

# America's oldest Black town is in Illinois — and it's dying. But the fight has begun to save it.

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January 5, 2025



By [Jonathan Bullington](#) | [jbullington@chicagotribune.com](mailto:jbullington@chicagotribune.com) | Chicago Tribune

UPDATED: January 6, 2025 at 5:42 PM CST



Brooklyn residents Amir Watson, right, and Promise Houston ride bikes on Madison Street, Nov. 24, 2024. Brooklyn, Illinois, is considered to be one of the country's first Black settlements, the first majority-Black town in America to incorporate and the oldest such town still in existence today. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

You may never have heard of Brooklyn, Illinois. You might not be aware it's one of the country's first Black settlements, or that it's thought to be the first majority-Black town in America to incorporate and the oldest such town still in existence today.

You also probably don't know that it's dying.

Established in the early 1830s as a refuge for free and enslaved Black people and incorporated in 1873, Brooklyn is nestled on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River across from St. Louis. It was once a key outpost on the Underground Railroad and, later, a welcoming beacon for those fleeing the Jim Crow South.

It was a thriving, close-knit community where, at its peak, more than 2,500 lived under the town motto: “Founded by Chance, Sustained by Courage.”



An aerial view of Brooklyn, Illinois, on Nov. 25, 2024, shows the railroad tracks, vacant lots, single family homes and churches that make up much of the tiny village’s footprint. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

In the last 70 years, though, Brooklyn has spiraled toward extinction. Nearby factories that once employed Brooklynites have long since vanished. Railroad companies whose tracks encircle Brooklyn have, in previous decades, gobbled up swaths of land, displacing residents and shrinking the usable footprint of a village that has about a dozen streets, none with stoplights.

A small but vibrant commercial district disappeared. In its place came strip clubs, adult bookstores and seedy massage parlors that, along with government corruption scandals and a deadly Wild West-style gunfight involving the town’s then-police chief, fueled Brooklyn’s past notoriety as a dangerous den of vice.

Today, Brooklyn's population has dwindled to around 650. About a third meet the federal definition of impoverished. Roughly 60% of Brooklyn's total acreage is owned by railroad companies, which are eyeing continued expansion. The rest is occupied by a mix of single-family homes — some well-maintained, some in various stages of dilapidation — vacant lots, churches, a public housing complex and a small school district.

Even the once-booming adult entertainment industry, still about the only business in town, appears now to consist of two clubs.

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Strip clubs located off of Illinois Route 3 in Brooklyn, Illinois, are seen on Nov. 23, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

### Expand

It's unclear how many Black towns once populated the United States and how many still exist today. By and large, the ones that remain are, like Brooklyn, struggling to survive, said Hannibal B. Johnson, an attorney and author who has written about historic Black towns, primarily in Kansas and Oklahoma where he lives.

"There wouldn't be a reason for Black towns at all if there wasn't racism," Johnson said. "The whole point is Black folks couldn't be integrated into the white power structure that existed at all levels of American society."

Preserving them, he added, "reminds us of our strength in the midst of our oppression, then and now."

To be sure, there have been people fighting to save Brooklyn for as long as it's needed saving. Those efforts received a much-needed boost when the historic preservation nonprofit Landmarks Illinois took the unprecedented step of adding the entire town to its 2023 list of the state's most endangered places.

Now, a disparate group of university archaeologists, urban planners, preservationists, current residents and former Brooklynites have coalesced around what many think is the best — and possibly last — chance at breathing new life into Brooklyn.

In October, after a month of meetings in the village senior center, the group crafted a sweeping revitalization plan. At the center is an ambitious riverfront development proposal and a renewed push to add Brooklyn to the National Register of Historic Places, a distinction some hope could lead to the creation of a museum and other monuments aimed at driving historic and cultural tourism to town.



Prince Wells III, 71, a trumpet player and retired Southern Illinois University Edwardsville professor whose family lineage in Brooklyn dates back to before incorporation, stands outside on Nov. 24, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

“If anything should be saved, Brooklyn should,” said Prince Wells III, 71, a trumpet player and retired Southern Illinois University Edwardsville professor whose family lineage in Brooklyn dates back to before incorporation.

