

Some Challenges of Preserving and Exhibiting the African American Experience: Reflections on Working with the National Park Service and the Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site

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DESPITE RECENT REPORTS FROM THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION revealing a continuing decline in job opportunities for historians in academia, it appears that the vast majority of those who are enrolled in history graduate programs and who earn doctorates in history still have aspirations of one day securing highly coveted tenure-stream positions in the “ivory tower” as faculty members at colleges and universities. A distinct sub-field in the study of history, public history educates individuals who want to work in private enterprise, museums, government agencies, archives, and historic sites, as well as within historic preservation. Many historians, like myself, who were not exposed to public history during their graduate education sometimes encounter its practice through transformative events.

Revisiting the painful aspects of African American history

In 2003, I served as a scholar-consultant for the permanent exhibit “And Still We Rise: Our Journey through African American History and Culture” at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan. With a group of about a dozen scholars with diverse expertise in African and African American history, life, and culture, I participated in a series of invigorating meetings convened by the museum’s administrators and curators during which we talked through what this long-term exhibition should encompass and emphasize. We mulled over countless ideas and viable approaches and debated how this state-of-the-art museum could best present consequential episodes, historic icons, and prevailing themes in African American history to a variety of publics. It was in this setting that I first encountered in an up-close-and-personal manner the challenges faced when preserving and exhibiting the African American experience.

Despite our at-times divergent visions and assorted interpretations about what should be brought to the fore, we seemed to have reached the consensus that the exhibit should cel-

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celebrate the richness of African American culture and African Americans' remarkable abilities to persevere, while also laying bare the mind-boggling oppression that African descendants confronted and endured in the United States, especially before the enactment of monumental civil rights legislation in the 1960s. We agreed that the exhibit needed to strike a conspicuous balance between themes of resistance, triumph, and progress *and* ill-treatment, suffering, and injustice. This was in line with the museum's vision to create "a world in which adversity *and* achievement of African American history inspires everyone towards greater understanding, acceptance and unity!" Our notions of what the museum should feature, and how, was also undeniably influenced by the Motor City's large black community that in 2003 made up more than 80% of the city's population.

Several particular discussions left great impressions on me. Most importantly, we insisted that the exhibit illustrate two major genocides that profoundly shaped the black experience: the Middle Passage and lynching.

I distinctly recall that, during our discussions about how to best portray the Middle Passage, anthropologist and director of the New York African Burial Ground Project Michael Blakey not only supported the decision to construct a replica of a slave ship with wax figures of captured Africans jammed together on the lower decks, but he also suggested that the curators seriously consider working with an organic scent manufacturer to explore the possibilities of exposing visitors to what historian Sterling Stuckey described as "the smell of filth and stench of death" during the Middle Passage. Though Blakey's creative proposition was not earnestly pursued beyond our energizing dialogues, he underscored that the museum's curators mustn't shy away from graphically portraying these horrific experiences, which Stuckey argued were "the first real incubators of slave unity across cultural lines."¹

When debating how best to portray lynching, we had no problem agreeing that Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching crusade needed to be spotlighted. We also eventually concurred that the museum should have on display a wax replica of a black man who was the victim of this once-common phenomenon. Images like those in the path-breaking book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), and that now may be found on countless websites, reveal the brutality of lynching, and we concurred that such images would be included in the exhibit. Yet, we reasoned that something more compelling was warranted. Like the reconstructed replica of the slave ship with life-like bodies crammed together and the eerie sounds of moaning, despair, and water rocking the ship playing from strategically placed speakers, the wax figure of a lynching victim provided, we concluded, a startling and dramatic representation of yet another "dark chapter" in American history that many Americans have heard about only in passing.

Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site

My other impactful and more sustained introduction to the basics of public history—experiences that constitute the focus of this essay—began a decade ago when I was hired by the National Park Service (National Capital Region, National Capital Parks–East) and the Organization of American Historians to write the historic resource study (HRS) for Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site (NHS). On December 19, 2003, close to three

decades after it was designated a national historic landmark, Public Law 108-192 authorized acquisition of the Woodson Home, and it became part of the national park system. In 2005, NPS purchased the home from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) for \$465,000, and on February 27, 2006, the building was dedicated as Carter G. Woodson Home NHS. Though ASALH no longer owns Woodson's home, the organization continues to play a leading role in conceptualizing its development.²

The Woodson Home has appreciable historic significance. In 1922, Woodson, appropriately dubbed "The Father of Black History," purchased the three-story, Victorian-style row house located at 1538 Ninth Street, NW, in Washington, D.C., for \$8,000.00. Until his death in 1950, this space served as Woodson's "office home" (he lived in a small space on the third floor); the national headquarters of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH, predecessor of ASALH); the place of business for *The Journal of Negro History*, Associated Publishers, Inc., and *The Negro History Bulletin*, an informal archive with thousands of valuable documents, artifacts, and memorabilia; "a training school for future historians"; and, in essence, the center of operations for the early black history movement (Figure 1). It must be kept in mind that this was all accomplished during the oppressive era of Jim Crow segregation.

Figure 1. Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site, 2017. The park visitor center is located in the building to the right. Courtesy of the National Park Service, National Capital Parks–East.



For more than a decade, NPS has been working on meticulously rehabilitating this building and determining how the site will operate. District of Columbia Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (who, in 1999, introduced legislation to establish the historic site) emphasized that the Woodson Home involved a unique set of NPS private–public partnerships. These partnerships have been manifested in varied ways. For instance, in 2016 NPS and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., signed a formal agreement to collaborate on restoring the Woodson Home.³ This arrangement was “the first of its kind between the NPS and a national African American organization.”⁴

While funding issues currently still loom, according to NPS the complete restoration of the Woodson Home “is a high priority from both our regional and national leadership.”⁵ Tara Morrison, National Capital Parks–East superintendent, and Vince Vaise, chief of visitors services, National Capital Parks–East, have been very enthusiastic about the Woodson Home’s future. On February 26, 2017, there was a “Special Preview” of the Woodson Home to celebrate the completion of Phase 1 of the restoration.⁶ After an uplifting program that included the acknowledgement of Woodson’s descendants, approximately 200 people had the opportunity to visit the home and attend a catered reception at the nearby Shiloh Baptist Church. The home was then re-opened from April 21 until April 23, 2017, for National Park Week. The group DMV Black History Field Trips offered its own tour of the home, declaring to potential participants: “Be one of the first visitors to step foot inside the Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site!” On weekends from Memorial Day until Labor Day, NPS offered guided tours of the site that, on occasions, included a performance by a talented Woodson re-enactor who bears an uncanny resemblance to Woodson (Figure 2). I

Figure 2. Carter G. Woodson re-enactor Dexter Hamlett sitting in the Woodson Home NHS during the “Special Preview” on February 26, 2017. Courtesy of the National Park Service, National Capital Parks–East.



was able to visit the home during the “Special Preview” and was impressed with the renovations, especially the winding staircase that Woodson walked up and down on a daily basis. I had been in the home before, but experiencing it in a more refurbished state helped me gain a better appreciation for the conditions under which Woodson worked. “If these walls could talk,” I thought to myself as I ambled through Woodson’s universe. It was a spiritual and transcendent experience for me. On December 17, 2017, I had another opportunity to visit the Woodson Home following the uplifting Carter G. Woodson Birthday Commemoration program held at Seaton Elementary School. On Thursdays and Saturdays, one can take an interpretive tour of the Woodson Home for 45 minutes with excellent rangers.

