

HOBSON CITY-UNC HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROSPECTUS

Alberta C. McCrory, Mayor
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Only 50 - 60 African American towns were legally incorporated municipalities by the end of the 19th century. These incorporated towns were located in nineteen states in the lower forty eight; eight southern, and eleven northern states. At least twenty four towns were located in southern states; and at least twenty six were located in northern states. Hobson City, Alabama is one of fewer than twenty five incorporated African American towns remaining in the United States. Traces of others have been gerrymandered, demolished, built over, and sold into anonymous ownership to avoid acknowledgment of African American heritage and achievement. Today it is rare to be able to identify the original boundaries of a 19th or early 20th century African American community. Documentation, which cannot be disputed by argument or evidence, exists to verify the original, and evolving extent of Hobson City.

The act of incorporating an all-Black town in Calhoun County, Alabama during a time of intense racial tension and violence was a heroic act. Not individual heroism, but collective, or mass, heroism. Within the town limits the founding residents, and visitors, laid claim to civil rights denied by southern "Black Codes" for generations:

- Right to vote in public elections
- Right to hold public office
- Right to buy, hold and own land
- Right to move/travel and assemble in a public place
- Right to choose one's profession

Hobson City opened opportunities for itself and other people of color within a radius of several counties. *The New York Times* newspaper reported on the town founding thirty eight days after it was incorporated in 1899. Hobson City's first mayor, Mr. S.L. Davis, made a presentation to the National Negro Business League on "building a successful Negro town" in Boston, Massachusetts in 1900. In 1902 Dr. Booker T. Washington wrote an article naming Hobson City as an exemplary town with "quality houses". The town was featured again in a 1923 edition of Hampton Institute's *Southern Workman Magazine* as "A Model Negro Town". Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport was a noted boogie woogie and blues musician born in Anniston. In 1945 he recorded a musical composition, presumably created years before, entitled "Hobson City Stomp". Hobson City's "town park" was commissioned as soon as the community was incorporated. The Hobson City park is one of the oldest African American public parks in continuous use in the United States. It is a recreational legacy that spans at least 115 years.

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Request for Assistance

The Town of Hobson City requests assistance with the following initiatives:

1. Town Founders and Community Genealogy

Hobson City was chartered in 1899, using the signatures of forty nine registered Black male voters. The town has the names of all of these incorporators. Many of these pioneers remained in the town and played major roles in its evolution and very difficult struggle for survival. Many descendants of the original incorporators still reside in Hobson City. Oral history, church records, veterans records, and detailed census research will play an important role in this phase of the project. The town needs in depth genealogical research on all of the incorporators in order to reconstruct its human and physical history and prepare programs and exhibits for education and cultural tourism. The results of this research will be also used to provide content for the town website and interpretation of physical resources that may be considered for historic landmark designation.

2. Cemetery research, documentation and interpretation

Numerous early residents and descendants of the town incorporators are buried in the Hobson City cemetery. The second step in the genealogy process will be to cross reference the cemetery roster and genealogy of those buried in the cemetery with the list of town incorporators. One of the town residents has compiled a roster of graves in the Hobson City cemetery. The data needs to be digitized for permanent recording and ready access. The results of this research will be also used to provide content for the town website and interpretation of physical resources that may be considered for historic landmark designation.

3. National Register of Historic Places (NR)

In 2009 the entire Town of Hobson City was placed on the Alabama Historical Commission's "Places In Peril" list. As a step toward protecting the community, the Town of Hobson City would like to be nominated and listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Town needs assistance with the necessary historic research and interpretation to meet Federal Secretary of the Interior Standards and Alabama Historical Commission criteria. More than ninety percent of the original town plat is extant within the current town limits of Hobson City, yet none of the town site is included in any local, state or NR historic district.

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3. National Register of Historic Places (NR), continued
Including the original 1899 town plat area in a NR district would document and interpret the important cultural legacies. This would also expand the knowledge and understanding of the variety of resources that are fundamental parts of Hobson City's, and America's heritage.
4. Historic records, documents and artifacts curation and archival preservation
A few years ago Hobson City received a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to preserve the town's heritage. Documents were gathered and presented to the community but digital recording was not produced and permanent archival storage was not arranged. In addition, original town records and documents need to be digitized, restored and permanently housed. All of the documents in the Town Historic Interpretation Room need to be catalogued, conserved and digitized. Several town residents have private collections that need to be catalogued, conserved and digitized.
5. Youth engagement
Several Hobson City organizations and churches that have ongoing youth programs are interested in participating in the historic preservation activities described above. Hobson City and area youth would participate in a series of training, learning activities and cultural tourism programs that significantly expand and explain the relationships between place (land, landscape, structures, sustainable environment), the civic virtues that formed the base of 19th and early twentieth century Black communities across America will be planned and produced.
6. Investigation, Evaluation and Interpretation of Oldest House
The oldest house in Hobson City is still standing. However, the property is overgrown and the house is in eminent danger of deterioration. It is critical that the house be investigated and evaluated to determine the necessary steps for documentation (photographic and measured drawings) or physical preservation. Research of the construction history, including the builder/contractor, should be included. A great deal could be learned about construction materials, methods and techniques even if the house could be systematically demolished. It may be possible to salvage some materials for use in historical and educational exhibits.

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Timetable(s)

The Town would like to produce a series of exhibits that could be displayed for its 2015 Founder's Day (August) activities. The planning and preparation of the exhibits can be used as educational training for the youth and community at large.

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