

THE NEW JERSEY BLACK HERITAGE TRAIL  
GUIDELINES  
2026



## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

### **NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

### **THE NEW JERSEY HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**2026**

#### **Mission and Goals of the New Jersey Black Heritage Trail**

Understanding New Jersey's African American history is essential to understanding the development of culture and democracy in New Jersey and in the United States. The history of African Americans in the state predates the establishment of New Jersey as a colony. The fabric of African American history and the state is interwoven with both the displacement and community resilience of Native American and Indigenous communities. It is also bound to the history of all immigrants to North America. As free and enslaved, immigrants and migrants, and multiracial and multiethnic citizens, African Americans have been at the forefront of defining what it means to be an American. To understand the history of New Jersey is to understand the groups of people who have been present throughout our shared history.

The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail seeks to augment education around these significant, critical histories of the mid-Atlantic region and the broader nation. It will engage the role underrepresented histories play in our state's ongoing cultural and democratic development. For more than 350 years, New Jersey has seen how nationwide/national themes played out within its borders. The state's pivotal role during the American Revolution, slavery, abolition, early industrialization and ongoing technological innovation, civil rights, and social justice movements (women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and labor movements) distinguish New Jersey in the historical records. For these and many other reasons, the study of Black history in New Jersey is both engaging and relevant to the state's residents and visitors.

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

### **About The New Jersey Historical Commission**

The New Jersey Historical Commission (NJHC) is a state agency dedicated to the advancement of public knowledge and preservation of New Jersey history. Established by law in 1967, its work is founded on the fundamental belief that an understanding of our shared heritage is essential to sustaining a cohesive and robust democracy. The NJHC receives its funding primarily by legislative appropriation. It fulfills its mission through various initiatives, including an active grant program, a free archival evaluation service called the Caucus Archival Projects Evaluation Service (CAPES), a free artifact evaluation service called Artifact Assessment Program (AAP), the African American History Program, and RevolutionNJ. Currently, it oversees the development of the broader state historical marker program.

### **African American History Program**

The African American History Program champions the development of African American history in New Jersey, and partners with schools and universities, historical societies, other interested organizations, and individuals in a statewide program. Founded by the late Giles Wright in 1983, it was reestablished at the Commission in 2021. The African American History Program's work includes a speaker and panel series to preserve, educate, and engage the public about New Jersey history and historic sites. It also administers the Mildred Barry Garvin Prize; consults on the New Jersey Historical Commission and other Department of State initiatives and collaborations (including RevolutionNJ), as well as public partnerships such as the Annual Marion Thompson Wright Lecture (MTW) series at Rutgers University – Newark, and the Black Heritage Trail.

### **New Jersey Black Heritage Trail**

On September 7, 2022, Governor Phil Murphy signed L. 2022, c. 102, which calls for the New Jersey Historical Commission to establish a Black Heritage Trail “to promote awareness and appreciation of

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

Black history, heritage, and culture,” that will “highlight Black heritage sites through historical markers and a trail-like path that connect the stories of Black life and resiliency.”

The Black Heritage Trail program coordinates the design, fabrication, and installation of historic markers to commemorate people, places, and events related to Black history and heritage as described below. This program will also coordinate and facilitate public engagement and educational events around markers and the history they represent. This document will outline the process for nominating people, places, and events to receive markers.

### **Guidelines for Nomination**

Please read these guidelines in their entirety before submitting a marker application. The purpose of the New Jersey Black Heritage Trail shall be to promote awareness and appreciation of Black history, heritage, and culture in the State. Successful applications for the New Jersey Black Heritage Trail will be for subjects that:

1. Highlight Black heritage sites through historical markers and a trail-like path that connect the stories of Black life and resiliency in the State.
2. Create thematic linkages to surrounding arts, cultural, historical, entertainment, or other tourism destinations or exhibits of interest to tourists interested in Black heritage sites.
3. The Black Heritage Trail will address topics such as:
  - Revolutionary and Pre-Civil War history
  - Enslavement, resistance, and Black liberation in New Jersey
  - Early social justice and activist organizations
  - Arts and culture
  - Great Migration
  - Civil Rights Era

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

- Black Achievement Milestones (science, art, music, culture, economics, leisure, and others)
  - History related to Blacks or African Americans including all members of the African diaspora - African, Caribbean, Latin American, and other multiracial individuals.
4. Contribute to the diversity of the overall trail by incorporating intersectional identities (e.g., Black LGBTQIA+ people, Black women, Black immigrant populations), underrepresented geographies, and topics (Antebellum period, free communities, Black history and heritage, etc.).
  5. Create opportunities for public engagement and learning.
  6. Raise the profile of Black history, heritage, and culture in New Jersey.

