Waves of Change: An Analysis of Protective Measures at Historically African American Beaches and Their Application to American Beach, Florida

Katie Elizabeth Martin
Clemson University, kheuertz@gmail.com

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WAVES OF CHANGE:
AN ANALYSIS OF PROTECTIVE MEASURES AT HISTORICALLY AFRICAN
AMERICAN BEACHES AND THEIR APPLICATION TO
AMERICAN BEACH, FLORIDA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in
Historic Preservation

by
Katie Elizabeth Martin
May 2018

Accepted by:
Dr. Barry Stiefel, Committee Chair
Amalia Leifeste
Kristopher King
The objective of this thesis was to analyze the protective strategies and tools that are available to preserve the historic character of African American beaches across the country. This thesis looks at protective measures available to address the three greatest threats to historic African American beaches: loss from neglect, loss of character from incompatible development, and loss from natural disasters. The potential protective measures were then analyzed to see which measures would be applicable to the protection of American Beach; a historically African American Beach in Florida. The most feasible options for American Beach were taken into consideration and presented as recommendations.
DEDICATION

To the residents of American Beach.

May you always have this place to call home.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all of those people who have helped me through this process. I appreciate you more than you know. Thank you to my thesis committee: Dr. Barry Stiefel, Amalia Leifeste, and Kristopher King. Your guidance and opinions helped push me to write a better thesis. Thank you to Taco Pope, Director of the Nassau County Planning Department for all of the information regarding American Beach and Nassau County. Thank you to Marsha Dean Phelts and Tony Nelson, for your wonderful stories and insight into life at American Beach. Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my family for your support and patience with me through this process, especially my husband. Chris, your encouragement, love, and understanding during these last two years mean the world to me.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From the late 19th century until the end of Jim Crow, there were few beaches African Americans could enjoy in the United States without fear of discrimination. During this time, several coastal African American communities were founded and developed to create a place for vacationing and relaxation. The objective of this thesis was to analyze what protective strategies and tools are available to preservationists and communities seeking to preserve the historic character of African American beaches across the country. This thesis looks at those protective measures available to address the three main threats to historic African American beaches: loss from neglect, loss of character from incompatible development, and loss from natural disasters.

With regard to neglect, the history of these coastal communities is very similar. As soon as segregation ended, and African Americans were free to vacation where they pleased, they stopped frequenting these once lively communities. As for the loss of character from insensitive development, real estate trends and changes resulting in “coastal capitalism” were examined to see what has occurred with regard to the economic impacts on these communities. As for natural disasters and/or erosion, coastal management practices were examined to see the best ways to prepare these communities, or how best to relieve them after a disaster.

After addressing the threats to these communities, several of these historic beaches were researched with regard to their location, history, significance and current status. The protective measures that are currently in place were analyzed to see the range of strategies being used by these communities. Then these strategies were reviewed to see which ones would be beneficial to American Beach. As will be discussed in detail later, American Beach is located in northeast Florida, and is one of a handful of the last remaining intact African American coastal communities in the United States. It is especially important to the state of Florida because it is one of the last African American coastal community in the state. To be able to fully understand
the importance of this community, the history of American Beach was researched with regard to its origins. Then the most feasible options for the protection of American Beach were taken into consideration and presented as several recommendations.

Chapter 2 discusses the three most common threats to African American coastal communities and how those threats can be mitigated. Chapter 3 examines the history of several historic African American beach communities, outlining their history, and focusing on how their cultural landscapes have, or have not been protected. In addition, this chapter ends with an analysis of all available protections, including some not found in service to these beaches.

Chapter 4 discusses American Beach with regard to its historic context and significance within the greater African American narrative of Amelia Island and the United States. It also introduces American Beach as a case study through a brief version of an Area Character Appraisal. As will be discussed in further detail, Area Character Appraisals are meant to document, assess and define the design elements that make a particular neighborhood or community unique. Chapter 5 discusses the existing protective infrastructure that is in place with regard to American Beach. The neighboring city of Fernandina Beach is examined with regard to how it was able to create two historic districts, and how those historic district guidelines can be used for American Beach. Then the legal documents that are currently on the books in Florida and Nassau County were examined to see what codes, laws and ordinances are available to protect this historic community.

Also in this chapter, several organizations that have been involved with American Beach’s recognition and protection over the years are acknowledged to see which ones have been beneficial to the community. Finally, Chapter 6 examines the best options for preserving American Beach. The hope is that this thesis will be a useful tool for the community of American Beach, and give them additional options with regard to preserving their community’s historic character and cultural heritage.
CHAPTER 2: THREATS TO COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Coastal communities will always have threats, especially those that are historically African American. These places face threats from human interaction as well as threats from the natural environment. This chapter looks at three specific threats: loss from neglect, loss of character from incompatible development, and loss from natural disasters. These threats are looked into so that communities know what they are up against, and how they can prepare or avoid further damage and loss.

Loss from Neglect

The Civil Rights Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2, 1964, but was first brought to the forefront by President John F. Kennedy during a nationally televised address on June 6, 1963. President Kennedy spoke to the nation about taking action to guarantee equal treatment for every American regardless of race. President Kennedy was assassinated before he could sign this Act into law, so President Johnson was the one who officially signed the Act. The purpose of the Civil Rights act was:

To enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes.¹

The Civil Rights Act set out to accomplish equality for all, and this allowed for a new found freedom for African Americans across the country. While these advancements were something to celebrate, they also ironically became the downfall for these once lively African American coastal

¹ The opening of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was transcribed from ourdocuments.gov, a collaborative effort among The National Archives and Records Administration, National History Day, and USA Freedom Corps.
communities. These coastal African American communities flourished during segregation, but after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, they slowly began to disappear. Places that were once off limits to African Americans were now the hot spots to be, and most of the time closer to home. This new way of vacationing was the beginning of the end for many African American coastal communities. The decline of these once lively communities came about due to the lack of vacationers frequenting the area.

Many of the communities began to see vacant and boarded up buildings because the heirs of former residents had no interest in the area, and did not want to vacation in the same places they did as children. People also did not want to frequent areas that while enjoyable at the time, tended to be a reminder of social, cultural, and political strife. There was also little interest from white public with regard to venturing to these once black resorts. As fewer people came to the area, the businesses had to close up due to a lack of revenue. As the boarded up buildings begin to age at a much faster rate along the coast, they were eventually condemned and torn down. The demolishing of these communities shows just what happened in the name of progress; a loss of a community’s history and resources. Even if the entire community was not demolished, the increase in vacant and dilapidated properties puts the rest of the community at risk. The property values will go down as the area becomes undesirable, which increases hazards including safety issues. There is even the possibility of condemnation by local authorities. American Beach is one of those communities that has faced issues due to loss by neglect. Buildings have been abandoned and demolished and lots have been left unkempt. The neglect is due to a variety of different factors, whether it is the inability to pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the structures, or the lack of desire to frequent the area. These issues of neglect and unkempt lots have led to tensions within the community as to how things should be handled.
Loss of Character from Incompatible Development

The next threat is the loss of character from incompatible development, which ties in with the first threat of loss from neglect. The lack visitors frequenting African American resort communities, it made it easier for outsiders to come in and buy up the land (for cheap) from those who had no idea of its worth. This “coastal capitalism,” began as soon as blacks began leaving these once lively coastal communities. In his book, *The Land Was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South*, Andrew Kahrl addressed this issue of coastal capitalism and how it has affected these historic African American communities. Kahrl states that coastal capitalism is “characterized by the commodification of the beach as a commercial asset.”

This trend of turning public coastal land into private spaces started a new form of exclusivity.

This change been noted through real estate trends within the United States as the properties along the coast have increased in price over the years. The most sought after land is either beach front, or a short walking distance to the beach. While all beach communities regardless of their history face these challenges, historically African American coastal communities are the ones that have suffered the most. Many of these African American communities are threatened due to development and an insensitivity to a storied past. As the demand for prime real estate increased, the prices and the taxes increased which led to locals being pushed out due to lack of funds or a tempting offer. In these once undesirable sections of the coast, developers and individuals also realized they could buy up prime oceanfront real estate for a fraction of the cost. This led to several African American coastal communities being bought up and bulldozed.

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Kahrl mentions that during the time of segregation, African American beaches and coastal land ownership by African Americans was at its height, and it has “steadily eroded in the half-century since.” Kahrl sees this “erosion” of African American coastal ownership as “less of a matter of historical inquiry and contemporary concern than the manner in which black coastal landownership disintegrated and how such lands became incorporated into modern coastal economies.”

This taking of the land by outsiders and making it a private retreat with large scale buildings has produced a lack of sensitivity to the history of the place that was once there. Many African American communities have over the years been turned into massive resort complexes. These complexes are out of touch with the community’s original character and intent. The scale of these modern and contemporary buildings is vastly different than what was previously there, and those buildings take away from the livability of the locals. There is almost a type of competition between developers who understand the land values/investment opportunities, and preservationists who understand the historic and cultural values of a place. The most feasible way to be able to properly protect these communities, is through education. Most likely, the people visiting these resorts have no clue of the history of the area. Preservationists can make strides to protect these disappearing African American coastal communities by cultivating advocacy, educating the community and the locals, and simulating interest with regard to the significance of the place. Three of the African American beach communities in the next chapter no longer exist because of the threat of incompatible development. In addition, American Beach has lost a significant amount of its original acreage because of the large scale resort communities directly to its north and south.

3 Andrew W. Kahrl, The Land Was Ours, 257.
Loss from Natural Disasters

The final major threat to African American coastal communities is the same thing that threatens all coastal communities; the occurrence of natural disasters. The most common and widespread being flooding. Coastal communities also face the possibility of extreme natural disasters -- hurricanes and coastal storms, as well as the long term threat of coastal erosion. With regard to flooding, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), created a technical report in February 2018, the *Patterns and Projections of High Tide Flooding Along the U.S. Coastline Using a Common Impact Threshold*. This report notes in its Executive Summary that NOAA has established three coastal flood severity thresholds to ensure public safety. These flood thresholds are “based upon water level heights empirically calibrated to NOAA tide gauge measurements from years of impact monitoring by its Weather Forecast Offices (WFO) and emergency managers.” The types of flooding are broken down by severity: minor flooding is flooding that is more disruptive than damaging, moderate flooding is damaging, and major flooding is destructive. The intent of this report by NOAA is to provide “an objective and nationally consistent set of impact thresholds for minor/moderate/major coastal flooding.” The report notes that definitions of these types of flooding are currently lacking, and which limits the ability of new and/or effective products that relate to flood mitigation. NOAA also states that the coastal communities in the United States need guidance about flooding which could happen in the near future, in the coming season, or in the long run. This report gives guidance with regard to exposure and potential vulnerability. The most common type of flooding -- minor flooding (also known as high tide flooding or nuisance flooding), leads to public inconveniences such as road closures, overwhelmed storm drains, and the deterioration of infrastructure such as roads and

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railways. These inconveniences play a huge impact on business and the quality of life for those living in the area. Flooding is increasing around the coastal regions, with more issues occurring along the East and Gulf Coasts. According to the National Ocean Service (NOS), the increase in high-tide flooding is due to “climate-related sea level rise and land subsidence (sinking) combined with loss of natural coastal barriers.” The effects of rising seas along the coastline is predicted to become more noticeable, more severe, and cause more of an impact on these communities and environments than any other climate-change related factor.5

Another type of flooding is caused by storm surge, which is a common issue during large storms and hurricanes. Storm surge is an abnormal rise in seawater during a storm, which is caused by the storm’s winds pushing water onshore. The amplitude of the surge depends on the orientation of the coast with regard to the storm’s track, as well as the storm’s intensity, size and speed.6 Besides the effects of flooding from large storms and hurricanes, another threat to coastal communities comes from changes to the shoreline from the waves, currents, tides, and wind – this is known as coastal erosion. Coastal erosion is defined as the loss of shoreline sediment. It is a natural, but complex process that continually reshapes the shoreline. Coastal erosion can also be greatly influenced by human interaction and activities including: dredging of ports and nautical waterways, construction of harbors and dams, shoreline armor (seawalls, breakwaters, etc.), and even beach renourishment (the adding of sand).7 Many coastal communities attempt to stabilize the coast line to protect residential and commercial properties and infrastructure, by building shoreline armoring. Shoreline armoring is made up of structures intended to hold the sea back and to prevent the loss of the shoreline sediment. Often times, shoreline armoring can be

detrimental instead of beneficial. The armored shorelines prevent the loss of erosion and help to block the waves by creating a barrier, but often times, that barrier eliminates marine habitats and prevents the natural movement of sediments. The best way to provide for coastal protection, and prevent damage to the natural cycle of the coast, is to make sure that the stabilization efforts are site specific, and they balance the needs of humans and the natural environment.

These above mentioned changes in the coastline can be catastrophic and costly. It is imperative to prepare coastal communities for these threats, and give them the ability to bounce back if possible. Local and state governments have been on the forefront in efforts to minimize the environmental, social, and economic impacts of coastal erosion and natural disasters. Through these organizations, communities have tools, information, and training to prepare themselves for the inevitable. In addition to these smaller organizations, there are federal organization like NOS, a branch of NOAA. NOS is dedicated to preparing coastal communities for the threats they will face from natural disasters, sea level rise, storm surge, erosion, etc. One important task that coastal communities can do is to create and build a resilience plan. That way when a disaster occurs, the community is able to take immediate action after the disaster. An assessment of the damage and figuring out a positive solution to deal with the damage will help these communities bounce back and hopefully minimize loss and reduce vulnerabilities. Another branch of NOAA is the National Coastal Zone Management Program, which addresses the nation’s coastal issues through a partnership between the federal government, coastal and Great Lakes states and territories. This program is authorized by the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, and “provides the basis for protecting, restoring, and responsibly developing our nation’s diverse coastal communities and resources.”

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8 The Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 is an act, “To establish a national policy and develop a national program for the management, beneficial use, protection, and development of the land and water resources of the Nation’s coastal zones, and for other purposes.” Information regarding the Act came from,
Natural disasters, especially hurricanes have led to the decline in historic structures and landscapes. Many of these disasters create issues with cleaning, clearing and rebuilding, especially for those who are disproportionately affected or ineligible for disaster relief loans. If financial or physical help is not given to those who need it most, these historic properties will not be able to be rebuilt or repaired, thus causing their imminent loss. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responsible for disaster relief, and the organization has a multitude of policies with regard to how it acts with response to disaster recovery, mitigation and preparedness responsibilities. Unfortunately, while there are a multitude of policies in place, there have been issues with communities receiving help and funding after a disaster occurs. Many of the areas that do not receive immediate assistance tend to be those that are either under privileged or minority communities. Part of the problem is that while there are various federal agencies that provide a range of assistance after major disasters, state, territorial, and local governments are the primary entities in charge of recovery efforts. The state and local governments have to apply for federal assistance themselves. These governments are also responsible for what actions will be taken with regard to recovery. Those homeowners who have experienced loss due to a disaster must first seek help through their homeowner’s insurance company. If the individual has not been granted assistance, then they could be eligible for federal funding. The Stafford Act specifies that “federal agencies providing financial assistance after a major disaster cannot provide assistance to an individual for the same loss for which another

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10 The people who are disproportionately affected or ineligible for disaster relief loans tend to be because they are tenants and rent property instead of owning the property.
federal program or private insurance company has provided compensation.”11 This keeps people from double dipping into financial reserves. Many times, people who rent have a harder time receiving financial assistance than someone who owns their home. Other issues with low income and minority communities is with regard to how long it takes for these communities to receive funding. Often times the more prominent and important areas of towns and cities are taken care of first, and the outlying areas do not receive assistance until a much later date.

Though not typically thought of as historic preservation, it is worth looking into all types of protections which could help maintain the historic character of coastal communities. Coastal management, disaster planning, and conservation issues in the United States are important avenues to be aware of when it comes to protecting all coastal communities. These communities face constant threats from erosion, natural disasters, and lack of environmental sensitivity. Thus it is important to look at the different areas of preservation and conservation that address these concerns, and make sure that threats to the character and historic fabric of these coastal communities are minimized and mitigated.

As will be discussed in Chapter 3, historic African American beaches have all faced hardships due to at least one, if not all of these threats. These communities have either persevered and figured out ways to protect themselves, or they have succumbed to outside forces and have been lost forever. The first step in trying to save these communities is identifying the threats. Only then can something be done to save them.

CHAPTER 3: AFRICAN AMERICAN BEACHES – THEIR HISTORY AND METHODS

As previously noted, African American coastal communities began to appear during segregation. These coastal communities were sometimes advertised in newspapers, magazines, and city directories, but more often than not they became popular due to word of mouth. The most recognizable guide for African Americans during the middle part of the 20th century, was known as *The Negro Motorist Green Book (The Green Book)*. This guide was published from 1936 to 1963. The 1940 edition of *The Green Book* can be seen in Figure 1.

