

# “The Town That Freedom Built”: Eatonville — a Collaboration with OTOWN on the Politics of Historical Memory

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Cassidy Clarke and Christell Victoria Roach

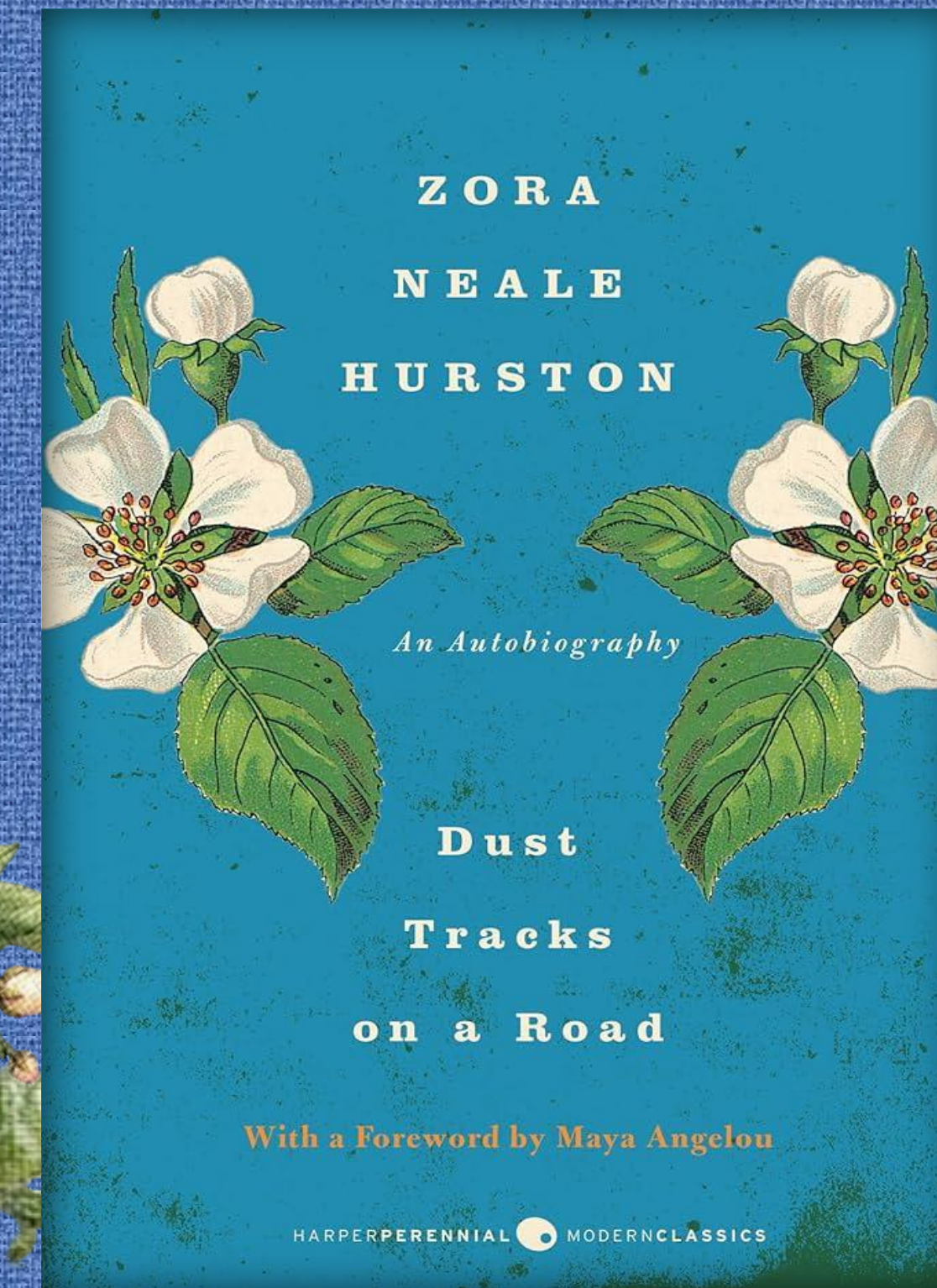
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UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH  
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## Introduction

