



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation  
**African American**  
Cultural Heritage Action Fund

# **THE *FUTURE* OF COMMEMORATIVE PLACEMAKING**

**Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza  
in Akron, Ohio**



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MAY 2025



*Introduction:*

# PRESERVATION— BASED PLACEMAKING



Commemorative spaces are pieces of the larger story we tell about who we are and where we come from. Throughout history, these places have represented who can contribute to and shape dominant narratives, and who is empowered or oppressed by them—impacting whose history is memorialized, and whose is erased.

The key focus of this toolkit is how places of memory can relate to the future, especially when an original neighborhood, building, or landscape no longer exists.

This toolkit offers a model, Preservation-Based Placemaking, as a solution to this challenge, one faced by countless Black communities across the country that have lost historic churches, schools, and other sites to demolition or underinvestment. This preservation-based approach uses the power of place as an active conduit between the past and the future. An expanded notion of what constitutes a memorial landscape also broadens who should be involved in shaping and managing collective memory: community organizers, descendants, preservationists, youth, elders, historians, archivists, activists, futurists, and creatives all have valuable roles to play in this work.





## *Case Study:*

# SOJOURNER TRUTH LEGACY PLAZA

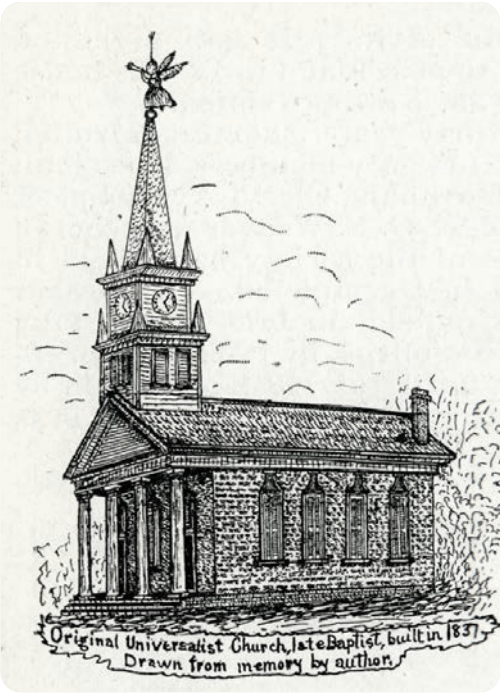
The National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund had the privilege of partnering with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and United Way of Summit & Medina to support the ideation and construction of the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza in Akron, Ohio. The plaza's official opening, and the unveiling of a six-foot tall statue of Truth designed by world-renowned artist and sculptor Woodrow Nash, took place on May 29, 2024. This marked the culmination of decades of work on the part of Akron community members and the Sojourner Truth Project Akron, who had long advocated for a memorial site dedicated to the suffragist, activist, and abolitionist.



On May 29, 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered her iconic speech calling for the abolition of slavery and the importance of gender equality to the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention at the Universalist Old Stone Church in Akron, Ohio. Considered by historians to be one of the most important speeches in U.S. history, Truth recalled the hardships she endured along her personal journey from enslavement to activism.

By 2020, the church building no longer stood. In its place, was a 10,000 sq. ft. parking lot and service vehicle access route for the United Way of Summit & Medina’s office building. Given the enduring legacy of Truth’s vision and work, the United Way’s former CEO Jim Mullen was eager to work with Towanda Mullins, chair of the Sojourner Truth Project Akron, and the local community to memorialize Truth on the property. Through the engagement of the Action Fund, and with philanthropic support from the Knight Foundation, the project scope expanded from the placement of a singular statue in a “pocket park” on-site to the dedication of what would become the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza, a public greenspace with multi-layered symbolic elements honoring Truth’s legacy and that of other important Black women in Akron’s history.

Using the success of this project as a model of preservation-based placemaking, this toolkit is a resource for community activists, preservationists, and design professionals to navigate the process of bringing a commemorative landscape from concept to fruition.



