

Howard University

Digital Howard @ Howard University

History Department Faculty Publications

Department of History

April 2003

Report from the Field: Public History at Howard University

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis

Howard University, eclark-lewis@howard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://dh.howard.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [Public History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark-Lewis, Elizabeth, "Report from the Field: Public History at Howard University" (2003). *History Department Faculty Publications*. 51.

https://dh.howard.edu/hist_fac/51

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

Report from the Field: Public History at Howard University

ELIZABETH CLARK-LEWIS

At Howard University, the public history program uses new empirical methodologies and pedagogies to engage students and nonacademic audiences. This article outlines the specialized knowledge, perspectives, approaches, practices, issues, and critical concerns of this program. It illustrates how focused, innovative research opportunities simultaneously move students beyond the boundaries of academic theories, publicly funded agencies, private corporations, or entrepreneurial firms while helping them remain sensitive to community-based programs, projects, institutions, and constituencies. Public history is congruent with service, a core value of Howard University, and it strengthens the university's ability to reach beyond the confines of academe; define, shape, and immerse students in challenging new historical syntheses; and inclusively document social, economic, political, and cultural histories that might otherwise go untold.

THE PUBLIC HISTORY PROGRAM at Howard University had not been around for long before the community came knocking. Within several months of its creation, the Anacostia Museum needed its students to conduct interviews for a 25th anniversary oral history project. Students also participated in other activities, including Juneteenth and "Black Mosaic," a project that

ELIZABETH CLARK-LEWIS is the director of the Public History Program at Howard University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland.

This article could not have been written with the gracious cooperation of Joyce Jones. She wrote a very long, thoughtful and cogent review of the public history program for the Howard Magazine in 1999. Paul Ruffins featured the program in a February 2002 article for Black Issues in Higher Education. Ted Pelonis highlighted the program's activities with the Black Fashion Museum, the Howard University Center for Urban Progress, and the Center for the Advancement of Service Learning in the Winter 2002 edition of the Howard Magazine.

examined the meaning of community, culture, and cultural exchange from the perspective of Washington, D.C.'s various populations of African descent.¹ In less than eighteen months, the university's public history program was attracting exciting internship opportunities, presenting lectures, and helping the surrounding community document its past. In the first three months alone, students developed an outline for collecting oral histories at the Potomac Gardens public housing complex in Southeast Washington, D.C. An article in the *Washington Post* at the end of the project detailed the new questions, techniques, and connections this award-winning program created for the youth and older residents.²

In its second year, the public history program at Howard University presented lectures at community sites to commemorate the 130th anniversary of emancipation in the District of Columbia. The *Washington Post* coverage of the emancipation programs noted how the descendants of slaves, from ages 10 to 102, celebrated the 130th anniversary of the freeing of the slaves in the District, which came eight months before President Abraham Lincoln freed slaves anywhere else in the country. The article stressed how this "piece of history seemed forgotten," but public historians were "determined to resurrect the commemoration."³

Two and a half years after being established, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History invited the program to co-sponsor an all-day Women's History Month program. Before the end of the program's third year, Howard University students worked with the North Brentwood Historical Society history committee to document the social, economic, political, and cultural history of one of the Washington area's earliest incorporated African-American towns. Students collected oral histories, catalogued family objects, transcribed the oral interviews, and processed archival materials that included local school records, church bulletins, "Negro" league baseball team uniforms, and important letters written by North Brentwood leaders in the nineteenth century. "This project and the museum exhibit at the Smithsonian would not have been possible without the Howard public history program and its students. Period."⁴

1. "Juneteenth Celebration Is Planned," *Washington Post*, 20 June 1991; "A Day of Jubilation Marking Freedom," *Washington Post*, 23 June 1991. See also Delisa Saunders, "The Anacostia Welcomes Steven Newsome," *Newsletter of the Anacostia Museum* 2 (Spring 1991): 1. Meeting notes for 6 March 1991, 19 March 1991, 25 March 1991, 29 March 1991, 14 April 1991, 28 April 1991, 10 June 1991, 5 July 1991, 7 August 1991.

