

The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums

Jeff Hayward and Christine Larouche

ABSTRACT: This article offers an overview of the field of African American museums, describing the growth and variety of museums created, basic operational characteristics, their service to their communities, and perceived challenges in the present and future. The data were obtained through two national surveys, each of which had a focused purpose to serve the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), and were funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Data from those surveys describe the outlines of the field of African American museums, many of which are small and undercapitalized, but driven by vital missions and a passionate commitment to their communities.

KEY WORDS: African American, museum, movement, cultural museums, Black museums

The field of African American museums is a relatively young, energetic, and expanding cultural community. This observation comes from data about the operations of African American museums and perceptions of people in the field, derived from two national surveys. Commissioned by the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), the first of these is referred to as the “National Survey” and was concluded in 2008 with the goal of identifying as many African American museums as possible and collecting data about their characteristics and operations. The second is referred to as the “AAAM Needs Assessment” and was primarily about understanding the needs of museum organizations with an explicit focus on African American themes (whether institutional members of AAAM or not) and individual members of AAAM (regardless of where they work)¹ in order to inform strategic planning for the Association. That study was conducted primarily in 2016, with the final report produced in 2017.

1 Individual members of AAAM include professionals who work at African American museums, other associated roles (board member, volunteer) at those museums, professionals (mostly African American) who work at mainstream museums, as well as a variety of independents (people at universities, or retired from a museum career, or consultants) who do substantial work related to African American museums or interpretation.

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Taken together, these two national studies offer some perspective on the history of the field, the characteristics of the array of African American museums, their role in serving their constituents and communities, and challenges they face in sustaining and developing the field.

History

Although pioneering African American museums began in the nineteenth century—the Hampton University Museum in Virginia was established in 1868—evidence of the emergence of a “field” of African American museums seems to point to a hundred years later, the 1960s, as the seminal period when key African American museums established themselves as a force in the museum world. For example, writer Dr. Margaret Burroughs, an admirer of W. E. B. Du Bois, was inspired by his work to found Chicago’s DuSable Museum of African American History in 1961 with the mission to showcase both Black history and the work of Black artists. In 1969, activist and minister John Kinard, with the support of the Smithsonian Institute, founded the Anacostia Community Museum in Washington, DC. The Museum fully engaged with the surrounding Black community, offering exhibitions and public programs focused on African American history, community issues, local history, and the arts. In 1968, envisioned by a diverse group of artists, activists, philanthropists, and Harlem residents, the Studio Museum opened in Harlem with much critical success and community support; it continues to play a vital role in the African American community and the museum world today. In fact, the growth of museums in general in the United States primarily occurred after WWII, and really gained steam in the 1970s.² For a broad perspective with context, there are in-depth and scholarly histories of the development of black museums.³ Supplementing those works, the two studies reported here offer data on three components of this history: the timing of when new museums opened, their geographic distribution, and the elusive question of how many African American museums have been created.

The unprecedented surge of African American museums in the 1970s can be attributed to the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements—all of which gained momentum in the 1960s. The influence of the Civil Rights Movement, especially, prompted the founding of new museums in the South, where many of the intense events of the period occurred. However, the emergence of new

² Statistics give an indication of the increase in the number of museums and in museum visiting. Of 8,200 museums reported in the United States in 1988, 75 percent had been founded since 1950 and 40 percent since 1970. For more, see: Geoffrey D. Lewis, “History of museums,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, revised September 25, 2000, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-museums-398827>.

³ John E. Fleming, “The Impact of Social Movements on the Development of African American Museums” in this issue, 44–73; Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

