



Clementine Hunter's Home Promotes Her Legacy

NATCHITOCHEs, LA. — African American artist Clementine Hunter (1887–1988) lived her entire life in central Louisiana in an area known as Cane River. For most of her life, her home was a small, tin-roofed, four-room cabin of vernacular architecture, located across the road from the plantation big house. Such provenance warrants its place on both the list of Historic Artists Homes and Studios, and the list of National Register of Historic Places, where it is listed separately from the Melrose Plantation itself.

The artist's cabin is typical of the kind of housing of the area and originally had neither indoor plumbing nor electric lights. Hunter loved working at night when she perched on a low wooden stool, beside a quaint pot-bellied stove, as she held a homemade plywood palette in one hand and a brush to create her paintings in oil or pieced together her butcher-backed "quilts." Hunter's images tell stories of Melrose Plantation and the life she knew. Of baptisms in the river, funerals, the juke joint, hog killing and pots of zinnias. It was her world, and even an invitation from President Jimmy Carter to visit the White House could not stir her from Cane River.

In July 2018, Hunter was posthumously inducted into the Lou-



Clementine Hunter in front of unpainted cabin, undated photo.

isiana Folklife Center Hall of Master Folk Artists, and her works continue to draw attention. This past August, "Clementine Hunter: Life on Melrose Plantation Exhibition" opened at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, DC, where 13 of her paintings will remain on display for a year.

While Hunter lived in it, the building was originally located across Louisiana Highway 119 from the plantation. After Hunter moved out in 1977, the house, along with other tenant houses

in the area, was headed for demolition. The late Maxine Southerland, a member of the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, decided to move it to the plantation grounds. She then sealed it to preserve it.

Empty and dormant for four decades, the preservation of Clementine Hunter House was made possible by Gitter Gallery and The Cane River Art Corporation. Melrose Plantation is owned by the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. It oversaw the project and matched the funding with volunteer hours to maximize the benefits.

Preservation of Clementine Hunter House began by creating a sound foundation for the structure. Volunteers from the Fraternities and Sororities of Northwestern State University painted the exterior of the house. Leaks were repaired on the original tin roof. A handicap-accessible ramp was added to the rear of the house. New museum lighting was installed in each room. Signage was added to the front of the house and, landscaping around the house was completed.

Hunter's painting room was restored to how it looked when the artist lived there. None of the wallpaper had remained in the house. The design team had a small swatch of the paper and old photographs of the room. Artists painstakingly recreated the design of the wallpaper and printed it in Dallas. The walls of the room were raw planks. The paper was hung in the way it had been originally installed. Muslin was stretched over the planks and the paper glued to the fabric. Since the tours of the home will be self-guided, the design team was not allowed to use original artifacts, so awards, plaques, pictures and furniture were replicated for the installation. In the remaining three rooms, interpretive panels were installed to address the themes the artist focused on in her work, and they share other important highlights

of Hunter's career.

Next door to the artist's home, visitors from around the world can see her most famous works, the African House Murals, located on the second floor of the mushroom-like structure known as African House. In the murals, Hunter recalls her life on the plantation during the Twentieth Century. These rare works of art become portals into plantation life from the point of view of the worker; and for that reason, they are considered historically significant. The artist painted the expansive murals in her cabin during the summer of 1955.

The house, formally named "The Clementine Hunter House," is a highlight of the Natchitoches Fall Pilgrimage and Tour of Homes presented by the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. Pilgrimage chairman, Gary Cathey, recognizes another of Hunter's legacies, "A lot of children don't live in big houses," he said. "It will be powerful for those children to see where a famous person lived and how she used her voice and talent and spirit to tell her story. Look where it took her and changed her life and the story of that plantation."

Melrose Plantation and the Clementine Hunter House are at 3533 Louisiana State Highway 119. For information, 318-393-0055 or www.melroseplantation.org.

Boise Buys, Reinterprets James Castle House

BOISE, IDAHO — In July 2015, the City of Boise announced it had purchased the property at 5015 Eugene Street, the former home of noted artist James Castle. Two years later, the city broke ground on a project to save and interpret the James Castle House. When completed, the James Castle Home Site will preserve the Castle family home, outbuildings and landscape where Castle lived and worked. Programming will include permanent and temporary exhibitions, an Artist-in-Residence program and other engagement and educational opportunities. The James Castle Home Site will be the only site open to the public that commemorates the life of an artist in Idaho.