“Is it significant? Yes. Is it historical? Yes. Is it neglected? Yes. So, these things should be saved, not paved over and forgotten like so many other significant events in African American history.”





Watch Video At: [https://youtu.be/yPZtOiP0h\\_8](https://youtu.be/yPZtOiP0h_8)

### **‘Mother’ Baltimore and the birth of Brooklyn**

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The oral history of Brooklyn’s founding goes like this:

In 1829, “Mother” Priscilla Baltimore led 11 Black families — some former slaves, some fleeing slavery — across the Mississippi River from Missouri.

Not yet 30 years old, Baltimore was born into chattel slavery in Kentucky and eventually sold to a Methodist missionary who allowed her to keep a portion of her work wages, money she used to buy her freedom.

The Baltimore group settled in St. Clair County on a forested patch of high ground overlooking St. Louis, hoping the spot would offer relative seclusion in a state that, for Black people, was free in name only.

With slave catchers patrolling both sides of the river and Illinois enacting a set of draconian “Black Codes” that included among their punitive measures a ban on gatherings of three or more Black people, the newly formed freedom village would have undoubtedly wanted to keep a low profile. As such, verifying the exact date of Brooklyn’s founding has proved challenging for historians.

In his book, “America’s First Black Town,” University of Illinois professor Sundiata Keita Chajua estimates that Baltimore and her husband, John, settled in the county between 1830 and 1832. Illinois archaeologists Miranda Yancey and Joseph Galloy put the couple in Brooklyn closer to 1839 or 1840.

“We don’t have good documents that can confirm that (1829) date,” Galloy said. “But that doesn’t mean it’s inaccurate.”

Historic records do show that by the late 1830s, a group of five white men platted the land near the settlement and sold lots. They called it Brooklyn, Yancey and Galloy believe, because of a nearby horse ferry of the same name.



“Mother” Priscilla Baltimore. (Wikimedia Commons)

Priscilla Baltimore and her husband were among the first buyers, as were other families named in oral history as having founded the initial freedom village.

Around that same time, Priscilla Baltimore and Bishop William Paul Quinn, an African Methodist Episcopal missionary, established the town's AME church, which along with a Baptist church and a number of homes, served as stops in the Underground Railroad.

In his book, which draws on local lore, Cha-Jua writes that Baltimore risked her life to ferry Quinn and another man across the river at night "so that they could sneak into St. Louis and spread the word of salvation and liberation."

Baltimore, he writes, "deserves a place in the pantheon of courageous African Americans, such as Harriet Tubman and Josiah Henson, who led their people out of bondage."

### **Brooklyn incorporated**

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In 1865, the U.S. Civil War ended and Illinois repealed its punitive Black Codes. With the ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870, Black men could vote. And on July 8, 1873, Brooklyn's eligible voters — men at least 21 years old — were asked to decide whether the town should incorporate.

The vote, Cha-Jua writes, was unanimous. Brooklyn became the first majority-Black town in the country to incorporate.

By 1880, Brooklyn's population had grown to 574. Of that total, nearly two-thirds were Black. Many came to Brooklyn from slave states, Cha-Jua writes, "lured by the dream of land ownership or the hope of industrial employment."

At the time, a wave of industrialization transformed the East St. Louis region into an economic hub. And yet, none of the factories and rail yards fueling that growth were built in Brooklyn. Its residents could work in sprawling meat packing plants and aluminum processing centers, often for the lowest wages, but the town itself would not see any of the tax dollars those industries produced.





Grave marker for the Henry Hawkins family in the Brooklyn cemetery on Eagle Park Road in Brooklyn, Illinois, on Nov. 25, 2024. Henry Hawkins Sr. was born into slavery in Kentucky. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Many of the Black towns that sprung up in that time were similarly excluded from industrialization, often with severe consequences.

In 1836, a Black man named Frank McWorter, known as “Free Frank,” platted and sold parcels of farmland he owned in Pike County, Illinois, about 150 miles north of Brooklyn. The town he created, New Philadelphia, is considered the first in the United States to be planned and legally registered by a Black person. It was poised to prosper, that is, until a Missouri-based railroad company chose to divert a new rail line — intentionally, researchers argue — around the fledgling community.

