

Archaeological Investigations at the Kingdom of the Happy Land

Henderson County, North Carolina

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Introduction

This preliminary field report presents the results of an intensive Phase I archaeological survey and surface reconnaissance conducted at the *Kingdom of the Happy Land*, a historically significant African American settlement established during the postbellum Reconstruction period. The project area is located in Henderson County, North Carolina, within the southern Blue Ridge physiographic province, and comprises part of the former communal lands historically associated with this self-governed freedmen's community. The investigation was undertaken by Cultural Heritage Resource Impact Solutions, Inc. (CHRIS, Inc.), under the direction of Principal Investigator Christina Benton, from May 26 through June 30, 2025.

The Kingdom of the Happy Land occupies a distinctive place in the history of Black community formation in the southern United States, and yet it remains almost entirely absent from archaeological scholarship. Founded in the years immediately following the Civil War by formerly enslaved families migrating out of South Carolina, the Kingdom developed into a small but remarkably cohesive society in the mountains along the North Carolina-South Carolina border. Oral histories describe it as an autonomous polity- complete with elected leadership, communal labor systems, and a shared moral and spiritual ethos. The Kingdom persisted into the early twentieth century, long enough to span multiple generations, shift labor strategies as local economies transformed, and develop a recognizable social geography of its own. But despite its cultural and historical significance, very little is known about how its residents built their physical environment, organized their work, or used architectural spaces to sustain their autonomy.

African Diaspora archaeology has, over the past decade, increasingly emphasized the importance of studying Black post-emancipation landscapes through the material practices that made freedom durable rather than symbolic. Scholars such as Agbe-Davies (2017) and Barnes (2016) argue that freedom after the Civil War was not a static achievement but an ongoing practice enacted through the everyday negotiation of labor, space, kinship, and survival. Material remains-buttons, nails, stonework, domestic refuse, yard spaces-are therefore not incidental; they are the primary archive through which these social dynamics become archaeologically visible. Likewise, recent work on Afro-Appalachian history and archaeology underscores the particular strategies that Black upland communities adopted in navigating environmental isolation, racialized land exclusion, and economic marginality (Skinner 2021; Mullins 2023). These communities often left modest but highly patterned material signatures, emphasizing reuse, cooperative building traditions, and multifunctional architectures suited to both labor and social cohesion.

The present investigation brings these frameworks to bear on a structure identified in descendant memory as part of the Kingdom of the Happy Land settlement. The dry-laid stone chimney, surface architecture, and associated artifact assemblage represent one of the only surviving physical elements of

the Kingdom's built landscape. By documenting this structure, establishing its integrity, and reconstructing its likely function, this project contributes a rare material perspective to a community that has until now been interpreted almost entirely through oral tradition and local history. More broadly, it addresses a significant gap in African Diaspora and Appalachian scholarship by examining how a Black autonomous settlement-operating under its own laws, culture, and labor systems-manifested its independence through the built environment.

This introduction is not simply a preface to excavation findings; it is a statement of what is at stake. Archaeological evidence from the Kingdom provides a crucial line of insight into how formerly enslaved people defined freedom on their own terms, in their own landscape, using their own spatial and architectural decisions. These material traces allow us to reconstruct the rhythms of collective labor, the affordances of vernacular architecture, and the organization of communal life that sustained this unique settlement for decades. The work presented here moves the Kingdom of the Happy Land out of the margins of local memory and situates it directly within current archaeological conversations on Black post-emancipation autonomy, upland settlement, and community-based survival.

This Archaeological survey was designed as an initial step toward redressing that absence and establishing a rigorous archaeological framework for future investigations. The primary objectives of the project were to:

- Establish the presence, extent, and condition of archaeological features associated with the Kingdom;
- Document and analyze surface-visible cultural materials and structural remnants;
- Conduct limited subsurface testing to determine the integrity of buried deposits;
- Collect high-resolution spatial data via GPS and develop a baseline geospatial model of the site;
- Provide interpretive context and preliminary recommendations for further research, community engagement, and potential site preservation.

Fieldwork focused on a core 7-meter by 5-meter area, herein designated Unit 1, which encompasses a partially intact dry-laid stone chimney base - interpreted as the central architectural element of a domestic dwelling. This structure is likely to have served as both a functional hearth and a symbolic anchor within the household and broader community. Associated artifact scatters, rock alignments, and shallow subsurface testing were used to assess horizontal and vertical distribution patterns of material culture within this targeted area.

All field activities were conducted in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archaeology and Historic Preservation and in consultation with applicable State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) guidelines for reconnaissance- and identification-level surveys. Emphasis was placed on minimally invasive methods, sensitivity to descendant community concerns, and integration of both oral history and archaeological data into a unified interpretive framework.

Ultimately, this investigation contributes to a growing scholarly and cultural effort to illuminate the physical and social landscapes of freedmen's communities in the post-Emancipation South. The *Kingdom of the Happy Land* is one of very few known examples of a large, organized Black settlement in western North Carolina, and its archaeological documentation is both timely and essential. This report

establishes a foundational record of material culture, feature integrity, and spatial layout to guide further inquiry and cultural resource management decisions related to this extraordinary site.

Historical and Project Background

The *Kingdom of the Happy Land* is a historically significant African American settlement founded in the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War by formerly enslaved individuals seeking refuge, stability, and autonomy in the upland interior of the southern Appalachian region. Located in present-day Henderson County, North Carolina, in the rugged and relatively isolated terrain of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Kingdom emerged during the Reconstruction era as one of the rare, intentional Black communities in western North Carolina. Its founding represents a conscious and strategic response to the social upheaval and systemic violence that characterized the post-Emancipation South.

Historical Context: Formation and Social Organization

According to oral tradition and limited documentary evidence, the Kingdom was established in the late 1860s by a group of formerly enslaved men and women who had migrated from South Carolina to escape racial terror. These individuals are said to have pooled their resources to purchase land in a remote mountain hollow, far from white landowners and the racial terror that defined much of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras.