![The Negro Motorist Green Book](image)

Figure 1 -- The 1940 Edition of *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*. Image courtesy of The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
The idea for The Green Book came from Victor H. Green, a postal worker in New York City who started the guide as a local publication. When the response for copies of other locations became so great, Green made the guidebook a national publication. The Green Book was meant to be a guide to inform African Americans travelers about services, facilities, and lodging that were safe places for them to patronize. According to the 1936 introduction of the guide, the purpose of the guidebook was, “to give the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into difficulties, embarrassments and to make his trips more enjoyable.”12 The Green Book was updated every year with new businesses and locations. The travelers frequenting these establishments were encouraged to mention that they heard about said establishment from The Green Book. In addition to The Green Book, the United States Department of the Interior published their own guide during this era. The publication was known as “A Directory of Negro Hotels and Guest Houses.” This directory was published under Franklin Roosevelt’s Administration and mostly included old hotels, private homes, and the Young Men’s and the Young Women’s Christian Associations.13

Unfortunately, during segregation, the summer season was a difficult time for African Americans. Many of the local bathing spots were for whites only, and the only accessible places to swim (runoffs, ponds, streams) were less than desirable and often dangerous. The few beaches that were set aside tended to be inferior in quality. It was because of these trying times that several elite African Americans began to establish their own coastal communities as early as the 1890s. This small, but influential group of wealthy African Americans realized that an afternoon of rest, relaxation and play provided a reprieve from their daily struggles. These affluent communities embraced the leisure lifestyle and the opportunity to create their own coastal

getaways. Several of these African American coastal communities began to appear along the Atlantic Coast, the Great Lakes, the Gulf Coast and the West Coast. These communities became a place for “recreation and relaxation without humiliation,”\(^{14}\) and a safe haven to spend the day, the weekend, or the summer season. While these coastal communities were all created for, and used by African Americans, these communities also reflected the diversity of black America. The communities tended to be either exclusive retreats with entry restricted to only residents and their guests, religious campgrounds where spirituality took precedence, or “bawdy, raucous beaches where the sound of jazz and R&B drifted out onto the waters, where flasks of moonshine passed from coat pockets to hands, and where pairs of dice bounced off hard surfaces.”\(^{15}\) The heyday for most of these communities was from the 1940s to the 1960s, when they were well established, and the entertainers popular. When the Civil Rights Act was passed on July 2, 1964, many African Americans who had frequented these communities began going to vacation spots that were closer to home, and not previously open to them. The lack of an influx of people, entertainment, and business to these communities ultimately lead to most of their downfalls.

This chapter looks at eight historically African American beaches in the United States. These eight beaches were used to survey some of the remaining key examples of historic African American Beaches to compare their history, significance, current status (an active or lost community), and, if possible, the protective measures put in place that have kept these communities alive. While this is a fraction of all of the beaches that were once home to thriving African American communities, the following places were chosen because of their strong historical significance, their ties to the community (both past and present), and the amount of tangible protective strategies available. The communities chosen are focused on the east coast of

\(^{14}\) This quote was said by A.L. Lewis, the founder of American Beach, and used as its tag line for this Florida community.

\(^{15}\) Andrew W. Kahrl, The Land was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 14.
the United States, with one in the Great Lakes Region, and another on the Gulf Coast. While there are a few remaining communities on the West Coast, they were not included in this survey.

It is important to note that more often than not, African American historic sites are preserved on a more informal basis, and thus they do not often get the recognition they deserve. This study of African American beaches shows that there are a range of communities. Some of the beach communities were built by and for a small, but elite group of African Americans who were very exclusive, other communities were open to all classes and were meant for enjoying the entertainment aspect of that community, and still others were meant as religious retreats. A map of the African American beaches that were used in this study can be found in Figure 2. The beaches are color coded based on their status, red means they no longer exist, teal means they are still active communities, and the purple icon represents American Beach. Two of the beaches that no longer exists (Carr’s Beach and Sparrow’s Beach) cannot be seen from the map as they are hidden behind Highland Beach.
Figure 2 -- Map of Case Studies, courtesy of Google Maps.
Atlantic Beach

Atlantic Beach in Horry County, South Carolina was founded in the 1930s by George W. Tyson. Tyson was an African American entrepreneur who owned several businesses that served African Americans. He had connections with a white business man, R.V. Ward, and was able to get Ward to agree to sell 47 acres of oceanfront land in Horry County. At the time, Tyson paid $2,000 for the land and built the Black Hawk Night Club, which became a popular retreat for African Americans in the area. Tyson was able to convince other African Americans in the community to buy tracts of the land and develop them. Several people purchased plots, which prompted Tyson to buy an additional 49 acres of land adjacent to his tract. Up until 1943, Tyson continued to sell the plots to African Americans to develop. After that time, Tyson gave the ownership of the land to the Atlantic Beach Company. The African American buyers and developers ranged from the well-educated to the blue collared (who often bought property together). These people were the ones who helped develop Atlantic Beach’s landscape. Between the 1940s and 1950s, Atlantic Beach experienced its most growth and saw an increase in hotels, banks, restaurants, businesses and vacationers to the area, it was during this time that Atlantic Beach became known as “The Black Pearl.” The community also hosted many prominent African American performers of the day.

Atlantic Beach experienced some hardships over the years, including in 1954 when Hurricane Hazel destroyed wooden buildings from the 1930s and 1940s. In 1966, Atlantic Beach became its own municipality, which made it one of the few African American owned, and

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governed beach communities in the United States.\textsuperscript{17} A decline in visitation occurred due to the passage of the Civil Rights Act, so Atlantic Beach sought novel ways to bring revenue and tourists to the city. Since the community has strong ties to the Gullah-Geeche\textsuperscript{18} community, Atlantic Beach city officials started the Gullah-Geeche Festival to revitalize the beach and increase visitation. The Gullah-Geeche Festival takes place every August at Atlantic Beach and celebrates the cultural heritage of the Gullah-Geechee people through food, music and dancing. The community also hosts “Black Biker Week,” an annual celebration that takes place every Memorial Day weekend. In 2001, Atlantic Beach residents incorporated the Atlantic Beach Historical Society. The mission of the historical society was “to preserve the history of the Coastal Carolinas’ African-American heritage through oral histories and memorabilia, year-round family events, and personal and real property.”\textsuperscript{19} Unfortunately, the Historical Society disbanded in 2007, but there are still efforts to preserve the beach’s history. The community created a Master Plan in 2007 to “promote the revitalization of the Town of Atlantic Beach and provide guidance on the implementation of a new Town Vision.” This plan’s objective was to “provide for redevelopment in a manner that respects and balances the goals of the Town and its unique historical and physical characteristics.”\textsuperscript{20} The Town of Atlantic Beach also created a Comprehensive Plan that looks forward from 2017 to 2027. The Comprehensive Plan was put in place due to a South Carolina law (South Carolina Code of Laws, Title 6, Chapter 29), that


\textsuperscript{18} The Gullah-Geeche corridor runs from the Carolinas, down through Georgia and into northeast Florida. The Gullah-Geeche people are descendants of slaves who were brought to the United States from West Africa. The Gullah-Geeche people practice their own unique culture and speak their own unique language. The traditions of their ancestors are alive and well, and can be seen in the sweetgrass baskets that are woven to this day. Anna Hopkins, “Black beaches that broke barriers,” September 7, 2017.


\textsuperscript{20} Zyscovich, “Atlantic Beach, South Carolina Master Plan” (February 20, 2007), 1.
requires communities to develop and adopt a plan prior to creating zoning, land development regulations, public facility reviews, and an official map. If a community does not have a comprehensive plan, they are limited in their ability to be involved in development and future growth. The Comprehensive Plan for Atlantic Beach was created to provide an analysis of the community’s existing conditions, to assess its challenges and future opportunities, and to make sure policies and strategies were implemented. The plan helps to provide a structure for the community’s future goals and to assist in the decision making process with regard to development and future community initiatives.\(^{21}\) Atlantic Beach is one of the few African American owned and governed coastal communities left in the United States. It has been successful in its ability to keep its identity and history, while also being able to move forward and enhance its community.

**Carr’s and Sparrow’s Beaches**

Carr’s Beach and Sparrow’s Beach were located in Annapolis, Maryland towards the neck of the Annapolis peninsula. In 1902, Frederick Carr, a retired Naval Academy cook purchased 66 acres of cheap land as a place for farming, and for raising hogs and cattle. Three years later, he purchased another 114 acres of land for his family. Carr faced difficulties with trying to get his goods to the market due to prejudice, so he started hosting picnics and boarders on his property. Then in 1917, Carr conveyed his land to his children so it would remain in the family, and two of Carr’s daughters used their tracts of land to found Carr’s and Sparrow’s Beaches. The beaches developed side by side in the late 1920s, early 1930s, but were run as separate entities. Carr’s Beach was founded in 1926 by the Carr family and was eventually run by Elizabeth Carr Smith. This community was open to all African Americans, but tended to be frequented by middle-class and working class African Americans coming from Baltimore and

Washington, D.C. Carr’s Beach had a lively reputation and became a major place for concerts on Sunday afternoons. The concerts were known as “Bandstand on the Beach” and took place at the beach’s pavilion. These beachside performances brought some of the most popular African American performers of the time to this community. Some of the acts were so popular that visitors could not make it through the doors due to safety precautions.22

Sparrow’s Beach was founded by Florence Carr Sparrow, in 1931 and was just north of Carr’s Beach. In the mid-1930s, the beach saw the construction of an open-air pavilion which brought many entertainers to the area by the summer of 1940. Sparrow’s Beach hosted Sunday afternoon “swing jamborees” and jazz bands, which provided a venue for popular black artists and local acts.

After Elizabeth Carr Smith died, her son Frederick Smith took over, and changed the business model of Carr’s Beach to focus on entertainment and amusement. This prompted Sparrow’s Beach to change its business model as well. Sparrow’s Beach decided to appeal to those who wanted a quieter and less commercialized summer retreat. The beach began offering group reservations for churches and organizations, and it rented out cottages on the grounds for weekends and longer vacations. The cottages at Sparrow’s Beach also served as the overnight accommodations for those musicians who were performing down the road at Carr’s Beach.23

Unfortunately, after desegregation there were a lack of visitors to the beaches and a high demand for the beach property. Carr’s Beach and Sparrow’s beach both succumbed to the threat of loss due to development, the beaches were closed and sold to developers by 1973. Luxury condos now stand on the former beaches, and the history of these once lively communities exist only in photographs, books and oral histories.

23 Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land was Ours*. 186, 193.
Gulfside Assembly

Gulfside Assembly (Gulfside) is located in Waveland, Mississippi, originally called the Gulfside Chatauqua and Camp Meeting Ground. It was founded in 1923 by Bishop Robert E. Jones (the first African American Methodist Bishop), as a Methodist Church spiritual retreat and resort. Jones wanted a place where African Americans could relax and worship outside. Gulfside was opened and incorporated on January 2, 1924, and served as the first resort in the Gulf Region open to African American Methodists. Gulfside also served as a boarding school for poor African American boys from rural areas, a day school for children from the community, and a theological training center for African Americans from the surrounding Gulf states. It was also one of the only places African-Americans could get overnight lodging in the area, or even have access to the ocean. The community became a meeting space and campground for civil rights organizations in the 1960s. Gulfside became the location of the Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This separate jurisdiction was created for African Americans as a compromise when the Methodist Episcopal Church, the south branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Protestant Church merged. This separation between the Central Jurisdiction and the rest of the Church lasted until 1968 when segregation ended and there was a merger of the different branches which created the United Methodist Church.

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In the 1970s and 1980s, there were efforts to preserve the resort and rebuild some of the structures that had previously been damaged by Hurricane Camille in 1969. In 1980, Gulfside was recognized by the United Methodist Church as a historical site. Then, in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina destroyed every building on the community’s 60 acres, including a brand new building that opened sixteen days before the storm made landfall.

There are currently signs of recovery at Gulfside, a new open-air chapel has been built with concrete seating to create an outdoor prayer space. The process has been slow at Gulfside, and dealing with insurance requirements, and the cost of construction has taken more time than the community would like. The Board of Trustees, the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church, and supporters of Gulfside are committed to rebuilding the community by creating a modern multi-use ministry center on the original site of the Gulfside Assembly. Since everything was lost, it is not a quick fix to adding new buildings, the reconstruction of the site is seen as a spiritual journey for the community. While the historic makeup of the community was physically lost due to a natural disaster, it is still important to the community that they keep the history of Gulfside alive for future generations.

Henry’s Beach

Henry’s Beach was located in Somerset County, Maryland on the Tangier Sound. It was founded in 1952 by businesswoman Lorraine Henry and her husband George. The beach was a popular day resort for African Americans, and unlike many other African American beaches at the time, it was open to the general public. Nationally renowned bands and musicians came to the beach to perform in front of busloads of visitors. Henry’s had a restaurant and changing

rooms for those that frequented the area. Henry’s also had a popular baseball field that was used by traveling and local African Americans to play ball.29

Unfortunately, the beach closed in 1982 and became private property. The family that purchased the land left most of the original buildings intact. There is a historical marker about a mile away from the beach's original location, that gives the only clue about the area’s history. The marker notes that at Henry's Beach, “families enjoyed a pleasant atmosphere including ballgames, bathing, fishing, crabbing, and home-style cooking, as well as the premier black entertainers and musicians of the period.”30

Highland Beach

Highland Beach is located in Annapolis, Maryland, and was the first African American beach resort community in the United States. It was founded in 1893 by Frederick Douglass’ son, Charles Douglass, who was long-time employee of the Treasury Department, and served with the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry31 during the Civil War. The idea for Highland Beach came about after Charles and his wife Laura were turned away from a restaurant at a whites-only Bay Ridge resort. Douglass purchased the 40 acre plot of land, that included 500 feet of beachfront next to the restaurant for $5,000 ($130,000 in modern currency).32 Douglass built two homes in the community, one for himself (and his family) and the other one for his father, a cottage known as Twin Oaks. Twin Oaks was an important symbol to Frederick Douglass as he had helped to design his home and hoped that “as a free man [he] could look across the bay to the land where I

29 Claudia Mouery, Deal Island Then and Now (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 14-17.
30 Information regarding the marker came from “Maryland’s’ Roadside Historical Markers,” courtesy of the Maryland Historical Trust. http://mht.maryland.gov/historicalmarkers/
31 The 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry was a volunteer regiment and the first military unit consisting of black soldiers. “Prior to 1863, no concerted effort was made to recruit black troops as Union soldiers. The adoption of the Emancipation Proclamation in December of 1862 provided the impetus for the use of free black men as soldiers.” “54th Regiment,” Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed March 2018, http://www.masshist.org/online/54thregiment/index.php.
was born a slave." Unfortunately, Frederick Douglass passed away before the house was completed. The home is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was purchased and restored in the 1980s, and then in 1995, it was acquired by the State of Maryland and Anne Arundel County who deeded the property to the Town of Highland Beach. The town then made Twin Oaks a memorial to Frederick Douglass and created the Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center. Over the years, the beach community became a thriving and exclusive summer resort for many elite blacks from Washington, D.C. Since the majority of the people who frequented the beach were wealthy and well educated, they had high standards for who was allowed into the community. Highland Beach became a preferred vacation spot for Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois and other prominent figures in the African American community. There was even a security guard who stood watch at the entryway to the community to ensure that only home owners and guests could access the property.

In 1922, the community became an incorporated municipality and year round town in Maryland. Highland Beach is still an active beach community for the African American elite. The community remains entirely residential due to a decision that prohibits commercial establishments in the town. The community is very much invested in preserving its history and identity, and many of the residents at Highland Beach are the direct descendants of the original settlers of the community. The all-volunteer government has allowed for Highland Beach’s protection as a residential community. The mayor and the four commissioners are elected to four year terms. The commissioners are in charge of public works, government operations, planning

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34 “Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center,” Town of Highland Beach, Maryland, accessed April 2018, http://www.highlandbeachmd.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7BB18C159E9-B3B4-4963-9C22-37992CB67685%7BD.
and zoning, and finance for Highland Beach. The community also has documents that regulate the happenings at the beach including: the Highland Beach Zoning Ordinance, a Planning and Zoning Ordinance, Draft Board of Appeals Rules and Procedures, Requirements for the Use of Common Areas, Emergency Preparedness, etc. Highland Beach is an active community that includes monthly events, meetings, and an active citizen’s association that sponsors events. The Citizens Association’s purpose is to “promote the interest, concern, and welfare of the residents of the Town of Highland Beach,” through a membership organization. The annual dues are used to support a “newsletter, beautification, activities for children and youth, and social and recreational activities for residents and their families.” The community has several new additions that have helped to keep it a living and thriving town. A new Town Hall was built (which is Platinum Certified Green), and a Rain Scaping Park was built in 2015 to create a space in the community for relaxation, education, and a solution to water pollution. The community is a proud community and still very in touch with their history. The town’s website notes that their beachfront is public land and benefits their entire community. In the history section of the beach’s website, they have a quote from an August 7, 2003 article in the Washington Post. That article states:

That Highland Beach has changed so little is, in many ways, what makes this community distinctive. Elsewhere around the bay, neighborhoods that started as summer resort communities have succumbed to the pressures of development and individuals’ desires to own a slice of the beach for themselves. As a result, most of the waterfront on the Chesapeake has disappeared from the public realm, piece by piece.

