The Full Spectrum of History: Prioritizing Diversity and Inclusion in Preservation
Diversity and Inclusion at Heritage Organizations

AMANDA DAVIS, ADRENA IFILL, AND LILY ANNE WELTY TAMAI

Participants in the PastForward 2015 Diversity Summit identified diversity and inclusion as top priorities for heritage and preservation organizations. Through focused diversity and inclusion efforts, preservation professionals can better engage and involve underrepresented communities to tell the full American story. Attendees examined telling missing stories and protecting undervalued and endangered historic places that resonate with underrepresented communities as strategies for achieving social and racial justice. They also discussed the importance of acknowledging the tangible and intangible heritage of often-overlooked groups. The strategic partnerships that emerge from prioritizing inclusivity help create a shared ethic of stewardship and connect local communities with vital preservation resources, and summit participants emphasized their value.

We pick up the conversation around organizational priorities where we left off in November by interviewing three heritage professionals working on the front lines of advocacy and action. These interviewees highlight the specific ways in which their respective organizations welcome and work to sustain cultural diversity in practice, programs, and projects:

Amanda Davis of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project; Adrena Ifill of Ifill/DoubleBack Global Group; and Lily Anne Welty Tamai, Ph.D., of the Japanese American National Museum.

What is the mission of your organization and scope of your work? How do you bring attention and protection to undervalued and/or endangered places that reflect America’s diversity?

Davis: Identifying and protecting undervalued and potentially endangered historic places is the core of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project’s mission. Our project was founded specifically to provide a more diverse and inclusive view of history by documenting...
extant places in New York City that are significant to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community.

Besides developing an interactive online map, which will feature 100 historic sites when it launches this fall, we are also working on gaining official recognition for tangible heritage through listings on the state and national registers of historic places. We have received a grant from the National Park Service (NPS) to either nominate at least five sites to the National Register of Historic Places for their significance to LGBT history or amend existing nominations to include this history.

While there is still an active push for LGBT equality and acceptance, decades of hard-fought struggles have achieved significant milestones like gay marriage—and those struggles all physically took place somewhere. Recognizing these places at the local, state, and federal levels through official landmark designations and register listings sends a message that LGBT history matters. That message can be incredibly empowering to a community that has long been—and, to varying degrees, remains—ostracized legally, professionally, and personally.

**Ifill:** The mission of Ifill/DoubleBack Global Group is to share the stories of undervalued and endangered histories. We provide cultural heritage management services to private corporations, government agencies, and nonprofit institutions, including event management and marketing, documentary and multimedia production, and educational curriculum development. Working with clients like the National Archives and Howard University has allowed us to bring diverse histories to life for a modern audience, which is one of our specialties. Diversity and inclusion is not merely a goal for Ifill/DoubleBack Global Group—it is a way of life.

**Welty Tamai:** The Japanese American National Museum’s (JANM) mission is to promote the understanding and appreciation of America’s ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience.

JANM opened its doors in 1992, housed in the former site of the historic Nishi Hongwagi Buddhist Temple, built by Japanese immigrants in 1925. The building was later renovated to support
the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy, a National Museum project. In 1999 the Japanese American National Museum opened a new 85,000-square-foot pavilion, which is the current site of the museum. The two buildings are connected by a granite-and-flagstone-paved courtyard and garden.

The National Center partners with educators and community-based mentors to inspire youth to become active, informed participants in shaping democracy in America. Telling the history of the Japanese American experience in a historic setting amplifies the value of the museum by contributing to the education of our visitors. Approximately 10,000–12,000 students from nearly 250 schools and about 35 school districts visit the museum annually. Among them are students from underserved communities in the Los Angeles area—JANM raises funds to transport them to the museum.

**Why is it important to acknowledge and protect America’s diverse cultural places?**

**Davis:** Buildings and sites are the physical reminders of where we have been and how we arrived at today. This is particularly true for sites that represent underrepresented groups who have had to overcome discrimination in the past. Heritage tourism is evidence of how compelling and inspiring it is to be able to see where history took place—there is nothing quite like standing in front of the place where one’s history was made to instill a sense of pride in that history.

**Ifill:** Inclusion—as practiced through acknowledging the full spectrum of history, providing resources to explore lesser-known elements of a place or event, and inviting input from communities that are historically connected the site or event—is integral to preservation. By learning our history in full color, we as a society can thrive at our highest level. Preservation requires acknowledging the story of a site and all of its participants and making that story accessible to a global audience.

**Describe some of your projects and plans. What is their relationship to your organizational diversity/inclusion priorities?**

**Davis:** Our first documented victory was the successful nomination of Julius’, a bar in Greenwich Village, to the state and national registers this spring. This was the site of the April 1966
“Sip-In” organized by members of the Mattachine Society, an early gay rights organization, to challenge the State Liquor Authority’s discriminatory practice of revoking the licenses of bars that served gay men and lesbians. Many people don’t know about this significant pre-Stonewall event—in fact, many are surprised to hear that this kind of discrimination happened. On April 21, we celebrated the Sip-In’s 50th anniversary, as well as the National Register listing, at Julius’. The press event and the story itself drew broad interest from both the public and elected officials, illustrating that this history very much matters to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.
One of our upcoming initiatives is amending the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Alice Austen House on Staten Island to include the life that Austen and Gertrude Tate, her partner of more than 50 years, shared there. Tate played a pivotal role in helping them hold on to the house after Austen lost everything in the 1929 stock market crash.