Local oral histories, passed down through generations of descendant families, describe a unique and highly organized community structure. Leadership reportedly took the form of a monarchical or quasi-monarchical system, with elected or appointed figures bearing titles such as "king," "queen," and "prime minister." While no comprehensive archival records survive to confirm the full extent of this governmental framework, such descriptions point to a fusion of African-derived traditions, spiritual worldviews, and strategic responses to the instability of the era.

Daily life in the Kingdom reportedly revolved around subsistence agriculture, communal labor, spiritual fellowship, and limited trade with neighboring settlements. Some accounts suggest that the Kingdom operated schools, religious institutions (likely Protestant churches), and self-policed security structures. Descendant interviews indicate that literacy, music, and foodways all played important roles in community cohesion. These oral narratives, though fragmentary, collectively position the Kingdom as a deliberate act of freedom- both a material and symbolic expression of African American sovereignty in the postbellum period.

Decline, Dispossession, and Legacy

By the early 20th century, the Kingdom began to decline, likely due to a combination of economic hardship, external political pressure, and generational dispersal. Land dispossession, a pervasive threat for Black landowners during this era, may have also played a role in the community's fragmentation. Over time, property was subdivided, sold, or absorbed into surrounding white-owned holdings. By the 1930s, few residents remained, and the landscape gradually returned to forest.

Despite the site's physical disappearance from maps, its cultural memory endured. The "Kingdom of the Happy Land" remained a fixture in regional folklore and descendant storytelling. In the absence of formal written histories, the community's legacy has been preserved primarily through oral transmission and place-names embedded in the regional geography - such as references to the "Bumblebee

Turnpike,” an informal migration and trade corridor that may have connected the Kingdom to other Black settlements in upstate South Carolina and east Tennessee.

To date, no formal archaeological investigation of the Kingdom has been undertaken. As such, the material record of this rare and culturally unique African American settlement remains largely undocumented, and its physical remnants are vulnerable to degradation from natural erosion, modern land use, and neglect.

Current Project Area

The 2025 archaeological investigation was conducted on a privately owned, wooded parcel believed to encompass a portion of the original Kingdom settlement core. The tract lies on a sloped landscape exhibiting moderate topographic relief, with a combination of hardwood and pine forest cover. The terrain shows signs of both historical disturbance and gradual erosion, creating a complex surface matrix that preserves elements of earlier occupation. The designated project area contains a mix of disturbed and undisturbed zones that together offer valuable insight into past land use and settlement organization.

Within the survey area, several visible cultural features were documented. A partially intact dry-laid stone chimney base measuring approximately four by seven feet remains in situ, reflecting vernacular postbellum domestic construction methods common to the region. Scattered brick fragments and residual mortar are distributed across the site, suggesting evidence of structural collapse or deliberate dismantling activities. Additional stone alignments and clustered rock piles appear throughout the parcel, potentially representing the remnants of foundation piers, boundary markers, or garden plot edges. Artifact visibility across the area ranged from moderate to high, with materials such as hand-forged nails, glass fragments, metal objects, and personal items like buttons observed on the surface. These finds collectively indicate an extended period of domestic occupation consistent with a settlement core.

No standing structures are currently present within the project boundaries, and there is no indication of recent grading, utility installation, or modern development that would have compromised site integrity. Overall, the parcel retains sufficient archaeological potential to support continued investigation and interpretation of the Kingdom’s historic landscape.

Project Scope and Permissions

The fieldwork for this project was initiated with the full consent and cooperation of the landowner, who expressed interest in understanding and preserving the historical significance of the site. Given the community’s cultural importance and its undocumented status, the initial work was scoped as a Archaeological intensive pedestrian survey and surface investigation with limited subsurface testing.

All field activities were carried out in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological Documentation, as well as North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) standards for Phase I investigations. Given the sensitive cultural nature of the site, special attention was paid to minimally invasive techniques, descendant community ethics, and the development of an interpretive framework grounded in African American heritage values.

Initial field visits focused on controlled pedestrian survey, visual inspection, and the use of handheld GPS and total station equipment to document surface features and define a preliminary site boundary.

Surface collections were performed in a gridded fashion, and shovel test pits (STPs) were excavated in selected loci to assess soil stratigraphy and subsurface artifact presence.

The results of this Phase I investigation form the basis of this report and will inform both heritage management decisions and potential Phase II investigations, pending consultation with descendant stakeholders, SHPO, and regional preservation partners.

Field Methodology and Strategy

The archaeological field investigation at the *Kingdom of the Happy Land* site employed a multi-scalar, minimally invasive methodology designed to systematically document visible cultural features, evaluate subsurface integrity, and establish an accurate geospatial framework for interpreting site layout and feature relationships. All methodologies were developed in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Archaeological Documentation and best practices outlined by the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for Archaeological reconnaissance and intensive survey of historic-era archaeological sites. Special emphasis was placed on sensitivity to site integrity, stratigraphic variability, and descendant community values associated with the postbellum African American heritage landscape.

The overall field strategy integrated five core components: (1) intensive pedestrian survey and grid layout, (2) architectural and feature mapping, (3) controlled surface artifact collection, (4) targeted shovel testing, and (5) spatial data integration and geoprocessing. Each step was designed to maximize data recovery from a limited sample unit while minimizing unnecessary disturbance to the archaeological record.

The initial phase of fieldwork began with the establishment of a seven-meter by five-meter rectangular grid, designated as Unit 1. This grid was deliberately centered on a partially intact, dry-laid stone chimney base, which represented the most architecturally diagnostic feature visible on the site. The chimney served as the central anchor for spatial orientation, providing a logical focal point for testing and artifact recovery. The grid was aligned along a north–south axis to correspond with the natural slope of the terrain and the probable orientation of the historic building, inferred from the spatial arrangement of surface features and artifact distribution patterns.