This article makes it clear that Highland Beach is one of the few remaining African American coastal communities that has successfully preserved its history and charm.

36 “Highland Beach Citizens Association,” Town of Highland Beach, Maryland.
Idlewild

Idlewild in Lake County, Michigan was founded in 1912 by white Chicago developers who wanted to capitalize on the demand by middle and upper class African Americans for a summer vacation resort. The developers bought 2,700 acres in Lake County, just east of Lake Michigan. The area was focused around a few small lakes in the woods. Advertisements were placed in big city newspapers stating that there were many activities to be enjoyed in the area including hunting, fishing, boating and horseback riding. The lots were offered for $1 down and $1 per month.37 Due to the ads, the word spread of this outdoor getaway and black professionals around the country took note and bought vacation homes. It was known as “The Black Eden,” and was a glamorous hot spot in its day with some of the country's finest African American musicians and performers of the time. Idlewild became a party place in the wilderness, and a major stop on the chitlin’ circuit.38 Due to all of the entertainment and musical talent, Idlewild grew into the biggest and most successful resort in the Midwest. Many African Americans from Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis frequented the resort community, or bought property including: Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, an African American general surgeon, the founder of Provident Hospital in Chicago, and more importantly the first doctor to successfully perform open heart surgery in the United States.39 Dr. Williams bought a large area of land, subdivided it and sold it to many of his African American friends and professionals. Some of those friends


38 The Chitlin’ Circuit was a group of performance venues located around the country that were safe places for African American musicians and entertainers to perform during segregation. These venues were important starting places for African American entertainers before they became famous. Chitlin’ references chitterlings a soul food dish made out of pig intestines. The entertainers called it the Chitlin’ Circuit because the venues often sold chitlins and other soul food dishes. Tanya Ballard Brown, “The Origin (And Hot Stank) of The Chitlin’ Circuit,” National Public Radio, Inc, February 16, 2014, accessed March 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/02/16/275313723/the-origin-and-hot-stank-of-the-chitlin-circuit.

included Madam C.J. Walker, the first female African American millionaire who had a thriving cosmetology business, Charles W. Chesnutt, the first important African American novelist in the United States and a lawyer\textsuperscript{40}, W.E.B. DuBois, an important African American leader and a co-creator of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The prominent figures who spent time at Idlewild helped create the two peaks of the area as a vacation resort. The first peak was from the 1920s to the 1940s, and the second peak was from the 1950s to the 1960s. Unfortunately, the passage of the Civil Rights Act contributed to the decline of the community due to a lack of people coming to the area, and thus leading to the lack of reinvestment in the community.

The area is slowing being revitalized and it has become a community of mostly year-round residents. In 1979, Idlewild was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, then in 1994, Lake County was designated a federal Enterprise Community.\textsuperscript{41} This designation helped Idlewild obtain a new sewer system, and included major renovations to a former Yates Township Hall building. The building is now the home of the Idlewild Historic and Cultural Center. In 2000, John Meeks, a Detroit businessman founded the Idlewild African American Chamber of Commerce. Meeks was the closest thing to a mayor of Idlewild, and he organized music festivals, bought and renovated a historic hotel, and opened a public park.\textsuperscript{42} The revitalization of Idlewild has brought small businesses to the area, including a rural one-stop convenience store, a restaurant and several motels. In 2006, the Idlewild, Michigan Transformation Initiative was created when the State of Michigan entered into a formal partnership with Idlewild and Yates


\textsuperscript{41}The Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community (EZ/EC) program is a large scale federal effort that was created to revitalize impoverished urban and rural communities. This designation helped communities that were eligible for federal grant funding. “Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community Program,” U.S. Government Accountability Office, September 22, 2006, accessed March 2018, https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-06-727.

\textsuperscript{42}John Carlisle, “Once a paradise, Idlewild hopes to rise again,” \textit{Detroit Free Press}. 
Township. This partnership connects local businesses, residents, nonprofits and officials and allows for technical assistance to be provided to the community. This partnership has also benefited the community with regard to planning for its future and receiving commitments of funding to realize that vision. Additional plans for Idlewild include the expansion of the historic district, the placement of historical markers and walking tour signs, and the funding to help with blight removal, and the addition of more community events. The locals are trying to bring people back to Idlewild by hosting a variety of annual events including: Summer Oasis, “A Musical Glamping Tent Festival” that has been held every August since 2014, and the Idlewild “Jazz” Bike Ride & Tour.

In addition to the locals trying to create a comeback for Idlewild, the state of Michigan invested roughly $500 million in the resort’s leadership. The state partnered with ten (10) graduate students from Michigan State University to create a ten-year Tourism Development Strategy. The purpose of the project by the Michigan State University students was to “help the historic community of Idlewild, Michigan achieve community and economic prosperity by researching and creating a tourism development strategy that leverages Idlewild’s cultural and natural assets to attract year-round visitors.” The plan was completed in 2013, and the graduate students also put together a traveling museum exhibit that pays tribute to Idlewild.

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Oak Bluffs

Oak Bluffs is located on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, and has been active since the 1800s when the whaling industry was a main form of revenue. By the late 19th century when other forms of energy were obtainable, the island became a resort community. It was during this time that a tabernacle was built in Wesleyan Grove by a group of Methodists who wanted a space for open air revivals. Due to an influx of people during this time, gingerbread cottages began to appear as places for people who were attending the revivals to stay. The town at that time was known as Cottage City; it changed its name to Oak Bluffs when it was reincorporated in 1907.47

Before the city became Oak Bluffs, Charles Shearer (the son of a slave and her white owner) purchased land and built a cottage for his family as a summer retreat in 1903. Then in 1912, Shearer and his wife, Henrietta built a twelve room home on their property as a summer inn. This inn became known as Shearer Cottage and was the first inn for black vacationers on the island. Shearer opened this cottage for African Americans who could not find lodging on Martha’s Vineyard. As Shearer Cottage gained recognition, it drew in visitors from all over the northeastern United States. It became a summer haven for an elite African American community, especially those families with deep roots in Boston.48 Some of those wealthy visitors fell in love with the area and decided to put down roots. One of which was Dorothy West, a writer who was instrumental during the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s New York. West’s writings explored the conflicts and aspirations of the middle-class African Americans.49

Today, Oak Bluffs retains much of its original character and historic fabric. The community has a Historical Commission whose mission is to “promote the preservation of

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Since Shearer Cottage is a landmark institution in the community, and it has become a symbol of the rich history of African American life, culture and commerce on Martha’s Vineyard. In 1997, Shearer Cottage was dedicated as the first landmark on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha’s Vineyard. The original inn is still a fully functioning vacation spot in Oak Bluffs. Most recently, and because of the success of the community to retain its original character, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture created an exhibit that has pieces from Shearer Cottage on display in its collection. The town also gained recognition when President Obama and his family frequented the area on vacation.51


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beach</th>
<th>Lack of Infrastructure</th>
<th>Recognized Historic District or Historical Markers</th>
<th>Historic District/ Ordinance or Design Guidelines</th>
<th>Zoning</th>
<th>HOA – Covenants</th>
<th>Envion. Conservation</th>
<th>Incorporated/Municipality</th>
<th>Future Plans or Strategies</th>
<th>Easements</th>
<th>Misc.</th>
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<td>Property Owner’s Association is present, not sure if they have any restrictions and/or covenants</td>
<td>Florida Coastal Management Program Guide, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Amelia Island Beach Renourishment</td>
<td>Possible DCA, Nassau County’s Future Parks Plan and Historic Park is in the area.</td>
<td>- Possible DCA, Nassau County’s Future Parks Plan and historic park is in the area.</td>
<td>- None known</td>
<td>Neighboring town of Fernandina Beach has two historic districts. Old Town Fernandina and Downtown Fernandina Beach, historical Twin Oaks development is on the property. Currently, the town handles by the county, legal resources from the county and the state. Florida Black Heritage Trail – American Beach is a step on the trail. Known as “The Black Pearl”. Strong ties to the Gullah Geeche people. Galveston-Geneva Festival held every August; and Black Shoe Walk held every Memorial Day Weekend. Jazz Festival; Hurricane Hazel destroyed the waterfront in 1961; State Charter that named Atlantic Beach the first and only black owned coastline town; The Town of HAV has documents and forms on their website including – Building Permits, zoning board of appeals info, zoning map, a master plan, comprehensive plan, town council meeting minutes, freedom of information act request form, and ordinances.</td>
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<td>Carr’s Beach and Spann’s Beach – Annapolis, MD</td>
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<td>- South Carolina Historical Marker for Waveland Beach 19-16, located outside of the town hall</td>
<td>Not specifically, regulated by the city though Own zoning district</td>
<td>Own zoning district</td>
<td>- Property Owner’s Association is present, not sure if they have any restrictions and/or covenants</td>
<td>Florida Coastal Management Program Guide, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Amelia Island Beach Renourishment</td>
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<td>Gulfside Assembly – Waveland, MS</td>
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<td>- Gulfside Assembly historical marker and “Sea Song Plantation” historical marker – Andrew Jackson, Jn’s home and later a part of Gulfside Beach erected in 2013 by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; historical markers for hurricane damage in 1969 and Hurricane Katrina 2005.</td>
<td>None known None known Own zoning district</td>
<td>None known - Property Owner’s Association is present, not sure if they have any restrictions and/or covenants</td>
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<td>- Henry’s Beach historical marker – Maryland Historical Marker</td>
<td>None known None known None known None known None known- Property Owner’s Association is present, not sure if they have any restrictions and/or covenants</td>
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<td>Neighboring town of Fernandina Beach has two historic districts. Old Town Fernandina and Downtown Fernandina Beach, historical Twin Oaks development is on the property. Currently, the town handles by the county, legal resources from the county and the state. Florida Black Heritage Trail – American Beach is a step on the trail. Known as “The Black Pearl”. Strong ties to the Gullah Geeche people. Galveston-Geneva Festival held every August; and Black Shoe Walk held every Memorial Day Weekend. Jazz Festival; Hurricane Hazel destroyed the waterfront in 1961; State Charter that named Atlantic Beach the first and only black owned coastline town; The Town of HAV has documents and forms on their website including – Building Permits, zoning board of appeals info, zoning map, a master plan, comprehensive plan, town council meeting minutes, freedom of information act request form, and ordinances.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highland Beach – Annapolis, MD</td>
<td>- Lack of paved roads and sewer service until the 1980s.</td>
<td>- Lack of paved roads and sewer service until the 1980s.</td>
<td>Zoning Ordinance: Planning and Zoning</td>
<td>Zoning Ordinance: Planning and Zoning</td>
<td>- Florida Coastal Management Program Guide, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Amelia Island Beach Renourishment</td>
<td>Possible DCA, Nassau County’s Future Parks Plan and Historic Park is in the area.</td>
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<td>- None known</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idlewood – Lake County, FL</td>
<td>- Lack of simple services, and signage, dirt roads that need paving, fallen bridge, water and sewer, no trash service, etc.</td>
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<td>Zoning Ordinance: Planning and Zoning</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak Bluffs – Martha’s Vineyard, MA</td>
<td>- Shawyer Cottage – recognized as historic african american vacational housing, Historic City, and Bird Bathhouse – historical marker</td>
<td>- Shawyer Cottage – recognized as historic african american vacational housing, Historic City, and Bird Bathhouse – historical marker</td>
<td>Yes, Historical Commission Oak Bluffs Historical Commission – promotes the preservation of historic structures, landscapes, artifacts, and architecture in the town.</td>
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Figure 3 -- Protective Strategies of African American Coastal Communities
**Protections Used**

The chart in Figure 3 shows a variety of protective strategies used by the above mentioned African American coastal communities. Each of these communities is unique in its own right, and thus they have each had different experiences with keeping their history and significance alive. The chart became a useful tool in analyzing the different beaches that were used as case studies in this thesis. The purpose of the chart was to see what communities had protections in place, and how those compared to the other beaches. Having a visual representation of the different beaches allowed for a better understanding of the types of protections in place. Each of the beaches are listed individually in the first column, and from there the different types of protections are listed across the top of the chart. If a beach had a policy, program or any information regarding that type of protection, the box was filled in. This chart was useful because it showed a variety of ways in which the communities still exist; or in the case of Carr’s Beach, Henry’s Beach, and Sparrow’s Beach that they are no longer around.

The communities that have fared well have used an assortment of preservation and non-preservation related options to allow them to keep their history intact. The communities that have established their own municipality with their own governing body, codes, zoning ordinances, board of appeals, historical commission, and rules and procedures like Atlantic Beach in South Carolina, Highland Beach in Maryland, and Oak Bluffs in Massachusetts have had the best results. These communities have established what is best for them and have fully operating local governments. Another helpful and useful tool for the communities that have fared well is the creation of a master plan, a comprehensive plan, and/or future plans for the community. These plans allow for the protection and the progress of the community through an established document that helps to thwart off outside pressures. It also gives those within the community a chance to understand what changes will be taking place, and how those changes will be
implemented. Some of the communities either have received, or are eligible to receive federal funding. This is important because federal grant and funding options allow for communities that have the passion to protect, but not the means, to receive funding.

In addition, most of the communities that are still around have established a historical society or a heritage organization. The communities that created an organization whose sole purpose is to take care of, and promote the history of the community, benefit the most. Many times these historical societies are involved in a museum, a cultural center, the creation of a heritage trail, or walking tours. While these organizations do not provide the community protections, they bring awareness and a sense of community pride. The creation of an exhibit space to house memorabilia and souvenirs help bring tourism to the area. Tourism has become a large part of bringing awareness, celebration, and funding to some of these communities. Yearly festivals and events bring people from all over, and showcase the history and importance of these places. In addition, some of these communities have received help by partnering with a college/university, national organization, or even with local governments. For example, Idlewild partnered with Michigan State University to create a Tourism Development Strategy, while Oak Bluffs has close relationships with two historical commissions: Martha’s Vineyard Commission and Cottage City Historic District Commission. These partnerships strengthen the community through its connections, and allow for additional resources with regard to preservation and protections. These partnerships can also lead to additional funding through grants which will allow for the rehabilitation and revitalization of buildings, landscapes and the community.

Additional options for protections of these historic communities include documentation of the community. This can be done either through a federal organization like the National Register of Historic Places, the National Historic Landmarks Program, or through a private organization that can create a report for the community. Documentation is important because it
provides a document of the historical property, building or community by making a detailed record of the value and significance associated with what is being documented. Documentation also acts as a way to interpret or to mitigate the anticipated loss of a property through the recording of information.52 While documentation does not physically protect the buildings and structures that are being recorded, it may sometimes be the only viable option. Documentation is useful because it helps create a snapshot of what is being threatened and preserves it through images, drawings, photographs, and oral and written history.

