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## **African American Civil Rights Museums: A Study of the R.R Moton Museum in Farmville, Virginia**

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**African American Civil Rights Museums-  
A Study of the R.R. Moton Museum in Farmville, Virginia**

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**African American Civil Rights Museums- A Study of the R.R. Moton Museum  
in Farmville, Virginia presented to the Graduate Faculty  
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Masters of Arts**

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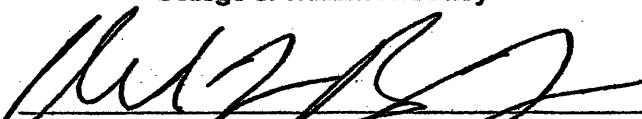
**Masters of Arts**


  
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## ABSTRACT

This study describes, in depth, the origin and development of the R.R. Moton Museum (Farmville, Virginia) in the context of the rise of African American museums in an America where black historical and cultural events have been considered of marginal interest to the community and nation.

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**African American Civil Rights Museums-  
A Study of the R. R. Moton Museum in Farmville, Virginia**

**Introduction**

On an evening in the late 1920s, the newest New Negroes, the colored literati of Lynchburg, Virginia step through a gate into the magnificent garden of poet Anne Spencer to greet writer James Weldon Johnson who was visiting from New York. They sip tea as the sun descends behind the fragrant bowers. The place is a sanctuary. Edankraal, Spencer's charming, one-room writing cottage, is nestled to the side. The name Edankraal springs from three distinctive surnames: *Edward*, her husband's first name; the *Garden of Eden* from the Bible; and the African *krall*, a term for a southern African village.<sup>1</sup> Near the tiny cottage the water-spouting, dark head, "Prince Ebo," in the round reflecting pool is a gift from W.E. B. Du Bois. Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Martin Luther King, Jr.--- they all came to Edankraal. "In their home and garden the Spencers formed an intellectual oasis for notable Black scholars and travelers who enjoyed their hospitality regularly since there was no local public accommodation for Blacks at that time."<sup>2</sup> For years after Spencer's death in 1975 the Spencer home was shut and the garden ran to weed. Today, the Spencer House and Garden Museum is a Virginia landmark on the National Registry of Historic Places. Restoration began in the 1980s and still continues.<sup>3</sup> Would we not want to preserve the place, the garden in which such distinguished Americans once sat and debated issues of the struggle for social justice in their day? Museums have been created traditionally to do just that: to protect

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<sup>1</sup> (White 2011)

<sup>2</sup> (White 2011)

<sup>3</sup> (White 2011)

treasures as well as the cultural heritage and spaces they represent, so that they can be shared with future generations.

The goal of this study is to describe, in depth, the origin and development of one Civil Rights museum set in the context of the rise of African American museums in an America where black historical and cultural events have been considered of marginal interest to the community and nation. The term *community* is defined as a group of people who have cultivated values, interests, and social responsibilities through shared experiences. In this study I also explain how the museum concept gained acceptance among African Americans as they grappled not only to build pride in cultural and educational achievements among the race, but also to command recognition and respect for their cultural contributions among people across the spectrum of society at the sites where these contributions originated. Advancements and achievements attributed to the struggle for equality against adversity laid the foundation for all that followed, even today's Civil Rights Museums. For this reason I have chosen to focus my study on the Robert Russa Moton Museum, a Virginia Civil Rights Museum.

This museum provides context for understanding the transformation of a historically fraught building from a rural, segregated high school to a Civil Rights museum. Sixty years ago, the students enrolled in the R. R. Moton High School brought American history, and in particular, the story of Virginia's pursuit of massive resistance in face of the fight for school integration to a world audience. Today, the museum site changes the historic landscape by moving it from a place where the preservation of segregation marked its purpose to an interpretive place where integration of schools and the attainment of equal opportunity in education for all students became the accepted social order. Thus, the "change in the historic landscape" resulted from what happened there: the student strike of 1951.



The definition of the phrase “change the historic landscape” signifies the cultural transformation of the site. The R.R. Moton School evokes the memory of racial segregation and massive resistance as it moves to racial integration; however, that memory is created in a context of preserving and interpreting the untold story of the students, alumni, and local residents.

This study, although focused on a single museum, also builds on highlights of broader research available: (1) how American museums grew from private collections of art, historic Americana, and natural history artifacts<sup>4</sup> as well as (2) how the possibility of African American cultural and historic museums captured the imagination of some private collectors who wanted to preserve records of events marking social, educational and legal advancements among the race. Moreover, cultural contributions were prized and preserved for fear that these might have been lost or omitted from the telling of a larger American story.

I argue that Civil Rights museums present to the public a challenge to the experience of visiting a museum. They offer an interactive experience, resulting in a profound encounter with the historic events that occurred at the site. While earlier studies open the readers’ eyes to the importance of museums as institutions of value to all Americans, often they provide no opportunity to consider the Civil Rights Movement and the historic societal changes left in its wake.

### **African American Community Museums: Humble Beginnings to the National Mall**

A museum’s journey begins with a commitment to tell stories through material culture. However, representations of peoples of color in anthropological museums have been

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<sup>4</sup> A number of scholars have worked on the history of the American museums. See Mary Alexander’s, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (American Association for State and Local History, 2007); Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrel (eds.), *Museum Origins: Reading in the Early Museum History and Philosophy* (Left Coast Press, 2008); Hugh H. Genoways, *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century* (AltaMira Press, 2006).

limited, racially segregated, and framed by stereotypes that render these peoples as primitives locked in static past.<sup>5</sup> Such segregation continued in museums devoted to American history which emphasize progress and change yet, in practice, reduced “American” history to European American history until a more inclusive approach began to take hold after the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

As Fath Davis Ruffins has argued, “African Americans had few opportunities to preserve their history until the 1820s, when communities of free Black people grew large enough to give birth to Black newspapers and other institutions.”<sup>7</sup> Since then African American communities have been telling their stories in print and materials from the past. Though it has not always been so, these stories today, especially those highlighting struggle and celebrating personal achievement, are a source of inspiration to most Americans.

