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The Black Presence In Westchester County, New York (1620-1865)
64th Annual Convention Study of Afro-American Life and History
Statler Hilton Hotel, New York - October 26, 1979

Paper Presented By: MR. JOHN H. HARMON,
Director of Westchester County Black History
Project Chairman and Acting Director of the
Afro-American Cultural Foundation, and
Member: Executive Council ASALH

This paper is an outgrowth of a planning grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities, to the Afro-American Cultural Foundation, a traveling Exhibit of the Life and History of Black People in Westchester County, New York.

This project is of special significance because so little attention has been paid to the role of Blacks in this County throughout history. Although the County was in the middle of the revolution and had played a significant role in the early development of this Nation.

This is the first effort by a Black person at chronicling the history of their County. White writes and authors, in describing the role of Blacks as slaves mostly referred to them as property or as faithful and or skilled servants. Their role in the early days of the colonies and during the Revolutionary War, the Abolition Movement, the Civil War and their efforts towards building institutions were more or less ignored. Despite the increase in the Black population, even today, the role of Black citizens has been constantly underplayed and unreported. It is for that reason that when I first became President of the Association's Westchester County Branch I immediately began to search for any early facts about the History of Black People in Westchester County that had not been uncovered.

In 1968, when this ASALH Convention came to N.Y. we published a Journal which contained an article about slavery in early Westchester County which was written by Dr. Emilio Silvera.

In 1975, the County wide Bi-centennial Committee was formed to celebrate the birth of the Nation in this County. One of the activities of that Committee, the Afro-American Cultural Foundation, and of the White Plains Public Library was to present the National Portraits Gallery's travelling exhibit. The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770-1800.

In 1977 the Afro-American Cultural Foundation in cooperation with the Westchester Community College presented a lecture series, Black American 1977-78, which was funded by the New York Council on the Humanities at Westchester Community, Valhalla, New York. One of the lectures was by Dr. Bettye Thomas who is the Director of Historical Development for the National Council of Negro Women, Inc.

It was through Dr. Thomas that the Afro-American Cultural Foundation made contact with the National Endowment for Humanities. As a result of this contact the Foundation applied for a planning grant to develop a travelling exhibit on the Life and History of the Black people in Westchester County (1620-1865).



Here now is an abstract of the history and purpose of the project.

The Afro-American Cultural Foundation is requesting a planning grant to plan to design and develop a travelling exhibit, which traces the history of Black people in Westchester, New York, during the period 1620-1865. The project will involve the assessment of written materials and material artifacts in the possession of the Afro-American Cultural Foundation and in the White Plains Public Library, and the utilization of private collections of documents and photographs which collectively tell a fascinating story about the lives of Colonial antebellum Blacks in Westchester, New York.

The exhibit, focusing upon the largely free Black population, will expand the public's knowledge of American History, Black History and New York's History, as it focuses upon the issues, the involvement and the fabric of black social and economic life during the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. Despite the existence of documentary evidence, this is virtually an unknown story. Accompanied by interpretative material, this exhibit will open in White Plains, New York and subsequently travel to selected cities in New York State. Similar programs sponsored by the Afro-American Cultural Foundation have attracted a wide and varied audience. This exhibit will appeal to a diverse audience, of Black and white persons, comprised of students, adults, professionals, non-professionals, etc.

For the past decade, the Afro-American Cultural Foundation has been the only organization in Westchester, New York engaged in the research of Black history in the Westchester area.

THE HISTORY OF BLACKS IN WESTCHESTER COUNTY, NEW YORK, 1620-1865

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Afro-American Cultural Foundation (AACF), a non-profit organization founded in 1968, has successfully developed and produced a series of educational programs and services. The Foundation has provided consultants in Black history for public schools; educational workshops for scholars and laymen; lecture series focusing upon topics in the humanities; and an annual "Panorama," a three (3) days exposition of speakers, art exhibits, cultural events and tour of historical sites, has been held, for ten years, at the Westchester County Civic Center in White Plains, New York, during Black History Month (always in February). One of the major features of the Panorama is the exhibits on the history, culture and arts of Black people, with special emphasis on local and regional history.

The Panorama has become an institution in the County, supported and co-sponsored by the Westchester County municipal government and other major community institutions.

The AACF proposes to plan, design and to develop a travelling exhibit, which will trace the history of Black people in Westchester County, New York, for the period 1620-1865. This travelling exhibit, a natural extension of the AACF Panorama Program, would be used to further communicate the history, ideas and values of Black Americans in Westchester County. Unlike the traditional and sterile gallery of exhibits, normally displayed, this mobile exposition would be a vibrant, active, community oriented educational program. It would include documents,

photographs and manuscripts, as well as material artifacts, such as clothing and personal furnishing - articles used in one's everyday functions.

Through the sponsoring of the annual "Panorama of Black Culture," the AACF has identified a wealth of resources and material artifacts, which are available for inclusion in this exhibit.

Resources, presently at our disposal are in the various historical societies, such as the Westchester Historical Society and are widely scattered in public and private repositories throughout the County. The AACF travelling exhibit will include materials from the following sources: The Westchester town and village records; the Quaker Meeting Houses manuscript collections; Black and white family records; memorabilia, clothing, toys, cooking utensils, etc.; records of organizations, such as the early Black churches, mutual-aid associations and social clubs; colonial and ante-bellum newspapers; chattel records; city directories; census records; and indenture books.

The AACF has sponsored and co-sponsored a number of exhibits. The Foundation, The Westchester Bicentennial Committee and the White Plains Gallery in 1975-1976, presented the Smithsonian Institute's travelling exhibits - "The Frederick Douglas Years," and "The Black Presence in the American Revolutionary Era, 1770-1800." Presented at the White Plains Public Library, these exhibits were highly successful, both in presentation and attendance. The Foundations, in 1976, exhibited for the first time a collection of documents and material artifacts owned by a local Black family. The family traces its lineage back to the 18th century in Westchester County. The exhibit included material dated as far back as 1773. Other exhibits have focused upon special collection in private repositories, such as that held by Eugene Redd. Mr. Redd has a very rich and varied collection of historical documents. The Foundation has also sponsored and presented exhibits at various schools in the County - New Rochelle High School, R. J. Bailey School, Greenburgh, White Plains High School, Roosevelt Elementary School and Marymount College at Tarrytown.

There is a wealth of resources available for the mobile exhibition. The need is to evaluate assess and specifically identify those
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228

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