

Building Homes for Black History

Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915–95

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ABSTRACT: This essay investigates the cultural forces that shaped the development of the post 1945 founders, founding directors of African American museums and the pioneers at historically white institutions, such as the Smithsonian. All of these people were shaped by the “Negro Canon” whose principal components were the African American political and cultural activists of the earlier twentieth century such as Carter G. Woodson and Alain Locke, and their exposure to the society of “historically Black colleges and universities” (HBCUs). These experiences helped them creatively adapt to the rapidly shifting socio-political environment of the postwar era to change forever the cultural landscape of the United States.

KEY WORDS: founding directors, founders, pioneers, Negro Canon, HBCUs or historically Black colleges and universities, Carter G. Woodson, Alain L. Locke

Introduction

The founding directors and pioneers of the Black museum movement saw their institutions as a way to fight the internalized feelings of individuals, particularly young people, and to empower their communities. Each of these individuals had been inspired by the uplifting “Negro Canon,” which developed in the 1910s and 1920s. This “Negro Canon” was composed of two key elements: history and art. The history of Black achievements and accomplishments was promoted by Carter G. Woodson and the Association of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). Not limited to history, the growing “Negro Canon” also benefited from the contributions of Alain Locke and the other writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance.¹

1 Over time, people of African descent within the United States have changed the ways in which they wished to be referred. In the 1700s and earlier, *sons and daughters of Africa* was a common appellation. Consequently, independent churches formed during that era often have a name such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. By the 1830s, another designation became common: *Colored Americans* and *People of Color*. For example, Frederick Douglass often referred to “peoples of color” in his speeches. However, during these same years, *Afro-American* was often used in newspapers and other published works. By the late 1800s, *Colored* was the most frequent name used,

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Following in the footsteps of these earlier figures and movements, in the 1950s and 1960s, these Black museum pioneers viewed art and music as valuable weapons to help fight social oppression and the internalized belief that Black people were intellectually inferior, with no significant history or culture.

The founders and early members of what became the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) also created new realities out of the opportunities generated by the modern Civil Rights Movement, the urban rebellions and the political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. All of these museum founders were activists in local and national causes. Some had worked previously in newly liberated African nations, so their understandings of the connection between African and African American art, history, and culture was not based on imagined similarities, but on real human relationships and experiences.

In response to the modern Civil Rights Movement and campus takeovers in American colleges arising from protests against the Vietnam war, Black Studies departments bloomed across the nation. Emerging scholars in many fields began to discover older texts such as those by W. E. B. Du Bois and began to focus new research on Black people history and culture, stimulating the ever-widening studies of other previously ignored groups. In the last forty years, several generations of historians, cultural anthropologists, musicologists, and other academics have published thousands of books documenting the history of African Americans in the United States and throughout the African diaspora. All of this work provided an increasing evidentiary basis for the extension of this earlier “Negro Canon.”

The founding directors of Black museums and pioneers did not invent the study of Black history nor were they the first to celebrate African art. Rather, they became a key cultural wing of the Black Consciousness Movement by establishing independent African American museums. These new museums gave Black history and art their first permanent homes outside of universities, homes that the wider public could visit and enjoy. In these Black institutions, Black people controlled the narratives and they could decide how the complexities of the Black experience could be explored and exhibited.

History as Ammunition and Culture as Healing: Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, and the Development of the “Negro Canon,” 1910–50

“Canon” is a literary term used to describe a collection of works widely acknowledged as culturally significant. In this essay, I use “Negro Canon” to describe a body

in both oral and written language. In the early 1900s, a younger generation of people felt that *Negro* was a term that connoted a new sense of dignity and pride. For years, African American activists campaigned for white publishers to capitalize the word *Negro*. This was symbolically achieved in the 1940s, when the *New York Times* officially changes its style sheet, although many southern papers continued to print the term in lower case. During the 1960s, another younger generation felt that *Black* or *Black American* was a term that connoted greater racial pride and identification. In the 1990s, *African American* became more popular, coming almost full circle to the 1700s.

African American history, culture, and art that developed to combat the notion that Black people were a people “without history.”²

During the Jim Crow era, many white American racists, scientific and otherwise, justified racial prejudice and discrimination on the basis that Black people were an intellectually and culturally inferior race. During the twentieth century many white public intellectuals and scholars believed that there were no contributions that African Americans had made to the American experience except through their labor. They argued that Negroes came from a continent with no history to begin with and that even the limited cultural accomplishments that they had attained in Africa had been eliminated during enslavement, and therefore these abject people had produced no societal contributions or accomplishments beyond physical labor. It was difficult for many Black people not to internalize these beliefs.

The “Negro Canon” was an accurate and uplifting narrative about Black history and culture researched, published, and disseminated between 1915 and 1960 as a deliberate counter-story to white supremacy. The “Negro Canon” was built on history, art, and culture, and was powered by the practices of scholarship and activism. Though there were many who contributed to the “Negro Canon,” two exemplars were historian Carter G. Woodson and art critic and philosopher Alain Locke. Highly educated, both men worked within and outside universities, especially Woodson. Both men were extremely productive, generating many books, essays, and lectures. Indeed, they spent their whole lives challenging these racist notions with factual histories and stimulating artistic achievement so as to promote individual self-esteem and community empowerment for Black people.

Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950) is widely considered the “father of Black history.”³ Born into a large family from formerly enslaved sharecroppers, Woodson invented himself. At the age of twenty, he entered Berea College and in three years

² “People without history” is a concept that was widespread in the early twentieth century, but is perhaps best expressed by Eric R. Wolf in his *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), originally published in 1982. While this may seem ridiculous to younger people, as late as 1972, when I went to college, there were no courses on Black history or even slavery in Harvard’s history department. One of many examples of Wolf’s concept can be found in this succinct quote from eminent historian Hugh Trevor-Roper’s 1963 lecture series at the University of Sussex, which was later published as a book: “Undergraduates, seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.” Trevor-Roper’s first lecture, from which this quote is taken, can be found at “There is no African History,” *The Toynbee Convector*, June 9, 2010, <https://daviderrick.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/there-is-no-african-history/>. See also: Robert L. Harris Jr., “Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American Historiography,” *The Journal of Negro History* 67, no.2 (Summer 1982): 107–120, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717569/>.

³ Woodson’s life and work has been honored in many ways. For example, in February 1984, the U.S. Postal Service released a Carter G. Woodson twenty-cent stamp. In 1976 his home in Washington, DC was designated a National Historic Landmark, and in 2003 the US Congress named his home a National Historic Site. In 2006, the Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site became the 389th unit of the National Park System. In 2015, the DC government erected a statue in

graduated with a bachelor's degree in literature (1903). He then earned a second bachelor's degree and a master's degree in history from the University of Chicago (1908) and a PhD in history from Harvard University (1912).⁴

Woodson taught in public schools in Washington, DC and in the Philippines, and at Howard University. His experiences made him suspicious of both public schools and traditional institutions for Black higher education, because they were dependent on either white city officials or white philanthropists. Therefore, he devoted his life to building free-standing organizations that had intellectual independence and academic heft to produce socially relevant Negro history. This would serve to uplift all Negro people, not just the elite, and challenge the overt racism and discrimination rampant in American society.

Woodson operated on at least two fronts simultaneously. In 1915 in Chicago, he established a grassroots organization, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (hereafter ASNLH), and also created a publishing house owned and controlled by Black people to the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.”⁵

ASNLH was among the earliest public history organizations in the nation. The ASNLH preceded by twenty-five years the creation of the American Association of State and Local History (1940) and by sixty-four years the founding of the National Council on Public History (1979).⁶ Woodson linked the scholarly ideal of an accurate recounting of Negro History with the public goals of individual and community empowerment. He saw this empowerment as the fundamental basis for sustained social activism against white supremacy.⁷ During the Jim Crow era, the