### **Black Heritage Trail Application Process Overview**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Pre-Application Worksheet Opens</b> | Accepted on rolling basis                            |
| <b>Pre-Application Worksheet Due</b>   | Due January 16, 2026 to be considered for 2026 Cycle |
| <b>Application Due</b>                 | May 15, 2026   |
| <b>Notification Letter</b>             | December 2026  |

### **Goals of the Black Heritage Trail**

The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail also promotes sites that are in close geographic proximity to other Black heritage sites or thematically linked by surrounding arts, cultural, historical, entertainment, or other tourism destinations. The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail shall be inclusive of all eras as well as be geographically representative of the entire State.

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

Any member of the public, public or private institution (including but not limited to the New Jersey Black Cultural and Heritage Initiative Foundation), or the New Jersey Historical Commission itself may make nominations to the Black Heritage Trail.

### **Payment for Markers on Privately-Owned Property**

Please note that the New Jersey Black Heritage Trail legislation L. 2022, c. 102 states that **public funds cannot be used to “erect markers or signs on private property.”** However, private organizations may fund their historical marker fabrication and installation themselves or identify external funding sources, and we will provide the information for our marker fabrication process. **The approximate cost of the fabricated marker is \$3,000.** Additionally, approved private sites will be included on the New Jersey Black Heritage Trail website as those organizations secure the funding for their historical marker.

### **Eligible Nomination Types**

Nominations can be places where events, people, or organizations *have significantly impacted Black history and heritage in New Jersey, either locally or statewide, and where items of political, military, artistic, cultural or social history have been preserved.* Markers provide opportunities for public engagement, education and awareness, ongoing dialogue, as well as follow-up activities and events. Nominations should be straightforward presentations of relevant facts describing why a nominated entity is historically significant. The following are general categories for potential nominations:

#### **a) Nominations of Locations Associated with Individuals**

Locations associated with individuals may be nominated based on significant contributions the individuals made to Black history and heritage in New Jersey and the country, such as leadership or key roles in historic events. Nominations are not intended to be honorific, and therefore language used in marker text should be objective without qualifiers.

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

### **b) Nominations of Locations Associated with Events**

Events that can serve as the basis for marker nominations may include, but are not limited to, pivotal moments in Black history in New Jersey if they are associated with significant milestones or movements.

Examples might include a demonstration that is tied directly to a public policy change addressing racial discrimination, or a conference/convention that led to the founding of an organization that plays a key role in advocacy on behalf of Black populations in New Jersey.

### **c) Nominations of Locations Associated with Organizations**

The nomination of a location with a significant connection to an organization will be considered for panel deliberation if the organization played a key role in a historic event or movement.

These might include organizations that played a major role in enactment of laws or court rulings that address discrimination or disenfranchisement of Black people, or if their buildings were the site of a critical event in New Jersey's Black history.

Due to the role of the Black church in social movements including establishment of free Black communities during the Antebellum period, the Underground Railroad, the Great Migration, Civil Rights Movement, etc., churches that have played a critical role in Black history and heritage are therefore eligible. However, churches will not be summarily approved for inclusion in the trail without demonstrating the church's specific participation in historic events or advocacy; applicants who wish to nominate a church must address this specifically.

Cemeteries are also important repositories of history and culture in Black communities in addition to the role they play in memorializing the deceased. Their nominations must also be linked to specific participation in historic events, heritage, or activism to be considered. For example, a cemetery could be eligible as a resting place for multiple US Colored Troops that

## The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines

fought in the Civil War, or because of its association with the establishment of Antebellum free Black communities, or because of association with a church congregation that qualifies as historic as noted above.

### Underserved Populations and Regions

The New Jersey Historical Commission is particularly interested in ensuring that the Black Heritage Trail is reflective of the diversity of the Black experience in New Jersey. To that end, we will strongly encourage applications that focus on women, LGBTQIA+ populations, geographic regions that contain significant Black history without any public commemoration, history relating to Black immigrant populations, and other historically underserved populations.

### Evaluation Criteria

*Substantiating the historic significance of a marker subject.*

1. The significance of the site must be substantiated with citations of primary sources and secondary sources on the online application. We have provided prompts to assist you in documenting the sources used and indicating which ones are primary sources and which are secondary sources. Within each prompt there is a space to provide a summary that will state the relevant historical facts used to support the nomination with 2-4 sentences alongside the citation. There should be at least **three primary sources and three secondary sources** total. The National Underground Network to Freedom (also included in the application for your reference) has a useful illustration for applicants needing assistance in defining their sources; some are excerpted below or you may download the full document on the Black Heritage Trail page.

