

# Heritage, History, and Hurston Eatonville within the Preservation Movement

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*"I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America..."*

—Zora Neale Hurston  
*Dust Tracks on a Road*

**T**he historic Town of Eatonville is a community known around the world because of the magnificent prose of charismatic 20th-century writer/folklorist/anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960). Probably, the most significant collector and interpreter of southern, rural, Africa-descended folk life, Hurston is acknowledged as having single-handedly preserved this culture for future generations. It was she who introduced readers to Eatonville, her “native village”; the place she believed to be the cultural prototype for her people’s traditions.

To appreciate Eatonville’s present-day prominence, a quick history lesson is in order. Established in 1887, about 10 miles northeast of Orlando, the town is an example of a “race colony,” an independent, planned community, intentionally populated by people of African descent. Though Eatonville’s founding came as a result of amicable circumstances—white men were willing to sell land to black men who had the money to buy it, in most other cases, “race colonies” emerged as a result of extreme racial hostility and violence.

Recall that during Reconstruction (1865–1876), federal troops served as guarantors of safety for newly-emancipated and enfranchised blacks living in the South. However, with the election in 1876 of Rutherford B. Hayes to the presidency, federal troops were withdrawn. Subsequently, the black population experienced a societal-wide effort at resubjugation—southern

legislatures passed a series of laws known collectively as the Black Codes: former slaves who had acquired land lost it due to actions taken by unscrupulous whites; and the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist, terrorist organization became the dominant force of intimidation throughout the region.

In this environment, a number of thoughtful blacks believed that the only way their people could realize full enfranchisement and protection under the law was to establish their own communities and become self-governing. Thus, between 1887 and 1914, literally hundreds of these settlements sprang up, scattered throughout the South, Southwest, and West. Mt. Bayou, Mississippi; Nicodemus, Kansas; Boley, Oklahoma; Allensworth, California are all towns whose existence came as a result of race colonists’ efforts.

Today, only a handful of these 19th-century black towns exist. By the end of World War I, most had succumbed to the triple threat of lack of sufficient water to sustain agriculture, no viable means of maintaining a local economy, and hostile conduct on the part of encroaching development.

Eatonville, on the other hand, not only survived, but became, for those familiar with the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, “sacred ground.” For them, Eatonville, like New York’s Ellis Island, evoked a broad range of emotions and attachments because “the place” had become a repository of historical experiences.

This record notwithstanding, the tiny town of 2,500 had fallen upon hard times. In 1960, the interstate highway system (I-4) had cut the town in half, separating neighbors on the east side of town from those on the west side. In 1967, Eatonville received another blow with the loss of its high school. Like its counterparts throughout the South, Orange County Public Schools district downgraded Eatonville’s academic high school to a vocational/alternative education center, busing into the community unsuccessful students from around the district, while

busing Eatonville's students to another city's high school. This action was particularly hurtful.

Since 1895, Eatonville had been home to the Hungerford Normal and Industrial School. A private boarding facility, Hungerford received its first teachers from Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and had been modeled on that school: students received training in industrial and liberal arts as well as the social graces. The curriculum insured that graduates would become productive citizens, able to earn a living, while at the same time, prepared with the necessary social skills. Hungerford graduates had become doctors, teachers, preachers, bricklayers, and cabinetmakers, but with the new "alternative education" approach, Eatonville would be forced to house a school where students were not actually expected to graduate.

Finally, in 1987, the Orange County Board of County Commission administered what seemed to be the town's *coup de grâce*—in a unanimous decision, the five-member body passed a resolution authorizing the five-laning of Kennedy Boulevard, the two-lane road which is Eatonville's main street. By the spring of 1989, the road improvement project was to have been completed. Had this governmental action not been contested, Eatonville would have lost its historic character and would have suffered the fate of countless other traditional African-American communities.

Looking back on the past decade, there is little to doubt that Eatonville has faced major challenges, significant among them being its efforts to attain "standing" within the mainstream preservation movement. Those persons who came together in 1987 to form The Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. (P.E.C.), though accomplished in their professions/various walks-of-life were, when it came to historic preservation, a part of "the great unwashed;" the uninitiated. Reflecting on that period, it is equally clear that Eatonville preservationists became activists during the time when turbulent discussions were taking place within the mainstream preservation community. How, for example, in practical terms, was historic preservation going to treasure the many "...[properties that] are associated with events that have

made significant contribution to the broad pattern of our history?" If, in another instance, worthy historic preservation projects are defined as those where there remains existing built environment, does this mean, ipso facto, that those projects where there is no/little built environment remaining are unworthy?

Such questions have not been idle speculation. For Eatonville, where almost all of its 19th-century structures no longer exist, the "significant = built environment" formula would not provide a mechanism to validate the community's place in America's history.