Tucked in the orange groves of Central Florida, Eatonville championed itself as a symbol of liberty, self-determination, and American progress. Most scholarly examples of American democratic ideals and self-governance often highlight key documents, like the Mayflower Compact, and significant events, such as the formation of the thirteen colonies and the American Revolution. However, many of these narratives frame American history through a lens of whiteness. Eatonville, established after Emancipation and recognized as the oldest incorporated all-Black municipality in the United States, embodies the same founding ideals of self-governance, liberty, and civic organization that defined early American history. Still, portrayals of African American self-governance are often viewed through narratives of horrific destruction and racial violence, reducing African American towns to sites of tragedy rather than hubs of political innovation and communal prosperity. By centering Eatonville, whose longevity and institutional stability complicate this pattern, this research challenges dominant constructions of American history and examines who is seen as a legitimate architect of the nation's foundational values. This paper argues that Eatonville's municipal independence both reflects core American democratic ideals and exposes the selective boundaries of these very principles. By utilizing Zora Neale Hurston's books while focusing on Eatonville's archival information, I intend to illustrate a narrative that truly encapsulates the scope of influence and importance Eatonville has had on American history.

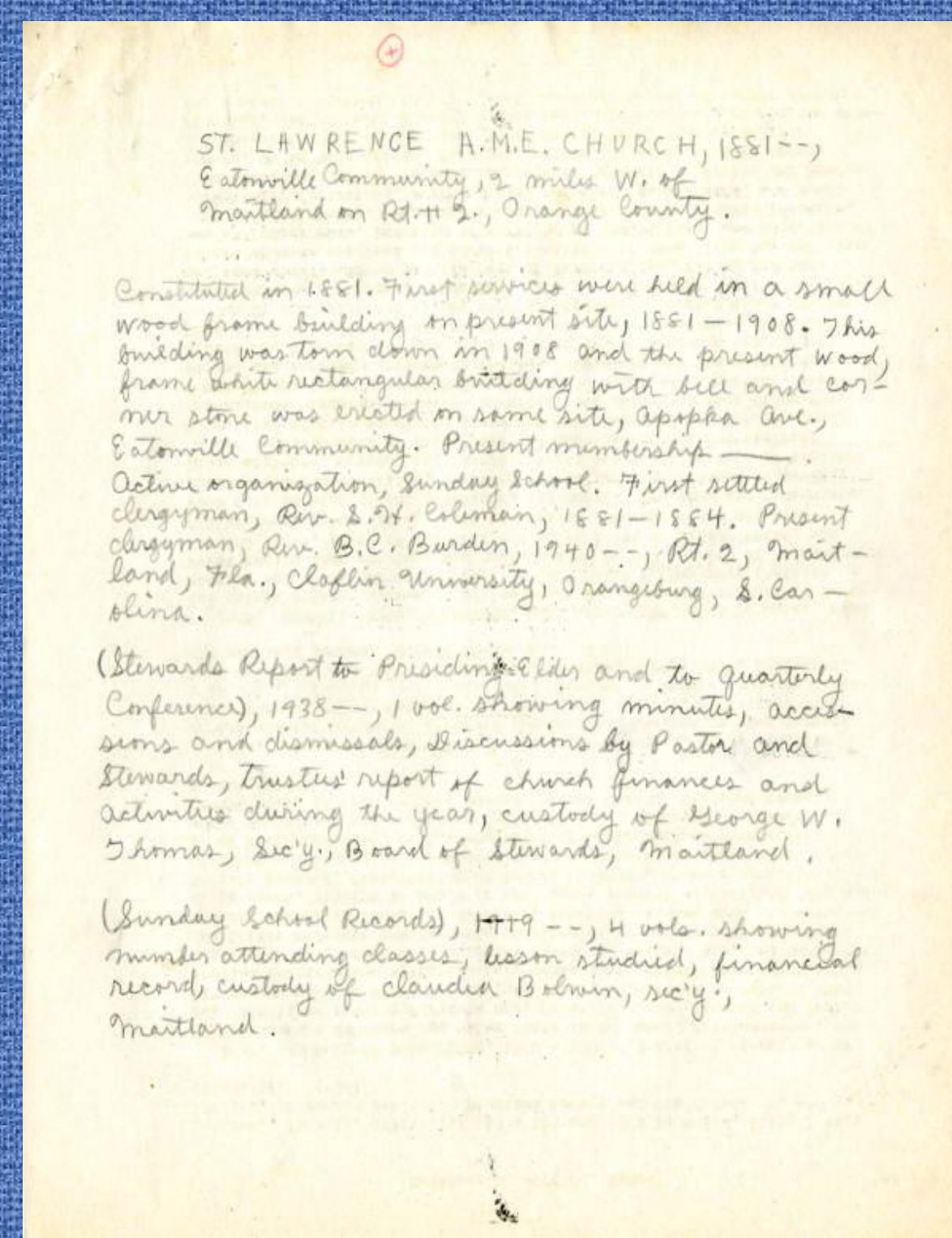
## Methodology

To examine Eatonville's municipal independence and broader historical significance, this study combines literary analysis and archival research to construct a historical portrait of the town as a pioneering civic community. I conduct close readings of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Eatonville Anthology*, and *Mules and Men*, analyzing how Hurston's portrayals articulate themes of self-governance, cultural autonomy, and communal identity. Raised in Eatonville during its formative years, Hurston writes not as a distant observer but as a participant in its early development. I pair this literary analysis with archival research, examining oral histories, photographs, and municipal records from the cusp-era twentieth century (1890s–1920s). Drawing from collections at the Library of Congress, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Florida State Archives, and Eatonville's municipal archives, I couple literary representation alongside lived testimony and institutional documentation. This combined approach both corroborates and complicates literary depictions of American political and cultural identity, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of Eatonville's development and of Black American contributions to the nation's democratic heritage. These materials will also inform a site-specific digital exhibit developed through the OTOWN framework, which maps archival photographs, literary excerpts, and community memory onto locations throughout Eatonville using location-based storytelling.



*Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston

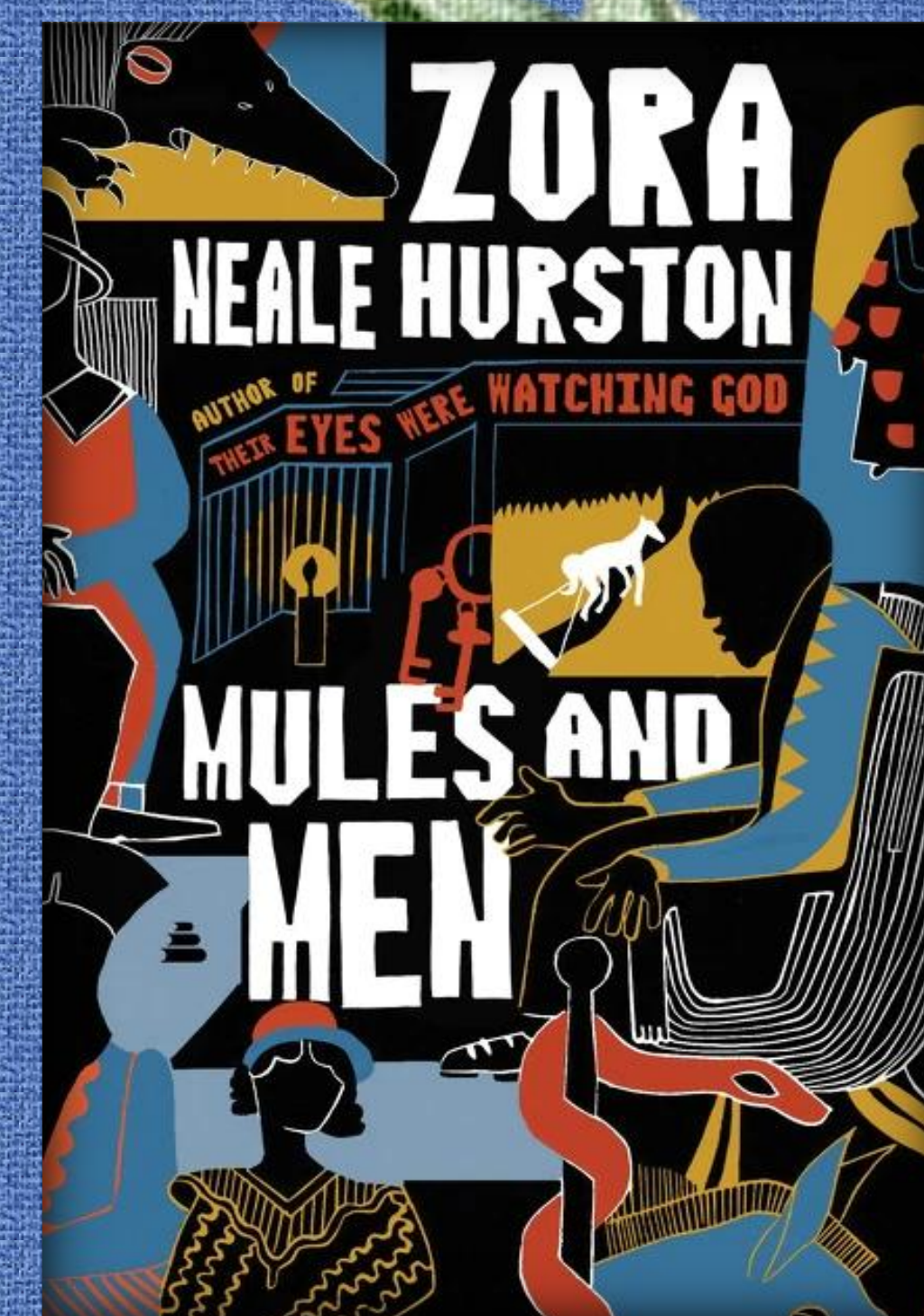
In *Mules and Men*, Hurston captures Southern African American folklore and oral traditions in Eatonville and throughout Polk County, Florida. In the first three chapters, she travels to her hometown, collecting stories—“big ole lies,” as her family and friends call them. This folklore showcases the rich storytelling heritage of African Americans in the Deep South and demonstrates Eatonville's cultural autonomy through Hurston's preservation. I include this book in my research because it brings to life Eatonville's social dynamics. Hurston's conversational prose transforms the town into a vibrant, three-dimensional landscape, shaped by its landmarks and community dynamics.



Records from St. Lawrence A.M.E. (1881)

“I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.” p.3

*Dust Tracks on a Road* presents Hurston's autobiographical account of her early life in Eatonville, FL. In the book's opening chapter, Hurston offers a historical synopsis of the region. When referencing the predominantly white town of Maitland, she describes the wealth and significance of the region, while pointedly avoiding language that assigns it cultural or political superiority. Instead, her narrative positions Eatonville as a self-sustaining and autonomous community. Through her prose, Hurston depicts both the town and its residents as a cohesive, independent body.