Typically speaking, the primary function of national historic sites like the Woodson Home—and museums such as the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History—is to amass, display, protect, and exhibit historic materials and artifacts to the public for educational and entertainment purposes. “The completed site will provide a unique opportunity for visitors to experience the very place where Woodson lived and worked as he and ASALH brought African American history to life,” the National Park Service projected several years before completing renovations. “Completion of the Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site will include a restoration and renovation of historic buildings; development, fabrication, and installation of interpretative exhibits; production and distribution of educational and interpretative materials and other site improvements such as parking, way-finding signs, wayside exhibits and much more.” The ultimate purpose of this site is unambiguous: “to inspire and educate through the preservation of the home, life, and legacy of the preeminent historian and educator Carter G. Woodson.”⁷ Yet, how this is accomplished—namely during Phase 3 with the installation of the interpretive exhibits—is open for friendly debate, especially when considering how to frame the onerous context (i.e., Jim Crow segregation) within which Woodson labored.

Thoughts on writing a NHS historic resource study

As the principal investigator for the site’s HRS, I was part of the interpretation program. I was responsible for producing a comprehensive narrative “designed to serve managers, planners, interpreters, cultural resource specialists, and the interested public as a reference for the history of the region and resources within the park.”⁸ I felt a great sense of responsibility because, after all, my assessments would play a major role in the site’s interpretive plans and park rangers’ informational dialogues during tours. At the same time, I was given detailed instructions about exactly which archives to visit and what my HRS was to comprise in a lengthy “Scope of Study.” This was something entirely new for me. Never before had I been hired to write a book with such specific directives. The peer-review system was also more tedious than I was accustomed to. After submitting an initial project outline for approval and before submitting the final version of the HRS, I delivered three drafts at 50%, 90%, and 100% levels of completion. Each incarnation, moreover, was reviewed by two NPS historians, the Organization of American Historians public history manager, the NPS site manager, and three to four members of the ASALH’s Carter G. Woodson Home Committee, who focused

on my document's "organization, accuracy, quality, completeness, and compliance with project requirements."⁹

Central to my work was not only highlighting Woodson's life, contributions, and intricate personality, but, more importantly, unpacking the significance of the Woodson Home and his and others' relationships with this historic space. Spatial history—in simplest terms, the critical examination of how a space was used over time—was a central component of my HRS. Before embarking on this project, I had never before deeply contemplated or researched historic occupancy. In documenting Woodson's life in the home and in Washington, D.C.'s historic Shaw neighborhood, I acquired a more profound understanding and appreciation of his life and work. Entitled "*Willing to Sacrifice*": *Carter G. Woodson, the Father of Black History, and the Carter G. Woodson Home*, my HRS (approximately 80,000 words in length) is deliberately practical and comprehensive yet straightforward. With permission from NPS, in 2014 I published a condensed version of this study as *Carter G. Woodson in Washington, D.C.: The Father of Black History*.

The crucial work of the Carter G. Woodson Home Committee

Since completing the final version of the HRS in June 2010, I have continued working as a volunteer scholar-consultant with NPS and as a member of ASALH's Carter G. Woodson Home Committee on helping develop the long-range interpretive plan (LRIP) for the Woodson Home.¹⁰ The Carter G. Woodson Home Committee—at one level an offspring of the Carter G. Woodson House Use Committee that was founded in 1980 when ASALH renovated the home during the early 1980s—has been actively involved in working with NPS and the Woodson Home since it was designated a NHS. The current members of this committee, an active group of historians and Woodson enthusiasts, include Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, myself, Barbara Spencer Dunn, Bettye Gardner (chair), Cheryl Gooch, June Patton, and Alicestyne Turley. Other ASALH members, such as John Fleming (who from 1988 to 1998 served as the director of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (the current national president of ASALH), and Sylvia Cyrus (executive director of ASALH) have been in conversation and worked with the committee.

This committee has been vital. As we have stressed, creating interpretive exhibits for African American historic sites calls for different approaches than more conventional sites do. I believe that we have contributed immensely to what the authors of *Imperiled Promise* called the agency's "history infrastructure."¹¹ Our work has also been complicated because of changes in the management of the Woodson Home and National Capital Parks–East, reorganizing that calls for revisiting previous plans and strategies. As one member of the committee whispered to me after meeting with NPS, "It is a blessing that we are so involved in this process"—a sentiment that we all shared.