Growth of African American museums through the decades

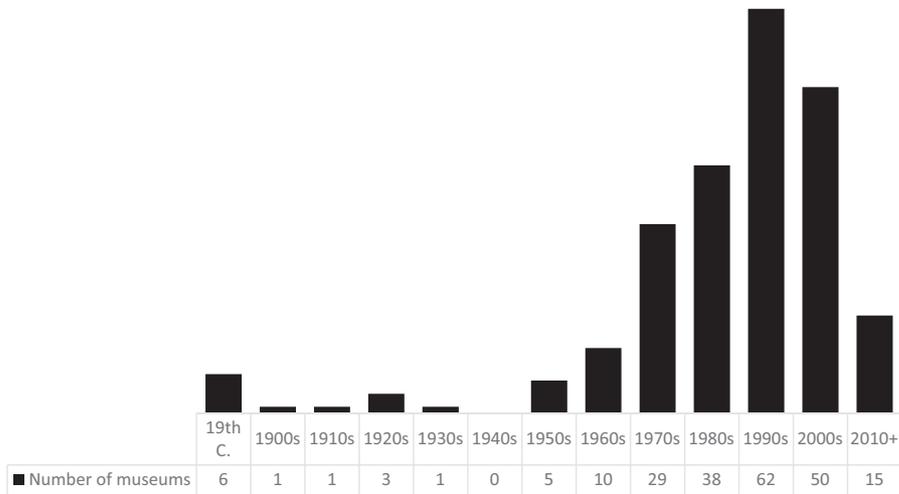


Figure 1. The timing of development of the field of African American museums.

museums was not a flash in the pan; new African American museums developed in succeeding decades, and continue to open. Along with that surge came the informal series of Black Museums Conferences, which became the African American Museums Association, which later renamed itself as the Association of African American Museums (AAAM).⁴

Geographically, the swell of new museums began in the South—there were so many stories to tell, so much to commemorate, and many of the intense events of the Civil Rights Movement happened there (see figure 2). However, an indicator of the increasing strength and diversity of the field is the fact that other regions have opened more facilities to the point where now there are African American museums in at least thirty-four states.

The strength of the field is unmistakable. Two key pieces of evidence are:

- the diversity of themes and subject matter across the country—including museums that focus on distinctive individuals, music, art, slavery, baseball, civil rights, firefighters, Buffalo Soldiers, Tuskegee Airmen and other themes;⁵ and

⁴ “Mission and History,” Association of African American Museums, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://aaam.wildapricot.org/missionandhistory>.

⁵ See the listings of specific museums in either of the reports of the two national surveys: Jeff Hayward and Brian Werner, *Assessment of the Field: African American Cultural Organizations* (unpublished research report, Association of African American Museums, 2008), or Jeff Hayward, Christine Larouche & Marla Shelasky, *National Needs Assessment for the Association of African American Museums* (unpublished research report, Association of African American Museums, 2017).

Growth of African American museums analyzed by time period and region of the country

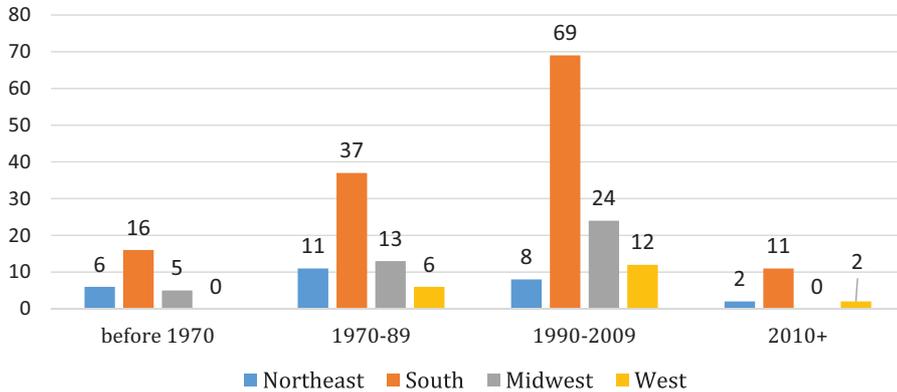


Figure 2. Growth of African American museums analyzed over time and region of the United States.⁶

African American Museums in all regions of the country

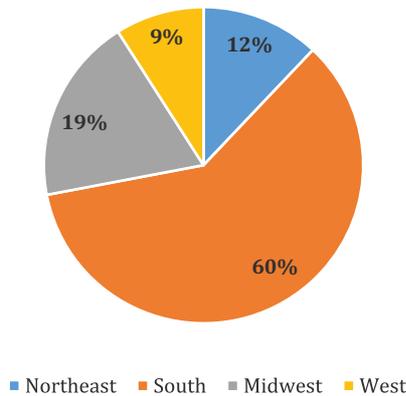


Figure 3. Geographic distribution of African American museums in the United States.

- the dramatic and impressive 2016 opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington DC, which has energized the field. The nationally televised media coverage and discussion was extensive, and ten months later the 2017 annual conference of AAAM, hosted by the new National Museum, attracted many more attendees than ever before.