The decision led to an exodus, and less than 50 years after its founding, New Philadelphia was officially dissolved.

### **‘Little Las Vegas’**

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There is a palpable sense of pride, tinged with melancholy, that comes when Brooklyn natives of a certain age talk about their hometown.

Brooklyn, they say, had everything they needed. There were grocery stores, dry cleaners, service stations and confectionaries, a pharmacy and a doctor, a hotel and a movie theater, a barber shop, a malt shop and a shoe repair shop.

The civic center hosted talent shows and dances on weekends. And to this day, locals will swear that the rice at Chang Hing Inn restaurant, which burned down in 2005 after six decades in business, was the best they've ever tasted.

Churches, of which there were many, preached to full pews on Sundays. Children all went to the same school and played together on manicured lawns under the watchful eyes of neighbors who doubled as surrogate parents.



Prince Wells III's parents Jewell Wells and Prince Wells Jr., at left, during a night at The Harlem Club in Brooklyn, Illinois, in the early 1950s with their relatives and friends James Joor, Beatrice Hill, Prentice Hunter and Leatrice Bradley. (Wells family photo)

“It was a wonderful place to grow up and live in,” said Wells III, the musician and retired professor who left Brooklyn in the late 1970s. “You wouldn’t believe that such a place like that could exist. But it was a very warm and nurturing environment. It was small enough that you literally could know everybody in town. People lived there for generations. People my parents grew up with were living there. So, generations of people would know who you are and your family history.”

Perhaps Brooklyn's biggest export back then was entertainment. Multiple nightclubs stayed open well past the time that bars in St. Louis and elsewhere in Missouri closed, luring people across the Mississippi with the promise of a party that didn't stop.

Magnolia Johnson, 91, remembered seeing Ike and Tina Turner, B.B. King and Fontella Bass perform at The Harlem Club, which was advertised in the 1959 edition of The Negro Travelers' Green Book as having "famous mixed drinks" and "plenty of free parking."

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Historic photographs of Brooklyn, Illinois, from the collection of Magnolia Johnson, one of Brooklyn's resident historians. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

### Expand

Bonita Tillman, 66, lived so close to a dance hall called Chuck and Al's, she remembered, that she could sit on her front porch and hear a free concert. Once, she said, she ventured behind the club and peered through a crack by a wall fan to watch Chuck Berry play.

Trenton Atkins, 64, said he lived around the corner from legendary blues guitarist Albert King, who moved to Brooklyn around 1956.

King "used to practice in his garage," remembered Atkins. "He used to let us come around and just stand there and listen."



Brooklyn native Trenton Atkins, 64, said he learned much of his town's history by listening to stories told by his elders. "It's like living on a gold mine and never knowing about it," he said. "Brooklyn is so rich in history." (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Some of the clubs doubled as gambling dens. In 1965, Brooklyn's then-mayor, George Thomas, told the Illinois Crime Commission that gamblers spent \$600,000 a year on food and drinks in Brooklyn (equal to nearly \$6 million today).

Thomas described Brooklyn as "little Las Vegas," newspapers reported. "I turned my back on this because it was the community's main source of revenue."

He reportedly testified that he received no personal financial gain from the enterprise, adding, "I'd sure like to."

Ten years later, Thomas was sentenced to between one and three years in prison, newspapers reported, after pleading guilty to extorting \$4,000 from a pump project in town.

### **'Tales of an All-Night Town'**

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Thomas was not the first Brooklyn official to end up behind bars. And he would not be the last. A string of mayors and trustees, a police chief and a village treasurer have all been accused and in some cases, convicted, of accepting bribes or pilfering the town's meager coffers.

People in Brooklyn have plenty of theories on what happened to their beloved hometown. Most acknowledge that their past leaders did them no favors. But they point their fingers, first, at the industrialists who bypassed the town when building their factories, and then shuttered those factories, taking jobs and decimating the communities that surrounded them.

While factories were closing, railroad companies were expanding. At one point, Brooklyn's residential footprint extended west of Illinois Route 3 to the river. Then, around the 1960s, railroads started to acquire those parcels, severing Brooklyn from the river.

Most of the displaced residents could not find housing in the village.