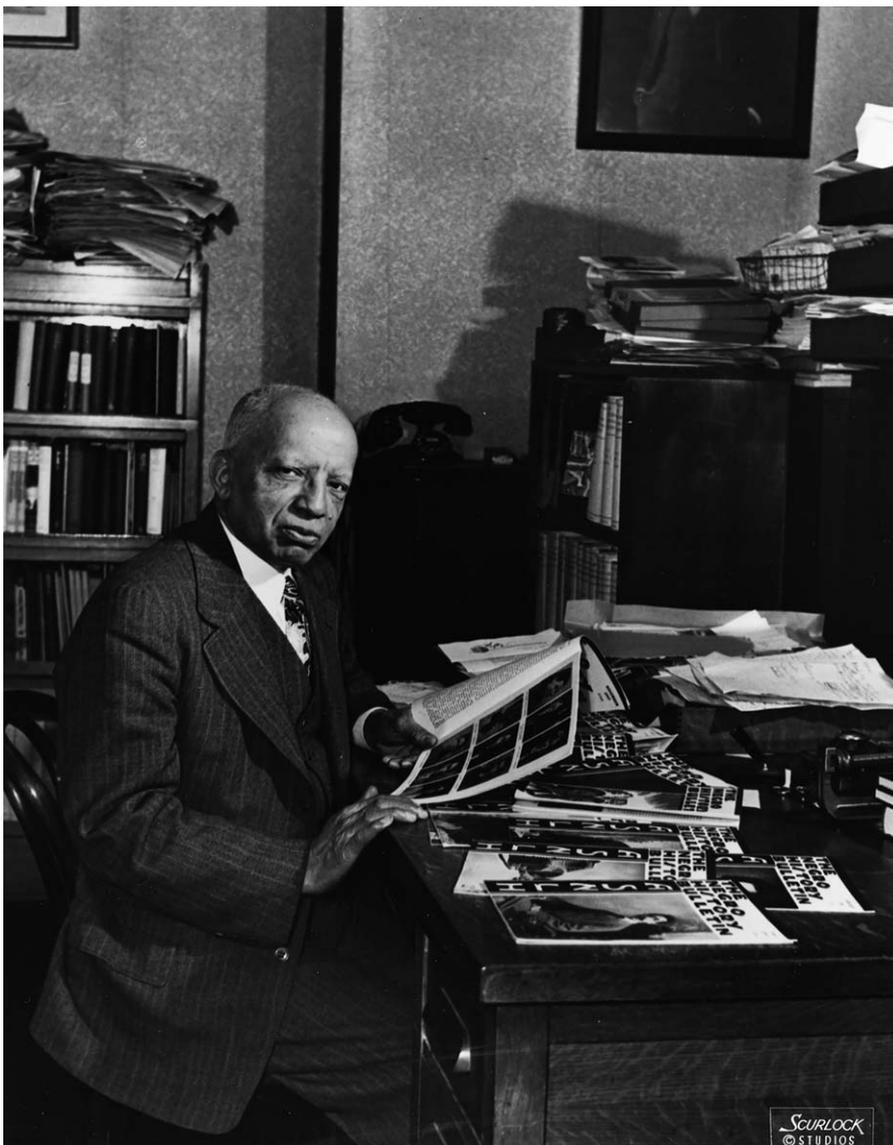
Woodson's honor on Rhode Island Avenue N.W., near his home. Interestingly, this statue shows Woodson seated among benches where others also sit near him.

4 Woodson was the second Black person to earn a PhD from Harvard, the first being W. E. B. Du Bois in 1896. However, unlike Du Bois, whose parents and ancestors had long been free, Woodson was the only person ever who was the child of formerly enslaved people to earn a PhD from Harvard.

5 This phrase “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” is the official epithet of the Smithsonian Institution, written on every publication and enshrined in the shield. Woodson was himself completely devoted to his cause, which could be described as “the increase and diffusion of knowledge about African American history.”

6 Woodson was the principal founder and guiding force throughout his lifetime. However, four other men were also co-founders of the Association. In 1972, the name of the Association was changed to the Association for the Study of Afro American Life and History (ASALH). Sometime in the 1990s, the title shifted to “African American Life and History.” See their website at <https://asalh.org/>, last accessed April 9, 2018. When I was young, Black scholars just called it “the Association” and everyone knew what was meant. The contemporary generation, however, has made it into a kind of acronym, calling it “As-Sall-A” – phonetically, I guess. When I first attended ASALH meetings as a young professional in the 1980s, the organization had been going through some major ups and downs and was at a low point (poor attendance, poor membership numbers, disorganized conferences). However, this is a great example of an organization that has been rejuvenated in recent years, particularly by the participation of scholars all along the academic spectrum. The current president is Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham of Harvard University.

7 There are only two major biographical studies of Woodson, and my interpretation is deeply influenced by both: Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement: Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007) and Jacqueline A.



Today, Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950) is widely considered “The Father of Black History.” (Photo courtesy of Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905–1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)

ASNLH was the primary method whereby Black people learned about their contributions to the American nation.⁸

Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

⁸ Now, there are many articles in which Carter G. Woodson and the Association are mentioned, but this was one of the first articles to talk about the Association within the context of public history: Jeffrey Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins, “A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in

By tapping into existing social networks of Black churches, teachers in segregated elementary and secondary schools, fraternities and sororities, and other social organizations, the association reached a wide range of African Americans who could participate in their programs and engage in local history research. African American teachers, librarians, ministers' wives, social workers, and clubwomen were the key supporters of the ASNLH, forming the backbone of local clubs to disseminate this history. These clubs performed historical pageants, organized lectures, published newsletters and informative ads in local Black newspapers and national magazines, and sponsored field trips to important sites like the Frederick Douglass home in Washington, DC and Harper's Ferry in West Virginia. In 1926, Woodson created "Negro History Week," held annually between the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. It became "Black History Month."

In 1916, Woodson, along with Jesse B. Moreland, a graduate and trustee of Howard University, established *The Journal of Negro History*. Years before, upon completing his Harvard history dissertation, Woodson had been unable to get his manuscript published. He became a publisher as a way to increase scholarship on Black history, and also to inform the public with new research. *The Journal of Negro History* (later changed to *The Journal of African American History*) published articles by credentialed scholars like Lorenzo Greene, Rayford Logan, and Benjamin Quarles, whose essays were unlikely to be published in mainstream white historical journals.⁹ All of these men had earned graduate degrees from historically white universities, but due to segregation could not teach in them.¹⁰ Consequently, all taught at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and needed an outlet for peer-reviewed academic essays and articles. *The Journal of Negro History* provided an opportunity to publish, to edit, and to build up a body of work such that books by African Americans might occasionally be published by white academic presses or mainstream publishing houses. In 1921 Woodson founded the Associated Publishers Press to guarantee a growing scholarly record of African American contributions to American society.

In 1933 Woodson published his seminal study, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. In this classic book, still in print, Woodson explicitly argued that denying African

Historical Perspective," *Presenting the Past: Critical Perspectives on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.) See also more recent scholarship such as: Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of Afro-American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

9 According to Dagbovie, Goggin and others, Woodson had fraught relationships with these younger Black historians—sometimes supporting them and sometimes criticizing them. Nonetheless, he published them in the Journal. More information about the Journal can be found on the ASALH website: "Journal of African American History," Association for the Study of African American Life and History, accessed April 11, 2018, <https://asalh.org/document/journal-of-african-american-history/>.

10 In 1956, John Hope Franklin was appointed full professor and chair of the History Department at Brooklyn College, the first African American to be named chairman of an academic department at a municipal college. "John Hope Franklin Memorial Page," Brooklyn College, accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/centers/children/news/franklin.php>.

American people knowledge of their history and past contributions was a key pillar in the edifice of white supremacy. Woodson sometimes said that “it had taken him twenty years to recover from the education he had received.”¹¹ At the time, many white leaders and politicians, particularly but not only in the South, argued that greater education would be simply wasted on Black people because they only had the intelligence for menial labor, or perhaps, providing musical entertainment. Then, they used the alleged absence of educated or successful Black people as evidence of their racial inferiority.

To counter the stereotype that Black people had only been submissive, uneducated field hands or grinning minstrels, Woodson offered a history of the United States in which Black people were accomplished, highlighting historical role models such as naturalist and surveyor Benjamin Banneker, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and banker Maggie Walker. Woodson viewed scholarship, publications, and the association as weapons to inspire ordinary Black people to look beyond their circumstances and seek full citizenship and equal rights. Historian Pero Dagbovie describes Woodson as a key member of what he terms a “post emancipation scholar activist tradition.”¹²

Something of a curmudgeon, Woodson never married and never had children. Perhaps he believed that family life might deter him from his larger goal. He seemed to harbor conventional ideas about women and their role in social organizations; their job was to supply the hard work but to allow better educated men more suited to public speaking to take the lead. Nonetheless, it is evident from the list of membership rolls that women predominated in the ASNLH, as they did in African American churches.

The ASNLH produced teachers’ guides, lecture series, articles for publication in Black newspapers along with special programs and events to celebrate the achievements of African Americans. Woodson and the Association essentially created a public mechanism for African Americans to be exposed to more accurate versions of American history, accounts where their presence and agency was documented and affirmed. In segregated Black neighborhoods, through churches and local neighborhood organizations, through newspapers and ASNLH Bulletins, the work of the ASNLH offered bundle of historical and cultural expressions that made up the “Negro Canon.”

The second key pillar of the “Negro Canon” forefronted achievements of Negro visual artists and writers, composers and musicians, choreographers, and other

¹¹ Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement*, 26; Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Pres, 1990). First published by the Associated Publishers in 1933.

