

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

## Celebrating Black Communities and Their Fight for Environmental Justice

The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice celebrates Black History Month in recognition of the struggles, sacrifices, and achievements that have brought us to this moment in time when racial equity is a goal shared by people of different races and backgrounds, from grassroots community organizations to the [President of the United States](#). We pay special tribute to the following historic Black communities in the Gulf Coast Region whose vision for future generations drives their fight today for environmental justice and equitable climate solutions:

- Africatown – Mobile, AL
- Handsboro/Mississippi City, Magnolia Grove, North Gulfport, The Quarters and Soria City – Gulfport, MS
- Lower Ninth Ward – New Orleans, LA
- Pleasantville – Houston, TX
- Wedgwood, Rolling Hills, Olive Heights – Pensacola, FL

### AFRICATOWN – Mobile, AL

The people who founded Africatown were kidnapped and brought by force to America in July of 1861 on the Clotilda, the last known slave ship. On board were approximately 100 Africans ages 2 – 24. In 1866, after the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of Black people, many of those who survived the Clotilda and slavery came together to build a community for themselves that they called Africatown, located along the Mobile River in Mobile, Alabama. They built the Mobile County Training School, the first accredited public high school for Black students. Years later, with the growth of industrial development in the South, Africatown became the target of large toxic facilities that have contaminated the land and continue to pollute the community to this day. The recent discovery of the Clotilda in 2019 has brought greater awareness of the Africatown community, its unique history, and present-day struggle for environmental justice.

Being on the register of National Historic Places is not enough to keep Africatown from facing a daily battle against environmental racism and industrial encroachment. Leading the charge to protect and preserve Africatown is the organization Clean,



Healthy, Educated, Safe and Sustainable (CHESS) Community. CHESS is a partner in the HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium and Gulf Water Justice Project. In these collaborations, CHESS and community members created a research-to-action plan focused on reducing toxic industrial pollution. The group is leading community efforts to create an Africatown Safe Zone aimed at establishing a land use policy that preserves and values the Africatown community.

“The documented fact of the Clotilda slave ship, the sacrifice made by the founders of Africatown, and the work we have done with the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice to research and document the pollution and its harmful impacts on our health have strengthened our fight for environmental justice, which is a fight for our future.” – Joe Womack, Executive Director, CHESS.



The Clotilda, the last-known slave ship in the US, was discovered in May 2019 in a remote area of the Mobile River. Photo Credit: Master Shooter, via Wikimedia

As we celebrate Black History Month, we recognize these historical highlights of Africatown:

- Africatown was established as a community in 1866 by the survivors of the last known slave ship named the Clotilda. They were brought by force to Alabama for enslavement in 1861.
- Emancipated after the Civil War, the survivors saved money they earned from their labors to purchase the land from the Meaher Family.
- Before the Civil War, the Meaher family were slaveowners in Mobile, Alabama. Timothy Meaher, the family

patriarch, entered a bet in which he staked money on kidnapping and transporting Africans to the US, which was a violation of US law.

- Federal prosecutors were unsuccessful in charging Timothy Meaher and William Foster, who was the captain of the Clotilda, with the crime of illegal importation of slaves because they could not find the Clotilda. Both men were acquitted.

- In the 1880s, the founders of Africatown and their descendants opened a school that operated in a church. They later built the first accredited public high school for Black students that they named the Mobile County Training School.

- The Clotilda, a schooner, was discovered in May 2019 where it had been buried under 9 feet of sediment at the bottom of a remote area of the Mobile River.

- \* The Clotilda, a schooner, was discovered in May 2019 where it had been buried under 9 feet of sediment at the bottom of a remote area of the Mobile River.

---

## HANDBORO/MISSISSIPPI CITY, MAGNOLIA GROVE, NORTH GULFPORT, THE QUARTERS AND SORIA CITY – Gulfport, MS

Gulfport is home to the Black communities of Handsboro/Mississippi City, Magnolia Grove, North Gulfport, The Quarters, and Soria City. These communities are the birthplaces of John Robinson, who is known as the Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, and stellar voting rights activist Stacey Abrams. Civil rights leader Dr. Dorothy Heights came to the aid of Black families to establish in North Gulfport a remarkable subdivision of single-family ranch-style homes that the families designed, helped to build, and own. The Forest-Heights subdivision bears her name.