**LEFT** Historical marker in Akron, Ohio (Image by markallender on Atlas Obscura)  
**RIGHT** Drawing of “The Old Stone Church” by Samuel Lane, 1892 (Image courtesy of the Summit County Historical Society)



**“The Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza demonstrates how cultural preservation can protect the legacy and contributions of notable Americans throughout history. The Akron community’s work to establish this commemorative landscape will serve as a model for communities across the country seeking innovative ways to preserve significant legacies in places where historic structures no longer exist.”**

**—BRENT LEGGS**

Executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and senior vice president at the National Trust for Historic Preservation



# SITE PLAN

## ABOUT THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

### *Dion J. Harris, PLA*

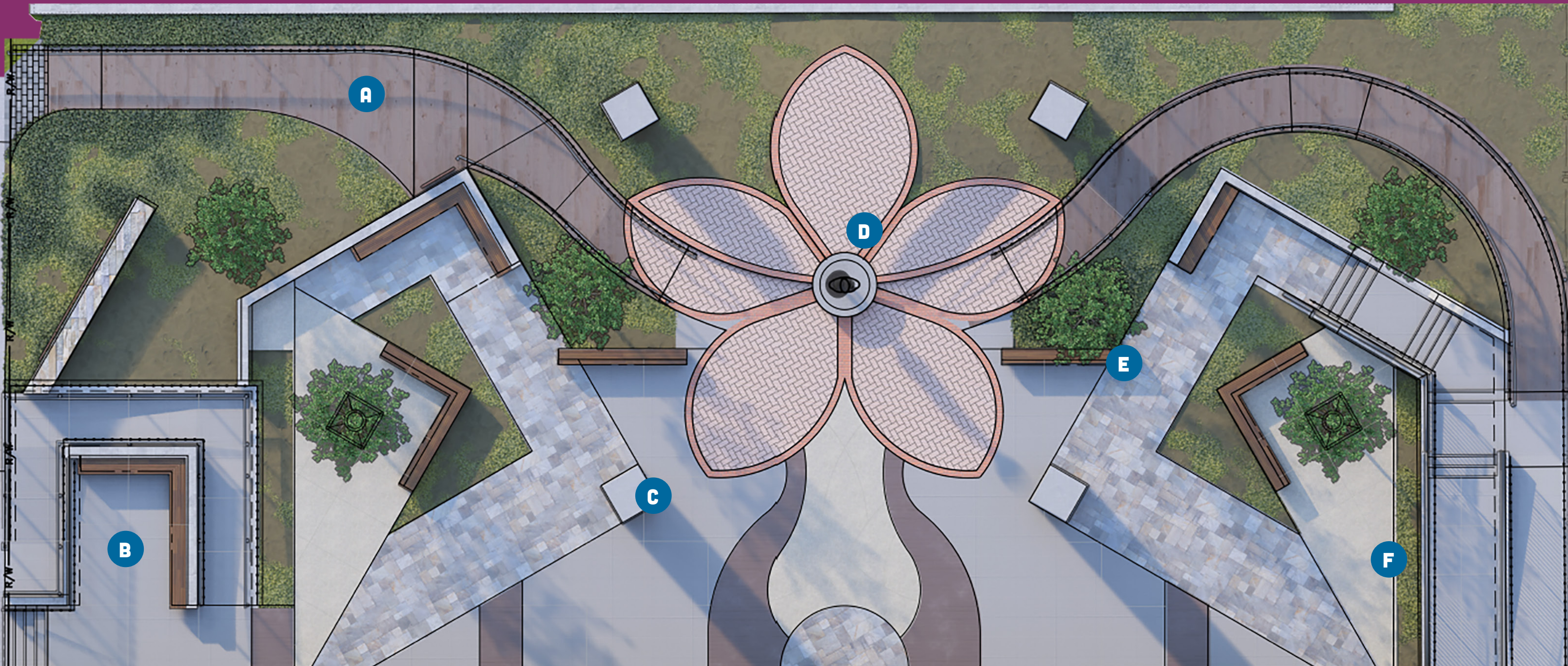
Dion J. Harris has been a landscape architect with Summit Metro Parks in Cleveland and Akron since 2018. Working with United Way of Summit & Medina, the Sojourner Truth Project Akron, the STLP core project team, and the community, he created a design that embeds motifs and core values that represent Truth's life throughout the plaza.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

### *Woodrow Nash*

Woodrow Nash is a nationally acclaimed African American artist and sculptor. Born in Akron, his work and techniques across a variety of mediums resulted in his signature "African Nouveau" style, which blends 15th century African art and 18th century Art Nouveau, conveying the human soul and form through natural materials.