Across the United States, an urgency to preserve the unknown stories of the people before the stories are lost motivates institutions whose mission it is to preserve African American history and culture. Early efforts among the people may be described as having “humble beginnings.” For example, Nikki Giovanni, poet and noted member of the Black Arts Movement, defined a museum in her childhood neighborhood. Her explanation still resonates with African Americans:

As a Black woman I never visited a museum until I enrolled at Fisk in Nashville. Knoxville didn’t have any that Black people seemed to visit; Cincinnati, our hometown, had them but we never seemed welcome. Both my sister and I are collectors. Though neither of us had articulated it until fairly recently, we now realize that we grew up in

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<sup>5</sup> (Blakey 2003)

<sup>6</sup> (Blakey 2003)

<sup>7</sup> (Ruffin 1997)

museums. Because the Black community had no public place to deposit our memories, the church and colored schools, the Masonic and other lodges, but mostly the homes in which we and our playmates lived, were museums. The photographs of men and women in the armed services from the Civil War to the present; the framed letter saying great-great-grandfather was entitled to a pension for his service to the country; the books signed by Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois; the piece of silver or crystal from “the plantation.” The needlepoint chairs, pillows that were embroidered, handkerchiefs with delicate work, the quilts...oh, the beautiful quilts filled with gunny sacks, old army blankets, bags that once held one hundred pounds of flour or coffee beans, which weighted you down when you went to bed.

The Black community is a living museum.<sup>8</sup>

There is a plausible continuity between the African American community and the concept of a living museum. This concept of collecting and displaying artifacts within public or private spaces allows for artifacts to be interpreted and shared in a safe place. Today, many of these African American safe havens, that is, former colored schools, country churches, even urban, black neighborhoods, are in disrepair or are gradually disappearing. Sites where such schools, churches, and lodges are still standing are often rediscovered as places suitable for a “new museum.” The coming together of Giovanni’s “living museum” concept and reflections upon the site of a dramatic, even horrific event from the Civil Rights movement

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<sup>8</sup>(Giovanni 1994)

fifty years hence is a challenging thought. It raises the question: “Why not a Civil Rights Museum?” A Civil Rights Museum is a living museum that is often housed in a structure where a major Civil Rights Movement event occurred. These museum sites are filled with artifacts from the neighborhood homes and residents who lived there and participated in the events of the movement. Conceptually, the Civil Rights Museum Movement is akin to the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. Larry Neal, poet and critic, states that the reason for the Black Arts Movement was clear. It was to promote “artistic responsibility derived from Black Experience.”<sup>9</sup> Civil Rights Museums are designed to promote and interpret the events of the Civil Rights Movement from a place and a perspective of cultural group.

More often than not, faith and perseverance, inextricably connected to the art of storytelling, serve as the driving forces not only for small, African American museums, but also for the largest of these institutions. Establishing a museum and passing it on to those who follow demand that all involved remain steadfast in pursuit of this goal. It is, indeed, a journey of faith, because once a community attaches value, meaning, and worth to articles and events that change the course of the nation’s history, the possibility of a museum lies in its future.

What is an example of a community’s attachment of value, meaning and worth? A first edition of Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Strive Toward Freedom* (signed and inscribed to A. Phillip Randolph) arrived at auction in 2012, valued at eight to twelve thousand dollars.<sup>10</sup> This book sold in March 2012 for \$10,200. This manuscript, when it was inscribed, was a gift between two friends, colleagues who shared a passion for righting the injustices African

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<sup>9</sup> (Neal 1989)

<sup>10</sup> <http://harlemworldmag.com/2012/01/12/a-philip-randolphs-stride-toward-freedom-book-signed-by-martin-luther-king/>

Americans had endured. The Swann Gallery in New York auctioned the book. The catalog description read as follows:

First edition of King's first book...with a full-page presentation to A. Philip Randolph, who has made extensive notes throughout the book. "To my dear friend A. Philip Randolph. In appreciation of the standards of loyalty, honesty, non-violence and the will to endure that you have held before all people in the struggle for freedom, justice and democracy, Martin." Randolph has underlined certain passages throughout the book and here and there made marginal notes. In the chapter "The Violence of Desperate Men," for example, Randolph wrote "Southern Senators and Congressmen and politicians, and some religious leaders have created a climate by their violent racist public statements that make racial violence inevitable." In the chapter "Where Do We Go From Here," Randolph has covered numerous pages with notes: "New Negro Consciousness," "America's schizophrenic personality on the question of race," "Lack of Presidential leadership in the racial crisis" and "The verdict of history, a First Class Nation cannot afford second class citizenship."...Between King's printed words and the jottings of A. Philip Randolph, it is almost as though these two great fighters for racial equality were having a conversation.<sup>11</sup>

This copy, purchased for inclusion in a private collection, is considered to be part of material cultural heritage. Its owner and all Americans treasure this exchange between friends. It is evident by this description that these men shared a friendship, but they also appreciated each other's shared values: political, social, and religious. A simple exchange of a gift among

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<sup>11</sup> <http://catalogue.swanngalleries.com>

powerful friends became part of a story that changed the world. Theirs is an American story that must be preserved. It has value, meaning and worth.

In September 2012 the Pin Point Heritage Museum became another example of value, meaning, and worth being bestowed on a site by those who lived there. It happened in Savannah, Georgia. The museum's mission is to preserve the story of an African American coastal settlement that was established in the 1890s by formerly enslaved people and their descendants. From 1926 until its closing in 1985, A.S. Varn & Son Oyster Seafood Factory, the site of the Pin Point Museum, employed the majority of residents of Pin Point and other surrounding African American communities for generations. Paul Presley, a Georgia historian, has declared that this museum "will explain and illustrate the nature of crabbing on Ossabaw Sound and will offer insight into a descendant community of people who worked the plantations on the barrier islands of this region."<sup>12</sup> In addition, the museum will become, Presley continues, "one of the premier sites" on the Georgia coast "for understanding and appreciating the Gullah heritage."<sup>13</sup> While this museum does not represent a specific event of the Civil Rights Movement, it does give credibility to the concept of interpreting the landscape and its inhabitants as a "living museum," which shows how African Americans discovered a way to make a living for themselves, once they were freed from the constraints of enslavement.

There are other museums planning grand openings in the near future. In 2015 the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture will open in Washington, DC. In the fall of 2017, the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, Mississippi will open its doors. Samuel Black, President of the Association of African

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<sup>12</sup> (Moblely 2011)

<sup>13</sup> (Moblely 2011)

American Museums and the Director of African American programs at the Senator John Heinz History Center, describes these two institutions as “game changers.” Black states:

The museum in Washington, decades in the planning and approved by Congress two years ago, is part of the Smithsonian Institution and has a unique opportunity because it sits on the National Mall and will be seen by visitors from all over the world. Mississippi’s museum is in a state once notorious for racial violence. The state was the scene of incidents such as the 1955 lynching of black teen Emmett Till after he allegedly flirted with a white woman and the 1963 shooting death of state NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers by a white supremacist. The museum will help the state and the public face an uglier side of history.<sup>14</sup>

Communities create culture and share values of common interest. People recognize themselves to be an extension of their landscape: the places where they live and work. While scholars give historical value to the artifacts, it is the people who give an object/place its meaning and worth. But, what meaning and influence does the landscape bring to a hand-held object or historic site? The truths and lies that are stated, written, and interpreted about a site or an artifact are paramount to understanding a site’s meaning. James Loewen states:

... the lies and omissions memorialized across the American countryside suggest times and ways that the United States went astray as a nation. They also point to unresolved issues in a third

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<sup>14</sup> (Eversley 2014)

ear- our own. That's why it may be more important to understand what the historical landscape gets wrong than what it gets right.<sup>15</sup>

Nowhere has the quest for understanding the African American community and its landscape been embarked on with greater fervor than among the leaders of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). It is the stories of the people that will serve as one of the pillars of this national museum. Anticipation is great for the newest arrival to Washington, D.C. In 1913, on the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, legislation was first proposed for such a national center; however, it was not until 2003 that this piece of legislation was signed into law. Although "a long time coming, it received a \$250 million congressional appropriation in 2003 and is now on a quest to raise another \$250 million in private support. With nearly \$175 million in gifts and pledges,"<sup>16</sup> the leaders leave no doubt that the stories of the people will be told. Lonnie G. Bunch, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, is adamant that the purpose of a museum is to "create a new synthesis that demonstrates how cultures interact, clash, and change."<sup>17</sup>

Fortunately, in Virginia, people who lived in the small, rural area around Farmville realized the need to preserve its powerful story years earlier. Americans who have come of age after the 1960s find inspiration among the courageous leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Younger generations try to imagine walking with Barbara Johns on the day she persuaded those assembled to take up the cause and led her one hundred plus high school classmates in protest against the injustice of an inadequate educational facility. Unlike their white counterparts at Farmville High School, the students at R.R. Moton lacked lockers, a cafeteria, a gymnasium, and an auditorium with fixed seating. Young visitors to the site want

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<sup>15</sup> (Loewen 1999)

<sup>16</sup> (H. Hall 2014)

<sup>17</sup> (Bunch 1992)



to come as close as possible to experiencing the event through their senses. A visit to a museum like the R. R. Moton Civil Rights Museum can provide an interactive experience where American history and political science intersect with race and place. Change comes alive through the telling of the story.

### **African American Museums within the American Museum Movement**

What is a museum? According to the International Council of Museums, a museum is

a non-profitmaking, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.<sup>18</sup>

In the United States, the Museum and Library Services Act defines a museum as:

a public or private nonprofit agency or institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes, which, utilizing a professional staff, owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis.<sup>19</sup>

The above definitions share the premise of collecting and interpreting materials for the purpose of educating the public. Traditionally, museums are organized by discipline: art, history, natural science. This systematized grouping of subject matter is a direct reflection of the European influence in museums, in particular, separating the arts from the natural sciences.

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<sup>18</sup> (website 2014)

<sup>19</sup> (website) 2014)

## Collecting

The importance of African Americans collecting material culture can be seen through the work of historical archeologists. Plantation excavations from the Chesapeake Bay colonies to the first excavation of a slave quarter in 1968 speak to enslaved cultural practices that survived in the American South. The relics of materials used to perform daily household tasks speak to the relationship of the enslaved with their owner and the cultural traditions from West Africa that they practiced in their communities. Shards of pottery found in root cellars, burial practices and offerings, and the power of objects to ward off unwanted dispositions all reveal collective history. Anthropologist Patricia Samford speaks to the importance of these collections and the influence of these objects on their collectors:

...where objects of West African spiritual significance have been found they add new dimensions to studies of slave resistance, spurring interest in the roles West African-based spiritual practices played in the lives of the enslaved and in their resistance to bondage.<sup>20</sup>

Ideally, a similar relationship should exist between collector and object as between that of African American Museums and community. Objects collected by an enslaved person or an African American museum give credibility to the assertions of identity and Black presence and must be treated with respect so that each becomes a repository of public memory. The collection of these “objects viewed contextually can shed light on those intangible aspects of culture.”<sup>21</sup> Further, as Dr. Michael Blakey has shown through his direction of the New York African Burial Ground project, archaeologists and other researchers must work collaboratively with the community throughout processes of

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<sup>20</sup> (Samford 1996)

<sup>21</sup> (Samford 1996)

excavation, analysis, and memorialization.<sup>22</sup> Today, the African Burial Ground Historic Site, administered by the U.S. Park Service, stands as a living museum to the thousands of enslaved who lived and died building New York and a reminder of continuing African American contributions to the city and nation.<sup>23</sup>

The oldest African American Museum in the country is the Hampton University Museum, located on the campus of Hampton Institute (now University) in Tidewater Virginia. The institution began to amass a collection of material objects in 1868, the year it opened. The collection included artifacts representing and documenting the cultural heritage of African Americans and Native Americans. As a school established for freedmen and the children of former slaves, “interest in ethnicity and a concern for African American culture and its roots have characterized the school since its founding. By 1873, this concern had given rise to the ...African studies program, and by the 1890s a Folklore and Ethnology Society created the context in which Hampton began developing its African collection, as long-time museum curator, Cora Mae Folsom, later noted, ‘Things African proved to be the favorite theme.’”<sup>24</sup> Clearly, the objective of such education was to cultivate acceptance, respect, and pride in one’s African and American cultural heritage.

Hampton’s museum collection, exhibited and labeled in accordance with ethnic origins, became a critical part of the education of students there as the stories of their ancestors were told. It remains so today with more than 9,000 objects. However, this was not the earliest evidence of a cultural collection. And while the model for the American museum reflected European influences, the earliest known cultures to preserve their material past were

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<sup>22</sup> (M. Blakey 1997)

<sup>23</sup> “African Burial Ground National Monument,” last modified November 4, 2014  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_Burial\\_Ground\\_National\\_Monument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Burial_Ground_National_Monument)

<sup>24</sup> (Zeidler 1988)

the Chinese, Japanese, Islamic, and Greek cultures.<sup>25</sup> In addition, museum curators have long drawn from the ancient cultures of Egypt, West Africa, and Mesoamerica. When art and artifacts representing these cultures were brought to American museums, usually they were exhibited in galleries or halls designated to emphasize their ethnic or cultural origins. African art and music were considered *primitive* in origin and, thus, exhibited often to emphasize utilitarian purposes reflected in their creation.