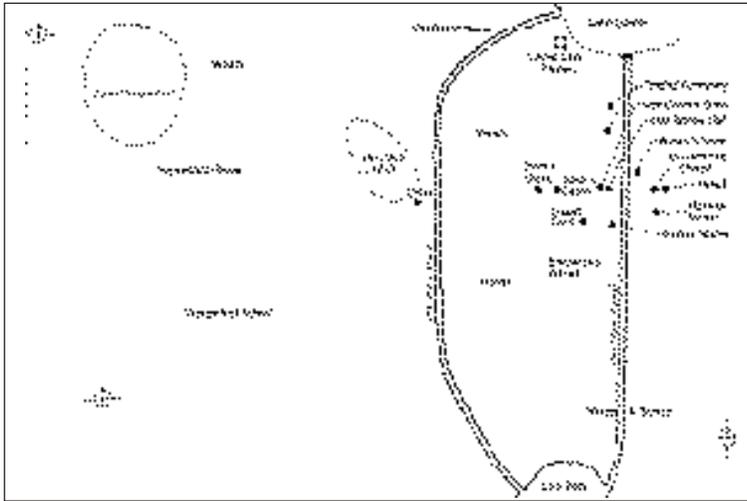
Though today Eatonville has a historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places; is now a Certified Local Government; has a functioning historic preservation board; and will have had installed, by the publication of this article, an "Eatonville Heritage Trail"—all initiatives possible only with the full support of the State's Division of Historical Resources, the fact remains that these accomplishments could not have taken place 10 years ago.

Over time, changes, some subtle, others more obvious, have paved the way for Eatonville to assume its rightful place within the preservation movement.

Several of these changes deserve recognition. Certainly, the constant critical attention which Zora Neale Hurston receives is a circumstance in Eatonville's favor. Hurston has become "required reading" in undergraduate curricula around the nation; and, increasingly, high school students are exposed to her, not only in advanced placement and international baccalaureate programs, but also in standard 11th and 12th grade English classes. What Eatonville's daughter has brought to her hometown, then, is an "instant recognition" factor: Eatonville has become a permanent feature of our intellectual psyche.

*This 1950s-era photograph of Eatonville reflects an organized business community and civic pride. Photo courtesy Louise M. Franklin.*





The Eatonville Heritage Trail represents the most recent evolution of historic preservation activities in Eatonville, where tourists are attracted to the arts, humanities, and heritage issues. Photo courtesy the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc.

Another Hurston-related benefit to preservation efforts in Eatonville has been the annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities. Organized by The Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community and first presented in 1990, the Hurston Festival has three objectives:

- to celebrate the life and work of Hurston;
- to celebrate the historic significance of Eatonville;
- to celebrate the cultural contributions Africa-descended persons have made to the United States and to world culture.

This three-and-a-half day, multi-disciplinary event, featuring public talks, cultural arts events, curriculum-based/hands-on activities for students, pre-K to grade 12, theater productions, juried arts exhibitions, a street festival of the arts, and more has attracted some 500,000 visitors in its 10 years of existence. Because the festival has been developed in five-year cycles, there is an organizing principle at work, which allows for a systematic consideration of each festival's theme, thereby providing visitors with an opportunity to explore the subject matter from a multi-disciplinary vantage.

Though Eatonville preservationists decided to present the festival in order to educate the public about Historic Eatonville and the then little-known (in central Florida) author; as fate would have it, their initiative would enjoy perfect timing. Within five years of the festival's start, the travel and tourism industry would identify and begin to focus upon a phenomenon it called "ecotourism," "cultural tourism," and more recently, "heritage tourism." Eatonville could demonstrate already its ability to attract the tourist interested in the arts and humanities and in heritage issues. If, by the year 2000, the travel and tourism indus-

try would be the largest industry in the United States, and if the travelers identified as this niche market would account for the greatest increase of dollars spent, then certainly the Eatonville preservationists could advocate, more forcefully still, that for Historic Eatonville, "Preservation = \$\$\$."

A third key change which has taken place over the past decade and which has allowed for the establishing of an environment whereby Eatonville's history could be valued is the "changing of the guard" within the ranks of preservation professionals. What this has meant, pragmatically, is that better informed, enlightened professionals have assumed key management positions. This new class has had the ability to ascertain, for example, if an Eatonville district could be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. During earlier times, it would not have been uncommon for an Eatonville preservationist to be told, "You people don't have anything worth preserving in Eatonville anyway." Such a statement, issuing forth from the smiling lips of a kindly "preservation professional" produces a chilling effect. This pronouncement becomes especially reprehensible, however, when it is recognized that had the codger kept up with his research, he could have responded to his own spurious comment.

Yes, changing times have meant a marked improvement in Eatonville's position within the mainstream preservation movement. After a decade of work, the foundation had been laid for serious and exhaustive study of this community and its traditions. There is tremendous promise for this small town. The way is actually open for the world to see a model at work: an Africa-descended community using its rich heritage and literary resources to revitalize its economy, rebuild its educational infrastructure, and demonstrate the universal appeal that culture holds.

When The Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community incorporated in 1987, it proclaimed itself a "21st century model for historic preservation and civic involvement." Now, 12 years later, after having accomplished almost all of its initial objectives, P.E.C. looks to its next decade and rolls up its organizational sleeves, declaring it is "working to develop Historic Eatonville into one of America's premier heritage communities."

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