- A** The winding path through the plaza represents the journey of Truth's life and legacy.
- B** United Way of Summit & Medina office
- C** Four pillars are marked "Faith, Activism, Power, and Identity" and feature quotes from Truth and a panel honoring notable Black women of Akron.
- D** The impala lily represents Truth's Ghanaian heritage
- E** Integrated seating provides visitors with space to reflect and connect with others.
- F** The terraced walls feature contemporary artwork from local creatives inspired by Truth and Akron's Black community.





# GETTING STARTED

Preservation work takes time and developing memorial landscapes where structures or key features no longer exist requires creativity and dedicated planning. In Akron, the celebrations surrounding the centennial of the 19th Amendment in 2020 sparked renewed interest in local women's history and support for the Sojourner Truth Project Akron, which had been trying to establish a memorial to Truth for over a decade. Building on this reinvigorated grassroots support, the Action Fund assembled key stakeholders to begin bringing the Plaza to life.

To lay the groundwork for a placemaking project, consider the following components:

- 1 PROJECT TEAMS**  
Identify key stakeholders who can centrally-manage the project from start to finish, some of whom may be responsible for the site's ongoing stewardship after it is completed and open to the public.
- 2 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**  
Co-creation with the local community is key. Establish early avenues for local residents to give input on their needs and potential interactions with the site and its history.
- 3 DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION**  
The Project Team will select a designer who will liaise with key stakeholders and the construction team to realize the vision for the site.
- 4 SITE INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING**  
Develop storytelling, interpretation and community engagement best practices and programming to activate the history and key themes associated with the site.
- 5 BUDGET AND FUNDRAISING**  
As the project mission and design concept are solidified, developing a budget and fundraising strategy is key to supporting this work.
- 6 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS**  
To promote awareness about the historic resonance of the site, and enhance fundraising and community outreach, the Project Team should have an ongoing public relations strategy to provide progress updates and inspire broad support.



# 1 PROJECT TEAMS

Creating the right team—a group of collaborators who share your vision and commitment to honoring history—is critical to your project’s success.

The Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza (STLP) Core Team was composed of STLP Committee members and Chair Towanda Mullins; Jim Mullen, CEO of United Way of Summit & Medina; Lisa King, executive director at Summit Metro Parks; Dion Harris, STLP site designer and landscape architect at Summit Metro Parks; Theresa Carter, Akron Community Foundation board member and president of the Synthomer Foundation; and Executive Director Brent Leggs and Director of Fellowships and Interpretive Strategies Lawana Holland-Moore from the Action Fund, who provided project management support and acted as advisors.

The collaboration’s success is owed to regular meetings and frequent communication, including a comprehensive memorandum of understanding that kept progress aligned through the site’s ideation in 2020, its groundbreaking in 2022, and public opening in 2024.

Members of the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza Project Core Team from left to right: Dion J. Harris, Pamela Hickson-Stevenson, Jackie Derrow, Towanda Mullins, Lawana Holland-Moore, Brent Leggs, Lisa King, and Leianne Neff Heppner



The project teams assembled for the STLP, and ones you may consider forming for your own project include:

## CORE TEAM

The Core Team is responsible for developing the site from concept to completion. Its members will work to merge the ideas and needs of the community with the commemorative intentions for the site. This team should include representatives from the community, designers, historians, fundraising partners, and consultants whose skills are vital to the site’s design.

## PROJECT MANAGER/LIAISON

This person will project manage the work-streams of the project teams and continually and transparently update the overall project timeline and deliverables—from early brainstorming and planning sessions to post-construction needs.

## ADVISORY THOUGHT LEADERS

This multidisciplinary group of creative, academic, policy and/or industry professionals will advise on and critique the concept plans, on-site programming and interpretation, community engagement strategies, etc. and provide recommendations.

## CREATIVE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION TEAM

This team develops the design for the site in consultation with the local community and should include the designers, landscape architects, contractors and/or artists chosen by the Core Team. Meetings may include guest participants such as engineers, consultants, community constituents, fabricators, installers, etc.

## INTERPRETATION AND PROGRAMMING TEAM

This team creates the framework that will guide education and programming strategies. Its members work with the Thought Leaders and Core Team, discussing key themes and activities for the site, noting how they could be incorporated into the site’s design.