The question of how many African American museums exist arises frequently. While conducting the National Survey for AAAM in 2007–08, it became apparent

⁶ Northeast: CT, DE, DC, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT; South: AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, WV, VA); Midwest: IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI; West: AZ, CA, CO, ID, OR, MT, NM, NV, UT, WA, WY.

why it's so difficult to answer the question: many of the museums are so small—e.g., no paid staff, run by volunteers—that they aren't able to communicate in expected ways (answering surveys, or mail, or phone calls, or having a website or domain name for email). Historian Andrea A. Burns cites a 1988 study from the African American Museums Association that obtained responses from fifty-two African American museums.⁷ It is impossible to know how many museums did not respond to that survey, but clearly, the number of existing museums was greater than the number of those that responded, and has increased dramatically in the past five decades, especially during the 1990s and 2000s. In 2007–2008, 163 museums⁸ provided enough information to be analyzed in the National Survey.⁹ The 2017 Needs Assessment identified 215 museums,¹⁰ but only 165 responded despite all having been contacted multiple times by various means of communication. At this point, there are 221 museums with information obtainable from direct communication or indirect data collection via websites. Therefore, this latest figure of 221 African American museums is the best available estimate of how many exist in the United States at this time.¹¹

Characteristics

Although African American museums vary considerably in size, the Needs Assessment found that—similar to the pattern of all museums in the United States—most are small and work with modest resources.¹² Size can be defined by staffing, annual budget, or physical space—of these, the first two are the most indicative.

Data about staffing collected in both the 2008 National Survey and the 2017 Needs Assessment indicate a stark reality about small museums: some operate with no paid staff at all, and about one-third have no full-time staff. Among the museums that responded to the surveys, the median number of paid staff is six, and the median number of volunteers is ten.

⁷ Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*.

⁸ Technically, in the 2007–08 National Survey, the definition of “museum” was “an African American cultural organization” with these criteria: African American content as a primary emphasis of the organization’s mission, presenting collections to the public, and not including for-profit galleries that only offer items for sale.

⁹ An incentive for museums to participate in the 2008 assessment was a one-year institutional membership.

¹⁰ In the 2017 Needs Assessment, the range of organizations included African American museums, libraries, and archives. Of the responding organizations, 82 percent were totally or partially defined as a museum; others were cultural centers, libraries, archives, or combinations of those.

¹¹ The 2017 Needs Assessment includes at least two museums that have not yet opened to the public, but are functioning as legitimate 501(c)3 entities.

¹² Jeff Hayward, Christine Larouche, and Marla Shelasky, “2017 National Needs Assessment for the Association of African American Museums,” (Unpublished research report, 2017), 5. As DuSable Museum trustee Earl Moore vividly put it: ‘Most [museums] in the city were endowed with money. Our institution was endowed with blood, sweat, and tears.’” Quoted from Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 154.

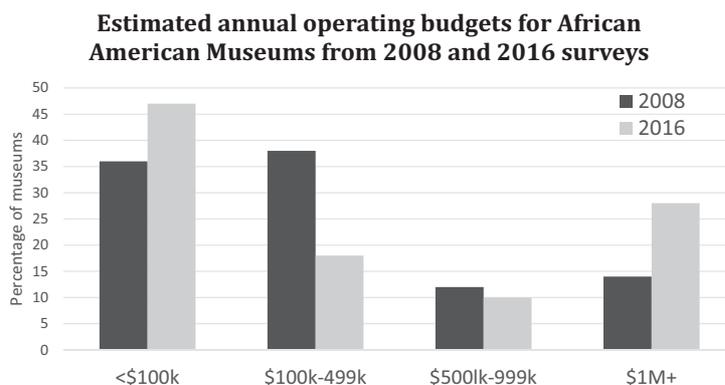


Figure 4. Annual operating budgets for African American museums. (Incomplete data from both surveys)

Finances, as expressed in an annual operating budget, also demonstrate the commitment that staff and volunteers have to their museums, as many work with minimal resources and persevere in creative ways. Funding is the biggest issue facing African American museums, according to the museum directors surveyed, and these museums “have severe operational challenges in virtually every aspect of their existence.”¹³ Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of annual operating budgets of museums surveyed who were willing or able to disclose this information; we suspect that the non-responding museums (which tend to be the very smallest institutions) would skew this distribution even more toward the low end.