In 1950, Brooklyn's population exceeded 2,500. Twenty years later, it fell to 1,700.

Perhaps no story better encapsulates the tumultuous decades that followed railroad expansion than the story of Frank Skinner and Brooklyn police Officer James Bollinger.

The year was 1973. A heavily armed gang of cops, led by Bollinger, reportedly controlled Brooklyn's streets, terrorizing residents and shaking down clubs.

Thomas and then-police Chief Harry King turned to Frank Skinner, a club owner and former police chief. They named Skinner the new police chief. He and three other newly deputized officers jumped in a squad car to search for Bollinger. Hours later, they found him outside Garrett's Lounge on Fourth Street.





Brooklyn, Illinois, police Chief Frank Skinner, of East St. Louis, is flanked by deputies Richard Jackson, left, and Raymond Douglas on Nov. 21, 1973. Brooklyn's mayor and police chief at the time turned to Skinner and newly deputized officers to stop a heavily armed gang of officers that reportedly controlled the town's streets, terrorizing residents and shaking down clubs. (James Mayo/Chicago Tribune)

Legendary Chicago Tribune reporter Anne Keegan described the confrontation like this:

*Bollinger's hands were on his hips, inches from the sawed-off 30-caliber semiautomatic carbine tucked into his Levi's. He stared into the squad car, straight at Skinner. People on the street began to run. By the time the car drew up in front of Bollinger, Fourth Street was empty. Skinner got out last. He stood in the street, a deputy on each side with a police riot gun loaded with deer slugs in his right hand.*

*"I guess you're looking for me," Bollinger said.*

*"That's right. I'm looking for you, man," Skinner replied. "I know you've heard by now. I'm the police chief now. All commissions are void. I'm authorized by the mayor to pick up your commission and weapons."*

*"I'm not giving up a goddam thing," said Bollinger. "You can do what you want."*

*"I was looking in his eyes," Skinner recalled. "Then at his hands. The right hand reached down and grabbed the handle of his 'enforcer' and started up with it. The law of survival took over."*

Bollinger, wrote Keegan, was dead before he could fire a shot.

The showdown grabbed national attention and eventually became the focus of author Elin Schoen's 1979 book, "Tales of an All-Night Town." In it, she noted how the FBI closed its civil rights investigation of the shooting without finding sufficient evidence, and how a subsequent witness account said Bollinger had his hands in the air when Skinner gunned him down.



A dog passes elders in Brooklyn, Illinois, on Nov. 21, 1973. Brooklyn's mayor and police chief at the time asked Frank Skinner to stop a heavily armed gang of officers that reportedly controlled the town's streets, terrorizing residents and shaking down clubs. (James Mayo/Chicago Tribune)

Skinner, who said the shooting was in self-defense, was eventually charged with murder and acquitted. No longer the police chief, he was acquitted in 1984 of wounding a massage parlor operator in a shooting that Skinner again said was in self-defense.

Seven years later, Skinner pleaded guilty to selling crack cocaine from his Brooklyn home.

By then, Brooklyn was in a tailspin. The businesses and nightclubs that had once been a source of pride to residents were gone. To make up for the lost tax revenue, village leaders turned to the adult entertainment industry.

Despite some organized protests, more strip clubs followed, as did adult bookstores and massage parlors of questionable legitimacy. They had names like Roxy's, Rub-A-Dub-Dub, Fantasyland, Pleasure Palace, Pink Slip, Bottoms Up, Red Garter and Above the Garter Health Club.

Some tolerated their presence. The sex trade, they argued, was not new to Brooklyn and the surrounding area. And with few other businesses, who could say no to the money those clubs generated?

Others saw them as an embarrassing affront and preferred to use Brooklyn's other name when referencing their hometown. Around the turn of the 20th century, the U.S. Postal Service renamed the village Lovejoy — after newspaper editor and slain abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy — to avoid confusion with another Illinois village named Brooklyn.

Still others simply packed up and left.

Cheryl Bailey, 76, grew up in the village jail, her dad being the town's police chief for about 16 years, starting in the late 1940s. After the strip clubs came, she and her husband, Roland Bailey, then on the village council, decided to leave Brooklyn after hearing their children talk about seeing strippers outside the clubs.

