Historically Black Communities in the Fifth Federal Reserve District

This list of historically black communities in the states of Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia is by no means exhaustive, but it reflects the rich heritage of African-Americans in our District. Sources of place names included the Black Towns Project Archive and America’s black towns and settlements: a historical reference guide by Morris Turner, III.

Maryland:

- **North Brentwood** – Prince George’s County, between Hyattsville and Brentwood; the community was planned specifically for black families by Captain Wallace A. Bartlett, a veteran commander of the U. S. Colored Troops. Beginning at the end of the 19th century, the town was settled by black families seeking, through home ownership, some control over their lives in a segregated society.

- **Fairmount Heights** – Located in western Prince George’s County, east of Washington, DC, and was one of the first planned communities for African-Americans. Fairmount Heights became the center of political activism and progressivism in early 20th century. It was the site of first African-American public elementary school in Prince George’s County (1912). The town was incorporated in 1935.

- **Highland Beach** – Ann Arundel County, south of Annapolis, founded in 1893 as the first African-American owned summer resort community in the United States. Charles Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, founded the community after he and his wife were denied service at a restaurant at the Bay Ridge Resort on the Chesapeake Bay. Douglass began buying up beachfront property just south of Bay Ridge. Douglass’ son had the town incorporated and was influential in keeping the town small and inclusive. Adjoining beachfront development after the 1940s led to higher property values and taxes, and a movement for younger, affluent blacks to move to adjoining communities led to population loss and isolation for Highland Beach.

- **Lincoln** - Prince George’s County, east of Washington, DC; established as a rural retreat on the railroad line. It was developed in 1908 by Thomas J. Calloway, an African-American educator, developer, and attorney from Washington, D.C., who became vice president and general manager of the Lincoln Land and Improvement Company. Lincoln was ideally located near the Washington, Baltimore, and Annapolis Electric Railroad. It had streetcar station, general store, and elementary school (1922). Lincoln remained loosely-knit and residential and did not incorporate.

North Carolina:

- **Beech Bottom** – In the northwest corner of NC, near Newland in Avery County. From 1900 to 1940, the population rose as high as 100 people, African American, Caucasian, and Native American. The population shrank after 1940 due to decline in feldspar mining. Most families migrated to Virginia or Ohio. Current population is approximately 25.

- **Columbian Heights** – Forsyth County, now part of the city of Winston-Salem. Founded by Simon Atkins, a noted educator who also founded what is now Winston-Salem State University. Atkins
convinced a group of white business owners to develop a wooded hillside in eastern Winston into one of the first planned communities for black professionals. The neighborhood, named Columbian Heights, was where he built his own home in the 1890s. The house was eventually relocated to the Winston-Salem State campus and now sits on the National Historic Register. A community development corporation in Winston-Salem is named for Atkins.

- **Hayti** – Section of Durham, first documented use of the name in 1877; also called “Black Wall Street” (W.E.B. DuBois called the area “mecca for black business”). Continued to thrive throughout the 1930s and 1940s, as documented in the film “Negro Durham Marches On.” The community faded in the 1950s, and many of Hayti’s buildings were destroyed in the name of urban renewal. Efforts such as the Hayti Heritage Center seek to preserve the history and significance of Hayti.

- **James City** – Settled in 1863, located in central Craven County along the Trent River. James City began as a settlement effort by Union Army for refugees during the occupation of New Bern. The settlement was first called “Trent River Settlement”, established on land seized from Confederate colonel. It was renamed for its founder, Horace James, of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees and Abandoned Lands. James City’s land was returned to the former owner and the residents either left, became sharecroppers or paid rent to live there. It became an impoverished community. NC Supreme Court ruled against the black residents. Many left, including a large number who left for jobs in World War II.

- **Little California** – Settled in 1863 by the Freedman’s Bureau; located on northern Roanoke Island, by 1865 population was nearly 4,000. The land was poor for farming and the colony relied on government assistance, and Little California was decommissioned after the war. Many families stayed on Roanoke Island. The small island life brought whites and blacks together despite Jim Crow laws. In recent years, the influx of population on Roanoke Island has brought “mainland problems” (drugs and violence), and speculative real estate growth is impacting cost of living for these residents.

- **Method** – Wake County, now part of city of Raleigh, was a 69-acre village started in 1872 by freedmen Jesse Mason and Isaac O’Kelly, who sold its subdivided tracts as an alternative to more expensive housing offered to African Americans in Raleigh proper. The village originally was called Mason’s Village, Slabtown and Save-Rent, until being named Method by the United States Post Office in 1890. The first postmaster of Method, Berry O’Kelly, was called “the most prominent leader of the Negro race in Wake County ...” Method was home to the Berry O’Kelly Training School, named recently to the National Register of Historic Places. Method was annexed to Raleigh in 1960.

