



## Activating History Across Alabama

Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC)

Final Report: Period of Performance: October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2024

USDA Rural Development Funding Opportunity Number: RD-RPIC-2023

Program Federal Award Identification Number FAIN: 12RDIC2200001

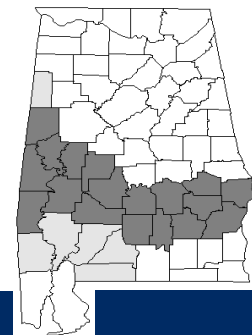
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### SUMMARY

Alabama's Black Belt region played a crucial role in the Civil Rights Movement, standing as a battleground for the fight against systemic racial injustice and serving as the birthplace of transformative change in American history. From 1955 to 1965, communities across this region witnessed some of the most significant events of the era, marked by acts of courage and resistance at lunch counters, courthouse squares, churches, schools, and other public spaces where thousands of citizens defied segregation and demanded equality.

Despite the profound contributions of Black Americans, their stories have often been minimized, overlooked, or intentionally erased from our nation's historical narrative. To address this ongoing injustice, The Conservation Fund (TCF) has partnered with local communities, grassroots organizations, municipal leaders, and other stakeholders to conserve and restore Civil Rights and Black cultural heritage sites across the country.

Over the past two years, with support from the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge Grant, TCF has convened a diverse coalition of partners to develop an innovative placemaking plan for the Black Belt region of Central Alabama. Known as the "Black Belt Pilgrimage Project" (BBPP), this collaboratively crafted plan focuses on communities along the Historic Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights Trail, encompassing the rural counties of Lowndes, Dallas, and Perry, including the cities of Marion, Selma, and White Hall.