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

This team will promote your site in local, regional, or national media outlets and develop key messaging for the Core Team and Thought Leaders to use in their fundraising activities and community updates. It should include a public relations and communications professional, and may also include a web designer, social media strategist, or content writer.

## FELLOWS/INTERNS

Fellows and interns (preferably graduate students or early career professionals) can provide support for the research, planning, and design processes.



## 2 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

From the beginning of the STLP planning process, the Core Team convened three community engagement sessions and asked participants what they wanted and needed from a space dedicated to Sojourner Truth's legacy. They expressed a need for a place of gathering and reflection for Akron's Black community, something they did not currently have, and shared their thoughts on the selection of the artist and design for the statue and plaza. This informed a set of guiding principles for the design and interpretation teams to consider as design plans took shape.

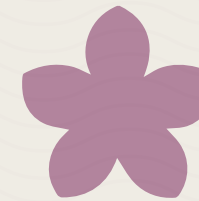
Community involvement should be integral to the design process from a site's conceptualization to its unveiling because visitors will be experiencing the site long after the project teams are gone. Design is not done in a vacuum, so this process should be as inclusive as possible.

### FOR THE COMMUNITY TO BECOME TRUE COLLABORATORS:

- ♦ The Core Team should diligently research and be mindful of who should be included in the community engagement processes, as there may be grassroots organizations or individuals that should have a seat at the table.
- ♦ Engagement sessions should capture and address community desires and communicate design solutions or limitations.
- ♦ Prioritize transparency and communication throughout the site's development.
- ♦ Consider the community's role as post-completion stewards of the site. It is theirs to use for community events, educational purposes, programming, and respite.



One of several Akron community engagement sessions hosted by the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.



**“The entire Akron community is the steward of Truth’s story, and it is theirs to tell. They were involved in every step along the way and told us what they needed. We listened and were intentional about creating a safe, welcoming space and an opportunity to tell their story.”**

**—LAWANA  
HOLLAND-MOORE**

Director of Fellowships  
and Interpretive Strategies,  
African American Cultural  
Heritage Fund



### 3 DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

When choosing a location for your site, do your research and let the story of what or who you are commemorating drive your decision-making.

Will it be located at a site directly associated with the subject being commemorated? To the community? Are there environmental or zoning limitations? How will it impact or be impacted by adjacent properties? How will your site benefit or be impacted by adjacent properties?

For the STLP, there had to be a historical connection to the site, in this case the former location of the church where Truth delivered her speech. United Way of Summit and Medina donated the land (their office building's 10,000 square foot parking lot) and requested an easement for the field behind it to preserve the view when entering downtown Akron. These considerations reflected the desire to have a very visible site for the statue and plaza, ensuring pride of place.

The design was directly influenced by the community's input about their need for an accessible gathering and reflection space. Themes from Sojourner Truth's life acted as an inspiration for the plaza's design elements such as the pillars, bronze panels, cast concrete walkway, and the central impala lily representing her Ghanaian heritage.

“It’s not just a plaza, it’s getting so many people from different walks of life in the community to come together. This work is a living document, every aspect of the landscape has to mean something, and it is about so much more than representing Sojourner Truth’s speech on May 29th. It didn’t end there and that’s what I like the most.”

—DION J. HARRIS, PLA

STLP designer and landscape architect  
at Summit Metro Parks

#### WHEN DEVELOPING A SITE DESIGN PLAN CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- ♦ What type of commemorative space are you creating? Is it a gathering space that will need a lot of seating? How can the design accommodate various accessibility and mobility needs?
- ♦ What materials will you need? Your site may need furniture, lighting, interpretive panels, safety features, drainage, tree grates, etc. Their fabrication and installation should also be included within your project's budget, design, and construction timeline.
- ♦ How will the Core Team and Project Manager oversee construction? Managing contractor expectations requires regular communication, meetings, drawing reviews, site observation, and thorough documentation.
- ♦ How to address security issues such as hidden spaces, lines of sight, and lighting.

Once construction wraps up, the work continues. As the STLP is located on a site privately owned by United Way of Summit & Medina, they are taking on the responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance and operations of the site, including landscaping, cleaning, and general upkeep. It's important to plan for your site's day-to-day operations, who will be accountable for site management and cyclical maintenance in the years and decades to come after your project is complete.



