

Preserving the Legacy of Civil Rights and Black History



“We can’t just nominate individual sites to the historic register and expect that to have a lasting effect. Instead, we need to find a way to protect and bring life to sites by building the capacity of activists and historians everywhere to make civil rights stories visible.”

—RANDY MASON

Located near Tuskegee University, the Armstrong School was built in 1906 to support education for rural Black children. Amidst ongoing emergency stabilization efforts by students and faculty from Tuskegee University, researchers from Penn’s Center for the Preservation of Civil Rights Sites documented the school’s history and have helped develop a preservation plan for the site.

Spurred by a partnership between [Randy Mason](#) of the [Stuart Weitzman School of Design](#) and Kwesi Daniels of Tuskegee University, Penn’s Center for the Preservation of Civil Rights Sites (CPCRS) aims to amplify, commemorate, protect, and preserve the legacy of civil rights and Black history in the United States through teaching, research, and field projects.

As part of its teaching objective, Mason, a professor in the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation, and Brent Leggs, an adjunct associate professor at the Weitzman School and executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, co-teach the studio course Reckoning with Civil Rights Sites. During its first iteration in Spring 2021, for a final project, students developed conservation plans for Black heritage sites in Alabama and Pennsylvania.

Located near Tuskegee University, the Armstrong School is a one-room schoolhouse designed by Robert R. Taylor, the first known Black architecture school graduate, in 1901, more than a decade before later versions of the same building type were adopted by the Tuskegee Rosenwald Community School program. The Armstrong School is part of the St. Paul Baptist Church and Armstrong School National Historic District. The district exemplifies the early and ongoing relationship between Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and rural Black communities in Macon County to improve education through the construction of schoolhouses and prolonged school terms. Collaborating with students and faculty from Tuskegee University, CPCRS manager [Sarah Lerner](#) documented a more complete history of the school and continues to help develop a preservation plan for the site.

Across the state in Marion, the Perry County Jail was at the center of peaceful voter registration protests that led to the murder of Black veteran and civil rights activist Jimmy Lee Jackson by police officers, which spurred

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Researchers at Penn's Center for the Preservation of Civil Rights Sites and Tuskegee University are collaborating on stabilizing the structure and developing an interpretation plan for the historic Armstrong School.

the Selma to Montgomery march of 1965. Hanna Stark, a recent graduate of Penn's Historic Preservation master's program, drafted a National Register of Historic Places nomination for the jail, conducted archival research, and began drafting a historical narrative about the jail and the events surrounding it.

The Center is also working to preserve Philadelphia's Black heritage. CPCRS is a committed partner in the collaborative effort to save the Henry O. Tanner House located at 2908 W. Diamond St. in the Strawberry Mansion section of North Philadelphia, and transform it into a dynamic hub of community arts and culture activity. Built in 1871 and listed as a National Historic Landmark in 1976, the Tanner House was once deemed by Black scholar Carter G. Woodson as "the center of Black intellectual life in Philadelphia" due to its association with 19th century painter Henry O. Tanner and his influential family of Black Philadelphia excellence. CPCRS is working with the Friends of the Henry O. Tanner House and other local Black cultural workers and preservationists to recognize the persistently undermined value present within Philadelphia's rich historic African-American legacies.

"This project aspires to far more than traditional building preservation and house-museum curation; our partnership seeks to reflect specific ways Black folks have shaped and reshaped the city," says Lerner. "More profoundly, it will grow and sustain a transformative community cultural platform for and by the heart, hands, and imagination of Black folk."

Moving forward, Mason says he wants to make sure that CPCRS research, design proposals, and investments, and the attention garnered by garnered by civil rights stories are not just fragmented but contribute to a bigger narrative.

"We can't just nominate individual sites to the historic register and expect that to have a lasting effect," he says. "Instead, we need to find a way to protect and bring life to sites by building the capacity of activists and historians everywhere to make civil rights stories visible."



Recent Historic Preservation master's graduate Hanna Stark drafted a National Register of Historic Places nomination for Perry County Jail. The site was at the center of peaceful voter registration protests that led to the murder of Black veteran and civil rights activist Jimmy Lee Jackson by police officers, which spurred the Selma to Montgomery march of 1965.

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