 2012j). Outhwaite Homes, in the historically African American Central neighborhood, was originally open to African Americans, but Lakeview Terrace, in the Ohio City neighborhood, was originally for white residents. Conspicuously absent from the survey report or OHI form for Lakeview Terrace is any mention of its original segregation, the process of integrating it, or any direct connection to African American heritage (McDonough 2012g). In fact, there is little justification for its inclusion in the survey at all, aside from the fact that today most of its residents are African American.

The Rainey Institute (c. 1904) and the Morison Avenue Missionary Baptist Church (c. 1925) are properties...
deemed worthy of future designation but whose significance comes from affiliations that predate the transition of their respective neighborhoods (Hough and Glenville) to African American communities. The Rainey Institute was built as a social service organization serving the Hungarian and Slovenian community and the recommendation for designation was based on its “importance to the early Hough community” and a pressing threat of demolition (McDonough 2013d, 24; also see McDonough 2012b) (Figure 5). The project team emphasized the Morison Avenue Missionary Baptist Church’s connection to the city’s Jewish heritage, as “it originally housed the Jewish Association Bath House of Glenville and served as a Jewish Mickveh” (McDonough 2013d, 26; also see McDonough 2012), and the property’s material integrity amid a severely deteriorated neighborhood (Figure 6). The report recognizes that the property “symbolizes the transition of Cleveland’s African American neighborhoods from Jewish enclaves” (McDonough 2013d, 26) but does not elaborate on this point.

Finally, there were four properties that derive their significance entirely from their architectural merit. These buildings were included in this project on African American heritage simply because they exist in what
are now predominantly African American communities, despite the survey report or OHI forms providing no information on how or why they are important to the city’s African American heritage. For example, the Pentecostal Determine Church of God (c. 1872) (Figure 7) exemplifies this complete disconnect from the goal of identifying African American heritage sites. The building, located in what is now a predominantly African American neighborhood and used by the surrounding community since the late 1970s, was recommended for potential designation because of “its architecture, which consists of a mixture of Gothic Revival and Romanesque elements” (McDonough 2013d, 39; also see McDonough 2012k).

INTEGRITY AND PROVENANCE

Finally, seventy of the properties included in the project were not recommended for future investigation or National Register designation. While these properties warranted the preparation of an OHI form, the final project report simply states that they lack “integrity or provenance” (McDonough 2013d). These properties often possess interesting ties to African American heritage and provide insight into the ongoing challenges of preserving urban African American heritage. For instance, the Icabod Flewellen Home (c. 1912) has “cultural significance as the original site of the African American Cultural and Art articles.

Fig. 7. Pentecostal Determine Church of God, 9105 Miles Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio (ca. 1872). (Author, 2013.)

Fig. 8. Icabod Flewellen Home, 8716 Harkness Road, Cleveland, Ohio (ca. 1912). (Author, 2013.)
The team identified the home as “the oldest African American Historic Museum in the Hough area and in America” (McDonough 2012c, n.p.). While highlighting the current threat of neglect, the team determined that it lacked sufficient material integrity. In other words, the same neglect that threatens the future of the property prevents it from being worthy of National Register listing.

Another case was the Mayor Arthur R. Johnston House, once the home of the first African American mayor in Cuyahoga County and the state of Ohio (Figure 9). Around 1919, Johnston moved to the house, which at the time was located in the village of Miles Heights, one of the few areas where African Americans could own homes in the region. Once elected, Johnston remained mayor of Miles Heights until the City of Cleveland annexed the area (McDonough 2012h). The survey report recognizes the property’s significance in African American politics, but simply states that it lacks “integrity or provenance” and therefore does not suggest any future action (McDonough 2013d).

Finally, two homes, both built around 1900, illustrate issues of integrity, provenance, and the politics of preserving African American heritage. Jesse Owens, world-renowned African American track athlete from the early twentieth century, lived in at least two extant homes in Cleveland’s Fairfax neighborhood. Owens lived in one of the houses from 1927 to 1930 (Figure 10) and the other during 1935 (McDonough 2012d; Historical Society” (McDonough 2013d, 25) (Figure 8).
McDonough 2012e). From the outset, the project team identified these as ideal properties for local and/or national designation (CRS staff, pers. comm.). As the project proceeded, though, the potential nomination of these buildings raised community tensions, which ultimately resulted in a recommendation for no immediate future action. Both of the homes are in close proximity to the Cleveland Clinic, which has “plans to erect 14 new buildings in the Fairfax area over the next several years” (McDonough 2013d, 15). The local community developers have a delicate relationship with the Cleveland Clinic and have developed neighborhood plans that benefit residents while accommodating projected Clinic expansion. When neighborhood leaders realized that CRS was eyeing the properties for potential designation, tensions emerged, with critiques that CRS had not reached out to community members and was disregarding other (non-preservation) concerns in this disinvested neighborhood. Community leaders also raised questions about the homes’ significance, arguing that Owens lived in many houses in Cleveland and they could not all be historic sites (CRS staff, pers. comm.). Embedded within this argument is a core struggle in African American preservation efforts, namely how to handle the high mobility and impermanence of African American residents, business operations, and other activities. In other words, African Americans living in Cleveland and other cities in the early twentieth century were highly mobile resulting from restrictions on property ownership and limited financial resources. These two houses, thus, are significant for their ties to Owens and as a tangible artifact of early twentieth-century African American settlement and mobility patterns. This significance, though, also undermines arguments for historic designation as they are two among many of Owens’s residences.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESERVING AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE**