2. Ann Marie Plane, "On Pulling Together: Historians, Citizens, and Collaboration," *Public Historian* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 8; Molly Sinclair, "'Freedom Bags' Carried Hope of a Better Life," *Washington Post*, 30 July 1992.

3. Patrice Gaines-Carter, "A Legacy of Liberation: DC Was First to Free Slaves," *Washington Post*, April 10, 1992; "Emancipation at Union Temple Baptist Church and Southeast Museum," *NewsChannel 8*, 11 April 1992; Patrice Gaines-Carter, "Dances With Freedom, A 102-Year-Old's Star Turn: District's Emancipation Anniversary Is Celebrated," *Washington Post* 17 April 1992. Emancipation discussed on "Evening Exchange," WHUT Channel 32, 19 April 2002, and "Viewpoints," WRC Channel 4, 13 April 2003.

4. Many details have been kindly supplied to the author via e-mail by Project Director Ruth Wilson, 25 June 2002. Also see "Tracing History of Two Towns: North Brentwood and

Public history at Howard University emerged from “the desire to promote a positive racial identity, preserve a history in danger of being lost, and challenge the racist stereotypes and myths pervasive in American popular culture.”⁵ The History Department was formally established in the pre-World War I era, and it embraced public historians from its inception. After briefly teaching at Howard University, Dr. Carter G. Woodson established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. During the Association’s first years, Dr. Woodson founded the *Journal of Negro History*, Associated Publishers, a Home Study Department and Lecture Bureau, and Negro History Week, the most successful strategy for publicizing African-American history. Woodson’s work captured a new audience for African-American public history because he “took history directly to the people in schools, churches, social clubs, and businesspeople.”⁶

Four decades after the founding of the *Journal of Negro History*, Professor John Hope Franklin wrote about the dramatic and significant “frontal attacks on segregation and discrimination.”⁷ Howard University professors in history, sociology, philosophy, political science, psychology, law, economics, commerce, and finance offered detailed, community-based remedies to substantially elevate the position of the Negro in American life.⁸ The Department of History was a nexus for research, reform, and community programs because “every scholar was eager to relate classroom work to social action.”⁹ According to Dr. Donald Roe, an archivist at the National Archives in Maryland, a major push for a separate public history program coincided with the department expanding its civil rights and women’s history courses “when blacks and women began demanding that their stories be more tightly woven into the nation’s fabric. History started to become

Bethesda,” *Washington Post*, 3 March 1994; “North Brentwood Savors, Sustains Proud Heritage,” *Washington Post*, 4 March 1995; “Black Town . . . in History,” *Washington Post*, 14 July 1996. For an essay describing the participation of Howard University in the entire project, see “Acknowledgments” in Frank Wilson, *Footsteps from North Brentwood* (North Brentwood, Md.: North Brentwood Historical Society, 1997).

5. Jeffrey C. Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins, “A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective,” in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Eds.), *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 334.

6. Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1993) and Stewart and Ruffins, 313–16.

7. John Hope Franklin, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1956).

8. See Jonathan S. Holloway, “Secret Sites: Black Washington, D.C., and Howard University,” *Confronting The Veil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002): 34–83. See also David Levering Lewis, *A Bicentennial History of Washington, D.C.* (New York: Norton, 1976); Rayford Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); Letitia Brown and Elsie Lewis, *Washington in the New Era, 1870–1970* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1972); Walter Dyson, *Howard University, The Capstone of Negro Education: A History 1867–1940* (Washington, D.C.: The Graduate School of Howard University, 1941); Sterling Brown, *Washington, City and Capital* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1937).

9. Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 59; and *A History of the Department of History* (Washington: Howard University, 1970).

more inclusive, and that is what public history is all about . . . including people who have been left out and making their experiences available to a wider audience, not just an academic community.”¹⁰

In 1990, with the founding of a formal public history program, Howard University began to offer master’s and doctoral degrees in history with special emphasis on “preparing students to move beyond the narrow confines of the academic world and toward careers in institutions—such as museums, archives and government agencies—that are concerned with a wider audience than simply students and professors.”¹¹ Students in the program are asked to help people interpret materials found in homes, neighborhood organizations, or historic church buildings.¹² Its primary mission is to teach students how to enhance the knowledge of people coming through the door, whether it is a museum, an archive, or a church. How can public history help people recover lost voices, understand their place in history, see how history mirrors their experience, and recognize the ways they mold history?¹³

At Howard University, students must take core courses in public history theory, museums, archives, and historic preservation, and develop specialties such as film, photography, and material culture. Many students seek out their own areas of interest and create independent study courses tailored to their own needs. For example, Jim Harper worked on a research team for the African American Museum of Culture and History in Maryland. As a part of the internship, he reviewed artifacts and collected oral histories of the Oblate Sisters, the first order of black nuns in the country, located just outside Baltimore, Maryland. Although their numbers are diminishing, those who remain are continuing the order’s original mission, educating children. Working with Sister Reparata Clarke, this native of Mount Olive, North Carolina gathered information on items that ranged from the axes nuns used to do the work of men to an ancient communion wafer. He is also collecting oral histories and objects to tell the history of his home town, the pickle capital of the world.¹⁴

Dr. Spencer Crew, one of the public history program’s adjunct professors, helped students like Jim Harper understand why it is essential “to use objects to tell a Black story.” In each course students learned how to go “out and ask the Black community to donate objects to help recreate important part[s] of American history. That in itself draws people into the institution because they feel honored when the dress that their grandmother wore when she moved up North goes in the same Smithsonian museum that

10. Joyce Jones, “Making History Count: Public History is Bringing the Past Contribution of African Americans to Light,” *Howard Magazine* 7 (Spring 1999): 10.

11. Paul Ruffins, “Embracing Public History,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* (14 February 2002): 32.

12. Richlyn Goddard, *Persistence, Perseverance, and Progress: History of African American Schools in Calvert County, Maryland, 1865–1965* (Prince Frederick, Md.: Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum / Calvert County Afro-American Historical Society [Huntingtown, Md.]), 1995.

13. Frank Rich, “White History Month,” *New York Times* 12 February 1995.

14. Jones, “Making History Count,” 12.

preserved George Washington's false teeth."¹⁵ In seminars, readings, and problems in public history courses, this distinguished scholar guided students working in environments that are not "seen as having any particular relevance to African Americans" or seeking "an alternative career path." Dr. Crew demonstrated the need for public historians to "use ingenuity to uncover material culture; . . . encourage people to reflect . . . [and] take action to make sure [our] material culture does not disappear, is not lost or forgotten."¹⁶

Internships are critical for teaching students how many segments of the historical community are not open to ingenuity, innovation, or new interpretations. Emerging scholars learn why minority neighborhood residents "are demanding that African American, or Hispanic or Asian historians are at the table to ensure that their history is conserved and preserved."¹⁷ Rhonda Jones is a Ph.D. candidate with a passion for history that resonates from her public experience. She has been selected for internships in the office of then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich and the D.C. Humanities Council. She also led a walking tour of several historic districts and worked with a mural project chronicling U Street, the vibrant historic area near Howard University that was called "Black Broadway" from the 1910s to the 1960s. However, as an intern working with Georgetown's historic Mt. Zion United Methodist Church, she experienced resistance to research that was a departure from her university courses and previous practices. Her findings illustrated how secrecy and an unspoken policy surrounding the church congregation and its cemetery were important parts of the Underground Railroad story. Unmistakable frustration was evident as she outlined how the presence of church records dating back to 1816, oral histories, and information in slave narratives were not enough to satisfy tradition-bound federal historians. All too often Underground Railroad scholars, historic site interpreters, and preservationists wanted runaway slaves to "stop, write a diary, sign a book and say, 'I was here.'" The history of African-American participation underground, like slavery, is a contentious, anxiety-producing topic that requires interpretive flexibility and fresh perspectives.¹⁸

15. For more detail see Spencer Crew, "A Museum Perspective on The Presence of the Past," *The Public Historian* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 23–26. For a recent work describing the prevailing views, see Professor Crew's comments in "Embracing Public History," *Black Issues in Higher Education* (14 February 2002): 35.