In 1900, there began a fundamental shift in the theory behind preserving and interpreting cultural history in American exhibitions. While it was still acceptable for American curators of exhibitions to separate the primitive artifacts from those of their colonizers, some museum professionals believed it was also imperative to show the influence “civilized” colonizers had on the people they considered “primitive.” Regardless of the perception Americans may have had of African American freedmen and the men and women who were former slaves, W. E. B. Du Bois, the sociologist, along with Thomas J. Calloway, lawyer and educator, created an exhibition for the Paris Exposition Universelle de 1900. The question: What was real life like for eight million African American people thirty-five years after the end of the Civil War? The story of their advancement and achievements was told in 363 photographs. In *Exhibit of American Negroes: African Americans at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, Du Bois declared, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.”<sup>26</sup> To Du Bois, class differences were surmountable; however, issues of color differences remained too deeply rooted in American society. Unlike the early collections at Hampton University that preserved the material culture of what some Americans no doubt described as “uncivilized” peoples, Du Bois’s collection of photographs was presented to make a poignant statement on the world stage: Civilized African Americans

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<sup>25</sup> (Samford 1996)

<sup>26</sup> (Smith 2004)

are creators of a culture that deserves recognition and respect.<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Jealous, former president and chief executive officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, explains, “The 1900 Paris Exhibition was a chance for African Americans to show the world that they had, against all odds, developed a vibrant intellectual, educational, and religious culture in the former slave states of America.”<sup>28</sup>

Howard University’s leadership, also accepting this challenge, sought to begin a Negro-American Museum and Library. Dr. Jesse Moorland, a distinguished YMCA administrator, provided 1,600 volumes and started the Moorland Foundation to fund the management and supervision of the “Library of Negro Life.” In 1946, a second gift was given to the library from Civil Rights attorney Arthur A. Spingarn. In addition to the Spingarn family being founding members of the NAACP, they were also collectors of black history and culture. Consequently, the library was renamed the Moorland-Spingarn Library and is now known as the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.<sup>29</sup>

More recently, Dr. John Hope Franklin wrote the preface to *Legacy: Treasures of Black History*, which chronicles the collections housed in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, a collection that dates from 1434 to the present. Dr. Franklin recounts his last visit with Arthur Spingarn. They conversed about the Spingarn collection. Mr. Spingarn remarked how pleased he was to have his collection at Howard University and how he was still securing acquisitions. Dr. Franklin commented on his many uses of the materials in his own research and the importance of the collection to future scholars. In the preface to *Legacy: Treasures of Black History*, Dr. Franklin references the legacy of this collection, “Many

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<sup>27</sup> Francis Benjamin Johnson also produced a set of photographs for this exhibition; the subject matter was students from Hampton Institute. The Hampton Album captured students in their everyday vocational activities. The photographs portrayed newly freed ex-slaves and Native Americans and highlighted the work of Hampton Institute where they were educating the “uncivilized” in, “the hand, the mind, and the heart.”

<sup>28</sup> (Provenzo 2013)

<sup>29</sup> (Center 1983)

thousands have benefited from those materials since, and continue to do so...in keeping with Arthur Spingarn's original intention to share all the materials of African-American culture and history that he had collected with those who would take an interest in them."<sup>30</sup>

Mr. Spingarn, however, was not the only major collector of African American materials. In New York, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, a Black Puerto Rican immigrant, started his collection in 1910. His collection included books, manuscripts, sheet music, and artwork. Due to the size and scope of his collection, the Carnegie Foundation purchased it in 1926 for the Harlem Branch (located on 135<sup>th</sup> Street) of the New York Public Library's division of Negro Literature, History and Prints. In 1938, Mr. Schomburg died and the library assumed his name. This library would become the epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance or Negro Renaissance movement. Currently, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture "is recognized as one of the leading institutions focusing exclusively on African-American, African Diaspora, and African experiences" and "continues to serve the community not just as a center and a library, but also as a space that encourages lifelong education and exploration."<sup>31</sup> These institutions are just two examples where individuals have created collections. What if Black America created a collection? There are individuals who amass collections of African American history, art and culture and they share these collections with traditional museums. Civil Rights Museums, however, approach the acquisition process differently. In most cases their locations are already important to the Civil Rights Movement, and the neighbors create a collection of varied stories of the past and the present ideally from the perspective of Black America.

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<sup>30</sup> (Center 1983)

<sup>31</sup> (Library n.d.)

### Community Building

Museums that represent a group of people and their materials have a critical interpretative function. Not only do they represent the material past, but they also contribute to the credibility of cultural canons.<sup>32</sup> During the last thirty years, museums have entered the “cultural apparatus of modernity.”<sup>33</sup> This concept suggests a divide within contemporary museum theory and practice. ‘Since a major function of museums and reconstructions is to socialize the public,’<sup>34</sup> museums have gone from educating the public to becoming part of the public sphere. They now strive to be an integral part of the communities they serve. This is expressly true of Civil Rights Museums. This repositioning of the museum allows the institution to take an active role in an area’s civic and economic development. Museums are no longer “disciplinary spaces of academic history but places of memory, exemplifying the postmodern shift from authoritative master discourses to the horizontal practice- related notions of memory, place, and community.”<sup>35</sup>

This new type of museum has made its appearance in diverse geographical and political settings, according to Jens Andermann and Silke Arnold-de Simine. They also raise the concern that the new museum’s apparently global aesthetics imply a danger of surrendering the very specificity of historical experiences the memorial ‘site’ offers its visitors. This concern is directly relevant to the place that Civil Rights Museums occupy within the larger African American Museum movement. The places that house Civil Rights museums and the events that took place at the sites of these institutions resonate with museum visitors before they enter the building. “Rather than as ruins of a lost past, ...

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<sup>32</sup> In literature a canon is used to describe a body of work that is genuine. Here the term cultural canon is used to describe museums that represent a specific group of people, for example, those who participated in the CRM.

<sup>33</sup> (Andermann 2012)

<sup>34</sup> (Blakey 2003)

<sup>35</sup> (Andermann 2012)

museum objects have turned into the material hinges of a potential recovery of shared meaning, by means of narrativization and performativity.”<sup>36</sup> Nowhere is this more present than with African American museums, which are often housed in historic homes or schools, within historic neighborhoods or campuses that were and continue to be critically important to the people they serve. Michael Blakey speaks to the issue:

Only when the histories of Native, Afro-and Euro-Americans are examined within a common framework of political and economic analysis and displayed in a single interactive context can the historical inequalities and inter-group conflicts integral to the American story become comprehensible to museum visitors.<sup>37</sup>

Blakey makes a valid point. Nevertheless, the common framework referenced here may not always include the dynamics that create the context for an African American Museum. African American Museums seek to reshape the role of the traditional museums, in turn making an invaluable impact.