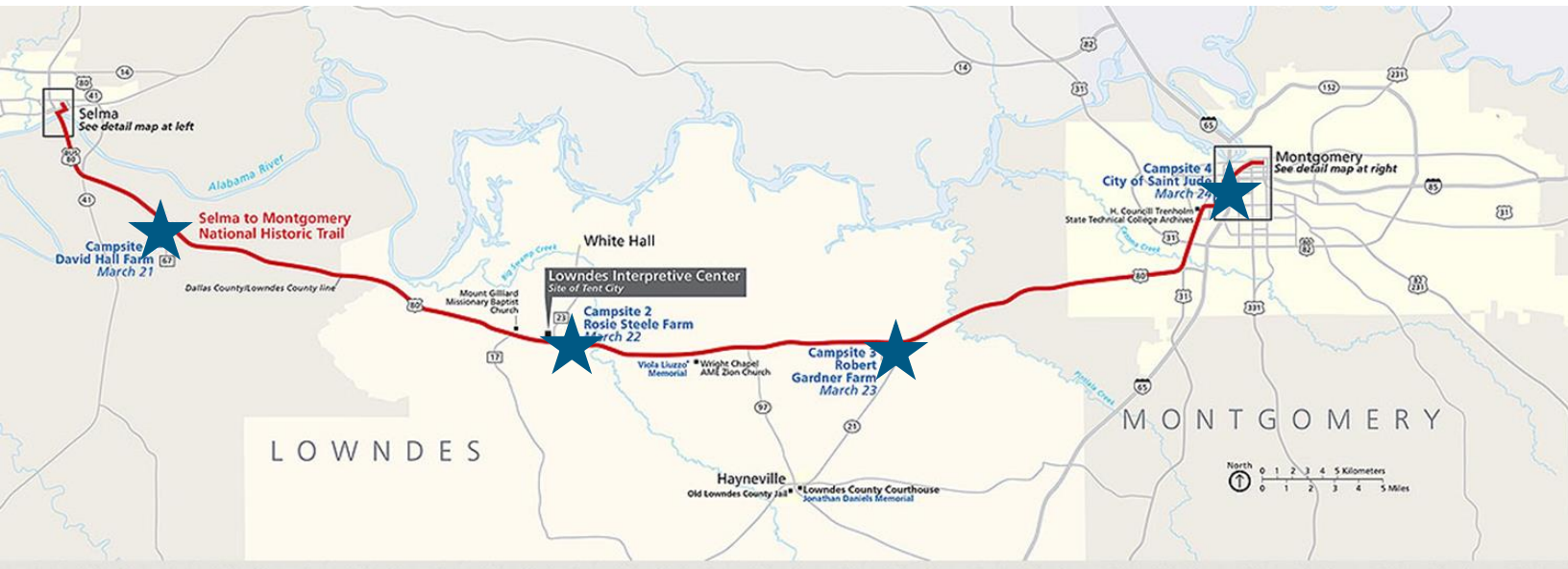


### What is the 'Black Belt'?

The Black Belt spans from Texas to Virginia and was originally named for its rich, dark topsoil that formed millions of years ago. But the term Black Belt took on additional meaning during colonial times when the area was transformed by sprawling cotton plantations and the introduction of slave labor. Today, the region is known as having **"the richest soil, and the poorest people"**, with 34% of the nation's poorest residents living in the Black Belt. The region is also home to nearly half of all Black Americans, highlighting a clear connection to the legacy of slavery. In Alabama, the Black Belt region spans 19 counties, and includes cities like historic Tuskegee, Selma, and the state capital, Montgomery, as well as 9 out of the 10 poorest counties in the State.

The BBPP plan identifies and prioritizes the protection of multiple at-risk Civil Rights and Black History sites within the Black Belt region. It outlines comprehensive goals and actionable strategies to maximize these culturally significant, community-based assets while equipping partners with curated outreach materials to build momentum and advance the plan’s objectives. The ultimate aim is to support greater social, cultural, and economic vitality for these rural communities.

This unified effort celebrates the unique character and place-based assets of these communities, fosters connections between them, and amplifies their shared narratives. By aligning community-driven goals with actionable strategies, the project has overcome barriers to historical preservation planning and established a foundation for sustainable economic and cultural growth. Through this approach, these small, rural communities are poised to reap the substantial economic benefits of cultural and historic tourism.



*The RPIC project focused on the rural counties along the Historic Voting Rights Trail, including Perry, Dallas, and Lowndes Counties. TCF leveraged support to include partners in the city of Montgomery.*

The project’s success is evident in the completion of its four core components:

1. **Documenting Community Assets:** Comprehensive mapping of existing community-based assets, including physical sites and potential multi-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional connections.
2. **Convening Partners:** Facilitating peer learning opportunities and workshops to build capacity, define a shared placemaking vision, and foster deeper connections among stakeholders.
3. **Crafting a Placemaking Plan:** Developing a stakeholder-endorsed roadmap that captures a collective vision and provides actionable steps for future progress.
4. **Providing Follow-Up Support:** Offering ongoing guidance to propel the plan’s implementation and ensure sustained progress.

This initiative has not only identified and prioritized essential cultural heritage sites in need of protection and stabilization but also strengthened local partnerships and equipped stakeholders with critical outreach materials and toolkits. The foundation established through this effort marks a significant step forward in empowering the Black Belt region to honor its rich history and advance toward a vibrant and sustainable future.

Further details related to tasks and deliverables are outlined in the following sections.

## PROGRESS ON TASKS

### Task 1.1: Research and Document

Description: The Fund will research, synthesize, and document existing and ongoing plans and initiatives in the plan study area.

Progress to Date: Complete. The TCF team researched existing plans and found limited comprehensive planning has been done in the region that incorporated community-based input and grassroots partners focused on cultural heritage tourism.

### Task 1.2 Interview Stakeholders and Identify Working Group and Grassroots Partners

Description: The Fund will conduct a minimum of twelve (12) background and information interviews with various individuals and organizations.

Progress to Date: Complete. Thirteen (13) individual interviews were held with stakeholders across the region, including the Mayors of White Hall and Marion, two Councilmen, and several community groups.

### Task 1.3: Compile Background Materials for Presentation to Partners

Description: The Fund will document the findings of this phase and the information will be presented at the first Working Group meeting, launching Phase 2.

Progress to Date: Complete. A compiled list of interview statements, timelines, and grant deliverables was created and presented to Working Group participants.

### Task 2.1: Establish and Convene Ongoing Series of Working Group Meetings

Description: The Fund will establish and convene a Working Group that will serve as the visible constituency for this project. Participants will work together to develop the placemaking vision and build the momentum needed to implement the Activating History Across Alabama Plan.

Progress to Date: Complete. TCF hosted 10 Working Group meetings throughout Phase Two of the grant performance period, onboarding more than 35 organizations into the Working Group. Details on these meetings were included in prior reports.



