



MEMORANDUM

TO: Timothy J. Baroody, City Manager
FROM: M.C. Morris, Assistant Director for Tourism
DATE: February 7, 2023 (updated for the February 14, 2023 City Council meeting)
SUBJECT: Fredericksburg Area Museum Memorandum of Agreement Update
From Dr. Gaila Sims, Curator of African American History

ISSUE

The Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Fredericksburg Area Museum has been in place for 19 months. FAM has hired a Curator of African American History and this work is vital to telling our more complete history. Council will receive an update on the progress being made on the MOA from Dr. Gaila Sims, on February 14, 2023.

BACKGROUND

In 2017, the City of Fredericksburg engaged the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to conduct a study to better understand the community's telling of its African American history. After a year-long study and significant community engagement and outreach efforts, the City Council made the decision to remove a slave auction block from the public right-of-way, and to focus efforts on telling the more complete story of Fredericksburg's history. The Fredericksburg Area Museum (FAM) accepted the auction block as a loan from the City, and committed to engage a professional in the field of museum interpretation to plan and install a permanent exhibit meeting high standards of scholarship, accessibility, and design for display of the auction block.

The collaboration with FAM is dedicated to telling a more complete story of the City's diverse community and its history. The goals of this collaboration were set forth in the MOA, which was passed by the City Council on July 13, 2021, as R21-61. The MOA supports these wider interpretive goals with FAM and funded a portion of the salary the Curator of African American History with a City allocation of a projected \$50,000 (annually) for the newly created curatorial position.

Representatives from the community and the City Government were asked by FAM to serve on the selection panel. After a national search, the process resulted in the unanimous decision and Dr. Gaila Sims was hired to fill the FAM position. She began this work in Fredericksburg on August 1, 2022.

Dr. Sims began a multi-functional approach to the monumental work at hand. She began a full immersion into the lesser-known history of Fredericksburg, meeting and connecting with hundreds of people in the African American community, hearing stories, reading books and

articles, and listening. Using the MOA as her roadmap, Dr. Sims invited dozens of people to participate in this effort by convening six committees. These committees are both working and advisory, helping with a wide range of the subject matters included in the MOA. The committees are:

- Youth Outreach Committee – 8 members
- Waysides – 6 members including City’s Historic Preservation Planner
- Trails Brochures and Other Museums – 6 members including two City Tourism staff
- Auction Block – City Manager, Councilor Gerlach, Kate Schwartz, and five others serve on this committee
- Collections and Exhibits – 5 members
- Website – 2 members

The public presentation to City Council from Dr. Sims will occur on February 14, 2023. At that time, the current workings of the committee listed above will be discussed in detail.

Recent accomplishments include the opening of the exhibit “**A Monumental Weight: The ‘Auction Block’ in Fredericksburg, Virginia**” on November 5, 2022. Attendance was strong: 130 people at the evening opening, and coverage from the media was extensive.

After such a strong showing of community interest, and with the plan of keeping momentum going during the time the museum is closed to the public in January and February 2023, FAM has been offering a series of free, public presentations on the Auction Block exhibit. Three have been held -- January 6th, January 12th, and January 23rd. Two more will be held on Saturday, February 11th and February 26th. Additional public history programming is being offered. A collaboration with FAM and Historic Fredericksburg will include a walking tour on the topic of **Black Businesses and Entrepreneurship in Fredericksburg, 1787 to Present**. This tour will connect the stories of John DeBaptiste, through to the thriving Black business located on Princess Anne Street prior to integration, to Black business owners today.

Currently, there are approximately 35 members of the community actively involved in the work group meetings, and that number is growing.

On March 8 an all-hands retreat-styled planning meeting will be held to discuss the African American History Committee’s Interpretive Plan. That meeting will culminate in a draft of the Interpretive Plan, which will be available to City Council by April 2023.

The City has, on a parallel track, collaborated during this same time period with members of the community, professors and students at the University of Mary Washington (UMW) to install multiple interpretive panels and highway markers. On February 23, the City and UMW will unveil Fredericksburg’s Civil Rights Trail.

The important work outlined in the MOA and the continued commitment of City Council is creating the path where great strides are being made toward inclusiveness. Our history

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becomes more complete with each new story shared and each new artifact discovered. Since August 1, 2022, the work of the FAM/City MOA began, in earnest, and the MOA is the living document that will continue to guide this vitally important and unifying endeavor.