"He didn't want his kids to see that," Bailey said.



Like many Brooklyn natives, Cheryl Bailey has fond memories of growing up in the village. “There’s no way it will probably go back to the way it used to be,” Bailey, 76, said of the current revitalization effort. “But I think they’re progressing a little bit. I’ve seen where lots have been cleaned and streets repaired.”  
(E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Those that remained lived on edge. Roberta Rogers, 66, moved to Houston in 1978 to work for a railroad. She said her mother stayed behind on the family compound near Jefferson and South Seventh streets on the east side of town and, like her neighbors, slept with a gun in her nightstand.

“If you knocked on her door past 10 p.m.,” Rogers remembered, “she’d open her window and fire a round.”

Despite the negative press Brooklyn generated, there were still some who viewed it with wonder.

Early in her career, former Brooklyn resident Adella Jones worked as a journalist for the Fox affiliate in St. Louis. In the late 1980s, she met two South African journalists through an exchange internship.

At the time, South Africa was still under apartheid rule, and when the journalists learned about Brooklyn and its government run by Black people, they wanted to know more.

Jones took them to dinner at her mom’s house.

“They were astounded,” she remembered. “Again, taking for granted what was a sense of freedom for someone else in the world, I got a whole new layer of pride for the town. That was something else.”

Still, much of that pride in Brooklyn’s past had been buried under stories of strip clubs and corruption and violence, each headline another shovelful of dirt.

It would take professional diggers to unearth it.

## **Looking for Brooklyn’s past**

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It was a fall day in 2007 when Joe Galloy and dozens of archaeologists with the [Illinois State Archaeological Survey](#) dug up soil in a railyard just east of Brooklyn.

The University of Illinois-based research team had meticulously excavated the site, called Janey B. Goode (named in honor of the famed Chuck Berry song and the wife of the archaeologist who first found artifacts there) over a stretch of six years, the work required by state and federal transportation agencies before a road construction project could begin.

In that time, they found a treasure trove of artifacts, storage pits and house basins, some dating from 600 to 1350.

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Fragment of tableware, from circa 1860s, unearthed in Brooklyn, Illinois, in an Illinois State Archaeological Survey excavation. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

### Expand

Their work produced plenty of curious looks from passing motorists. Roberta Rogers was one of them.

Though she left Brooklyn 30 years earlier, Rogers remained tied to her hometown and often returned to see family and friends. That day in 2007, she and her cousin Ronnie Steele took a drive to find Brooklyn’s century-old cemetery, obscured from the road by overgrown weeds and brush.

Rogers stopped the car and strode toward Galloy and his team.

“Frequently when we do archaeology, there are curious people who stop by and ask questions,” Galloy said. “Usually it doesn’t involve more than that. It was really Roberta’s enthusiasm for what we were finding that inspired her to look more into Brooklyn’s history.”

Like many Brooklynites, Rogers knew pieces of the town’s history, often from stories shared by elders. She knew her great-uncle, Howard Dale, lived in the village as early as 1900. He distilled whiskey and opened a grocery store that his brother, Rogers’ grandfather, eventually ran after Howard Dale’s death.



But she hadn't learned the full scope of Brooklyn's founding, its incorporation or its historic significance. Those stories weren't taught in village schools. If she searched the internet for America's oldest Black town, she'd find entries on [Eatonville, Florida](#), incorporated in 1887, 14 years after Brooklyn (in 1999, Eatonville's mayor threatened to sue Brooklyn over the distinction, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported).

Rogers realized that Brooklyn did not appear on Route 66 maps even though she and other locals clearly remembered the famed road once passing through town.

Even now, the [Illinois Historic Preservation Division website](#) includes a section on African Americans in Illinois that makes no mention of Brooklyn.

To Rogers, it was as if Brooklyn had been systematically erased. "The history wasn't highlighted," she said, "so no one researched it."

Rogers and Steele soon formed the nonprofit [Historical Society of Brooklyn, Illinois](#). Together with the university archaeologists, they launched the [Brooklyn Public Engagement Program](#).