- **Navassa** – In Brunswick County, at the confluence of the Brunswick and Northwest Cape Fear Rivers, named for Navassa Island in the Caribbean. The Navassa Phosphate Mine Company was established there, and it imported guano from Caribbean to NC for fertilizer manufacture. The town was established by black workers employed by the Navassa fertilizer operation. Navassa has roots in Gullah Geechee culture, descendants of slaves on rice plantations of Cape Fear valley. Navassa now has environmental problems from fertilizer manufacture and a Kerr-McGee creosote operation.

- **Princeville** – Edgecombe County, settled in 1865 by former slaves and called “Freedom Hill.” Incorporated in 1885, later named for Turner Prince, a citizen. Princeville established a public primary school in 1883 with black principals who had been educated at Oberlin College and Yale
University. By 1910 Princeville’s population had increased to 636, half of its adult residents could read and write, and the town contained a growing number of black merchants and artisans. In 1912 the primary school added a high school curriculum. The town has been ravaged by a series of floods, and a levee built in 1967 brought some protection from the Tar River until Hurricane Floyd in 1999. A “100 year flood” repeated in 2016, with Hurricane Matthew.

- **Sedalia** – Small community in eastern Guilford County, given its name by the postmaster, R. B. Andrews. Its history goes back to 1870 and founding of Bethany Institute by the American Missionary Association. In 1901, teacher Charlotte Hawkins arrived to teach at Bethany. The AMA soon abandoned the school and Hawkins took over the school. She renamed it “Alice Freeman Palmer Institute” after her mentor, who was president of Wellesley College. The Institute became one of the leading black preparatory schools in the state and existed as a school until 1961. The Palmer Institute is now a North Carolina Historical Site. Sedalia was incorporated as a town in 1997.

**South Carolina:**

- **Atlantic Beach** – Founded in the Jim Crow era, 1930s, by a group of black businesspeople as a refuge, called “The Black Pearl”. Black entertainers who played white beach clubs along Grand Strand were barred from white hotels so they would stay, and perform late-night shows, in Atlantic Beach. The end of segregation signaled the end of Atlantic Beach’s heyday. Atlantic Beach did not join with other beaches to form North Myrtle Beach in 1968, a remnant of decades of distrust, “even the ocean is segregated.” Today it is one of the poorest municipalities in South Carolina. Black Bike Week is one of its main sources of revenue.

- **Lincolnville** – Charleston/Dorchester County, between Summerville and Ladson. It was founded in 1871 by Rev. Richard Harvey Cain, who purchased tracts of land 20 miles outside of Charleston and sold them to freedmen. He established the Ebenezer AME Church on the property, originally called Pump Pond. Lincolnville was incorporated in 1889 and renamed for President Lincoln. Richard Harvey Cain became a U.S. Congressman in 1872.

- **Promised Land** – In Greenwood County. It was created by freed slaves in the early 1870s on land that was formerly a plantation divided in lots and sold to freed African Americans. The community name comes from their “promise” to pay for the land. The population has fluctuated (World War I, Great Migration, emigration after boll weevil infestation destroyed cotton crop, 30% population loss in 1920s). Emigration slowed during the Great Depression, and New Deal programs helped revive farming economy. Promised Land experienced new housing development in 1950s, as a third generation of founders returned to Promised Land.

- **Washington Heights** – Greenville, now known as Green Avenue Neighborhood. It was established in 1922 by J.W. Norwood, a white banker. Greenwood was predominantly African-American but also had white residents. Many residents worked at Eagle Iron Works and the Working Benevolent Society Hospital (closed in 1948). The city of Greenville has been working to revitalize the area since 1970s.

**Virginia:**

- **Almagro** – Now part of Danville, separated by Norfolk and Southern Railroad. It may have been known as Jacksonville in late 1800s. Before it was annexed into the city (1932), Almagro was the
largest incorporated black community in the state with its own post office, town council and police force. Most residents worked in tobacco factories or Dan River mills, or operated their own businesses in the community. Betts Street is the main street (Betts family prominent in early history of Almagro). Peters Park (also known as Almagro Stadium) played host to Danville All Stars baseball team.

- **Bay Shore** – Segregated beach established south of Buckroe Beach (Hampton). It began with a small four-room cottage in 1898 and later grew to be one of the premier African-American resorts in the Jim Crow era. Integration diminished the resort’s appeal and it closed for good in the 1970s

- **Coardtown** – Accomack County, near New Church (Eastern Shore). Coardtown had a population of 400 in the 1921-1922 Negro Year Book.

