**Reaching back to move forward towards a future of HOPE:  
The story of Sandhills Family Heritage Association**

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*We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people. And because the connection between the South of the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s has been broken, it’s very difficult to understand who we are.*

August Wilson[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Sandhills Family Heritage Association (SFHA) works to revive the unique African-American culture in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. One of the first African-American organizations in the United States to combine land protection with community development, SFHA demonstrates how cultural connections to the land can be converted into a broad array of economic, social, and environmental benefits. The key principle of the Association’s work is embodied in its emblem, the mythical Sankofa bird that moves forward while looking backward with the egg of the future in its beak. The word Sankofa comes from the Akan people of West Africa and translates into English as “go back to fetch it.” SFHA is helping community members reach back and gather the best of what the past has to teach in order to move forward.

The seeds of SFHA were sown when its founder Ammie McRae Jenkins returned to her birth place in the Sandhills after living for decades in the city of Durham some 120 km away, where she had worked for 18 years as a computer programmer and instructor at a technical community college and later had a stint as a spa owner. What started as a personal quest to learn about her family’s history soon became a broader endeavour to document the rich cultural heritage of African-American community in the Sandhills. Ammie’s conversations with the elders revealed one thread that ran through every family story shared: the deep connection of local African-American families to the land. Land had always been central to their social, economic, and political life, as well as to their cultural identity. However, with the introduction of Jim Crow laws[[2]](#footnote-2) and the racial and economic discrimination that ensued, black land ownership began to decline. The decline of black land ownership and the discrimination against African-American farmers continued even in the civil rights era (Daniel, 2013). The stories of Sandhills families recorded by Ammie provided ample evidence of the detrimental effects the loss of land had upon their livelihoods and the unique African-American culture in this region. It was natural, therefore, that land and the cultural traditions tied to land ownership acted as a magnet drawing together a group of African-Americans concerned about preserving and passing on their heritage, which eventually developed into SFHA.

Today, SFHA provides programs and services in the areas of heritage preservation, land ownership, public education, and economic development, with a view to fostering self-reliance and a sense of self-worth among the African-American community in the Sandhills. Inspired by the local traditions of giving, SFHA leaders seek to reaffirm these traditions through the ways they engage with the community and other public and private actors, which they describe as “culture-based philanthropy.” SFHA’s work offers important lessons and insights, especially with regard to black land loss, the inclusion—or, rather, non-inclusion—of African-American communities in the dominant development models, and the capacity of active citizens to influence systemic social change, even when these “grassroots davids” have to face the Goliath of mainstream development. Perhaps the key contribution of SFHA to social innovation is that it offers a vision of development in which economic well-being is attained through preserving and drawing on the local cultural heritage, rather than at the cost of disregarding or even destroying it. It illustrates not only a reclaiming of African American heritage and a resolution to the past wrongs that drove people off the land, but also a demonstration of how a local economy can be build on deeply grounded cultural connections, in a region which is otherwise dominated by industry, military and history of economic dependence. However, in order to clearly appreciate this and other innovations that SFHA’s work presents, we must first understand the historical context that shaped it.

**Context**

The Sandhills comprise 11 counties in south-central North Carolina: Cumberland, Harnett, Lee, Moore, Richmond, Scotland, Hoke, Robeson, Chatham, Montgomery, and Wake. This area holds national significance for a number of reasons. Besides being recognized as one of the last strongholds of longleaf pine forests that rank among the most diverse and threatened ecosystems in North America, it is also home to one of the world’s largest military complexes, some of the finest golf courses in the United States, and a unique African-American culture. The Sandhills region has witnessed the dramatic journey of African Americans from slavery to self-reliance. This journey amply demonstrates the inventiveness and tenacity of African Americans, their entrepreneurship and strong cultural ties to the land, and the many contributions they have made to the region.

African-American heritage in the Southern United States dates back to the early 17th century, when the first Africans were forcibly brought to this region to work on tobacco, rice, and cotton plantations. In the pre-Civil War United states, enslaved African labour played a critical role in economic development, especially in the South. While the high rates of slavery were generally associated with tobacco plantations in Virginia and rice plantations in Southern Carolina, the dry, nutrient-poor soils of North Carolina’s Sandhills could not support these crops. The demand for enslaved Africans in this region came mainly from the naval stores industry—the production of tar, pitch, and turpentine for the construction and maintenance of wooden ships (Aragon, 2000). In the mid-1800s, North Carolina produced over 95% of the naval stores in the country (North Carolina History, n.d.). Slave labour there was used primarily to produce turpentine, a volatile fluid obtained by the steam distillation of pine resin, which had a multitude of uses in and beyond the naval industry. “It was a dirty job,” notes Ammie Jenkins, “many people used to get sick with the fumes and a few even died” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). Besides the naval stores industry, enslaved Africans also worked on farms, constructed buildings, sailed ships, and did domestic chores (UNC, n.d.). Among other things, they built the longest plank road in North Carolina between 1849 and 1854, stretching 129 miles from Fayetteville to the village of Bethania near Salem.

The social dynamics of slave life in North Carolina was somewhat different than it was in other Southern states, where large-scale plantations typically featured hundreds of slaves and a clear hierarchy of specialized field and domestic workers. By contrast, most slaves in North Carolina worked on small farms,[[3]](#footnote-3) where they may have been required to work both in the fields and at various other jobs at different times of the year. Another consequence of living in smaller groups was that slaves in North Carolina generally had more interaction with slaves on other farms. They often looked to other farms to find a spouse, and visited different farms during their limited free time.

***The emergence of land-based black culture***

Since their emancipation from slavery, African Americans fought hard for their economic independence, and acquisition of land was central to that struggle (Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012). After the institution of slavery was formally abolished in the United States in 1865, many freed slaves became tenant farmers or sharecroppers on the land of their former owners. This eventually enabled some of them to become land owners, as the cash-poor whites sold off their land in parts (Aragon, 2000). The land did not come cheap or easy, though. African Americans had to work very hard for many years as sharecroppers or in industry in order to be able to acquire farms of their own. Yet land was so important to them that in the period immediately following emancipation, most African Americans wanted to become land owners even more than they wanted voting rights or education (Mitchell, 2000). Land ownership was much more than owning a piece of property; it provided a source of livelihood as well as a means to economic and political independence. Ammie Jenkins explains the importance of land ownership for African Americans in the Sandhills in this way:

At times one may not understand why so much importance was placed on land ownership; but when you have been treated just like a piece of property, sold with the cattle and everything else on the auction block . . . and then you are freed, you’ll get to the point where you want to own land. And it’s even sweeter if you can own that one which you worked on. . . . Land was a dream, independence, it was power to our ancestors. . . . It was one thing around which they achieved self-sufficiency and built communities (personal communication, January 14, 2013).