¹² Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement*, 11. Dagbovie also includes a persuasive chapter discussing the role of women in the ASNLH, during Woodson’s lifetime. This is an area deserving of additional study, however Dagbovie concludes that African American women were the mainstay of the Association for most of its history, especially the K-12 teachers in the segregated public schools, the librarians in historically Black colleges and universities (hereafter HBCUs), and the many “church ladies” who were the largest number of congregants of almost every African American church, whatever the denomination.

performing artists. Alain Locke (1885–1954), the philosopher, impresario, and “architect” of the Harlem Renaissance, first focused attention on these. Locke was the only child of a Negro couple from prominent Philadelphia families whose forebears had long been free. Locke’s father and a younger brother died when he was quite young, so he grew up as an only child with his mother in Philadelphia. He attended the famed Central High School as a token Negro student. In 1907, he graduated from Harvard College with degrees in English and philosophy, achieving membership in Phi Beta Kappa. In 1908, he became the first Negro Rhodes scholar and went off to study at Oxford University where he encountered much more overt racism than he had expected. After studying at the University of Berlin (1910), he returned to the US and eventually became the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard in Philosophy (1918). He taught for many years at Howard University. In 1925, he edited *The New Negro*, which quickly became a classic. In five essays, Locke wrote about a new generation of Negro men and women who were engaged in all kinds of artistic efforts, especially in and around Harlem. These people came to be known collectively as “the Harlem Renaissance.”¹³

Historian Jeffrey C. Stewart has recently argued that Locke saw his multiple roles thusly: as a scholar and philosopher of aesthetics; a knowledgeable art critic; a teacher of students; a developer and producer of art exhibitions; and perhaps most importantly as a conduit for white philanthropists to support African American artists so that they could concentrate on their artistic production. He found philanthropic support for many of the artists who became famous as members of the Harlem Renaissance such as writers Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and sculptor Richmond Barthe. Eventually some of these artists such as Hughes and Hurston tired of Locke’s interference and were less willing to accommodate some of the personality quirks of Locke’s wealthy white supporters. Still, Locke articulated his belief that Negro artists could and should find inspiration in African sculptural forms and in African American vernacular culture. Though Locke himself was a dandified aesthete not a “man of the people,” nonetheless he saw clearly that Negro artists needed to embrace the cultural production of ordinary Black people as the wellspring of their creativity. Negro artists needed the time and resources to hone their artistic skills so as to be better able to develop great art from the inarticulate and inchoate feelings present in “folk” cultural expressions.¹⁴

Like Woodson, Locke was enormously productive, publishing more than twenty books and countless articles and essays. Locke organized and participated in a wide range of art and culture exhibitions including an annual traveling “Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists” sponsored by the Harmon Foundation.

¹³ This work first appeared in the March, 1925 issue of the journal *Survey Graphic*. Locke was the guest editor of issue and wrote an essay titled “Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro.” His piece was a special on Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance. With Locke as the editor, an expanded version appeared as a book, *The New Negro*, in 1926.

¹⁴ Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: the Life of Alain Locke* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018).



In 1918, Alain Locke became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard in Philosophy. (Photo courtesy of Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905–1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)

Locke’s contribution to the “Negro Canon” was his emphasis on artistic achievement as a way to fight racism and to free the soul for personal inspiration and liberation.¹⁵

Woodson and the association, and Locke and his many artist friends, foes, and students were the primary “content developers” of the canon. The teaching traditions and public programs of the historically Black colleges and universities were the third pillar of the “Negro Canon.”¹⁶ Since the mid-nineteenth century, the HBCUs have been the principal source for the creation of the Black middle class.

¹⁵ The William E. Harmon Foundation began in 1922 and supported a variety of philanthropic causes, including nursery schools and city parks. However, it is probably most famous for its patronage of Negro artists, both exhibiting their works and purchasing them for its own collection. In 1926 the Harmon Foundation established a prize, the William E. Harmon Foundation Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes. For more information, see *Harlem Renaissance Lives: From the African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), and “Breaking Racial Barriers: African Americans in the Harmon Foundation Collection,” National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/harmon/>.

¹⁶ For more on that history, see: Bobby Lovett Jr. *America’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Narrative History 1837–2009* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2015). In 2016, PBS released a documentary on the history of HBCUs: *Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of*



W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of the "Talented Tenth" was exemplified by superbly trained African American scholars at HBCUs, who were barred from teaching at predominantly white institutions. (Photo courtesy of Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905–1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)

The majority of African American teachers, doctors, lawyers, ministers, artists, and intellectuals attended HBCUs for their college years. Although few offered courses in what came to be known as "Black history," their faculties embodied the types of educated, cultured men and women that racists did not believe could exist. These were the people who joined the ASNLH and attended Locke's exhibitions.

Across the decades, as these schools trained more and more scholars, their faculties became majority African American. Before the 1970s, African American intellectuals, scholars, and educational leaders (especially those with graduate degrees from historically white universities) could teach only in these institutions. Consequently, students at Howard University (Washington DC), Morehouse and Spelman Colleges (Atlanta, Georgia) and others were taught by professors who exemplified the ideals of a group that W. E. B. DuBois labeled "the talented tenth."¹⁷

Historically Black Colleges and Universities, directed by Stanley Nelson and Marco Williams (2016; New York: Firelight Films Inc./PBS).

¹⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: James Pott and Co., 1903), accessed April 1, 2018, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-talented-tenth/>.

HBCUs also provided a refuge and training ground for generations of African American writers, visual and performing artists. Several who achieved fame during the Harlem Renaissance taught and worked at HBCUs, including Langston Hughes who spent time at a number of schools, including Morehouse College and Aaron Douglass who taught at Fisk University.¹⁸ African American composers and choir directors, such as John Wesley Work III at Fisk, spent their careers at HBCUs. All in all, HBCUs provided a third pillar of the “Negro Canon,” by supporting the careers of and training of generations of African American artists, writers, musicians and performers. A key goal of these HBCUs was to equip their students to reject internalized feelings of oppression and inferiority by giving them access to these intellectually and aesthetically rich opportunities for self-expression.

Additionally, these schools served as the training ground for generations of activist lawyers, ministers, politicians, and social workers. Thurgood Marshall went to Howard University Law School, trained by Charles Hamilton Houston, a graduate of Harvard University Law School. Many of the lawyers who worked at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund received training at Howard.¹⁹ Martin Luther King attended Morehouse College and Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) graduated from Howard University.

A number of protests against segregation began with groups of students gathering on HBCU campuses. Howard University students (women and men) led sit-ins in Washington, DC in the 1940s. Four men from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University launched the 1960 sit-in at the Greensboro Woolworth lunch counter. Joined by women from Bennett College and other A&T students, the sit-in involved hundreds of people over six months, ending with the desegregation of Woolworth stores nationwide. HBCU’s led legal resistance to

¹⁸ There are many books on the history of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. One excellent source: Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2000).

¹⁹ These schools were established to “uplift the race,” especially those founded by private Christian associations—such as Fisk College, established by the American Missionary Association—and/or supported by white philanthropists—such as Spelman, supported by Laura Spelman Rockefeller, or Morehouse College, supported by John D. Rockefeller Sr., John D. Rockefeller Jr., and Henry L. Morehouse. For more information, see: Clara Merritt DeBoer, “The Role of Afro-Americans in the Origin and Work of the American Missionary Association: 1839–1877” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1973). See also: Clara DeBoer, “Blacks and the American Missionary Association,” United Church of Christ, accessed April 1, 2018, http://www.ucc.org/about-us_hidden-histories_blacks-and-the-american.

Many of the early white faculty and staff were missionaries from Northern churches who wanted to support the freedmen and educate their children. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, a significant number of European scholars who had escaped from the Third Reich came to teach at a number of HBCUs. Many, though not all, were Jewish. They brought a distinctive new element to these schools. For more, see: *From Swastika to Jim Crow*, Documentary, directed by Lori Cheatle and Martin D. Toub (2001; San Francisco: Pacific Street Films/ITVS). The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia also held an exhibition on the subject in 2013: *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*, National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia PA, 2013.

segregation and provided student activists across generations a proving ground for their political actions.²⁰

HBCUs were the principle location for Black students to witness how the “Negro Canon” was enacted. HBCUs imbued their students with these values of scholarship, artistic production, and activism. HBCU-educated professionals who founded Black museums were exposed not only to the values and ideals of the “Negro Canon” but to methodologies for expressing or implementing those values institutionally. Perhaps the most critical idea lay in the importance of independent Black venues where Black people were in control of their narratives about history, art, and activism.

Symbolically the whole “Negro Canon” can be summed up by the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”²¹ Written as a poem in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson

²⁰ The sitting presidents and administrators of these colleges were not always pleased with the activities of their students. Still, the HBCUs provided a place where activists could find others of like mind.