Surface visibility within the unit was estimated at approximately sixty percent, reduced by recent rainfall, partial leaf litter displacement, and minor bioturbation caused by root activity and small fauna. Despite these conditions, the exposed surface provided adequate visibility for identifying visible artifacts and structural remnants. The grid was established using standard field instruments including compass, measuring tape, and stadia rods. Each corner of the unit was precisely marked and recorded using a Trimble Geo7X GPS unit, which provided sub-meter accuracy. The control points were assigned as Point 53 (southwest corner), Point 54 (southeast), Point 55 (northwest), and Point 56 (northeast). These points formed a reliable spatial reference framework for all subsequent mapping, excavation, and documentation.

Following grid establishment, a controlled pedestrian survey was conducted within grid. Field team members traversed the grid in parallel transects spaced less than one meter apart, ensuring complete visual coverage of the unit. This systematic approach allowed for the identification and documentation of surface-visible cultural materials, such as artifact clusters and displaced stones, while reducing the

likelihood of overlooking subtle features. The careful pacing and close-interval transects facilitated recognition of low-relief structural remains and minor soil disturbances, which often mark the boundaries of historic occupation zones or collapsed building elements.

Excavation proceeded using standard trowel and shovel techniques, driven by stratigraphic visibility rather than arbitrary levels. Each stratum was documented with detailed notes on soil texture, Munsell color, inclusions, compaction, and relationships to adjacent contexts. Because post-emancipation structures often involve episodic repair, reuse, and floor rebuilding, close attention was paid to subtle transitions in soil composition—thin ash lenses, compacted clay layers, and charcoal flecking—all of which can represent work activity, seasonal shifts, or localized burning events.

Screening through ¼-inch mesh allowed for the recovery of small finds such as buttons, cut nails, wire nails, cartridge casings, and small metal fragments that might otherwise be overlooked but are crucial to interpreting activity areas in rural Black communities (Fitts 2018). Artifacts were bagged by precise provenience, with each bag labeled by unit, level, and feature association. Special care was taken with corroded metal; nails with diagnostic heads were wrapped to preserve form, and metal buttons were separated to prevent further deterioration.

Four shovel test pits (STPs) supplemented the main excavation. Three STPs to the west encountered sterile subsoil, suggesting the structure did not extend in that direction and that midden deposits were limited. In contrast, the eastern STP—placed in a landscape depression—produced artifacts consistent with Kingdom-era use, as well as a large fieldstone whose placement appears intentional. The presence of this stone within a compacted activity surface suggests a working pit, storage feature, or structural element adjacent to the building's chimney.

Documentation strategies included scaled drawings, profile sketches, photogrammetric mapping of the chimney, and digital photographs. These documentation approaches align with best practices for historic-period vernacular architecture in rural and upland African American communities, where construction techniques often diverge from formal architectural norms yet reflect generational knowledge and regional traditions (Skinner 2021; Mullins 2023).

The methods described here are not simply procedural; they are tailored to the interpretive challenges of studying post-emancipation Black settlements. Such sites often lack the heavy artifact accumulations seen in plantation quarters or urban Black neighborhoods. Instead, they require careful reading of architectural traces, small finds, soil transitions, and activity residues.

Cultural Feature Mapping

Cultural features within Unit 1 were systematically identified, recorded, and analyzed through a combination of traditional field documentation and geospatial mapping techniques. The investigative focus centered on architectural remains, domestic activity areas, and landscape modifications suggestive of past habitation or boundary definition. Detailed attention was given to both material composition and spatial relationships to ensure accurate interpretation of the site's functional and structural organization.

The most prominent architectural element was the central chimney base, constructed from stacked fieldstone bound with intermittent lime-based mortar. This feature was recorded in both plan and elevation view, with measurements indicating an approximate footprint of four by seven feet. Field

observations captured construction attributes such as coursed versus uncoursed stonework, the presence of mortar seams, and patterns of deterioration resulting from collapse, weathering, and exposure to heat and moisture. Charcoal staining and partial stone displacement suggested thermal activity consistent with long-term hearth use followed by gradual degradation.

Associated cultural materials were observed surrounding the chimney area, including a flat hearthstone that may represent an in-situ flooring element, and numerous brick fragments, some showing vitrification indicative of direct exposure to high temperatures. Concentrations of rock located between Points 57 and 65 were interpreted as possible remnants of collapsed foundation piers, wall alignments, or boundary markers defining the structure's limits. Each discrete feature was assigned a provisional identification number (for example, Feature 1: Chimney Base; Feature 2: Rock Alignment Cluster 59) and was documented photographically with appropriate metric scale and north arrow orientation to facilitate future modeling and analysis.

Photographic documentation was carried out using a Nikon D7500 DSLR camera, capturing high-resolution images embedded with GPS metadata to support spatial accuracy and digital archival management. A detailed photo log was maintained throughout excavation to ensure consistent reference between imagery, field notes, and spatial datasets. Hand-drawn field sketches and feature maps were later digitized and georeferenced within ArcGIS Pro, enabling precise integration of the site's physical features into the broader project's visual overlays and interpretive datasets.

Artifact Collection and Cataloging

Controlled surface collection within Unit 1 followed a quadrant-based provenience system to ensure precise spatial documentation of artifacts. The excavation grid was subdivided into one-meter squares, each assigned an alphanumeric designation (e.g., 1A, 1B, 1C) to allow artifact locations to be accurately mapped and correlated with stratigraphic and contextual data. All artifacts were hand-collected, bagged in labeled brown paper bags, and logged on standardized CHRIS Inc. Artifact Recording Sheets. Each entry included artifact class, material type, typological identification, condition, and any observed contextual associations such as proximity to architectural features or concentrations of debris.

Special attention was given to diagnostic materials, which provide valuable chronological and functional insight into site activity. Table 1 summarizes the principal artifact categories and their interpretive significance.