*The Conservation Fund, Black Belt leaders, and other partners meeting in Perry County, Alabama to discuss conservation goals and Civil Rights tourism opportunities.*

### Task 2.2: Provide Opportunities for Leadership Development and Peer-to-Peer Learning

Description: The Fund will work in partnership with the Working Group and RD Staff to identify thematic needs and to host a variety of opportunities focused on leadership development, capacity building, and peer-to-peer learning that shares knowledge and expertise.

Progress to Date: Complete. TCF hosted 7 Learning Opportunities throughout Phase Two of the grant performance period. Details on these meetings were included in prior reports. In addition, Working Group partners participated in TCF’s Parks with Purpose Peer Exchange in September 2024, marking the 8<sup>th</sup> Learning Opportunity. This annual Peer Exchange Event brought together nearly 100 grassroots community members and organizations who are focused on equitable development projects in some of our nation’s most struggling communities. Programming is focused on peer-to-peer engagement, including the sharing of best practices, lessons learned, successes, and challenges across communities. The Peer Exchange was held September 25-27 in Raleigh, NC Additional details about the event have been included as part of Deliverables 2B.

**Task 2.3: Activate Grassroots Organizations to Support Public Engagement**

Description: The Fund will develop new relationships with identified place-based community partners and build collaboration by encouraging their participation in the Working Group.

Progress to Date: Complete. During this final reporting period, TCF continued to build relationships with and activate the power of grassroots organizations. This included meeting with Common Power, a group focused on fostering and amplifying a just and inclusive democracy. Common Power committed \$10,000 to support concept designs and is interested in purchasing two buildings in the historic downtown waterfront district of Selma. TCF is leading acquisition efforts to secure the properties.

In addition, partners from Morehouse College, Partnership for Southern Equity, National Parks Service, and the City of Marion have begun discussions on the protection of the childhood home of Mrs. Coretta Scott King and a larger discussion about how to better connect the Civil Rights history in Atlanta to that same history in the Black Belt.

**Task 2.4: Coordinate the Development of Placemaking Plan and Implementation Toolkit**

Description: In collaboration with Working Group partners, including RD staff and design consultants, the Fund will oversee the development of a draft placemaking plan for Activating History Across Alabama.

Progress to Date: Complete. TCF contracted with Design Alabama to support the development of the BBPP placemaking plan, including the creation of maps, renderings, concept plans, and other analyses used by the Working Group in the development of the plan. Design Alabama has submitted a final draft of the comprehensive placemaking plan that includes overall goals, objectives, and actionable next steps for implementation, and identifies additional partners and outreach needed in each of the rural communities along the Historic Voting Rights Trail. Using feedback from community outreach, the plan has been refined to include additional cultural, historic, and nature-based community assets, as well as economic development and placemaking priority actions that were identified in the planning process as important to local character and sense of place for these rural communities. A copy of the BBPP plan produced by Design Alabama is provided in the Deliverables attached to this report.



*“What my grandfather did was brave, and he did it for all of us. I will do whatever is needed to protect this history, our history.”*

*Davine Hall, granddaughter of David Hall, Selma to Montgomery Trail Campsite #1.*

*The Conservation Fund is supporting our community-based partners to have sites listed on the National Registry for Historic Places. To date, two successful nominations have been secured, including two of the four Campsites along the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail.*

### **Task 2.5: Design Development and Oversight**

Description: TCF will seek out and contract with a professional Design Team that will work in collaboration with the Working Group during Phase 2 to develop the placemaking plan

Progress to Date: Complete. Design Alabama has completed its work and submitted the final draft of its report. TCF has paid all invoices and submitted copies to USDA as part of prior reports.

### **Task 2.6: Secure Feedback through Surveys and Outreach**

Description: In collaboration with partners and design consultants, the Fund will develop and deploy a variety of surveys and outreach tools that allow the draft plan to be shared more broadly and that provide multiple opportunities for feedback from local stakeholders.

Progress to Date: Working Group participants were given copies of the draft BBPP plan as part of WGM #11 held in Selma and WGM #12 held at the National Parks Service Lowndes County Interpretive Center. Working Group members, community participants, and federal and city stakeholders were able to provide feedback directly to TCF and Design Alabama that has been incorporated into the Placemaking Plan.

Next Steps: While the bulk of the report has been drafted, TCF and our consultants are continuing to refine the Placemaking Plan and Toolkit to maximize its value for broad collective use. This ongoing effort will extend beyond the RPIC period, incorporating further review and input from stakeholders to ensure the final product is both comprehensive and widely beneficial.