Black families settled the communities with a sense of



Dr. Dorothy Height (1912 – 2010)

living in harmony with natural wetlands and the Turkey Creek waterway, where some residents were baptized. The deep connection of families to the environment fuels the work of EEECHO. EEECHO is the acronym for

Education, Economics, Environmental, Climate and Health Organization.

EEECHO is a partner in the HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium and the Gulf Water Justice Project, which has guided the group and community members in creating their own research-to-action agenda. This agenda focuses on racial equity in flood protection and wetland preservation. EEECHO is working with the Consortium's support to stop a proposed project by the state Port Authority at Gulfport which would create the risk of contaminating waterways that flow through Black neighborhoods with arsenic and lead. As we celebrate Black History Month, we recognize these North Gulfport historical highlights:

- Forest Heights is the first African American residential neighborhood developed in the 1960s by President John F. Kennedy administration's Turnkey 3 Program. Part of the neighborhood's name is dedicated to Dr. Dorothy Height, a civil rights icon and the longest serving president of the National Council of Negro Woman. She championed the participation of Black families in the federal home ownership program in which the key to a new home would turn three times from the federal government to the developer and then to the homeowner. The families contributed to planning the design of their neighborhood as well as the home design and construction plans. They also contributed sweat equity by taking part in building their homes.





• Gulfport native Stacey Abrams is the first woman to lead either party in the State of Georgia General Assembly and the first African American to lead in the Georgia House of Representatives. Her campaign for Governor in 2018 mobilized millions of new voters in Georgia and brought national condemnation of the tactics aimed at suppressing Black voters. Ms. Abrams built an organization dedicated to voting rights and

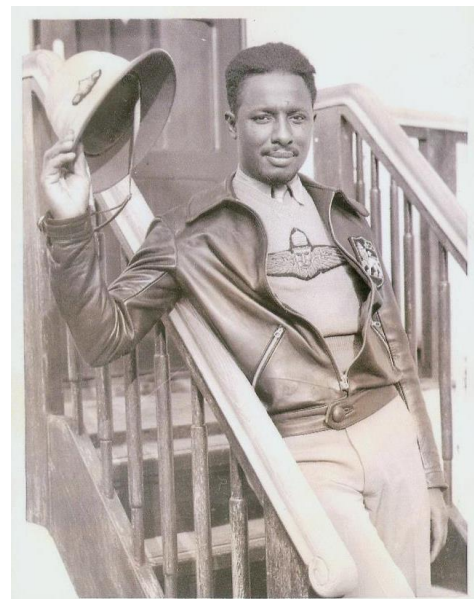
free and fair elections called Fair Fight. She is rightly credited for leading organizing efforts that resulted in a record number of registered voters in Georgia electing U.S. President Joe Biden and U.S. Senators Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff.



Stacey Abrams

• John Charles Robinson grew up in Gulfport. He dreamed of being an airplane pilot when he first saw a float-equipped biplane. He completed his education in mechanical engineering at the Tuskegee University in Alabama, but he was denied applying his degree in the field of aviation because of the color of his skin. In this era of Jim Crow, he could get jobs as a janitor or pumping gas, so he did so at the Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical School of Chicago. This was the premiere aviation training center in the US, which had never enrolled a Black student. While cleaning the school building, Mr. Robinson eavesdropped on class instructions and memorized the writings on chalkboards before he cleaned them. He worked his way into being allowed to sit in the back of the classroom and even convinced the school to finally admit him and other Black students. He graduated in 1931 at the top of his class. He returned to his alma mater Tuskegee University to establish an aeronautics program. Mr. Robinson was motivated by Pan Africanism and the independence of

African countries. He answered the call of Ethiopian leader Haile Selassie whose country was invaded by Italian forces led by dictator Benito Mussolini. Mr. Robinson commanded the Ethiopian air force. He realized he could do more at Tuskegee's aeronautics program by training Black pilots who fought valiantly in World War II. Mr. Robinson later returned to Ethiopia which regained its independence. He rebuilt Ethiopia's air force and directed the country's passenger airlines.