At the various meetings that I have attended, I have learned a great deal about how public historians and NPS experts and staff grapple with identifying the most effective ways to establish key themes, programs, strategies, and resources in order to creatively and effectively educate different potential visitors. Unlike most professional historians operating in academia, NPS planners and specialists are most concerned with targeting different audiences,

especially the youth audience, who have specific needs and expectations. How these public historians reconstruct the complex past is largely shaped by their mission to make history accessible and usable for as many people as possible. In this advanced technological era, digital media and innovative geospatial technology will play an important role in educating those who visit the Woodson Home and other historic sites and museums built and upgraded during the 21st century.

Beginning in September 2008, NPS has been quite transparent in sharing—through a series of newsletters, meetings, online updates, tweets, and Facebook posts—the extensive processes involved in the three major phases of planning. Because “what the public thinks” is central to NPS, the project managers have actively sought input. “Have we missed the boat on the preliminary alternative concepts?” they even asked in a February 2009 newsletter.¹² According to NPS, “the public was expansive and enthusiastic in its suggestions.” As the NPS managers amassed feedback from a diverse group of stakeholders (including community activists, amateur historians, and laypersons in the D.C. area) for their draft general management plan for the Woodson Home, they faced the challenge, I soon realized, of deciding what to include and what not to include in this important space. There is only so much information and so many artifacts that can be displayed in this three-story Victorian row house located in the heart of the historic Shaw neighborhood. As one who primarily disseminates interpretations of the black past in books and lectures, I do not usually face this predicament. What ends up being featured in the Woodson Home will be what NPS deems most important based upon the collaborative LRIP.

As already alluded to, because the vast majority of African Americans were denied their most basic human and civil rights during nearly 80% of the total black experience, the curators of black museums and historic sites face a significant challenge: to offer a snapshot of the African American experience that tactfully balances the prevailing themes of victimization and perseverance. In the late 20th and 21st centuries, this issue has preoccupied those involved in working with displaying black history.

Echoing many museum professionals, Max A. van Balgooy concluded: “African American history does contain certain difficult, controversial, and sensitive topics—as does all American history” and at our “historical museums and historical sites, we have a great responsibility to share all of the lessons of history, whether it moves through successes and failures, tragedy and delight, laughter and sadness. Favoring one without the other can mislead our listeners, giving them only an incomplete understanding of our past and present.”¹³ The founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Lonnie G. Bunch, III, described the underlying goal of the Smithsonian Institution’s nineteenth museum: “I think the museum needs to be a place that finds the right tension between moments of pain and stories of resiliency and uplift.” He continues, “There should be moments where visitors should cry as they ponder the pains of the past, but they will also find much of the joy and hope that have been a cornerstone of the African-American experience.”¹⁴ Bunch also revealed that some in the black community voiced to him their concerns that the museum not overlook the genocidal nature of anti-black violence, something that might shock white visitors and make them feel uncomfortable.

In late November 2015, NPS distributed the “Carter G. Woodson National Historic Site (CAWO) Foundation Section Long-Range Interpretive Plan” to members of the ASALH Carter G. Woodson Home Committee. In response to the report, we opened our comments by noting:

Members of the committee have reviewed the report, discussed it amongst each other, and attended NPS sponsored planning meetings and workshops concerning CAWO, the most recent being the workshop on January 27 and 28, 2016. At this workshop, members of this committee shared their appraisals of and voiced their concerns regarding the LRIP. Recognizing the challenges involved in documenting the assorted remarks that the NPS received about the LRIP, the committee offers here some of our most important responses.¹⁵