Our top priority is making sure that our survey, which is the first initiative to comprehensively document LGBT historic sites in New York City, is as inclusive as possible. We are taking steps to identify and include sites associated with less-represented LGBT groups, including people of color and transgender people, by partnering with community-based groups and local institutions, and asking the general public to provide suggestions through our Google form. We are also looking beyond Manhattan through public outreach to LGBT organizations and community groups in all five boroughs and by working with the LGBT Caucus of the New York City Council. We have an invaluable opportunity to hear from people who lived through some of the history that we are documenting, and we want their stories to be included. We hope to collect oral histories from the elderly LGBT community and feature them on our website.

Welty Tamai: JANM is committed to educating the public about the incarceration experience of Japanese Americans during World War II. Our commitment to this topic is rooted in the belief that history is relevant in the present and that we can safeguard other vulnerable communities by interpreting a painful past. Our ongoing core exhibition, Common Ground: The Heart of Community, includes a reconstructed barrack from the Heart Mountain War Relocation Center in Wyoming. The abandoned barrack, which typified the hastily built residences in which Japanese American
families were confined during the war, was brought to Los Angeles in fragments and rebuilt within the museum.

In promoting cultural diversity and inclusion, does your organization focus on tangible heritage, intangible heritage, or both?

Davis: Our focus is on promoting and raising awareness of tangible heritage so that people can understand where history happened. We feel that this is particularly important for the LGBT community, given that contemporary society may not realize how far back this history goes or how vibrant and diverse it is. Our survey findings have already identified sites dating back to the 18th century associated with activism; arts and culture; notable figures; and important social centers like bars, clubs, and restaurants. The project will enable historians to look at LGBT communities’ intangible heritage in the form of social and political organizing and cultural activities.

Ifill: Ifill/DoubleBack Global Group leads the way in building a portfolio wherein inclusion is integral to preservation. It is critical to acknowledge the full spectrum of intangible and tangible heritage, providing resources to explore lesser-known elements of a place or event, and inviting input from communities that are historically connected the site or event. Oral history, for example, blends the tangible and the intangible. Working with the National Park Service, we produced a video to help visitors of the Mary McLeod

Left: In 1994 volunteers organized by the Japanese American National Museum traveled to Powell, Wyoming, to preserve two original barracks from the Heart Mountain War Relocation Center. Many of the volunteers had been incarcerated there or were the children of those who were.

Right: The dismantled barracks were trucked to Los Angeles and one was rebuilt next to the museum.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STAN HONDA
**Bethune Council House** in Washington, D.C., recognize both the history of the site and its contemporary role.

**Welty Tamai:** JANM promotes the understanding of the Japanese American experience through both tangible and intangible heritage, including personal oral histories, artifacts, and the aforementioned historic structures. Its permanent collection includes two- and three-dimensional artifacts, oral history interviews, photographs, and film and video.

**How do you form partnerships with other civil rights or heritage-based organizations, and what do they contribute?**

**Davis:** We recently spoke with members of the Harlem branch of Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE), which directed us to numerous LGBT-related sites in Harlem and provided us with a wonderful oral history. We not only plan to keep that conversation going but would also like to reach out to other SAGE branches around the city. Such partnerships are invaluable to a small group like ours because New York is a big city with many diverse communities within the larger LGBT community, and we want to represent all of them.

As we undertake more public outreach, we hope that people will come forward with suggestions of significant places throughout the five boroughs. Reaching a national audience is important because many New Yorkers with knowledge of historic sites may have moved away from the city, and we still want to hear from them. Conversely, we also want to hear from people who have only lived here for a short period of time.

We also hope to encourage national civil rights and heritage-based organizations, as well as preservation organizations, to advocate for the recognition of LGBT historic sites. National groups can reach a broader audience and encourage positive understanding in a country that has a long way to go toward full LGBT acceptance.

**Ifill:** Partnerships between national civil rights organizations and preservation groups are invaluable to conversations and actions around inclusion. Every heritage site has many layers, and including its complete story in its preservation requires engaging all stakeholders and acknowledging all connected communities. The working relationships between these organizations may
require difficult conversations, trainings, and many steps—but all are essential to move forward.

We have forged several strategic relationships with national civil rights and heritage-based organizations, including government agencies, universities, and international repositories. We have been working with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation on the Avoice Project for more than 10 years. In that time, we have developed and leveraged partnerships with corporations like Dell Inc. and nonprofits like the National Girl Scouts to aid digitization efforts and marketing campaigns. This enables us to understand the communities that we work in and to develop programs that align with their goals and priorities. It also allows for technical knowledge transfer and implementation that support preservation work.

Welty Tamai: JANM has partnered with organizations like the Little Tokyo Community Council, the Japanese American Citizens League, the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center, the Go For Broke National Education Center, the Buddhist Churches of America, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Skirball Cultural Center on events, programs, and exhibitions. By doing so, we have attracted diverse audiences, learned from our partners, and built on our strengths.

We participate in the All-Camp Consortium, a meeting of representatives from all of the World War II Japanese American incarceration camps, sponsored in part by the NPS through its Japanese American Confinement Sites (JACS) program. The consortium convenes people and organizations connected to the War Relocation Authority Incarceration Centers, Assembly Centers, and other confinement sites to develop networking relationships and partner on projects related to the Japanese American incarceration experience. FJ

---

AMANDA DAVIS is the project manager for the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. ADRENA IFILL is the founder and CEO of Ifill/Doubleback Global Group. LILY ANNE WELTY TAMAI is the curator of history for the Japanese American National Museum.

TAKEAWAY