

Preserving and Remembering Black History in Upstate New York

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Section I: Narrative

The *Preserving and Remembering Black History in Upstate New York* project's two main goals were to help the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum (NAHOF) and the Gerrit Smith Estate National Historic Landmark (GSENHL) digitize their collection of Peterboro Heritage programs and to create an educational program to highlight the history of Black Americans in the region. Under the belief that inclusive history can help promote cross-racial relationships, the project promoted peace by increasing access to educational material centered on Black Americans and their experiences in local history.

These goals developed throughout 2020-2021 while I interned with NAHOF to help them overcome setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I worked on a month-long educational program called *Black History Matters*, which contained presentations on historical topics centering on the Black American experience in U.S. history. The program was entirely virtual and was the first event hosted by NAHOF since its closing in March of 2020. The video series premiered on YouTube in February 2021 and met with such success that the organization saw an increase in its online outreach and renewed interest in the organization. Increasing their online presence and outreach was extremely important for NAHOF in the age of COVID-19 when it could not physically reopen to the public. However, as small nonprofits, the sister organizations of NAHOF and GSENHL did not have the necessary workforce to increase their digital presence.

As a history major interested in education, media, and multi-cultural history, I proposed a summer project aimed at helping both organizations increase their visibility and online presence. I was also motivated to use my historiographical and media skills to create a digital educational program, like *Black History Matters*, by the current political climate surrounding history education. Many attempts have been to ban curriculums that seek to tell narratives underscoring the histories of marginalized communities in American history. Given the importance of these stories to understand the reality of our nation's past, present, and future, I decided to create an accessible educational program for students and educators. The program focused on prominent Black spaces and individuals in Upstate New York, a region that has traditionally been perceived as white. For example, John W. Jones, David Ruggles, Harriet Powell, and Louisa Jacobs, some of the individuals covered in the educational program I created titled *Black History in Upstate New York*, are integral to the history of New York State and movements like abolitionism and women's rights but are rarely mentioned in history books despite their national and local importance. Through the educational program, I produced educational content that anyone could access via YouTube while also emphasizing the important roles Black Americans played in championing and leading movements centered on human rights.

While working with the organization, I also discovered that NAHOF and GSENHL had many CDs with past recorded presentations sitting in storage rooms. None of the presentations, given by a wide range of scholars and known as Peterboro Heritage programs, were accessible to the public, and they went unused for several years. Yet, NAHOF and GSENHL receive many emails from students seeking information on certain abolitionists or local history. Understanding that students, educators, and scholars might use these programs if they could be digitized and made accessible via online platforms, I made the second goal to help NAHOF and GSENHL digitize, organize, and make use of their past recorded programs. This would bolster the organization's usefulness to students, educators, and scholars by

servicing as a resource while increasing their online outreach and helping spread information far beyond their traditional reach of Upstate New York.

The first portion of the project, digitizing the Peterboro Heritage programs, was completed in one month. In that time, I digitized and sorted over seventy CDs containing Peterboro Heritage presentations on topics like Harriet Tubman's visits to Peterboro, Gerrit Smith's role in helping establish the racially inclusive Central College in McGraw, and site-specific histories like the New York Antislavery Societies' meeting in Peterboro. Part two of this first portion is still underway but has progressed substantially. This part focuses on making the newly digitized programs accessible and available to anyone with internet access. Over the next two months, I ran the digitized files through Otter.ai software to produce subtitles to ensure that the videos were accessible with closed captions. I also uploaded the videos to NAHOF's Digital Library YouTube channel. The videos are currently being sorted and added to a curated space, called the Video Library, on the NAHOF website. The public can access these programs when browsing through the NAHOF website and will be able to benefit from the expertise of the hundreds of presenters.

The project's second component took place in August with the premiere of the *Black History in Upstate New York* educational program on NAHOF's YouTube channel. The program consisted of eleven presentations by myself and several other scholars, filmed remotely over Zoom, which I then edited through Sony Vegas to make them function as videos. The program received 550 plus views from various locations in the United States. Each video ran anywhere from 10 minutes to 30 minutes and allowed me to experiment with what video length was ideal for encouraging viewership. The program also helped NAHOF connect with scholars, many of whom expressed interest in working with NAHOF to make future presentations. All of the presentations highlighted spaces in Upstate New York and Black individuals who lived or spent significant amounts of time in Upstate New York. The program also received press from local and state-wide publications like the *Utica Observer Dispatch*, *New York Almanack*, *Daily Advent*, and *Spot On New York*. This widespread coverage maximized its outreach to the local community in addition to my daily posts on NAHOF's Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

Overall, *Preserving and Remembering Black History in Upstate New York* helped NAHOF and GSENLH become more sustainable after encountering the difficulties of a pandemic. I created a streamlined digitization process that will allow the organization to quickly upload future in-person presentations to their website for easy accessibility to others. This means that NAHOF's website will continue to add educational content to benefit students, educators, and researchers alike. Consequently, the museum and hall of fame will spread its impact beyond Upstate New York by making online content accessible from anywhere in the world. Likewise, the *Black History in Upstate New York* program and the subsequent survey we conducted with our viewers will provide NAHOF with statistics it can use when applying to grants that fund educational programs and media equipment purchases.

Additionally, since I purchased the equipment needed to make videos through the Projects for Peace grant, the organizations' capacity to continue creating online programs is secured. I will personally continue to work with the organization to develop future programs as a newly inducted member of NAHOF's cabinet and member of the Educational Programs Committee. I have already begun working on two new programs, *Black History Matters 2022* for February and *Black Women Histories 2022* for March, which will cover new topics and bring in many new presenters. I remain committed to utilizing my media and historiographical skills, especially as I improve my knowledge through my graduate education, to help NAHOF and GSENLH find innovative ways to reach larger audiences and spread history inclusive of all.

"Projects for Peace gave me the tools needed to launch, from start to finish, a grassroots educational program alongside a community-based nonprofit that is just beginning to reopen after COVID. As an

aspiring historian, this experience fortified my commitment to work towards promoting inclusive history education that reflects the diversity of our country in order to promote peace.” -Victoria Basulto

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Section II: Photographs

