

A Long Journey to the Washington Mall

James F. Brooks

On October 28, 2016, the editorial team of *The Public Historian* waited in a crisp windy dawn for the doors of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) to open. Members of the *TPH* editorial board would soon join us for our annual fall meeting, hosted by Deborah Mack and John Welch of NMAAHC. On our agenda lay a planning discussion for what would become this special issue of our journal, "The State of Black Museums." The pre-ticketed crowd stretched from the entry doors to the sidewalks of Constitution Avenue and around the block down 14th Street SW. We were a short month beyond the grand opening



Sunrise at NMAAHC, October 28, 2016. (Photo by author)



Chuck Berry's Cadillac Eldorado. (Photo by author)

of the museum in September (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/dedication-highlights>); visitation would exceed 700,000 by year's end. Timed-entry tickets were at a premium.¹

That morning, however, our hosts guided us through a VIP line and up a swift elevator to the fifth floor, where a conference room looked south on the National Mall. The Washington Monument stood startlingly large beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. Much of our meeting that day was devoted to planning the issue you find here—fourteen wide-ranging essays and case studies that trace the all-too-slow-yet-inexorable journey from the creation of the first black museum at Hampton Institute in 1868 to the grand opening of NMAAHC in 2016. Mack, associate director for community and constituent services, and Welch, Strategic Communications Coordinator, performed their roles as co-editors with sustained vision and unflagging good-humor. Their goal, to produce a collection in honor of the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Association of African American

¹ "Visitor Statistics," Newsdesk: Newsroom of the Smithsonian (blog), <https://newsdesk.si.edu/about/stats>.



Segregated Pullman Car. (Photo by author)

Museums (AAAM), is fulfilled in these pages. Telling that story, however, required their authors to reach deeper than the AAAM's four decades. Several of these essays offer vital insights on a long century of advocacy, activism, political turmoil, and transcendence that evolved from community-oriented shopfront or house museums into landmark institutions like the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the Charles Wright Museum, and the Boston Museum of African American History—fundamental rehearsals for the achievements of the NMAAHC.

The following morning promised a tour of the exhibits. So large were the entry crowds, however, that we again whisked to higher floors to experience—descending—the African American story in a reverse, Dante-esque, chronology. From the Culture Galleries, featuring an array of object-driven stories around foodways (including Mack's donation of her grandmother's cast-iron skillet), artistry, language, and movement, to the Community Gallery's emphasis on place, sports, and military service, then to arrive at Explore More, where kids leapt laughing into the Step Show interactive while parents probed genealogy in the Family History Center, we sampled a feast of African American culture. The History Galleries brought

us from the Obama presidency in “Changing America” to the firestorm summer of 1968, then down another level through the preceding century, from Chuck Berry’s red Cadillac Eldorado and “Maybelline” through the apex of Motown, only to submerge in the grim era of Jim Crow, powerfully made tangible in the segregated Pullman railcar that dominates the hall.

The lowermost gallery, Slavery and Freedom, skillfully juxtaposed the intersections of markets (from those of the African Atlantic’s Middle Passage to the Black Belt’s King Cotton) with the resilience of the women and men drawn into those brutalizing circuits. Multimedia elements deepened the power of each. Humbled within and hushed without, we emerged from the darkened hall into the shimmering blue light of the Contemplative Court, where pearling strands of water rained from the ceiling to fill a shallow pool. Fellow visitors silently absorbed the experience.

Tiya Miles wrote in these pages last May that “This museum represents a feat of sheer imagination and daring. Its exhibits capture the pain and beauty, the suffering and invention, of the black past, translating that reality for visitors.”² We certainly experienced it so. Thanks to Deborah Mack, John Welch, and fourteen contributing authors, we can also appreciate the historical precedence, patience, endurance, and inspiration that made it possible.

² Tiya Miles, “National Museum of African American History and Culture,” *The Public Historian* 39 no. 2 (May 2017) 82–86.