²¹ The lyrics are:

“Lift ev’ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod
Bitter the chast’ning rod
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Every day we lit
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.”

(1871–1938), it was later set to music by his brother, John Rosamund Johnson (1873–1954). In 1900, James Weldon Johnson became a distinguished writer, lawyer, and leader of the NAACP.²² Eventually, “Lift Every Voice” was dubbed the “Negro national anthem.”²³ The lyrics of the song express the faith, urgency, and values of what became the “Negro canon.” “Lift Every Voice” was and continues to be featured at virtually every official HBCU event, ASNLH program, and African American church, sung by the audience or performed by a professional soloist or choir. Known today as the “Black national anthem,” “Lift Every Voice” is now in the mainstream of American public history and culture.

Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers 1950–95

After World War II, free-standing museums emerged as a central location for African American historical and cultural production. Although the history of Black museums goes back into the mid-nineteenth century, this new era of museum building was unprecedented.²⁴ Earlier museums had been on the campuses of HBCUs and tended to focus on art collections. Beginning in the 1950s, growing slowly in the 1960s, then bursting into a flood in the 1970s and 1980s, a significant number of grassroots museums/cultural centers sprang up all over the country.²⁵ By 1988, there were more than two hundred African American museums across the nation.²⁶

How did these founders and directors, who had no training as curators, registrars, art historians, exhibit designers, or conservators, manage to build museums that largely survived and flourished for over the years? These men and women shared certain advantages. As individuals, they had sought out good educations, were energetic, and demonstrated strong organizing skills honed by years of community activism. Collectively, they worked well together because most shared the intellectual values, operating protocols, and social networks of America’s HBCUs. Perhaps their greatest source of strength was their visceral understanding that the healing power of the “Negro Canon” could be greatly amplified and expanded if forwarded by Black professionals. As Myrtle Glascoe told me, “These museums

22 There is no full-scale contemporary biography of James Weldon Johnson. However, he did leave a story of his life in two formats: a novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, (New York: Sherman, French, and Co., 1912) and *Along this Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*, (New York: Viking Press, 1968), originally published in 1933.

23 Timothy James, “The Story of the Black National Anthem, ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing,’ Written by James Weldon Johnson,” *Selah* 1 no.1 (Winter, 2013).

24 Fath Davis Ruffins, “Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820–1990,” *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

25 I am using these two terms—“museums” and “cultural centers”—because not all of the Black museums established at this time fit the American Alliance of Museums definition. A key function of the AAAM is to provide support, access to training, help and support for these emerging institutions.

26 *Profile of Black Museums*, African American Museums Association (Washington, DC: African American Museums Association, 1988).

have always got their ups and downs, but it's a lot easier to keep fighting to keep the doors open when you know the community is hungry for what you've got inside."²⁷

Of course, not all of these efforts proved successful. Most museums struggled at various times in their history. Some, such as the Philadelphia Afro-American museum, almost closed. Some died altogether such as the Cleveland Afro American museum founded by Icabod Flewellen. Flewellen created a museum in his home in 1953 to house and exhibit his personal collections of African art and African American artifacts. However, though he worked hard for local support, his museum failed in the 1990s and the bulk of his papers were transferred to East Cleveland Public Library before his death.²⁸

In the early 1980s, most of these African American museums were still being run by the individuals who founded them. Three iconic individuals were Margaret Burroughs at the Ebony Museum of Art and Culture (Chicago, 1959), Charles Wright at the International Afro-American Museum (Detroit, 1965), and Joan Maynard of the Weeksville Heritage Society (Brooklyn, 1968). Other museums were managed by pioneering directors who worked to implement the vision of a museum started by someone else. These directors included E. Barry Gaither at the National Center for Afro-American Artists, an institution founded by Elma Lewis from her pre-existing School for the Arts (Boston, 1968). In 1972, Rushing was selected to head up the African American Museum in Boston after he helped relocate it to the historic African Meeting House on Beacon Hill. Rushing's project was built on the work of the Boston Afro-American Historical Society founded in 1959 by Sue Bailey Thurman.²⁹ Rowena Stewart had the distinction of being both a founder of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Museum (Providence, 1976) the founding director of the Motown Museum, established by Esther Gordy in 1985, and the senior executive of several other museums.

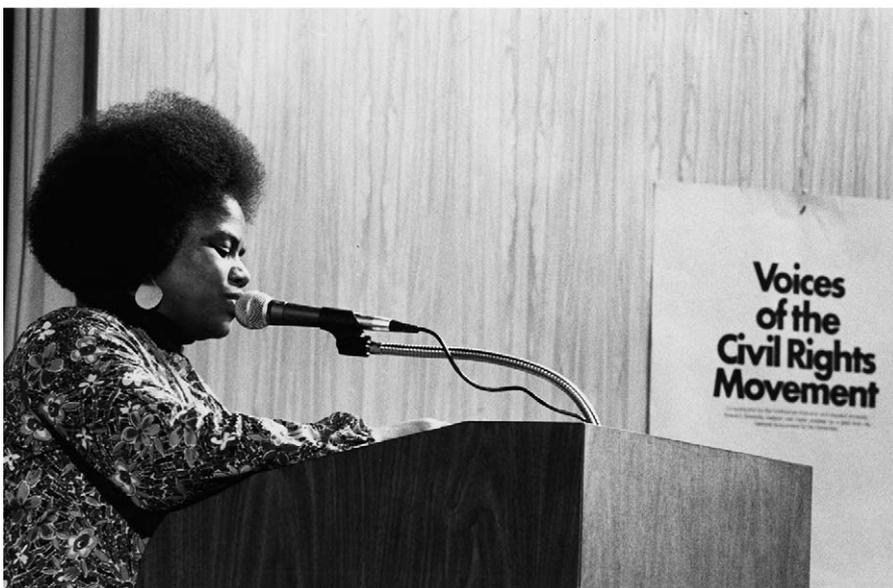
Yet another chapter of the expansion of African American museums in the development of the Black museum movement. Key to the development of this movement are the first generation of Black professionals at the Smithsonian Institution. This first generation of Smithsonian pioneers included John Kinard of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (1967) and Bernice Johnson Reagon and James Early of the Smithsonian's Folklife Center (1969). They played crucial roles as the Smithsonian began to change its longtime narratives in response to the pressures of the post-WWII Civil Rights Movement and the urban rebellions of the 1960s. Black museum founders, founding directors, and pioneers at the Smithsonian Institution all should be considered members of the Black Consciousness Movement.³⁰

27 Myrtle Glascoe, private conversation with the author, May 1988.

28 Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, <https://case.edu/ech/articles/f/flewellen-icabod>.

29 Ruffins, "Mythos, Memory and History," 564.

30 Reagon and Early were not the only African Americans to work at the Folklife Center (there were more than ten). However, here I am concentrating on those whose entire museum career took place at the Smithsonian. Only one other could be included here: John W. Franklin. Franklin began



James Early and Bernice Johnson Reagon were given contracts to produce programs for the Folklife Festival beginning around 1969. (Photo of James Early courtesy of the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution. Photo of Bernice Johnson Reagon courtesy of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)

his longtime SI career at Folklife in the early 1970s, doing research in preparation for the 1976 Folklife Festival. However, he is younger than the three pioneers mentioned here and was not a founder of AAAM, which is why I have not included him in this essay.



John Kinard became the first director of the Anacostia Community Museum, as well as the first director of a Smithsonian Institution museum, in 1967. (Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives. Image # OPA-1654R1-05A)

None of the individuals mentioned here conducted their work alone. There were any number of local African American preservation committees, initial and long-term staff members, and a plethora of supporters and critics. Greater detail about the history of these museums projects is discussed in the sources listed above. However, in this short space, I have concentrated on the founding people who are the bold-faced names associated with these efforts.

In the following section I give a sense of what these founders, founding directors, and pioneers were like as individuals, as well as their shared experiences and values.³¹ These men and women grew up in segregated circumstances, whether in southern towns or northern urban neighborhoods. These men and women were nurtured by historically Black institutions—not only segregated elementary and secondary schools, but also HBCUs, churches, and fraternal and sororal

³¹ Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). See also: Jennifer Scott, “Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century at a Post Emancipation Site,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (May 2015): 73–88 and Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). For a compelling description of the origins of the Studio Museum in Harlem, see Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2016).

organizations, as well as the barber shops, beauty parlors, corner stores, and funeral parlors that made up the neighborhoods and structured the social environments of African American cultural life. Above all, these men and women all shared in common deep exposure and dedication to the “Negro Canon.”

