The Full Spectrum of History: Prioritizing Diversity and Inclusion in Preservation
Discussions on Broadening Outreach and Programming

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For the past two years, I have been working to develop heritage programs and facilitate discussion with colleagues across the field about historic preservation issues related to African American communities and resources. The discussions, which began in spring 2014, have been informal and short (one hour or less) monthly or bimonthly calls that have allowed colleagues to exchange information and views regarding topics that typically come up in our work or observations of current professional and social issues.

The discourse has ranged from general conversations to sharing technical expertise and best practices, and some discussions have been instrumental in launching new programming to address the issues that were raised. While the conversations have focused on African American resources, many of the discussions may be useful in expanding educational outreach and approaches to program planning for any number of cultural groups.

INFORMATION GAPS ON BOTH SIDES

Every individual whom I have engaged in these discussions has identified the lack of information and awareness about historic preservation as an impediment to their work with minority communities. Historic preservation is a fairly new academic discipline in North America, and most Americans are only vaguely familiar with the term, let alone the field. This is magnified among African Americans and other minority groups and further complicated by the perception that preservation has played a significant role in the disenfranchisement of communities through gentrification.

Even among members of the general public who are actively involved in preservation efforts, few have formal training or education in the field or related disciplines. Most are community organizers, activists, clergy, civic leaders, educators, servicemembers,
or retired professionals dedicated to their communities. They tend to be well educated in their respective fields and have the organizational leadership necessary to gather resources and build support for a project, but they lack fundamental knowledge of preservation methodology and philosophy. Unfortunately, community projects can stall or even fail when leaders lack the information they need to make sound planning decisions. Typical components of a project—identifying the preservation method, selecting contractors, developing cyclic maintenance plans—can become daunting tasks that take longer to accomplish. Not only might the projects fall prey to financial mismanagement and ultimately fail but the community organizations that attempted them may also face difficulty in securing support for their future efforts.

More often than not, minority communities will be forced to seek technical assistance for their preservation efforts outside of their demographic groups because historic preservation, a relatively small field of study to begin with, attracts very few minority practitioners. According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, in 2014 people of color earned only 10 percent of the total degrees awarded in historic preservation and closely related disciplines.¹ African Americans accounted for roughly 4 percent with Hispanics following closely at a little more than 3 percent, whereas white Americans earned 90 percent of those degrees. With so few people of color going into the profession, disparity in knowledge about preservation—including what resources are available for funding, technical assistance, and specialized services—is unsurprising.

When there is an information gap, preservation organizations that have forged relationships to assist community projects may fail to provide adequate mentoring or real knowledge exchange. This can lead to a paternalistic relationship that fosters distrust and compounds the negative view many communities have of the preservation movement.

The information disparity also comes at a cost to preservation professionals. While communities may lack fundamental preservation awareness, preservation organizations often lack cultural awareness. The homogeneity within the profession adversely affects the
field, as interactions with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds would broaden historical knowledge, accurate cultural perception, and critical thinking skills. A lack of diverse viewpoints and accountability also precipitates practices and rationale that exclude diversity in programming areas.

**VARYING PHILOSOPHIES ON PRESERVATION**

Program planning for resources in African American and other under-represented communities is another topic that merits close investigation. The field generally adheres to the Western definition of historic preservation, which focuses on maintaining the aesthetic properties of the material object. Many cultures, however, have different priorities, which can vary based on values. For many African, Eastern, and Native American cultures, the primary historic or cultural resources are intangible, and preservation is defined by the maintenance of beliefs, traditions, history, and craftsmanship. Maintaining material items is secondary because the tangible object—whether it be a structure, site, or ornament—only has relevance or value when it is functioning within the community to convey cultural ideology or related history.