In our response, we asked that the five interpretive themes be reviewed to match what was identified in previous deliberations. Beyond correcting a handful of historical inaccuracies, we were concerned about how the black struggle for liberation amidst pervasive racism and overt and violent racial oppression should be treated. The NPS staff, none of whom having expertise in African American history, was receptive to our feedback and incorporated some of our concerns into their revised and final LRIP (May 2017). Though our critical observations were not as elaborate as our previous feedback, we did seek further clarity and precision on several issues. Once again, we challenged the agency to more carefully integrate information from the HRS and to elaborate upon how what they called “scenes from nadir” (of black life) would be treated and how, in more specific terms, the contents of the space would prompt visitors, in their words, to “get angry with the racist scholarship that in part inspired Woodson.”¹⁶

While we understood NPS’s inclusive assertions that the site is connected “to the struggle for civil rights for *all* Americans” and that Woodson was a “multiculturalist,” we underscored that Woodson’s most pressing concern was the cause of blacks’ civil and human rights during the era of Jim Crow segregation. Linked to this, we stressed that Woodson’s work needed to be situated in what historian and chair of the ASALH’s Woodson Home Committee Bettye Gardner called “the entrenched racism” of the Jim Crow era. By highlighting the difficult and even unfathomable times that inevitably molded Woodson and his contemporaries, we reasoned that visitors would better understand and appreciate what he accomplished. After all, as NPS highlights on its website for Teaching with Historic Places:

[H]istoric places have powerful and provocative stories to tell. As witnesses to the past, they recall the events that shaped history and the people who faced those situations and issues. Places make connections across time that give them a special ability to create an empathetic understanding of what happened and why.

Historical context is everything—some basic examples

The nation’s capital fostered the development of a dynamic black intellectual community that rivaled that of the Harlem Renaissance, boasted a noticeable black middle class, and was home to Howard University, the nation’s leading historically black college and university.

Black businesses were thriving in D.C. by the 1920s. The black community in the Shaw neighborhood where Woodson lived was especially vibrant. Yet, in the District African Americans still faced great challenges in terms of race relations, which should be adequately addressed in the Woodson Home. As points of departure, several examples suffice when speaking about the first decade after the founding of the ASNLH on September 15, 1915.

In July 1919, soon after ASNLH's second biennial meeting in Washington, D.C., a four-day race riot erupted because of a rumor that a black man had sexually assaulted the wife of a white man serving in the U.S. Navy. In retaliation, mobs of white men, including veterans, invaded black neighborhoods, beating down and murdering African Americans in their paths while the Metropolitan Police Department did virtually nothing to prevent the carnage. President Woodrow Wilson deployed about 1,200 troops to end the rioting. But, by then, the damage had been done. Estimates place the death toll as between six and thirty people, both black and white. Woodson was living in D.C. at the time of this "race war" and it certainly impacted his outlook as a scholar similarly to how W.E.B. Du Bois was affected by the Atlanta race riot of 1906. Moreover, shortly after Woodson purchased his "office home" in 1922, racism in the nation's capital was epitomized on August 8, 1925, when more than 30,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan marched in full regalia down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Though Washington, D.C., did not have elaborate "Jim Crow" laws on the books like quintessentially southern states, segregation and racism ran rampant by the time that Woodson purchased his home. As one scholar recently remarked, "from 1913 until 1921, President Wilson oversaw and endorsed unprecedented segregation in federal offices."¹⁷ "Except for the haunts of bootleggers and other elements of the underworld," historian Constance Green noted, "by 1923 the only places in Washington where racial segregation did not obtain were on the trolleys and buses, at Griffith Stadium, and in the reading rooms of the public library and the Library of Congress."¹⁸ The city was elaborately segregated in the ensuing decades as well. "By 1950, segregation by law and by custom was firmly entrenched in Washington. Segregated restaurants were only one reflection of a racially divided city. Black Washingtonians encountered segregation in the most fundamental aspects of their daily lives."¹⁹ Woodson himself was denigrated by the District's racist system. After being denied Pullman accommodations in late November 1932, Woodson, via an account in *The Norfolk Guide and Journal*, boldly indicted the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad office in Washington, D.C.²⁰