In 1978, twenty-one of these museum founders, founding directors, and other professionals officially formed the organization that became the Association of African American Museums (AAAM).³² The formation of AAAM is a significant occurrence in African American public history because this organization marks the moment when African American museums became a platform for cultural expression in Black communities.³³

I entered this story in January 1981, when I arrived at National Museum of History and Technology (MHT) now known as the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to take up my new job as a historian. A lawyer and former foundation executive named Roger Kennedy was the first director of the NMAH to seek out African American curators or professionals. I joined two other colleagues at MHT, Spencer Crew and Bill Harvey.³⁴ George Washington University professor James Horton was also a key consultant to Roger Kennedy as he went about remaking the museum. Together, we were the first African American professionals to work in the MHT. In our positions in the Smithsonian, we were part of a second wave of Black museum curators and historians, following the pioneering work John Kinard, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and James Early.³⁵

³² The original name for the group was the African American Museums Association (AAMA). However, that name was later changed. For the sake of clarity, I am using AAAM throughout the essay. For a photograph of original group and further description, see: Joy G. Kinard, *The Man, The Movement, The Museum: The Journey of John R. Kinard as the First African American Director of a Smithsonian Institution Museum* (Washington, DC: A.P. Foundation Press, 2017), 168.

³³ AAAM also provided advocacy to these museums at the national level. Working through members of the Legislative Black Caucus on Capitol Hill, and networking with funding organizations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), AAAM represented these museums in the Congressional halls of power.

³⁴ From 1992–94, Spencer Crew was the deputy director. However, in 1994, he became the first (and still only) African American director of the National Museum of American History. Bill Harvey left the museum world in 1994. On Monday, January 19, 1981, I arrived at the National Museum of American History, just barely in the nick of time to accept a job as a historian. President Ronald Reagan was sworn in the next morning. By noon he had signed an executive order to freeze all federal hiring immediately. Only luck got me there in time, since no one had warned me of this possibility! While this is of no great significance historically, for me personally it symbolizes the issues of the Reagan years: the ensuing culture wars, threats to cut off NEH and NEA, the reduction of Smithsonian budgets that resulted in the zeroing out of all federal funds for exhibitions and programs. For the last forty years, all exhibitions and all educational programs have been supported through private fundraising.

³⁵ The first African American employee of the Smithsonian who was not a laborer was Solomon G. Brown, who worked for over fifty years between 1852 and 1906: “Solomon Brown: First African American Employee at the Smithsonian Institution,” *Stories from the Smithsonian*, Smithsonian Institution Archives, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/featured-topics/stories/solomon-brown-first-african-american-employee-smithsonian-institution>. Brown was first brought to public attention by Louise Daniel Hutchinson, the longtime chief of research for the

Sometime during the spring or summer of 1981, Joy Ford Austin called me for an appointment. I suspect that she had been sent by John Kinard, whom I had recently met. She came to my office and asked whether I knew of the African American Museum Association. I had not. Austin introduced herself as its executive director and told me about the organization. My first response was: “I need to join this group!”

When I joined I was twenty-eight years old, and by far one of the youngest and probably the mildest person in the group. All of these founders, founding directors, and pioneers were exceptional, ferocious people, each with a distinctive point of view. To establish and maintain these grassroots enterprises, these founders and founding directors had to negotiate with wily white and Black politicians and be able to sooth grandstanding local agitators. To wrest funds from local businesses, recalcitrant bureaucracies, and reluctant foundations, they had to be persistent, disciplined, and politically savvy.

At the same time, these people had to be charismatic yet approachable because in their local communities, they embodied “Black history.” Rowena Stewart told me that once your neighbors realize that you are the director of their Black museum, they will approach you night and day to ask questions and give suggestions. You can be shopping for shoes or getting your hair done, yet they will stop and converse. “Once you take up the mantle, you have to hold it all the time, no matter how weary,” she said.³⁶

My knowledge of these individuals, their institutions, their challenges and successes draws upon my years as their colleague. From the moment that I entered the MHT museum, I participated in and observed many meetings, panels, lectures, and receptions with these brothers and sisters. I became a close friend and confidante to some; an acquaintance or work colleague of others. I was a consultant to many of

Anacostia Museum, in *“Kind Regards of S. G. Brown”*: *Selected Poems of Solomon G. Brown*, ed. by Louise Daniel Hutchison and Gail Sylvia Lowe (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

Prior to the arrival of the pioneers Kinard and Reagon, there were a small number of African American employees who worked as clerks, specialists, technicians, designers and fabricators. Of these, the most prominent was Margaret Santiago, who rose from a clerk position to become the first registrar of the National History Museum in the 1980s. She was a charter member of AAAM. Margaret Santiago, interview by the author, August 24, 2012.

The first African American curator was probably Lou Purnell, a former Tuskegee Airman. He began as a museum specialist at the Natural History museum, transferred to the National Air and Space Museum in 1968, and was made a curator in 1972. For more information, see: Courtney Bellizzi, “Louis Purnell, Airman and Curator,” Smithsonian Institution Archives, accessed April 11, 2018, <https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/louis-purnell-airman-and-curator>.

The first high-level African American in the Smithsonian was probably Julian Euell, who was Special Assistant to Secretary Dillon Ripley. He was hired around the same time as John Kinard. However, neither of these individuals was particularly active in the Black Museum Movement.

³⁶ Rowena Stewart, in discussion with the author. She said this to me more than once, but I remember it particularly when I visited her at the Philadelphia Afro-American Museum in the 1990s. Over the years, a number of Black museum directors, many still at work, have echoed this sentiment to me.

these museums, and an observer at many conferences, performances, exhibitions and events. For my earlier research, I also conducted an extensive series of personal interviews, including with some people now deceased.³⁷ I also consulted the many interviews conducted by the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the HistoryMakers archive in Chicago. But most of the research was based on personal experience. Watching and listening to these men and women was a privilege that shaped my scholarship.

Though from different regions and operating in somewhat differing political environments, the founders, founding directors and pioneers shared similar characteristics across at least two generations. The chart below reveals some of their key similarities. Most (but not all) attended historically Black colleges for their bachelor degrees and some attended Black universities for their graduate education.

Name	Birthdate	College/Grad School	Institution/Location
Margaret Burroughs**	1915	Chicago Normal College, Chicago Teachers College/ School of the Art Institute, Chicago	Du Sable, Chicago
Icabod Flewellen**	1916	*West Virginia State Univ., *various Cleveland colleges from 1953–1993, Case Western Reserve Univ.	Afro American Cultural and Historical Society Museum

(continued)

³⁷ Being a participant/observer is an unusual position for a historian because historians mostly deal with people who are dead and events that are long over. Participating in and documenting cultural expressions—especially as embodied by the term “culture bearer”—this is an essential experience for an anthropologist. There is extensive anthropological literature about how to navigate these complicated relationships, beginning with Bronislaw Malinowski (1928) and Margaret Mead (1929). For more information, see: Clifford Geertz, “From the Native’s Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* ed. R. A. Shweder and R. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 123–136. See also: Robert V. Labaree, “The risk of ‘going observationalist’: Negotiating the Hidden Dilemmas of Being an Insider Participant Observer,” *Qualitative Research* 2, no.1 (April 2002), 97–122; Renato Rosaldo, “From the door of his tent: the fieldworker and the inquisitor,” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Alpha Shah, “Ethnography? Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no.1 (Spring, 2017): 45–59.

Some HBCUs were founded by Black people or Black Protestant denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which in 1856 established Wilberforce College (Ohio) with minister Daniel Alexander Payne as its first president. In 1881, Booker T. Washington founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. At first, virtually all HBCUs had been run by white founders or ministers appointed by white missionary boards or philanthropists. Over time, various Black men rose to authority such as John Hope at Morehouse College (1906) and Atlanta University (1929); Mordecai Johnson at Howard University (1926); Horace Mann Bond at Lincoln University (1945); Charles S. Johnson at Fisk (1946).

