**Overview Of The Site (focus on its historical significance and interpretive past)**

Israel Hill was the former site of an African-American community in present day Prince Edward County that was inhabited by an original population of around 90 freed slaves. This community provided a life of independence, yet coexistence with the neighboring whites.  This land in which the freed blacks owned was willed to them by their former slave master's son, Richard Randolph, whose beliefs regarding his slavery were rooted in his statement that the acts were "in violation of every sacred Law of nature" (Crofts, 2005).  His vision was to grant these slaves, in which his generational bloodline had denied for decades, a life of freedom and land to further pursue such.  The success of this new found freedom for these slaves was achieved, as Israel Hill became the site of the "promised land" for those African-Americans able to move freely about Prince Edward County.

Over time, the commercial community grew rapidly as they were able to build up a solid client base.  Specialized professions were adopted amongst the community at Israel Hill such as artisans, farmers, and boatmen. Despite the racial conflicts in the U.S., the community facilitated "a dense web of economic exchanges and personal contact continued to link whites and free blacks"  (Crofts, 2005).  These freed blacks were born into a life in which they were politically, economically, and socially disadvantaged.  It is fascinating to ponder their ability, to not only prosper amongst each other, but to advance in conjunction without much resistance from the local whites for Prince Edward County.  This was such a feat that most undoubtedly was not achieved over a century later as portrayed through the extensive Massive Resistance within the community and school systems in particular.

Although the freed slaves were granted their independence, this came with a lack of social, political and legal defense.  For instance, current slaves were protected, even if it resembled the same protection that materialistic property received.  Despite the harsh corporal punishments and familial separation inflicted by slave members, a slave did not have to worry about outside ridicule and physical mistreatment by society (Crofts, 2005).  The dissolving of this slave to slave master relationship ultimately provided a life with increased autonomy, but did not eliminate racially based hardships and discrimination that ultimately only escalated in the coming years.

All did not support Richard Randolph’s freeing of the slaves and the accomplishments of these African Americans remain heavily unrecognized.  Many opposers of the emancipations expressed that they believed the freed blacks would inflict damages to the only social system of order that they had ever known, and that slavery thus supported.  Instead of owning the slaves as property, the freeing of the slaves provided a confusing concept as these same individuals now possessed property of their own.  This complication created resentment towards free blacks from their white counterparts.  However, in review of the accounts of Melvin Patrick Ely, it was explained that Israel Hill was a "product of it's own time" as there was accounts of local whites feeling particularly unthreatened by the freed African Americans.  The reality of the reactions consisted of whites in the local area that mostly were not intimidated by the freed slaves at Israel Hill, while the opposing ideals of more distant southerners and state legislators heavily disagreed with the decision.

**Discuss necessity for memorializing the site or memorializing it in new ways**

Throughout most of pre-civil war history, slaves that were brought to the United States lived mostly in the South. The South’s economy was largely agricultural and at one time used indentured servants as laborers in crop fields. As immigration from England and other European states declined, the need for a new labor force rose. When slaves began to ship in from the western shore of Africa, white plantation owners saw in them their new labor force. Slaves were not seen as humans, but as property to a white master. Slaves were used in a variety of ways. Not only were they used as laborers to work in fields, they worked in other trades as well. Some were carpenters and weavers. They were able to develop other skills and assets that made them more successful and more useful in other areas of the plantation other than the crop fields. Some were also used as collateral or were used in trades. The first African slaves arrived in the United States in 1619; however, in the early 1800s slavery was still very much at the forefront of southern society.

According to the United States Census in 1810, there were about 7,239,881 people lived in what then was the United States. Of that population, about 1,191,362 people were slaves (about 16% of the population) (Franklin, 1988). In Virginia alone, of the 974,622 people, there were approximately 392,518 slaves and 30,570 nonwhite free people (Historical Statistics of the U.S., 1970). That population of slaves made up 40.27% of the population of Virginia. 20 years later in 1830, the total population in Virginia was 1,211,405. The free nonwhite population increased to 47,348 people, which was 3.9% of the population of Virginia. The enslaved population increased as well to 469, 757 people, which was 38.7% of the population of Virginia (Fisher). In Prince Edward County in the 1830s, however, out of the 14,107 total people 8,593 were enslaved (61% of the population) and 475 (3.3% of population) were free blacks (Fisher). Although small, the growing amount of free black persons in Prince Edward County up through the 1830s played an integral part of the development of Farmville, Virginia. This increase in the amount of enslaved and nonwhite free persons continued even through the 1860s. The amount of enslaved people and free nonwhite peoples constantly increased in America due to the increase in births of American-born slaves. Slaves were an important part of southern society, and definitely a substantial part of Virginian society. They contributed greatly not only to the population, free and enslaved, but also to the economy.