Owing to the persistent desire of African Americans to acquire land and their hard work to fulfill that desire, black land ownership in the United States rose steadily until the early 20th century. By 1920, nearly one million African Americans owned roughly 15 million acres of farmland across the country, and 25% of black farmers owned the land they worked (Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012; Mitchell, 2000). Almost all of the black landowners lived in the South (Ibid). In the Sandhills region, many of the former slaves owned 50 to 100 acres, and few owned much larger amounts of land, including Ammie’s great-grandfather who owned 658 acres.

After acquiring land, African Americans converted it into farms where the entire family would dwell and work together. This way of living shaped a culture of self-reliance and entrepreneurship. The Sandhills region in particular boasts a strong history of black entrepreneurship; local African-American businesses included the production of natural remedies, carpentry, barbershops, and eateries, to name a few. Ammie pieced together the following account of how her family’s economy looked like in the early 1900s:

The one hundred-acre farm of . . . grandfather Neill McRae, Sr. [was] agriculturally diversified and self-sufficient. Structures . . . included a house, hay barn, mule stables, smokehouse, wood shed, ice house, chicken coop, cane syrup mill, and privy. Besides grains such as corn and wheat, the family raised livestock and a variety of fruits and nuts such as pears, grapes, peaches, apples, plums, blackberries, dewberries, persimmons, pecans, and black walnuts. These items were grown for family consumption, and also sold directly off the farm to local customers, as was honey gathered from the orchard bees. Deer, rabbits, squirrels, and raccoons were hunted for recreation as well as for meat to supplement the homegrown beef, pork, and poultry (cited in Aragon, 2000, p. 42).

Black-owned farms were generally able to supply the needs of the resident families without external assistance. When additional cash was needed, family members would work in the tar and turpentine industry or plant more cash crops such as corn, cotton, or tobacco. Ammie refers to those years as a golden period in the history of African Americans in the Sandhills, a time when “we were a self-sufficient community” buoyed by a spirit of entrepreneurship and sharing. A century later, these traditions of entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and sharing will become the guiding stars for SFHA.

Ironically, the end of slavery, while making it possible for African Americans to achieve self-determination and economic independence through land ownership, did little to ease social segregation and racial tensions (Aragon, 2000). These tensions, along with other factors that will be discussed in the following section, eventually led to epidemic losses of black-owned farmland across the United States.

***Decline of African-American land ownership***

The decline of black-owned land in the rural parts of the Southern United States over the 20th century is a well-documented trend. While this period saw a general decline in the number of farmers across the country, its rate was markedly uneven with regard to race (Richardson, 2013). Wood and Gilbert (2000) and Mitchell (2000) have established that the number of black farmers in the US plummeted by 98% between 1920 and 1997, whereas the number of white farmers declined by 66% over the same period. The overall amount of black-owned farmland also declined sharply: according to the 1997 US Census of Agriculture, African-American farm owners/operators across the country, including part-owners, owned a little over two million acres, a dramatic decline from the 15 million acres they had accumulated between emancipation and 1920. As noted by Mitchell (2010), “In 1920, black farm owners accounted for one out of every seven farms in the United States; today [in 2000] these farms account for less than one percent of all U.S. farms” (p. 22).

**Figure 1. Number of black-operated farms in the USA, 1900-1997**

Source: Wood and Gilbert (2000).

The period following emancipation and enactment of Jim Crow laws was marked by vigilante “justice,” lynchings, race riots, and attacks on successful African-American businesses and farms (Conrad, Whitehead, Mason, & Stewart, 2005). Traumatized by the rampant violence and lack of legal protection in the South, African Americans fled en masse to the North, leaving behind their land, livelihoods, and ancestral culture. Their exodus continued for much of the 20th century, involving over eight million people (Gregory, 2005). Many of them never prepared wills determining who would inherit their property; so after their death ownership of their land was automatically passed to their heirs, making it an “heir property.” Mitchell (2000) estimates that at least half of African-Americans who had owned land in the South died without a will; therefore, a significant proportion of black-owned land in this region, especially in its rural parts, must have heir property status. Heirs own such property as tenants in common. All heirs hold an undivided interest in the entire property, which cannot be physically distinguished but can be transferred or sold to someone outside the family or ownership group. Such unstable type of ownership spurred the decline of black-owned land, since any heir had the right to partition his or her interest and cash out.

Land developers would often use this loophole, convincing just one inheritor to sell their portion of an heir property, whereupon the sale of the entire property could be forced since it had not been legally apportioned to the other heirs. The oft-occurring expansion of heir numbers over generations, leading to increasingly fragmented property ownership, further contributed to black land loss. These factors are still in place today (PBS, n.d.). Indeed, Mitchell (2000) argues that “a sale for partition and division is the most widely used legal method facilitating the loss of heir property” (p. 9) in African-American communities.

Those African-American farmers who remained in the South would often experience various forms of discrimination from local offices of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), such as untimely delivery of operating loans or non-provision of information about the availability of technical and financial support programs (Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012), which could prevent them from being able to plant their crops at the optimal time or purchase new equipment and quality supplies. The expansion of corporate agriculture further exacerbated the decline of family farms across race lines; however, African-American farmers were affected especially severely because they were also hit by discriminatory practices of USDA and other agencies (C. Brown, personal communication, January 16, 2013). Daniel (2013) highlights a paradox whereby the expansion of black-owned land was most pronounced during the period when race-based violence and discrimination in the United States reached its worst level since the Civil War, while the decline of African-American land ownership peaked during the heyday of the civil rights movement when new government programs incorporating the latest scientific and technological achievements promised to usher in an era of universal prosperity.

***Fort Bragg***

In addition to the factors discussed above, the Sandhills witnessed one specific phenomenon that caused the loss of countless acres of black-owned land in this area: the creation of what has now become by far the largest Army installation in the country.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During World War I, the U.S. Army was “seeking an area having suitable terrain, adequate water, rail facilities and a climate suitable for year-round training” (U.S. Army, n.d.). The Sandhills region met these criteria, and a military reservation now known as Fort Bragg was set up there. Today, Fort Bragg is one of the largest and busiest military complexes in the world, with an area of 251 square miles (650 km2) and a population of approximately 140 thousand, including nearly 80 thousand military and civilian personnel and over 60 thousand military family members (Militarybases.com, 2012).