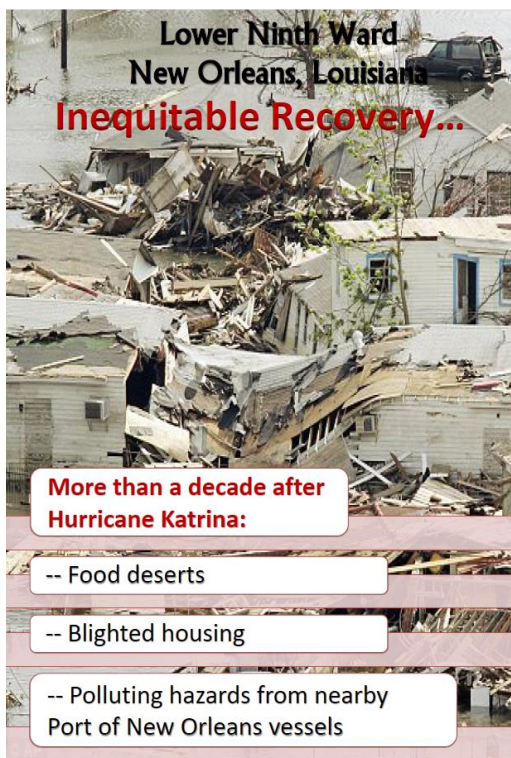


John Charles Robinson (1903 – 1954)

---

## LOWER NINTH WARD – New Orleans, LA

As we celebrate Black History Month, we recognize New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, where the fight for justice has been long and hard, yet the people understand that theirs is a legacy worth sustaining. We pay respect to the free Black people who created a culturally significant neighborhood more than 160 years ago. The Lower Ninth Ward is the home of civil rights activism in New Orleans led by African American residents who fought to end racially segregated public education and protested their exclusion from city services. It is the birthplace of music legend Fats Domino, poet Kalamu ya Salaam, jazz musician Kermit Ruffins, and NFL player Marshall Faulk. Until Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Lower Ninth Ward had one of the highest rates of African American homeownership in the United States.



The Lower Ninth Ward has been subjected to the environmental injustice of the Industrial Canal and ongoing efforts by the US Army Corps of Engineers and the New Orleans Port Authority to widen it. The community was devastated by levee failure during Hurricane Katrina and struggles under inequitable disaster recovery that unjustly denied the return of thousands of displaced residents.

As a partner in the HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium Partner and the Gulf Water Justice Project, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development (CSED) has developed a research-to-action agenda that focuses on healthy air quality and flood protection. In these collaborations, the CSED is forging ahead with monitoring air quality and engaging in policy solutions to reduce flood risk that includes restoration of Bayou Bienvenue, an important waterway in the community that extends to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Sankofa Community Development Corporation (CDC) is a partner in the Gulf Water Justice Project. The project supports the Sankofa CDC to develop the Sankofa Wetland Park as a community asset that provides a space for health and wellness and climate resilience as a green infrastructure improvement in the Lower Ninth Ward.

"At a time when Black people were not welcome in most New Orleans neighborhoods as homeowners, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward became a significant community that acquired national recognition as the largest community of Black homeownership per capita. It is very important to recognize that our belief in community engagement and environmental science dates back to our history that leads the way to current community development that emphasizes the importance of equitable public policy on climate resilience as we know it today!" -- Arthur Johnson, CEO, Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development.

---

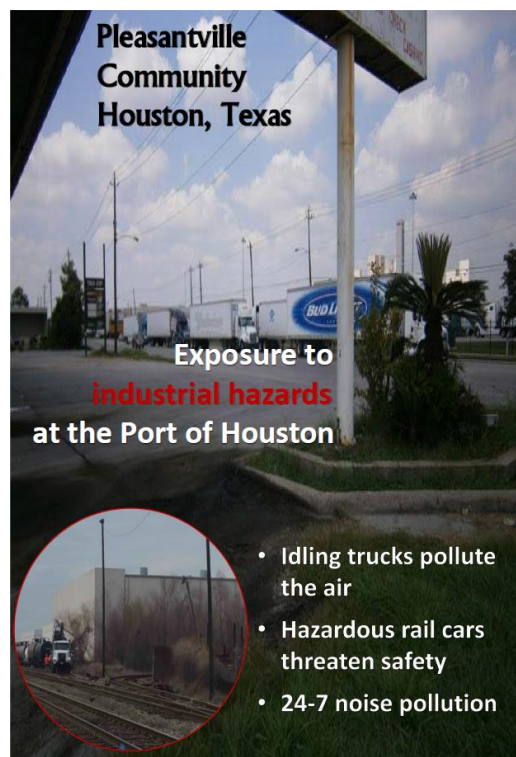
## PLEASANTVILLE – Houston, TX

The Pleasantville neighborhood in Houston was established in 1948 and attracted a wave of African American residents because it was one of the first areas where they could legally own a home in the Jim Crow era. Neighbors were teachers, doctors, engineers, barbers, small business owners, postal workers, cooks, and lawyers. They took great pride in their community. They formed the Pleasantville Civic Club League (which is still in existence today) and the Garden Club, among many other community organizations, that continuously worked to improve the area. The collective power of neighbors as a unified force in the 259<sup>th</sup> voting precinct was cause for the nickname given to the Pleasantville as “the mighty 259.”