"With Brooklyn, everything started from interest within the community rather than from the archaeological side," Galloy said. "That's really been gratifying. Oftentimes, with local communities and archaeologists there may be a disconnect. We could work in an area and not have a lot of contact with folks who live there. To have this project come from local interest is really unusual."

The historical society created a website and populated it with stories and photos from Brooklyn's past. A section called "[Brooklyn Legends](#)" pays tribute to natives or one-time residents like Albert King, hair care pioneer Annie Turnbo Malone, Negro Leagues standout "Prince" Joe Henry and jazz musician Hamiet Bluiett.



Prince Wells III, in a photo taken by his father with his friend Denise Henry, the daughter of Negro Leagues standout “Prince” Joe Henry, around 1958 in Brooklyn, Illinois. (Wells family photo)

The group commissioned a granite monument to Brooklyn’s founding and raised money for brick pavers meant as the centerpiece of a memorial park that has yet to materialize.

All of this was in pursuit of an ultimate goal: To have Brooklyn added to the National Register of Historic Places.

“The historical designation is so very important,” Rogers said. “To be one of the few remaining pre-Civil War, Black-established towns and not be on the national registry is a crime to me.”

The federal registry contains nearly 100,000 entries (almost 2,000 in Illinois). Most are buildings or structures or historic districts that, once included, are eligible for tax credits and grants aimed at preservation.

Beyond Quinn Chapel AME, there are no 19th century buildings or structures still standing in Brooklyn. So, to underpin the town’s application, archaeologists looked for artifacts buried underground.



Glen Chatman and Irene Henry chat after Sunday service at Brooklyn's Quinn Chapel AME church on Nov. 24, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Excavations began in 2008. The team focused on the northern end of town, known as Upper Brooklyn, where records showed the founding families once lived. With the permission of property owners, they dug shovel holes every 15 feet, and then switched to post-hole diggers to reach below the original surface layer, which over the century had been covered by maybe 2 or 3 feet of soil in an attempt to raise the town's elevation and prevent flooding.

"You're digging very small test holes in lots," said Yancey, the one-time university archaeologist who now works for the Illinois State Museum. "It's by chance you place it in the right spot to get something."

Archaeologists would return multiple times over the next few years as discretionary funds and time allowed. Eventually, they unearthed shards of pearlware, thin window glass and evidence of a cellar, all dating to the 1830s and '40s.

Two years ago, the team submitted its findings to the National Register. They were told the artifacts, while impressive, were not enough.

They needed to find more.

### **An 'endangered' town starts planning**

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With federal recognition proving elusive, a Brooklyn school grant writer named Kay Diamond suggested that Rogers and others look to Landmarks Illinois for help.

In its 53 years, the Chicago-based nonprofit has been a staunch advocate for historic preservation. Each year, the group releases a list of the state's most endangered historic places, often historic buildings threatened with demolition.

In May 2023, after meeting with the historical society and learning more about Brooklyn, Landmarks added the entire town to its list of endangered historic places.

"The whole town deserves recognition," said Quinn Adamowski, Landmarks regional manager. "It's not a place or a building; it's the community's history."

The inclusion brought renewed attention to Brooklyn. Adamowski, meanwhile, connected the town's leaders with the Western Illinois University-based Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, which includes among its programs a state-sponsored initiative aimed at revitalizing rural communities.

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Former Brooklyn Mayor Nathaniel O'Bannon III, 66, on Nov. 12, 2024, in his home that's been in his family since 1929. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

### Expand

Many of those communities, like Brooklyn, face housing shortages, dwindling economic bases and deteriorating infrastructure, said Gisele Hamm, who since 2006 has led the initiative, called MAPPING the Future of Your Community.

Brooklyn's needs are as severe as any she's seen in that time, Hamm said.

"But out of all the communities we work in," she added, "I don't know that we've seen this level of passion about a community as we've seen there."

Last October, the institute organized five planning sessions at Brooklyn's senior center. Each one was packed, Hamm said. Many of the 50-plus attendees were former Brooklyn residents who left years ago. Some have relatives who still live in town or own property they hope to one day return to, if fortunes improve.