Another method to preserve a specific building or structure is through the addition of easements. Easements are voluntary legal agreements, that are usually executed as a deed, and meant to permanently protect a specific place. The easement is a part of the chain of title of the property, and runs in perpetuity making sure that all future owners protect the property. Easements are donated by the owner of a property who “places restrictions on the development of, or changes to, the property and transfers these restrictions to a qualified organization.”53 The organization then becomes the body that manages and enforces the restrictions associated with the easement. The organization tasked with the easement must have a mission that includes historic preservation, environmental protection, land conservation, or open space preservation. The organization must be capable of taking on an easement financially and physically, as the organization will need to do inspections of the property in its care. Easements are useful because they protect the historic character of the property, while also allowing the property to be privately owned. The main benefit for property owners is that easements provide tax benefits.54 It is also

54 To be able to qualify for tax benefits, the property must be considered a certified historic structure. It must be either individually listed on the National Register or located within a registered historic district and is a contributing structure to that district. Charles Fisher, “Easements to Protect Historic Properties,” 5.
important to note that if a community has involvement with a federal organization, then Section 106 applies to the property. Section 106 applies if there is any federal funding, licensing, or permitting that has taken place in the area, and requires a federal agency to take into account the effects of their actions on historic properties. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation provides guidance and oversight when a federal agency is involved. Besides the protection of historic buildings and structures, conservation efforts and protections can be used with regard to natural resources. For example, if there are endangered species habitats in the area, or a special type of flora that only grows in one specific place, conservation efforts can create a protection by regulating human use.\footnote{55 “Protect an Important Place,” National Park Service, accessed March 2018, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/protect.htm.}

While there used to be many different African American beaches around the country, not all of them are still around. Since not all of these places still exist, or reflect their once simple origins, it makes it even more important that American Beach is protected so it does not succumb to the same fate as the beaches that are just a distant memory. American Beach can also take note from those beaches that have been successful in keeping their history and community alive. The different plans, guidelines and strategies that have been put in place to protect these beaches have, so far proven to be effective in keeping these communities relevant and protected. The coastal communities that have been successful in retaining their historic fabric and keeping their history alive are the three that have their own governmental entities: Atlantic Beach, Highland Beach and Oak Bluffs. While different from each other, they have managed to be successful African American coastal communities. They have protections in place that allow for the historic fabric of their communities to be at the forefront, while also making sure there is positive progress for future growth. It is from these examples that American Beach can gain a better understanding as to how to protect its own community. Having a vision of success shows growth is possible and
can coincide with the preservation of a community’s history. It is important to note that there can be progress within a historic community as long as the future plans work directly with the historic resources and the community to ensure that the historic fabric remains.
CHAPTER 4: AMERICAN BEACH A CASE STUDY

“American Beach. There is no place like it on the American landscape.”\textsuperscript{56} A bold, statement written by Marsha Dean Phelts, a longtime African American resident of American Beach, a historically African American beach community in northeast Florida. This chapter focuses on the community of American Beach by giving the reader a glimpse into the community’s setting, its vibrant history, its character, and how it should be cared for so it does not lose its integrity and cultural heritage. The best way to give a glimpse into the community and its unique cultural and physical aspects is through an Area Character Appraisal (ACA). An ACA is used to document, assess and define the design elements that make a particular neighborhood or community unique. This helps inform future residents and builders so that what is built might be compatible with, and add to the community. ACAs serve as a planning function as well as an educational tool for developers, local governmental agencies, and even the residents of the community. They can be used to inform readers about the historical development of an area and how the architectural aspects have, or have not changed over time. ACAs act as a preservation tool by broadening the view of preservation from a few buildings to an entire area. ACAs also depict the rhythm of a place by including height, scale, and mass of structures, as well as depicting the streetscapes and landscapes of the area. ACAs are important to help characterize an area or neighborhood before changes happen and the area loses its sense of self. While this chapter gives a very brief version of an ACA, it would be beneficial for American Beach to have an official ACA completed for the community since the community has been facing developmental pressures for a long time. It is important to note that while ACAs give a sense of a particular area, they are only effective if they adapt as those areas change.

\textsuperscript{56} Marsha Dean Phelts, \textit{An American Beach for African Americans}, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), xi.
Figure 4 -- Map of Amelia Island courtesy of Google Maps
Setting

American Beach is located on a coastal barrier island in northeast Florida known as Amelia Island. The island is thirteen miles long and four miles wide at its widest point. The island is separated from the mainland by the Amelia River to the north, the Nassau River to the south, the Intracoastal Waterway to the west, and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. The Westside of the island has extensive salt marshes along the rivers, the eastside of the island has coastal dunes with sea oats and grasses. The rest of the island is made up of a thick canopy of oak trees, pine trees, sable palms and saw palmettos. Within the context of Amelia Island, American Beach is an unincorporated community a few miles south of the City of Fernandina Beach, and within Nassau County’s jurisdiction. The community is bordered by Summer Beach, a planned development to the north, the Amelia Island Plantation a resort community to the south, State Road A1A to the west, and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. American Beach has lost a substantial amount of acreage over the years due to development and only 116 of its original 216 acreage remains. Figure 5 shows the current boundaries of American Beach. While the island is just shy of the Georgia border, and a quick trip north of Jacksonville, its southern end was relatively undeveloped until the construction of State Road A1A in 1949. Before the construction of A1A there was only one way onto the island -- the bridge that connects Amelia Island to the town of Yulee. The addition of A1A allowed for easy access from Jacksonville to the south end of Amelia Island, which lead to the development of a once fairly remote area of the island.
Historic Context

Amelia Island’s original occupants were Native American tribes that are believed to have come to the area around 4,000 to 2,000 B.C.\textsuperscript{57} The island was inhabited by the Timucuan Indians at the time of European contact. The south end of the island was home to the Timucuan Indians, and later became the location of two Spanish missions known as Santa Catalina de Guale and

Santa Maria de Yamassee. The Spanish missions eventually led to the building of a plantation owned by the Harrison family. Samuel Harrison was a captain in the South Carolina loyalist militia during the time the British were in South Carolina. He moved from Beaufort, South Carolina to Amelia Island after the evacuation of Charleston and Savannah, and settled on the southern end of Amelia Island in 1781. In 1791, he applied for a land grant for the property he had homesteaded, and received a 600 acre tract of land that was deeded to him by the Spanish government.

Figure 6 -- Land issuance to Samuel Harrison. Document courtesy of the American State Papers from 1834.


Harrison owned slaves up until Union soldiers occupied the island during the Civil War. The occupation of the Union forces brought freedom to the slaves from the local plantations. After the Civil War, a former slave by the name of Franklin E. Town sought to buy land near the river and close to Jacksonville. While Town never actually purchased property on the south end of the island, and his relationship to the town is unclear, the area became known as Franklintown. Several African American families remained on the island after emancipation and took up residence in Franklintown. One of the early settlers was Gabriel Means, an ex-slave from the Harrison Plantation, who enlisted in the United States Colored Infantry. Means paid $340 for 40 acres in Franklintown during Reconstruction, and he later donated property for the establishment of a church (with a cemetery), and school to the town.\textsuperscript{60} The area became a farming, ranching and fishing community and eventually made enough profit to become self-sufficient. The decline of the town began with the building of State Road A1A, and most of the African American residents moved to American Beach as the development of the south end of the island began in the 1970s. Although reduced in size, the Franklintown cemetery still exists to this day. It is on the west side of A1A just south of American Beach, and is hidden in a grove of trees surrounded by a modern subdivision.

In 1935, American Beach was formally founded by Abraham Lincoln “A.L.” Lewis, a prominent African American businessman and the then president of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company. Lewis was born in Madison, Florida in 1865 and moved to Jacksonville in 1876 with his family. He received formal schooling from Duval County public schools, and worked his way up from water boy to foreman at a lumber-mill in Jacksonville. Later in his life, Lewis was involved in multiple social and civic organizations including the Masons and Odd-Fellows, and he worked with Booker T. Washington to found the Negro Business League and the

\textsuperscript{60} McEachin and Jones, “American Beach Historic District”, section 8, page 2.
National Negro Insurance Association. Lewis was a long time member of Mount Olive A.M.E. Church and served as a Sunday school superintendent for fifty-four years. He also served as a trustee for Edward Waters College, and helped establish the Lincoln Golf and Country Club of Jacksonville. In addition, Lewis is noted as being Florida’s first black millionaire.

Figure 7 -- 1919 Portrait of Abraham L. Lewis. Image courtesy of Florida Memory.

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61 Edward Waters College was founded in 1865 by Reverend Charles H. Pearce, a presiding elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This private college is located in Jacksonville, Florida, and is the state’s first institution established for the education of African Americans by African Americans. “The History of Edward Waters College,” Edward Waters College, accessed February 2018, https://www.ewc.edu/about/our-history/.

62 The Lincoln Golf and Country Club was established in 1929 as the first African American country club in northeast Florida. It was a 36-acre club that included a nine-hole golf course, club house, swimming pool, stream with a fishing spot, a shooting range, clay tennis courts, a picnic area and an outdoor play area for children. Phelts, An American Beach, 35.
In 1901, Lewis and six other African American gentlemen founded the Pension Bureau of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company, as a response for the need of health and burial insurance for African Americans. Lewis and the other co-founders each invested $100 to establish the company. The company was originally known as the Afro-American Industrial and Benefit Association; and it was referred to as the Afro. The company’s goal was to help the poor blacks in the community with funerals. The company allowed for members to pay just ten cents a week for funeral expenses. The Afro was able to open branches in several Florida cities, and by 1910 had its first office in downtown Jacksonville. Lewis was elected president of the company in 1919, and he directed it until his death in 1947. (At the time Lewis became President, he owned more property and paid more property taxes than any other black citizen in Florida.) In 1936, the Afro established a savings department, pension bureau, and an investment department to allow for additional services to help the black community. In 1937, the company is noted to have assets in excess of one million dollars, and thus changed its name to the Afro-American Life Insurance Company. The Afro was able to provide low-cost health and burial insurance for African Americans who could not obtain insurance from white companies. The company later expanded to other locations in the southeastern United States.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Afro-American Insurance Company sponsored beach outings on Amelia Island at Franklintown. These outings became popular among the company employees and their families. It was during this time that Lewis decided to invest in an oceanfront community for African Americans. Land for the community was purchased over an eleven year period, and it consisted of 216 acres of property located on the southeastern end of Amelia Island. The first plat for American Beach was filed in March of 1936 (Figure 8) and

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included ten blocks. The property was acquired in three parcels and consisted of twenty-eight blocks. These blocks consist of either eight or sixteen lots for a total of 323 lots. Most of these lots were fifty feet by one hundred feet, with the fifty foot side facing east/west to allow for views of the ocean. The lots were purposely made small to allow for everyone to experience the views, encourage narrow construction, and to keep the property affordable. The community was laid out in a rectangular grid pattern and all of the streets but one (Ocean Boulevard), were named after people associated with the company.

Lewis Street was named for A.L. Lewis, and is one of the main streets in the community and the only one that allows for drive on beach access. Julia Street was named after Julia Brown Lewis, Lewis’ mother. Mary Avenue is named for Mary F. Lewis, Lewis’ first wife. Leonard Street is named after Lewis’ grandson, J. Leonard Lewis. Waldron Street is named for Reverend J. Milton Waldron, a pastor of Jacksonville’s Bethel Baptist Institutional Church from 1892 until 1907, Waldron was also an organizer of the Afro. Gregg Street is named for Reverend E.J. Gregg, a pastor of Mount Zion AME Church and the first president of the Afro in 1901. Price Street is named for Reverend Alfred W. Price, the president of the Afro after Gregg. Ervin Street is named after Louis Dargan Ervin, the first full-time agent for the company. Ervin later became the company’s vice president. Lee Street is named for William H. Lee a vice president and secretary for the company. Last but not least, James Street, was named in honor of James H. Lewis. The only surviving child of Mary and A.L. Lewis.

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Figure 8 -- 1936 Plat of American Beach. Plat courtesy of the Nassau County Planning Department.
The beach was originally a private vacation spot for the company’s employees and their family members. The first structures built on the land were private vacation homes for the founders, an open air pavilion for company outings, and guest houses for company officials and employees. The company later opened the beach as a leisure spot to all African Americans. They named it American Beach to “remind everyone, blacks as well as whites, that the people there were just as American as others in this country.” This beach community was meant to be a place for “recreation and relaxation without humiliation,” and it became known as the “Negro Ocean Playground.” Eventually, the other lots were bought by professionals and educators in the area as vacation properties. These single family vacation houses make up most of the buildings within the community.

Figure 9 -- The Rosier family at American Beach in 1958. Image courtesy of Florida Memory.

67 McCarthy, African American Sites in Florida, 183.
American Beach gained popularity within the African American community because it provided a safe and enjoyable place for people to relax when other beaches were off limits during segregation. American Beach gained quite a reputation and it became the go to place to get away during the summer months. The beach attracted visitors from all over the country. American Beach was also visited by many well-known African Americans including: author and folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston; songwriters and musicians Billie Daniels, Cab Calloway, Ray Charles and James Brown; and an array of sports figures, actors and artists. The beach has also been home to important African American political, judicial, and legislative figures. As American Beach became the place to be during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The construction of more buildings was needed. The first hotel at American Beach was the Ocean Vu-Inn. It was built in 1945, and included twenty-one guest rooms, a restaurant, and a ballroom. The Ocean Vu-Inn was the first business to sell beer and wine at American Beach. Then, Williams’ Guest House was constructed in 1949, it was popular among presidents of historically black colleges and universities. In 1950, the A.L. Lewis Motel opened, with twenty-two rooms that could accommodate four guests each. As the crowds grew, the need for entertainment and dining establishments also increased. The popular social area of American Beach, known as the “Cross Roads,” was composed of the blocks where Lewis Street intersected Ocean Boulevard and Gregg Street. An aerial of this social hub is seen in Figure 10. Popular businesses in this area were Evans’ Rendezvous (a club that served food and liquor), El Patio (a hangout for teenagers), Reynold’s Sandwich Shop, Netty’s Place, and the Sweet Tooth (an ice cream and candy shop).

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69 National Register, American Beach Historic District, 6,7.
The decline of American Beach began in 1964. The passage of the Civil Rights Act opened beach access for all local and national beaches, and thus people did not have to travel so far to enjoy a day in the sand and sun. The decrease in summer visitors led to the closing of business that were once lively. Also, the destruction caused by Hurricane Dora in September of 1964, led to the leveling of Williams’ Guest Lodge, and several other buildings in the community. Approximately thirty structures have been demolished over the years, leaving numerous vacant lots. The dwindling physical status of American Beach was parallel to the changes going on around the country. The Afro-American Life Insurance Company began to decline after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and the company closed its doors in 1991. Additional changes in the landscape of American Beach occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, as the descendants of A.L. Lewis began to sell off their various holdings at American Beach.
Development History

In 1970, the Amelia Island Company began to purchase undeveloped property on the south end of Amelia Island. The Amelia Island Company developed the land for the Amelia Island Plantation. This 1,330-acre resort and residential community, is just south of American Beach. When first built, the homes were priced from $200,000 to over $4 million. The company also purchased property along Lewis Street near State Road A1A, which became the location of the resort’s warehouses and maintenance facilities. In 1995, the Amelia Island Company acquired the 100-acre parcel that was sold by the descendants of A.L. Lewis in the 1980s. This parcel was developed into a senior living facility with a nine-hole golf course. The golf course backs up to Florida’s largest dune system known as Nana. (As will be discussed later, this dune system is a sacred place for the American Beach community.) To the north of the community is the Summer Beach resort which is a 450-acre complex that includes single family homes, condominium buildings, and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. These resorts flanking American Beach have increased property values and taxes, and have put pressures on the community. The increase in development over the years has mostly been due to these resort communities. The market has fluctuated since these resorts were first built, but the prices continue to increase as more people move to the island.

A reason people tend to move to Amelia Island is due to its small community, historic charm, proximity to water, and its resort like amenities. The island offers a relaxing and small town feel, with beach front properties that are significantly less expensive than property in South Florida. This area is a big draw to snowbirds and people from out of state. Amelia Island has several annual events that bring tourists from all over the country, and even the world. The most prominent event is the Amelia Island Concours d’ Elegance. It is a weekend long exhibition of

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vintage or classic motor vehicles. Prizes are awarded to those vehicles in the best original condition. The event takes place at Summer Beach on the Ritz Carlton’s golf course, which as noted, is just north of American Beach. The Concours d’ Elegance brings in large crowds of people from all over to take part in the events ranging from a Porsche Driving Experience, to Road Tours, a Sotheby’s Auctions, seminars, awards shows, and even a cocktail reception and gala dinner. This weekend brings curious visitors to the island, and some of them have even stumbled upon American Beach. Some of those visitors have realized they could buy an oceanfront lot for a lot less than in other parts of the country, and they have left their mark on the quaint landscape of American Beach.

While these local annual events are great for the island’s tourism and revenue, it increases the risk of buyers who are not sensitive to the history and importance of American Beach. American Beach was originally a small, quaint community with one and two story homes and cottages. Over the years, people have come into the community and built three story or larger homes that are not sensitive to the historic fabric of the area. If these developers, and those looking for a beach side getaway do not understand the importance of this local African American community, there is a great risk of loss from incompatible development. These changes then lead to a disruption of the harmony, character and a possible loss of the historic integrity of the community.

Local Landmarks

American Beach has several local landmarks that are key to its unique history and community heritage. Those landmarks give a sense of the community’s importance and physical characteristics. There are additional landmarks that are well known to the members in the

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71 Information courtesy of the Amelia Island Concours d’Elegance’s website and event information.
community, but the ones that have been included below are those that are either a part of the National Register Historic District, the National Park Service, or the Florida Historical Markers Program. The one exception is Burney Park, as it does not have its own marker, but it is a main gathering spot for the community and it is located just outside of the National Register Historic District. It has received funding from the county since it is a county park. It is also one of the few facilities on the south end of Amelia Island that provides public beach access.