Artifact Type	Sub-Type/Example	Analytical Significance
Nails	Cut, wire, square-headed	Indicate construction methods, repair activity, and temporal phases of building use
Glass	Windowpane fragments, bottle glass	Differentiate between architectural debris and domestic refuse deposits

Metal Hardware	Brass casing, iron tools, unidentified fittings	Suggest associations with labor practices, hunting, or domestic economy
Buttons	Porcelain, metal, bone	Reflect personal adornment, clothing style, and possible socioeconomic indicators

All recovered materials were temporarily curated under controlled field-lab conditions pending final curation decisions. Field documentation adhered to the CHRIS Inc. standardized recording system, ensuring consistency and cross-reference capability with spatial mapping data at the site level.

Shovel Test Pit (STP) Excavation

To evaluate the presence and integrity of subsurface cultural deposits beyond visible surface scatters, four shovel test pits (STPs) were excavated at strategic points (71–74) within and adjacent to Unit 1. Each STP measured 50 x 50 centimeters and was excavated either by natural stratigraphic layers or in arbitrary 10-centimeter levels where stratigraphy was indistinct. All excavated soils were passed through ¼-inch hardware cloth mesh to ensure the recovery of both artifacts and ecofacts, including small fragments of charcoal and bone.

Soil characteristics were documented using Munsell color charts and detailed descriptions of texture, composition, inclusions (such as rock fragments and rootlets), and the depth of each horizon. The observed soil profile across the test pits generally revealed a thin A-horizon of loam to sandy loam with limited organic content, transitioning into a compact B-horizon of clay subsoil encountered between approximately 12 and 25 centimeters below surface.

STP No.	Soil Description	Depth (cm)	Notable Findings
71	Loam to sandy loam (A-horizon) over compact clay (B-horizon)	0–25	Embedded flat stone possibly related to yard paving or outbuilding foundation
72	Sandy loam transitioning to dense clay	0–20	Minimal cultural material
73	Loam with moderate rootlets and inclusions	0–18	Minimal cultural material; likely erosion
74	Disturbed loam over compact subsoil	0–22	Minimal material; truncated cultural horizon

The stratigraphy suggests that STPs 72–74 yielded limited cultural material due to either erosion or historic truncation of the upper cultural horizons. STP 71 was the only test unit to reveal a possible feature - a flat embedded stone that may correspond to historic yard or structural remains associated with the main occupation area. Each STP was photographed in profile using a metric scale and documented through annotated drawings to record soil transitions and features. Upon completion, all test pits were backfilled and restored to their original condition to ensure minimal site disturbance.

Spatial Data Integration and Geoprocessing

All spatial data collected during the field investigation were systematically processed using ArcGIS Pro and other industry-standard Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to ensure the creation of accurate and analytically robust spatial datasets. GPS points numbered 53 through 70 were imported directly into ArcGIS Pro and converted into a shapefile dataset representing the complete spatial framework of the project area. This dataset included all mapped features, shovel test pits (STPs), and the defined site boundary.

Each mapped element was assigned unique attribute values within corresponding GIS tables. These attribute tables recorded key descriptive data such as feature type, provenience, soil characteristics, and artifact presence or absence. Once compiled, all spatial data layers were integrated with multiple reference datasets to enhance spatial accuracy and interpretive potential. Specifically, the GIS environment incorporated modern U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) topographic quadrangles, historical and contemporary aerial imagery (1985–2024), and site-specific geospatial control points collected during fieldwork.

To visualize and interpret spatial relationships among the features, a digital site sketch map was developed through a combination of hand-drawn field maps, georeferenced GPS coordinates, and orthophoto basemaps. The resulting map depicts the layout of Unit 1, the chimney and associated rock alignments, and the distribution of STPs and artifact concentrations within the broader site context.

GIS Layer	Data Source	Purpose
Feature and STP Points	GPS (Points 53–70)	Represented excavation units, features, and STP locations
Site Boundary Polygon	Derived from field mapping	Defined spatial extent of the site
USGS Topographic Overlay	USGS Quadrangles	Provided elevation, contour, and hydrological reference
Aerial Imagery (1985–2024)	Historical and modern aerals	Documented environmental and land use change

This spatial dataset forms the analytical foundation for subsequent geospatial analyses. The integrated framework allows for artifact distribution studies, feature clustering assessments, and terrain-based analyses, including slope, aspect, and hydrological modeling. It also provides the basis for potential viewshed analysis originating from the domestic structure's core area, offering insights into past landscape visibility, site selection, and functional use of surrounding terrain. The spatial integration ensures that all cultural and environmental data are interoperable within a single geospatial environment, supporting both current reporting needs and future research or compliance-level investigations.

Environmental and Geoarchaeological Context

The *Kingdom of the Happy Land* site is situated atop a moderately sloped ridgetop characterized by a south-facing aspect, overlooking a broad, low-lying valley to the south and southeast. This elevated position affords extensive viewsheds across the surrounding landscape, a feature that likely influenced both the original settlement location and its long-term viability. The ridge provides a natural vantage point for surveillance and early warning against potential threats, which may have held strategic significance for a postbellum freedmen's community seeking relative isolation and security in a racially and politically hostile environment.

Vegetation and Landscape

The current environment is dominated by secondary-growth deciduous forest, indicative of historic land abandonment and natural succession following the site's gradual depopulation in the early 20th century. Dominant canopy species include oaks (*Quercus* spp.), hickories (*Carya* spp.), and maples (*Acer* spp.), interspersed with scattered pines (*Pinus* spp.) contributing to a mixed forest composition. Understory vegetation is dense and heterogeneous, with significant pine sapling proliferation and patches of thick brush, particularly on the eastern margins of the project area. This dense brush growth likely obscures some surface features and inhibits extensive pedestrian survey beyond the primary unit.

Topography and Slope

The site's topographic profile features a moderate incline averaging approximately 10-15 degrees within the 7m x 5m Unit 1 grid, transitioning from the ridge crest to a lower valley floor. This slope contributes to both natural drainage and erosional dynamics within the project parcel. The south-facing slope promotes increased solar radiation, which likely enhanced early agricultural productivity and seasonal microclimate advantages for the Kingdom's inhabitants.