- **Jackson Ward, Richmond** – Jackson Ward was created in 1871 as a sixth ward in the city of Richmond for the purpose of consolidating the free black voters into one ward and diluting their vote throughout the rest of the city. It became a self-sufficient and thriving business district (called a “Black Wall Street”) and an epicenter of black culture (“Harlem of the South”). Influential figures such as John Mitchell, Jr., editor of the Richmond Planet, an African American newspaper, and Maggie L. Walker, the first woman to charter and serve as president of an American bank, operated businesses and lived in Jackson Ward. The construction of I-95 in the 1950s split Jackson Ward, and the end of segregation led to residents leaving Jackson Ward for business and educational opportunities. Jackson Ward was designated a Historic Landmark in 1976 and is now experiencing a rebirth.

- **Hare Valley** – Located near Eastville, Northampton County (Eastern Shore). It was home of Brickhouse Banking Company, incorporated in 1910 and serving the African-American community of Hare Valley until 1916 (land deeded from William and Janie Brickhouse in 1911). After 1916 the bank building was used as a dwelling and later fell into disrepair and burned. Hare Valley had a population of 500 in the 1921-1922 Negro Year Book.

- **Seaview** – African-American resort on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia Beach, near what is now First Landing State Park. It was founded in 1944 by three African-American businessmen and Dudley Cooper, the developer of the all-white Ocean View Park in Norfolk. The resort was a “vital part of Virginia’s upper and middle-class African American society.” It became very popular (over 15,000 visitors on July 4th weekend in 1947), but it closed in 1965 as the integration of Virginia Beach diminished the resort’s appeal.

- **Slabtown** – Located on the site of the Yorktown, VA, battlefield. It was founded in 1863. After the Confederate army retreated from Yorktown, Union General Wister ordered the town to be built for fleeing slaves who were encamped near Fort Monroe. The settlement grew to be as large as neighboring Yorktown. Residents were mostly farmers and watermen, and many later worked for naval mine depot and National Park Service. The town existed until mid-1970s, when the National Park Service acquired Slabtown to complete the land acquisitions it wanted for the 1976 bicentennial. NPS commemorated Slabtown as part of the 150th commemoration of Yorktown’s role in the Civil War.

- **Titustown** – Located between Ocean View and Norfolk. It was an independent community in an agricultural region. The community was established on valuable real estate. The land for Titustown was purchased by Augustus Stroud, a white lawyer, who required that the black buyers pay off the lot before building homes. It was a self-sufficient community with schools,
churches, more than 24 businesses, and access to trolley lines. Most residents worked at Portsmouth Navy Shipyard or Norfolk Naval Base, as civil servants and longshoremen. Titustown was supported and encouraged by white citizens as a manifestation of “separate but equal.” The community of Titustown still exists, with new homes being built and an influx of new residents.

- **Truxtun** – Located just west of the Portsmouth Navy Yard (near the intersection of Deep Creek and Portsmouth Boulevards). It was the first wartime government housing project (United States Housing Corporation) constructed exclusively for blacks in the US, and named for Thomas Truxtun, an early naval hero. Truxtun was developed after the outbreak of World War I as housing for ship yard workers (Cradock was a similar community developed for white workers). It had a business district, post office, fire department, and governing structure entirely composed of African-Americans. Truxtun has now been absorbed into the city of Portsmouth. It was designated a National Historic District in 1982.

**West Virginia:**

- **Institute** – Kanawha County, near Dunbar. It was established by Samuel Cabell, a wealthy pioneer who moved with slaves to the Kanawha Valley, where they worked the salt mines. Cabell fathered 13 children by one of his slaves, Mary Barnes, and he provided for her and the children in his will, buying 967 acres of Kanawha River land and moving his family there. Cabell’s descendants sold the land for the purposes of establishing the West Virginia Colored Institute. The WV Colored Institute, established in 1891 as a Morrill Act institution, is now known as West Virginia State University. Most residents of the town worked at the college. African-Americans moved to West Virginia because it did not have the segregationist views of Virginia. Institute has been impacted by environmental hazards from the Union Carbide and Bayer Crop Science (Chemical Valley), and is the site of a new methanol plant. The 2016 population is 110.

- **Tinkersville** – Kanawha County, near Malden (Kanawha Salines). It was established by former enslaved African Americans, and the site of African Zion Baptist Church, the first church completely owned and controlled by African Americans in West Virginia. Tinkersville was the boyhood home of Booker T. Washington, who settled there with his family after they were freed by Union troops in 1865. Washington worked in the salt furnaces and later attended Tinkersville School.

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