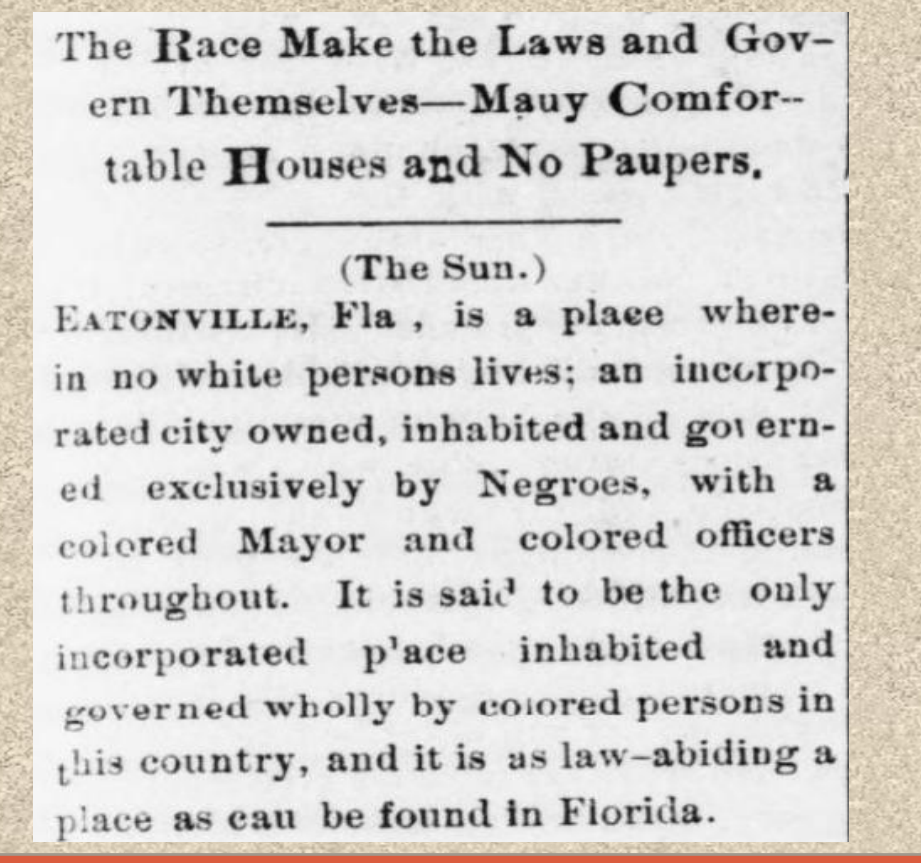
*Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston



Quilt made by Ella Johnson Dinkins in Eatonville, FL (2001)

## Literary and Archival Analysis

Through analyzing the works of Zora Neale Hurston alongside recorded interviews with Eatonville residents, I gain a perspective on the town's collective memory that traditional historical documents alone cannot provide. Newspapers from the era celebrate Eatonville as a beacon of possibility for Black Americans, while first-hand accounts, both in recorded interviews and in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, recall families moving to the town by word of mouth in search of opportunity. Together, these written and oral sources reveal Eatonville not only as a functioning political entity, but also as a powerful symbol of Black civic leadership and self-determination. In contrast, many official records explain the town's development but fail to capture what Eatonville meant to Black Americans in the Deep South and in the broader history of the United States. By combining literary analysis with oral histories, this research moves beyond simple historical explanation to present a more nuanced understanding of Eatonville's identity and significance.



The American Citizen Vol. 8 (1895)

## Further Direction

- Through extended archival research and a curated exhibit, this research aims to demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach to exploring historical landscapes. This research applies CVR's pedagogical “OTOWN” model that maps and embeds community memory through site-specific storytelling. Through OTOWN, a digital archiving app, “The Town that Freedom Built...” will remain a curated exhibit *geo-located* in Eatonville, Florida, for public engagement. The exhibit will be accessible only in location.
- This research will continue through expanded archival investigation. I plan to examine additional materials related to Eatonville, with particular attention to oral histories and municipal documents that further illustrate the town's political and cultural development. Although my current findings draw from state and municipal archives, I will deepen this analysis by consulting collections at the Meek-Eaton Black Archives in Tallahassee and by engaging directly with the city of Eatonville to access additional records and community knowledge. This expanded archival focus will not only reinforce my existing claims but also enrich their cultural and historical significance. Through extended archival research and a curated exhibit, this project expands into a digital humanities installation using the OTOWN model developed by Christell Victoria Roach. Archival photographs, literary excerpts from Zora Neale Hurston's work, and oral histories will be mapped onto historic Eatonville locations to create a site-based storytelling experience accessible only in location, remaining a digital monument for the years to come.

## References