The mapping of the original African-American land holdings in the area carried out by SFHA revealed that much of today’s Fort Bragg acreage was once owned by black farmers. Many of them never wanted to leave their hard-earned and well-tended land but were forced to do so under eminent domain provisions.[[5]](#footnote-5) To facilitate the takeover, the authorities applied pressure tactics, telling the local land owners that the military facilities were meant “to protect them” and that they would prove themselves as loyal American citizens by letting the military use their land. A board member of SFHA recalls:

Military people came in big numbers, with horses and guns, and when you see them for the first time, it puts a fear in you. Many people got afraid but they had no rescue because the military itself was there “to protect them from the enemy”! Many felt powerless in that situation and ended up giving the land for as little as nothing, practically a giveaway (personal communication, January 13, 2013).

However effective this pressure tactics may have been, Ammie remembers that the military had to escort the last black farmer out of the Fort Bragg area because he did not want to voluntarily give up his land.

Since its creation, Fort Bragg has continuously expanded its area and operations. Many Sandhills farmers who started out with 50 to 100 acres, are now down to five-six acres or even less, and some have lost all of the land they once owned (focus group discussion with SFHA members, January 15, 2013). When Ammie started interviewing elders in communities surrounding Fort Bragg in 2001, she found that many local residents feared its further growth. Their fears soon came true: in 2005, the US Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommended a significant expansion of Fort Bragg to carry out the relocation of forces from the recently closed bases. As a consequence, its core area was enlarged and a buffer zone was established, which restricted non-military development opportunities around the base. With the expansion of the core military area, additional land was also required for housing, infrastructure, services, and other activities associated with the base maintenance. As Fort Bragg continues to grow, it threatens the local landowners with further land loss and land use restrictions.

***Culture at risk***

Despite facing the hardships of slavery, racial discrimination and segregation, and enormous financial burdens, African Americans created a strong culture closely tied to the land they once worked on and later owned. The decline of land ownership had a profound and manifold impact on the African-American community. First, African Americans agonized deeply over losing the one thing they had thought they could leave as an inheritance to their posterity. Second, losing their land meant losing the income they derived from using that land for agricultural and other purposes. They also faced the danger of losing the natural remedies they used to harvest in the woods or grow on their farms. Further, losing their land put them at risk of losing their cultural traditions inextricably linked to the land.

The land was much more than just a “natural resource” for African Americans; it was the lifeblood of their culture. As a board member of SFHA observed, “The land—it’s about [your] whole life . . . hunting for food; growing food; income. It’s a secure place you can call home. All of these things you lose when you lose the land” (personal communication, January 15, 2013).

It was into such circumstances that SFHA was born.

**The unfolding of SFHA**

SFHA was formally incorporated in 2001, but its roots can be traced much further back, to a momentous experience Ammie Jenkins had in 1978, when she returned to the Sandhills to visit her birth place—for the first time after she had to leave it for city life 23 years earlier, at 13 years of age. She came back to fulfill one of her ailing mother’s final wishes:

Mama wanted to see the old home place before she died. But she got so sick that she couldn’t go, so she asked me and my sister if we could go. . . . She just wanted something to remind her of her old home place. . . . And she said, “See, if you just go, look around, and if there’s an old jar or even a jar lid, bring me that.” And we wanted to do that for her because we knew she wouldn’t be around much longer (A. Jenkins, personal communication, January 14, 2013).

Ammie herself never wanted to return to the Sandhills, worrying that it would bring back unhappy memories. After her father died of lupus in 1954, at age 35, her mother and six younger siblings were harassed by racist hate groups and evicted from the family farm, which was eventually appropriated by Fort Bragg (PBS NewsHour, 2007). But eventually Ammie and her sister went there; and once they started up the little road leading to their old home site, “a miracle happened” (Ibid.): “We just forgot about all the bad stuff and started talking about all the fun and all the good times that we had there, and it started bringing back all the good memories” (A. Jenkins, personal communication, January 14, 2013).

The experience of revisiting her old home place brought a rediscovery of her ties to the land, and also enkindled in her a desire to research her family history. Ammie started interviewing older family members and soon found herself collecting the stories of other families across the Sandhills. Her interlocutors would often refer her to other old-time residents, and eventually her undertaking snowballed into more than 80 tape-recorded interviews with people aged 80 or older.

In most of these interviews, people talked at length about the land they used to own. Ammie learned that many African-American families in the Sandhills had once possessed diverse and self-sufficient farms exceeding 100 acres, similar to the one she grew up on. “That’s a lot of land,” she observes, “I know these people’s descendants and they don’t know anything about the land; so where is that land now?” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). Many of the people she talked to appeared to have the same concern: “The land is disappearing” was their common lament. Ammie knew all too well from her personal experience how drastic the consequences of land loss can be. Once their family farm was lost, she remembers, “we left from being self-sufficient to ‘Where do we go from here? We have nothing,’ to the point of accepting handouts and that type of thing” (cited in PBS, 2007).

Now that Ammie saw that the entire culture she belonged to was in jeopardy, she knew she had to find a way to preserve it.

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While conducting interviews, Ammie noticed that Sandhills residents had a number of common concerns, and eventually she started organizing group meetings to discuss these concerns. As these meetings progressed, participants also started talking about what their community had achieved in the past. One of the accomplishments they remembered with special pride was the old civic center built by seven young people with financial and other contributions from the community. It quickly became a local hub of African-American social life, being used by the entire community for any activity that could not be held at the Church. It also became a political hub in the days of the civil rights movement, when local black leaders used it as a place to get together and strategize. Other collective achievements brought up at these meetings included the construction of churches and the creation of businesses and community gardens.

The discussion circles catalyzed by Ammie’s interviews, which usually met after church services, either in somebody’s home or simply in the street, became a regular feature of the community’s life. It then occurred to Ammie that they could make a real difference by forming “some type of a group where we could speak as one having a common concern, which was the loss of our land, the income, and everything else that goes with that loss of land” (A. Jenkins, personal communication, January 14, 2013). She ran her idea by several friends, including then mayor of Spring Lake, Marvin Lucas, with whom she had gone to high school together. Everyone was enthusiastic about the prospect. “All I did was just encourage the idea,” remembers Lucas, “and she took the bull by the horns” (cited in Solano, 2011). The Sandhills Family Heritage Association was launched in 2001 with the goal of “building self-sufficiency and self-worth through preserving our cultural heritage and our natural resources” (A. Jenkins, cited in Cohen, 2007). Ammie gave up her spa business in Durham and moved back to the Sandhills to devote herself to achieving this goal.