Soil Profile and Subsurface Conditions

Subsurface testing was conducted through systematic shovel test pits (STPs) and targeted soil probing to document the soil composition, stratigraphy, and overall site formation processes. The soil profile across the investigated area was generally shallow, with the predominant texture classified as clay loam exhibiting moderate compaction. This profile type aligns with well-drained upland soils typical of the Appalachian foothill region. Munsell color readings consistently reflected values around 10YR 5/4 (yellowish brown), indicating oxidized, stable, and aerated soils formed under relatively consistent drainage and vegetation conditions.

The organic horizon (O-layer) was thin, averaging 4–6 centimeters in depth throughout Unit 1. This layer consisted primarily of decomposed leaf litter and minor humic material. The limited thickness of this stratum suggests regular surface disturbance resulting from bioturbation - root growth, small fauna activity, and weather-related turnover - rather than heavy anthropogenic modification. The shallow organic layer also reflects a natural equilibrium between vegetation input and decomposition rates within the woodland environment.

Root intrusion was especially evident along the northern edge of Unit 1, where mature tree roots disrupted the upper stratigraphy. These intrusions have caused localized mixing of soil layers, which complicates the preservation of discrete archaeological contexts. The root activity has also displaced small stones and compacted sediments, making it necessary to interpret stratigraphic transitions cautiously within those disturbed zones.

Frequent inclusions of subsurface rock fragments and small cobbles were documented at depths ranging between 20 and 40 centimeters below surface (cmbs). These rock inclusions are consistent with the region's underlying geologic structure, associated with residual soils derived from weathered metamorphic bedrock characteristic of the Blue Ridge physiographic province. Such rocky substrates would have presented practical constraints on historical construction, influencing foundation techniques and site placement. The dry-laid stone masonry observed in the extant chimney base appears to directly respond to these geological conditions, utilizing readily available local stone as a stable and drainable foundation medium.

Depth (cmbs)	Horizon	Description	Texture	Munsell Color	Notable Features
0–6	O	Organic layer of leaf litter and humus	Loam	10YR 3/2 (dark brown)	Active root network
6–20	A	Topsoil with mixed humic content	Clay loam	10YR 5/4 (yellowish brown)	Moderate compaction, occasional small roots
20–40	B	Subsoil transition with clay accumulation	Clay	10YR 6/6 (brownish yellow)	Frequent cobbles and small stones
40+	C	Weathered parent material	Clay loam with rock fragments	10YR 6/8 (light yellowish brown)	Stone inclusions increase with depth

Overall, the site's subsurface conditions reveal a moderately compacted, well-drained upland environment with thin organic development and intermittent stone inclusions. While biologic and geologic processes have altered some stratigraphic integrity, the soil matrix remains suitable for controlled archaeological excavation and provides a clear context for interpreting construction methods and activity patterns at the site.

Hydrology and Erosional Processes

Hydrologically, the site maintains a stable drainage regime, with no evidence of standing water or soil saturation during the investigation period. However, erosional features were documented along the western margin of Unit 1, including shallow gullies and sediment displacement likely resulting from historic surface runoff, possibly exacerbated by natural slope gradients and the absence of contemporary vegetation buffers.

The eastern edge of the unit was overgrown with dense brush, limiting visual and physical access, while the northern boundary exhibited disturbance from mature tree root systems that had lifted and fractured the soil matrix, potentially affecting the preservation of cultural deposits in that area.

Depositional Environment and Archaeological Implications

The combination of shallow soils, moderate erosion, and active root bioturbation suggests a limited vertical stratigraphy within Unit 1. While deep, stratified cultural deposits are unlikely, the site conditions are favorable for the preservation of horizontal patterning - that is, spatial organization of surface and near-surface artifacts and features.

Such horizontal integrity is critical for interpreting domestic site layout, activity areas, and structural footprints in historic-era sites where deep stratigraphy often is absent due to limited sediment accumulation.

Regional and Cultural Landscape Context

The environmental setting of the *Kingdom of the Happy Land* is emblematic of broader locational patterns identified in similar freedmen's settlements throughout the southern Appalachian region and the post-Emancipation South. These communities typically sought forested, upland locales that provided relative isolation from white-controlled territories, fertile soils sufficient for subsistence farming, and natural defenses from external threats.

The site's proximity to historic routes, most notably the "Buncombe Turnpike," suggests important socioeconomic and migratory linkages. The Buncombe Turnpike, a regional corridor connecting South Carolina and Tennessee, likely served as a conduit for trade, communication, and population movement among African American settlements during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This corridor may have facilitated the flow of goods, information, and cultural practices integral to the Kingdom's endurance and social networks.

In sum, the environmental and geoarchaeological setting of the *Kingdom of the Happy Land* reflects a carefully selected landscape balancing agricultural potential, defensibility, and connection to regional African American migratory and trade routes. These physical and cultural factors underpin the site's historical significance and inform archaeological interpretation of material remains.

Field Observations and Feature Descriptions

Unit 1 Overview

The primary excavation area, designated as Unit 1, consisted of a 7-meter by 5-meter rectangular grid strategically positioned on a moderate north–south oriented slope. This location was selected to encompass the most prominent architectural feature visible at the site - an intact chimney base believed to represent the structural core of a historic dwelling. The area provided an ideal window into the integrity, construction, and potential occupation layers associated with the feature, while also allowing for controlled excavation and artifact recovery.

To ensure precise spatial control, the unit corners were georeferenced using Trimble GPS technology. The coordinates were recorded as follows:

Point ID	Corner Position	Description
53	Southwest (SW)	Origin point for grid layout
54	Southeast (SE)	Aligned along southern baseline
55	Northwest (NW)	Northern boundary reference
56	Northeast (NE)	Upper boundary closure point

This grid orientation was chosen to follow the natural topographic slope, optimizing drainage control during excavation and maintaining contextual integrity of in-situ deposits. The systematic layout also facilitated accurate spatial mapping of features, stratigraphic transitions, and artifact distributions within the unit.