16. Jones, "Making History Count," 54.

17. Gretchen Sullivan Sorin extensively covers this topic in "Embracing Public History," *Black Issues in Higher Education* (14 February 2002): 33.

18. James Oliver Horton, "Presenting History: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4, (Fall 1999): 37; Judith Wellman, "The Underground Railroad and the National Register of Historic Places: Historical Importance v. Architectural Integrity," *The Public Historian* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 11–30. For more detail on silencing the past, keeping marginalized people and the sites associated with them out of our historical memory see Barbara Little, "Archaeology, History, and Material Culture: Grounding Abstractions and Other Imponderables," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 1 (1997): 179–87. See also Ida E. Jones, "Their Chains Shall Fall Off: The Activism of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church," in Elizabeth Clark-Lewis (Ed.), *First Freed: Washington, D.C. in the Emancipation Era* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 2002).

By contrast, in a 2000 seminar class, every student's research paper or project for the Black Fashion Museum required unusual innovation. The museum's collection is valued in the millions and includes the dress Rosa Parks carried with her the day she refused to give up her seat at the front of the bus. The museum also owns a line-for-line copy of one of the many dresses Elizabeth Keckly designed for Mary Todd Lincoln during her years as first lady of the United States. Also featured are works of Ann Lowe, a personal friend of the founder, and the designer who created the gown Jacqueline Bouvier wore when she married Senator John F. Kennedy. Each student in the course met with Joyce Alexander Bailey, the current director of the Black Fashion Museum, and toured the museum's home — a building believed to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad. Every paper or project addressed one of the museum's current or projected challenges and was presented to the museum director and staff. The unique research proposals included devising creative public relations procedures, a blueprint to expand the museum's membership base, an audience development plan, and a design for handicapped access. One student's research led to the "discovery" of a female designer who lived within two blocks of the museum. The research on Mary Sprow, a respected but "invisible" community-based couturiere, her adornment techniques, design processes, and surviving garments led to a public program profiling her designs. Each student completed a project and helped the museum tell how, for hundreds of years, talented people of African descent were designing clothing but were "unable to let the world know what they were doing."¹⁹

Howard University public history students have produced papers, projects, and publications that recast and refine history in the District of Columbia.²⁰ Their research has explored African Americans as production workers at an early nineteenth-century federal ordnance center; founders of little-known, pre-Civil War newspapers that highlighted the vicissitudes of life facing local free and enslaved persons; individuals who spelled out the dissonance in the local segregation laws passed in the years following slavery; community-based photographers; activists who worked with teachers in nearby Calvert County; and post-emancipation political leaders who continued to condemn slavery in other areas of the African diaspora. This excellence was engendered by seminars or small class lectures in which students received policy instruction from Robert Stanton, director of the National Park Service. Debra Newman Ham, the specialist in African-American history in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress, and Steven Newsome, director of the Anacostia Museum, conducted seminars

19. Ted Pelonis, "A Fashionable History," *Howard Magazine* 10 (Winter 2002): 44.

20. Student research has been published in several volumes including *First Freed: Washington, D.C., In The Emancipation Era* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 2002); and "Preliminary Findings of Howard University Million Woman March Study," WTTG Channel 5, 27 October 1997.

on manuscript collections and museum development. Advanced archives and research methods courses were presented by Thomas Battle, director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, and Walter Hill, black history specialist at the National Archives. Cecil N. McKithan, chief of the National Register Programs Division of the National Park Service, and Barbara Taggar, Southeast coordinator for the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, have presented preservation classes and special research seminars.²¹

