

North Carolina Freedom Park ^[1]

North Carolina Freedom Park

By: Mattison Bond, June 2023

^[2]The North Carolina Freedom Park is located in downtown Raleigh on the corner of Wilmington and Lane Streets, behind the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources' Archives and History/State Library building. The park was designed to be a recreational stop for tourists, school children, and North Carolina residents.

In June 2002, a meeting was held in Raleigh—the first of several such meetings across the state—for community members to discuss what a memorial dedicated to the contributions and history of African Americans in North Carolina should look like. The project was “initiated, nurtured and developed” by the [Paul Green Foundation](#) ^[3].

Representatives from each of the Town Meetings joined in 2003 at a statewide conference to explore different perspectives of African American freedom, and how to best recognize the plights and success of African Americans within North Carolina. A year later, the project became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable corporation with a distinguished advisory board and board of directors, including [John Hope Franklin](#) ^[4] serving as the honorary chairman alongside other well-known board members such as civil rights activist [Julius L. Chambers](#) ^[5], [Mary Duke Biddle](#) ^[6], [William C. Friday](#) ^[6], and [Dr. Elliot Brown Palmer](#) ^[7]. The North Carolina Freedom Park Board of Directors oversaw the development of a curriculum for children called “The African American Experience in North Carolina” and gathered ideas from people across the state.

Once a Board of Directors was established, a jury was convened to select an artist team that would design the park. Out of 108 international proposals, the team that was selected was made up of sculptor Juan Logan; landscape designer David Swanson; and art historian [Lyneise Williams](#) ^[8]. The initial design's [theme](#) ^[9] examined “slavery, Jim Crow, and the historical struggle of Black North Carolinians for freedom.”



Diorama mockup of the North Carolina Freedom Park. Image courtesy of Perkins&Will, North Carolina Freedom Park website.

Commission and a \$100,000 challenge gift was made by Dorrie and Paul Green, Jr. to produce videos and other promotional fundraising materials. The one-acre site between the North Carolina State Legislature building and the Executive Mansion was deeded to the project. During the following year, the State Legislature appropriated \$197,500 toward the project through the Department of Cultural Resources. The funds would go toward the development and planning of the park.

In 2011, the [North Carolina Capital Planning Commission](#) ^[11] approved the site. The [Council of State](#) ^[12] authorized a 10-year lease of the location for the park's construction in 2012, stating that the park would transfer back to the [Department of Administration](#) ^[13] and the [Department of Natural and Cultural Resources](#) ^[14] when it was completed. The lease agreement was signed by Governor [Beverly Perdue](#) ^[15].

The Board of Directors adopted a strategic plan with the goal of raising \$5 million for the park by 2017. A Campaign Leadership Committee was formed in order to meet that goal. The campaign started during the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 2013. In partnership with the North Carolina Museum of History, a special exhibit called “Freedom Coming, Freedom for All,” was created and displayed. The National Archives loaned the [Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation](#) ^[16] to the Museum of History for the exhibit in order to stimulate interest in and start conversations about African American freedom in North Carolina. The Campaign Leadership Committee began hiring staff in 2014 to develop additional fundraising strategies. One fundraising campaign was a Welcome Breakfast, held at the Umstead Hotel in 2014. Due to the increased concern about police brutality against African Americans stemming from media attention and public awareness of the murders of [Eric Garner](#) ^[17], [Michael Brown](#) ^[18], and [Tamir Rice](#) ^[19], potential donors submitted feedback that the concept and design of the park needed to be reexamined.

On July 25, 2015, the Raleigh News and Observer published an editorial highlighting the park, which increased media attention. The [Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation](#) ^[20] provided a grant of \$35,000 (later distributed in 2018) to create a “Booklet on North Carolina Freedom Park Origins, History, Mission and Meaning Project” with the intent of re-envisioning the project and creating a smaller, new board of directors. The project's name was changed from the Freedom Monument Park to the North Carolina Freedom Park. An Advisory Committee on Re-Design of the park concluded that a new design was needed for the park and a design competition was launched.



Benefactors at the groundbreaking of Freedom Park on October 7, 2020. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Freedom Park Website.

^[21]The Freelon Group of Durham, NC, headed by established architect [Philip Freelon](#) ^[22] was chosen to create the new design for the park. Freelon's inspiration for the park was taken from the oak trees of North Carolina. The pathways of the park were designed to resemble roots, sprawling and connected, that lead to the 40-foot central vertical structure, the Beacon of Freedom. Freelon paralleled the image of hidden roots supporting the tree from beneath the ground with the contributions of African Americans and other underrepresented groups in North Carolina's history. Freelon hoped that visitors would come to the park, feel the ambiance, and leave changed for the better.

Freelon's new design was publicized through special events held by Board members, used to gain statewide support and create community around the project. The American Institute of Architects - Triangle Section awarded the [Merit Award](#) ^[23] to the park for the design in 2017. The Park's Capital Campaign Committee was able to raise \$3.3 million from 2017-2020. The State Employees' Credit Union Foundation provided a [Challenge Grant](#) ^[24] of \$500,000 as well as a State Grant of \$1.5 million in 2018. In October of 2020, the "Light the Beacon" campaign started at the groundbreaking of the park. The "Light the Beacon" campaign is public, and its proceeds support the park, its maintenance and programming. Governor [Roy Cooper](#) ^[25] spoke at the groundbreaking. Duke Energy gifted the park \$100,000, and the Mellon Foundation's Monument Project also selected the park for a \$1.9 million grant in May 2021.

Construction on the park began in late 2021. It was announced by the leaders of the Freedom Park initiative that [Holt Brothers Construction](#) ^[26] was awarded the contract to complete the project. Torry and Terrence Holt, both North Carolina natives, grew up in Gibsonville and attended North Carolina State University. Both brothers played in the National Football League (NFL)--Terrance as a safety for the [Detroit Lions](#) ^[27], and Torry as a wide receiver for the Super Bowl XXXIV-winning [St. Louis Rams](#) ^[28].

The final design for the park includes quotes from 19 African American North Carolinians. The quotes are written on walls that border the five walkways of the park. The walkways lead to the Beacon of Freedom in the middle of the park. The North Carolina Freedom Park [opened](#) ^[29] to the public August 23, 2023.

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Authors:

[Bond, Mattison](#) ^[54]

Origin - Location:

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