



Heritage Matters

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News of the Nation's Diverse Cultural Heritage

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Idlewild: A Hidden Gem In Northern Michigan Re-Emerges

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During the second decade of 20th-century America, a magical place arose from discarded forests in northern Michigan: Idlewild, known by many as “Black Eden.” The story of Idlewild, Michigan, is a true American story: one of determination, pride, failure, recovery, celebration, and renaissance. Idlewild, a community listed in the National Register of Historic Places, is engaged in a unique rebuilding process using the strength of its heritage and the creative resilience of its residents. In partnership with the State of Michigan and others, Idlewild is participating in a cultural economic development project designed to help preserve its past, overcome lingering internal challenges, and rise from decades of neglect.

Homesteaded in 1912 and platted in 1915, Idlewild was one of several dozen African American resorts established throughout North America during segregation. According to the National Resource Team (NRT), a national group of distinguished scholars: “At approximately 3,000 acres, Idlewild is the largest land based historically African American resort ever assembled in the United States. It is a rare and valuable national resource with physical and cultural significance.” Like most of these resorts, Idlewild grew to social and economic prominence only to spiral downward in the late 1960s after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when African Americans could legally exercise once forbidden recreational and entertainment choices. Today, Idlewild stands with five other surviving historic “African American Beaches:” American Beach (Florida); Freeman Beach (North Carolina); Highland Beach (Maryland); Oak Bluff (Massachusetts); and Sag Harbor (New York).

Idlewild, approximately 35 miles east of Lake Michigan, and 240 miles northwest of Detroit, attracted investment by notables such as Madame C. J. Walker, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois,

National Register Nominations

Christine H. Messing / National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers / Rustin Quaide / National Park Service

1 Madonna Acres Historic District

The Madonna Acres Historic District was the first residential subdivision of Raleigh, North Carolina, built by African Americans for African Americans in the early 1960s. This was an especially significant accomplishment considering segregation was still in full force in Raleigh, and most black residents were limited to living in the inner city. The district consists of 40 custom built homes, mainly ranches and split-levels, with sizable lawns averaging a quarter acre each, and attached carports. The exteriors are brick with decorative accents in stone or wood, with large picture windows and planters as common features. Madonna Acres' location adjacent to the campus of St. Augustine's College has much to do with the district's establishment.

The college was started by the Episcopalians in 1867 as a teacher training school for African Americans, and the other services available on campus, including a hospital, a chapel, and cultural events, established the area as a center of local black community life. Reverend Henry Beard Delany was an early rector at St. Augustine's, later becoming the first African American Episcopal bishop in the United States in 1918. That same year he purchased a tract of land where he lived with his family just east of the campus. Several adjacent tracts were added and subdivided to form the 13 acre plat that would become Madonna Acres.

John Winters, an African American native of Raleigh, had left the area as a child but returned in the 1950s following his education in New York and Virginia. White suburbs were being developed on the north and west sides of Raleigh, while the black residential areas southeast of Raleigh were virtually ignored, so John Winters started his own real estate and insurance business, with Madonna Acres as his first foray into housing development in 1960. He acquired the land from Bishop Delany's heirs and began to plan this subdivision that would allow middle income black families to purchase a new home on a large, scenic lot. The main north-south road running through the long narrow development was aptly named Delany Drive.

Winters drew the initial designs for each home in consultation with the buyers, making custom layouts, often taking advantage of the sloping lots. Almost two-thirds of the original homeowners were educators, many at the neighboring St. Augustine's College but also at the State Department of Public Instruction and public schools in the area. A white subdivision that developed concurrently,



The initial design for each home in the Madonna Acres subdivision was drawn in consultation with the homebuyer to suit individual needs and tastes, and often took advantage of natural features such as a sloping lot. Photo courtesy of the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office.

Battery Heights, helps to illustrate a divergence in housing tastes between the black and white communities, with a tendency for black suburbs to more fully embrace modern design.

The exceptional modernist architecture of Madonna Acres maintains a high level of structural and historical integrity since many of the original homeowners remain in the neighborhood, or have passed their homes on to their descendants. The district is included in the Multiple Property Submission of Post-World War II and Modern Architecture in Raleigh, North Carolina, 1945-1965, and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on September 1, 2010.