

The State of Black Museums

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This issue of *The Public Historian* commemorates the fortieth anniversary (1978–2018) of the African American Museum Association (AAMA), known today as the Association of African American Museums (AAAM). The oldest Black museums date some 150 years ago following emancipation (Hampton University is observing the sesquicentennial of its 1868 founding), with an exponential growth in the latter twentieth century leading to more than two hundred presently documented.

In creating their own organizations and institutions, African Americans historically have developed ways to address both needs and aspirations that fostered values of community, service, and mutual support. In this vein, museums were among the institutions established to both serve Black communities and serve as vehicles for social change.

For the past 150 years Black museums have demonstrated solidifying their value as critical cultural resources for communities across the United States and beyond. The essays in this volume reflect the distinctive arc of Black museum historical development in a country historically shaped by slavery, legally and socially enforced Jim Crow, and organizational apartheid for much of its history. Black museum professionals labor even now to identify and eliminate the socio-economic and political vestiges of this legacy that endure and that present themselves in addressing issues around memory, voice/s, subject matter, audiences, equitable access to resources, professional development and leadership, and organizational stability.

This volume provides both essays and case studies that identify important issues, perspectives, and resources that illustrate the diversity of development in Black museums from their earliest origins through today. Despite the presence of two hundred museums, in the United States and abroad, the arc of the history, mission, and practice of Black museums in the United States remains largely unknown in both the larger public history and museum studies fields. In early 2017 the guest editors of this special issue convened a working group that included academics, museum professionals, practitioners and preservationists to discuss the current state of Black museums. There was broad recognition that museum professionals

and others engaged in public history and public culture, both emerging professionals and those with longstanding experience, could greatly benefit from an accessible publication illustrating both historical and contemporary practice. The resulting volume therefore addresses a range of museum topics: the historical development of these institutions; the role of the politics of race around professional, cultural, and organizational practice; changes over time in audience development and engagement; the nature of twenty-first century globalizing influences. Because of the dearth of accessible literature on Black museums, and the scarcity of this literature in many museum studies curricula, this volume includes a research bibliography organized around strategic topics in the literature.

Founding generations of Black museum leaders recognized the need for collective effort and voice, collective strategic planning and imagining a collective future. That need is as urgent and as vital today as it was in 1868 when Hampton University was founded, and in 1978 when AAMA was established.

This special issue of *The Public Historian* on the *State of Black Museums* focuses on a range of critical topics looking back to founding institutions—their leaders and historical, political, and social contexts—as well as contemporary and forward-facing twenty-first century issues. *The State of Black Museums* offers readers a rich historiography centered on Black museums and related institutions, as well as a broader range of essays that address critical issues involving interpretation, organizational relevance and sustainability, leadership and professional practice—past, present, and future.

Informed by the activism of the twentieth-century Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts movements, a Black museums movement emerged among many of these cultural organizations in the 1960s and later that are, by intention, engaged in the practice of “participatory history” and culture. This culturally informed, audience-centered institution building and professional practice around organizational values, exhibitions, interpretation, and audiences both anticipates and instructs the “participatory” historical model adopted by the field of public history in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In her memoir-like essay on Black museum founders, Fath Davis Ruffins offers readers an intricate social and political historical context of Black museums, the ideologies informing their creation, the challenges met, and the legacies of Black museum founding leaders from the perspective of one who knew and worked with first- and second-generation museum founders. John Fleming, a senior museum leader whose essay also reflects first person involvement with founding generations of Black museum leadership, provides a compelling historiography that illustrates the alignment of social movements that inform Black museum philosophies. Priscilla Cooper’s essay combines both personal reflection and thoughtful analysis of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute’s early development. BCRI is one of the earliest social justice museums that addresses both “difficult” and emotionally and racially charged topical focus with the power of place, and that has become a model for other comparable institutions that have since then been created.

Juanita Moore addresses the evergreen issues of governance, sustainability, and succession planning that challenged early generation Black museums, and the ongoing but also new ones that challenge them today as audiences, national demographics, technologies and other factors change over time. Nancy Weiss's documentation of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) federal funding of Black museums includes an extensive legislative history of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution. Leading researchers Jeff Hayward and Christine Larouche similarly provide a national perspective with data points and illuminating research findings, and offer a blueprint on trends and outcomes prevalent among Black museums. They also provide an organizational snapshot of the professional membership organization, the Association of African American Museums (AAAM).

Brent Leggs provides a national overview on the need to preserve Black historic places and landscapes, stressing the reality that the preservation of sites happens frequently on an informal and personal basis, where it is the endeavor of individuals who realize that the stories and places of the past would all but be erased if they did not act to protect them.

Contributing to the nation's pool of diverse museum professionals is a long-standing focus within the history of Black museums. John Welch's essay on the 150-year history of Hampton University Museum's liberal arts program, encompassing its collections, programming, and museum studies initiative founded in the 1980s, reminds us that it has been historically Black colleges and universities that have produced many of today's practicing Black museum professionals. Thoughtful case studies include Renee Franklin's chronicle of the establishment and growth the Saint Louis Art Museum minority fellowship, a program that has provided rare and invaluable on-the-ground training to emerging Black museum professionals over the past twenty-six years.

It is audiences and stakeholders who create "meaning" for museums. The essay by Ariana Curtis on Afro-Latinidad in Smithsonian spaces highlights the role of both politics and critical methodologies in the construction of meaning making. Instructive cases detail twenty-first century approaches to reinterpreting plantations, historic sites and heritage trails, as well as individual legacies like that of Black nationalist activists and maverick Margaret Walker with ideologies and pedagogical techniques meaningful to twenty-first century audiences. Case studies on current practice in digitization at large museums such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture and specialized historical archives like Tuskegee University focus on the critical heritage work undertaken by African diasporic and African American collections and sites today within and outside of the United States.

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colleague Dr. Spencer Crew, Robinson Professor in American, African American, and Public History at George Mason University. Dr. Crew graciously hosted the early 2017 project meeting at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. The National Council for Public History has called for a more inclusive approach in professional practice that includes a range of voices and perspectives. This volume's contributors reflect public history and public culture academic, practitioner, and professional perspectives. We requested that this volume be clearly informed by these values and TPH editorial team enthusiastically agreed. We wish to thank them for their gracious willingness to experiment with us.

It is our hope this volume will serve as a historiography resource on Black museums and leaders as well as an educational resource on salient issues and challenges resonant for today's Black museums and their audiences.