



Driving Transformation: THE POWER OF COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS IN AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN COMMUNITIES

by JANE O'BRIEN DAVIS AND CURTIS WHILEY /// EAC Volunteers

Community members at an early meeting about the establishment of New Communities Incorporated.

PHOTO: Upper Hammonds Plains Community Development Association

UHPCLT staff and board at the groundbreaking for the Upper Hammonds Plains Housing Co-Operative.

PHOTO: Ali's Photography (Sabrina Allison)

The Community Land Trust (CLT) movement traces its roots back to the civil rights era in the U.S. In 1969, a group of Black farmers in Albany, Georgia, were facing eviction by white landowners in retaliation for registering to vote and participating in civil rights activism. In response, the farmers came together with a goal of securing land for Black farmers and their families. They established New Communities Incorporated (NCI), the first CLT. NCI was able to purchase 5,000 acres of land – at the time the largest tract of land owned by Black Americans – and lease it to their community members for farmland access and housing. This model of member-based collective land ownership to meet community needs laid the foundation for the CLT as we know it today.

More than 50 years later, the legacy of New Communities Inc. continues to resonate in Black communities around the world, including here in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia. In 2022, the Upper Hammonds Plains Community Land Trust (UHPCLT) was established by descendants of the original Black settlers of Upper Hammonds Plains, in response to a rapid influx of development that was accelerating land loss within our community.

Upper Hammonds Plains is a historic African Nova Scotian community founded in 1815 by Black Refugees from the War of 1812, along with free Black people seeking freedom and a new beginning in Canada. Our ancestors settled just north of the then-established logging and farming community of Hammonds Plains, laying the groundwork for one of the earliest African Nova Scotian communities in the province. Though they were pushed to the

margins, allocated land on the outskirts of more developed areas and forced to endure profound hardship, they persisted, building an industrious, faithful and resilient community.

By 1964, Upper Hammonds Plains had grown into an almost exclusively Black community of around 500 residents, but new challenges arose with municipal and provincial government actions related to land and water expropriation. In 1974, land was expropriated to serve the expanding urban needs of Kijpuktuk/Halifax, Kwipek/Bedford and Halifax County. The expropriation of Pockwock Lake to house the Halifax Regional Water Commission's treatment plant had lasting impacts and the community was never fairly compensated. Although water main lines ran through the community's backyard, its residents were denied access to city water.

Significant advocacy and litigation ultimately led to the community's connection to the city's water system in 1999, some 25 years later. "The Water Fight," as it became known, was a hard-won victory in the ongoing fight for fair treatment.

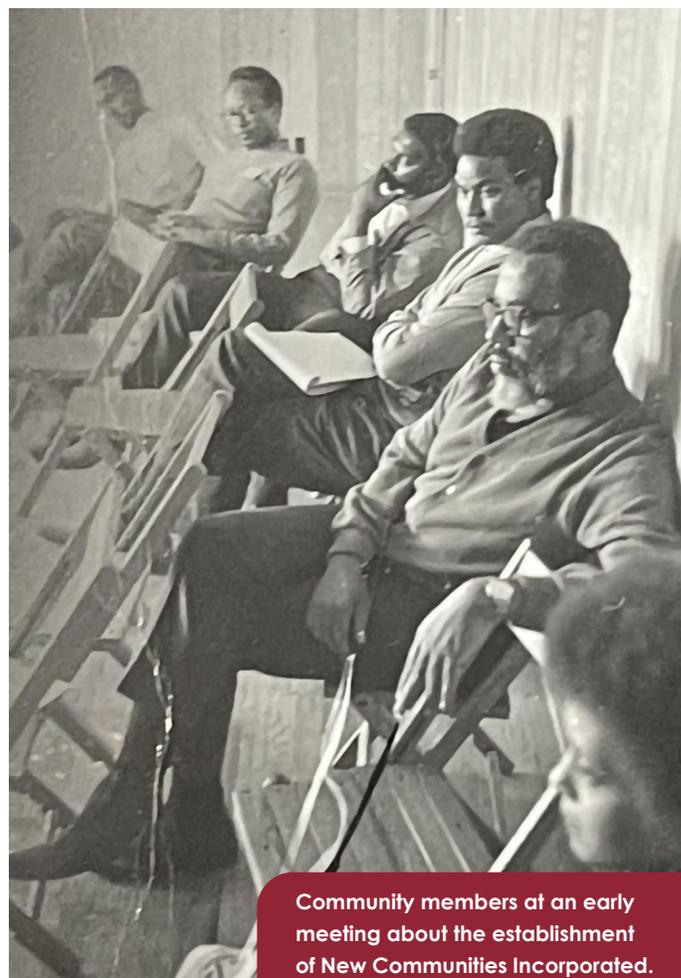
The history of Upper Hammonds Plains stands as a testament to its residents' strength and determination to preserve their legacy and improve the quality of life for future generations. This legacy lies at the core of UHPCLT's mission to preserve African Nova Scotian culture and heritage through collective land ownership and responsible stewardship. UHPCLT uses the CLT model to reclaim our historic lands and ensure that our community members can remain in the place we've called home for over 200 years.