Castle (1899–1977) was a self-taught artist, born deaf in the tranquil settlement of Garden Valley, Idaho, nearly

120 years ago. Presumed to have very little language, Castle communicated primarily through his production of images drawn on found materials, such as discarded mail and food containers, with an improvised ink of his own saliva tempered by soot from the wood burning stoves of the various residences that quartered him throughout his life. His distinct drawings, assemblages and books explored the interiors of buildings, the external landscapes and the animals and people that filled his environment, and yet Castle's work equally explored his own interior, the housing of a soundless landscape which he appeared to roam by touch, such was the tactile and immediate, yet practical nature of his artistic impulse.

A significant Idaho artist, Castle's work can be found in public collections all over the world, including the Smith-

sonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, American Folk Art Museum in New York City, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the Boise Art Museum.

By preserving Castle's buildings, landscapes and objects, the Boise City Department of Arts & History will ensure that future generations of artists and other individuals enjoy and amplify Castle's contributions to Twentieth Century art history.

In addition to the artist residences presently in place at the James Castle House, on view through April 27 is the exhibition, "Between Board and Batten: Works From The James Castle House."

The James Castle House is at 5015 Eugene Street. For more information, 208-336-6610 or www.jamescastlehouse.org.



Interior of the James Castle House, photo courtesy the Boise City Department of Arts & History.

Grassroots Effort To Save, Develop William Edmondson Homesite

NASHVILLE, TENN. — In May, the mayor's office of Metro Nashville & Davidson County suddenly and unexpectedly announced an intention to sell, to the highest bidder, a seven-acre plot of land surrounding a closed elementary school in a rapidly gentrifying historically African American neighborhood called Edgehill. It was an attempt to

plug a budget shortfall, expecting to yield around 16 million dollars. To the administration, this was surplus land, a vacant spot on a map. To the neighborhood of Edgehill, this land was home to a beloved informal neighborhood park with a playground and basketball court, Nashville's oldest and largest community garden.

In addition, this land was

where favorite son and neighborhood hero William Edmondson had once lived and created his renowned limestone sculptures that, in 1937, earned him the first solo show at the Museum of Modern Art offered to an African American artist.

Though Edmondson's house itself was razed shortly after his death in 1951 to make way for the Murrell Elementary school, the actual plot of land on which he worked, has remarkably been spared from construction. Two towering oak trees, probably planted during his time, shade a basketball court and grassy field where his house, workshop and garden were the site, and inspiration, for his work.

A grassroots coalition, headed by retired history professor and local Civil Rights icon Gloria McKissack, and documentary filmmaker and Edmondson expert Mark Schlicher, who is producing a documentary on Edmondson, was quickly formed. Using social

media to organize, they got the attention of the local press, organized a petition and letter writing campaign that garnered thousands of signatures, and ultimately convinced the Metro Council to defeat the plan by a near-unanimous vote. Thanks to the assistance of leading art and history academics, the alarm was sounded nationwide, including a moving op-ed penned by Edmondson scholar Jennifer Jane Marshall PhD, of the University of Minnesota.

The entire effort was mounted from inception to victory, in the space of three weeks.

The land is safe from immediate threat, but the Save the William Edmondson Homesite Park Coalition believes that the long-term preservation of this unique historic and cultural jewel depends on creating physical structures that can house programs and displays to properly celebrate and honor Edmondson's legacy, as well as other

Edgehill heroes, including harmonica virtuoso DeFord Bailey (the first African American star of the Grand Ole Opry), and Callie House, an early champion for ex-slave pensions.

The community-based planning is in its early stages and will require coordination with many government departments, public and private donors, grant makers and community volunteers.

Coalition organizers envision that the site can eventually host a sculpture garden where local artists can compete to install their works, an interpretive history trail on the homesite and a new neighborhood branch library that could include art classrooms, gallery space and performing arts spaces.

For information, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/save-the-william-edmondson-homesite-park-gardens/statement-by-the-save-the-edmondson-homesite-park-memorial-gardens-coalition/722967357827671/>.



Edmondson in his yard, October 1937, photo courtesy Mark Schlicher.