Stanley Madison has big plans for Lyles Station. His family’s history stretches for five generations through the small unincorporated area near Princeton, Indiana and he has dedicated his life in recent years to educating others about the rich history of the place he calls home.

The first Black settlers arrived in Gibson County in early 1800s and bought land to start farming. The area that is still known as Lyles Station really began to grow in the early 1840s when the Lyles family sold their land in Tennessee and moved north to Indiana where slavery was outlawed and they could live with more freedom.

From those earliest days, farming in Lyles Station was hard work. The land was a swampy forest, but the soil was rich thanks to the periodic flooding that would prove to be an advantage and curse for the area. The early settlers, including the Madisons who Stanley said arrived around 1838, took advantage of the abundance of trees and opened a sawmill. Once the trees were cut, they started to raise livestock and grow hay, rye, sorghum and corn on the fertile land. In areas where the soil was sandier, they grew melons and planted apple orchards.

“They started cutting down the small trees, digging out the stumps,” Madison said. “Then the big tree, you plowed to it, plowed around it and you raised that corn for your family, and maybe a neighbor or two would help every once in a while. That’s how the production of our crops came together is because everybody worked together to be successful.”

Lyles Station and the other Black settlements in the area hit a boom period in the 1870s when L&M Railroad built a spur through town allowing the farmers and the sawmill to sell their products far and wide. By the early 1900s, the area around Lyles Station was home to between 800 and 1,000 people.

Then, in 1913 the flood waters that had once contributed to making the land fertile became the area’s curse. Heavy rain in late March caused the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to overflow, which spread into the Patoka and Wabash Rivers that run alongside Lyles Station.

Madison remembers hearing stories growing up about the Great Flood of 1913 and how the floodwater’s currents were so strong it made the railroad ties stand out of the ground like fence posts. The area ended up underwater, destroying the barns and log cabins where the families lived and worked. The area never truly recovered,
be completed in the spring when a seasonal high tunnel is constructed to harvest. The first stage of Madison's grand plan for the museum will be exhibits where students can learn about the life of a seed from planting to harvest. The first stage of Madison's grand plan for the museum will be completed in the spring when a seasonal high tunnel is constructed on a parcel of land behind the schoolhouse. The construction of the high tunnel will be financed in part through an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract Madison and the preservation corporation enrolled in through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Through all the challenges, Madison never left the area and he has continued to farm the same land his forefathers did. In seventh grade he was given his first hog by his grandfather, a “45-pound gilt,” and Madison worked hard to raise hogs into his 20s and now in his retirement he still owns and farms the land he inherited from his grandfather.

In all, Madison estimates there are five or six descendants from those early Black settlers still farming the same land and that about 30 still own their family parcels even though they don’t live locally or farm it themselves.

“I grew up here as a youngster being very proud of who and where I came from,” Madison said. “When you look back through Lyles Station’s history, of the struggles of all the forefathers and what they had to endure to be successful, it builds that pride in you and your heart goes out to continue that from this day on.”

The story of Lyles Station and its more than 200 years of history is now told through an exhibit at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. It can also be found at the Lyles Station museum in Gibson County, Indiana which is housed in the restored Lyles Consolidated School that opened in 1922.

It is where Madison, the president of the Lyles Station Historic Preservation Corporation, works to share his heritage with school children from Indiana, Kentucky and Illinois during field trips. It is also where he hopes to see his big dreams come to fruition. For now, the museum consists of multiple exhibits in the schoolhouse including a classroom where students can take a class taught in the style of those from the early 1900s. Behind the school, a log cabin has been rebuilt, there is a garden and a couple acres of crop land where visitors can learn about farming and which also becomes a corn maze during the fall.

Every current and future exhibit Madison and the preservation corporation have planned is designed to teach the next generation about agriculture through the history of Lyles Station and the generations of farmers who have worked the land.

“We didn’t just want a historic site and not just a museum, but we wanted an educational site,” Madison said. “That’s what we have really worked hard on over the last few years to make this not just the historic site, but a place that knowledge is going to be developed and they take it away when they leave.

The future goals include an amphitheater, more cabins and interactive exhibits were students can learn about the life of a seed from planting to harvest. The first stage of Madison’s grand plan for the museum will be completed in the spring when a seasonal high tunnel is constructed.

The EQIP high tunnel funding is designed to help urban farmers grow crops during all four seasons allowing them to be more financially viable. Madison’s goal for the Lyles Station high tunnel is to use it as an educational opportunity and also grow food that can support local food banks and be sold to support the museum. Part of the high tunnel’s growing area will also be set aside to grow produce for their annual farm-to-table fundraiser, which they hope to start hosting again after the COVID-19 pandemic comes to an end.

“We’re going to raise a lot of our produce and take it to the empty pantries in Princeton, and wherever someone needs (food).”

Along with the high tunnel, EQIP dollars will be used to fund the planting of a pollinator area at the back of the crop field. That too will be used as an educational resource along with serving a practical purpose of attracting more pollinating insects to the area to help the crops and gardens.

“That’s also going to be able to help (Madison) when he does tours with the kids. It shows the kids that different plants attract different insects and what the benefit of it is for the environment and for the area. It will also demonstrate the different types of pollination as well,” said Stephanie Mitchell, NRCS district conservationist for Gibson County.

Walking throughout the museum you can feel the passion Madison has for LYLES STATION’s history come alive and why it is so important for him to share it with future generations. One wall is dominated by old blacksmith-built tools that early settlers used to farm this land when it was all done by hand. Next to the tools, a large Mason jar of dirt sits full under a glass case. The dirt is from the land of Norman Greer, who still farms the plot his family has owned for more than 160 years.

“We have continued to do what our forefathers did — feeding people around the world,” Madison said. “I think people that get a chance to come and visit here at Lyles Station, they kind of get a real understanding about the African Americans history, and how we did help contribute to our society, being successful and making the United States the greatest country in the world.”