

# A Historic Museum Opens in the Nation's Capital: The National Museum of African American History and Culture

Candra Flanagan

On September 24, 2016, a one-hundred-year-old wait will be over. The only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, history, and culture—the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)—will open on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Inside its mesmerizing walls, it tells stories spanning centuries and weaves an American narrative through the African American lens.

**“What we witnessed today  
will go down in history....  
It is the substance of  
things hoped for and the  
validation of our dreams.”**

Representative John Lewis,  
NMAAHC groundbreaking  
ceremony, February 2012.

In 1915, spurred by the 50th anniversary of the Civil War, a committee of black leaders advocated for a memorial to honor the war's African American veterans, absent from other mainstream memorials. This committee grew and soon identified the need for an entire building to house the story of African American contributions to American society. The racial climate of the segregation era deferred this dream for decades, but the vision has finally become a reality.



Established by an Act of Congress in 2003, the museum has collected more than 36,000 artifacts to date. When the NMAAHC opens it will be the 19th and newest museum of the Smithsonian Institution.

It has four main pillars of principle:

1. To provide an opportunity for those who are interested in African American culture to explore and revel in this history through interactive exhibitions;
2. To help all Americans see how their stories, their histories, and their cultures are shaped and informed by global influences;
3. To explore what it means to be an American and share how American values like resiliency, optimism, and spirituality are reflected in African American history and culture; and
4. To serve as a place of collaboration that reaches beyond Washington to engage new audiences and to collaborate with the myriad of museums and educational institutions that have explored and preserved this important history well before this museum was created.<sup>1</sup>

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**Middle Passage Shackles (wrought iron), c. pre-1863.**

Ankle shackles of the type used to restrain enslaved people aboard ships crossing the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas during the Middle Passage.



**Nat Turner's Bible, 1830s.**

Bible owned by Nat Turner, who led a historic slave rebellion in 1831. Gift of Maurice A. Person and Noah and Brooke Porter

**“You can learn a great deal about a country, about a people, by what it remembers. The Corona is a beacon that reminds us of what we were and what challenges we still face, and it points us toward what we can become.”**

Founding Director  
Lonnie G. Bunch III.

A bold design, the structure of the museum takes its inspiration from history and blends African elements with African American sensibilities. Wrapped in a bronze-colored scrim called the Corona, the building, with floor-to-ceiling windows allowing for views of the landscape, has an “outside-in” quality, allowing visitors to situate the African American story at the center of American history within the nation’s capital. According to the architects, the Corona’s shape was inspired both by the sculpture columns of traditional West African shrines and by the celebratory gesture of worshipers with arms raised in exultation. The filigree within the Corona evokes the art of enslaved and free African American iron-workers in Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>2</sup>

Inside, the building houses over

100,000 sq. ft. of exhibition space, which will hold displays that cover stories of history, community, and culture. Some of the most notable collection items speak to the sorrowful and challenging stories of history—a South Carolina slave cabin dating from the 1800s, a segregated railcar from the 1920s, and glass shards from the bombed 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Reflecting the complex and layered nature of history, the museum interweaves stories of courage, resiliency, and creativity of African American people through items such as Nat Turner’s bible from the 1830s, a school desk from the era of segregation, and musician Chuck Berry’s Cadillac.

**“I think knowing one’s history leads one to act in a more enlightened fashion. I cannot imagine how knowing one’s history would not urge one to be an activist.”**

Historian John Hope Franklin,  
1994.

The museum’s education department is committed to inspiring and transforming learners of all ages. The education department is responsible for programming and events that enliven the stories

of African American history in new and varied ways. It has been piloting various types of programming for the past eight years.

Programming for educators and students, through the *Center for Teaching and Learning @NMAAHC*, is strongly based in historical and pedagogical research. Crafted to address historical thinking skills, teach content, and highlight the “Americanness” of the African American story, the Center for Teaching and Learning programs provide educators with resources and tools for their classroom toolbox. The center is dedicated to assisting educators in gaining knowledge as learners and skills in order to present a full and complex story of the American society. Whether online or in-person, the center respects the educator as a lifelong learner and values the importance of reflective teaching. Preparing various models of professional learning such as in-person and online workshops (to debut in winter 2017), digitally distributed content, and, by 2018, an online professional learning community, the center seeks to meet and interact with educators where they are.

Two specific student audiences that the museum will engage in programming are the early childhood audience and the teen audience. The Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC) aims to empower, enrich, and educate young children, from birth to eight years old, and provides resources and support to



**Louis Armstrong Selmer Trumpet, 1946**

Brass-and-gold trumpet owned and played by Louis Armstrong. This one-of-a-kind trumpet was crafted by Henri Selmer specifically for Louis Armstrong in Paris after World War II, during the French recovery period.

the parents, caregivers, and educators of early learners. Programs introduce American history through the African American lens to the youngest visitors through the museum’s collection and content. Highlighting age-appropriate and diverse books, the ECEC emphasizes literacy skills and historical knowledge while fostering positive identity development and a sense of justice.