Twenty years ago, Betty Collier-Thomas affirmed that museums and other nonprofit organizations are a reflection of the varied beliefs and practices of the communities they represent. She declared:

Museums, churches, courts and other vital societal institutions do not function apart from the larger society. They mirror the thoughts, practices, and beliefs of the dominant, racial and cultural group... Thus, a society that defines a given group as inferior is

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<sup>36</sup> (Andermann 2012)

<sup>37</sup> (Blakey 2003)



unable to give positive recognition to individual or group achievements.<sup>38</sup>

In 1995, on the fiftieth anniversary of UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Kenneth Hudson wrote:

....the most fundamental change that has affected museums during the [past] half-century... is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them.... The museum's prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors.<sup>39</sup>

In the larger world of American museums a change was necessary.

The practice of having community at the core is not a shift, however, within African American museums. African-American museums were established to preserve, document, and interpret the contributions of African Americans. As we have already seen, these preservation efforts extend as far as back as to the homes of the enslaved.

Archaeological study of the detritus of daily life can provide a perspective on African American life generally absent in the documents-the perspective of the enslaved themselves, visible through the structural footings of their homes, the broken ceramic bowls from which they ate their food, and the objects they used to give spiritual meaning to their lives.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> (Collier-Thomas)

<sup>39</sup> (Hudson 1998)

<sup>40</sup> (Samford 1996)

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century African Americans also founded numerous benevolent societies, including the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American National Baptist Convention, and the National Association of Colored Women. The goal of these societies was to preserve the contributions of the people, while educating African Americans to have a greater understanding of racial pride. In her work, “*We Are Coming.*” *The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth- Century Black Women*, Shirley Wilson Logan brings to the forefront the rhetorical and written contributions of African American women of this time who were exercising “verbal warfare for human dignity.”<sup>41</sup> One of the women highlighted in her work is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.<sup>42</sup> Ms. Harper consistently used the theme of community interest in her work. The excerpt below from a letter she wrote explains her thematic interest:

I hold that between the white people and the colored there is a community of interest, and the sooner they find it out, the better it will be for both parties, but that community of interest does not consist in increasing the privileges of one class and curtailing the rights for the other, but in getting every citizen interested in the welfare, progress, and durability of the state.<sup>43</sup>

This letter was written in 1872. However, Ms. Harper’s message echoes that of the Twentieth Century Civil Rights Movement: the nation must move past divisions of color and look toward holistic community interests. Achieving unity in the pursuit of such common interest

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<sup>41</sup> (Logan 1999)

<sup>42</sup> Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was born in Baltimore and was a noted author and abolitionist. She was a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women. Throughout her career, she consistently used the term community of interest in her speeches.

<sup>43</sup> (Logan 1999)

remains a challenge in the face of differences not only among the many peoples who make up American society but also, among African Americans.

There is, in fact, a question of whether Black America still exists. Eugene Robinson, Pulitzer Prize winner and *Washington Post* columnist, was interviewed about his book *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* by *Black Enterprise* magazine's, Editor-in-Chief, Derek T. Dingle. He asked, "What impact does this splintering effect have on collective political power and leadership?" Robinson began his answer by acknowledging the political parties in terms of their relationship with the African American population. His answer regarding the leadership portion of the question is most interesting: "I guess that's one of the issues that confront traditional groups like the Urban League (and) the NAACP that have been, frankly, for a number of years really seemed kind of lost.... But, the agenda used to be really clear back in the old days. It's much less clear now."<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the agenda for African American museums has always been clear.

"Museums must be at the centers of their communities... any publicly supported institution must do something for that public."<sup>45</sup> These are the words of John Cotton Dana, founder of the Newark Museum, spoken in 1911. His words rang true with two of his contemporaries, Spingarn in Washington, D.C. and Schomberg in New York. One must remember that the work of the "traditional" groups such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters established the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement. Many of the leaders of these groups, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and A. Phillip Randolph, became heroes among African Americans and inspired those who led the Movement. Preserving, documenting, and interpreting their stories have become part of the mission of African American museums.

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<sup>44</sup> (Dingle 2011)

<sup>45</sup> (Bunch 1992)

## Civil Rights Museums

African-American museums help to take the conversation out of the context of intellectual discourse and place it in an arena that engages the individual previously unprepared for thoughtfully posed questions and directed dialogue.<sup>46</sup> This impromptu conversation coupled with a historic site is far reaching because “historic sites also help hold society together, providing a shared community heritage.”<sup>47</sup> Civil Rights Museums embody the contents of a history museum; moreover, they also embrace the public memory of their local communities.

In 1963 James Baldwin gave a presentation to a group of teachers in which he made the following statement: “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.”<sup>48</sup> The same could be said about museums. “History museums have been viewed as temples of truth---touchstones to the past that allow visitors to celebrate and revel in what Ken Ames calls the primacy of memory.”<sup>49</sup> Not only do Civil Rights museums evoke the celebration of such memory, these museums dare to challenge visitors to reach for a more radical perspective on the Civil Rights Movement.

Civil Rights Museums exhibit a dual memory---pluralism. The term *pluralism* is paramount when discussing Civil Rights Museums because not all Americans experienced the movement the same way. Therefore, a wellspring of articulate arguments and different memories comes forth when a museum contextualizes and stimulates public dialogue around a historic site, bringing together different points-of- view. This struggle intensifies over how best to interpret and memorialize the historic structure as community leaders choose opposing

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<sup>46</sup> (Robinson- Gubbuch 1997)

<sup>47</sup> (Loewen 1999)

<sup>48</sup> (Baldwin 1963)

<sup>49</sup> (Bunch 1992)

views. More importantly, this struggle can be expected to reinforce, derail, or reshape the historical events the site represents.

People hold the belief that their heritage is valuable and it must be shared. Civil Rights Museums include “Monuments and markers [which] provide sacred sites for what sociologist Robert Bellah has called America’s ‘civil religion’.”<sup>50</sup> Civil Rights Museums continue to preserve the legacy of the movement by redefining what may be described as our Godly obligation to society. Addressing bus boycotters in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr. affirmed this idea of civil religion: “We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.”<sup>51</sup> Declaring the moral imperative facing the nation, that night King spoke for *We, the people---all of the people.*

America reluctantly began to respond to King's challenge, though not without painful, sustained efforts at grassroots and national levels. Civil Rights museums across the American South memorialize an American movement that forced a nation to begin to accept the fact that Black Americans insisted upon the full rights of citizenship and would not cease to fight for them, despite the violence they faced. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham is located directly across the street from 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, where four little Alabama girls were killed on a Sunday morning. The International Civil Rights Center and Museum in Greensboro is the site of the Woolworth’s sit-ins organized by North Carolina A& T college students; and the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee is housed in the building where it is believed that James Earle Ray fired the shot

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<sup>50</sup> (Loewen 1999)- Robert Bellah borrowed the terms “civil religion” from Rousseau. However, it was his definition of the term in 1967 “ a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth.”