The establishment of Unit 1 provided a balanced sample area - large enough to capture architectural and depositional variability, yet confined enough to allow for intensive, fine-grained recording of cultural materials. This approach enabled integration of field data with broader spatial analyses across the site, supporting interpretation of site organization, activity zones, and material patterning associated with the standing chimney and its surrounding occupation area.

Feature 1: Chimney Base

The chimney base measures approximately four feet in width and seven feet in length. It is constructed primarily from dry-laid fieldstones, interspersed with small patches of lime-based mortar. The workmanship reflects vernacular masonry practices typical of late nineteenth-century rural mountain dwellings. Evidence of partial collapse is present, especially along the southern face where stones have shifted downslope. This displacement is likely the result of long-term weathering and frost heaving, processes commonly observed in abandoned or unmaintained stone structures in similar environments.

A large flat hearthstone remains intact within the chimney interior, marking the central domestic hearth of the dwelling. Charcoal staining observed on both the hearthstone and adjacent soils confirms the area’s use for fire-related domestic activities, likely cooking and heating. Scattered

brick fragments - some vitrified - were identified primarily to the east and downslope of the chimney. These materials are consistent with debris from collapse or repair episodes, suggesting maintenance or modification during the structure's period of use.

The chimney base serves as the best-preserved architectural feature on site and likely represents the structural core of a dwelling or functional workspace. Its integrity provides valuable information on nineteenth-century construction techniques and domestic organization. The hearth would have been the focal point for daily life - serving as a site for cooking, warmth, and social interaction.

**Feature Summary: Chimney
Base**

Description

Dimensions

4 ft wide × 7 ft long

Construction

Dry-laid fieldstone with lime-based mortar

Condition

Partial collapse along southern face

Associated Artifacts

Hearthstone, charcoal staining, vitrified brick fragments

Interpretation

Structural core of domestic dwelling; primary hearth area

Feature 2: Rock Piles (Points 57–65)

The rock piles recorded between GPS Points 57 and 65 consist of both linear and clustered arrangements, spaced at intervals of roughly one to two meters. The spatial organization suggests intentional placement rather than random deposition. Some alignments appear parallel or perpendicular to the chimney base, particularly the cluster at Point 59, which runs roughly along the same axis - indicating a deliberate and possibly planned layout associated with domestic or agricultural activity areas.

These rock concentrations could represent remnants of low stone walls or foundation piers associated with ancillary structures such as small cabins, sheds, or workspaces. Alternatively, they may delineate property boundaries, garden plots, or livestock enclosures - common features within self-sufficient rural settlements of the nineteenth century. Their modest height and compact spacing make them consistent with boundary demarcations or garden wall remains rather than load-bearing foundations for large dwellings.

The detailed spatial mapping of these features reinforces their interpretive potential. The regular intervals and repeating alignments across the grid point toward an organized site plan rather than scattered field clearing piles. When considered alongside the nearby chimney base, these features

collectively support the interpretation of a small domestic or work compound characterized by multifunctional use of space for habitation, subsistence, and boundary definition.

Feature Summary: Rock Piles (57–65)	Description
Arrangement	Linear and clustered groupings, spaced 1–2 m apart
Notable Alignment	Point 59 parallel to chimney axis
Possible Functions	Collapsed wall bases, boundary markers, or garden enclosures
Cultural Association	Typical of rural 19th-century settlement layouts
Interpretation	Organized spatial planning indicating domestic or agricultural use

Shovel Test Pits

Four shovel test pits (STPs 71–74) were excavated in close proximity to Unit 1 to evaluate subsurface archaeological integrity beyond the visible surface features. STP 71, located on the eastern side, was excavated to a depth of approximately 25 centimeters. The test revealed a shallow topsoil layer overlying a compact clay subsoil, indicating limited stratigraphic development. Within the upper horizon, a flat rock was embedded in the matrix, suggesting the possibility of an intentional placement associated with architectural paving, a pathway, or a constructed floor surface. Artifact recovery from this pit included a small lithic fragment, reinforcing the potential for limited but meaningful cultural material in this area.

STPs 72 through 74 were excavated along the western side of the excavation grid. These units exhibited a more compact subsoil encountered at an average depth of 15 centimeters, with minimal stratigraphic differentiation. Artifact recovery from these pits was sparse and primarily consisted of small nails and fragmented metal pieces. The overall stratigraphic profile appeared disturbed, likely the result of erosional truncation or post-depositional processes that disrupted original soil integrity.

STP	Location	Depth (cm)	Soil Description	Artifacts Recovered	Interpretation
71	East	~25	Shallow topsoil over compact	Small lithic fragment	Possible paving or floor surface; localized integrity

			clay; embedded flat rock		
72	West	~15	Compact subsoil, minimal stratigraphy	Sparse nails, metal fragments	Disturbed context
73	West	~15	Compact subsoil, minimal stratigraphy	Sparse nails, metal fragments	Disturbed context
74	West	~15	Compact subsoil, minimal stratigraphy	Sparse nails, metal fragments	Disturbed context

The results from these shovel tests suggest that vertical stratigraphy across the tested area is generally shallow and disturbed, except for the immediate zone surrounding the chimney feature, where cultural deposits appear more intact. The presence of the flat rock and lithic artifact in STP 71 indicates isolated pockets of integrity that may warrant further focused testing or excavation. In contrast, the western units show evidence of erosion and soil displacement, diminishing the likelihood of intact buried deposits.

The surrounding vegetation and ground conditions further contextualize site disturbance patterns. The eastern edge of Unit 1 is enclosed by dense brush and thick understory vegetation, restricting visibility and pedestrian movement. The northern boundary is influenced by the root system of a large mature tree, whose root bulge has disrupted the soil structure and contributed to mechanical disturbance of archaeological contexts. The western perimeter exhibits clear signs of erosion, likely caused by historic runoff or slope wash, which may have resulted in soil loss and the downslope migration of artifacts. These environmental and natural processes collectively explain the variability in subsurface integrity across the site and provide important considerations for planning any future excavation or conservation work.

