



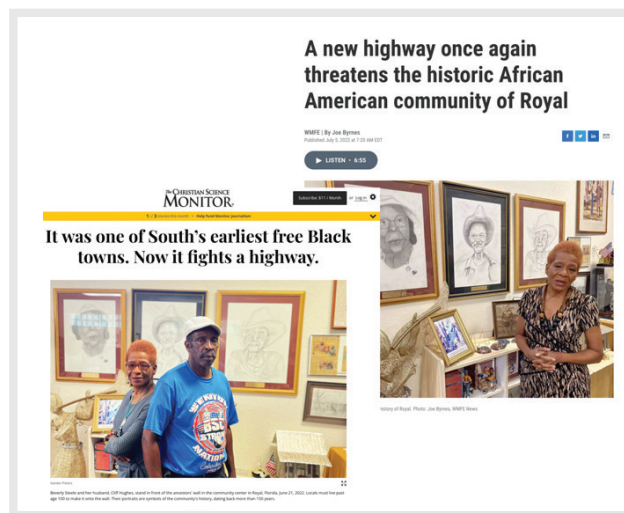
COMMUNITY OF ROYAL

Protecting a Rural Historic African American Cultural Landscape

By: Brad Cornelius, AICP, CPM, CFM

Across Florida, pressures for growth continue to put historic rural communities at risk. While development can bring opportunity, it may also threaten places whose value cannot be measured in acreage or market demand. For the Community of Royal in Sumter County, preserving historic and cultural character is not simply about protecting old buildings or boundaries—it’s about safeguarding identity, heritage, and a living community that has endured for generations.

Royal was founded in 1865, under General Sherman’s “Special Field Order No. 15,” by freed slaves from the Old Green Plantation on the Withlacoochee River as a rural, self-sustaining African American community. Similarly to many towns across the South, Royal emerged during a time when segregation and limited economic opportunity forced Black families to rely on mutual support, land ownership, faith institutions, and strong social networks. Over time, Royal developed a distinct cultural landscape rooted in history, tradition, and resilience that remains in the present day.



However, current challenges are threatening Royal’s legacy. Rapid growth in the surrounding region has increased development pressure, land use changes, and infrastructure expansion. Industrial rezonings, large-scale residential proposals, and regional transportation projects have created an uneven power dynamic between long-standing residents and external interests. Without intentional action, these forces risk overwhelming Royal’s historic fabric.

Royal has taken proactive steps to protect and define its future. For example, one key effort has been the completion of a Cultural Resources Assessment Survey, which documents Royal’s historic significance, cultural assets, and development patterns. This assessment provides an evidence-based foundation for preservation planning and strengthens Royal’s position in land use and policy discussions.

Building on this work, the community has advanced a community-led planning process to prepare a Community Heritage Plan focused on equity, self-determination, and long-term sustainability. Rather than reacting to development proposals,

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Royal is articulating its own vision—one that balances growth with preservation and ensures residents have a voice in decisions affecting their land, homes, and heritage.

Royal has also actively pushed back against incompatible regional transportation initiatives, including a proposal to extend the Florida Turnpike through the community, and broader county expansion

strategies that fail to account for cultural and historical impacts. Through advocacy, engagement, and coordination with legal and planning professionals, the community continues to challenge projects that threaten its integrity.

Another critical milestone is Royal's pursuit of designation on the National Register of Historic Places as a Rural Cultural Historic District. This process not only recognizes Royal's state

and national significance, but also provides tools to raise awareness, inform planning decisions, and support long-term preservation efforts. This represents an important step toward formal recognition and protection.

Protecting Royal matters, not just for its residents, but for Florida as a whole.

Royal is a rare example of a historic African American rural community that has endured against significant odds. Its protection affirms the importance of inclusive planning, cultural equity, and honoring histories that are too often overlooked. By standing up for Royal today, the community is ensuring that its story, and its future, remain firmly in its own hands.

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