A rendering of landscape architect Dion Harris' design showing the completed Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza. (Dion Harris/GPD Group Akron)



## 4 SITE INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Because the church and landscape that Truth visited in Akron no longer existed, the STLP interpretation team considered unique storytelling, interpretation and community engagement best practices to activate the site.

This included addressing challenges such as how to interpret Truth's life beyond her speech and addressing the controversy around the phrase "Ain't I A Woman?" which is commonly associated with Truth but historians now know was wrongfully attributed to her. It was also important to determine how to best integrate a local-national interpretation strategy at the plaza by honoring notable Black women in Akron's history.

### WHEN CREATING YOUR INTERPRETIVE THEMES AND STRATEGIES:

- ♦ Honor the person, event, or place being commemorated by telling the full story of its significance and highlighting its present-day relevance.
- ♦ Consider the through-lines. What connections link the present and past? How might visitors of all ages and backgrounds see themselves in your site's story?
- ♦ How can interpretive elements, signage, contemplative spaces, or programming be leveraged to inspire visitors to come away inspired to delve deeper into the site's history?
- ♦ Collaborate with local historical societies, museums, scholars, or journalists as they are valuable sources of information, documents, and photographs.

The Sojourner Truth Project's education committee collaborated with Akron Public Schools and the Akron Public Library and invited students, teachers, parents, and community leaders to provide feedback and prototype opportunities for on-site educational experiences. As a result, K-12 students will visit the plaza as part of Akron public schools' educational curriculum.

### WHEN DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING AT YOUR SITE, CONSIDER:

- ♦ Who has authority to decide or plan what programs can/can't be held at the site?
- ♦ How to engage students, teachers, historical societies, parents, and community leaders who can provide valuable feedback.
- ♦ Consider if the site can physically or spatially support desired programming activities or whether there are adjacent spaces that may be used.
- ♦ Will visitors need a guide on-site or can visitors explore and understand the site independently through signage or other resources?



Members of the Akron regional community celebrating the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza's opening day.



## 5 BUDGET AND FUNDRAISING

For the STLP, United Way of Summit & Medina and the Sojourner Truth Project Akron (with the Akron Community Foundation supporting as a fiscal sponsor) raised funds for the project to cover its capital costs. When it came to creating a budget for the project, flexibility was key as the Core Team dealt with challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic, supply chain and weather delays, and the expansion of the project's scope from a single statue to a plaza landscape.

### WHEN PLANNING YOUR BUDGET, CONSIDER:



Labor and materials costs



The design scale and construction timeline



External consulting costs



Site promotion and marketing



Post-construction maintenance



Staff and Programming Costs

### CREATING A FUNDRAISING PLAN

Once your budget is developed and approved, having a fundraising plan is crucial. It helps to prioritize key milestones throughout the project timeline and transparency around needs and progress forms a foundation for healthy collaboration. Consider the following:

- ◆ Use your design and construction scope and cost estimates to develop a parallel fundraising goal and timeline to sustain work from concept to completion.
- ◆ Identify your target donor audiences and levels of philanthropic investment for each.
- ◆ Keep your donors engaged with periodic updates and document your follow-through.
- ◆ Have a plan for donor recognition and how it will be presented at the site.
- ◆ Develop a stewardship and engagement plan for continued donor support after the site's completion, incorporating key elements such as program implementation, cyclical maintenance, and other operations costs.

“With support from Knight Foundation and the expertise of the National Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, Akron was able to transform the historic site of Sojourner Truth’s famous speech into a vibrant public space in downtown. Over the past year, the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza has become something truly special, growing into a place of learning, reflection and pride for the community.”

—KYLE KUTUCHIEF

Program Director in Akron for the  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation



## 6 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

As the first site dedicated to a Black woman in the state of Ohio, the STLP had a critical local and national story to tell. Building on decades of community advocacy, the Action Fund, the Project Team, and the Advisory Thought Leaders Panel worked together to determine ways to ensure Akron residents remained engaged and informed while ensuring news about the Plaza and what it represented had a broad reach beyond the city itself.