Name	Birthdate	College/Grad School	Institution/Location
Charles Wright, MD**	1918	Alabama State College/ Meharry Medical School	Intl. Afro-American Museum, Detroit
Elma Lewis**	1921	Emerson College, Boston Univ.	Natl. Center of Afro- American Artists, Boston
Paul Stewart**	1925	*Roosevelt University, Moler Barber College	Black America West Museum, Denver
Leo Twiggs, EdD	1934	Claflin College, NY Univ., Univ. of Georgia	I.P. Stanback Museum, Orangeburg, SC
John Kinard**	1936	Livingstone College, Hood Theological Seminary	Anacostia, SI- DC
Rowena Stewart**	1936	Edwin Waters College	Rhode Island Black Heritage, Providence; Afro American Museum, Philadelphia; Motown Museum, Detroit; American Jazz Museum, Kansas City
Myrtle Glascoe, PhD	1936	Howard, U. Penn, Harvard Univ.	Avery Center, Charleston SC
Joan Maynard**	1939	Art Career School, Columbia Univ.	Weeksville Heritage Center, Brooklyn
Howard Dodson	1939	West Chester State College, Villanova Univ., *University of California at Berkeley	Schomburg Center (NYPL,) NYC
Harry Robinson, EdD	1941	Southern Univ., Atlanta Univ., Univ. of Illinois- Urbana Champaign	African American Museum, Dallas
Bettye Collier- Thomas, PhD	1941	Allen Univ., Atlanta Univ. George Washington Univ.	Bethune Museum and Archives, DC
Byron Rushing	1942	*Harvard College	African American Museum, Boston
Bernice Johnson Reagon, PhD	1942	*Albany State College, Spelman College, Howard Univ.	Program in African American Culture, SI-DC
E. Barry Gaither	1944	Morehouse College, Brown Univ.	Natl. Center of Afro- American Artists, Boston
John Fleming, PhD	1946	Berea College, Howard Univ.	National Afro-American Museum, Wilberforce Ohio; National Under- ground Railroad Freedom Center, Cincinnati;
Thomas Battle, EdD	1946	Howard, Univ. of Maryland, George Washington Univ.	National Moreland- Spingarn (Howard,) DC

(continued)

Name	Birthdate	College/Grad School	Institution/Location
James Early	1947	Morehouse College, Howard Univ.	Folklife Center, DC

*Dropped out before finishing. ** Deceased

(Sources: HistoryMakers: The Nation's Largest African American Video Oral History Collection, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/about-us>; interviews conducted for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2016–18).

Another key benefit of HBCU educations was to be able to observe Black people running their own institutions in a largely secular environment, meaning outside of African American churches.³⁸ Admittedly, at a number of HBCUs, white philanthropist board members or white politicians in state legislatures sometimes wielded outsized power.³⁹ Nonetheless, before 1960, HBCUs were the only major national institutions with a significant number of Black professionals in paid positions of authority. Students at these schools saw Black administrators and staff running the show. Some Black museum folks told glowing stories of administrators or professors whom they admired; others told hilarious tales of how they had evaded a curfew or outfoxed a more conservative professor. Harry Robinson of the Dallas African American Museum once told me a very funny story about the president of one of the schools he had attended commenting on “controlling Black people.” In an avuncular manner, the president opined that, “Negroes are just wild, just wild, and they can only be ruled with a strong hand.” Robinson and I both laughed but we both knew that this had shaped his own institution as well. Their experiences on HBCU campuses shaped Black museum founders and pioneers as they sought the confidence to start and manage new organizations.

These Black museum movers and shakers shared other characteristics as well. Their birthdates indicate that they all grew to adulthood and trained for their professions under the strictures of de jure and de facto segregation, regardless of where they were, North or South. None had any professional museum experience or training at all. Charles Wright was a gynecologist. Margaret Burroughs was a locally known artist, published poet, and long-time art teacher in the Chicago public schools. Elma Lewis was a renowned speech therapist and actor. Paul Stewart was a barber who owned his own shop. Rowena Stewart was a social worker in Jacksonville, Florida and Providence, Rhode Island. John Kinard was a trained minister and remained an assistant pastor throughout his life. Their

³⁸ Black churches were the single most important institutions in all African American communities. However, male ministers overwhelmingly ran these churches, along with a board or group of elders often dominated by older men. Though Black women made up the vast number of congregants, very few could be ministers (only in some Pentecostal churches).

³⁹ These potentially problematic relationships were famously lampooned by Ralph Ellison in the early chapters of his novel, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

professional accomplishments meant that they were respected members of the Black middle class. Their professional self-esteem undoubtedly helped them to successfully interact and negotiate with skeptical white powerbrokers.

Another element they had in common was that these folks were all involved in the social and political struggles of their times. Elma Lewis and Margaret Burroughs lived through the 1930s, a time of radical social ferment, and also through the repressions of the 1950s when earlier activism was often punished. For example, Margaret Burroughs had been deeply involved with Chicago's Arts and Craft Guild that later merged into the progressive Southside Community Art Center, which opened in 1940. A place where young people could study art and professional artists could exhibit, the center became a haven for artists and art activists, including some of who had been Communists during the Popular Front era of the 1930s.⁴⁰ By the 1950s, the Art Center came under attack, became a more conservative institution, and eventually asked firebrand Burroughs to leave.⁴¹

The ongoing engine of the modern Civil Rights Movement and increasing unrest in northern and urban cities affected everyone. In nearly every speech he gave, Charles Wright spoke about his experiences of serving as a doctor during the southern civil rights struggle, and especially his participation in the bloody Selma March, where he had joined demonstrators in walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Myrtle Glascoe was active with the Baltimore chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and later she worked in Mississippi for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), staying there to run a Head Start program.⁴² Bernice Johnson Reagon had left Albany State to work for SNCC's headquarters in Atlanta. She later went to Mississippi where she was among the original four members of the Freedom Singers.⁴³ James J. Early had been a member of a number of radical organizations, and found a political home at the left-leaning Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC. All raised money, volunteered time and resources, and in some cases put their bodies on the line to support the Freedom Movement, North and South. Many also took part in the protests against the Vietnam War and the later struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's work emerged directly from her years as a SNCC field secretary and Freedom Singer. She was initially hired as a consultant to the

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Negro Building*, 233–35.

⁴¹ Margaret Burroughs was the only one to leave her own version of her story: Dr. Margaret T. G. Burroughs, *Life with Margaret: The Official Autobiography* (Chicago: Time Pub and Media Group, 2003). For more information on Margaret Burroughs, see Anne Meis Knapfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Margaret Burroughs interview, *The HistoryMakers*, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/margaret-burroughs-40>; and Margaret Burroughs, interview by Wayne Coleman, National Museum of African American History and Culture, November 18, 2005.

⁴² Myrtle G. Glascoe, interview by Dwandalyn Reece, Civil Rights History Project, National Museum of African American History and Culture, November 17, 2010.

⁴³ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Smithsonian's Folklife Festival by Ralph Rinzler, the festival's co-founder, who knew her from his years working for the Newport Folk Festival. Rinzler gave Reagon and a number of others, including James Early, contracts to produce programs for the Folklife Festival beginning around 1969. In the early 1970s, the Smithsonian and other organizations began to plan their programs for the upcoming bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1976.⁴⁴ In 1974, Rinzler brought Bernice Johnson Reagon on as a full-time employee to research and plan the groundbreaking African Diaspora program. The purpose of this program was "to make a comprehensive statement about the dispersal of Black culture. The area [of the festival] pays tribute to the varied cultural contributions of Black American communities and documents how Black peoples and cultures flourish through the world."⁴⁵ Most folklife festivals were two weeks long; in 1976 the festival lasted for the whole summer. Although this festival was very successful and the African Diaspora section proved transformative for many visitors, there were some contentious issues. A particularly infamous episode occurred when Ralph Rinzler forced the African/Caribbean/African American all-night drumming to stop. Harsh words were exchanged, including a critique that "people tried to stop us from drumming when we were enslaved and we won't put up with this now."⁴⁶

While the Diaspora program was an enormous success, Bernice Johnson Reagon was unhappy about the various confrontations, and so decided to found her own program that she could control. She left Folklife Center for the Smithsonian's Division of Performing Arts and founded the Program in Black American Culture (PBAC). In 1983, the Division of Performing Arts was dissolved and Reagon moved the program to Roger Kennedy's MHT.⁴⁷

With the Program in African American Culture (PAAC), Reagon was able to produce a remarkable series of public programs, academic research, and musical recordings. Although there were evening and Saturday events throughout the year, PAAC's focus was on producing a major conference during Black History Month. Topics ranged from the music of the Civil Rights Movement, the history of gospel music, and the history of African Americans during the Revolution and the early national period, among many others. This work is attested to by her extensive range of publications and recordings, which have added to the historical and ethnomusicological literature on African Americans.

44 For a general discussion of the national preparations for the Bicentennial see: M.J. Rymsza-Pawlowska, *History Comes Alive: Public History and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

45 Program of the 1976 Festival of American Folklife, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution and National Park Service), 16.

46 Ruffins, "Mythos, Memory and History," 577–80. This incident was mentioned by a number of people I interviewed for that essay, including Ralph Rinzler, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and James Early, so I got to hear various sides of the story.