### **Task 3.1 Produce Final Plan and Present to Working Group**

Description: In collaboration with design consultants and Working Group partners, including RD staff and design consultants, TCF will oversee the development of the Placemaking Plan.

Progress to Date: While Design Alabama has submitted an excellent and comprehensive 104-page report that fully meets the outlined scope of work, its length makes it less practical for broad distribution. To address this shortfall, TCF has already secured additional funding beyond the RPIC grant. The draft plan has been attached to this report as a Deliverable.

Next Steps: TCF will continue collaborating with Design Alabama and Working Group partners to refine and finalize the document so that it is most useful for TCF, community partners, and local leaders who are looking to attract resources and advance projects. Additionally, TCF's marketing and GIS teams are developing a coordinating branded map to more effectively illustrate opportunities for acquiring cultural heritage sites for permanent public protection. TCF remains deeply committed to this initiative and will continue advancing the BBPP placemaking plan and the protection of these Civil Rights sites through the strong relationships established under the transformative RPIC grant.

### **Task 3.2 Produce Implementation Toolkit**

Description: In collaboration with design consultants and Working Group partners, including RD staff and design consultants, TCF will oversee the development of the Implementation Toolkit.

Progress to Date: The implementation Toolkit has been drafted as part of the BBPP Placemaking Plan developed by our partners at Design Alabama. The Toolkit includes new branding, logos, and other graphic assets, as well as outlined implementation strategies, key messaging, and partner outreach lists.



Next Steps: Similar to the BBPP Plan, the Toolkit will continue to be refined outside of the RPIC award period to ensure it meets the needs of our community-based partners.

### **Task 3.3 Implementation Kick-Off**

Description: TCF will continue to convene Working Group partners and work collaboratively to advance the implementation of the placemaking plan.

Progress to Date: Complete. While the BBPP is not quite complete, TCF did continue to host Working Group Meetings during this period that were focused on advancing the goals outlined by partners in the draft plan. WGM #11 was held on 8/11/24 and focused on reviewing the draft BBPP, as well as planning for the Marion to Selma Bike Ride extension, the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration for the Voting Rights March, and the creation of the VotingRightsTrail.org website. The website was funded by a \$15,000 award from TCF's Activating Natural Resources Economy program. The website will serve as a hub for sharing events and opportunities focused on the rich cultural heritage of the region.

WGM #12 was held on 9/23/24 and featured Dr. Janette Howard-Moore, who was 16 years old in 1965, and who spoke about being assaulted on the Edmund Pettus Bridge during Bloody Sunday. In addition to sharing this history, the meeting also focused on gathering input from Working Group members on the BBPP Plan and Toolkit.

Meetings with Working Group members have continued in November and December, outside of the grant period, and will continue as the committee moves to implement the plan and collaborative goals.

## **PROGRESS ON DELIVERABLES**

### **Deliverable 1.A: Research Existing Plans**

Status: All research has been completed.

### **Deliverable 1.B: Background Interviews**

Status: Complete and submitted to USDA Rural Development in prior reports.

### **Deliverable 1.C: Background Materials**

Status: Complete and submitted to USDA Rural Development in prior reports.

### **Deliverable 2.A: Working Group Agendas and Meeting Notes**

Status: Complete. The agendas and meeting notes for ten Working Group Meetings completed during Phase 2 have been submitted as part of prior reports.

### **Deliverable 2.B: Leadership Development/Peer Learning Agendas and Meeting Notes**

Status: Complete. Meeting notes and agendas from seven previous Learning Opportunities were included with prior reports. In addition, a copy of the Parks with Purpose Peer Exchange agenda, as well as the PWP Community Yearbook have been attached to this report, reflecting this additional Learning Opportunity from the final quarter of the grant.