During the early period of her community organizing work in the Sandhills, Ammie came in contact with Mikki Sager of the Conservation Fund, a national non-profit with a dual mission of environmental protection and economic development. As director of the Fund’s Resourceful Communities Program, Mikki immediately saw the congruence of Ammie’s aspirations with the Program’s mission of fostering a network of grassroots organizations implementing the triple bottom line of sustainable economic development, social justice, and environmental stewardship in North Carolina communities. She also found in Ammie “that unique combination of somebody who is both a visionary and a doer” (cited in Solano, 2011). Ever since the inception of SFHA, the Resourceful Communities Program has been its key partner, providing financial support as well as capacity building assistance, both of which have been crucial for its continued existence and growth.

SFHA is a membership-based, non-profit organization with a volunteer board of eight members representing all the five Sandhills counties in which it works. Its current membership exceeds 250 people. SFHA membership is not restricted to African Americans, and includes both current and former residents of the Sandhills. The Association has only two staff members—Ammie (executive director) and her part-time assistant. Most of its work is being accomplished by volunteers which include members and non-members alike.

**Key facets of SFHA’s work**

What had begun as a personal quest evolved into community organizing, and what had begun as a heritage documentation project evolved into a commitment to keep that heritage alive and draw on its strengths to build a better future; that’s how SFHA came to be. Its mission is articulated as building communities of HOPE through **H**eritage preservation, **O**utreach education, **P**rotection of land and natural resources, and **E**conomic self-sufficiency (Sandhills Family Heritage Association, n.d.).

***Heritage preservation***

In keeping with the Sankofa principle of looking back in order to move forward, much of SFHA’s work is focused on documenting the rich history and culture of African Americans in the region. By now the Association has conducted and recorded over 130 interviews with Sandhills elders. These interviews have formed the basis of two books compiled by Ammie Jenkins. One of these, *Preserving our family heritage*, presents the stories of local African-American families dating back to slavery. These stories range from the simple everyday struggles of farming in white America to various agricultural, forestry, and technical innovations created by African Americans in the Sandhills (Jenkins, n.d.). The second book, *Healing from the land*, illustrates the deep connection between African-American elders and their natural environment as reflected in their use of various resources from the forests, waters, and fields “to sustain life and heal themselves” (Jenkins, 2003).

SFHA makes systematic efforts to correct the one-sidedness of the mainstream historical memory, which has tended to overlook the contributions of African Americans in the Sandhills region (McCann, 2008). In addition to documenting African-American heritage, the Association has partnered with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to prepare new history lesson plans for state schools. These lessons draw upon SFHA’s oral history collection to demonstrate the rich tapestry of black cultural expressions in North Carolina and the important historical contributions of African Americans in local communities. They also illustrate the cultural impacts of civil rights activism in the Sandhills.

SFHA has also been active in showcasing the achievements of African Americans through heritage tourism. It has developed an African-American heritage trail that connects historically significant sites across the Sandhills. In collaboration with several partners including Fayetteville Convention and Visitors Bureau, Town of Spring Lake, and local churches, SFHA organizes heritage tours for families and youth groups, guided by its volunteers.

The development of heritage tourism is closely related to SFHA’s work in revitalizing historic places such as the above-mentioned civic center. At the time when SFHA was formally launched, the old center stood empty and in disrepair (SFHA, 2004). The Association acquired the building and renovated it with financial help from community members. Next, it petitioned the Town of Spring Lake to designate the building as a historic landmark owing to its past role as a hub of the local African-American community. The designation was awarded in 2007, and the renovated facility—named Sandhills Heritage Center—has now become a feature of SFHA’s heritage tours, including boasting a replica of the historic plank road and a brush arbor,[[6]](#footnote-6) constructed time to time by the Association’s volunteers. The Center also hosts a thriving weekly farmers’ market, initiated by SFHA as well. The Association’s plan going forward is to develop the Center into a fully-fledged hub of community life that would host a library, a business incubator, and SFHA offices, as well as providing space for various cultural events, celebrations, and meetings.

Yet another signature element of SFHA’s heritage preservation work is the Sandhills Sankofa Festival. Held annually since 2002, it offers a one-of-a-kind opportunity to promote the music, dance, storytelling, food, crafts, and other local African-American traditions on a continuing basis.

***Outreach education***

For SFHA leaders, keeping the traditions of African Americans in the Sandhills alive is just as important as documenting them. This goal is being achieved through an intensive education outreach program aimed both to foster a greater public awareness of these traditions and to ensure that they are passed on to future generations.

“One of the biggest impacts we have had is through our outreach education,” observes Ammie, “because this is something we have done from the very beginning of the organization in 2001 on a monthly basis” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). SFHA offers at least 12 workshops a year for Sandhills residents, covering a wide range of subjects—estate planning, heir property ownership, predatory lending practices, financial management, forest stewardship, gardening, and heritage appreciation. Hundreds of people have attended and benefitted from these workshops. In addition to the local workshops, SFHA also conducts regional trainings in community organizing, asset mapping, communication skills, fundraising, conflict resolution, and other aspects of community development for grassroots leaders. The attending leaders then bring their newly-acquired knowledge and skills into their communities.

Recognizing that the success of its mission largely depends on the involvement of the younger generation, SFHA has developed apprenticeship and service learning programs targeting youth. One example is its gardening project which pairs up community elders and young people in order to document and pass on knowledge about growing traditional African-American food crops. Another example of SFHA’s outreach work targeting young people is the project on “Building the Bridges to Healthy Communities” (carried out in partnership with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2008), in which Sandhills youth were taught to conduct interviews with the local citizens about public health and environmental issues in their communities. In the course of that project, the youth were also taught the basics of building partnerships aimed to address these issues. SFHA’s most recent youth-oriented outreach initiative is a model apprenticeship program, “Youth Engaging in Agriculture,” launched in 2012 in collaboration with the North Carolina A&T State University. This three-year program connects limited-resource local youth with mentor-farmers to provide in-depth practical experience in the production and marketing of locally-grown crops, which the apprentices could use to start their own farming businesses. In the third year of the project, the participating youth interested in continuing farming as a career will be provided with guidance for locating rental farmland and securing loans from USDA or other institutions.

***Protection of land and natural resources***

SFHA was born out of Ammie’s conversations with Sandhills elders, which revealed the fundamental role that owning and tending land have played in shaping the unique African-American culture in the region. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Association has been committed to helping sustain African-American land ownership and traditions of land stewardship since its very inception.