Additional museum characteristics of interest include governance structure, electronic communications, exhibition/collection themes, and types of collection materials:

- Governance structure: Two-thirds¹⁴ of African American museums are 501(c)3 private non-profit organizations, about 20 percent are governmentally owned (municipally owned, or state owned), and there are other combinations and governance structures.
- Electronic communications: Even ten years ago, museums that responded to the 2008 National Survey indicated their use of basic electronic services, with 92 percent having Internet access and 91 percent having a website.
- Exhibition and collection themes: The most common themes presented by African American museums are local and regional history, famous

¹³ Hayward, Larouche, and Shelasky, “2017 National Needs Assessment,” 6.

¹⁴ The figures for governance structure are almost exactly the same in the 2008 National Survey and the 2017 Needs Assessment, but vary slightly because of different sample sizes with slightly different participating organizations. For example, depending on the pool of respondents in the different surveys, the proportion of 501(c)3 organizations is either 69 percent or 67 percent; the proportion of municipally owned facilities is either 13 percent or 10 percent; and the proportion of state-owned facilities is either 11 percent or 7 percent.

individuals, African art and history, slavery and abolition, national history including civil rights, as well as art and music.

- Collection materials: African American museums are collecting diverse materials, in various forms. Almost all have photography, historic artifacts, and books or printed materials (91 percent, 89 percent, 88 percent, respectively); most have art, film or video, oral histories, and furniture or furnishings (76 percent, 68 percent, 64 percent, 60 percent, respectively).

Service to their communities

African American museums are, at their root, about celebrating the contributions of Black people to American life, and raising awareness of the inequities that have plagued Black communities historically and in modern times. These museums serve their communities in a variety of ways, including preservation, community advocacy, and programming for social activities, as well as through education and providing a focus for community identity.

Preservation: Many museums surveyed were created as a strategy for preserving a building with a notable history in an African American community—the house of a prominent person, a school, or another community facility. More than half of the museums surveyed (57 percent) have national, state, or local landmark status, with most of those (40 percent) having national landmark status.¹⁵ This value of African American museums may not be obvious to people outside the community, but shoring up the townscape of neighborhoods through historic preservation has tangible and intangible benefits. For example, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) in Birmingham, Alabama, was created to honor and memorialize events of the Civil Rights Movement. Although a new building, its presence between the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the historic Gaston Motel stimulated the creation of a historic Civil Rights District around Kelly Ingram Park, and in 2016 the area was named a National Monument within the National Park Service. Similar stories of community recognition, preservation, and benefit can be told about large museums such as the National Civil Rights Museum at the site of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, as well as smaller historic house museums such as the John G. Riley Center/Museum in Tallahassee, Florida, the Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn, New York, or the Dora Nelson African American Art and History Museum in Perris, California.

Community Advocacy: Many African American museums are well connected with their communities and involved in helping local organizations raise awareness of racial inequities, helping improve the lives of their citizenry, and celebrating the many and varied accomplishments of African Americans. About two-thirds of

¹⁵ The figure of 57 percent of African American museums with landmark status is from the 2008 National Survey, and has probably increased since then.