The group wrapped up the month with an ambitious set of goals, long-term plans and "quick wins." They want to build more homes and attract more businesses to town. They want to clear overgrown lots, fix sidewalks and beautify streets. They want to improve educational and after-school opportunities for children. They want to restore riverfront access. They want Brooklyn to become a destination for historic and cultural tourism.

It's a daunting to-do list, Hamm acknowledged, but not an impossible one.

“After working in these communities, I’ve found it’s really not about how wealthy the community is, the resources and assets,” she said. “It’s really about the people. If you have passionate, engaged, dedicated people, you have a much higher chance of success with this program.”

Brooklyn, she added, is primed for success. “It’s got so much potential.”

## Saving Brooklyn

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It’s 2 p.m. on a Monday in November, Veterans Day, and Brooklyn Mayor Vera Glasper-Banks is in her office looking for a letter. Her desk is covered in large aerial maps of the town and paperwork — ordinances and printed emails. Two framed proclamations sit on a nearby table. One is from the Illinois Senate. The other is from the U.S. House. Both recognize Brooklyn’s 133rd anniversary of incorporation in 2006.



Mayor Vera Glasper-Banks, of Brooklyn, Illinois, stands in front of the home where she grew up. She says the town’s creation wasn’t taught in its schools. “We always thought they were folktales.” The mayor said she was confident the October planning sessions will improve Brooklyn’s fortunes. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

The 79-year-old mayor grew up on 5th Street at the northern end of town. The modest home still belongs to the Glasper family, with the letter G on its slate-gray shutters.



Her father worked in a chemical plant and ran the Glasper Bros. service station with her uncle. The siblings sold ice in the summer and coal in the winter. Her mom and aunt ran a restaurant near The Harlem Club.

She lived in Seattle for a while and worked for Boeing, she said, but came back to Brooklyn about 20 years ago to care for her mother, who was dying from cancer. She became mayor in 2013, motivated by frustration with a Madison County bus that, driving along pocked village roads, shook homes with such force that it dislodged gutters from roofs.

Glasper-Banks eventually finds the letter in her office. Dated June 6, 2024, it's from the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis, an entity nearly as old as Brooklyn. In it, the railroad says it was awarded a grant to add a third track from a junction in Brooklyn south to East St. Louis.

The new track would increase train traffic at Bend Road, which has three at-grade railroad crossings. And so, to reduce delays and mitigate danger, the railroad says it would like to permanently close the crossings.

The proposal would cut off Brooklyn's sole eastern access road and sever the town from its historic cemetery, which is now clear of weeds and brush largely thanks to a restoration project with the Illinois archaeologists.

As compensation, the letter says the village could receive \$1 million.

That kind of money could go a long way in Brooklyn. The fire department, which occupies a portion of city hall, is condemned due to roof damage, water leaks and mold. The rest of city hall is barely usable. They regularly lose police officers to neighboring towns that can pay more than \$21 an hour and provide benefits.

The mayor turned down the railroad offer. Bend Road, she said, is Brooklyn's backdoor.

"What are you going to do with \$1 million if you lose your life?" she rhetorically asked. "You take that \$1 million and you can't get out of town, so you perish here."

In an emailed statement, a spokesperson for the railroad association said transportation officials and the railroads are working on an elevated bridge south of Bend Road that would take cars from Illinois Route 3 in the west to Illinois 203 on the east.

"The village has not accepted the offer and if they choose to decline, TRRA will respect that choice," the statement reads.

Still, word of the proposal has done little to assuage the fears of some Brooklynites who think TRRA, Norfolk Southern and the rest of the railroad companies — by far the village's largest landowners in combined acreage and parcels — could continue to expand into Brooklyn at the expense of its residents.

“I feel they all want to see Brooklyn go away,” said VelJon Banks, the mayor’s son and one of the leaders of the village’s revitalization efforts. “They’d rather Brooklyn be an afterthought.”

For its part, TRRA sponsored meals during the village’s October planning meetings and said in its statement it would continue to support Brooklyn’s community efforts. A Norfolk Southern spokesperson said the railroad company recently awarded a grant to the historical society for its planned memorial park.

