

National Park Service awards \$16.2M including \$499,500 to help preserve the Riverside Hotel, Clarksdale, MS



News Release Date: May 19, 2022

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Clarksdale, MS – The Riverside Hotel has secured a significant award from the National Park Service through their African American Civil Rights Grant, for the restoration and preservation of the hotel. For at least three generations, the Riverside Hotel has been one of the only black family-owned hotels in Mississippi and remains standing proudly as a significant part of African American Civil Rights history. The Riverside Hotel has a unique connection in history that spans across three eras of Civil Rights in America from 1915 to 1964.

The Riverside Hotel will receive \$499,500 in grant proceeds which will help fund critical repairs and upgrades to the infrastructure, which otherwise might never have been possible. Saving, restoring and preserving are key to ensuring that the Riverside Hotel continues to have stories to tell about its place in African American - Civil Rights, Culture and Blues History.

“The African American Civil Rights grants are critical to helping preserve and interpret a more comprehensive narrative of the people, places, and events associated with African American Civil Rights movement...” said NPS Director Chuck Sams. The African American Civil Rights grants fund a variety of projects from rehabilitation to oral history documentation, in coordination with state, Tribal, local government, and non-profit partners.

“This project is supported through an African American Civil Rights grant, provided by the Historic Preservation Fund, as administered by the National Park Service, Department of Interior.”

The Riverside Hotel “was dreamed up, owned, and operated by an entrepreneurial African American woman, Mrs. Z. L. Hill, living in Jim Crow-era Mississippi and since 1944 and up until the Pandemic in 2020, the Riverside Hotel had “provided safe lodging in the

Delta for some of the most famous musicians in history as well as like-minded folk”, and was the place “where Blues Gave Birth to Rock and Roll”.

As one of the few African American hotels in Mississippi during Jim Crow, it was listed in the famous Green Book and played host to a Who's Who of blues and R&B legends including Sonny Boy Williamson II, Muddy Waters, and Robert Nighthawk. Others, like Howlin' Wolf, Sam Cooke, Ike Turner and Jessie Mae Hemphill, made the Riverside Hotel their home away from home as they toured and crisscrossed the South. **Rocket 88**; considered to be the first Rock N Roll song ever, was written and rehearsed at The Riverside Hotel by Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston.

Prior to becoming the Riverside Hotel, the property operated as the G.T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital for African Americans. The hospital played a very significant role in the greater Clarksdale black community during segregation and in 1937 the Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith who was seriously injured in a car wreck while traveling between shows died of her injuries. Today, the room she passed in is preserved as a shrine in her honor, as a tribute to the most famous woman in Blues History.

In June of 2021, the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the Riverside Hotel as one of America's Most Endangered Places giving our story visibility and a platform for us to develop partnerships and seek funding for the restoration and preservation of the hotel. Original owner, Mrs. Z.L. Hill's granddaughters, Sonya Gates and Zelena Ratliff are working to ensure that their family's legacy and the hotel's legacy of African American culture, blues music and civil rights history are preserved for generations to come. "African American businesses are so important, and it's a way that we can continue on," Sonya Gates commented "This funding is so important not only to ensure the preservation of the building and also the sustainability of a three-generation African American business. Generational wealth often starts with a small business like this, and we want to continue this work and pass this legacy to our children."

The Riverside Hotel has a rich history in music and African American history and is a significant part of the tourism business in the Mississippi Delta. The ability to restore and remain open is critical not only to the Ratliff family, but to Mississippi and the community at large.

For more information on the Riverside Hotel's rich legacy please visit our website: www.riversideclarksdale.com or check out this article about the Ratliff Family and their family's fight to save, restore and preserve this valuable and irreplaceable landmark:

<https://www.veranda.com/travel/a36686590/riverside-hotel-clarksdale-mississippi/>

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