Artifact Assemblage and Material Culture Analysis

Overview

Surface and subsurface artifact recovery within Unit 1 comprised a moderate-density assemblage reflecting domestic occupation and episodic activity spanning from the late 19th century through the early to mid-20th century. Artifacts were categorized, inventoried, and preliminarily analyzed in the field with particular attention to diagnostic types indicative of chronological and functional usage.

Category	Description	Count	Preliminary Interpretation
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Buttons	Porcelain (4-hole), metal (3-hole), decorative button covers	6	Reflect domestic clothing and personal adornment; typologies suggest late 19th-century manufacture and use
Metal Objects	Brass bullet casing, rusted disc, cylindrical fragment (possible tool debris)	3+	Suggest hunting activities and tool maintenance; brass casing implies 20th-century presence or reuse
Glass	Flat windowpane fragments, curved bottle glass (likely beverage container)	2	Indicative of residential architectural glass and household consumption
Nails	Mixture of hand-wrought, machine-cut, and wire nails, including square-headed forms	40+	Reflect construction and repair activities; variety suggests extended occupation with reuse of building materials
Cast Iron	Fragments consistent with cookware and stove parts	2	Associated with cooking and heating, correlating spatially with chimney feature

Temporal and Functional Insights

The recovered artifact assemblage provides valuable insight into the temporal and functional use of the site. The presence of cut nails and porcelain buttons corresponds with a general occupation period dating from approximately the 1870s through the early 20th century. These materials align with the known historical settlement timeline associated with the Kingdom, indicating domestic and structural activities during that era. The consistent recovery of these artifact types supports an occupation period that reflects sustained residential or community use rather than short-term or transient activity.

The presence of a single metal bullet casing and tool-related fragments may be associated with intermittent hunting, mechanical repair, or brief visitation events occurring during the primary occupation phase. The functional distinction between the earlier domestic artifacts and later utilitarian debris suggests the site experienced minimal but continued interaction across generations, possibly by local residents familiar with the historic area.

The complete absence of modern materials such as plastic, aluminum, or synthetic compounds further strengthens the conclusion that the site has not undergone significant modern disturbance or reoccupation. This lack of intrusive material indicates that the archaeological integrity of the site remains largely intact, preserving the original depositional context. Together, these temporal and functional patterns provide a clear sequence of use that situates the Kingdom site within a late 19th- to early 20th-century occupational horizon, with only limited post-abandonment activity thereafter.

Interpretation and Preliminary Conclusions

The Kingdom of the Happy Land archaeological site exhibits a noteworthy degree of archaeological integrity despite evident environmental disturbances such as bioturbation, erosion, and reforestation. The preservation of the stone chimney base stands as the most architecturally substantial and informative feature on the site, serving as a central structural marker within what appears to have been a communal or multipurpose building - potentially used as a gathering place for education, sewing, meetings, and other collective activities central to daily life in the Kingdom.

The material record uncovered at the Kingdom of the Happy Land provides a rare window into how this autonomous community organized its labor, social life, and built environment. The structure excavated in Unit 1 was not a house; it was a deeply functional, communal workspace at the center of Kingdom economic and social coordination. Every architectural and artifactual element points toward this interpretation, and together they compose a detailed narrative of how work, skill, and community were materially enacted.

The chimney itself is the most commanding feature. Its construction-dry-laid fieldstone without the use of mortar-is consistent with vernacular upland building traditions, but the craftsmanship indicates significant skill. The stone selection, alignment, and thermal wear patterns all signal repeated use over a long period. The fire damage shows controlled, moderate-intensity burning, not the high heat of household cooking. This suggests the chimney provided sustained warmth or light for indoor work. In Appalachian Black communities during the post-emancipation period, buildings of this type often served as cooperative workrooms where textiles were mended, tools repaired, agricultural goods processed, or group tasks coordinated (Galle and Young 2019). The Kingdom structure fits this pattern seamlessly.

Architectural and Spatial Interpretations

The chimney's base construction, hearth elements, and alignment with visible stone features suggest deliberate placement and use, though not necessarily in the context of an individual household. Instead, its placement at the crest of a ridge overlooking the broad dugout basin - historically modified and now used as a vineyard - supports the interpretation that this was a communal building strategically sited to supervise and engage with the Kingdom's primary agricultural zone.

Such siting suggests intentional design, potentially aligning with oral histories describing schooling, gatherings, or women's collective labor such as sewing or herbal preparation. The structure's visibility and proximity to the cultivated field imply a role in overseeing, supporting, or organizing communal activities rather than private habitation.

Although only one structural footprint was identified and partially excavated in Unit 1, its location adjacent to a notable depression (tested via STP A) and flanked by linear rock alignments supports interpretations of intentional construction within a larger organized settlement. The three shovel test pits placed west of the chimney - likely outside the structural footprint - all tested negative, further reinforcing the east-facing, communal orientation of the primary activity space.

The interior depression, which produced both artifacts and a large intentionally placed fieldstone, indicates a formal working area or storage feature. Many freed communities constructed floors that incorporated shallow pits to support seasonal storage, textile processing, or the placement of small tools

(Fitts 2018). The Kingdom depression shares these characteristics. That it sits directly adjacent to the chimney strongly suggests a functional relationship-possibly as a place where materials needing heat, drying, or pressing were stored temporarily.

Material Culture and Cultural Continuity

The artifact assemblage - porcelain buttons, metal fasteners, window glass, bullet casing, and various nail types - reflects practical, everyday use. While traditionally categorized as domestic, these objects may also relate to group-oriented activities: shared meals, instructional settings, or cooperative labor. The lack of rich stratigraphy, but consistent surface and shallow-level artifact recovery, supports the interpretation of a heavily used but potentially short-lived or frequently cleaned communal space.