Figure 11 -- 1998 American Beach Boundary Map. Image courtesy of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the “American Beach Historic District.”
American Beach Historic District

Figure 12 -- Views of the American Beach Historic District from 2001. Images courtesy of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.

In 2002, the American Beach Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The period of significance starts in 1935 when American Beach was established, and ends in 1965; which is the first year following the passage of the Civil Rights Act. The community qualifies as significant under Criteria A, because there are properties associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of American history. It also qualifies under Criteria G, the area has achieved significance in the past 50 years. The areas of significance include African American history, and community planning and development. Approximately 116 acres of the original property remains, and 40 of those acres are a part of the
Figure 11 shows the results of the 1998 Historic Resources Survey of American Beach. The map shows the boundaries of American Beach as well as the contributing structures (diagonal stripes) and the non-contributing structures (white) in relation to each other.

**Ervin’s Rest**

![Ervin’s Rest](image)

Figure 13 -- Ocean and street views of Ervin’s Rest from 1998. Images courtesy of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.

In 1938, Louis Dargan Ervin had a modest two and a half story home built at 5448 Gregg Street. Ervin was one the first full time agent of the Afro-American Insurance Company. He worked for the company for sixty-three years, and worked his way up the ladder to become inspector, auditor, superintendent, manager, director, cashier, and finally the vice-president. Ervin Street was named for him. Ervin’s home on Gregg Street was one of the first houses built at American Beach. The house is on its original site, and retains its original materials, setting and feeling. The house is one of the few original oceanfront buildings in the community, and the only one that has not been significantly altered. The only alteration to the building is regarding the enclosure of the rear porch, but it was made within the first year after the house was constructed.

Ervin’s Rest is a wood frame building that was constructed over a concrete block two car garage, with its main facade facing the Atlantic Ocean. The exterior siding consists of its original asbestos shingles, and its original wooden, 2/2, double hung windows. The interior of the house is modest and floors and interior walls are made of heart pine. This house continues to reflect the character of American Beach’s original landscape. The house remained in Ervin’s family after his death, and was placed on the National Register by his granddaughter Ernestine Latson Smith in 1998.73

*Hippard House*

![Figure 14 -- Front and side view of the Hippard House from 1987. Images courtesy of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.](image)

In 1938, the Hippard House was built at 5406 Ervin Street as a vacation house for Martha Thompson Hippard, a Fernandina Beach business owner. Hippard owned and operated a business known as the Plum Garden. It was a restaurant, lounge, and rooftop bar in Fernandina Beach. She had her house constructed at the end of Ervin Street where it was slightly secluded, and the house was referred to as “Miss Martha’s Hideaway.” Besides being secluded, the house

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got its name from oral tradition stating that after the clubs and bars were closed for the evening, the “outbuilding/garage was actually used to house gambling and other recreational activities.” Other oral traditions state that the garage space actually held dances and club parties for a variety of fraternal, civic and religious organizations.

Hippard hired Frank Wayne Johnson, Sr., a Fernandina Beach builder to construct her two story, concrete block house. Johnson and his son, Frank Johnson, Jr., made the concrete blocks on site, and by hand using a form that could produce two blocks at a time. The blocks were made using a formula of two parts coquina shell (sourced from the beach), mixed with one-part cement. The house is in the Colonial Revival style and is the highest style home at American Beach. The main facade faces west onto Ervin Street and is symmetrical in elevation. It has a one story central portico with two Doric columns supporting a metal railing with balusters. The house has aluminum 6/6 windows with decorative shutters, masonry sills and cast stone lintels. While the house has had a few minor alterations over the years (enclosure and vinyl cladding of the rear porch), it still retains much of its original fabric including its carpentry work. The carpentry work is credited to Frank Xavier Mayer a German craftsman who immigrated to Fernandina Beach with his wife in 1936.

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The 60-foot dune system, Nana, is the tallest dune in Florida, and has been a reference point, and a part of the local history for centuries. MaVynee Betsch\(^{76}\) named the dune Nana and saw it as a majestic and spiritual presence at American Beach. Nana is home to a variety of species of flora and fauna, including gopher tortoises, wildflowers and butterflies. The dune system was threatened when the Amelia Island Company purchased the 100 acres of land that were a part of the original undeveloped portion of American Beach. After many years of back and forth, the developer agreed to donate the 8.5 acres of the dune system in honor of MaVynee Betsch’s conservation efforts. The dune system is now a part of the National Park Service’s Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, which is a series of sites throughout the Jacksonville area. Since the creation of a national park or preserve requires an act of Congress, the process to create the national park took longer than the community expected. Eventually, the proposal to

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\(^{76}\) MaVynee Betsch was the great-granddaughter of A.L. Lewis, and, American Beach’s fiercest advocate. She dedicated her life to the conservation and preservation of her beloved community. More of Betsch’s conservation efforts are discussed in the environmental conservation section in Chapter 5, page 91.
protect the dune system was approved and signed into legislation so it could be a part of the National Park Service.

*Evans’ Rendezvous*

![Image](image_url)

Figure 16 -- The building on the right was formerly Evans’ Rendezvous. Image courtesy of Google Maps.

Evans’ Rendezvous operated from 1948 until 1980. It was owned by Willie B. Evans, Sr., who used to frequent American Beach while he was working for the Civilian Conservation Corps in Georgia. Evans is noted to have been so impressed with the large crowds at American Beach that he decided to buy a small lot on Gregg Street. In 1942, Evans named his small wooden club, Sunny’s Spot. He was drafted for World War II that year, and did not return until the summer of 1946. When he returned, Sunny’s Spot operated day and night in celebration. The club was directly across the street from Lewis’ house and Lewis did not tolerate smoking, drinking or card playing, plus he hosted Sunday school at his home on Sunday mornings. Lewis eventually got tired of the commotion, and offered Evans a larger lot with an ocean view further down the road in exchange for his smaller lot. This move allowed Evans to create a larger building with an open porch facing the ocean. Evans’ Rendezvous became the most popular spot at the beach as it was the only place with a liquor license, and could seat two hundred people in
its dining room. It sold short orders and sandwiches, and provided entertainment. It was always packed with people and lines were out the door as it was the place to be on Friday and Saturday nights.77

_A.L. Lewis’ House_

Figure 17 -- Current view of A.L. Lewis’ home, the first home on American Beach. Image courtesy of Bruce Stambaugh.

In 1938, A.L. Lewis’ home at 5466 Gregg Street, was the first house constructed on American Beach. It is an important landmark for the community as it signaled the beginning of the community’s historic and lively past. Lewis eventually sold this home to his son, and moved into a newer home next door. There is now a historic marker outside of the residence, letting locals and visitors know of the importance of this building. According the National Register nomination for the American Beach Historic District, the house no longer retains its original character due to the alterations over the years. The house was said to originally be a frame vernacular house with wooden siding. The building is now resurfaced in stucco and does not

77 Phelts, _An American Beach for African Americans_, 90-95.
contain its original fenestration. The home still stands as a dedication to Lewis and his hard work and efforts to create such an important ocean side community.

*Burney Park*

![Figure 18 -- Aerial of Burney Park looking south. Image courtesy of Google Maps.](image)

In 1990, a six-acre public park known as Burney Park was dedicated at American Beach. It is the second largest beachfront park in Nassau County, and the first park in the county to honor an African American. Isadore H. Burney, II was president of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company from 1967 to 1975. He was the only president of the company who was not related to Lewis and his descendants by blood or marriage. Burney Park has multiple facilities for people to use and has become a popular destination for locals and visitors alike. There are several events and community activities at the park throughout the year. The most popular event is hosted by the American Beach Property Owners’ Association and is known as “An American Beach Jazz Festival.” The festival takes places over the summer and includes a series of concerts that hearken back to a time when American Beach was the place in the southeast for African American beach front entertainment. Burney Park is also one of the last public beach access
points on the south end of Amelia Island. The last two miles are composed of beach front resorts or private access through gated communities.

**Architectural and Urban Form**

American Beach has a unique and endearing character, and represents the time and place in which it was created. American Beach was originally a vacation spot, and not home to a large year round community. Thus, most of the architecture is small in scale and simple in design. The community is modest, because it was an affordable place where the average person could live. The community consists of mostly small single family homes, with a few multi-family structures scattered throughout the community. There are several connecting streets with a few dead ends, some of the roads are paved, but several are dirt roads. The community is walkable and the streets are laid out in a grid like fashion, with small lots that measure fifty feet by one-hundred feet. Out of the total number of lots (323), only 122 are occupied by buildings, and approximately two-thirds of those buildings were constructed by 1965; the rest of the lots are vacant. Of these blocks and lots, only 23 blocks and 204 lots are within the National Register district. The other buildings were constructed either after the period of significance, have lost their integrity over the years, or were demolished. While there are multiple buildings in the community, the historic district has 67 contributing buildings and one contributing structure to the district. Most of the buildings are predominately single-family homes that are privately owned. As noted above, most of the structures were built as vacation homes and have little to no formal architectural style, and are either frame or masonry vernacular construction. The few buildings that do have architectural elements are associated with the late 19th and early 20th century revivals, specifically Colonial Revival. The houses that are wood frame are typically constructed

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78 These figures of occupied and vacant lots came from the 2002 National Register Form for the American Beach Historic District. Additional homes have been added, and some removed since this survey was conducted.
on a raised pier foundation, while the masonry buildings are constructed on concrete slab, or continuous foundations. The masonry elements tend to be concrete block, as is typical with beach houses. Most of the houses were constructed with front or side porches, but many of them have been enclosed over the years to allow for extra living space. As for the roof lines within the community, most of the buildings have front or side gable roofs, with gently sloping roofs and hipped roofs being few in number. The original double hung wooden sash windows are rare, as they have been replaced with more contemporary aluminum windows. Contemporary windows in the community consist of casement, crank, jalousie, fixed, and plate glass windows, with some sliding doors to let in more light. With regard to siding seen throughout the community, much of it is artificial siding (asbestos siding is some of the original fabric, but aluminum and vinyl siding tend to be seen on buildings after the period of significance) with some natural finishes including wood or stucco. Typical commercial construction consists of buildings constructed out of concrete block on a concrete slab. The only structure in the historic district is the well that was drilled in the 1930s. It is enclosed by a wooden structure, and continues to serve the community’s water needs.79

Threats

The community faces a number of threats including loss from neglect, loss from incompatible development, and loss from natural disasters. But there are also threats that are visual, physical, and material. These types of threats include carless renovations and additions, buildings that are a lot larger than the rest of the structures, and the use of different or incompatible materials. With regard to visual threats, the removal of natural vegetation like the thick canopy of the maritime forest, or the disruption of the sea grass, wildflowers and sand dunes would threaten the visual aspects of the community and also some ecological processes. The

natural vegetation helps add to the community’s surroundings. Physical threats that might affect the character of American Beach include the threat of over renovation and new development. Developers have been known to purchase inexpensive houses and land and build something that they or their client want, without any regard to the surrounding area. The lack of regard to the community’s characteristics and surroundings results in a property which is too expensive and insensitive to the neighborhood. This leads to the possible pricing out of the longtime residents in the community. Also, these properties do not fit within the harmony of the neighborhood. Material threats are also common among new development and renovations. The most common materials used in building at American Beach are concrete block, stucco, and wood siding, with some synthetic materials such as asbestos or vinyl siding. If a structure was built with large amounts of glass or metal, it would be incompatible with the cottage style and simpler single family vernacular homes in the community. To be able to avoid threats from incompatible development, there should be set goals and objectives that are able to promote the original integrity of the community, but allow for new development. The development would help to economically revitalize the community, but the development should be sensitive to the community while also being representative of its own time.

American Beach is a unique African American coastal community in Florida. It has experienced a lot in its eighty plus year history. There have been reasons for celebration and times of despair, but this community has kept a hold of its history and character. There is always going to be a threat from outside forces when there is a community in such an ideal location. While much of the original acreage has been lost and turned into large developments, the core of American Beach and its heart is still there. The community needs to find a way or a variety of ways to make sure that American Beach is protected and around for generations to come. The next chapter addresses what current protections are in place, and which ones need work.
CHAPTER 5: EXISTING PROTECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

While American Beach has issues with regard to overdevelopment in the surrounding areas, there is a small but passionate group of people who want to protect this special place. It is due to their hard work over the years that American Beach still retains much of its historic fabric. There have been changes in the area, but due to the amount of support the community has received thus far, it is possible to find ways that will keep American Beach protected. This chapter discusses what kinds of infrastructure and protections are currently in place, and if they have or have not been successful. If measures have been successful, an examination of why they are successful is stated. If the measures are ineffective, an analysis of what needs to be done to improve them follows. These examinations are important with regard to understanding the future protections of American Beach.

Lack of Infrastructure

One of the reasons American Beach has been mostly spared from development is due to a lack of infrastructure within the community. The houses and buildings lack municipal services and utilities. There are also several unpaved roads, minimal fire hydrants and a lack of street lights. There is a small utility provider in the community, American Beach Villas, who provides water to the former A.L. Lewis Motel and a few other residents. There are restrictions when it comes to the septic and well placement on the lots. The setback restrictions require the septic system to be at least five feet from the house, and 75 feet from the well. These restrictions limit the size and square footage of the homes within the community, but, it is possible to ask for a variance from the state. These homes are able to hook up to Nassau County’s utilities if the property is located towards the south end of American Beach, near Burney Park. Since the county owns the park, they provide services to its facilities. The houses at this end of American Beach tend to be newer and larger, and have modern conveniences with regard to their plumbing
and water. Due to the lack of utilities and infrastructure at American Beach, it has made it difficult for properties to be sold thereby protecting the character of the area. The small 50’ by 100’ lots have also helped keep developers at bay. These small lots are all individually and privately owned, which makes it difficult to buy up any number of them to develop.

While the lack of infrastructure has had a preserving effect on the community, it is not the best solution for the future of American Beach. There are inevitable issues with a lack of proper water and waste facilities. Septic tanks always have the possibility of overflowing or seeping into the ground, which will then affect the drinking water of those using the well. There is also always a risk of fire, and the lack of fire hydrants and water pressure put the community at risk of loss due to natural causes. The possibility of hooking American Beach up to the county’s utilities has been a polarizing issue. There are some residents who are in favor of having updated and proper infrastructure and services. These people want to see American Beach move forward and adapt in a positive and progressive way. Other residents do not want to be a part of the county’s grid because of the costs of adding the improvements, and thus the possibility of being pushed out due to higher property taxes and expenses. In 2013, Nassau County had GAI Engineering, Planning & Environmental Consulting, a Jacksonville based company do a study on how to provide reliable public water service, sewage collection and fire protection for American Beach. The study cost Nassau County $10,000 and considered various options as to what the cost to provide services would be. The study found that to provide services to 319 lots was $1.1 million for water and $2.2 million for sewer. This would make the property owners each pay “$26,144, including a one-time payment of $8,869 and a 15-year annual assessment fee of $1,151.”

While the plan provides safe and reliable water, sewer systems, and fire protection,

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the cost of the project is way too expensive for most of the residents of the community. There is a need for updating the community and connecting it with the rest of Nassau County, but unless there are federal and state grants, or private funds, the cost of adding utilities to the community is always going to be a battle.

American Beach has issues with loss due to neglect, and this has caused the community to become blighted. While blight has many different meanings, including its historical context of referring to unsanitary housing conditions, and the need to control and sterilize these communities. Blight with regard to American Beach refers to the “physical changes of properties and that harmful impacts that blighted properties have on the life cycle of neighborhoods and residents along with the legal and policy strategies deployed by communities to combat blight’s secondary effects.”

Some of the secondary effects from vacant, substandard, and abandoned homes and lots includes decline in property values, decline in construction loans, lack of investment from the public, cost increase for local governmental officials (police and fire), clean up and removal costs, and maintenance costs. There are a variety of houses and building types in the community, including abandoned buildings, modest and well-kept single family homes, and even some large million dollar properties. The variety of building types is due to the differences of the residents in the community, and these differences have added to growing tensions with regard to how to solve the issue of blight. In the past, there have been efforts made to establish a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) for American Beach. Under Florida Law (Chapter 163, Part III of the Florida Statutes), “local governments are able to designate areas as CRAs when certain conditions exist. Such as: the presences of substandard or inadequate

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82 “Charting the Multiple Meanings of Blight,” 5.
structures, a shortage of affordable housing, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient roadways and inadequate parking.”