The Tuesday after Veterans Day, close to a dozen people took their places in the senior center multipurpose room for bingo. As the caller spun the metal cage to retrieve each number, a crowd gathered in the hallway. Two months earlier, someone drove into the village post office building on South Third Street. It still hadn’t been repaired, another affront in locals’ eyes. In the meantime, people had to wait for the postal carrier to distribute their mail from an office in the senior center. The alternative is to drive to East St. Louis.

Across the parking lot, inside village hall, the mayor’s son and Richard Ruel, president of the East St. Louis-based Metro Chamber of Commerce, put the finishing touches on the second of two grant applications submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The village has asked the federal agency for \$20 million to build a waste recycling plant and solar farm on a 90-acre tract along the river. The application also calls for a community garden in town, which would supply a farmers market, and job training in partnership with the school.

The project could be transformative for Brooklyn, Ruel said, bringing in jobs and tax dollars at a time when strip clubs — its primary economic engine — “are dying out like dinosaurs.”



Massage parlor located off of Illinois Route 3 in Brooklyn is seen on Nov. 12, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Others have tried and failed to develop that land. Whether this time is successful depends on whether their application is approved, whether the incoming presidential administration decides to pull the plug on agency spending and whether they can work out a lease deal with the land's owner, Ameren.

Brooklyn is expecting more federal money. Democratic Rep. Nikki Budzinski's fiscal year 2025 federal appropriations request includes \$2.5 million to turn a vacant building at Madison and South 5th streets — once a grocery store and, later, a skating rink — into a community center.



The former grocery store and roller rink at Madison and South 5th streets that Brooklyn officials hope to redevelop into a community center. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Meanwhile, the University of Illinois archaeologists are wrapping up an inventory of pottery fragments and other artifacts uncovered during a new round of excavations this past September at a lot near the northern end of town.

The objects continue to corroborate that people lived in Brooklyn around the time oral history says it was founded.

“I cross that river everyday, but trying to imagine people escaping from enslavement and Missouri across the largest river in the U.S., it’s a scary thought,” said Alleen Betzenhauser, an associate research scientist with the Illinois State Archaeological Survey. “Creating this new settlement for them and to help others gain freedom, it’s really inspirational and foundational to the history of the United States.”

The team is planning more excavations next year, Betzenhauser said, as well as a geophysical survey, which measures magnetic differences in soil, and ground-penetrating radar. The techniques could help them find a long-vanished cemetery that a few older Brooklynites remember being near the school. It’s believed the lost cemetery dates to the mid-1800s and could be where some of Brooklyn’s founders were buried.

The cemetery search and the new excavations could finally put Brooklyn on the national registry. Beyond being a point of pride for residents, some think the registry could drive grant dollars and donations toward historical markers, monuments and a museum to Brooklyn's past.



Silhouettes evoking Brooklyn's role as a stop on the Underground Railroad outside Quinn Chapel AME church. The figures were put there with the help of students and staff at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and are the first pieces of what the Rev. Aurelia Jackson envisions will be a replica of Brooklyn's early days. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

The Rev. Aurelia Jackson, pastor of Quinn Chapel AME church, envisions a replica of Priscilla Baltimore's freedom village, with historic reenactments, in the lot next to the church, which in 2013 was added to the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

All of this, locals say, could make Brooklyn a destination for historic and cultural tourism. A similar model is in the works in Oklahoma, said attorney and author Hannibal B. Johnson. Called the Oklahoma Civil Rights Trail, it includes 13 historic Black towns and other sites significant to Black and Native American history.

"The centerpiece of those sites is these small, all-Black towns because we want to use cultural tourism as a way to advance the economic interest of the Black town," Johnson said. "Cultural or heritage tourism is on the upswing. People want to learn about the past and in particular their own history."



The big question in the minds of many Brooklyn natives is whether their town can hold on long enough for these plans to materialize, and what the cost would be if it can't.

“Yes, Brooklyn has experienced some hard times, many phases, ups and downs,” said Robert White III, 44, a Brooklyn native who moved with his family to the St. Louis area at 17 and now serves as president of the village's historical society. “But Brooklyn is still very resilient. It's still a very beautiful place. I have not given up on Brooklyn. In fact, I'm quite optimistic the fate of Brooklyn can and will be restored.”

Originally Published: January 5, 2025 at 5:00 AM CST