<sup>51</sup> (Kazin 2013)

that killed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel. The public memory of these events allows for strong arguments to be articulated regarding racial and social justice. In this instance, memory is defined as the process by which people recall, lay claim to understand, and represent the past.<sup>52</sup>

There can be no argument, however, that denies the inevitable change for which these events, which occurred at these sites, served as catalyst.

It is believed that “what a community erects on its historical landscape not only sums up its view of the past but also influences its possible futures.”<sup>53</sup> If one looks at Civil Rights museums, one sees:

- historically, the monumental, even tragic, events that transformed the entire United States;<sup>54</sup>
- socially, the dynamics of an ever-changing relationship between communities-at-large and the historical and religious dwellings as well as the way in which those communities create museums that are reflections of themselves and their history;
- politically, the struggles (both religious and nonreligious) of government to define its role in the midst of chaotic change (local, state, national, and international levels); and the philosophical divide within the African- American population in the face of arguments over the most effective way to obtain equal rights (non-violent or forceful methods).

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<sup>52</sup> (Edited by Romano 2006)

<sup>53</sup> (Loewen 1999)

<sup>54</sup> The Civil Rights Movement precipitated the African American Museum Movement across the country. The United States experienced the reverberations throughout a segregated society in which new laws governing open housing, integration of school systems (in both local and collegiate), and equal employment were met with great resistance.

- culturally, the values and behaviors learned regarding race relations among Blacks, Mixed race, and Whites within the United States, in particular, during and subsequent to the Civil Rights Movement.

Each of these sites of the Civil Rights struggle represents a major event in American history. Each captures the essence of an American experience. Each chronicles ordinary people on a journey to change their own ways of life. Memory of that experience is ignited in the moment for museum visitors. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, shares a view of memory. He reflects: “As a Jew, I believe that whatever we receive we must share. When we endure an experience, the experience cannot stay with me alone. It must be opened. It must become an offering. It must be deepened and given and shared.” He continues: “Yes, our stories are essential to memory. I believe that the witnesses, especially the survivors, have the most important role. They can simply say, in the words of the prophet, ‘I was there.’”<sup>55</sup> In most of Wiesel’s works the theme is “redemptive power of love and friendship.”<sup>56</sup> Denis Diamond describes Wiesel as “the chronicler of less exacting passions like human yearning and loss, grief and sadness, celebration and bravery.”<sup>57</sup> Edward Casey argues that there are four major forms of human memory: individual memory, collective memory, social memory and public memory. In this study social memory is comprised of memories held by a group due to their common connection. Public Memory is comprised of memories that occur among members of a group out in the open. These two types of memory--- social and public---are most applicable to Civil Rights Museums.

Social memory is particularly important because it has the following characteristics:

This is the memory held in common by those who are  
affiliated whether by kinship ties, by geographical proximity

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<sup>55</sup> (Wiesel 2008)

<sup>56</sup> (Wiesel 2008)

<sup>57</sup> (Diamond, Eli Wiesel: Reconciling the Irreconcilable 1983)

in neighborhoods, cities, and other regions, or by engagement in a common project. In other words, it is memory shared by those who are already related to each other, whether by way of family or friendship or civic acquaintance or just an alliance between people for a specific purpose...Crucial here is that social memories are not necessarily public: families can harbor memories that are known only to themselves; such privacy is often itself prized as such, providing that intimacy and bonding that are so important to the maintenance of family life.<sup>58</sup>

But the idea of collective memory, where different people recall the same event can be seen within other Civil Rights museums, in particular within their exhibitions. For example, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has a replica of a burned-out bus that is used in conjunction with a dramatic media presentation in one of the four theatres throughout the permanent exhibition where the freedom rides and bus boycotts are deconstructed. Likewise, the R. R. Moton Museum developed plans to re-create the tarpaper shacks students were using as classrooms when Barbra Johns and her schoolmates were enrolled in the R. R. Moton School. The shacks were originally built at the recommendation of the Prince Edward County School Board, the government authority, which regularly practiced an unequal distribution of funds based on racial segregation. The museum's recreated tarpaper shacks spotlight the irony of the school board's decision. These reconstructions, in juxtaposition with the historical building, allow the museum visitor to be immersed in an experience of the past. This and other interactive experiences expose all visitors to the dramatic resistance segregationists put up to keep black and white children from going to school together.

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<sup>58</sup> Edward S. Casey in (Phillips 2004.)



Whatever the visitor's point of view as he looks at the exhibition, the challenge is clear: "be the change you want to see in the world."<sup>59</sup>

### **R. R. Moton School History**

Robert Russa Moton, whose namesake is the R.R. Moton School, lived from 1867-1940. He spent his professional life as an educator and activist. Born in Amelia County, Virginia, he was a graduate of Hampton Institute (now University), succeeded Booker T. Washington as the principal of Tuskegee Institute, and in 1932 he was awarded the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP. Many educational facilities carry his name, including elementary schools, college dormitories, and the initial training field for the Tuskegee Airmen. He understood and believed in the importance of having the opportunity to obtain a quality education. He practiced what he was taught by General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, founder of Hampton University, who declared that a good education must touch "the head, the hand, and the heart."

African-American families have struggled to provide themselves and their children an opportunity to earn an education since their captivity in America. Hopes, dreams, and sacrifices marked their pursuit of this elusive goal. "Free and enslaved people grasped, and actively created, opportunities to read and write."<sup>60</sup> While these opportunities were scarce, after the Civil War African Americans became increasingly aware that literacy skills were necessary to survive in a society that had not only worked them, but had also worked against them for so long. A basic elementary education, not to exceed eighth grade, became the

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<sup>59</sup> Ghandi

<sup>60</sup> (Gundaker, "Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice," pp. 483-494 In Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, ed. *A History of the Book in America: Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), quote p 483.

by. .) See also Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

norm.<sup>61</sup> Carter G. Woodson explains the inequities realized in the public educational system of the twentieth century in his work *The Miseducation of the Negro*:

...Instead of teaching such Negro children less arithmetic, they should be taught much more of it than the White children. For the latter attend a graded school consolidated by free transportation, when the Negroes go to one-room rented hovels to be taught without equipment and by incompetent teachers educated scarcely beyond the eighth grade.<sup>62</sup>

Public educational funding in Virginia came with certain restrictions when it arrived in 1877.<sup>63</sup> Most notably, this new public structure offered African-Americans an opportunity for an education only within a racially segregated system of public facilities that was legally recognized in 1896 with the *Plessy v Ferguson* decision in the United States Supreme Court.<sup>64</sup> While this court case focused on separate but equal transportation facilities, Charles Hamilton Houston, the NAACP attorney who attacked racially segregated education, would later use the same premise to denounce the “separate but equal” justification for public school segregation.