SFHA offers seminars and workshops on landowner rights and responsibilities, estate planning, and land management; produces various guides and toolkits for land owners; disseminates information on government-directed and non-governmental landowner assistance programs; facilitates the development of individual farm management and forest stewardship plans; offers trainings on sustainable land use practices; and advocates on behalf of African-American land owners.

Land goes for a premium in the Sandhills as the continuous growth of Fort Bragg and the expansion of other economic activities create an ever-increasing demand. To satisfy it, developers and real estate companies are keenly looking to acquire new land. Ammie speaks sadly about the “predatory” tactics they employ:

The community is the place where most of the land predators target their activities, because they feel it is easy taking. You have people who will come in and say, “I see that your roof needs some fixing.” And then the next thing you know is your house in on collateral. They would do anything to put your land at risk (personal communication, January 13, 2013).

The SFHA is addressing this threat by educating African-American land owners about their legal rights and options and by connecting them to support services when they are considering selling their properties. It also helps them obtain clear titles on their properties, document their family trees, complete affidavits of heirship, and organize family reunions to discuss the status of jointly owned land.

Access to land management services is important to maintaining land ownership. However, many black land owners in the Sandhills feel uncomfortable initiating contact with relevant offices due to the discriminatory practices that representatives of these or other government agencies maintained against African Americans in the past. SFHA works with the land owners and agency personnel to help them build effective working relationships. The case of the North Carolina Forest Service provides a good example of SFHA’s mediating work. This agency’s mandate includes developing forest management plans for the interested landowners for a nominal fee or even free of charge. These plans provide valuable information on the habitat requirements and life cycle of various tree species, discuss insect-related and other tree diseases, and include recommendations on attaining the land owner’s management objectives (Harris, 2006). However, SFHA members found that no African American land owner in the Sandhills had ever requested this service. The agency staff, in their turn, had never made any concrete steps to reach out to black land owners. To address this issue, SFHA has recently run a workshop for the local land owners interested in having management plans developed for their woodlots, and then helped individual land owners connect with appropriate Forest Service staff. These efforts have yielded the creation of the first forest management plan for an African-American land owner in the Sandhills. SFHA’s work on educating land owners about their rights, responsibilities, and entitlements is about ensuring that everyone is included and treated equally and fairly within an “all-inclusive” system. This is a different way of changing the system: an all inclusive system is a different system.

SFHA also organizes Sandhills residents to advocate their position regarding land issues with various stakeholders. Its work with Fort Bragg is an example that deserves to be discussed here. As mentioned earlier, in 2005 the US Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommended the closure of several military bases across the country and an increase in Fort Bragg area to accommodate their personnel. SFHA board members were invited to participate in the consultations on the projected expansion. Fort Bragg authorities proposed a five-mile buffer zone around the base, which threatened Sandhills land owners with another massive land loss and further land use restrictions. During the initial consultations, SFHA representatives insisted that the information about the proposed expansion should be shared with local land owners. SFHA also undertook its own research to determine which properties would be affected, and conducted discussions with the owners of these properties to assess the possible impact of Fort Bragg expansion on various aspects of their life. Along with that, SFHA leaders insisted that consultations on Fort Bragg expansion should be conducted in open meetings allowing the public to participate. They saw to it that Sandhills residents showed up at the meetings armed with detailed information on their land-based economic activities, and encouraged them to openly express their concerns about the negative effects of Fort Bragg expansion on their life. Ammie remembers:

We were always at the table to discuss how it is going to change the lives of our people. . . . Why are you upsetting the life of people who were already upset once [by the creation of Fort Bragg]? It seems like a replay (personal communication, January 13, 2013).

While SFHA was not able to prevent the establishment of a buffer zone and associated land use restrictions, it did succeed in having the buffer zone reduced from the proposed five-mile radius to a one-mile radius outside the core base area. Without challenging the law of eminent domain as such, SFHA has also helped those residents who had to give up their land to Fort Bragg receive compensation equivalent to its market value of by connecting them with premier land condemnation lawyers.

***Entrepreneurship and economic development***

Today’s economic landscape of the Sandhills is dominated by military facilities, big-box stores, and sprawling golf courses. These development models are hardly conducive to preserving the culture of land-based self-reliance that became a hallmark of the African-American community in the Sandhills since the abolition of slavery. Nor have they helped this community achieve wealth even in the very narrow economic sense of the term. On the contrary: the interviews conducted by SFHA reveal that one of the major reasons why black land ownership in the area has dropped so precipitously in the recent decades is because many Sandhills families were simply not earning enough income to pay land taxes.

SFHA’s work in the area of economic development is focused on “creating land-based jobs or income opportunities so people can help pay their taxes and hold onto their land and so they can continue to do the type of work they enjoy doing and at the same time preserve the cultural heritage that is tied to the land and have something to pass on to the next generation” (A. Jenkins, cited in Cohen, 2007). For example, the Association works actively with the North Carolina Forest Service to help the local land owners develop sustainable timber harvesting practices. Before SFHA entered the scene, African-American land owners in the Sandhills had difficulty obtaining assistance, or even information, from this agency. However, through patient and persistent work with both the Forest Service officials and the landowners, SFHA has helped them develop constructive working relationships. The Forest Service helps the land owners determine when their woodlots are mature enough for harvesting, and assess the volume and value of their timber before sale. It also provides information and advice on cost-share, tax, and other financial incentive programs available to nonindustrial private forest owners in North Carolina to promote sustainable forestry. These services are particularly important in the Sandhills where some timber companies “prey” on small-scale woodlot owners, especially on those of advanced age, in order to gain an unfair marketing advantage.

Thanks to SFHA, local land owners such as Ed and Sheila Spence are now better equipped to make informed decisions regarding the harvesting and sale of their timber and other resource management issues on their land. The Spences attended SFHA’s educational workshops and were inspired by its vision of land-based entrepreneurship. They became the first land owners in the Sandhills to work with the North Carolina Forest Service on developing a management plan for their woodlot, the process that has helped them determine sustainable harvest levels and appropriate silvicultural practices.