The Community Redevelopment Act was adopted in 1969, and its purpose is to help revitalize downtowns, preserve historic structures, and enhance the community and designated a CRA district. To be able to document the required conditions listed above, the local government must conduct and prepare a report called a “Finding of Necessity.” This report determines if those required conditions exist which then allows the local government to establish a community redevelopment agency and create a CRA to: “improve their targeted areas,” exercise the powers of a local government, and finance the project. CRAs are funded through Tax Increment Financing and revenue bonds. This type of financing system is successful because it “provides specific public services without increasing or levying any new taxes.” How that works is by determining the value of real property from a fixed date. This fixed date allows for a frozen tax base. The increase in “total taxable property value between the base year and year two is called ‘the increment.’” The total tax increment revenues are deposited into the CRA’s trust fund for use in redevelopment projects only within the CRA district.” This allows for any money paid on the properties within the CRA to be funneled back into the community, ultimately acting as a revolving fund to help with preservation and community needs.

Currently, the Nassau County Planning Department has been in talks with the American Beach Property Owners’ Association, Inc. to once again try to establish a CRA. The first CRA was originally prepared for the Association, and for consideration by the Nassau County

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85 Cruz, “Community Redevelopment Agencies,” 1.
86 “Establishing a Community Redevelopment Area in Your Waterfront Community,” Prepared by the University of Florida Levin College of Law, 3.
Commission in September of 2001. Unfortunately, the proposal was not accepted due to internal issues and community disagreement. At the time of the first CRA, “several members of the homeowners association asked Nassau County commissioners to declare the beach blighted and create a Community Redevelopment Agency.” 87 These members wanted a CRA so that tax money could be used within the community for improvements to the beach’s infrastructure. The property owners in disagreement with this plan did not want the CRA because it would “drive up property values and create an incentive for people to sell out.” Those property owners sued to stop the CRA, and the plan ultimately fell through due to lack of support. 88 The proponents for the redevelopment and rehabilitation of American Beach are pushing for the CRA because there are health concerns for the community due to the lack of adequate water and sewage disposal. The hope of the Nassau County Planning Department is that the CRA will allow for the proper infrastructure to be added to the community to improve the lives of the residents.

The idea of redevelopment and rehabilitation, along with updated roads, and proper water and sewage have added to the uneasiness of the community. These changes bring concerns that the plan would make it easier for developers to encroach even further on the remaining acreage. The health and safety of those living in the community are important to keeping the area vibrant, which includes adding proper sanitary needs that meet code. Meeting these needs and keeping the community as undiluted as possible is a high priority to making sure the authenticity and character of this historic beach remains for years to come. To be able to successfully designate American Beach as a CRA, the plan needs to have the support of the members of the community. Without the communities support and understanding of the process, the CRA will be shut down again.

Neighboring Fernandina Beach

Fernandina Beach is the only incorporated municipality on Amelia Island. The city is located on the northern end of the island and has two historic districts: the Old Town Historic District and the Downtown Historic District. This section will look at the history of each of these historic districts, and the historic preservation guidelines associated with each district. The analysis of these historic districts will give a better insight as to how American Beach could possibly create its own recognized historic district.

Old Town Historic District

The area that is now known as Old Town was originally settled by the local Native Americans, the Timucuans. The area was chosen due to its location along the Amelia River and because of the high and dry ground and the fertile soil. The area was originally the site of the town of Fernandina, and named for King Ferdinand VII of Spain. It was platted in 1811 by the Spanish, and was the last town platted in the Laws of the Indies in the Western Hemisphere. The original grid was over 26 blocks and mostly remains to the present day. The forty contributing structures that exist in Old Town date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The full block of green space that overlooks the Amelia River was included in the original design, and is known as the San Carlos Plaza. This green space is now administered by Fort Clinch State Park. The area also contains a historic cemetery (Bosque Bello Cemetery), which takes up two of the blocks. Fortunately, Old Town has been relatively preserved from development due to its

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89 Laws of the Indies was a planning edict from 1573 that contained an entire body of laws, with 148 principles governing the planning and development of a town. The Laws were issued by the Spanish Crown during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries while it governed its American and Philippine possessions of the Spanish Empire. The Laws regulated social, political and economic life. While the laws were criticized they were also the most comprehensive laws instituted for a colonial empire, and also set forth humane principles for the treatment of Native Americans. “Laws of the Indies,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed January 2018, https://www.britannica.com/event/Laws-of-the-Indies.
geographic location. The area is encompassed by salt marshes, Egan's creek and the Amelia River. The streetscape of the area keeps with the tradition of rural settlements; there are only a few paved roads, with several that are composed of crushed shells, the roads are minimal widths, there are no sidewalks, and there is a green space for the right of way.

Figure 19 -- Old Town Fernandina Plat from 1811. Image courtesy of the Old Town Fernandina Preservation and Development Guidelines.
Old Town has its own set of Preservation and Development Guidelines that were created in 1999 and updated in 2013. These guidelines were created to “preserve the town plan and guide Old Town through a period of inevitable growth.” The guideline sets out four goals for Old Town’s preservation: “[1] Maintain the same configuration of land use fitted to the lot sizes of the Spanish plate in order to make a spatial connection to the history of the Old Town. [2] Encourage inventive ways of adapting contemporary building practices to historical constraints. [3] Enable the design of diverse outdoor spaces to encourage public interaction and maintain privacy. [4] Design buildings and landscape to reinforce the order of the historic city plan.”90 The Guidelines give a historical overview of Old Town including the Laws of the Indies, the grid pattern, the importance of place, and the town's development over time. This section of the Guidelines is critical because it gives the reason for the area's historical significance. The next sections within the Guidelines discusses the existing conditions of the area, the building typology and the design guidelines for rehabilitation and new construction, and the overall setting and landscape and how that plays a role in the area. The Guidelines very clearly layout what is recommended for each section, what to avoid and what is prohibited. There are photographs and diagrams of what is typical in the community to give the reader a visual to relate to, and to show the historic fabric. These guidelines help keep the area's character and historical significance intact.

Downtown Historic District

In the 1850s, the town moved to its current location (south of Old Town), due to the construction of the railroad. The railroad was sponsored by United States Senator, and President of the newly formed railroad, David Levy Yulee. Yulee is one of the most influential men in the

history of Florida. He chose Fernandina as the starting point of the Florida Railroad because of its deep harbor on the Amelia River. In 1855, construction for the railroad began near Old Town, but the railroad had to be moved due to the marshy land that surrounded the area. In 1861, the completed rail line connected Fernandina Beach to Cedar Key (a town on the West coast of Florida). This new line of transportation helped create new development in Fernandina. During the Civil War the development of Fernandina and the railroad's expansion halted, but the 1870s and 1880s saw Fernandina prospering once again. Many of the contributing buildings in the historic district are from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
Figure 20 -- 2012 City of Fernandina Beach Historic Districts and CRA Map. Map courtesy of the City of Fernandina Beach.
The City of Fernandina Beach's Downtown Historic District Design Guidelines were originally created in 1999, and updated and expanded in 2013 to “provide applicants and the Historic District Council with clear and detailed standards to guide rehabilitation and new construction within the historic district,” and to “preserve and maintain the vitality and livability of the city's historic residential and commercial areas.” In 1975, the Historic District Council (HDC) was established to be the City of Fernandina Beach’s “primary agency responsible for furthering historic preservation within the city.” The council is made up of five regular members with two alternates. The positions are appointed by the City Commission for terms of three years. The HDC acts as a design review board and regulates exterior alterations, repairs, demolition, new construction, moving of structures, landscape features, etc., within the historic districts and the CRA. The HDC’s purpose is to make sure that any proposed changes are sensitive to the districts and are compatible with the existing historic fabric. The HDC has five main goals for the City of Fernandina Beach that protect the city's cultural and architectural heritage. Those goals include: “[1] Safeguarding the City's historic architectural resources by applying The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the City's Land Development Code and applicable design guidelines fairly and consistently in reviewing applications for Certificates of Approval; [2] Seeking or assisting others seeking National Register listing for historic properties; [3] Monitoring the health of the City's historic districts through periodic re-surveys; [4] Recommending administrative changes as required to strengthen code and guidelines for dealing with matters that affect preservation of historic properties, districts and sites, and other cultural

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and archaeological resources; and [5] Fostering and encouraging the preservation of private and public historic, cultural, and archaeological resources through public education.\footnote{City of Fernandina Beach Downtown Historic District Design Guidelines, 6.}

In 2005, the City of Fernandina Beach established the CRA along the riverfront. The CRA was created to revitalize the area and boost development. The riverfront had always been a working waterfront that was centered on Fernandina’s shrimping industry. While no historic or contributing structures remain, the guidelines were adopted to make sure the development of the riverfront stays true to its heritage.\footnote{Building in the Downtown + Old Town Historic Districts and the Community Redevelopment Area, City of Fernandina Beach, August 2013, \url{https://www.fbfl.us/DocumentCenter/Home/View/1662}.} The City of Fernandina Beach’s Community Development Department created a simple brochure for homeowners that lays out the “Do’s” and “Don’ts” of building within the historic districts and the CRA. This brochure clearly lays out what the Historic District Council has to approve, and that each historic district and the CRA have their own set of design guidelines that must be followed accordingly. This simple brochure provides valuable information to the homeowners and residents, as well as providing protections at the local level to keep these areas safe from overdevelopment.

Old Town Fernandina Beach and Downtown Fernandina Beach are relevant to American Beach because they are within the same county’s jurisdiction. All three communities have unique historical and cultural elements. There is an abundance of historic fabric with regard to architecture, the original community grids, and the overall feel and landscape of these communities. Old Town and Fernandina Beach have used tax incentives, and federal, state, local and non-profit funding to become successful historic districts. The city of Fernandina Beach is responsible for its own historic districts and has government entities to provide services to those historic districts. The city has also used the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards as guidelines to create a certified local government with its own Historic District Council, and National Register
Historic Districts. Since American Beach is not a part of Fernandina Beach, it has a much more difficult time creating a local historic district.

The community can create its own guidelines that protect it from unfavorable development. The Old Town Preservation and Development Guidelines would be a good example to follow because of the group of people who helped develop the guidelines. The University of Florida’s College of Architecture students and facility from the Preservation Institute: Caribbean, along with residents, the City of Fernandina Beach Community Development Department, the Historic District Council and the City Commission of Fernandina all assisted with the guidelines. The Preservation Institute: Caribbean notes in the Preface that their emphasis is to “provide growth management assistance in the form of documentation, design proposals and educational workshops to historic seacoast communities under development pressures from commercial tourism.”

This group would be a beneficial resource to American Beach in creating preservation related guidelines for the community, and American Beach could apply for grants and funding to help with the completion of the guidelines.

Legal Resources -- Florida and Nassau County

The legal documents analyzed for this section include Florida Statutes, Nassau County Laws, and additional local laws and regulations. The importance of analyzing these laws was to see if there were any protections already enacted that could protect American Beach such as: special zoning for the community, the creation of a historic district, or the implementation of some type of environmental protection for American Beach. These laws, ordinances, and regulations are useful in determining what the community has to protect itself already, and what the starting point is for more robust protection.

F.S. 267.061 - Historic properties; state policy, responsibilities.

This statute provides protections for the state of Florida’s rich and unique heritage and its historic properties. The state’s resources are important to its legacy and should be valued and conserved for present and future generations. The statute notes that “The destruction of these nonrenewable historical resources will engender a significant loss to the state’s quality of life, economy, and cultural environment.” This statute is also meant to assist local governments to “expand and accelerate their historic preservation programs and activities.” This statute discusses the responsibilities of the state that it must: care for, consider the effect of, avoid or mitigate harm, locate, inventory and evaluate, and in general assume responsibility for all state owned historic properties. This statute is relevant because it describes how the state of Florida is responsible for those properties that are on, or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This is important to American Beach because it has two properties listed on the National Register, as well as having its historic district on the Register. This statute also allows for the possibility of state funding for historic properties.

F.S. 267.074 - State Historical Marker Program

This statute is responsible for informing the general public about “persons, events, structures, and other topics relating to the history and culture of the state.” It is also meant to “encourage interest in preserving the historical resources of the state and its localities,” as well as to “promote a sense of community and place among Florida citizens; and provide for the enjoyment and edification of tourists.” The state’s marker program is important with regard to American Beach since there are five historical markers in the community. There is a marker on the corner of Lewis Street and Ocean Boulevard that describes “Historic American Beach,” a marker at on Ervin Street in front of “Martha’s Hideaway,” a marker along Ocean Boulevard in front of “A Dune System Called ‘Nana’,” a marker at 5466 Gregg Street paying tribute to the
“First Home on American Beach,” and last but not least, there is a marker at 5448 Gregg Street noting another important home “Ervin’s Rest.” These historical markers add value to the community and allow those new to the area to understand the importance of American Beach and its history. The Florida Historical Markers Program is meant as an educational tool and does not protect the building, structure, or landscape it is associated with. In addition, the property owner is not prohibited from taking action on their property.

Nassau County Laws

While Nassau County has general zoning codes set up for the county, there are several zoning codes that are specific to certain areas of Amelia Island including Old Town and American Beach. The zoning overlay came about because residents of American Beach were tired of seeing large scale planned developments going up around them, and were afraid those developers would encroach on their community. The residents fought hard for special zoning codes. Those codes were approved by the Board of County Commissioners in December 2002, and are now the main governing force in the community. American Beach has zoning codes for single, and multifamily buildings, as well as zoning for commercial areas of its community. The different types of zoning allow for the community to have small businesses that enhance the character and are reminiscent of the history of the bustling beach days.

This zoning code's intent is to “protect and preserve the unique residential character of American Beach, and to allow for the orderly expansion of single-family development in the American Beach area.” This zoning code goes into specifics with regard to permitted uses and structures, as well as their permitted accessory structures (garages, sheds, etc.), and how those additional structures must be compatible with the original building. This zoning code goes into depth with regard to specifics about the minimum lot requirements, the minimum yard requirements for a non-beach side lot and beach side lots. The zoning code has building restrictions that include a maximum building height of thirty-five feet, and a maximum lot coverage of forty-five percent. Additional requirements discuss parking, and lot coverage for single family dwellings. Most of the buildings in the community fit within, and follow the zoning codes. There are a few newer buildings (from 2006 and 2009) that look like they might be larger with regard to height, scale and mass. If those buildings did not follow the zoning codes, then the zoning codes either need to be more tightly enforced, or there should be less variances granted.

Article 12-A. -- Residential, General I -- American Beach: RG-1AB

This zoning code allows for a medium density residential areas with higher than average concentrations of persons and vehicles. This zoning area needs to be able to be properly served by public and commercial services, and have convenient access to thoroughfares. This zoning district also requires the need for open space due to the various types of residences and expected density of the zoning use. The permitted uses and structures for this zoning district include

96 All information regarding the special zoning of American Beach is taken directly from the Nassau County Code of Ordinances, and accessible online through Municipal Code Corporation (Municode). Municode is an online database and the “largest private sector publisher of municipal ordinances, responsible for the codification and publication of municipal codes for more than 2,700 cities and counties in all 50 states.” “What is Municode?” Municode, October 17, 2017, accessed February 2018, https://support.municode.com/support/solutions/articles/195672-what-is-municode-.
single-family dwellings, duplexes and townhouses, and multiple family dwellings. The different types of buildings are restricted to certain sides of the street and in certain parts of the community. This zoning code also addresses permitted accessory buildings and structures. The conditional uses for this area follow Article 28, Section 18.14 which allows for home occupations, day nurseries, schools, churches, cemeteries, etc. The minimum lot requirements and the minimum yard requirements for the residential general zoning district are discussed in length for each type of building/structure. This zoning code also limits the height of the buildings, the maximum lot coverage for each building type, and the maximum density. It also addresses parking and accessory buildings. This zoning code fits with most of the buildings within the community, although there are some that look like they might be larger with regard to height, scale and mass. If those buildings did not follow the zoning codes, then the zoning codes either need to be enforced more, or there should be less variances granted.

Article 15-A. -- Commercial, Neighborhood -- American Beach: CN-AB

This zoning code allows for small groups of selected establishments to be located approximately and serve the neighborhood. This commercial zoning is not intended for use by major commercial or service establishments. It does permit small-scale retail businesses, service establishments, and professional or business offices. The zoning codes for commercial buildings have guidelines with regard to the permitted uses, accessory structures, special restrictions and conditional uses. The code also addresses the building size, lot and yard requirements, as well as the height, scale and massing of the buildings. This zoning code relates to the commercial aspect of American Beach. Since the creation of the zoning codes, minimal commercial buildings have been added to the community and thus there is not enough evidence to support the strength of this zoning code.
This zoning code limits general commercial uses, but allows for the retail and service needs of the community through small businesses. These businesses are designed to primarily service the community for which they are built. The zoning codes cover permitted uses and structures including, but not limited to, retail stores, bakeries, florists, hotels, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, private clubs, and indoor commercial recreation centers. There are permitted accessory uses for a single family dwelling and conditional uses for childcare centers, churches, private schools, and establishments selling alcoholic beverages. The special restrictions for this district include: the proper location of the sale of alcoholic beverages in relation to churches and schools, on-street parking, and, if an area is designated as Conservation (Wetlands) on the Future Land Use Map, only passive recreation and silviculture⁹⁷ are permitted. This zoning code also addresses minimum lot requirements, maximum building height, maximum lot coverage by all buildings (including accessory buildings), and minimum landscaping. This zoning code relates to the commercial aspect of American Beach. Since the creation of the zoning codes, minimal commercial buildings have been added to the community and thus there is not enough evidence to support the strength of this zoning code. A zoning overlay of American Beach can be found in Figure 21. This map shows the current zoning codes for American Beach and the surrounding areas, and how those zoning codes and ordinances relate to each other. While the overlay zoning codes for American Beach are clearly laid out above, if these codes are not well adhered to incompatible development will be allowed to overtake the community.

