



The Fight for Eatonville, the First Official Black Town

Eatonville, Florida was the first Black town in the U.S. to incorporate. Originally thought of as a “test case” to see if Blacks could govern themselves, Eatonville became a model for Black towns that sprung up around the country after the Civil War. The historic legacy of the town now hangs in the balance as development threatens to pave over history. Julian Johnson, founder of [1887 First](#) describes the fight to preserve the town’s rich cultural heritage for future generations and advocating for what is owed to descendants and residents of a town that has long been stifled from reaching its full potential. Reported by Patrice Mosley.

You can follow Julian and his group on TikTok [@1887First](#).

Pamela Kirkland: I am Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer. The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how our country could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and brown citizens. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable, but essential to healing and moving forward. What we know is that reparations are owed to the descendants of the enslaved, and frankly, the bill is past due.

This episode is reported by Patrice Mosley.

Patrice Mosley: Eatonville, Florida is one of the oldest Black towns in the U.S. Founded in 1887, the town sits just outside Orlando. After the Civil War, the formerly enslaved came to Central Florida for work, but white landowners refused to sell them land to live on. Joe Clark and other formerly enslaved Americans acquired 112 acres after convincing two white men to make plots available for Blacks to buy. Eatonville became the first Black town to incorporate. The town had their own post office, their own police department, and their own school. Black families sent their children to the Robert Hungerford Normal and Industrial School, one of the few places in the south that issued diplomas to Blacks. Despite the town's deep resilient roots today, it is struggling to preserve its legacy. The population is still majority Black and celebrates the people who call Eatonville home, but development threatens to pave over history.

Julian Johnson: Our community, we fantasize about Black Wall Street, but Eatonville is that right now. Right? We still have Eatonville. It may not look as glamorous as those did at one time, but it did before.

Mosley: That's Julian Johnson, long time Eatonville resident and founder of 1887 First, the organization at the heart of the movement to preserve Eatonville. I spoke with him

about his grassroots efforts to save the town's rich cultural heritage for the future generations.

Tell me a little bit about Eatonville and how you became an activist.

Johnson:

So I grew up in a family where community was everything. So my parents were always on the front lines helping in the community. So that stuff came like secondhand. It was natural. Eatonville actually started in Maitland. It was first started right around the area called St. John's Hole, which is now Lake Lilly. Most of like the Blacks gathered around that lake and they were in shanties, like Zoran Ne Hurston talks about that in her books. Maitland was first incorporated and had the first Black mayor, and there were white people and Black people who got together in Maitland and they incorporated. There were white people of course who wanted those areas, but there were two white gentlemen, Josiah Eaton and Lawrence Lewis. Lawrence was a northern philanthropist. Josiah, he was really good and close with the Blacks in the area, and that's where they started, like a small little plot for Black people testing it over in Maitland.

So they were testing if these Blacks can govern themselves. They were putting in little plots, houses and everything where they had deed restrictions that they could only sell to another Black person because these white guys knew that there would be somebody that would try to scheme them out of their houses or something and their property. So these were deed restrictions that were put in by these white guys. And then what happened was they was like, "Okay." Once they figured out, they experimented, they figured out this was actually working. These Black folks can, they showed and demonstrated that they can govern themselves.

That's when the land was donated over in the town of Eatonville. And then they helped them incorporate as well, in the time where that was illegal, it wasn't the first Black town and settlement in the country. We were just the first to get our paperwork into the United States government.

Over time, due to racism and different things, that played a factor in the destruction of the community, it still stands to date. And that's what really makes it significant is because we have a strong core on the inside that allows us to really fight for the past and the people that have put their lives on the line to build.

Mosley:

It was the school that became the backbone of the community. Eatonville residents donated land to build the property. Founded in 1889 and modeled after the Tuskegee Institute, the mission of the Hungerford School was to provide top quality, academic and vocational training to Black students.

Johnson:

It was Robert Hungerford Normal and Industrial Vocational School. It was a school where Black students could go and get vocational training in agriculture and learn about things that they're really good at. So Dr. Hungerford, who was a white doctor in the area, he was the one white doctor that would care for Black people.

They donated a portion of the land of the Hungerford property, but it wasn't just them. It was actually a group of townspeople that came together with them and donated those hundred total acres to create that school. So when I say that the school has a direct connection to the people of Eatonville, it means something, right? Because they came out of their own pocket. They came out of their own blood, sweat and tears to educate their children. That's how high it was on the

spectrum here, if we're looking at things, education was on the top of the list to our people, and they just wanted their kids to be educated.