The establishment of the Sandhills Farmers’ Market represents another notable achievement in SFHA’s work to promote land-based entrepreneurship. The Association started working on the idea of creating a local farmers’ market in 2006, aiming both to enhance income opportunities for Sandhills land owners and to improve community access to fresh, healthy food. To begin with, it had to persuade the Spring Lake Board of Aldermen to amend the town’s zoning ordinance, adding a farmers’ market as a permitted use. Once the amended ordinance was approved, SFHA commissioned a design firm to develop a market site plan. Next, SFHA representatives had to present their project to the town’s Board of Aldermen and Board of Adjustment. Ammie had to swear on the Bible “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about the Association’s plans with regard to the market. Once the proposed market had received a temporary approval to operate from the Boards, SFHA quickly fulfilled numerous requirements concerning market layout and hygiene, and obtained a business license. The first-ever farmers’ market in Cumberland County was born.

Despite the many bureaucratic hurdles that the market creation involved, it was a labour of love for SFHA, a tangible step towards reviving the local tradition of land-based entrepreneurship. Ammie remembers the resistance they initially faced from the town administration, and what it took for SFHA to win:

They didn’t really want us to have the farmers’ market there. [The reason I say this is that] there was nothing written in the Town bylaws that could have prevented us from starting a farmers’ market. We were just trying to make fresh fruits and vegetables available to the community. . . . [But] we had many members show up and communicated what we wanted. That’s how we got the town ordinance amended and got the farmers’ market going. We persevered and we won! (personal communication, January 17, 2013).

In both its push for the farmers’ market and its campaign to curb the expansion of Fort Bragg discussed earlier, SFHA has proven itself an effective organizer, capable not only of bringing community members together for a cause of common concern, but also of keeping them mobilized until a satisfactory outcome has been achieved.

**Asserting pride in African American culture**

Historically, African-Americans in the Sandhills were subjected to discrimination and disparagement, by both public and private entities. To a certain extent, racial discrimination in the region continues today, albeit in less blatant forms. A board member of SFHA observes: “Black people [are often put] in a negative context . . . ‘they are lazy people; they do not want to work; they do this or that’” (personal communication, January 13, 2013).

SFHA is determined to change this:

We’ve got to get rid of that image and not buy what they are selling. We need to continue to work to uphold our own dignity and speak out what we believe in. We need to stick together as a group. We’ve got to speak up and say, “Here’s what you are doing, and here’s what we want” (SFHA board member, personal communication, January 13, 2013).

The Association’s efforts to foster a sense of dignity and cultural identity among African-American citizens in the Sandhills follow a two-pronged approach which combines community rebuilding with community organizing and advocacy.

***Community rebuilding***

SFHA seeks to bring a sense of pride and self-determination back to center stage in the life of African Americans in the Sandhills by helping them rediscover their community of identity and place. The Association’s leaders have realized that collecting and sharing family stories is key to fostering a strong sense of shared identity and belonging. They have learned first hand that recognizing the hardships our ancestors had to deal with, the accomplishments they made, the values they lived by deepens our sense of personal history in one place. In this way, we come to know who *we* are.

SFHA leaders believe that the perfect model for rebuilding a strong African-American community in the Sandhills is found in its own ancestry. At the same time, they emphasize that they are not in the business of merely reenacting the past ways. “I’m not talking about living in the past,” maintains Ammie, “but I’m talking about recognizing those things that we had that are of value and building on those assets” (cited in PBS, 2007).

SFHA leaders thus do not view their oral history documentation initiative as an end in itself. Rather, they see it as a form of asset mapping, a stage-setter for a deliberate community rebuilding process focused on helping African-Americans in the Sandhills regain economic self-reliance through creating income opportunities linked to land stewardship or heritage preservation work.

***Community organizing and advocacy***

In view of the magnitude and urgency of the issues facing African-American community in the Sandhills, Ammie sometimes speaks of SFHA as an organization “in an emergency phase” (cited in PBS, 2007). As such, the Association must engage in advocacy to ensure that the concerns and desires of the community it represents are taken into consideration by those in power, and this requires effective community organizing.

In the two examples of SFHA’s advocacy work mentioned earlier in this paper (limiting the size of the proposed expansion of Fort Bragg and pushing for the establishment of a farmers' market in Spring Lake), the Association relied on the same principles: identify the burning issues of community-wide concern; get as many community members as possible to show up at meetings with authorities; ensure that people come to these meetings armed with information pertinent to the issues at hand; encourage them to voice their concerns and desires regarding these issues; and make it clear to the authorities how these specific concerns and desires relate to the big picture of the overall community well-being. In both instances, this strategy has enabled SFHA to achieve its key campaign objectives: the buffer zone around Fort Bragg was reduced to a small fraction of its originally proposed size; the farmers’ market came to life. Significantly, the Association’s community organizing and advocacy efforts have also yielded an enhanced sense of self-worth in the African-American community, as reported by its members.

**Culture-based philanthropy**

One of the key drivers of SFHA’s work is the principle of giving back to the community. The practice of giving goes back to the history of African Americans in the Sandhills since slavery. Ammie’s childhood memories, corroborated by her interviews with Sandhills elders, provided enough evidence of the voluntary giving of help to each other in times of need for her to conclude that this practice was “the connection . . . that tied all the people together” (cited in Solano, 2011):

When we grew up, even though we weren’t considered to have a lot, I don’t know of anyone that went hungry. . . . Some of the older people in the community wonder when they see the news that people in New York and other big cities are hungry: they don’t understand how could they be hungry with all the people around them. . . . Because here if you see your neighbour hungry, you feed your neighbour. There is no such thing as people starving or wanting food—because what I don’t have, you have. It was inherent in the culture that you help your neighbor; it was a given (A. Jenkins, personal communication, January 17, 2013).

In its community rebuilding work, SFHA seeks to revive the traditional forms of giving that had a formative influence on African-American culture in the Sandhills. One example is the custom allowing those in need to collect excess crops, known as “gleaning.” In her book *Healing from the land*, Ammie describes it in this way:

As in many rural Southern communities, [our] home gardeners . . . have kept up the practice of gleaning—the traditional Biblical practice of gathering crops that would otherwise be left in the fields to rot or be plowed under after harvest. In the Sandhills, many who continue gleaning do so as an embodiment of their Christian beliefs (Jenkins, 2003, p. 44).

To ensure that this tradition is passed on to the next generation, SFHA’s gardening project has teamed up local youth with the farmers and gardeners interested in donating their surplus crops.

The leaders of SFHA also rely on local giving practices to harness a variety of philanthropic resources. Most of the Association’s work gets accomplished by volunteers and through partnerships—which also represent a form of mutual giving, albeit not commonly regarded as such (Price, Shank, & Jenkins, 2008). Examples include its collaborative projects with local universities (outlined earlier) as well as relationships with local churches and various public agencies, which provide spaces for community meetings and other activities organized by SFHA and disseminate information on various community affairs at its request. Besides serving their specific purposes, all these partnerships also help strengthen what SFHA leaders call “culture-based philanthropy,” based on the values of sharing and cooperation which the Association seeks to uphold.