The teen-targeted programming includes hands-on, interest-driven learning, and socialization necessary for teen development and connected learning. Programs offer opportunities for teens to collaborate, solve challenges, participate in deeper discovery, and give presentations. Participants expand their thinking beyond their initial interests and develop more integrated skill sets and connections

with history. Since 2013, the museum (which has until now had a gallery in the National Museum of American History) has conducted an annual teen literature and writing summer program called The Power of the Written Word. In future summers, teens will share contributions online and engage a larger community in discussions and problem solving. An ongoing series of programs assists students and their families through the process of creating a National History Day project. Through a combination of workshops, online resources, and virtual feedback, the museum seeks to help students integrate African American history into their understanding of the American story.

Engaging the audience extends beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom and K-12 student framework. The museum views its public programming—book talks, film screening, symposia, concerts, etc.—as opportunities to interact with an audience of life-long learners and to stimulate intellectual curiosity through immersive and experiential events. The museum’s signature programming seeks to provide broad, intense and respectful exchanges among presenters, the audience,

## **Educators! Looking for ways to access collections and resources from the NMAAHC?**

### **nmaahc.si.edu**

Redesigned in anticipation of the opening, the NMAAHC website hosts a thematic collection search that will enable educators to find items in the collection related to themes such as the American West, Civil Rights, or Education. In another section on the site, one can access ‘collection stories,’ more in-depth dives featuring one collection item and its story. Educators, students, and the public can access other types of resources from this site, with many more to be added over the next year.

### **LearningLab.si.edu**

Educators can access collections in a thematic fashion from across the institution. A search of the term “African American” can yield all of the digitized collections related to African American history throughout the Smithsonian. The search results can be filtered to show collections or learning labs from specific resource providers or museums. Educators can select resources and create learning labs that can be shared publicly or with students. There are also a selection of labs created by Smithsonian staff, which are identified by the SI sunburst logo.

### **NMAAHC App (available at the time of the museum’s opening)**

The Museum will have a mobile app to assist individuals who are visiting the museum in Washington, D.C., but people who download the app and are not in D.C. will enjoy viewing and reading the stories presented, many of which will be enhanced details of stories told in the museum or connected stories that give more context.

and museum staff that expand, and refresh overall knowledge about important figures or moments in African American history.

**“America is race.  
From its symbolism  
to its substance....”**

Julian Bond, civil rights leader.

Through innovative docent/visitor services training, the museum is well prepared for a range of emotional reactions among visitors in the face of specific stories in the galleries. The NMAAHC docents and visitor services staff are trained to interact with visitors not just with factual information like wayfinding, but also to support the emotional moments that will come with seeing artifacts such as the small child-size slave shackles featured in the story on slavery. After a multi-month training course that includes content on African American history and customer service, the volunteer staff will also be trained in issues related to inclusion and racial sensitivity.

The NMAAHC uses social platforms—Facebook and Twitter among



**United States Army  
Medal of Honor  
bestowed on Cornelius  
H. Charlton, 1952, for  
his actions in the  
Korean War.**

Collection of the  
Smithsonian National  
Museum of African  
American History and  
Culture, Gift of Ray  
R. and Patricia A.D.  
Charlton in memory of  
Cornelius H. Charlton

others—to engage the audience with stories of the African American experience in a timely manner. Sharing relevant historical content that relates to our collections, exhibitions, and events, the NMAAHC social media program also allows for of-the-moment responses and historical contextualization of contemporary events. These platforms connect

an active global citizenry and further the museum’s four-pillar vision while fostering calls-to-action. The social media strategy is focused on not only showing American history through the African American lens, but also on allowing people to locate themselves and their families within that history.

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As founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III has stated, the central mission of the museum is “to help all Americans remember and, by remembering, to stimulate a dialogue about race and help foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing.” Through thought-provoking events and resources, the museum provides a forum to encourage audiences to grapple with issues of race and racism directly. With a generous three-year grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies, the education department holds an annual five-day summer workshop for educators, which brings together classroom teachers of all levels, administrators, and experts to engage in deep dialogue about the impact of race in the classroom both on teachers and students.

The educators of the department believe strongly in the need for age-appropriate conversations around race and racism, and begin with the youngest visitors through programming that

discusses positive identity development, fairness, and justice. Beginning in the winter of 2017, the museum will host events for parents and caregivers to share resources around how to dialogue with the children in their lives about race and racism.

A recent example of the museum becoming a venue for expressing community concerns about race and racism was in April 2015 during a full-day program called “History, Rebellion, and Reconciliation: Communities Mobilized for Social Change.” The event reached learners of all ages and from all walks of life through a conversation on race, justice, and community activism. The event was so well received—in person and through social media—that the museum will be hosting more in this series.

A pivotal moment in the discussion on race and racism will be a multi-day conference tentatively scheduled for spring 2018 that will bring together scholars,

practitioners, and others to discuss race, identity, and the roles of museums.

During the 96th annual conference of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the National Museum of African American History and Culture will conduct a pre-clinic workshop on talking about race in the classroom. The pre-conference workshop is available through the NCSS conference registration and will be held on the Smithsonian campus in downtown Washington, D.C. 🌐

#### Notes

1. National Museum of African American History and Culture, “About the Museum,” [nmaahc.si.edu](http://nmaahc.si.edu)
2. Mabel O. Wilson, *Begin with the Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2016), 14.

**CANDRA FLANAGAN** is the Coordinator for Student and Teacher Initiatives at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. Prior to her current position, she designed and conducted U.S. Department of Education Teaching American History professional learning events for the Smithsonian.

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