Booker T. Washington came down and that's when they founded the Hungerford School in 1889. And from there, it was a success for the next 30-40 years. Well, by the time they started, people started dying off. They started losing the value. It's the same thing we see today where people die off and their kids just sell a house, right? So I feel like people knew there were outside forces that were plotting on this school, and they knew that this eventually, these heirs and these people who really care will eventually die off. And that's when we would go in and attack, when Orange County Public Schools started to move in.

Mosley: At its height, the campus consisted of 304 acres. By the 1950s, enrollment had declined. Trustees of the school considered selling the property. One proposal to keep the school operating was made by Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune Cookman University. Bethune's plan would've kept Hungerford a private Black boarding school, but following a decision by the State Supreme Court, the sale of the school and its property to the local school board was finalized. Orange County Public Schools transitioned it into a public Black high school, later desegregating it.

In 1974, due to the construction of a highway that divided the Hungerford property, the school district chose to sell a portion of the land that did not include the school. They also sought the removal of a court requirement that the property be used exclusively for educational purposes. The remaining part of the property where Hungerford High School continued to operate, retained the restriction.

After the school district closed the high school in 2009, the district officials began eyeing the land for possible sale.

Johnson: It's always been a, "We don't trust Orange County public school situation," ever since the get go. It's just people forgot about the story. People don't tell the story anymore. There was an agreement that this land must be used for educational purposes only, and that was the agreement that the townspeople knew was in place. So they're like, "Okay, well, they could have it as long as it's for education." And they worked years and years to take that restriction off to where they're just going to sell it off to private developers to build housing for people that aren't from the Eatonville community. So it was a potentially failed operation just waiting to happen, and I just couldn't let that happen on my watch.

Mosley: Located in the Orlando metro area, Eatonville has become an attractive piece of land for developers. In 2020, much to the community's surprise, the school board decided to demolish the high school with little prior notice. The following year, the school board approved a development group's proposed purchase of the site for \$14.6 million.

Johnson: It's prime real estate. It's in a central location. It is right off of the highway. It is neighboring Winter Park, which is a suburb, Maitland, which is another suburb, and then Orlando is right here as well. So there's this little town that's not developed in the midst of everything around it that is developed, right? So Eatonville, to me, it's a diamond gold mine because what we sit on. We sit on an aquifer, people don't even understand like there's a aquifer underneath our town. And people have well pumps in their yards, but nobody uses it. That Hungerford land, people were after that.

Mosley: That bid to develop the land fell through after opposition from town residents, including Julian Johnson. Residents spoke up at town council meetings against the plan moving forward.

Speaker 1: Quite simply, this development will erase this living, thriving historical community.

Speaker 2: For y'all to come and put all this stuff up here and think we as Black people don't be to stay here, shame on yourself.

Speaker 3: We are going to be outnumbered. And I want you guys to vote no.

Mosley: In March 2023, the developer pulled out of the purchase of the site. The school board responded to the decision in a statement saying, "OCPS has decided not to extend the contract or entertain other bids at this time. This decision presents us with a new opportunity to collaborate with the Eatonville community to preserve and celebrate the town's historic and cultural significance as the oldest incorporated Black town in the U.S.."

Karen Castor Dentel: The district was not always a good steward of this property. They did not always have the best interest in what happened. And we have this one last opportunity to do right by it.

Mosley: Karen Castor Dentel is a board member for Orange County Public Schools.

Castor Dentel: All I can do is act in good faith and put aside any ego. I keep talking to members at the school district to, wait, let's wait. Don't come up with any plan. Let's let the town and the folks who are involved take the lead. I don't want to have anyone directing or saying, this is what we prefer because it's not our decision. So I think showing anybody who's paying attention that we're not taking any steps right now. We're on hold, we're waiting. We don't have any timeline.

Mosley: Residents in the small Black town had been calling for Orange County Public Schools to forego the sale of the land to a developer and instead donate the land to the town. Julian Johnson says getting the land back would be the first step. What would be restitution in your eyes for the residents and descendants of Eatonville?