**Fostering systemic social change**

When SFHA was formed in 2001, it was intended to help preserve the cultural heritage of African Americans in the Sandhills, rather than to bring about social transformation. While implementing its original mission, however, the Association’s work gradually took on the attributes that clearly qualify it as a catalyst of systemic social change. Based on the preceding discussion, we can highlight at least three such attributes:

* A holistic vision of development, embracing preservation of cultural heritage, social justice, economic sustainability, and environmental stewardship;
* Deliberate engagement of community members, including elders, women, and young people, at all stages of work—from the identification of issues and planning of activities to implementation and evaluation of results; and
* Focus on programs that advance community self-reliance and self-determination.

The Association’s programs foster systemic change through various “channels”: shifting the attitudes towards land ownership in the African-American community, especially among its young members; helping local land owners understand and assert their rights with respect to land; forging effective working relationships between African Americans engaged in farming or forestry and extension services; providing training and technical support for community-based entrepreneurship; and facilitating implementation of local land use and economic development policies that help support a culture of self-reliance and self-determination in the African-American community.

This change-fostering work is taking place at a critical moment in the region’s history. The latest U.S. census, held in 2010, provides ample evidence that the South is experiencing a profound change in its demographic makeup, which owes much to the massive return of African Americans to their ancestral areas. A discussion of census data by *New York Times* reporters reveals the magnitude of this trend: “The share of black population growth that has occurred in the South over the past decade,” they observe, “[has been] the highest since 1910” (Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2011).

According to experts, such as demographer William Frey of the Brookings Institution or historian Clement Price of Rutgers University, a key factor behind the current shift of African Americans to the South is the decline of heavy industry which served as one of the major employers for black people in the urban areas of the Northeast, Midwest, and West. With this decline, observes Price, “the black urban experience has essentially lost its appeal with blacks in America” (cited in Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2011). Yet, as Frey points out, there is both “a push and a pull involved with the movement”: “. . . a big part, aside from the economy, is the kind of historic roots that blacks have had there [in the South]” (cited in Tanneeru, 2009).

The “reverse migration” of blacks is pronounced in the Sandhills, and many of the African Americans who have returned to this region were prompted by a desire to reconnect with their communities of origin and ancestral traditions. The story of Ed and Sheila Spence, who came back “to the peace and reward of being close to the land” (Spence Family Farms, n.d.) in their native Sandhills after long military and teaching careers in California, is a case in point. “My grandparents were sharecroppers,” explains Ed. “We literally lived off the farm . . . but they never owed any of the land. And so this was special for us to be able to do the same thing that we did when I was a child, but now we own the land” (cited in PBS NewsHour, 2007).

SFHA was instrumental in helping Ed and Sheila make their dream a reality. After assisting them with the purchase of a ten-acre property suitable for various farming activities, it linked them with available extension services that helped them develop a management plan for their woodlot. Through its own training programs, the Association also helped the Spences become reacquainted with gardening practices that sustained their ancestors, and its educational workshops provided them with a good understanding of current policy and legal issues affecting land owners in the region.

In less than a decade, Ed and Sheila developed a small forestry operation designed to offer a sustainable supply of timber, and a thriving farm producing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. They also raise grain-fed cows, goats, and hens. Thanks to SFHA’s efforts to promote community-level entrepreneurship, they now sell they produce not only at the farm gate but also at the Sandhills Farmers’ Market in Spring Lake. “We are always sold out,” observes Ed with pride (personal communication, January 15, 2013). He and Sheila are convinced that one can make a good living as a farmer in the Sandhills these days. Significantly, the Spences now assist SFHA in its efforts to promote farming as a worthy and viable occupation among the younger generation of Sandhills residents: for instance, in 2012-13 they provided hands-on mentoring to 16 local youth participating in the Association’s farm apprenticeship program.

This example illustrates SFHA’s role as a one-stop centre providing education, training, income opportunities, and support networks to help Sandhills residents create rewarding lives in tune with traditions of self-reliance and sharing that lie at the heart of the local African-American culture. In so doing, the Association also fosters a sense of community identity and pride based on preserving this cultural heritage and actively passing it on to future generations. By pursuing this multifaceted yet unified strategy, a small organization with just two staff members is achieving something that the “big-box” development model currently dominating the Sandhills doesn’t seem capable of: it is re-awakening the entrepreneurial spirit in the African-American community—and thereby empowering its members to become masters of their own destiny.

**Lessons**

Based on our discussion of the key aspects of SFHA’s work and its major results, we can identify a number of factors that have enabled it to become an effective agent of social change:

**An exceptional servant-leader at the helm.** Throughout its history, SFHA has been blessed with a unique combination of “a visionary and a doer” its leader brings. The Association’s key partners and supporters recognize Ammie’s leadership skills as the cornerstone of its success. “She’s one of those people who can see the big picture,” says Mikki Sager of the Conservation Fund, “but she also can get right down into the nitty-gritty and roll her sleeves up and push fish dinners across the table at the Sankofa Festival” (cited in Solano, 2011). State Representative Marvin Lucas concurs: “If you want a catalyst in any community involvement activities and someone who really wants to establish a historical profile, than you should get Ammie Jenkins” (Ibid.). There is little doubt that one of the Association’s core strengths—effective community organizing—owes much to Ammie’s humility and her commitment to *serving* the community that nurtured her sense of identity. “We are standing on the shoulders of the people who went before us,” she says. “My life’s work . . . is about giving back to a community that helped me” (cited in Solano, 2011).

**Being one with the community.** SFHA started out as an oral history project dedicated to capturing the traditions that have largely shaped the local African-American culture. While its work has greatly expanded over time, and is now focused on carrying on, rather than merely documenting, these traditions, it still hinges on the same core element: attending to community members, “being with” them. This means not just hearing and recording what people in the community have to say, but getting a sense of how they view life, what concerns they have, what they want to accomplish. The engagement of community members at all stages of the Association’s work—from the identification of “burning issues” to the evaluation of results—is, therefore, not a political gesture intended to draw support for its programs; it is *the* force that shapes and drives its agenda. As Mikki Sager has observed, “What SFHA is doing is very simple and common sense. It is about knowing your history and heritage, and it is about what people think is right, it’s not about what someone else thinks is right” (personal communication, January 18, 2013).