*Working Group members from Alabama's Black Belt participating in 2024 National Parks with Purpose Peer Exchange event in Raleigh, NC.*

### **Deliverable 2.C: Public Engagement Activity**

Status: Complete. Four public engagement events were hosted during the grant performance period, and planning work was completed for an upcoming Marion to Selma Bike Ride planned for February 2025. Each of these events connected partners, officials, and community members to the project. Details about each of these events have been included in previous reports and include:

1. Selma Slow Ride – Bike Ride – April 2023
2. [Freedom Rider’s Recount History](#) – May 2023
3. Black Belt Regional Partnership Meeting – Dec 2023
4. [59<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Selma to Montgomery March Commemoration](#) – March 2024
5. Marion Civic Pride Day – May 2024
6. Marion to Selma Bike Ride (February 2025)



*Original Freedom Riders, Mr. Charles Person and Dr. Bernard Lafayette sharing their personal stories during May 2023 Anniversary Event commemorating the events of 1961.*

### **Deliverable 2.D: Survey and Survey Memo**

Status: Complete. While a formal written survey was not implemented, The Conservation Fund and our consultants from Design Alabama were able to capture verbal input from Working Group participants during WGMs #11 and #12, where participants were asked to provide feedback on the draft Placemaking Plan and Implementation Toolkit.

### **Deliverable 2.E: Draft Placemaking Plan and Implementation Toolkit**

Status: Complete Design Alabama has provided a final draft of the Placemaking Plan and Implementation Toolkit to TCF and Working Group partners, entitled the Black Belt Pilgrimage Project. A copy is included with this report.

### **Deliverable 2.F. Contract with Professional Design Group and Outputs**

Status: Complete. All invoices paid to Design Alabama for technical support in drafting the placemaking plan have been included with prior reports.

### **Deliverable 2.G Working Group Survey and Memo**

Status: Complete. During WGMs #11 and #12, participants were asked to provide verbal feedback on the draft Placemaking Plan and Implementation Toolkit. Their feedback was incorporated into the current draft BBPP plan.

### **Deliverable 2.H. Marketing and Communication Materials**

Status: The following materials were produced in the final quarter: 1) Flyer for Community Input Session for BBPP Plan, hosted as part of WGM #11; 2) Flyer spotlighting ‘Disability March’, planned as part of 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Disabilities Act Celebration scheduled for 7-26-25 in Selma; 3) Save the Date flyer for Marion to Selma Bike Ride scheduled for 2-19-25, and 4) newly developed partner website available at <https://www.votingrightstrail.org/>.

### **Deliverable 3.A Final Vision Plan**

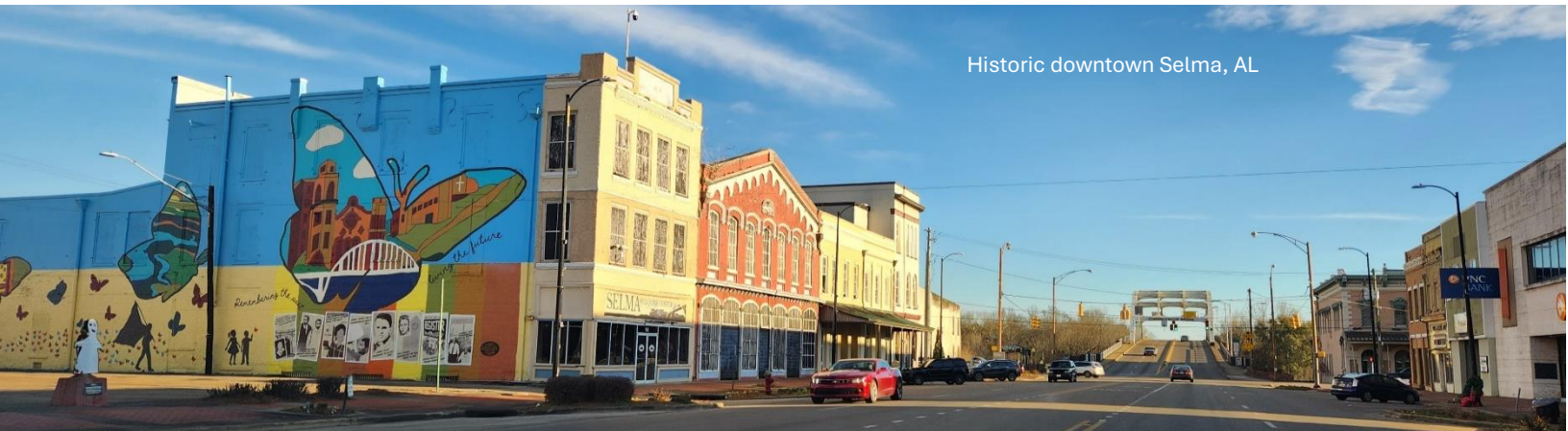
Status: While a robust placemaking plan has been crafted as outlined in our proposal, TCF and our partners are eager to refine the 104-page document to make it more accessible and to create additional supplemental collateral materials based on the report that will help advance the effort.