47 In 1989, the name of the program was officially changed to the Program in African American Culture.

Over years of working with Reagon and her second-in-command, Niani Kilkenny, I watched and absorbed her methodologies for public history research, public presentation, and program management.⁴⁸ Reagon believed that the richest research and exhibits came about through collaboration between scholars, “culture-bearers,” and artists, particularly performing artists.⁴⁹ The combination of her intense personality, her long history in the liberation struggle, her doctorate in music, her powerful vocal musicality, and her prestige as the co-founder of the *a capella* singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, gave Reagon enormous clout and charisma. She was a true diva who inhabited that term with the power of her achievements. Short but intense, draped in custom-made, African diaspora inspired clothes, Reagon swept through the Smithsonian landscape. Although Reagon projected a serene peaceful quality, she could use her deep voice, magnificent range of references, and her penetrating gaze to concentrated effect. Her scholarship and her commitment to public history produced significant books and recordings, especially those documenting the music of the Civil Rights Movement and the history of gospel music.⁵⁰

These founders, founding directors, and pioneers started out as social workers, doctors, artists, scholars, or ministers, but came to believe that building permanent homes for Black history provided a wider way of healing the African American community’s cultural traumas. Each supported local social movements and national campaigns that strengthened their sense of mission. Their years of activism taught them many valuable skills they later applied in their museum work, one of the most important of which was how to confront overt discrimination without backing down or quitting in disgust.

When I interviewed John Kinard, he told me many stories about racist encounters at the highest levels of the Smithsonian. For instance, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, S. Dillon Ripley, regularly met with a committee comprised of all the directors of its museums and research centers. Kinard had been director of the Anacostia Museum since 1967. In 1969, noted historian Daniel Boorstin became the fourth director of MHT, and soon after that, attended one of these meetings. Upon Kinard’s arrival, Boorstin took great offense, calling him unqualified to be the

48 Niani Kilkenny later became the third director of PAAC in 1995.

49 “Culture bearers” is a term used mostly by anthropologists and folklorists. The term refers to any individual who carries, and thus diffuses, cultural values and traits in their original community or as migrants to another. The role of culture bearers is particularly important within those cultures undergoing transition or experiencing threat from outside the culture. The Folklife Center was organized to principally support the role of “culture bearers” in “folk” arts, crafts, music, storytelling, and other forms of cultural expressions, especially those outside the mainstream of American life.

50 Reagon’s work as a scholar and composer is reflected in her publications on African-American culture and history, including: a collection of essays entitled *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001); *We Who Believe In Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock . . . Still on the Journey* (Anchor Books, 1993); and *We’ll Understand It Better By And By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* (Smithsonian Press, 1992). Reagon also recorded several albums on Folkways Records including *Folk Songs: The South*; *Wade in the Water*; and *Lest We Forget, Vol. 3: Sing for Freedom*.

director of a museum, and threatening to leave if Kinard was seated. John Kinard, not a tall man and somewhat portly, nevertheless had a commanding voice and an authoritative presence. Imbued with the righteousness of millions of ancestral voices, he mustered all of his ministerial dignity and calmly said that he had been appointed the director and that he would take his seat, just as many protestors had taken their seats at lunch counters and bus stations across the South. Secretary Ripley stood up and welcomed Kinard to the meeting, while Boorstin left in a huff. This is not to portray Ripley as a great liberal savior; he had very conventional ideas about Anacostia and the needs of poor people to be elevated. Nonetheless, he supported John Kinard as the community's chosen leader, and was willing to face down recalcitrant staff that did not support his decision and therefore challenged his power as secretary.⁵¹ On some level, Boorstin might have been correct that Kinard was not qualified to be the director of MHT, Boorstin's museum. Yet Boorstin was dead wrong about the Anacostia Museum, where Kinard had been selected as the director by the community group that had secured the neighborhood museum for the Smithsonian.⁵²

Kinard often laughed about this experience, because to him this was a familiar confrontation. However, it was probably new to Daniel Boorstin, whose underlying racism lay exposed for all to see. It was Boorstin, not Kinard, who ended up embarrassed and forced to concede.⁵³ This story provides some sense of what African American pioneers at the Smithsonian faced and the personal resources they had to muster in order to survive on their own terms.⁵⁴ Bernice Johnson Reagon told me repeatedly that it was important to decide what your "mission" was. Once you were clear on your mission, you could "work your plan from a broom closet or from a grand office." The key point was to be firm in your resolve to accomplish something for the betterment of Black people.⁵⁵

Although the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum has often been celebrated for its exhibition on "The Rat: Man's Invited Affliction," Kinard and his research staff were very concerned about adding to the scholarly materials on African American history and culture. Louis Daniel Hutchinson was the long-time head of research. Gail S. Lowe, who grew up in the neighborhood, was a youth volunteer in 1967, and

51 Ripley's comments about needing a museum in Anacostia can be found in Andrea Burns's *From Storefront to Monument*, 38–40.

52 Zora Martin-Felton and Gail S. Lowe, *A Different Drummer: John Kinard and the Anacostia Museum 1967–1989* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1990).

53 On several occasions, I was told by the late NMAH curator Keith Melder that Boorstin was adamantly opposed to the acquisition of any materials or objects related to African Americans. Boorstin thought that Black people had no history and were strictly a Southern, not national, "problem." A curator in the division that came to be called Political History, Melder was the first curator to actively collect materials and artifacts related to the Freedom Movement. He told me that he had to "smuggle" the stuff in so that Boorstin did not notice it.

54 John Kinard, interview with the author, April 11, 1985. Kinard always spoke about his respect for Secretary Ripley, with whom he had a very cordial working relationship. This was in stark contrast to his combative relationship with Ripley's successor, Secretary Robert McCormick Adams.

55 Bernice Johnson Reagon, interview with the author, August 26, 1990, and September 14, 1990.

later received a PhD from George Washington University, later joined Hutchinson. Lowe and Portia James, who had a master's degree from Howard University, formed the curatorial and research team for more than thirty years.⁵⁶ They were among the first to produce innovative local history exhibitions as well as important exhibitions on the African past, on Black inventors, and on African American religious history. Reagon and Kinard were able to add to scholarship in addition to creating their exhibitions and performing public outreach work.⁵⁷

Another shared connection among these folks lay in their shared experiences as visitors to various African countries. On his first trip in 1962, John Kinard spent months in Kenya as a field representative for Operation Crossroads Africa.⁵⁸ John Fleming was a Peace Corp volunteer in Malawi between 1967 and 1968. Bernice Johnson Reagon visited Tanzania with a group of SNCC veterans. Over the years, most of these pioneers visited places on the continent, including James Early, who went there to conduct research for the Folklife Center's 1976 festival under the direction of Bernice Johnson Reagon. Others, such as Margaret Burroughs, participated in international events such as FESTAC '66 and '77. FESTAC was the First World Festival of Black Arts, held in 1966 in Dakar, Senegal; the second FESTAC was held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977.

These first-hand experiences among African nations were very unusual for their time. The Black Consciousness Movement sparked a growing focus on earlier African history, Pan-Africanism, and African liberation struggles. This new interest in African cultures marked an extremely significant extension of the earlier "Negro Canon." African-inspired political thought, paintings, sculptures, poems, novels, music, and dance all played a major part in the aesthetic appeal of the Black museum movement. Black museums became neighborhood centers where ordinary people could learn about African history and cultures untainted by the disdain of white supremacy. There people could discover that Black scholars like Leo Hansberry, who taught for many years at Howard University, had long been interested in Africa.⁵⁹ However, few of the people speaking, writing or composing these

56 Tragically, all three of these women are now deceased. I knew and interviewed them all in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recently, I re-interviewed Gail Lowe in 2014.

57 The publications of the Anacostia Museum include: Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977); Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *Out of Africa: From West African Kingdoms to Colonization* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1979); Portia James, *The Real McCoy: African American Invention and Innovation 1619-1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989); and Gail S. Lowe, *Speak to my Heart: Communities of Faith and Contemporary African American Life* (Washington, DC Smithsonian Press, 1999).

58 Kinard, *The Man, The Movement, The Museum*, 55-68.

59 Leo Hansberry (1894-1965) was the first academician to teach a course on African Studies, which he introduced at Howard University in 1922. Hansberry studied at Harvard University, Oxford University and the University of Chicago but did not finish his PhD. Hansberry was also the founder of the Ethiopian Research Council. Among his famous students were Chancellor Williams and John Henrik Clarke, whose works were important additions to scholarship during the Black Consciousness Era.

works (especially in the early 1960s and 1970s) had actually visited any African nation. Indeed, the Afrocentric “first fruits” holiday, Kwanzaa, was imagined by Ron Karenga long before he ever set foot upon the continent.⁶⁰

By the 1990s, the majority of leadership had taken at least one trip to the continent and some such as Kinard, Early, and Gaither had taken many. Talking with the founders and pioneers about their varying experiences in Africa was especially interesting to me, because as the child of a Foreign Service Officer, I had lived and traveled there. “Africa” was not an imaginary place to me, but a collection of nations with very distinct histories, socio-political cultures, and natural environments. These founders and pioneers brought their real, lived experiences to the discussions about Africa in taking place in their museums, sometimes helping to counter the fanciful imaginings of a public that was enthusiastic, but lightly informed.