Internships also offer an important option for reinterpreting the salient aspects of African-American history. Data is not static, and our students' opportunities have been profoundly enriched after internships at federal public history sites, including the Smithsonian Institution, National Archives and Records Administration, United States Congress, Library of Congress, the White House, National Capitol Parks East, the National Historic Landmarks Survey, Mary McLeod Bethune Museum and Black Women's Archive, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Executive Department agency service includes the U.S. Departments of State, Commerce, Labor, Interior, Defense, Education, Transportation, Justice, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

State and local sites which have aroused the interest and attention of student interns include the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History and the Office of the Mayor, both in Washington, D.C.; the African American Resource Center in Alexandria, Virginia; and the Departments of Youth Service for Atlantic City, New Jersey, and New York City. Educational sites for internships include the Moorland Spingarn Research Center of Howard University; the Howard University Archives; the Ralph Bunche International Center; and WHUT (Howard University Television).

Private and nonprofit organizations at which students have interned include the Children's Defense Fund; National Council of Negro Women; national headquarters of the Red Cross; Calvert County (Maryland) Afro-American Retired Teachers Association; Historical Society of Washington, D.C.; Center for Policy Alternatives; Black Fashion Museum; and the North Brentwood (Maryland) Historical Society. Other organizations include the law firms Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver and Jacobson; Linda Ravdin and Associates; Forty Acres and a Mule/Spike Lee Enterprises; History, Inc.; Joint Commission on Hospital Certification; and Sisters Space and Books, Inc. Our graduates are employed at many of the above institutions, as well as at the Naval Research Center Archives, Washington, D.C.; National Security Agency, Beltsville, Maryland; National Parks and Conservation

21. For selected syllabi see Parker Hubbard Cohen and Robert Vane, *A Collection of Public History Course Syllabi* (Indianapolis: National Council on Public History, 1996).

Association; and the New Community After School and Advocacy Program, Washington, D.C.²²

If the Howard University public history program reflects the “healthy complexity” of the field today, service and trust form the program’s foundation. Ailene L. Stamper and many other Calvert County (Maryland) African-American citizens were unwilling to share any of their rare materials from the region’s segregated schools until the Maryland State Humanities Council agreed to “call Howard University.” Calvert County residents stressed that in the past scholars used the information of African Americans, published books, and never shared materials with the community. The community refused to “provide the missing links [that told] the story of struggle and progress”, until they concluded the materials would be “in safe hands” with a team led by public historians from Howard University.²³ A decade after the Calvert County project, the public history program assisted in developing the course syllabi and training the student interviewers in Dr. Camille Cosby’s National Visionary Leadership Project (NVLP). In the NVLP, African-American college students created videotaped interviews with living legends (all of them at least seventy years old) for broadcast on the Internet.²⁴ It is gratifying to know that when people have a need to unearth bittersweet lives not reflected in the literature or to document African-American history that might otherwise go untold, Howard University’s public history program is where they turn.²⁵

22. See the program description in Parker Hubbard Cohen, *A Guide to Graduate Programs in Public History* (Indianapolis: National Council on Public History, 1996), 49–50, and *A Guide to Graduate Programs in Public History* (Indianapolis: National Council on Public History, 2002), 61–62.

23. Ailene L. Stamper, “Introduction,” in Richlyn Goddard, *Persistence, Perseverance, and Progress: History of African American Schools in Calvert County, Maryland, 1865–1965* (Prince Frederick, Md.: Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum / Calvert County Afro-American Historical Society [Huntingtown, Md.]), 1995.

24. Cosby[s] . . . *New Visionary Project*,” *Tennessee Tribune*, 12 March 2002; “A Visionary Reality for African American Leaders,” *Washington Post*, 4 March 2002.

25. Denise Barnes, “Living . . . History,” *Washington Times*, 5 April 1995.