⁹⁷ According to the U.S. Forest Service, silviculture is the “art and science of controlling the establishment, growth, composition, health, and quality of forests and woodlands to meet the diverse needs and values of landowners and society such as wildlife habitat, timber, water resources, restoration, and recreation on a sustainable basis.”

Article II - Amelia Island Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission

Nassau County has the ability to create a historical commission, the commission’s duties and responsibilities are outlined below. The Amelia Island Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission was created to “acquire, restore, preserve, maintain, reconstruct, reproduce and operate for the use, benefit, education, recreation, enjoyment and general welfare of the people of this state and nation, certain ancient or historic landmarks, sites, cemeteries, graves, military works, monuments, locations, remains, buildings and other objects of historical or antiquarian interest of the City of Fernandina Beach, Nassau County, and surrounding territory.” This commission consists of five members appointed by the governor. Members of the original board are appointed for terms as follows: one person serves for two years, two people serve for three years, two people serve for years, and any additional members serve for four years, except appointments to fill vacancies for unexpired terms. The members, including
the chairman receive no compensation, but are reimbursed for travel expenses. The existence of this article is important with regard to American Beach. It notes that Nassau County has legislation in place to create a commission whose mission is to protect the history and culture of Nassau County. Fernandina Beach used this article to create its Historic District Commission, and the commission’s jurisdiction could possibly reach to benefit American Beach.

Environmental Resources

Coastal Erosion and Natural Disasters

With regard to coastal management, Florida has a federally approved Coastal Management Program Guide, which was last updated on June 25, 2014, by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The goal of the program is to promote effective protections and use of the land and water resources of the coastal areas of the state. This document is important because it provides protections and regulations for areas where there are natural resources as well as cultural or historic resources. With regard to Amelia Island, there is an Amelia Island Beach Renourishment Municipal Service Taxing Unit (the MSTU can be found in Sec. 5-5 of the Nassau County Code of Ordinances), that was put in place to “fund beach renourishment, restoration, erosion control and storm protection within the MSTU.” There are certain costs that are associated with the MSTU that can be allocated between the beach renourishment MSTU and areas on Amelia Island that are not within the boundaries. The areas not within the MSTU will receive help based on the amounts of service provided in the area (whether an area is incorporated or unincorporated). The City of Fernandina Beach is included within the MSTU and thus receives benefits of the taxing unit. The creation of the Amelia Island Beach Renourishment Municipal Service Taxing Unit was created as a new taxing unit that “shall be coterminal with the unincorporated areas of the county lying on Amelia Island and the
incorporated areas of the City of Fernandina Beach.\footnote{All information came from Section 5-5 of the Nassau County, Florida Code of Ordinances known as Amelia Island Beach Renourishment Municipal Service Taxing Unit. This document was accessed on Municode in October 2017.} The areas of Amelia Island not included in the MSTU are the areas the South Amelia Island Shore Stabilization Municipal Service Benefit Unit has jurisdiction over.

The South Amelia Island Shore Stabilization Association (SAISSA) was formed in 1993. SAISSA was created in response to a strong six-day storm that occurred the year before, and left the natural sand dunes almost completely destroyed, and also threatened several of the buildings along the shoreline. The SAISSA’s purpose is “to protect, preserve, restore and enhance the beach/dune system on the South end of Amelia Island.”\footnote{“What is the South Amelia Island Shore Stabilization Association?” South Amelia Island Shore Stabilization Association, accessed March 2018. http://www.saissa.com/home.asp.} The association has worked to find solutions to restore and stabilize the shoreline. SAISSA works with consultants, state and federal officials, and property owners to finance and figure out solutions for these large scale renourishment projects. SAISSA has completed three separate beach renourishment projects (and constructed three structures) since 1994. The last project that was completed was in 2011, and the SAISSA partnered with the Florida Park Service and Nassau County to restore the eroded shoreline. After the September 2017 impact of the shoreline by Irma, the SAISSA has been authorized to have a preliminary damage assessment conducted by Olsen Associates (a Coastal Engineering consulting firm). While the SAISSA is an association that is very involved in the rehabilitation, re-nourishment and protection of the shoreline of southern Amelia Island, they unfortunately do not handle the shoreline associated with American Beach. SAISSA’s jurisdiction only covers the geographical boundaries south of Burney Park until the northern boundary of Amelia Island State Park. The shoreline that receives the benefit of the SAISSA is the section of Amelia Island that is home to the Amelia Island Plantation, which encompasses a
golf resort, hotel, private residences and private beach access within the gated community. This private community receives the benefits because they have home owner fees that cover the cost of the beach renourishment projects.

As for the northern end of Amelia Island, there have been several renourishment projects over the years. The City of Fernandina Beach is the local sponsor for these projects which are a part of federal shore protection projects. These projects were first studied in the 1940s, but not authorized until the 1970s. It was not until 2008 that construction began by the Jacksonville Division of the United States Army Corps of Engineers.100 The most recent project was started in December 2017 as a renourishment project for the eroded shoreline due to Hurricane Irma. The project was authorized due to the Water Resources Development Act of 1988.101 This agreement authorized the United States Navy, and the Army Corps of Engineers to partake in the Nassau County Shore Protection Project. The Army Corps of Engineers awarded a nearly $33 million contract to the Dutra Group102 for the completion of the project. The project included a maintenance dredging of U.S. Naval Station Kings Bay to provide for deep-water passage of Trident Class submarines to their home base in St. Marys, Georgia.103 The dredged sand was then placed on critically eroded portions of Fernandina Beach, many of which were not routinely

102 The Dutra Group is made up of three distinct companies that work together to provide dredging and construction services as well as some materials (in the form of aggregates). The company has been around since 1904, and handles land and marine construction. “About,” The Dutra Group, accessed March 2018, http://www.dutragroup.com/home-aggregates-dredging-marine-construction.html.
103 St. Marys, Georgia is located just north of Amelia Island. The St. Marys River is the body of water that separates northeast Florida from southeast Georgia.
renourished. The beach renourishment started at Fort Clinch State Park’s coastal boundary (at the northernmost part of Amelia Island) and went south until Sadler Road, placing approximately 740,000 cubic yards of sand at Fernandina Beach. The project was expected to take three months, and end in March 2018 to allow for turtles to be undisturbed during nesting season. Due to the use of dredging sands to be placed on the shoreline this project was unique because of its cost sharing component that creates a savings of approximately $13.5 million. While the dredged sand did not make it the entire length of the shoreline, the natural down drifts associated with the coastline allowed for the shoreline further south to reap the benefits of the added sand.

Unfortunately, this most recent project did not encompass American Beach, but it proved that there is a way to protect the coastline from erosion and natural disasters. As noted above, Section 5-5 of the Nassau County Code of Ordinances does cover the unincorporated areas of Amelia Island. Since there is only a minimal amount of service provided by the county, the area is not as high of a priority.

The state of Florida does have coastal management programs and strategies in place for the areas that are the most populated, but tends not to do as much with the less populated areas. This issue can be due to financial issues and the lack of the communities paying taxes. Private areas are protected because they require their residents to pay fees which allows for funding and the ability to buy protections. American Beach is in need of federal, state, and local coastal protections to make sure that its coastline is also taken care of and nourished accordingly.

104 Fort Clinch State Park is a 1,400-acre park on the northernmost end of Amelia Island. The fort was built by 1847, and was used during the Civil War and Spanish American War. There are daily reenactments, monthly events that show the daily life of the Union soldiers, and galleries to explore around the grounds. The park also includes a variety of outdoor activities including camping, hiking, biking and swimming. “Fort Clinch,” National Park Service, accessed March 2018. https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/geo-flor/18.htm and “Fort Clinch State Park,” Florida State Parks, accessed March 2018, https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Fort-Clinch.

Disaster Planning

As for disaster planning for the state, Florida’s Division of Historical Resources and Division of Emergency Management created a manual in September 2003. The manual focuses on steps that local communities can take to make sure that local historic resources are considered when they are planning for emergencies and disasters. The *Disaster Planning for Florida’s Historic Resources* came about to address the unique needs of historic resources with regard to pre and post disaster planning. The manual includes steps to “improve coordination between emergency management and historic preservation efforts within a community in order to reduce disaster-related damage and rebuild local economies more quickly.” To improve disaster planning with regard to historic resources, the manual notes that there is often a lack of coordination between emergency management services and historic preservation in most local communities. This lack of: coordination, identification of historic sites, inadequate information, inadequate training, and hands-on experience severely limits local communities with regard to protecting their historic resources. The manual gives recommendations on how a local community without a proper plan in place can start to think about and prepare for the protection of their cultural resources. The manual mentions creating (and maintaining) an inventory of the area; establishing a network of preservation professionals to help with disaster preparation and recovery; developing review procedures for historic preservation that will be implemented in an emergency; and developing site specific plans for individual resources. Without proper preparation, post-disaster recovery could severely disturb historic sites and resources, creating further loss. Proper incorporation of historic resources into the local disaster management plan allows for timely access from qualified experts and the salvaging of historic properties. The most

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common concerns related to historic preservation that occur after a disaster have to do with clean up and repairs. Without the proper plan in place for these historic resources, restorable buildings are torn down, significant architectural elements are discarded, inappropriate repairs are hastily done, and archaeological resources are disturbed.\textsuperscript{107}

Most recently, the University of Florida’s Levin College of Law prepared a guide with the help of the National Park Service to “Protect Florida’s History from Hazards.” The document incorporates cultural resources and historic properties into the emergency management framework. The document discusses actions that should be taken under the National Flood Insurance Program, and how to address hazard mitigation in comprehensive planning. This document is helpful for coastal regions and allows for the preparation of historic and culturally rich sites in case of a natural disaster. The program was put in place as a precautionary guide to protect cultural resources in Florida. Like American Beach, Florida’s cultural resources add to a community’s sense of place and contribute to the quality of life for those in the area. In the document, case studies were done around Florida, and in particular in Fernandina Beach. These studies and objectives are a good guide for Florida’s resources.

With regard to the local strategies in place for American Beach, Nassau County’s Emergency Management Department has a Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS) Task Force that is responsible for a large body of work. The LMS Task Force is responsible for evaluating historical incident date, climate, and population trends, comprehensive land use and development plans, and local resources. They are also responsible for identifying local vulnerabilities and possible hazards. The task force estimates potential damage and losses, economic impacts, and disruption of services. Then the task force must “solicit, propose, and prioritize mitigation

\textsuperscript{107} 1000 Friends of Florida, \textit{Disaster Planning for Florida’s Historic Resources}, pg. 18.
projects for implementation when funding is made available.” The task force develops a mitigation plan for Nassau County in its entirety, and that document is a living document under regular review. The LMS Task Force meets quarterly to discuss new projects, incidents that have occurred, change in priorities for the county, etc. The task force is essential to Nassau County’s preparedness in case there is an emergency.

In 2015, Nassau County repealed an old ordinance and amended the Nassau County Code of Ordinances to adopt a new flood plain ordinance (Ordinance 2015-16). The intent of the ordinance was to establish minimum requirements to “safeguard the public health, safety, and general welfare and to minimize public and private losses due to flooding through regulation of development in flood hazard areas.” Along with addressing flooding in Nassau County, this ordinance also addresses historic buildings (Section 107.4) and grants them a variance with regard to the flood resistant construction requirements of the Florida Building Code, (Existing Building, Chapter 11 Historic Buildings). This variance makes sure that any work done to the historic building will be done in such a way that the building’s character and its designation as a historic structure will not be impacted. A Storm Surge map overlay provided by Nassau County can be found in Figure 22. The red rectangle in the map is the approximate location of a currently vacant two story building on the corner of Lewis Street and Gregg Street at American Beach. This map is useful with regard to flood hazard areas within the county. The map shows the possible changes in the water level due to severe storms and flooding. A rise in the water level would affect those historic properties that were not built on stilts or raised pillars. These low lying structures would suffer the most water damage due to flooding and storm surge. For houses built now and in the future, they would have to comply with the local building codes regarding

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flood mitigation. The changes in codes for construction affects the overall style of the homes that would be constructed, but would not be completely out of character for the community. There are several houses that were built between the 1930s and 1960s that are raised on concrete block pillars, including A.L. Lewis’ first home and Ervin’s Rest.

Figure 22 -- Storm Surge Map of American Beach, courtesy of Nassau County.
Environmental Conservation

With regard to the environmental conservation of American Beach, MaVynee Betsch immediately comes to mind. Betsch is the great-granddaughter of A. L. Lewis. She was born Marvyne Elizabeth Betsch in 1935, and later changed her name to MaVynee Oshun Betsch. Betsch was raised in one of the most prominent African American families in Jacksonville, and the South. She grew up in a twenty-two room mansion in Jacksonville, Florida and spent her childhood immersed in the vibrant and thriving African American neighborhood of Springfield. She was educated at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio, studied voice in London and Paris, and sang opera throughout Europe in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Eventually, Betsch quit her glamorous life abroad and moved back home to Florida. She inherited a large amount of money after her relatives passed away, but decided to give away her money to conservation causes, and to live as simply as possible. She often spent the night on a lawn chair on the beach where she felt closest to the spirit of American Beach. Eventually the family money ran out, and Betsch was forced to sell her great-grandfather’s home at American Beach. As Betsch had no physical property, her sister gave her a small RV to use as a home, and a place to store her collection of American Beach memorabilia.

Betsch was American Beach’s fiercest and most passionate advocate, and her full time mission was to preserve and protect the beach from development and destruction. Betsch refused to let American Beach lose its cultural significance, and worked to raise awareness of the community by offering historic beach tours to visitors. She earned the title the “Beach Lady” due to her conservation efforts, especially those surrounding the protection of a dune system called “Nana,” American Beach’s sixty (60) foot sand dune. Due to Betsch’s efforts, and the generosity of the Amelia Island Plantation, the National Park Service was given 8.5 acres of the dune.
system, which sits at the center of the community. In 2009, a historical marker (Marker Number 660), was erected due to the efforts of The American Beach Property Owners’ Association and the Florida Department of State. Betsch was also a champion for the protection of loggerhead sea turtle nests, the endangered right whales that live offshore, and the planting of wildflowers on vacant lots (meant to stabilize the sand and serve as hosts for butterfly habitats). Betsch also lobbied to require a natural sand and grass buffer between American Beach and the planned development of Summer Beach to the north. After Betsch passed away from cancer in 2005, the American Beach Foundation, a local non-profit organization focused on the conservation of American Beach stepped in to continue Betsch’s legacy. The organization works to fund the conservation and preservation of American Beach through help from donations, environmentalists and local citizens. The American Beach Foundation’s goal is to “preserve the beauty that exists today and share the history of the beach with visitors today and tomorrow.” The foundation notes that they also work to “preserve and rebuild the area in the same spirit in which it was created.” They are able to make a difference in the community through the sponsoring of events, educational programs, advocacy, and the contribution of architectural resources. While the organization rallies for American Beach, it does not have the legal capacity to protect the community.

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Organizations Involved

*The American Beach Property Owners’ Association*

Originally formed in 1982 by Ben Durham, Jr., American Beach, Inc. was created for the preservation of the community. The organization is now known as the American Beach Property Owners’ Association, Inc (ABPOA), and is the main governing body within the community. While the organization does not have as much authority over the preservation aspects of the area as there needs to be, the ABPOA does have some influence on the happenings of American Beach. The ABPOA's mission is “is to create, enhance, improve, promote, preserve, protect and perpetuate a healthy community for property owners of American Beach socially, economically, and aesthetically, and do such other things as are incidental to the specific and general welfare of the American Beach Community as enunciated by the membership of the Association and its Board of Trustees.”

