



Clockwise from top: Sign and tombstone at God's Little Acre, a colonial African American cemetery in Newport, RI, both photos by Leigh Schoberth; Sweet Water Foundation, Chicago, IL; and the home of John and Alice Coltrane in Dix Hills, NY, photo by Robert Hughes

Preserving Traces and Remnants of a Gardening Past

By Brent Leggs and Lawana Holland-Moore

African Americans have always gardened.

Our cultural identity was once inextricably tied to soil, to earth, and to designing and manicuring agricultural landscapes stamped with the marks we made upon them. Blackness was born in the South to feed and sustain a nation's thirst for power and independence. It manifested in the form of Black hands and bodies forced to toil in the land. Black hands coaxed seeds reaching for sunlight, and as the seeds bloomed into colorful new life, so did our ancestors' creativity and innovation. You will find traces and remnants of this cultural memory in unexpected ways and places.

Our memories are real and personal. Memories of Kentucky and being six years old in grandmother's lush garden with towering and haunting sunflowers. In another moment and garden, the smell of Dad's organic herb, pepper, and tomato blossoms, which mesmerized honey bee and person alike. Memory travels north where rose bushes cultivate deeper admiration of a beloved relative lost. Then, a flash of great-great uncle's smile while at family land in Virginia where magnificent cherry, apple, and walnut trees planted by ancestors over 100 years ago still bear fruit for their descendants and dark, sweet, muscadine grapes grow plump on their vine. These places and stories might not be historic, but the legacies they represent contain profound value and signify countless other examples of this nature and heritage relationship. As professionals working in the historic preservation field for some time, we have found that the recognition and preservation of historic African American places is often linked to legacies and memories such as these.

Through the work that we do at the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, we preserve and protect American legacies—landscapes and buildings that tell overlooked stories of a culture fundamental to the nation itself. Too often, the historic imprint of Black people has been rendered invisible in urban and rural communities, but that is not to say important Black sites have been totally ignored. To be sure, significant sites associated with African American history are formally recognized and serve as permanent reminders about our ancestors and their journey in America.

For instance, God's Little Acre, an African American Colonial-era cemetery in Newport, RI; public parks such as Stuart Nelson Park in Paducah, KY; and private ones, like the three-acre park currently being designed at the John and Alice Coltrane home in Dix Hills, NY, will showcase what happens when creativity and nature harmonize. In Chicago, the Sweet Water Foundation has reactivated and transformed once vacant city blocks into The Commonwealth—a community gathering space and campus embodying the concept of "regenerative community development." The Commonwealth creates employment and educational opportunities to learn more about urban agriculture and

Nothing is more beautiful than the loveliness of woods before sunrise.

—George Washington Carver

includes a two-acre community garden that nourishes more than 200 residents a week. In Bishopville, SC, a 400-plant topiary garden showcases the artistry and creativity of its African American creator, Pearl Fryar. All of these places exemplify how African American spaces—whether commemorative, public, or personal—are important to our shared past, present, and future, compelling us to reflect upon what more those spaces can be.

We must think about and redefine what it means to garden and who contributes to it. Whether it's an individual nurturing lush houseplants in an urban apartment, communities coming together in neighborhood gardens, or a family taking pride in well-tended flowerbeds and carefully trimmed shrubbery, gardens and the land connect us to a part of our culture and nature that passes forward memory and traditions. Agricultural gardening, especially, represents a through-line spanning centuries of tangible and intangible heritage. Cultural heritage sites that bring forward this African American narrative serve a crucial role in telling the country's overlooked garden history. These are connections to our past, and it is our responsibility to ensure that those sites—and the natural elements and landscapes that are so intrinsically a part of them—are celebrated for generations to come, so all Americans can share in their inspiration and joy.

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