Inevitably, separate schools meant great disparities would exist between the quality of education available to the white race and that available to the black race. Having little to no political power, African-Americans began experiencing firsthand the great disparities in education that were created by their lack of political influence. Anderson explains:

...whites all over the South seized the school funds belonging to the disfranchised black citizen,

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<sup>61</sup> (Anderson 1988)

<sup>62</sup> (Woodson 1933)

<sup>63</sup> (Anderson 1988)

<sup>64</sup> <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/sepbutequal.htm>

gerrymandered school districts so as to exclude blacks from certain local tax benefits, and expounded a racist ideology to provide a moral justification of unequal treatment.<sup>65</sup>

An astute observer could see this story as it evolved in Farmville, Virginia, where litigation began in 1951 against the School Board of Prince Edward County (VA).

R. R. Moton High School, a one-story brick building located at the intersection of South Main and Griffin Boulevard, was constructed in 1939. During this time the Commonwealth of Virginia only had eleven high schools in the state dedicated to African Americans.<sup>66</sup> In Farmville, the Prince Edward County School Board succumbed to the pressures of the local African American leaders and added a high school. It consisted of eight classrooms, an office, and an auditorium. Originally designed to receive 167 Southside, Virginia students on opening day, the maximum capacity of the school was 180 students. However, by 1951, more than 450 students needed accommodation. In an effort to meet the overwhelming classroom demands, many classes were housed in “tar-paper shacks.”<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, these shacks still did not address the issue of no cafeteria, gymnasium, or lockers for the students. In 1949, Leslie Francis Griffin was elected chairman of the Moton School’s Parent-Teacher Association. In addition to his post as chairman, he also organized the local chapter of the NAACP, thus, giving him direct access and interaction with state and national leaders.

On April 23, 1951, led by Barbara Johns, the students of Moton School walked out in non-violent protest of the unequal educational facilities. How did a teenage girl develop the leadership skills to execute this mission? Having lived with her Uncle, Dr. Vernon Johns,

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<sup>65</sup> (Anderson 1988)

<sup>66</sup> (Ward 1996)

<sup>67</sup> (Trail tbd)

Barbara Johns had seen this type of leadership and strong faith carried out by a heroic voice in the Civil Rights Movement from the time that she was a young child. Dr. Vernon Johns is best known nationally as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist church in Montgomery Alabama, having arrived there in 1948. Ironically, he was dismissed by the church elders for his controversial views on social justice issues, only to be replaced by a young minister from Atlanta, Georgia. His name was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Vernon Johns, a native Virginian, born and raised in Darlington Heights in 1892 (Prince Edward, County) was a Baptist minister. A graduate of Oberlin College, Johns is best known in Virginia for his pastoral appointments, in particular, his appointment and presidency of Virginia Theological Seminary and College in Lynchburg, Virginia. However, his unflinching service within the black community led his friend and colleague, Wyatt T. Walker, to refer to him as “the greatest preacher I’ve known, living, dead or unborn.”<sup>68</sup> In a 1948 commencement address to Stowe Teachers College in St. Louis, Missouri, Johns testifies that his race is still uneducated. His assertion: “‘respectable’ Negroes [have] no sense of trusteeship, no fundamental social interest beyond their own families, society and local organizations.”<sup>69</sup>

Three years after this address was given, his niece, Barbara, would teach her classmates the value of trusteeship. Barbara Johns led the student strike, and the school building where it was held prompted the court case of *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*. A lower court decided the case in favor of Prince Edward County. Consequently, on appeal this local case became part of the larger U.S. Supreme Court Case, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. In May of 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the decision for the U. S Supreme Court. He acknowledged that the separate but equal doctrine

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<sup>68</sup> (Luker 2004)

<sup>69</sup> (Johns 1948)

introduced in 1896 had, indeed, pertained to transportation, not education. The justices concluded: “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”<sup>70</sup> As a result of this ruling, the state of Virginia counteracted the U.S. Supreme Court decision with a movement of massive resistance. In 1959 the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors appropriated zero dollars to the public school system. Subsequently, schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia closed in 1959 and remained closed for five years.

### **The Robert Russa Moton Museum**

#### Preservation of the Building

The Robert Russa Moton Museum: A Center for the Study of Civil Rights in Education states where it stands clearly: “Farmville, Virginia’s former R. R. Moton High School, now the Moton Museum and a National Historic Landmark, is the student birthplace of America’s Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>71</sup> According to the museum’s website, it “promotes positive discussion of integration and advances positions that ensure racial harmony.”<sup>72</sup> The Museum was founded by the Martha E. Forrester Council of Women,<sup>73</sup> which benefits Civil Rights, social action, advocacy, focusing specifically on women's rights programs. Racial harmony was a far-in-the-distance vision, impeded by a fight that challenged the founders for years:

It was fought in the classrooms and in the courtrooms,  
from the capitol of the Confederacy, to the capitol of the

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<sup>70</sup> <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/5-decision/justices.html>

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/>

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/>

<sup>73</sup> The Martha E. Forrester Council was named for an African American Woman educator who came to Farmville from Richmond, Virginia in the 1950’s. Today, the council is comprised of women, just like their forbearers, whose primary mission is to address economic, educational, political policy for the African American community in Prince Edward County, Virginia.

Union. And this battle, like the one fought 100 years before,  
has lingering effects, which we have yet to understand and  
which we continue to have great difficulty in discussing.

To preserve that history and to promote that discussion  
is the mission of the Martha E. Forrester Council of Women.<sup>74</sup>

An outgrowth of the Council of Colored Women in Farmville, Virginia, the council began its work in 1920 and was instrumental in having R.R. Moton High School built. In 1995, the preservation efforts to reuse the school building for a museum were ignited. At that time the council was ready to begin work again. Vera Allen was president of the Martha E. Forrester Council in 1995. Her mother-in law, the namesake of the organization, was not present then, but as the daughter- in -law she was there to continue the work. During the year 1996, these women worked tirelessly to ensure that support was provided for U. S. Congressman L. F. Payne, who asked for the \$200,000 appropriation to have the National Park Service draw up plans to turn the R.R. Moton site into a Civil Rights Museum. (The appropriation came to fruition and was awarded.). This simple action moved the building and its story from a local preservation project to a national initiative. The interest of a national government agency additionally led to county officials rethinking their original position on the R.R. Moton site. First, some Prince Edward County representatives balked at the restoration of the school, advocating that preserving the school and the site would only remind the Farmville citizens of their horrid struggles over the integration of schools. In a twist of events, now, the same County officials began to see a new opportunity. The naysayers shifted their focus to ideas promoting heritage tourism and the potential economic opportunities that a museum could bring to the area.

