

African American Museum of History and Culture to Open in Washington in September

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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A center designed for the preservation and exhibition of the contributions of people of African descent in the United States is scheduled to open later this year.

Known as the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), the building represents efforts to construct such a project which extends back over 100 years.



NMAAHC

This will be the largest of such institutions in the country surpassing the Dr. Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit.

The museum is a 400,000 square foot edifice becoming the 19th division of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. President Barack Obama is scheduled to cut the ribbons at the building on September 24.

During the second week of May journalists were allowed in for a preview of what is in store for the public. The structure will feature numerous galleries with displays on slavery, segregation and the civil rights movement along with music, entertainment, sports and politics.

Much work remains to be done before the official opening. Electrical equipment, artifacts and artistic treasures will be moved in and fitted for public perusal. There are exhibits on cultural figures such as Bo Diddley, Little Richard and the Jackson Five.

In a report from the New Observer, it says "After years of false starts, a bill from Democratic Rep. John Lewis of Georgia to create the museum passed Congress in 2003 and became law with the pen of President George W. Bush. Three years later, the Smithsonian's Board of

Regents approved the five-acre site on the Mall between the Washington Monument and the National Museum of American History. Lead designer Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup were selected in 2009, and construction began in 2012. (May 15)

The article goes on saying “The \$540 million project was funded through a partnership with Congress, which provided half the money, or \$270 million. The other half is being raised through private contributions; officials are within a few million dollars of that goal.”

All together there are 3,000 artifacts with videos, photos and wall text which will be on view in 11 inaugural exhibitions. Dozens of staff people must be accommodated and the 400-seat cafeteria has to be set up. For security purposes there are metal detectors requiring installation at the two entrances.

According to the official website for the NMAAHC, “In many ways, there are few things as powerful and as important as a people, as a nation that is steeped in its history. Often America is celebrated as a place that forgets. This museum seeks to help all Americans remember, and by remembering, this institution will stimulate a dialogue about race and help to foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing.” (<http://nmaahc.si.edu>)

The NMAAHC goes on to stress that “There are four legs upon which this museum will stand:

The first is to create an opportunity for those that care about African American culture to explore and revel in this history. Equally important is the opportunity to help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us. The museum will use African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American.”

This website also emphasizes “Additionally, the museum will use African American culture as a means to help all Americans see how their stories, their histories, and their cultures are shaped and informed by international considerations and how the struggle of African Americans has impacted freedom struggles around the world. Finally, as a 21st century institution, the museum must be a place of collaboration. We must be a truly national museum that reaches beyond Washington to engage new audiences and to collaborate with the myriad of museums and educational institutions, both nationally and internationally.”

NMAAHC is steps away from the Washington Monument, the towering obelisk built in commemoration of the nation’s first president who owned slaves. Even though the official narrative within U.S. history suggests that the so-called “Revolutionary War” was fought to gain independence from British colonialism, Africans remained enslaved in the U.S. until the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865.

That contradiction is startling in light of the failure of the racist system to guarantee a decent life, genuine equality and self-determination to the African American people even in the 21st century. African Americans have achieved enormous gains over the last century-and-a-half since the end of slavery, nonetheless they remain an extremely exploited and repressed people.

Today African Americans are subjected to incarceration rates that far exceed those of whites who continue to represent the overwhelming authority within the state and economic structures of the country. Rates of joblessness and poverty disproportionately affect African Americans while the world economic recession of the last decade appropriated much of the

limited household wealth accumulated since the rise of industrialization in the 20th century.

In the areas of foreign policy, people of African descent in the U.S. have only made a progressive impact through their own propaganda, petitioning and mass demonstrations. For decades, successive administrations maintained close and fraternal relations with European colonial powers which carried out genocidal policies against territories in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

In 2016, the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) still enacts counter-insurgency programs across Africa amid a broadening mistrust of U.S. intentions among the masses of workers, youth and farmers in the region. Meanwhile the overall volume of trade between the U.S. and emerging African states has declined in the last several years despite the existence of the country's first self-identified president of African descent.

Detroit Museum Serves as Community-Oriented Model

At present the largest of such institutions exists in Detroit, a majority African American city. This center was founded through the decades-long visionary work of the late Dr. Charles H. Wright.

Dr. Wright started the museum in a residential house during 1965 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Wright was an admirer of the African American artist, actor, activist and social scientist Paul Robeson, Sr.

In the 1980s, Wright campaigned for the release of African National Congress (ANC) leader and then political prisoner Nelson Mandela as well as other South African political prisoners. Under the administration of Mayor Coleman A. Young, the first African American to serve in this position in Detroit, there was the initiation of the construction of a city-administered museum in the late 1980s.

Several years later an even larger museum was built in the area which is now known as Midtown near Wayne State University and the Detroit Medical Center.

Under its present administration the Wright Museum hosts numerous lectures, panels and conferences on African world history and culture. Just this year, the museum featured former Black Panther Party leader Kathleen Cleaver; Ramona Africa of MOVE; Saladin Muhammad of Black Workers for Justice; and other luminaries.

A Liberation Film Series screens documentaries on a myriad of issues impacting African people around the world examining the lives of historical figures such as Malcolm X, Thomas Sankara, Frantz Fanon, only to name a few. Every August the Wright Museum sponsors the African World Festival founded by Dr. Wright in 1983 on the Detroit Riverfront at Hart Plaza.

These institutions are important in their role of historical memory and assessment. They will only maintain their relevance if they are linked to the overall struggle for the complete liberation of the African American people.

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Articles by: [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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