Having a consistent promotion and advocacy strategy throughout the course of the STLP project kept all the project holders aligned on goals and values, ensured the local community was respected and engaged, and sustained momentum throughout the fundraising process.

Whether through traditional or digital media, getting the word out about your site not only attracts and informs visitors, but potential project advocates and donors as well. Members of the Core Team and Thought Leadership Panel who are comfortable advocating for the project should be identified early on as key spokespeople for a range of audiences from community events and media interviews to meetings with prospective funders.

### PROMOTION AND ADVOCACY STRATEGY



Determine the target audience for the site and create an engagement plan and key messaging points that involve the community, local and regional media, relevant cultural institutions, funders, and thought leaders.



Create a user-friendly website with regular project updates and easy-to-find information about the site, its history, and its progress toward completion.



Develop a multi-channel social media and documentation strategy for photographic and video content.



Give presentations about your site to community organizations, schools, conferences, civic leaders, cultural associations, and other strategic stakeholders.

**“After decades of dedication and commitment from our community, we are proud to commemorate Sojourner Truth’s historic visit to Akron. Truth’s timeless message continues to resonate, inspiring and empowering women worldwide.”**

**—TOWANDA MULLINS**

Chair of the Sojourner Truth Project Akron



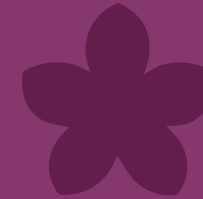
# CONCLUSION



So many sites of Black history and culture across the United States deserve commemoration and preservation support. For Akron, the challenge of recognizing Sojourner Truth's impact on the city, the Black community, and our nation when no landmarks remained standing required a creative and multi-dimensional placemaking approach.

The Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza is meant to act as a model for what a community-led, preservation-based placemaking process can look like. Our hope is that this guide will be a roadmap for communities and preservation professionals to create meaningful public spaces that speak to our nation's past, and connect, inspire, and spark open dialogue in our present.

At the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, we know that places have power. By preserving and reclaiming the achievements and challenges of the past, we can inspire future generations to engage with history and become advocates for a better, more inclusive future.



“Sojourner Truth’s legacy serves as an inspiration for all Americans. As a property owner and key stakeholder, the United Way of Summit & Medina has been thrilled to partner with the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, the Sojourner Truth Legacy Project-Akron, Summit Metro Parks, and an incredible team of artists and collaborators to bring the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza to life. We look forward to stewarding this beautiful space and ensuring it is a source of pride and joy in the Akron community for generations.”

—STEVE D. WILT

United Way of Summit & Medina  
Board of Directors Member



## *Acknowledgments*

The following individuals and organizations generously contributed their time, invaluable expertise, and insights to help make the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza a reality: Edna Borders, Theresa Carter, Priya Chhaya, LaNesha DeBardelaben, Jackie Derrow, Robert Louis Brandon Edwards, Lily Fournier, Karen Gegick, GPD Group Akron, Dion J. Harris, Leianne Neff Heppner, Haley Powell Kelly, Lisa King, Kyle Kutuchief, Michelle Lanier, Brent Leggs, Margaret Maurer, Adam Motter, Jim Mullen, Towanda Mullins, Woodrow Nash, Allison Nkwocha, Eto Otitigbe, Jessica Pumphrey, Monique Robinson, Ruhlin Company, Ilene Shapiro, Veronica Sims, Pamela Hickson-Stevenson, Daniela Tai, Ed Whitaker, Dr. Amber Wiley, Ujijji Davis-Williams, and Ellen McWilliams-Woods.

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## *Who We Are*

### **NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**

For more than 70 years, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has led the movement to save America's historic places. A privately funded nonprofit organization, we work to save America's historic sites; tell the full American story; build stronger communities; and invest in preservation's future.

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL HERITAGE ACTION FUND**

Created in 2017 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund is the largest preservation campaign ever undertaken on behalf of historic Black sites in the United States. Harnessing the power of place, the Action Fund preserves cultural landscapes and historic buildings that show the richness of Black life, history, and culture. Through this work, we uplift overlooked stories of resilience, activism, and achievement that are central to our national history and identity.

### **PROJECT FUNDERS**

This project was made possible through generous funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and leadership support from Kyle Kutuchief of Knight Foundation-Akron.

### **CREDITS**

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Isidor Studio

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