For example, the Ashanti people of Ghana, West Africa, have a long-held practice of crafting *akua ba*, commonly referred to as “African fertility dolls,” and presenting them to women of child-bearing age to help ensure conception. The dolls range in size; some are elaborately carved or decorated, while others have very little detail. While there may be a particular ceremonial akua ba used for many generations, preservation is focused on continuing the ceremony and conveying the value that the Ashanti people place on children, rather than on maintaining the doll itself.

In many African American and other minority American communities, there is a similar focus on historical information and cultural memory as the primary resources worth maintaining. Examining the aesthetic qualities of an object is a secondary exercise—one that is often considered superficial. Instead, people prioritize the ways in which objects relate to them or their understanding of history. Preservationists often fail to recognize this
view. Furthermore, they may assume that, in the absence of tangible evidence, there is no reason to include a particular history in their programming.

Incorporating varying preservation philosophies can be useful for expanding program development and outreach. Oral history and recitation of cultural memory—which is the main method of preservation for many African societies—can be used to link separate sites through interpretation as part of a shared cultural landscape or to bridge different time periods. People will attend historical programming events if they have confidence in the organizing group’s commitment to accuracy in interpretation. This applies to mainstream audiences as well, who appreciate learning about different perspectives on history. Broader and more varied interpretation can also increase repeated visitations to a site.

ADDRESSING ISSUES THROUGH PROGRAMMING
“Resistance, Escape, Community”

During my work with the Cane River National Heritage Area,² I developed two programs based on the issues and methods identified during discussions with colleagues. One was a two-day conference called “Resistance, Escape, Community,” which focused on the history of resistance to enslavement in 19th-century North Louisiana and the Deep South, maroon communities,³ and varying views on racial identity between the colonizing nations present in the Cane River area prior to the Louisiana Purchase.
The impetus for the program was local ethnographer Rolanda Teal’s recent discovery of the history of a well-organized slave insurrection that took place along Cane River in 1804. Teal’s research, coupled with the United Nations’ International Decade for People of African Descent, provided the perfect opportunity to develop a program directed at both history or cultural resource management professionals and a more general audience. The conference was marketed both to the public and professionals, especially staff of historic sites and local heritage organizations seeking to expand their historical interpretations. The aim was to promote a firm understanding of how African Americans resisted slavery while also providing enough historical details to compel professional researchers to engage in further historical research.

On the second day of the conference, oral history was used to link two sites within the heritage area, both of which are related to the history of slavery. The actual site of the insurrection was inaccessible and held no remaining tangible evidence relating to the event, so attendees first visited the adjacent Magnolia Plantation. There they heard an account of the insurrection and learned about slavery in the Cane River area. Magnolia Plantation contains intact slave cabins, a wooden gin press, and other historic outbuildings that illustrate what life there was like for enslaved people. This helped put the history of the uprising in context for the audience and gave a much-needed boost to visits to the plantation.
The second site, Los Adaes State Historic Site, is near the western edge of Natchitoches Parish, 24 miles from Magnolia Plantation. Los Adaes was the former capitol of Texas and a Spanish presidio. It was also a marker and safe haven for runaway slaves en route to Spanish territory, and those involved in the Cane River insurrection would have passed through on their way to freedom. The normal historical interpretation at Los Adaes was revised to include the history of enslaved Africans and describe the Sistema de Castas, a Spanish racial hierarchy system. This interpretation helped illuminate the differences in racial identity among colonizing nations and provided insight into why those escaping slavery in the region opted to flee into colonial Spain.

Nearly 300 people attended the first day of the conference, and 100 participated in the site visits. More than half of the attendees were from other cities or states, which proved that people will give extra consideration and effort to attend programming that is committed to conveying different aspects of history.

Attendee demographics, collected through an online survey, were found to be split 60/40 between African American and white participants, respectively. This is particularly significant in a local context of lingering racial tensions and proves the feasibility of building broadly appealing programming around intangible resources. My partners—the National Park Service and Los Adaes—and I worked to optimize audience diversity by carefully planning topics, themes, and learning expectations, as well as considering
the cultural backgrounds of our audience. Marketing efforts aimed at reaching diverse audiences included local talk radio and television segments, local newspaper articles, announcements on the website and during the programming of a local NPR affiliate, and promotional packets sent to universities.

