



Sankofa Collaborative

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NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Sam Stephens

(609) 334-6904

sstephens@sankofacollaborative.org

NEW JERSEY'S SANKOFA COLLABORATIVE CELEBRATES FIVE YEARS OF EDUCATION AND DIALOGUE ABOUT AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE

The Sankofa Collaborative, a coalition of five New Jersey cultural and historical organizations - 1804 Consultants, Grounds For Sculpture (GFS), New Jersey Historical Society, Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum (SSAAM) and William Trent House Museum – celebrates five years of programming designed to help individuals in schools, museums, libraries, and civic groups research, present, and discuss African American history.

During that time, the Collaborative has hosted 14 in-person and virtual events attended by nearly 900 participants, built an on-line following of nearly 1,000, and circulated hundreds of educational resources through its website and weekly emails.

The beginning of the collaborative emerged from 2016 conversations between Linda Caldwell Epps, CEO of 1804 Consultants, and Elaine Buck, historian and founding board member of SSAAM, and among Elaine, Beverly Mills, also a founder of SSAAM, and Sam Stephens, trustee for the William Trent House Museum. These four individuals then organized what was intended to be a one-time invitational meeting for January 2017. Based on the interest expressed then, they decided to organize workshops open to the public. In seeking a venue, SSAAM board member, Bruce Daniels, connected the team with Gary Garrido Schneider, executive director of the Grounds For Sculpture, who generously offered its facilities for this event. At that point, with the addition of GFS and the New Jersey Historical Society, the Sankofa Collaborative was formally born.

Co-founder Dr. Linda Caldwell Epps, head of 1804 Consultants, remembers the founding this way, "Although none of the founding partners have had formal training as intellectual

historians or culturalists, we bonded over our belief that we are all a product of our history and culture and if we as a society are to one day truly live up to the ideals put forth in our formal ruling and historical documents, we have to make accessible to the public the history and culture that is New Jersey and that is the United States. Much to our surprise, professionals as well as non-professionals follow every talk we deliver, every document we write, every resource we make available. Our popularity confirmed our belief that learning is contagious and opportunities to learn would be appreciated.”

Funding from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and the New Jersey Historical Commission enabled the Collaborative to meet demand with two additional programs in 2017, “Exploring African American History in New Jersey” and “Presenting and Discussing Difficult Topics in African American History.” These events drew capacity audiences and participants asked for more in-depth examination of African American history and ways to share ideas beyond the workshops.

Gigi Naglak, Director of Programs at the Council for the Humanities, recently commented, “The Sankofa Collaborative provides an invaluable service to the people of New Jersey, helping us all think about how we engage with African American history and culture in a way that encourages asking deep questions and confronting difficult topics but that is approached with a spirit of camaraderie, creativity, and joy. I’ve watched the Collaborative grow and thrive over these past five years; NJCH has been proud to support this work from the very beginning and looks forward to celebrating that work in the years to come.”

Since 2017, the Collaborative continued to present workshops and panels to a growing audience. The programs are noted for the expertise of its facilitators and panelists and for the quality of the dialogue among participants. The Collaborative also launched a website, <https://sankofacollaborative.org>, to share materials from the programs as well as a host of other educational resources.

“Being part of the Collaborative has contributed to the William Trent House Museum’s ability to authentically interpret colonial slavery and connect its impact to our society today,” says Sam Stephens, a Trustee of the Trent House Association Board. “We believe that the Collaborative’s programs and the resources on its website have benefitted many other museums and cultural organizations as well.”

“I am pleased to be in collaboration with the Sankofa Collaborative, and to have worked together for the last five years hosting workshops and sharing resources,” says John B. Buck, President of SSAAM.

When the COVID-19 pandemic caused a national shutdown in 2020, the Collaborative pivoted to virtual programming and launched a weekly email publication to share news and resources related to African American history and experience. During 2021 the Collaborative hosted virtual programs, including a three-part panel series on health as a civil right funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Patient First; a virtual workshop on African American cemeteries, monuments, and markers supported by the New Jersey Historical Commission; and

a June 1st panel commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre funded by the New Jersey Council for the Humanities.

In 2021, the Collaborative broadened its work to compile an inventory of more than 400 sites in New Jersey that are connected with African American history. The project, funded by the New Jersey Historical Commission, includes historic homes, cemeteries, markers, and more. Sara Cureton, director of the Commission, commented, "I am delighted to salute the Sankofa Collaborative on its fifth anniversary! The impact of this creative, dedicated organization on the New Jersey history community is remarkable. Through thoughtful, engaging programs and an ongoing flow of information and resources, the Sankofa Collaborative has led the way to a richer, far more inclusive understanding of our past."

Reflecting on the Collaborative's history and future, Gary Garrido Schneider noted that, "GFS is proud to be one of the founding members in this coalition, which has already made a significant positive impact in its first five years by convening sizable audiences eager for important conversations, fellowship, and collective learning about African American history. The Sankofa Collaborative's fifth anniversary is taking place as GFS is embarking on its own path to more fully embrace equity, diversity, and inclusiveness throughout all levels of the organization, an endeavor that will take time and dedication, during which we are sure to benefit from the Collaborative's inspiring example."

Collaborative co-founder and SSAAM historian Elaine Buck agrees, "Looking back at the accomplishments of the past five years, I am excited to move forward with future programming and workshops examining African American history."

In 2022, the Sankofa Collaborative is preparing to host two workshops and hopes that they can be in-person events.

To learn more about the Sankofa Collaborative and keep informed, visit <https://sankofacollaborative.org>. To receive the Collaborative's Weekly Resource emails, join their mailing list here <https://sankofacollaborative.org/contact-us>.

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