**Building bridges between generations.** SFHA leaders have realized from the outset that their community rebuilding efforts will be futile if they don’t reach different age groups, especially the youth—for how else can the traditions that are the community’s lifeblood be carried forward into the future? Accordingly, many of the Association’s programs deliberately bring people of different generations together as a means of passing on traditions and sharing knowledge and skills. The following observations by Sheila Spence indicate that these programs also help young people get a sense of their roots and thereby foster community cohesion:

We had a youth program. My granddaughter and I participated in that program, and it was very enlightening to her. Without her being out in the field, in the heat of the day, picking peas, she would have never been able to realize what it was like for our ancestors to be working on sharecroppers’ farms or be enslaved, to have to do that (cited in PBS, 2007).

It is important to note that SFHA leaders do not conceive of the sharing of knowledge and skills as a “one-way street” where traffic is only supposed to flow from the older generation to the younger. On the contrary: the Association’s programs provide ample opportunities for local youth to put their own skills and talents to good use. For example, SFHA often relies on young people proficient with computers to assist older community members with land title research or help them obtain information about government incentive programs for sustainable farming and forestry operations (C. Brown, personal communication, June 24, 2013).

**A clear vision and roadmap to get there.** SFHA’s work rests on the solid foundation of a simple yet profound vision that “sees the goals of economic development and heritage preservation as inextricably linked” (McCann, 2008, p. 41). For SFHA leaders, the “medium” through which these goals are linked is land, and maintaining African-American land stewardship traditions is a compass for developing a sustainable local economy:

I would say that Sandhills Family Heritage Association is all about preserving our land and natural resources. And the reason I think that is so key is because everything else is connected to the land and our natural resources: our culture, our livelihoods, our food, our medicine—all of those things that help to make us self-sufficient (A. Jenkins, cited in The Conservation Fund, 2013)

The various activities SFHA is spearheading—whether it be historical re-enactments, workshops addressing land ownership issues, farm apprenticeships, or the annual Sankofa Festival—are not silo projects; they are woven together into a single canvas, a coherent roadmap to regaining the community’s economic self-reliance and an increased sense of self-worth that it brings.

**Forging relationships that work.** SFHA neither attempts nor intends to be a jack-of-all-trades. Most of its work is carried out in partnership with a wide range of actors, including other non-profits, local churches, universities, government agencies, and individual farmers, to name a few. Here is just one example of the synergistic relationships SFHA leaders are so good at forging:

Look at the [farm] apprenticeship program alone: that is a partnership between farmers, students, the North Carolina A&T University, and our organization. Through this partnership SFHA creates a win-win for all the partners involved: the farmers get young apprentice trainees to work for them; the young students earn the real-life agricultural experience; and the university completes its field component (A. Jenkins, personal communication, January 17, 2013).

A prominent feature of SFHA’s work is their ability to collaborate with powerful actors and also challenge them at the same time. For instance, community organizing and advocacy helped in getting the farmers market going, and engaging with the Fort Bragg; whereas relationship building and collaboration with the NS Forest Service helped in getting the forest management plans done. However, their leaders’ devotion to collaboration extends to its advocacy work. This was evident when SFHA had to face Fort Bragg on the buffer zone issue, its leaders opted for working *with*, rather than against, their formidable opponent to find a solution that both the community and military authorities could feel positive about. This commitment to non-confrontational advocacy owes much to the high esteem Ammie has for Martin Luther King’s philosophy of non-violent direct action. In a recent talk she gave at Dr. King’s birthday celebration at Fort Bragg, she remembered her first encounter with his ideas: “I did go to one of the strategy meetings [organized by Dr. King’s followers]. And I found out if you could not protest and be non-violent, they did not want you to take part” (cited in Reinier, 2014). This happened in the early 1960s, during Ammie’s years at High Point College. As its first-ever non-white student, she remembers, “I was the target of a lot of spit balls” (Ibid.) and “heard the ‘n-word’ so much I almost thought it was my middle name” (cited in Solano, 2011). But Martin Luther King’s message that “we must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools” has nonetheless stuck with her—and now rings through SFHA’s commitment to building relationships across racial, cultural, and ideological differences. The fact that its membership is open to non-African Americans attests to that.

**Final message**

“I don’t know if the young generation of today would survive the way my generation did,” says Ammie, “and one reason of this is the fact that they don’t know their history” (personal communication, January 17, 2013). These words can be read as an allusion to her personal story. For much of her life, Ammie kept away from revisiting her family’s past, worrying it would only bring back painful memories. But eventually she resolved to face that fear—and experienced a “miracle” that would deeply change her life and many lives around her. A visit to her old home place set her on a path to uncovering the treasure trove of cultural traditions that had shaped her ancestral community. Walking that path gave her a sense of empowerment and inspired her to create the Sandhills Family Heritage Association.

The Association’s work of preserving the heritage of African-American community in the Sandhills is focused on *sustaining* the traditions that shaped its culture, rather than simply documenting them. And because these traditions are tied to good land stewardship—the ability to “live off the land without messing it up” (as Mikki Sager has put it)—sustaining them is a prerequisite to *survival*. This is, then, what the Association’s work is ultimately concerned with: reclaiming, reviving, and perpetuating the cultural traditions conducive to our survival—in the deep sense that involves self-determination, self-reliance, and self-esteem.

Finally, SFHA’s work illustrates that cultural recovery is important for economic recovery. It points to a way of looking at culture as an asset, and how it links to economic, social, political and environmental change. It offers a vision of an economy that links culture, rather than destroying it, to other benefits. What makes this case unique is that the surrounding development models – the military, the golf courses, and the box economies – do not bring this perspective. SFHA presents itself as an example, a contrast, promoting a different kind of economy drawing on multiple forms of wealth and based on a more sustainable future. It gives us a message that we cannot build an economy without being clear about the values and culture that we want it to preserve.

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1. Cited in Shannon (1997, p. 659). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S State and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States between 1877 and mid-1960s. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. During the antebellum period, 53% of the state’s slave owners owned five or fewer slaves, and only 2.6% of the slaves in North Carolina lived on farms with over 50 slaves (UNC, n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Community asset mapping conducted by SFHA in 2003 identified the proximity of Fort Bragg as one of the key culprits behind the loss of black-owned land in the region (Conservation Fund, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Eminent domain refers to the power of government agencies to take private property for public use, providing “reasonable compensation” in return. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brush arbor is an open-sided shelter constructed of vertical poles with a roof of brush. Such structures were used as worship places by local African-American congregations in the 1700s and early 1800s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)