



Smithsonian

*National Museum of African American
History and Culture*

News

Media only: La Fleur Paysour (202) 633-4761 or paysourf@si.edu
Lydia Charles (202) 633-7358 or charlesl@si.edu

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National Museum of African American History and Culture Launches National Collections and Preservation Initiative in Chicago

In celebration of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture is collaborating with the Chicago Public Library to host a daylong program designed to help people to protect the "treasures" in their homes by learning to identify and preserve items of historical and cultural significance.

Featuring visual presentations, hands-on activities and preservation tips, the program will be held Saturday, Jan.19 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Harold Washington Library Center, 400 South State St., Chicago.

Free and open to the public, the program is the first in a series called "Save Our African American Treasures: A National Collections Initiative of Discovery and Preservation." In addition to the inaugural event in January, the museum will offer "Treasures" programs in other cities, including Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C. Support for the program has been provided by a grant from Bank of America Charitable Foundation.

"Bank of America has long been a supporter of arts and culture, and it is truly fitting that we continue to help preserve history by bringing 'Save Our African American Treasures' directly into the communities where we work and live," said David Rudis, Bank of America president (Illinois). "I encourage Chicago residents to become aware of the important role that they can play by safeguarding family mementos and treasures for generations to enjoy."

As a companion to the series, the museum has produced "African American Treasures: A Preservation Guide," a 30-page guidebook to be distributed to individuals, community groups and educators to highlight the importance of proper preservation techniques. The guidebook is part of the "Treasures" kit, which includes white cotton gloves, archival tissue paper and archival document sleeves needed to help people keep their personal treasures safe.

"The goal of this project is two-pronged," said Lonnie G. Bunch III, founding director of the

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION MRC 509 PO Box 37012 Washington DC 20013-7012 Telephone 202.633.4751 Fax 202.633.8788

National Museum of African American History and Culture. “We must encourage private citizens to become aware of what they have, to protect it and to preserve it so the story of the African American in this country can be told. Private citizens knowingly or unknowingly hold 19th- and 20th-century objects in their basements and attics that can help tell this story for future generations.”

“We are doing this because of years of benign neglect. Every day items – family photographs, military uniforms, farm tools, decorative items, and wedding dresses – are deteriorating and at risk of being lost. Teaching basic preservation techniques helps us in our mission to save these objects for families and institutions. If we don’t act now,” Bunch said. “The tangible evidence of a critical component of American history will be lost.”

In addition to attending group sessions on preserving specific types of items – such as books, paper, and textiles – program participants are invited to make reservations to meet with professionals for up to 15 minutes to review up to three personal items (excluding furniture, carpets and paintings) and hear statements on their historical value. Items must not be larger than an average shopping bag. Specialists will function as reviewers, not appraisers; they will make no determinations of monetary value. The focus will be on how to care for specific items.

“For 135 years, the Chicago Public Library has been a guardian of Chicago’s diverse history,” said Chicago Public Library Commissioner Mary A. Dempsey. “We are thrilled to partner with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture to help Chicagoans preserve and fully appreciate their family’s historical treasures.”

Reviewers and workshop leaders will come from the Smithsonian and a number of Chicago organizations, including Architectural FoCUS, the Art Institute of Chicago, Bronzeville Children’s Museum, DuSable Museum of African American History and the Chicago Public Library’s Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

The “Treasures” program includes the following sessions:

- **Your Story/Our Story – Recording Oral Histories**
Participants may record up to 15 minutes of a personal memory, a family story or a memory of a historical event. Family members are encouraged to interview each other.
- **Hands-on Preservation**
Instructors will guide participants as they practice packing garments, storing letters and preparing photographs for storage. Attention will be given to standard techniques, tools and materials.

- Discovery Classrooms – Participants may attend sessions on the following subjects: “Preserving Textiles,” which focuses on a wide range of items including dolls, flags, hats, clothing, lace, quilts, needlework and table linens.

“Preserving Books, Photographs and Paper,” presented by staff from the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

“Establishing Origin Classroom,” presented by Don Williams, senior Smithsonian conservator and co-author of “Saving Stuff.” He is joined by Jacquelyn D. Serwer, the museum’s chief curator. They will outline what people need do to establish and document the age, place of origin and line of ownership for objects with historical value.

Required reservations may be made online at rsvpnmaahc.si.edu or by calling (888) 249-8033. Additional information is available at www.nmaahc.si.edu, at www.chicagopubliclibrary.org and by calling (312) 747-4050.

The Harold Washington Library Center joins all Chicago Public Library agencies to meet a broad spectrum of informational, educational and recreational needs. It develops and provides access to specialized collections and presents a wide range of programs and exhibits in collaboration with other educational and cultural institutions and with the business community.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture was established in 2003 by an Act of Congress, making it the 19th Smithsonian Institution museum. It is the only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, art, history and culture. The Smithsonian Board of Regents, the governing body of the Institution, voted in January 2006 to build the museum on a five-acre site in the nation’s capital on the National Mall. The Constitution Avenue site is adjacent to the Washington Monument and across the street from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Construction is expected to be completed in 2015.

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