The ABPOA has initiated several community projects, including the addition of sidewalks and the planting of palm trees along Lewis Street. The ABPOA notes on their website that their community is in a transitional phase. The community has an assortment of buildings from modest and well kept, to new and large, to neglected and abandoned, there are also several vacant lots throughout the community. The redevelopment of the community seems to be seen as something the ABPOA wants to happen. The association notes that because there is a lack of infrastructure, the redevelopment of the area is slow moving. They note that they are working closely with the Nassau County Board of Commissioners to “find ways to provide reliable public water service for potable water, sewage collection and fire protection for the American Beach

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113 Phelts, “An American Beach for African Americans.”
Community.” Besides working with the county to add much needed infrastructure to the community, the ABPOA was a part of the creation of Burney Park and is now focused on the revitalization of a historical oceanfront restaurant and nightclub once known as Evans’ Rendezvous. The ABPOA also hosts special events in partnership with Friends of American Beach, Inc. to raise funds and bring awareness to the community. Friends of American Beach, Inc. is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to “raise funds for infrastructure improvement and other issues germane to the preservation and protection of American Beach.” The ABPOA along with help from the Friends of American Beach has the opportunity to help protect American Beach the most. The ABPOA is the main governing body within the community, and is who the county deals with on a regular basis.

*Florida Black Heritage Trail*

In 1990, the Florida legislature created the Study Commission on African-American History. This commission was created to “increase public awareness of African American contributions to the state.” The commission then created a heritage trail to help identify sites that are points of interest of African American history and should be preserved and promoted as tourist attractions. American Beach is the first stop on the Florida Black Heritage Trail and a recognition of its importance within the greater context of Florida’s African American history and heritage. This Heritage Trail does not provide protections, but it does help bring tourists to the area and increases awareness of the community. An awareness to American Beach is important because it could bring about funding and other opportunities to protect the community.

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As mentioned in Chapter 3, American Beach’s Burney Park is an important resource for the community and visitors. There have been talks of expanding the park as part of the 2030 Nassau County Recreation Master Plan. The future plans for Burney Park include providing new amenities that “promote the social function of the park within the American Beach Community and preservation of the coastal heritage.” The physical expansion seeks to acquire two parcels of land that will deter fragments of ownership in the northeast corner of the property. This will

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118 “Burney Park,” 2030 Recreation Master Plan A Strategic Plan of Action, (Nassau County Department of Planning and Economic Opportunity, August 2016), Pg. 52-53.
allow for the partial protection of the view shed from Gregg Street, as well as the preservation of the eastern and southern extent of the Nana Dune System. The county wants to make these improvements to support the social function of the park and encourage and promote the park’s functionality as a community builder and an integral part of the community’s fabric. The future plans for Burney Park can be seen in Figure 23 provided by the Nassau County Department of Planning and Economic Opportunity.
Figure 24 -- Nassau County’s Future Plans for the American Beach Historic Park. Image courtesy of Nassau County.
Another project by the county includes the American Beach Historic Park. In 2004, The Trust for Public Land bought Evans’ Rendezvous for the county to provide protection to the building. In 2005, Nassau County had enough funds to purchase the building from the Trust for $2.27 million. The goal of the county is to make the building into a cultural center and historic park. The preservation of Evan’s Rendezvous coincides with the creation of the American Beach Historic Park, which is part of the Nassau County Recreation Master Plan. Future plans for this 1.64-acre park include the revitalization of Evans’ Rendezvous, and the expansion of the built environment by providing outdoor social spaces and facilities. There are also plans to include new dune walkovers, open grassy areas (that can be used for events or leisurely activities), improved landscaping, and on street parking. These plans are important first steps for the revitalization of American Beach’s social and recreational facilities, and to bring a liveliness back to this historic part of the community. These expansions are important to American Beach because it adds more resources that can be used by the community. It also keeps developers from taking land and privatizing it. The new and updated parks and historic areas will also help bring in additional resources. They will improve tourism and add revenue that will go back into the community.

All of these resources play important roles within the American Beach community. Whether they are community driven or state regulated, they create different levels of historic protections that can be utilized by the community. It just takes funding and a group of people committed to the cause to create a protected, yet progressive community.
CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As previously mentioned, historically African American coastal communities face three specific threats: loss from neglect, loss of character from incompatible development, and loss from natural disasters. It is important to understand what these threats are, and how they can possibly be remedied. With regard to the African American communities that were used in Chapter 3, all of them have been threatened by some form of loss. The communities that still exist have used different forms of protections to keep their historic fabric and cultural heritage alive. The three most successful communities with regards to keeping their history and heritage alive are: Atlantic Beach, South Carolina, Highland Beach, Maryland and Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. These communities that have established their own municipalities (with their own governing body), codes, zoning ordinances, board of appeals, historical commission, and rules and procedures. These communities have established what is best for them and each have a fully operating local government. Another helpful and useful tool for the communities that have fared well was the creation of a master plan, a comprehensive plan, and/or future plans for the community. These plans allow for the protection and the progress of the community through an established document that helps to thwart off outside pressures. It also gives those within the community a chance to understand what changes will be taking place, and how those changes will be implemented. These communities are different with regard to their individual histories and how they came to be, but they have managed to weather multiple storms and have been able to be relevant in modern times. Since there is only a fraction of the African American coastal communities left in the United States, it is more important than ever to make sure American Beach is around for generations to come. There are a variety of ways to protect a historic community, but the ones best suited for American Beach are listed below in no particular order.
Option 1 -- Establish Official Design Guidelines for American Beach

With regard to American Beach, there should be a set of design guidelines put in place that keep with the character of the community, but also allow for the homeowners to express themselves to some extent. In order to established official design guidelines for American Beach, there will need to be an official Area Character Appraisal (ACA) for the community. As mentioned in Chapter 4, an ACA would allow for proper documentation and assessment of the community before the design guidelines can be established. The ACA will define the elements of the community that make it unique and will help ensure that any future development will be compatible with the existing character of American Beach. The ACA is an important tool for developers and residents so they will have the proper understanding and knowledge of the history and makeup of the community, and how it has evolved throughout the years. Without this understanding, the design guidelines would not be able to effectively maintain the rhythm of American Beach with regard to its height, scale, mass and landscaping. The best guidelines to follow would be the “Old Town Fernandina Preservation and Development Guidelines.” This set of guidelines is the most relevant for the community, because Old Town Fernandina is located within the same county in Florida as American Beach. The guidelines for Old Town relate the character, landscape, history and overall feel of the community without being difficult for a non-preservationist to understand and comply with. As noted in Chapter 5, the guidelines lay out the specific goals for Old Town’s preservation. These goals can be used to help American Beach come up with their own set of goals with regard to creating design guidelines.

The formatting of the preservation and development guideline for Old Town can be found in Appendix A, and are broken down in a way that would be a good format for American Beach to follow if the community is intending to create their own design guidelines. The guidelines for Old Town also include a multitude of photographs, drawings, maps and other
visual reference to help with the maintaining of the community’s character. The guidelines include a glossary of terms so that anyone reading the document will know exactly what each of the architectural and preservation terms mean. Also, at the end of the document, there is a section dedicated to “Incentives and Assistance for Rehabilitation.” This section is important for those using this document as a guide for their own future use. The Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits and the Local Property Tax Exemptions for Historic Properties are described in detail. These are great resources for historic communities in need of financial help. These tax exemptions would provide an excellent opportunity for American Beach to utilize the funds to create a set of design guidelines for the community, or use the funds for other rehabilitation projects within its National Register Historic District.

Option 2 – Establish a Community Redevelopment Area

As previously noted in Chapter 5, there have been past efforts to create a CRA, but it fell through due to internal disagreements within the community. There is once again the option for a CRA to be put in place for American Beach. This option is feasible, and one of the best protective strategies for the community at this time. It will allow for American Beach to become a part of the Nassau County grid and allow for updated and much needed infrastructure, and community improvements. The CRA is established by the local government and it functions within that local government. As previously noted, the CRA will be funded through Tax Increment Financing and revenue bonds. This type of financing system is successful because it will provide much needed public services to the community without having to increase or levy taxes. The residents of American Beach can look to Fernandina Beach’s CRA as a positive example of this process.

Fernandina Beach’s CRA was put in place to create a redevelopment area along the city’s historic shrimping waterfront. This waterfront does not have any historic or contributing
structures left. The CRA was developed to help this historic area develop and progress positively while also keeping with the character of the historic district nearby. The CRA creates appropriate guidance to ensure the changes to the area are compatible with the Historic District Guidelines. These restrictions are monitored and maintained by the city’s Historic District Council to make sure that the progress of the area is not insensitive, and does not cause any harm. The creation of a CRA for American Beach would be beneficial to the community, and allow progress while also maintaining a level of protection and regulation. The CRA would be monitored by the American Beach Property Owners Association and the Nassau County Planning Department since these entities are the main governing force for the community. As long as the entire community comes together, the CRA can be approved and allow for the revitalization of American Beach.

Option 3 -- Create a Stronger Property Owners’ Association

As mentioned in Chapter 5, American Beach currently has a homeowners’ association -- the American Beach Property Owners’ Association (ABPOA). This association was formed in 1982 and is the main governing body for the community. While the ABPOA has governing ability over the community, it currently has limited powers. As noted in a Final Order of Dismissal (Order) from April 15, 2015, the document states the ABPOA has Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, but no Declaration of Covenants. In addition, the Order notes that Section 720.301(4) of the Florida Statutes defines “Homeowners’ Association” as:

(9) “Homeowners’ association” or “association” means a Florida corporation responsible for the operation of a community or a mobile home subdivision in which the voting membership is made up of parcel owners or their agents, or a combination thereof, and in which membership is a mandatory condition of parcel ownership, and which is authorized to impose assessments that, if unpaid, may become a lien on the parcel. The term “homeowners’ association” does not include a community development district or other similar special taxing district created pursuant to statute.119

119 Section 720.301(4) of the Florida Statutes
This states that a Florida corporation responsible for the operation of a community (the property owners’ association), must have a mandatory membership condition of parcel ownership, and, the organization is authorized to impose assessments. The Order also states that the Respondent, ABPOA is not a homeowners’ association controlled by Chapter 720, Florida Statutes. Since the ABPOA is not officially recognized, the association does not have the proper power to conduct business or protect the history of the community. The Order also notes that it was not able to find any provisions within the governing documents that allow for the ABPOA to follow the above mentioned conditions.  

While the ABPOA’s Articles of Incorporation lay out the creation of the association, they do not fully discuss the entirety of the association’s reach. The existence of the ABPOA is to be perpetual, and the purpose of its creation was “to promote the unity and property rights of property owners of American Beach.” The Articles are an important document to the association, but they only cover issues regarding the Management of Corporate Affairs, Earnings & Activities of Corporation, Distribution of Assets, Subscribers, Registered Agents, how to handle amendments, and a brief mention of the By-Laws that does not go into depth. If the ABPOA were to fully comply with the Florida Statutes, and become a fully functioning organization with the required provisions they would have a stronger ability to protect the community.

Currently, on their website, the ABPOA has an option for paying dues/signing up to become a member of the organization. The fee is $60.00 and the website mentions that payments

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120 There is a possibility that the ABPOA does have a proper Declaration of Covenants that allows for it to have more control over the community. But, the Order states that the Petitioner did not include the document, and the ABPOA did not respond to emails asking for the associations Bylaws and Declaration of Covenants. This suggestion with regard to the increase of power for the ABPOA comes from analysis of the Final Order of Dismissal, Articles of Incorporation and the Florida Statute relevant to this issue.

are due on January 1st of each year. The website does not share any of the founding documents for the association, which should be accessible to their members for transparency’s sake. The ABPOA is the face of the community, and they work with Nassau County to make sure American Beach is represented in current and future projects. If the association had more say over its jurisdiction, then it would be able to enforce proper protections regarding the preservation of the community. The ABPOA would be able to work with an organization to create an Area Character Appraisal and design guidelines for American Beach, which it could then enforce. This would allow for the preservation of the community’s history, while also allowing for positive progress and revitalization to occur.

Conclusion

Some of the best ways to stop loss is through education and outreach. Preservationist, or even local community members can advocate for their historic communities by educating property owners about the significance of their properties and the proper protective measures to take. Bringing the history and significance of the area to the forefront through education can lead to a better understanding of how historic preservation is attractive to, and beneficial for communities. To be able to successfully protect American Beach, the ABPOA and Nassau County need to work with the community so they understand that future progress, when done sensitively can be beneficial. The importance of these organizations to reach out and educate the residents will help with the internal issues that the community has previously faced. If the fears of the community are eased, then there is a possibility of growth that compliments and works with the historic fabric and heritage of the community. There is an array of options when it comes to protecting historic communities, especially those with such a unique history. While this thesis covers several options, there are more possibilities to protect American Beach. The hardest part besides cooperation from the residents, is finding the funds and financial backing to protect
and preserve the historic fabric. Fortunately, there are options when it comes to federal, state, or local preservation grants especially if the community or property is protected by a governmental entity. As noted previously, historically significant communities listed on the National Register of Historic Places are eligible for grants and federal funding. These financial incentives are useful to homeowners who have properties that are in dire need of rehabilitation. There are also other options to find funding, including private donors, non-profits, or grants given by preservation organizations.

One of the most helpful financial options for historic African American communities comes from the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund (Action Fund). This fund is sponsored through the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and its mission is, “to draw attention to the remarkable stories that evoke centuries of African American activism and achievement, and to tell our nation’s full history.” The Action Fund is used to provide grants to African American historic sites and to empower youth through Hands-On Preservation Experience. It is also used for research (to see how preservation impacts contemporary urban issues), and as advocacy for underrepresented groups. The fund also works with communities and cities to protect significant African American historic places.122

Additional resources for the preservation of historic African American sites include, the African American Heritage Preservation Foundation, and the Florida African American Heritage Network. The African American Heritage Preservation Foundation is a non-profit organization that is “dedicated to the preservation of African American history and historical sites.” The organization was founded in June 1994 by E. Renee Ingram as a result of her efforts to preserve her family’s cemetery. The mission of the foundation is to “engage in activities that include the preservation, maintenance, and awareness of endangered or little-known African American

historical sites primarily in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast Regions.” As for the Florida African American Heritage Network, it is a professional association that was organized in 2001 by the John Gilmore Riley Center Museum. The network “serves as an informal and technical assistance resource in response to a growing interest in preserving Florida’s African American culture.” The network is also responsible for the publication of the *Florida Black Heritage Trail Guide*, a publication that details African American landmarks and legacies throughout the state of Florida, and American Beach is one of the stops listed in the guide.

While these are only a few options that can help historic African American coastal communities protect themselves and preserve their unique histories. These historic African American coastal towns are important resources for their cities, their states and the nation, and they need to be taken care of. While nothing remains the same, and we all must adjust to the changing times, my hope is that the spirit of American Beach and these other small African American coastal communities will be properly protected and around for many more years to come.

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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A:

Sample Design Guidelines for American Beach

This is an example of formatting that follows the Old Town Fernandina Preservation and Development Guidelines. Using this format and referencing the actual guidelines would prove to be a useful tool for the American Beach community.

Design Guidelines:

I. Preface – Describes who played a part in the process, how the background research was conducted, why this document was created, and how it was funded and financed.

II. Introduction – Describes the importance of Old Town, its relationship to its surroundings, the standards used, and the intent of the document.

III. Sustainability and Historic Preservation – This section describes the general importance of historic preservation, and how it promotes and showcases a city’s history and heritage.

IV. Guideline Goals – The goals are stated so that the reader, the community and the governing body using this document know its purpose.

V. Historical Overview – It is important to discuss the historic context and background information of the place being surveyed. Without the history and significance, there would be no point in creating a document to protect the area. This section also discusses the importance of place, the town’s original development and its development over time.

VI. Existing Conditions – This section describes the current land use of the area, the privacy and community, vehicle pathways, fences, vegetation, and the scale and detail of the buildings and structures.

VII. Design Guidelines for Existing Buildings – This section is important because it discusses the general building typology and how to approach these buildings for rehabilitation. This section also very clearly goes over The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards of Rehabilitation and why these guidelines are important for unity across the country. The rehabilitation of the buildings is broken down by repairs, replacements, alterations, and materials for

125 While this format follows the Old Town Fernandina Preservation and Development Guidelines, the order and data will be slightly different depending on the entity composing the information.
contributing and non-contributing buildings, and also what to do with regard to relocation and demolition.

VIII. Design Guidelines for New Construction – This section is necessary because it allows for new construction, while also making sure the new buildings are compatible with the character of the community. The lot coverage, height, scale and mass of the buildings, and landscaping are all discussed.

IX. Setting and Landscape – The fences, walls, hedges, parking, old trees, public streetscape, and community landmarks are discussed. The proper care and addition to the setting are important in staying within the character of the community. Also, the maintenance of the original grid and/or pattern of the community should be preserved if possible.