



Since 1994, the Alabama Historical Commission and the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation have joined forces to sponsor Places in Peril, a program that highlights significant endangered properties. As awareness yields commitment, and commitment yields action, these endangered properties can be saved and returned to their places as treasured landmarks. Places in Peril has helped save many important landmarks that may otherwise have been lost.

2022 Places in Peril

Oscar Merredith Home / Tuscumbia, Colbert County

In 1916, African American entrepreneur Oscar James Merredith purchased the property and constructed a dog-trot log cabin during the difficult times of Jim Crow. The family enclosed the breezeway and added clapboard siding sometime before 1930. At some point the back porch was enclosed creating a lean-to addition to the original space. On the property Mr. Merredith, a successful entrepreneur, was known for his fine orchard, for which people traveled from all over to buy his peaches and blackberries.

Merredith's grandmother, Mattie Reid Napier, was born into slavery at the nearby Belle Mont Plantation in Tuscumbia, Alabama and eventually served as the plantation's cook once she became of age. After emancipation Mattie and her husband continued to work on the Belle Mont Plantation even though they were free people of color

After his death, Mr. Merredith left the property to his heirs and their descendants. He was the grandfather of the current owner, Oscar J. Merredith, who is currently trying to preserve this rare African American resource.

Like many African American resources this home faces some challenges in its preservation. Too little is known about its past inhabitants due the inadequacies of record keeping for African American resources. However, in many African American communities, they have kept their history alive through oral storytelling. The collected oral histories of the Merredith family played a key role in explaining the historical significance of the log house on their property.

The home's front porch roof was damaged by a storm and consequently removed. A modern concrete porch deck is abutting to the main house further creating moisture retention. The Logs visible on the front of the house exhibit substantial water damage.

Battle Ground School / Vinemont, Cullman County

In 1932 Battle Ground School was constructed by Cullman County Board of Education and was named Battle Ground because of a Civil War battle fought on this site in 1863. F. M. and Mary Gray sold the land to the State of Alabama for \$150.00 on August 11, 1931. In 1932, P. E. Moore, Superintendent of Cullman County Schools, allowed the community to donate 63,000 feet of lumber for the project. F. G. Fanning constructed the initial two-room building. Only grades 7-9 were taught for the first school year. Students then transferred to Falkville or Cullman to attend high school. Grades 1-6 were taught at several small one-room schools throughout the community.

In 1939, four classrooms were added, and the building was wired for electricity. In 1947 one of the initial classrooms was converted into a lunchroom. The school closed after the 1967 school year. It was only vacant for one year until the Head Start program opened in 1968. In 1989 the Head Start program ended and the building was used for storage until the Battle Ground Volunteer Fire Department leased it in 2000. In 2004, the Battle Ground School Historical Preservation Society took ownership of a portion of the property. This is when the building was listed in the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.

It is currently used for the storage. It is in a state of disrepair due to deferred maintenance, lack of funds, and vandalism. The Battle Ground School Historical Preservation Society hopes to bring awareness to this unique historical resource to raise grant funds and private donations to secure its long-term preservation.

Eddystone Hotel / Selma, Dallas County

The Eddystone Hotel is in Selma and is down the street from the St. James Hotel. These two hotels were key structures along Water Avenue. The Eddystone Hotel was built in 1855 and has direct ties to the Freedmen's Bureau.

During Reconstruction, the hotel was known as the Florence Hotel. The Freedmen's Bureau was a US government agency that assisted freedmen in the South following the Civil War and operated from 1865 to 1872. The Alabama bureau was led by Wager Swayne, the military governor of Alabama during Reconstruction; he was instrumental in starting Talladega College and other institutions of higher learning for the newly emancipated people.

Although it went by different names, the three-story brick building remained a hotel well into the 1900s. After that, it continued to be used for businesses into the 1990s. The last operational business, a barber shop, closed just a few years ago when the roof began to leak perilously.

The Eddystone Hotel has deferred maintenance, lack of funds, and vandalism. Currently, the old Hotel is missing part of the roof exposing sections of the interior to the elements and causing the inner walls to buckle. Further, this lack of a roof has allowed rain to leak down to the first floor, soaking the plaster ceilings and causing a section of the first-floor ceiling to cave in.

In November 2022, structural documentation of the Eddystone Hotel began, funded by a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This will provide the necessary information to develop a restoration plan.