#### 2. *Examples of Sources*

##### Primary Evidence Examples

- Original official records and sworn affidavits based on eyewitness accounts.



## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

- Diaries, journals, and autobiographies
- Authenticated narrative accounts by eyewitnesses to the event (oral histories)
- Accounts derived from interviews with eyewitnesses to the event (such as a period newspaper article)

### **Secondary Evidence Examples**

- Contemporary newspaper articles about the past
- Scholarly articles, books, and other publications
- Institutional blogs
- Documented biographies and local histories

### **Additional Criteria**

1. For a location nominated based on its association with an individual or individuals, the individuals must have been New Jersey residents during the time period represented in the nomination.
2. Places already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, The National Underground Network to Freedom, and/or recognized as National Historic Landmarks or United Nations World Heritage Sites may be considered for a Historical Marker.
3. Applicants are encouraged to indicate what other Black heritage sites (or those that promote African American sites), non-profits, businesses, or public institutions they currently collaborate with. If you do not currently collaborate with other sites, please indicate organizations that you may wish to collaborate with in the future. For example, a historic house might collaborate with a library or bookstore for a tour during Kwanzaa or Juneteenth holidays.

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

### **The Review Process**

**Once submitted by 2PM on the date designated, application review will proceed as follows:**

- Applicants are encouraged to submit applications as early as possible once they are fully complete.
- NJHC staff will review applications to ensure completeness and that additional clarification is not needed. Applicants requiring additional clarification will be notified via email and given an opportunity to provide the additional information.
- Complete applications will be put in the portfolio for staff review.
- Staff will review submitted applications within two months of the submission date and make recommendations to the Advisory Committee for its approval.
- Applicants that are approved will be notified via email with instructions regarding finalization of marker text and proposed timelines for ordering, delivery, and installation.
- When applicants are notified of approval, they must contact their municipal government office to find out if the municipality will assist in installing the marker.
- Applicants that are not accepted will be notified via email. If the nominator requests feedback, a staff member will share decision criteria and recommendations for improvement. These applicants can resubmit at the next deadline.
- The Advisory Committee will be composed of members with expertise in history, tourism, and preservation, including but not limited to the New Jersey Black Cultural and Heritage Initiative Foundation, the New Jersey Division of Travel and Tourism, the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, NJHC staff, university and community scholars.

## The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines

- The recommendations of the Advisory Committee will be forwarded to the New Jersey Historical Commission for final decision. Final approval will be voted on in a public session.

### Application Package

**Only complete applications will be reviewed. Note you can save and return back to this form. If you have any issues locating the link for the form, please contact**

**[NJBlackHeritageTrail@sos.nj.gov](mailto:NJBlackHeritageTrail@sos.nj.gov) and provide your Application ID number so that we can resend you the link. A complete application will consist of the following elements:**

1. **Completed Electronic Pre-Application Form** – A Pre-Application Worksheet is required for each round of nominations. Worksheets will be accepted for review on a rolling basis.  
  
However, please note that the Pre-Application Worksheet is **due Friday, January 16, 2026 at 3:00pm to be considered for the 2026 cycle**. After acceptance of the Pre-Application Worksheet, nominators will be required to set up a meeting with the staff. Submissions are not accepted by paper, mail, or fax and must be submitted online.
  - a. **Location** – The map should represent an aerial view of the proposed location and no more than a 5 block or ½-mile radius of the surrounding area. Maps can be created with GIS software, or by using a screenshot from an online program such as Google Maps to mark the proposed location. Please note you are also required to provide 2-5 recent photographs of the proposed location that provide an overview of the area and demonstrate that the location is visible and accessible to the public. Applicants should consult the zoning official from the municipality and county of the proposed location to ensure there are no limitations regarding signage in the proposed location.
2. **Completed Electronic Application** – The link to the application can be found on the NJHC website on the African American History Program tab. All applications must be submitted

## The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines

online by 2:00 PM on the date designated. Applications may be submitted prior to the deadline, however, please note that due to the volume of submissions we will only review completed applications.

3. **References** (as described on page 7) – Please note you are required to provide **at least three primary sources and at least three secondary sources** for your application to be considered complete. When citing primary sources, please include the name of the archive or other institution that maintains the records along with a link to the record itself or the institution in the case of non-digitized records. When citing secondary sources, please include the name of the publisher and either a direct link to the source or a link to an online retailer (e.g. Bookshop.org, Amazon, the publisher or press) if the resource is not available online. If any information is unavailable (e.g. a press release on a county website), please write N/A or Not Applicable in that field.

Please do not include non-reputable sources like personal blogs, self-published works, or websites that are not linked to a government entity, academic institution, or history organization. If you need assistance locating sources, please reach out to the Black Heritage Trail team.