### **Deliverable 3B Final Implementation Toolkit**

Status: Similarly, while the report submitted by Design Alabama included a variety of marketing and communications tools, TCF and partners will continue to refine the placemaking toolkit to meet the needs of TCF and our Alabama-based partners.

### **Deliverable 3 C Additional Working Group Meetings**

Status: Complete. WGM #11 was held in August and WGM #12 was held in September and are described under Task 3.3. Copies of agendas and meetings notes for each are attached to this report.



## **CHALLENGES**

The primary challenge encountered was the extensive time and effort required to build trust in communities of color that have been historically impacted by systemic oppression and disinvestment. These communities often carry a deep-seated mistrust due to past experiences, making it essential to approach relationship-building with care, transparency, and consistency. Additionally, the process of building capacity within these communities and identifying partners who genuinely align with the vision and values of TCF, and our dedicated Working Group partners posed challenges. Finding collaborators who share a commitment to equity, inclusivity, and sustainable practices required thoughtful engagement and patience, underscoring the importance of prioritizing authentic relationships and shared values in this work. This alignment was particularly challenging when working to identify the professional design consultant for developing the BBPP Placemaking Plan. Fortunately, we were able to eventually identify excellent partners at Design Alabama, but the delay resulted in the timing of the final draft being pushed past the grant award period.

## **ADVICE TO OTHERS**

The strength of this initiative lies in the community-centered approach and the reliance on partner-driven, collaborative goals and outcomes. This commitment to community-based partners led to deeper trust and stronger relationships overall. These deep relationships are crucial for advancing the long-term goals outlined in the BBPP plan. This model does present some limitations, specifically the inability to project how long it might take to advance outcomes as “progress moves at the speed of trust”. Our advice to others pursuing this kind of work is to build in more time than you think you might need to accomplish goals and be



flexible and willing to shift timelines to prioritize the needs and goals of those who have been most impacted by historic inequities.

## NEXT STEPS

While the RPIC award period is complete, TCF will continue to collaborate with our Working Group and local, state, and Federal partners to finalize the nearly complete draft BBPP Placemaking Plan and Toolkit and advance the outlined goals, including acquisition, preservation, and activation of at-risk cultural heritage sites that advance economic and social justice goals for Black Belt communities all along the Historic Selma to Montgomery Voting Right Trail.

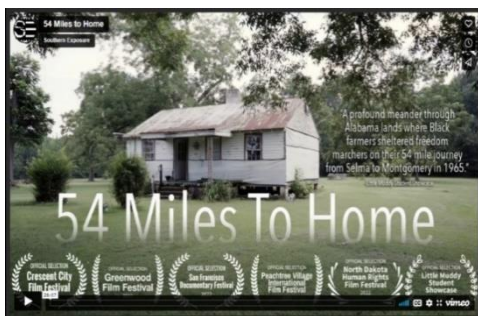
## MULTI-MEDIA

Ensuring these important American stories are captured and shared for the benefit of all is an important component in conserving these sacred places. To support this effort, The Conservation Fund is collaborating with grassroots partners and remaining eyewitnesses to document these stories before they are lost. Most recently, these efforts have included:

### Washington Post Feature Story

In June 2024, the Washington Post featured a front-page cover story highlighting Phillip Howard, The Conservation Fund's People & Places Program Director, and the efforts underway to protect additional Civil Rights sites in Alabama. [Access the full article here.](#)

### Two Full-Length Films



#### 54 Miles to Home

This Southern Exposure film tells the untold story of the three families who risked their lives by opening their land to provide campsites for the thousands of marchers along the 54-mile route from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

[Watch Trailer Here \(2 mins\)](#)

[Watch Full-Length Film Here \(28 mins\)](#)



#### Defending Freedom – The Arthur D. Shores Story

This new Longleaf Studios film spotlights the pioneering Alabama Civil Rights attorney and his legacy over the decades he fought for racial justice – a mission that often put him and his family in physical danger.

[Watch Trailer Here \(2 mins\)](#)

### In-Person Event



#### Freedom Riders Recount and Commemorate History

Hear directly from the heroic Freedom Riders who faced violent mobs in their fight for equality.

[Watch Video here \(5 mins\)](#)

[Media Coverage: Alabama.com](#)