This site is more than worthy of being memorialized. Currently, the story of Israel Hill and its inhabitants is not told to its fullest potential. The most recent memorialization was the unveiling of the historical marker I-14-a along W 3rd St just outside of Farmville in 2009. The historical marker was a good first step in acknowledging what began in the 1810s in Prince Edward County; however, that seems to be the only remnant left of the very successful settlement. Israel Hill is a paradoxical settlement. Despite the proportion of free blacks in Prince Edward County at the time, their settlement prospered beyond any enslaved or nonwhite free person’s wildest dream. As the conflict of slavery began to cause more and more controversy in American society, the free, flourishing black community on Israel Hill became a symbol of how the two races could successfully coexist in a community. Regardless of the growing conflict between the North and South about the system of slavery and regardless of the thoughts Whites had toward Africans, the free blacks of Israel Hill contributed so much to the Prince Edward County that over time, instead of being spiteful and incompetent, the blacks were seen as decent human beings that were honest and capable of living on their own.

One of the most known free blacks at the time of settlement was Hercules White. He was an older man, yet he was one of the free blacks that made the most out of the land he was given through Richard Randolph’s will. In the beginnings of the settlement on Israel Hill around December 1810, as told in *Israel on the Appomattox* by Melvin Patrick Ely, Hercules White is documented to have bought a multitude of door hinges and around 30lbs of nails (Ely, 2004). It can be concluded from these details that building on the settlement occurred immediately. He could have built a house for himself and others such as his children and those who settled on land plots around him. Also mentioned in Ely’s text is the fact that Judith and John Randolph (Richard’s widow and son) may have possibly been the source of simple tools such as axes, saws, hammers, plows, and mauls, which possibly aided Hercules White in his building endeavors (Ely, 2004). The necessity for shelter motivated the free blacks of Israel Hill to put up houses very quickly. Ely concluded in his discussion about the progress of the settlement that some of the earlier homes were made out of simple materials, such as log, and that everyone helped one another (Ely, 2004). The latter can be seen through Hercules’s large purchase of door hinges and nails as the community first began to settle down. This drive to immediately build houses and to truly make a home out of what they were given, in terms of land, conveys a considerable amount of work ethic. It breaks the stereotype of Africans being lazy and not being able to provide for themselves, and instead offers proof that they were capable of being successful independently from their white counterparts. This conclusion thus challenged the pre-existing conceptions of Blacks. It will stand to be one of many debunked stereotypes that challenge the assumptions of the South as a whole about this group of people.

Not only did the free black community quickly build homes, they used their trades they learned as slaves as a way to make a profit. A lot of Randolph’s slaves were field-laboring slaves. They worked on Randolph’s plantation and used those skills as a way to advance their own community. They planted crops and raised crops on Israel Hill. Most of the plots of land had areas of cultivated land that the owners used to plant crops such as cotton, flax, oats, corn, and most importantly, tobacco. In Ely’s book he mentions how the use of draft animals and domesticated livestock allowed for the success of the settlement as well. He discusses how certain landowners in the community herded sheep to use their wool and raised cattle for their hides, meat, and milk. There also was the use of draft animals as a way to help agriculture become a dominant aspect of the success of the community (Ely, 2004). According to research done by Ely, there was enough crops produced to sustain the settlement, and their surplus was sold in Farmville and surrounding areas of Prince Edward County for a profit. Other trades included, but are not limited to, skills such as weaving, being a boatman, shoemaking, and carpentry. In his book, Ely mentions three brothers: Billy, Tom, and Zack Ellis. Billy was a carpenter and a cooper. Tom was a shoemaker, and Zack learned all three of those trades (Ely, 2004). The interesting part about these three brothers is that these brothers were successful in the skills they pursued while choosing not to live on Israel Hill. They integrated themselves into the surrounding communities with other free nonwhite peoples and White people. This growing community of free blacks was substantial in their success in that White people in Prince Edward County and Farmville in particular began to take note of that. This portrays the undoubted self-determination of a group of Blacks in a very controversial southern society. The ideals that most southerners lived by at the time stereotyped Blacks as not being able to live properly or successfully without the guidance of or dependence on Whites. This challenged, again, the proposition that Blacks were inferior.

The free blacks made vital contributions to the Farmville community. Israel Hill settlers Sam White and Phil White Jr. alongside Reuben Seay, a white man, among others members of the community, helped to establish the Farmville Baptist Church in downtown Farmville in 1836 (Ely, 2004). The fact that this church still stands in Farmville, Virginia today conveys the extent of the legacy of the free blacks of Israel Hill. The growing and unmistakably successful settlement of Israel Hill stood as a symbol to the entire nation of the possibilities and benefits of interracial cooperation, especially within the clouds of the system of slavery.

In order to make the story of the free blacks of Israel Hill nationally known, it is important to interpret it in an innovative way. In the area that Israel Hill once sat upon, there is now nothing but grass and trees. The only remnant of their presence in Prince Edward County is the historical marker off of West 3rd Street and the Farmville Baptist Church along Main Street in Farmville.