4. **Historical Narrative** – The application includes a series of five prompts, as listed below. For each prompt you are required to provide at least three historical facts in 1-2 sentences with citations.
  - i. Provide an overview that specifies the historical significance of the subject and indicates how/why the subject will be meaningful and educational for the public.
  - ii. Describe how the subject had a significant impact on its time and has statewide and/or national significance.

## The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines

- iii. Explain why the subject has had a significant impact on the history of New Jersey populations and communities and their cultural development.
- iv. Describe how the subject can be thematically connected to other Black heritage sites in close geographic proximity to the site. How do these sites serve as stewards of Black history and culture, how might they serve as potential collaborators in future events highlighting the trail. If there are no nearby sites, describe the significance of this site in relation to its surrounding environment.
- v. Describe any existing walking/bus tours that your site participates in collaboratively with other organizations.

In the Source(s) field for prompts 1-3, all sources cited should be pulled from the References section. In this field, cite sources with the last name of the author(s)/creator(s), the four-digit year, and the page number, if available. If you do not know the name of the author, please use the name of the archive or publisher (e.g. Rutgers University Libraries, New Jersey Legislature, Mercer County). If you do not have a date for the source, please insert “n.d.” in place of the four-digit year. Each reference should be separated by a semicolon. Please note that sources are not required to answer prompts 4 and 5.

5. **Proposed Marker Title and Text** – The prompts in this section will help you develop your marker text according to the structure outlined by the Black Heritage Trail team. This proposed text should provide a concise summary of the marker subject, specifying the historical significance as it relates to Black resilience and liberation. The proposed marker title can be up to 50 characters, including spaces, and the proposed marker text can be up to 615 characters, including spaces. Prompts 2a-2c will guide you in drafting your marker text. The structure is like that of the Historical Narrative section in which you are asked to state a historical fact in 1-

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

2 sentences with source citations. Please note that the final text will be edited by Black Heritage Trail team in collaboration with the nominator. Be sure the proposed marker text includes:

- i. Overall statement
- ii. Historical significance and context as they relate to Black resilience and liberation.
- iii. Additional detail
- iv. Closing statement describing how the subject had a significant impact on its time and has statewide and/or national significance.

**6. Required Attachment** – Please upload a letter of support from the entity that owns the site.

This may be a government agency, cultural or historical organization, church leadership, or other private entity. Please note that whoever owns the site that is being nominated (i.e., a church cemetery, public park, performance theater, etc.) should provide this letter of support.

**7. Optional Attachments** – You can provide copies of any critical sources cited in the application or extant historic documents that support the nomination. Lengthy documents should be submitted via hyperlink. You can also provide up to five letters of support that either attest to community support for the proposed marker or provide corroboration by subject matter experts.

### **Acceptance and Installation**

If the nomination is approved, the nominator will receive an electronic approval letter. The New Jersey Historical Commission will provide a form that must be signed by the property owner or person with authority over the marker location. The final design of the marker, including the text describing the site and its significance, shall be determined by the Commission, and all markers erected shall comport with the design as determined by the Commission. All paperwork must be completed prior to installation of

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

the marker. The nominator and Commission will work together on planning the installation of the sign at the site.

**Please note that we are requiring all sites to host at least one annual Black history program that is free and open to the public.** Program options include, but are not limited to, a walking tour, a collaborative program with other Black Heritage Trail sites, a lecture. Approved sites may also roll this programming requirement into an existing event (e.g., Juneteenth, Kwanzaa, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Independence Day, Memorial Day, or any other existing program) rather than creating a new event.

### **Repair and Replacement**

Currently, the New Jersey Historical Commission will be responsible for the repair and replacement of all fabricated and installed markers. Nominating agencies will be responsible for monitoring and advising on any changes, or damages to the marker they nominated. In the event the marker was nominated by the Commission, the Commission will seek out a sponsor to perform these duties.

Markers, whether on public or private property, may not be transported, altered, or removed without written permission of the Commission. Markers on private property must be maintained by the private property owner, and any damage to markers on private property must be reported to the Commission. Any repair or replacement of a marker on private property that is mandated by the Commission as part of its oversight of markers shall be the responsibility of the private property owner. To determine whether there are funds available for reimbursement of costs associated with erecting markers on private property, please contact the Commission.

### **New Jersey Black Heritage Trail**

New Jersey Historical Commission

Email: [NJBlackHeritageTrail@sos.nj.gov](mailto:NJBlackHeritageTrail@sos.nj.gov)

## **The New Jersey Black Heritage Trail Guidelines**

Website: [blackheritagetrail.nj.gov](http://blackheritagetrail.nj.gov)

Phone: (609) 943-3304