Freeman Lake Dam / Fayette, Fayette County

This land was provided by Matthew Freeman, a freed enslaved person to his heirs. Joseph Freeman, his grandson, realized the recreational need for African Americans in the Newtonville community and surrounding counties. In 1960, he created Freeman Lake to fill a social and recreational void in the community. He developed the plan, provided the funding, and engaged people in the community to help dig and build the Lake. The Lake is 12 acres and was utilized not only by the community but by people throughout Fayette and other counties.

Freeman Lake is a freshwater lake that is fed by an underground spring with a small branch that leads into it. As such, it never runs dry and is beautiful throughout all seasons. The Dam is an earthen dam that was constructed by men of the community.

Freeman Lake and Dam need complete renovation. Access to the Lake is limited and a new road needs to be cut. The Dam is also in urgent need of repair. It needs to be inspected, trees removed, and dirt brought in to reinforce and strengthen the dam. If the dam failed the lake would empty in less than an hour. Its failure would cause significant environmental damage to the area, killing the fish and natural habitat, surrounding ecological systems, including animals, and flora and fauna, and it would significantly flood the surrounding areas.

The current goal is to restore, renovate, and modernize Freeman Lake. The updated park will feature hiking and biking trails and structures to accommodate meetings, social events, and overnight guests.

Armstrong School / Tuskegee, Macon County

The Armstrong School is significant for its association with education and for its role in the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study in Macon County. In 1900, eight African American tenant farmers united to purchase two acres of land. The schoolhouse was erected behind the church building as well and is located next to the mid-20th-century cemetery.

The Armstrong School was constructed as part of the Tuskegee Rural School Program, the predecessor to the Rosenwald School Program. The Armstrong school opened in c. 1905 and remained in operation until 1954. After it closed the St. Paul congregation regularly used the school building as a multipurpose space for community gatherings and activities such as Sunday School for religious education, a fellowship hall on holidays, and senior citizens' classes.

The church/school also served as a "roundup" site for health officials to meet community members and transport them to Tuskegee or carry out examinations in the farming communities of Macon County. Participants who were a part of the study's control group are buried in the graveyard on site and their descendants are congregants of the church.

The building is in danger of collapsing. The building's walls have become detached, exposing the interior to the elements. The roof is damaged extensively, again exposing the interior to the elements. The brick foundation is also failing, threatening the integrity of the building. Through this listing, Tuskegee University hopes to bring more attention to the Tuskegee Rural School Program.

William Lanford House / Huntsville, Madison County

The William Lanford House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. It is significant for its architecture and its early agricultural history. The house was constructed in 1850 for William Lanford (1797-1881), who moved to Madison County from Louisa County, Virginia, and established himself as a successful land speculator and planter. William married Charlotte F. Fennell in 1832, and the couple had three children before Charlotte died in 1840. After William and his three children moved to the property turned it into a thriving plantation.

According to the US Federal Slave Schedules, Lanford owned several enslaved people and also had 16 slave houses on the property. None remain standing, but the likelihood is high that vestiges survive in the form of archaeological remains. The home passed through the hands of several families until it was sold to the parents of the present owner in 1973.

The 115-acre property sits adjacent to a developing Research Park. The current master plan for the park includes the property in future development plans and extends the boundary of the research park to Indian Creek. The plan shows a major proposed street right-of-way to the west of the house across two of the contributing barns, and the remainder of the property including the house location is divided into six development parcels. In 2007 a parcel immediately east of the William Lanford House was developed and a large three-story office building was constructed. The current property owner has been pressured to sell the property for development purposes.

Epsibeth Missionary Baptist Church / Montevallo, Shelby County

Epsibeth Missionary Baptist Church was founded in 1873, by William Farrington Aldrich, the owner of the Aldrich Coalmines. Aldrich built two churches for the community and gave one of them to the African American community. The church also served as an early school for African American community members.

Only seven pastors have led the Epsibeth congregation over the years. The current pastor, Lorenza Mitchell, has been at Epsibeth for 41 years. During this time the congregation remodeled and added the fellowship hall and central air. The church previously had a pot-belly stove to burn wood to keep the facility warm for the congregation. They also added indoor restrooms, which were previously an outhouse.

Although the church is still active and meets in the original building, Epsibeth has been damaged due to vandalism and deferred maintenance. The doors were compromised and kicked in with force in 2019 and it will take replacement doors to secure the church properly. The weather has also taken a toll on the church. The foundation shifted and has caused cracks in the wall and the ceilings are showing a tremendous amount of damage near the restrooms and kitchen due to a faulty roof. The congregation did complete a partial repair of the roof, but it is still being challenged. The church faces tremendous expenses to make these repairs. The congregation hopes that listing in Places in Peril will bring awareness to this historic church.