

Preserving and Remembering Black History in Upstate New York

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Overview: *Preserving and Remembering Black History in Upstate New York* will take place during summer 2021 in Peterboro, NY and remotely. Working in coordination with the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum (NAHOF) and the Gerrit Smith Estate National Historic Landmark (GSENL), this project aims to preserve Upstate Black History by archiving and digitizing the video collections currently held by NAHOF and the GSENL and making them accessible to a wider, national audience. The project will also provide a month-long program in July that will highlight the rich history of Black Americans in the Upstate New York region by showcasing digitized presentations and hosting speakers from other history organizations in Upstate New York, specifically the Underground Railroad Consortium of New York State. By highlighting local Upstate New York history, this project will emphasize the role individual New Yorkers played in aiding or resisting discriminatory practices and institutions. This project will be promoting peace by creating a deeper sense of empathy between people of different racial backgrounds and will open avenues of reconciliation through the acknowledgement of history.

Background: The summer of 2020 saw the participation of around 15 million to 26 million Americans in the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, making it the largest protest movement in U.S. history.¹ The protests reached a large audience, occurring in over 2,000 American cities and in 60 countries. The size and reach of these protests indicate that issues of police brutality against Blacks and racial inequality are seen as pressing global problems.² In the midst of these protests there was a massive spark of interest in anti-racist education and in lesser known historical events like the Tulsa Massacre and Juneteenth. Books like *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi and *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo sold out due to interest in anti-racist education. Amid these events, I became interested in working with NAHOF through Colgate's Upstate Institute given the organization's commitment to anti-racist history education.

NAHOF is located in the town of Peterboro in Upstate New York, and is housed in the building where the inaugural meeting of the New York State Antislavery Society was held in 1835. NAHOF creates a variety of educational programming throughout the year alongside the GSENL. Both organizations honor antislavery abolitionists and their work in combatting slavery. NAHOF's mission is "to complete the second and ongoing abolition—the moral conviction to end racism," acknowledging that the legacy of slavery persists to this day. Additionally, NAHOF was one of the three original founders of the Underground Railroad Consortium of New York State (URCNYS), which is a coalition of organizations across the State with sites that preserve and celebrate Underground Railroad history. Many of the URCNYS members provide educational programming at their sites throughout the year. However, most sites have been closed since the beginning of the pandemic, motivating many organizations to step up their digital programming. I seek to ensure that they are continuing to share their history through a digitally centered program like *Preserving and Remembering Black History in Upstate New York*.

Project Summary: My project seeks to promote peace through the creation of an informed citizenry in a time of great political tension. The month-long educational program will highlight the region's local Black history and the presence or absence of white allyship that influenced it. The program will occur primarily over Zoom and will be distributed in video format over digital platforms to groups like the Madison-Oneida BOCES and the SCDN Statewide Social Studies network. Highlighting this history is especially important in the Upstate New York area, a region that is demographically 83% White yet includes cities like Rochester and Buffalo which are defined by their large Black populations.³ This lack of diversity translates into strained race relations in places like Rochester, named one of the worst cities for Blacks in America due to disproportionate rates of incarceration and unemployment.⁴

¹ Larry Buchanan et al., (July 3, 2020), "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in US. History", *The New York Times*.

² Audra D. S. Burch et al., (June 13, 2020), "How Black Lives Matter Reached Every Corner of America", *The New York Times*.

³ Nancy Denton et al., "How the Other Third Lives: A Focus on Upstate New York", Lewis Mumford Center, 2010.

⁴ Geoff Herbert, "2 Upstate NY Cities among Worst for Black Americans", Syracuse.com, November 19, 2018

The project will consist of the following components: (i) the months of May and June will be devoted to collecting, archiving, and organizing NAHOF and the GSENLH's existing material, which are currently stored on hard drives and CDs. Because the organization receives a high volume of requests for materials for research on abolitionists and the anti-slavery society, the NAHOF believes that digitizing and making its materials accessible on its website and YouTube is of vital importance for promoting knowledge nationwide. Digitization would make NAHOF's materials accessible to educators who are looking for ways to enhance their teaching on the era of slavery, the work of abolitionists, and the important role of organizations like the New York State Anti-Slavery Society. Furthermore, the need to digitize is exacerbated by the pandemic which has closed the museum and the estate down indefinitely.

To best assess how to begin the digitizing process, I will be traveling to Peterboro at the end of the Spring semester to view the collections and consult with Tim McLaughlin, the Chair of the NAHOF Archives, Collections, and Research department. Likewise, at the moment three NAHOF board members are involved in a two-year training with the Museum Association of New York called "Building Capacities, Creating Sustainability, Growing Accessibility". This program has provided the members with an understanding of how to use online resources to their advantage. Adding to the idea of training, I would also (ii) purchase a training course that would help NAHOF and the GSENLH learn about promoting their educational programs through social media networks. This training will help NAHOF and the GSENLH build their online presence and thus extend their reach nationally. Additionally, (iii) I will be reaching out to members of the URCNYS and other historical associations in the Upstate area to invite them to speak about their respective sites and their histories in July (these events will be held over Zoom). Lastly, (iv) I will publish the interviews, videos, talks, and other sources collected during the prior two months in a month-long educational program in July. Due to the pandemic, both components (iii) and (iv), occurring in mid-June and July, will be completed virtually through platforms like Zoom while I am working on the project remotely from Texas.

To ensure the success of this project, I will be working directly with members of the board at NAHOF and GSENLH. I will be relying on the organizational expertise of individuals like Dorothy Willsey, the President of the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum and the Cabinet of Freedom; Norman Dann, the Head Docent Gerrit Smith Estate NHL and Gerrit Smith Biographer; Tim McLaughlin, Chair of the NAHOF Archives, Collections, and Research; and Nell Ziegler, President of the Smithfield Community Association / Gerrit Smith Estate.

Expected Outcomes: There are three expected outcomes from this project. First, the archiving and organizing of NAHOF's and GSENLH's video recordings will allow the organizations to create more educational programs in the future. They will have the ability to use easily accessible digitized collections of past interviews, exhibits, and talks for programming and education indefinitely. Second, this project will illuminate the often-obscured history of Black resistance and abolitionists in the Upstate New York area. Providing a month-long program focused solely on the local history of Black Americans and their allies in Upstate New York will allow locals to engage with their regional history on a deeper level. This is important as it will promote the idea that we each are active participants in the creation of history. Focusing on the local history of Blacks and their White allies will highlight how the history of enslavement, discrimination, and violence, as well as the history of resistance and triumph, was not something that only occurred in a far-off place, rather it occurred in their own neighborhoods. Third, my evaluation of the project (surveying participants) will provide valuable feedback to NAHOF that can be translated into statistics that can be utilized in applying for grant funding for future educational projects. This will allow NAHOF to expand its programming reach and create future educational content that will continue to promote NAHOF's mission of creating a more peaceful society free of racism.

About the Student: Victoria Basulto will be graduating with a double major in History and English in May of 2021. She is hoping to pursue a graduate education in History with the goal of obtaining a PhD. Victoria studied abroad in London with the Colgate History Study Group in the Spring of 2020 and had the opportunity to work in several archives. Her experiences in the archives taught her the importance of preserving historical records. Similarly, her internships with organizations like Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) and NAHOF taught her the importance of history education, inspiring her to use her digital media skills and her history knowledge to create educational videos and digital resources.