Deed restrictions limited the area of Pleasantville to residential use only. However, the lack of zoning in Houston coupled with racist decisions on land use surrounding the neighborhood allowed for the encroachment of industrial facilities within close proximity to Pleasantville. Worse yet, was the decision to route the I-610 highway along the eastern border of Pleasantville which ushered in more industrial sites, including chemical plants, as well as continuous toxic air emissions from vehicle traffic.

In 1995, an industrial warehouse nearby Pleasantville went up in flames which triggered the evacuation of the entire neighborhood. The seven-alarm fire burned uncontrollably for an entire day as firefighters were unable to put out the flames because there was no record identifying all the chemicals stored in the warehouse. Pleasantville residents led the fight for change that resulted in the Hazardous Materials Ordinance to regulate where hazardous materials could be stored.

Pleasantville residents formed Achieving Community Tasks Successfully (ACTS) to fight for environmental justice. As a partner in the HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium and the Gulf Water Justice Project, ACTS and community members created a research-to-action agenda that focuses on flood protection and clean air. ACTS is supported by the Consortium in its efforts to advocate for flood mitigation after the climate-induced Hurricane Harvey in 2017 as well as train residents on health and safety protections from indoor mold that formed as a result of the high floodwaters that inundated their homes. With support from the Consortium and environmental organizations, ACTS launched its own network of air monitors stationed throughout Pleasantville that provide instantaneous readings of pollution levels that are analyzed for potential health impacts. ACTS founder and executive director Bridgette Murray credits the Consortium with educating her and other community members to be citizen scientists, apply a racial equity lens to analyze environmental data, and develop policy solutions.





She notes that the positive change she sees is due to the new collective power that continues the historic beginnings of Pleasantville.

## WEDGEWOOD, ROLLING HILLS, OLIVE HEIGHTS – Pensacola, FL



Members of Wedgewood's NAACP Youth Council stand next to plaque honoring their civil rights work to desegregate downtown Pensacola in 1961. Photo credit: John Blackie, PNJ.

Located in the Florida panhandle, the Black neighborhoods of Wedgewood, Rolling Hills and Olive Heights have a unique part in American history and the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1940s, Black people from Alabama traveled to Pensacola to take part in the rebuilding of the city's downtown that was destroyed by a major hurricane. They settled in an area that they called Olive Heights. By the 1960s an undeveloped portion of Olive Heights became Wedgewood, which was recognized as the first Black middle-class neighborhood whose residents included veterans of World Wars I and II. Rolling Hills followed with new home construction in the early 1970s. Youth from

Wedgewood joined the NAACP Youth Council and took part in nonviolent protest to desegregate lunch counters in the early 1960s. These lunch counters were located in downtown Pensacola, the very place that their parents and neighbors took part in rebuilding years ago.

Beginning in the 1970s, land use decisionmakers allowed companies to excavate soil leaving massive pits in the communities. Construction debris companies made this problem worse by obtaining local permits to fill the pits with waste from construction projects. Other industries followed with rock crushing operations near schools and residents. The communities have been targeted with 11 unlined toxic landfills and 25 years of toxic pollution. Foul odors and severe health problems, including cancer, are suffered by residents. Many residents recognize what has happened to their communities as environmental racism and the next civil rights battle they have to overcome.

As a partner in the HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium and the Gulf Water Justice Project, Unity in the Family Ministry (UFM) and community members have created a research action agenda that focuses on clean air and flood protection centered on racial equity. The Consortium supported UFM to establish the first Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to the Escambia County Board of County Commissioners, which held its first meeting in 2021. UFM executive director Dr. Calvin Avant chairs the committee.



### Toxic Landfills and Burrow Pits



“Our American dream of healthy and safe neighborhoods where Black families can thrive was turned into an American nightmare of toxic air and frequent flooding brought on by climate change. To fight for environmental justice, you need to change policies that disregard the science and the reality of what we experience as frontline communities. We now have strong Consortium partners and a direct line to county commissioners to advance policy solutions that can improve our communities.” – Dr. Calvin Avant, Executive Director, UFM.