The CRS’s Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience project reveals that, while preservationists have made great strides toward inclusiveness, long-standing preservation tools and practices can lack applicability and usefulness when working in communities without high architectural styles and material integrity but with a rich cultural heritage and historic significance. If the preservation profession is to truly embrace the nation’s multicultural heritage, it is imperative to have a range of techniques for identifying significant properties, engaging local communities, and valuing heritage that runs deeper than material fabric. These issues are especially highlighted when working to preserve African American (or other minority) heritage in urban, and often disinvested and impoverished, neighborhoods where decades of bricks-and-mortar deterioration have reduced and sometimes eliminated material integrity.

Overall, CRS’s African American heritage project reveals five key lessons for the preservation profession: (1) the field relies excessively on architecture, (2) there are structural barriers to designation, (3) funding is imperative, but the strings attached can be counterproductive, (4) meaningful community engagement is difficult, but imperative, and (5) connections to larger goals of urban revitalization must be clear and should not prevent recognition of a complex and tenuous history.

Preservationists must continue to move beyond the field’s architectural bias. CRS over-relied on the windshield survey, which emphasized the materiality of buildings. Rather, the identification of African American heritage sites called for more community-based engagement and historical research (Thomas 2004). In this context, identifying significant properties by architectural features is severely flawed given the history of African American settlement and migration. The result was a survey with numerous architecturally significant buildings that had only recent or very peripheral connections to the city’s African American community.

Preservation policy and practice are rife with structural barriers that result in bias against urban, African American communities. A lack of “integrity and provenance” was CRS’s primary reason for not recommending the majority of identified sites for future action. The precondition of high material integrity, given the history of disinvestment and poverty, creates a system in which there is little chance to honor, via National Register or local designation, many urban African American historic sites. The focus on material integrity further entrenches perceptions of preservation as an expensive, elitist practice that is in conflict with the interest of many low-income residents and community advocates. The issue of provenance, cited frequently in the CRS survey report, indicates the team’s difficulty in tracing the history of properties, including their ownership over time. Given the historic barriers to African American property ownership, it is not surprising that it is difficult to trace where individuals resided over an extended period of time. CRS completed the entire survey and 148 OHI
forms in approximately eight months, and dismissing properties, at this early stage, due to a lack of provenance is extremely premature.

In general, a lack of sufficient funding is a major impediment to thoroughly surveying and documenting many historic sites. When grants are available, funding agencies may impose counterproductive constraints. For CRS’s African American heritage project, a state preservation grant provided much-needed funding and reflects the preservation profession’s recognition of the importance of such work. The grant, though, required the completion of 150 OHI forms, causing the team to focus more on meeting that quota than on thoroughly researching and identifying African American heritage sites. The numbers-driven funding resulted in the inclusion of fifty-nine individual OHI forms for the Ludlow neighborhood, which is (a) already included in a National Register historic district and (b) should clearly be one district listing. The grant requirements also indirectly encouraged a focus on landmarks over potential districts, which by virtue of size and complexity can be more cumbersome and time-consuming to research and document. The term “landmark,” also included in the project’s official name (Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience), connotes an elevated status and architectural importance. When preservationists are working in underserved communities it is imperative to carefully select language and tools that facilitate better partnerships. For example, a project focused on recognizing community heritage would have potentially provided a stronger grassroots framework and built initial bridges to overcome critiques that preservation is an elitist concern of outsiders.

Preservationists must become equipped to carry out meaningful community engagement. For CRS, this was a significant missed opportunity to embrace diversity (of both race and class) and to build bridges to communities not historically engaged in preservation. According to the final survey report, public outreach was achieved through the creation of the task force (McDonough 2013d), which was comprised of about a dozen members including a handful of prominent African American leaders. The project included no process for simply talking to community members about the places that have historic meaning within their community, which could have occurred in any number of ways—through surveys, online forums, or community meetings. Oral histories, while time-intensive, would have served as a way to gather information from neighborhood residents who are often disenfranchised in top-down preservation or planning programs (Thomas 2004). CRS could have better engaged the community by focusing on a smaller geographic area, negotiating more flexibility in project outcomes with the funding agency, or giving up less productive methods such as the windshield survey. Meaningful engagement is not just a nicety, it is imperative to future successes in preserving African American (or other underrepresented groups’) heritage. Not embracing true community participation will perpetuate perceptions of preservation as an elitist, non-inclusive endeavor and will likely result in backlash from community leaders and residents.