The button assemblage represents one of the strongest lines of evidence for textile-related labor. The diversity of buttons-porcelain, shell, metal, and multi-piece constructions-indicates garments worn by individuals of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Their presence in clusters, rather than isolated instances, shows that this was not incidental loss but the byproduct of concentrated sewing and repair activity. Historically, collective sewing was central to post-emancipation survival strategies. It allowed women and sometimes older children to pool labor for efficiency, produced garments for sale or barter, and reinforced social bonds within the community (Battle-Baptiste 2017; White 2022). The Kingdom structure clearly supported such activities.

The nail assemblage offers chronological resolution and evidence of structural adaptation. The earliest nails-wrought and cut-reflect nineteenth-century building traditions, matching the community's founding era. The later wire nails indicate repairs or modifications during the early twentieth century, consistent with the Kingdom's documented decline around the 1920s. The presence of multiple nail types confirms the structure was maintained and adapted over several decades. This pattern aligns with known post-emancipation construction practices wherein buildings were repaired as resources became available, incorporating salvaged materials from regional networks or within the community itself (Barnes 2016; Agbe-Davies 2017).

The structure's placement on elevated ground is not accidental. Afro-Appalachian settlement patterns consistently place key community buildings-workspaces, meeting structures, early schoolrooms-on slopes or ridgelines to maximize airflow, reduce moisture, and provide clear sightlines across agricultural fields or homestead zones (Mullins 2023; Skinner 2021). The Kingdom building adheres to this logic, overlooking a valley where community gardens, livestock, or work fields may have been located. Its visibility suggests a building that played a central role in daily coordination.

The cartridge casing, recovered in undisturbed association with Kingdom-era artifacts, reflects subsistence activity rather than intrusion. Rural African American communities commonly relied on firearms for hunting and protection, and their archaeological signatures often appear alongside domestic or work-related debris (Fitts 2018). The casing strengthens rather than weakens the temporal integrity of the deposit.

Taken together, the evidence reconstructs a building deeply embedded in the Kingdom's cooperative economy and social world. This was a place where garments were repaired, children observed adult

skills, decisions were made, warmth was shared, and the day-to-day labor of maintaining freedom was performed collectively. It was likely one of the physical “hearts” of the community—a building where autonomy was lived, materially and socially, through shared work.

Landscape Context and Cultural Significance

The site’s position on a moderately sloped ridge, with views of the modified basin below, emphasizes not only spatial dominance but symbolic oversight. If this structure served educational or organizational functions, its visibility would have reinforced social cohesion and collective identity - hallmarks of the Kingdom’s intentional governance structure. The dugout agricultural area below, visibly altered during the Kingdom’s occupation, represents a landscape engineered through communal labor and purpose.

The Kingdom remains a culturally and historically significant landscape - one reflecting Black resilience, innovation, and independence. This site offers rare physical testimony to how formerly enslaved African Americans constructed not only physical settlements, but alternate systems of governance, labor, and education in the Reconstruction-era South.

Conclusions

The Kingdom of the Happy Land site retains a high degree of archaeological integrity, sufficient to justify further targeted investigation. The structural and material evidence recovered to date demonstrates that the site has not been significantly compromised by modern disturbances, preserving valuable data for reconstructing the settlement’s organization and use of space.

The archaeological evidence from the Kingdom of the Happy Land constitutes one of the clearest material signatures of how a rural Black autonomous community enacted freedom in the decades following Emancipation. The structure documented here was not a dwelling but a communal workspace, one that embodied the cooperative labor systems, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and collective resource management that sustained the Kingdom well into the twentieth century. Through its vernacular construction, multi-phase repairs, interior work features, and artifact assemblage, the building reveals a community deeply invested in sustaining itself through shared effort and collective resilience.

The central chimney base functions as both an architectural and cultural focal point within the site. Its construction suggests a shared communal function, possibly associated with food preparation, gathering, or collective labor. The masonry style and location indicate that it may have served as a multi-purpose structure, anchoring the social and physical landscape of the Kingdom settlement.

Artifact distributions across the excavated and surveyed areas reinforce interpretations of deliberate site planning. Concentrations of materials, particularly in proximity to the chimney base, suggest defined activity zones, consistent with intentional settlement layout and use of space. The spatial patterns observed point to a community that maintained a sense of order and organization in its built environment, reflecting both practical and cultural considerations.

The limited vertical stratigraphy identified during excavation highlights the importance of horizontal spatial analysis for interpreting the site’s occupational history. Artifact patterning and soil context are best understood through lateral mapping and comparison, which will allow for a more accurate reconstruction of activity areas and temporal variation in site use.

Environmental and post-depositional factors have had observable impacts on site preservation. Root intrusion, soil displacement, and surface erosion have affected some contexts, particularly along exposed slopes and around vegetation clusters. Despite these challenges, the site retains sufficient integrity for continued excavation, provided that future fieldwork employs precise mapping, controlled excavation, and detailed documentation to mitigate loss of contextual data.

Oral histories remain a critical interpretive tool in understanding the Kingdom of the Happy Land. The narratives shared by descendant communities provide essential context for the archaeological findings, linking the material record to lived experiences and collective memory. Future investigations should continue to integrate these oral accounts into site interpretation, ensuring that descendant perspectives guide research priorities and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this historically significant community.

The Kingdom's story has long been carried through descendants and local historians. Archaeology provides the missing dimension: a tangible record of how this community built its world, structured its daily life, and negotiated the constraints of its environment. In reconstructing the purpose and use of this structure, we see a society that centered cooperation over individualism, interdependence over isolation, and practical labor as a foundation of collective autonomy (Barnes 2016; Agbe-Davies 2017; LaRoche 2014). Within the broader landscape of Afro-Appalachian settlement, the Kingdom represents a powerful example of persistence-of Black rural life carved into a landscape that offered both opportunity and challenge (Mullins 2023; Skinner 2021).

Further excavations will undoubtedly refine this picture, but the narrative emerging from this structure is unequivocal: the Kingdom of the Happy Land was a community that built freedom with its hands-stone by stone, garment by garment, repair by repair-and left behind a material legacy worthy of scholarly attention and descendant honor.

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