

Remembering the Past to Impact the Future

By Martin Ondiwa

One of the most meaningful ways I have discovered places in Michigan has not been through typical tourist lists, but through history. As a researcher with a deep interest in anthropology and historical landscapes, I have always believed that understanding the past helps us interpret the present and imagine the future. That mindset has guided me from historic sites in East Africa to hidden cultural spaces here in Grand Rapids.

Before arriving in the United States, I participated in research and mapping projects at historic heritage sites. One of the most memorable was work at Thimlich Ohinga, a remarkable dry-stone settlement believed to date back to the 15th or 16th century. The project involved collaboration with organizations such as the British Institute in Eastern Africa, the National Museums of Kenya, and the Technical University of Kenya. As a surveyor, I helped map the stone structures to support preservation and digital documentation. Experiences like this strengthened my fascination with the stories that places hold.

My work with UNESCO and the British East Africa Institute took me across several iconic African heritage sites. I visited the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, a complex of monolithic churches carved directly into volcanic rock in the 12th and 13th centuries. Through Research, I have also explored the monumental ruins of Great Zimbabwe, once the center of a powerful trading kingdom. Laetoli Footprints, preserved human footprints from over 3.6 million years ago, offers a glimpse into early human life. And at the haunting Door of No Return, history confronts visitors with the painful legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

These experiences shaped how I explore new places. When I arrived at Grand Valley State University, I knew the best way to understand Michigan was through its archives, museums, and community stories. While many people talk about beaches, sports events, or scenic trails across the state, one of the hidden gems I discovered is the Grand Rapids African American Museum and Archives.

The museum sits quietly in downtown Grand Rapids, yet it holds powerful narratives about African American history in the region. When I first visited, I had the opportunity to meet Deborah P. Bayard, who generously guided me through the exhibits. On the entrance door was a statement that immediately resonated with my own journey as a researcher: “Remembering the past to impact the future.” That message captured exactly why places like this matter.

Inside, I encountered an inspiring collection of artwork, cultural artifacts, and rare historical documents. Some exhibits included preserved speeches from leaders who shaped the American civil rights movement, donated by the families of those leaders. One artifact that particularly stood out to me was a rare board template connected to the family of Gerald R. Ford. Deborah explained that only five of these templates exist, and the Ford family generously donated one to the Grand Rapids African American Museum and Archives. Moments like that reveal how community leaders and families continue to support the preservation of local history. Standing in that space felt like stepping into a living archive where stories of resilience, struggle, and achievement were carefully preserved. As someone who had spent years mapping heritage sites in Africa, I felt a powerful connection between the preservation of African history and the preservation of African American history here in the USA.

Another fascinating experience was learning about the Downtown Grand Rapids Black History walking tour. This two-mile interactive route highlights landmarks connected to the city’s civil rights movement and community leaders. Narrated by local historian Joe Jones, the tour shares stories such as Helen Claytor’s leadership at the YWCA, Malcolm X’s visit to Fountain Street Church, and the political legacy of Grand Rapids’ first Black mayor, Lyman Parks. It is a powerful reminder that history is not only preserved in museums but also embedded in the city’s streets and buildings.

Exploring these places has helped me see Grand Rapids not just as a new environment but as a landscape layered with stories, struggles, and cultural memory.