Per the survey, African American people who had never visited local historic sites before, or who had found past visits uncomfortable, attended because they felt confident that the interpretation would be factual and free from offensive statements and would reflect the experiences of African Americans. White Americans attended because they were unfamiliar with African American history, particularly resistance to slavery, and wanted to learn something new. Even those who had visited the sites before wanted to hear a new and more encompassing interpretation.

The majority of attendees identified themselves as “interested members of the public” (38 percent) or “researchers/historians” (32 percent), and the third-largest group (19 percent) were cultural heritage resources management professionals.

Nearly all the participants (92 percent) said that they would visit the heritage area again. White attendees emphasized their astonishment regarding aspects of slavery about which they had no previous knowledge. The responses to one particular survey question—“What was the most beneficial aspect of the conference?”—were especially revealing: The majority (74 percent) identified historical information as the most beneficial aspect. Networking and site visits came in second and third, respectively. Given that the site visits focused on intangible heritage, their popularity proves that programs built around intangible evidence can be a compelling draw. Most attendees were local—many lived within a few miles of the sites—but most were also first-time visitors. The opportunity to learn from an authentic interpretation of the sites was uniquely appealing for people who had not previously felt compelled to visit.

**Cultural Heritage Tourism Workshops**

This spring, I partnered with the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF) Program to develop an online
cultural heritage tourism workshop series—once again with the goal of filling information voids and raising awareness. The two-part series presents information on the NTF program, case studies on heritage tourism development, and technical assistance for researching and submitting nominations to the NTF’s database of sites. The workshops have been promoted to a national audience, this time specifically geared to cultural resources management entities, preservationists, and professionals in related disciplines. Ideally planners and preservationists will learn to develop heritage tourism initiatives around mostly intangible resources and add sites to the NTF database.

Part one of the series took place in April and was simulcast from the Maryland Office of Tourism Development (MOTD) in Baltimore. During the introduction I highlighted the benefit of understanding varying cultural views on heritage and preservation for programs focused on African American resources and history. Four organizations presented cases studies of cultural heritage tourism efforts successfully developed around tangible and intangible resources related to the Underground Railroad: Niagara Falls National Heritage Area; the MOTD; Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence in Albany, New York; and Friends of the Free State Capitol, Constitution Hall in Topeka, Kansas. The presenters shared details of their approaches to tourism development and the methods used, which include audio tours; restoration of historic structures; and, in the case of Niagara Falls, a binational event planned to celebrate the opening of an Underground Railroad History Center in 2017. Participants included staff from state historic preservation offices, museums, national heritage areas, architects, and community planners.

While the workshop series will be formally evaluated after its completion this fall, thus far it seems to be successfully broadening the approach of preservation organizations working with African American resources.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION
The telephone discussion sessions, which are ongoing but not permanent, have remained informal but have initiated innovative programming around African American history and other kinds of
intangible heritage. The conversations have raised other issues as well, including the links between land ownership and cultural heritage preservation, the effects of patterns of migration on community development, and cemetery preservation. Conversations are being broadened to include social issues, and future discussions will be more formal, publicized through short conversation synopses, and shared on social media. FJ

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2 Cane River National Heritage Area, located in Natchitoches, Louisiana, is one of 49 national heritage areas designated by Congress as areas with natural, cultural, and historic resources that combine to tell a unique aspect of America’s history.

3 The term “maroon communities” refers to communities in the Americas formed by escaped slaves.

4 Archivists from several universities were asked to compile a list of archives throughout the state that house significant collections related to African American history, and attendees received these lists to assist them with future research.

5 Magnolia Plantation is a part of Cane River Creole Historical National Park, which is a separate entity from the National Heritage Area.

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