Johnson: First and foremost, the land. The land is one. We need that back. And then it should be honestly payouts. They made a lot of money off of that property, but they also displaced a lot of people. And then they didn't use that money to put it back into the education of the Eatonville children. So they owe us a lot. They stopped us from thriving as a town. If you are holding 300 acres of land, what could have been done? What if Dr. Bethune would've been able to take over that? Would Eatonville have been a wrecking force in the area when it comes to trade relationships, right? We're talking dairy, vegetables, different type of farms. So would we have been one of those meccas in those hubs when it comes to agriculture?

They stopped us from producing and creating jobs. This is years and years and years of stopping somebody from doing something, from getting ahead and becoming independent on their own. We need them to rely on us when we never asked for that. So for me, it's about the land, but it's also about cash out payments to those families, descendants who have been here as well because you have

stopped everybody from progressing. All of that land, nobody was able to benefit from the town of Eatonville from that land that was just gone stolen and sold off. We'll take the land back. I'm cool with that. But anything else? Yeah, we want it all.

Mosley: The Orange County Public School Board has said they will not donate the land to residents, claiming legal complications.

Castor Dentel: By law and the statutes prevent us from now giving away government property or school property in particular. We'd have to find a fair market value for that property. We have to get that fair market value. So I've talked to the attorneys in the school district looking for what are our opportunities, what are our options for how we are going to convey this property? And we're still looking at that, but I know that one of them is not going to be just to donate the land.

Mosley: I asked Julian why he thinks it is essential to preserve Black towns like Eatonville.

Johnson: Because I believe that it is the closest thing that we have here from something like Africa. We don't have Africa right here, but if we have that Black town where you see it, you could walk on the same side of the street and you see somebody that looks like you or you're living next to people that look like you don't have to worry about anything. When Black people move into any other neighborhood, you either getting the police called on you, you got people really staring at you. So the importance of having your own is extremely important.

It's natural to be around your own people. Naturally, humans gravitate towards people that look like them. So you feel more comfortable in a town like that. So it is extremely important to preserve these type of locations for the advancement of Black people, African people here in the United States. It's the only way we can tell our own story and can control our narrative is by having and governing our own ourselves and having our own something that we can call our own.

Mosley: While the development of the Hungerford property is on hold, Julian says it's more important than ever to revitalize Eatonville before it's too late.

Johnson: For me, I look at it like, hey, let's all work together and let's save what we do have, right? Let's control what we can control. If it's been gone, it's been sold as real estate deals. You can't go back and unchange that. And this is where we made a post on Instagram, our VP of marketing and Brandon. She was like, hey, people fantasize about Tulsa and Greenwood when it's been gone for over a hundred years, but we have Eatonville still. Let's all work together and let's focus there in Eatonville and create what was already set with the blueprints from Tulsa, from all of these other places. Since we already had a land, you're not going back to get the land. You may get some restitution financially, but land is the most important thing because if you can keep that land, you can make that money back and you can continuously make that money back.

You can lease that land out. You can do different. You can put people on a hundred-year leases. You can put corporations on a hundred-year leases. As long as you're controlling the land, anything is possible. So like America became America because they were fighting over land. Every revolution is fought over land. And then as we're working those angles of getting restitution, we could put the money back into these towns. Not even just Eatonville all of the rest of the Black towns that are still standing today. If we get the restitutions from the other ones, let's invest into these towns and grow from there. Then we can go and buy

land elsewhere and do whatever we need to do. Keep going to get your restitutions, but let's also work together and bring the money to the places that are still standing today.

Mosley:

After the Civil War, there were just under a hundred all Black towns in the U.S., most are long gone. Groups like the Association to Preserve the Eatonville community are proposing to use the land so others can learn more about the history of the town. The Zora Festival celebrating Eatonville's own Zora Neale Hurston is a tourist attraction, but they hope that they can find ways to encourage economic development without losing what makes Eatonville special.

Eatonville was one of the first Black towns in the country and hopefully will not be the last.

Pamela Kirkland:

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Still Paying the Price is made possible by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation and is an original production of LWC Studios. Juleyka Lantigua is the show's creator and executive producer. I'm Pamela Kirkland, the series co-editor. Patrice Mosley reported this episode, Kojin Tashiro is our sound designer and mixed this episode. Paulina Velasco is our managing editor. Michelle Baker is our associate producer. Amanda DeJesus is our production intern. Lindsay Hood is our fact-checker. Thank you for listening.

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