How African American museums serve their communities

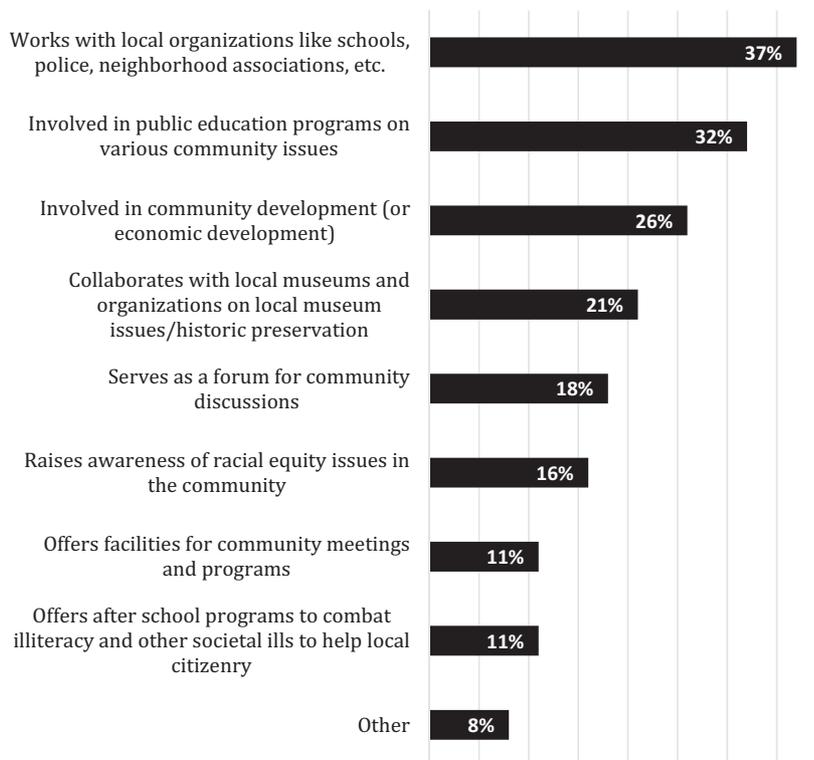


Figure 5. Community advocacy by African American Museums. (Source: Museum directors who answered a question about advocacy in AAAM’s 2017 Needs Assessment)

African American museums say they engage in such advocacy for their local communities. This work manifests itself in myriad ways, from hosting community forums, to training police departments in racial equity issues, to working in economic development with their most vulnerable communities. The many ways that they seek to support community needs are represented in figure 5.

Programming: The public programming of African American museums is educational, enjoyable and lively, and sometimes even life changing. These museums offer on-site school programs, public programs for adults and families, and children’s programs, as well as community outreach initiatives such as in-school programs, living history events, teacher workshops, and performing arts and distance learning opportunities. These programs extend the museums’ ability to disseminate an African American perspective in a variety of areas and for a diverse audience. For example, Prince George’s African American Museum and Cultural Center in North Brentwood, Maryland, offers free, bilingual Spanish and English programs for preschool children and their parents, featuring fun activities

that celebrate their cultural heritage while developing problem-solving, math, and reading skills. A different kind of program is offered at the Tubman African American Museum in Macon, Georgia, which offers an annual Pan African Festival of Georgia—a free weekend festival that explores the cultural impact of the African Diaspora, as expressed in music, dance, film, food, and art.

Challenges for the field

People who work in African American museums are passionate about their missions, and are doing substantial and useful work, often with modest resources. This is a good basis for feeling optimistic about the future of the Black museum movement. However, there are several challenges, as suggested by the 2017 Needs Assessment, that people in the field are constantly confronting:

- Funding is the biggest need and issue for African American museums. Museum directors say they need help with obtaining both funding and advice about fundraising and grant writing.
- After the issue of funding, networking and professional development are the most often cited needs.
- Resources are stretched. Many museum professionals who responded to the Needs Assessment indicated that they function in several roles simultaneously—25 percent work in two roles and 47 percent work in three or more roles.

Most small or large African American museums operate in uncharted territory: many are relatively young, and don't have the benefit of good exemplars to emulate, partly due to their size and unique missions. Unlike science museums, children's museums, art museums, or natural history museums, there is not a typical model or exhibition palette to draw from or to build upon. Also, there have been few traveling exhibitions that could benefit the field and the appeal of individual sites. If you were developing a new African American museum in, say, Arizona, would you want to use the same exhibition framework and content as other successful museums such as the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit? Or the Harvey B. Gantt Cultural Center in Charlotte, North Carolina? Or the BB King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, Mississippi? Probably not. So, inventing what you do as you go along—with a board who may not have had any prior experience with museum management and planning—is a huge challenge. As the field matures, it needs to address the need for strategic support for individual museums, in all areas of operations—management, planning, exhibitions, audience development, finances and sales, staffing and volunteer training, and so on.

The Black museum movement is rich in spirit, operating with limited resources. It is succeeding because of the dedication and commitment of many individuals. The field of African American museums seems likely to become a stronger cultural

community due to leadership from several sources: AAAM for its new strategic planning initiatives including leadership training, professional development using advanced technology, and partnerships with foundations and other associations;¹⁶ IMLS for its ongoing commitment to supporting African American museums, programming, and evaluation; and the Office of Strategic Partnerships at the National Museum of African American History and Culture for its outreach to Black museums around the United States and the Caribbean—all of which are helping to bring the field to the cusp of a much more robust national conversation.

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Christine Larouche, MA, is a trilingual researcher and Senior Project Manager at People, Places & Design Research. Her career in educational programming and audience research for museums involves strategic thinking about the effectiveness of exhibits and related experiences. She enjoys the challenges of defining audiences—especially multicultural or underserved audiences—as well as collaborating on interpretive planning and exhibit evaluations.

¹⁶ For example, at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) in Phoenix, AAAM was invited to be a Twitter partner during the conference and used the opportunity to promote African American museums in the Southwest.