Focusing on a range of heritage sites, including those with negative connotations or associated with difficult moments in the nation’s past, remains an uphill battle. From the outset, CRS envisioned the project as a community development vehicle (CRS 2012), which resulted in a survey that neglects sites of conflict or distress in Cleveland’s African American neighborhoods. Reminding people about the history of segregation, discrimination, violence, demolition via urban renewal, and poverty is difficult when an underlying goal is to change perceptions about what it means to live and work in the inner city. For instance, civil rights sites were a prominent theme in CRS’s project, but the heritage of civil unrest—as evident in the landscape of the city’s Hough neighborhood, where scars of the 1966 riots remain—was ignored. Furthermore, if a project such as this is to truly help stabilize impoverished neighborhoods, preservationists need to be more explicit about community benefits and communicate those benefits to city and community leaders and the general public. In other words, is there tourism potential? The ability to secure federal and/or state tax credits? Designated loan pools or funding for rehabilitation? Preservationists also need to constantly be reflexive practitioners, making a concerted effort to answer these questions themselves on a case-by-case basis. In other words, it is unproductive to make blanket statements that communities will benefit from historic sites without first understanding (ideally from the community’s perspective) what benefits are needed and then determining if and how preservation can contribute.

**CONCLUSION**

The Cleveland Restoration Society’s Landmarks of Cleveland’s African American Experience project provides an ideal case study of contemporary efforts to identify, survey, and document urban African American heritage sites. The project was an important step in preserving the complex heritage of Cleveland’s African
American community. CRS spent the first year of the project convening a task force, establishing project goals, completing 148 Ohio Historic Inventory forms, and writing a summary survey report. After encountering challenges to the initial intent of securing national or local designations, CRS shifted its emphasis to heritage education. The organization is exploring the purchase and installation of Ohio Historical Markers for select sites and launched a public education campaign entitled Know our Heritage. To date, CRS has published six online articles (also disseminated through their mailing list) about the Great Migration, the black church, the Jewish–African American connection, community leaders, arts and culture, and the civil rights movement (CRS 2014).

In Cleveland, as in other cities, the confluence of race, class, poverty, and urban decline makes preserving urban African American heritage a pressing concern. CRS found that redevelopment, neglect, or demolition threatened a majority of surveyed properties. The twenty-first-century foreclosure crisis has exacerbated the legacy of twentieth-century urban decline. Today, widespread demolition is not only probable, it is happening, and the opportunity to preserve the significant, tangible heritage of the city’s African American community may soon be gone. It is thus imperative for preservationists to reflect upon their practices, engage local communities, and make sound arguments for the preservation of these under-recognized and threatened historic resources.

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REFERENCES


The task force included prominent African American leaders in Cleveland, including Councilman Jeffrey Johnson (representing the Glenville neighborhood), Jennifer Coleman (the chairwoman of the City’s Landmarks Commission), Shelley Stokes-Hammond (daughter of former US Congressman Louis Stokes), scholars, community leaders, ministers, and others. The task force was chaired by Brady Lewis, a long-time leader in Cleveland’s African American community and an Honorary Life Trustee of the Cleveland Restoration Society.

6  OHI forms include basic property information and require at least brief paragraphs describing a property’s architectural features and historic significance. The forms do not constitute official designation at any level, but can serve as the basis for future National Register nominations.


8  All of the surveyed neighborhoods are within the city of Cleveland, except for Ludlow, which includes areas in both Cleveland and Shaker Heights, an inner-ring suburb. There were three sites identified via historical research that are in neighborhoods that were not surveyed (Slavic Village, Downtown, and Ohio City).

9 In reaction to the increasingly fast-paced racial turnover in Cleveland’s east-side neighborhoods and the start of such transition in adjacent inner-ring suburbs such as Shaker Heights, the Ludlow Community Association (est. 1957) formed to intentionally and peacefully integrate the neighborhood (McDonough, 2013d).

10 Boddie built his own radio and speaker systems, a record pressing plant in an outbuilding behind the house, and a mobile recording studio that was used by Carl Stokes’s successful mayoral campaign in the late 1960s (McDonough, 2012a).

11 The developments were among the first housing complexes completed by the Great Depression-era Public Works Administration, and the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (est. 1933) was the first official public housing authority in the nation (McDonough 2012g; McDonough 2012j).

12 The Rainey Institute eventually served African American residents as the neighborhood experienced racial turnover.

13 Other examples include the Zion Pentecostal Church in the Corlett neighborhood (Gothic Revival), the Second New Hope Baptist Church in Buckeye-Shaker (Beaux Arts), and the Lee Road Baptist Church in Lee-Miles (Modern).

14 The survey report often comments on these properties’ importance to local history and implies that local designation may be possible, but does not offer concrete recommendations as such.

15 When Flewellen was thirteen years old, he began a collection of African American artifacts, including articles, clipings, and other material culture. During his life, he amassed a collection of about 200,000 items and opened the African American Cultural and Historical Society Museum. The museum operated out of his house from 1953 to 1968 (McDonough 2012c, n.p.).