It is not an exaggeration to say that during the era of Jim Crow segregation "every institution in the United States—the academy, the churches, the courts, the sciences, even foreign policy—gave vent to the most violent forms of racism, including torture and lynching."²¹ The U.S. historical profession was not an exception. Between 1882 and 1935, 2,005 doctorates in history were awarded in the U.S. By 1940, only fourteen blacks were awarded Ph.D.s in history.²² Prior to World War II, many of the leading U.S. historians accepted the theory that blacks were inferior and had no history worth acknowledging. Historian Peter Novick has convincingly unveiled that a "consensual" and "near unanimous" racism connected white historians from across the nation during the Progressive Era, racist thinking that extended into the era of Jim Crow segregation.²³

Of course, I do not expect the Woodson Home to embrace the approach of America's

Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, or the soon-to-be opened Memorial to Peace and Justice (informally known as the national lynching memorial) in Montgomery, Alabama. All the same, the overt racism and anti-black behavior that profoundly shaped Woodson's and his contemporaries' lives warrants distinct and tactful attention in this national historic site. This will help visitors more fully appreciate Woodson's achievements.

Conclusion

In comments directed to NPS, a member of the ASALH Carter G. Woodson Home Committee was blunt in articulating reservations about this agency of the U.S. federal government, indicating a hope that NPS would move beyond its "usual strategy."

What exactly this scholar meant by *usual* is open to interpretation. To me, this statement implies that the conventional or customary manner that NPS has portrayed African American subject matter would not, in this critic's mind, constitute a sufficient approach for the Woodson Home. The challenges that NPS has faced in terms of diversity and its checkered earlier history with African Americans have been discussed by scholars and social commentators. There are historical precedents that help better contextualize my colleague's skepticism.

In 1971, a decade after the first historic landmarks were designated by NPS, there were virtually no historic landmarks honoring African Americans, "an embarrassing circumstance at the time of increasing black awareness and empowerment."²⁴ During the 1970s, NPS instigated efforts to designate black historic landmarks by hiring the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation (ABC), a group headed by brothers Robert and Vincent DeForrest with an advisory board that included several black political figures and many leading historians. From 1973 until the middle of 1976, the ABC received a total of \$540,000 in "special funding" to identify, study, and nominate black historic landmarks throughout the country. By July 1974, thirteen black landmarks were named, and three years later there were sixty-one black historic landmarks approved by the National Park Service. This example of creating "official memory" was not accomplished without controversy. More than a few NPS workers surmised that the ABC "sought to nominate properties for as many individuals and events as possible, with little regard for the concept of site integrity and the significance of relationships between the sites and their subjects."²⁵ This was certainly not the case for Woodson's Home and others. Inspired by the Black Power era, these ABC activists sought to balance the historical scales, to memorialize their heroes and heroines who had for so long been ignored by white America. The fair and equal treatment of African American history and culture was delayed by the absence of African Americans among the leadership of the National Park Service. No African American held the position of director of NPS until Robert G. Stanton, who served from 1997 to 2001.

As revealed in reference books like the exhaustive *African American Historic Places*, there are seemingly countless significant African American historic sites throughout the nation.²⁶ According to the National Register of Historic Places, including the Woodson Home there are twenty-seven NPS units featuring African American history. Others focusing on famous black individuals include Booker T. Washington National Monument, Frederick Douglass NHS, George Washington Carver National Monument, Maggie L. Walker NHS, and

Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS. All of these historic icons, with the exception of Douglass and Bethune, were most active during “the nadir” of black life, and how these sites portray this devastating period in the African American experience is certainly open for debate.

When completed, the Woodson Home will undoubtedly play a leading role in memorializing the contributions of Carter G. Woodson to what he routinely called “the life-and-death struggle” for the cause of black history. I hope that NPS is able to judiciously situate Woodson without sugarcoating the realities of anti-black thought and racial violence during the era of Jim Crow segregation.

The perspectives expressed in this essay are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the National Park Service or the United States government.

Endnotes

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