All in all, these two founding generations shared much in common: growing up in segregated schools and neighborhoods; deep investment in the “Negro Canon”; matriculation at HBCUs; a history of social and political activism; and for many, a grounding in the African hopes and realities of the time. If these were the commonalities, what were their differences?

Perhaps it is no surprise to say that “gender matters.” In AAAM, gender fueled a number of the arguments about strategy, planning, resource allocation, and even fundraising. Powerful women who had founded their own museums came together with men who had done the same. Talkative and relentless, Margaret Burroughs could stop a meeting cold with a lengthy harangue, if she thought it necessary to get her point across. Rowena Stewart was a tall, imposing woman with a booming voice. She towered over some of the shorter male founders and pioneers. Joan Maynard had a quiet voice and tended to be a peacemaker, but she too would hold fast to her points and would not be intimidated. Each of these women achieved tremendous respect, but sometimes privately complained that their words were not being listened to by some of the men.⁶¹

In the beginning, all of these museums were grassroots operations, running on a financial shoestring, supported by an army of local volunteers, students, and artists. Because they were not as inhibited as mainstream museums and sometimes because they lacked ideas of how things were “supposed to be done,” Black museum professionals were often able to be inventive and nimble. For example, in 1967 the International Afro-American Museum (Detroit) introduced the Mobile Museum that toured the city, providing access to many children and families who

60 Known today as Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga, he invented Kwanzaa as the first Pan-African holiday. Keith A. Mayes, *Kwanzaa: Black Power and the Making of the African-American Holiday Tradition* (London: Routledge Press, 2009).

61 For a number of years in the 1980s, I was the elected Secretary of AAAM and heard these discussions at board meetings and conferences. I was also privy to the private complaints of a number of women directors.

could not travel to Wright's small building.⁶² Many of these Black museums excelled at quickly producing exhibitions, involving student and adult volunteers, and designing public programs. In the wider history of American museums, they have not received full credit for their creative influence on the exhibitions and educational programs of mainstream museums.

However, these same institutions often had serious deficiencies in terms of collecting and collections management, and their research capacities were almost nonexistent. During the late 1980s and 1990s, I was a frequent consultant to a number of the Black museums and to organizations such as the American Association of Museums (AAM) as I helped to produce proprietary collections assessments and provide scholarly assistance on exhibition projects. Few of these museums had adequate collection policies or procedures until the 1990s. At that point, too many of their collections were a mishmash of airport quality African art, "slave made" materials of very questionable provenance, and racist memorabilia posing as Black collectables. There were some treasures, however, often artifacts and materials that documented the local communities' history. But often "archives" were simply filing cabinets jammed full of copies of photographs and documents. Even places run in a professional manner, such as the Museum of Afro-American History in Wilberforce Ohio or the Anacostia Museum were hampered by inadequate budget allocations that left them with too-small storage facilities and chronically overworked staffs.

As these museums moved from "storefront to monument," clashes developed between their grassroots origins and the growing desire of many staff to become fully professional museums.⁶³ As younger people joined the staff, they were more likely to bring specific training in some aspect of museum work, such as exhibition development and design, museum education, registration, or conservation. As scholarship about African American history and culture expanded, funding agencies, foundations and state humanities councils wanted to see university-based scholarship as the foundation of exhibitions and programming. This exacerbated long-standing tensions between museum staffs and academics.⁶⁴

With professionalization, some founding directors, such as Byron Rushing, moved on to other projects and left the mantle to others. A few, like Margaret Burroughs, were unhappy with these changes, even as the DuSable Museum moved into Chicago's Park district, got bigger buildings, and more acclaim. She

62 Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building*, 271–82.

63 Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 129–55.

64 There is lot to say about this and not enough space in this essay. In her November 18, 2005 interview with Wayne Coleman of the NMAAHC, Margaret Burroughs explicitly talks about these tensions and her resentment of academic scholars who "want to tell us about us." In the 1970s, these tensions were especially high, as many of the scholars writing on Black history and culture were actually white, or sometimes Jewish. Even as more young, Black scholars emerged, there were still generational tensions that replaced the earlier racial ones. As an ethnographer of the museum world, I became acutely sensitive to these worries. From Bernice Johnson Reagon, I learned how to incorporate a diversity of voices, while regarding each one with respect.

bedeviled a series of younger, more recently educated directors and held the reins of power until shortly before her death in 2010.⁶⁵ In Detroit, the board of the International Museum grew fed up with founder Charles Wright's insistence on managing the place regardless of who was named the director. In 1990, Wright was asked to leave the museum.

Some museums with an eye to tourism, such as the DuSable and the Detroit museums, moved from their original locations in Black neighborhoods to larger downtown venues. These new buildings required greater financial support, which often came from major local businesses and banks that had spurned the earlier, smaller, grassroots entities. New financial realities meant that the role of the director had to change. Eventually, most of the older founders passed or retired and younger people took the reins, some of whom had training in cultural management and experiences in the foundation world or the private sector that became deeply relevant as these monuments and their larger staffs needed to be sustained.

Other museums witnessed the neighborhood changing around them. During the 1980s and 1990s, many Black neighborhoods were devastated by the crack epidemic and the ensuing violence and mass incarceration. For example, the Anacostia museum had opened in the renovated Carver movie theater right on Nicholls Avenue, a major neighborhood thoroughfare that later became Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue. In 1967 this was fine location, but by the 1980s that corner had become "crack central," a dangerous open-air drug market. To get away from that, the Smithsonian moved the Anacostia Museum into a newly built building on a beautiful, but relatively isolated hill that was a very long hard walk from their original accessible location.⁶⁶

Other founders and first directors took change and growth more easily. Rowena Stewart left the Rhode Island Black Heritage Museum that she had founded and managed museums in Philadelphia and Detroit. In 1998 John Fleming left the Wilberforce museum where he had been the founding director. He joined a new startup project that developed into the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. In 1989, the Anacostia Museum was forced to find a new director because Kinard died of a long illness.⁶⁷

65 Here I will say only that I had many private conversations with former directors and other staff of the DuSable Museum, including people whose conflicts with Margaret Burroughs became public, such as Amina Dickerson and Dr. Gwen Robinson. One director was actually ousted by Burroughs during a meeting of the AAAM at the DuSable!

66 Some action was clearly needed at the time that Kinard made the decision to move uphill on Morris Road. He told me that he had been persuaded to do so by Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams. When the brand-new facility opened in 1987, Kinard told me that he deeply regretted the decision. Though the museum had more space for everything, including staff, it had lost its immediate connection with ordinary folk on Martin Luther King Avenue, at the center of Black Anacostia. This new museum opened in 1987 and Kinard died in 1989.

67 Longtime staffers Zora Martin Felton and James Mayo became co-directors in the interim, but it was clear that a permanent director had to be located. After a national search, Steven Newsome became the second director of the Anacostia Museum in 1990.

All in all, the Black museum founders, founding directors, and pioneers were a uniquely successful group of people. Exposure to the “Negro Canon” provided a foundation, and their histories of activism had prepared them to seize the opportunities that came their way. The Black Power movement, the urban rebellions and other dislocations of the 1960s shook American society. However, that moment also opened fissures in the barriers that made progress possible. By the end of the 1990s, African American history, art, and culture had dozens of permanent homes across the nation. The National Park Service established numerous African American historic sites and revitalized others, such as the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Anacostia. The Black museums and their constant drumbeat of Black history programming and outreach brought “Black History Month” to recognition by the federal government, most states, and many cities. Public school systems now teach some Black history, whereas fifty years ago none was taught. Despite President Ronald Reagan’s reluctance, in 1986, the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday became law.

Indeed, the National Museum of African American History and Culture probably would not exist without the forty years of struggle that these founders and pioneers performed. We should view these individuals and their museums as a crucial contributors to the Black consciousness movement, recognizing their work in 1960s and 1970s and beyond. Black people had struggled to achieve a memorial, monument or museum since the 1910s.⁶⁸ Yet it was not until a hundred years later that this grandest of all the African American museums stood proudly on the National Mall. While other political, social and academic forces were simultaneously at work, Black history museums deserve credit for their contribution to this landmark moment. These formidable individuals and their institutions provided permanent homes for Black history, chronicling African American culture in unprecedented fashion.

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⁶⁸ Robert L. Wilkins, *Long Road to a Hard Truth: The 100 year Mission to Create the National Museum of African American History and Culture* (Washington, DC: Proud Legacy Publishing, 2016). See also: Mabel O. Wilson, *Begin with the Past: Building the National Museum of African American History and Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2016).

exhibitions, other African American exhibitions and on many community history projects around the country. Between 2011 and 2014, she served as original project director of *Many Voices, One Nation*, and an exhibition that opened at NMAH in 2017. At present, she is at work on a book project that examines how the Smithsonian Institution changed over the last fifty years to become more diverse in terms of collections, exhibitions and staff. The working title is “Curating While Black.”

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