

TESTIMONY OF DERRICK C. EVANS

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Before the House Government Reform Subcommittee
on Federalism and the Census

November 1, 2005

Chairman Turner, Ranking Member Clay and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss "Historic Preservation vs. Katrina and Rita: What role should Federal, State, and Local Governments Play in Preservation of Historic Properties Affected by These Catastrophic Storms?"

My name is Derrick Christopher Evans. I am an historian and a sixth generation descendant of the African American men and women who settled coastal Mississippi's historic Turkey Creek community in 1866. I am appearing before you today as Founder and Executive Director of Turkey Creek Community Initiatives (TCCI) – a recognized 501©3 organization engaged since 2003 in the comprehensive revitalization of Gulfport, Mississippi's impoverished, historic, and ecologically important Turkey Creek community and watershed.

Enduring urban sprawl, environmental racism, and political-economic isolation since the arrival of casinos, hotels and municipal annexation in the early 1990s, community members founded TCCI in 2003 to "conserve, restore and utilize for education and other socially beneficial purposes the unique cultural, historical and ecological assets" of our community, coastal creek, and urban stream basin. TCCI's mission is to *conserve, restore and utilize for education and other socially beneficial purposes the unique cultural, historical and ecological assets* of this neighborhood, coastal creek and urban watershed of Gulfport and Harrison County, Mississippi. Preserving our community's architectural heritage through historical recognition and restoration has always been a core component of our broader effort to stabilize, retain and promote the community's residential, historical and environmental integrity. To fulfill this and other goals, TCCI has partnered since 2003 with teachers, churches, scholars, lawyers, conservationists, historic preservationists, government agencies, and *smart growth* advocates from across Mississippi and the United States. Today, we share with this subcommittee and others the critically important goal of saving as many historic properties as possible in the larger Gulf Coast region, so as to retain cultural memory, continuity of culture and a sense of place in this devastated area of our nation.

Situated at the geographic center of the state's second-largest and fastest-growing city (Gulfport), the Turkey Creek community was recognized in 2001 as one of Mississippi's "Ten Most Endangered Historical Places.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History confirmed that Over 250 National Register listed properties were destroyed, and that thousands of historic structures were damaged. Immediately following the storm, a small team from (MDAH) and Mississippi Heritage Trust performed initial assessments based on aerial photography, followed by on site reconnaissance. During the week of September 19, 2005 a special assessment team visited the disaster area at the request of the Deputy SHPO and the

National Trust for Historic Preservation to determine a plan of action for providing technical assistance. The team spent a week in the disaster area surveying properties, structurally evaluating critically damaged landmarks, meeting local officials, residents and non-profit organizations, in a number of affected areas, including Turkey Creek.

Among other things, they found that:

1. risk to historic buildings on the Mississippi coast is both immediate and long-term, due not only to structural instability, but also to *fear and neglect*.
2. *a very serious lack of connectivity exists between those who need the resources to save cultural property and those who have the resources, even among local and state officials.*
3. *the range of historic properties affected by the storm is substantially broader than those that are currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places; i.e., that the vast majority are privately owned houses and commercial buildings, rather than publicly owned landmarks, and that very many are in lower income areas – such as Turkey Creek*
4. *There is a huge logistical problem of identifying and locating properties that may be eligible for the National Register.*

The team's general recommendations included:

1. establishing immediately a joint "Heritage Recovery Center" or coast-based field office for surveys, data management, assessments, and delivery of services *for NR properties*, as well as establishing a special liaison in Jackson, whose purpose would be to coordinate with the SHPO representative on the coast, assist with technical information, assure compliance process, and coordinate with state and federal agencies.
2. ***need to enhancement and sharing of coastal resource database, via Coastal Environments, a consultant already working for DMR. The resource database is a critical element for accessing, sharing, and managing historic, archeological, and ecological resources. The basic pre-storm data are already available, and this consultant is actively gathering condition data on damaged structures. The database will be indispensable for screening for properties that need detailed evaluation, and for controlling the demolition and debris removal process.***

Frankly, while there is a consultant in place working with the Mississippi Dept. of Marine Resources who has developed a GIS database. There are few accessible technical experts available on the Mississippi coast for evaluating, stabilizing, and restoring historic properties. Ample professionals are available nationwide, either as volunteers or as paid consultants.

Throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s, Turkey Creek's land use, folkways, community institutions, and architecture remained remarkably true to earlier times. Important community fixtures like the Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church and the Turkey Creek ball diamond, as well as several "jukes", stores and other small businesses, further defined and preserved the settlement's distinct, local flavor. Plenty of wood- framed bungalows and "shotgun" houses still spoke, through their materials, style and construction, of the enduring legacy of previous inhabitants occupants.

The Turkey Creek community's highly valued independence and cultural continuity remained essentially undisturbed until the mid 1980s. Since then, a barrage including airport expansion, annexation by Gulfport, land speculation, deforestation, wetland destruction, commercial sprawl, spot zoning and political isolation have all severely endangered this priceless gem of Mississippi and American heritage. Notably, unsightly sprawl on Highway 49 and Creosote Road has continued to spread to within feet of Turkey Creek homes and yards. Even the community's historic cemetery, where Melinda Benton and others are buried, was largely destroyed by redevelopment in 2001. In that year, the Mississippi Heritage Trust listed the entire community as one of the state's *Ten Most Endangered Historical Places*. Notably, it was the only listing that was *not* a singular structure, but rather an entire area or district.

Since then, the Turkey Creek community and watershed have experienced a mix of setbacks, successes and *new* challenges. The former home of Thomas and Melinda Benton is now on the National Register of Historic Places, and enthusiasm runs high for having more structures added. Nevertheless, encroaching urban sprawl, deforestation and environmental degradation are continuous and escalating. Twelve acres of wooded wetlands abutting the community to its south have been slated by the Airport for rental car parking and a carwash. Even worse, a proposed connector road between I-10 and the airport would essentially bisect Rippy Road and run straight across both the historic "colored school" grounds and cemetery. The neighborhood's close proximity to active and inactive chemical plants, like the Gulf Coast Creosote clean-up site, pose additional obstacles to long term community survival.

Rare and irreplaceable in the cultural and ecological heritage of Mississippi and America, the Turkey Creek community and watershed were – well before Katrina- *severely* threatened by deforestation, wetland destruction, commercial sprawl and pollution – consequences of Harrison County's rapid urbanization since casinos began arriving on the coast in 1992. Gulfport, the county seat, more than doubled its area in 1993 by annexing 33 square miles to its north, including the Turkey Creek community and estuary. Constant expansion of the Gulfport-Biloxi Regional Airport and other development – mostly motels, chain stores, drive-thrus, and parking lots – have eliminated wetlands, forests, houses and residents with lightning speed and ease. By 2001, a rapacious climate of *boomtown* planning, zoning and construction contributed to the destruction of graves in the settlement's ancestral creek-side cemetery. That year, the neighborhood was deemed one of Mississippi's *Ten Most Endangered Historical Places*. Now located at the center of the state's second-largest and fastest-growing city, the Turkey Creek community remains an island of native habitat, cultural history, and down-home values *determined to hold on*.

Nevertheless, the Turkey Creek story is not over, nor does it have to end tragically. Intelligent urban planning incorporating growth as well as conservation of Turkey Creek's natural and cultural assets can readily pose a *win-win* situation for all of the area's long-term stakeholders. The creek itself is nothing less than Harrison County's premier inland urban waterway – great for fishing, birding, hiking and rowing. Gulfport, with 80,000 residents and growing, needs a centrally located urban greenway spanning it and enhancing city life for generations to come. In addition, a number of American cities have already proven that pro-active historic preservation, including in historically minority communities, is *integral* to smart development and sustainable growth. *Southern* cities like Charleston SC, Birmingham AL and Memphis TN have all learned that promoting the once-neglected histories of their African-American communities and institutions is highly beneficial to the overall quality of modern urban life, including: commerce, education, race relations, attracting and retaining new residents, and expanding local tourism. On the Mississippi coast, the Turkey Creek community and waterway present an equally rich and compelling array of opportunities.

For a century and a half, the African-American residents of coastal Mississippi's Turkey Creek community have survived slavery, civil war, segregation and more – only to enter the twenty-first century in danger of disappearing from the map. Once isolated in wooded wetlands north of Gulfport, Mississippi, their historic enclave of kinfolk and close-knit neighbors lies squarely in the path of developers, politicians and government agencies willing to trade the area's unique cultural and natural assets for the homogenous sprawl of a *New South*. Pushed to the wall by annexation, overdevelopment and backroom politics since the 1992 arrival of casinos to the Gulf of Mexico coast, the descendants of Turkey Creek's emancipated settlers stand locked in battle over ancestral land, environmental quality and the meaning of the American Dream. Their ongoing struggle for community survival is not just black, southern, or environmental - but profoundly *American* and deeply *human*.