UHPCLT envisions a future where community members play a central role in shaping the growth and development of Upper Hammonds Plains, ensuring fair access to affordable, high-quality housing. In 2024, that vision took a major step forward when the community completed a Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation-funded Housing Solutions Lab, the first of its kind in Atlantic Canada. The Solutions Lab created space for deep, community-led engagement to explore how a community land trust could work in our specific context. Through this process, residents developed membership criteria and a decision-making framework that now guide the direction of UHPCLT and ensure that community voices are meaningfully embedded in how decisions are made.

Our flagship development is the Upper Hammonds Plains Housing Co-operative, a 136-unit townhouse development primarily serving Black Canadians. With a total project value of \$61 million, this initiative is the result of years of sustained advocacy at municipal, provincial and federal levels to ensure that public investment in Upper Hammonds Plains directly benefits the community. It represents the largest federal investment in Black-led co-operative housing in Canada's history.

The housing co-operative is only the beginning. UHPCLT is working closely with residents and community organizations to guide the long-term growth of Upper Hammonds Plains in a way that reflects shared values and priorities. A cornerstone of this work is our partnership with Emmanuel Baptist Church (EBC), a long-standing anchor institution in the community. Together, we are advancing descendant-led housing and community development on 8.5 acres of church-owned land, transforming it into a vibrant, affordable and culturally grounded neighbourhood. This partnership reflects a shared commitment to stewarding land in ways that honour heritage, respond to present needs and create lasting opportunities for future generations, while demonstrating how faith-based lands can be mobilized for community benefit.

In addition to our partnership with EBC, UHPCLT has traced the title of 68 acres of undeveloped land, currently held by the Province of Nova Scotia, back to our ancestors. Building on these findings, we are working with the Province to explore the feasibility of reclaiming these historic lands to support additional housing opportunities for community members. Known as Little Pockwock, the site connects to Pockwock Lake and sits adjacent to the housing co-operative. This connection is especially significant, as the community has been denied access to the lake since its expropriation in 1974. The Little Pockwock initiative represents a transformative step toward



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PHOTO: SNCC Legacy Project

reclaiming historic lands, restoring community access and ensuring that these lands remain in community hands for generations to come.

UHPCLT is proud to carry forward the legacy of New Communities Inc. through a commitment to community power, resilience and collective action here in Nova Scotia. Guided by the example of our ancestors, near and far, UHPCLT's work is part of a broader movement for Black land stewardship within the community land trust sector in Canada and beyond. Through collective ownership and long-term stewardship, UHPCLT is not only building housing, but securing the cultural and economic future of Upper Hammonds Plains and advancing a powerful model of African Nova Scotian self-determination.



Community members during UHPCLT's CMHC Solutions Lab.
PHOTO: Ali's Photography (Sabrina Allison)

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