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<sup>74</sup> (Ward 1996)- Lacy Ward, Jr. is former Executive Director of the R.R. Moton Museum and was also a former student in this school building.

Allen Freeman wrote an article in 1996, "Farmville: A Burden of History for Historic Preservation," for the publication of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.<sup>75</sup> This article put R.R. Moton High School back in the national spotlight, thus, evoking the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement in the citizens' memory. This same year, the Martha E. Forrester Council of Women negotiated with the Prince Edward County school board to purchase the building for \$300,000. Like many small, local preservation projects, the original intent was to save the historic school building from demolition. Once the initial building preservation took place in 1996, the project was completed in the eyes of some local citizens. However, with the creation and success of other Civil Rights museums in the country, a renewed interest in the structure emerged from a variety of stakeholders. And why not? By 1990, there were over a dozen museums in the United States dedicated to remembering and honoring the Civil Rights Movement.

In December of 1997, the first payment of \$100,000 was made to the school board. During the same year, the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus directed \$25,000 to the council to be used for the purposes of developing and outlining a strategic plan for the establishment of a museum. In 1998, the R. R. Moton School Building received the highest level of historical recognition offered by the Federal Government: National Historic Landmark status. Shortly thereafter, the R.R. Moton High School was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Moton Project Advisory committee convened for the first time with the National Park Service. In an effort to bring the museum into existence, the Forrester Council held its first annual Moton weekend. The purpose of this celebration was to engage alumni of the school, interested local citizens, and future patrons in the process of remembering a historic event and capturing it as revealed through the eyes of the many people present who had been affected by the student strike. Lonnie Bunch acknowledges the

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<sup>75</sup> (Freeman 1996)

significance of such when he says, “the folks who actually participated in the civil rights movement are getting to an age where legacy is important.”<sup>76</sup> This realization of legacy often results in financial transactions that have lasting effects. By the year 2000, the Moton Museum Board was the official holder of the building. At the time of Vera Allen’s death in 2010, Lacy Ward, Jr., then Executive Director, stated: “Anything the museum is today is because it stands on her shoulders... It is an honor to continue to live the wisdom she imparted and fulfill her vision for what the Moton Museum might be.”<sup>77</sup>

Lacy Ward, Jr., while still working as a field representative for Congressman Payne in the Fifth District of Virginia, prior to his directorship of the museum, also wrote the following description of Farmville, Virginia:

Farmville is unique in the rural academic community.

It is home to two colleges, one public, one private; and two K-12 school systems, one public, one private. All four began as segregated institutions. All four are today integrated institutions. How did this transformation take place?

What is the lesson? How is it to be interpreted? These are the questions that the Robert Russa Moton Museum will seek to answer. A pivotal era in our nation’s history may hold the answers to a more harmonious future....<sup>78</sup>

The physical structure of the R.R. Moton Museum is important because visions of school desegregation were spawned there out of the unbearable, separate and unequal, Jim Crow era. Museum leaders explain: “Led by sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns, the 1951 Moton Student

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<sup>76</sup> (Severson 2012)

<sup>77</sup> (Museum n.d.)

<sup>78</sup> (Ward 1996)



Strike produced 75 percent of the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the landmark Supreme Court decision desegregating U. S. schools.”<sup>79</sup> In the sunlight of that spring day, the students’ fight took on its most public face. That is what allows the school to serve as a place of memory.

In summary, it is this sense of place and its relationship to American history that illuminates the ultimate presentation that is communicated to the public through exhibitions. Here, the role of children during the Civil Rights Movement and their contributions to its ultimate success become paramount to the site and to the museum’s interpretation of the event.

The permanent exhibition, which opened on April 23, 2011, the sixtieth anniversary of the R.R. Moton School strike, allows visitors to experience the perspectives of both black and white citizens, adults and children of Prince Edward County, Virginia. They engaged in private and public conversations about government authority and responsibility, family heritage, segregation, education, and citizenship rights. Six galleries tell the story from 1951-1964. Gallery I: A Call to Action (April 23, 1951 Moton Student Strike); Gallery II: Tar Paper Shacks; Gallery III: The Court Speaks (Davis v. Prince Edward); Gallery IV: Virginia Responds (Massive Resistance); Gallery V: Prince Edward County Says No (They Closed Their Schools); Gallery VI: Rebirth (Bound for Freedom). Delores Hayden argues in her book: *The Power of Place* that the social history of communities leads to new perspectives in public history and art projects. Not only does the R. R. Moton Museum nurture dialogue about racial consciousness and the dream of achieving racial harmony, it brings a new perspective to the history of Farmville, Virginia---and to the retelling of the history of America. Perhaps, a *Toledo Blade* journalist says it best: “If...you are looking for the handful of places where this nation’s civil rights revolution began, check out the old Moton

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<sup>79</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/>

High School in Farmville, Va.”<sup>80</sup> The Commonwealth of Virginia looked for a place where this nation's civil rights revolution began and the discovery surprised no one. In late February 2005, House Joint Resolution Number 799 launched an initiative supporting the establishment of a memorial commission to pay tribute to the Civil Rights Movement in Virginia.

Governor Mark R. Warner signed Executive Order Number 96, "Establishing the Civil Rights Memorial Commission," on July 29, 2005. The Executive Order explained the *Importance of the Issue, Created the Commission* to be Chaired by the Governor, and most importantly, set the *Charge for the Commission*. The Robert Russa Moton High School took center stage as the charge for the commission was written:

I hereby direct the Commission to study and recommend to the Governor and General Assembly an appropriate memorial in Capitol Square to commemorate the courage and fortitude of Virginians in the Civil Rights Movement, including the students of Robert Russa Moton High School, and other leaders who contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in Virginia.<sup>81</sup>

By December 1, 2005, First Lady Lisa Collis, who served as a member of the Commission, launched a fund-raising campaign for the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial with the goal of raising \$3 million to build the memorial on Capital Square. It would honor Virginia's civil rights heroes. Her inspiration was easy to explain:

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/>

<sup>81</sup> “Archives of Mark Warner, Governor of Virginia, Press & Policy > Executive Orders 2005. [http://wayback.archive-it.org/190/20060113220935/www.governor.virginia.gov/Press\\_Policy/Executive\\_Orders/html/EO\\_96.html](http://wayback.archive-it.org/190/20060113220935/www.governor.virginia.gov/Press_Policy/Executive_Orders/html/EO_96.html)

“During our first years in the Executive Mansion, my youngest daughter and I would take evening walks around Capital Square and discuss the individuals and history represented by the statues," said first lady Collis. "It struck me, as I'm sure it has many Virginians, that an important piece of Virginia's history was not represented there. I'm proud to help raise the funds needed to honor those Virginians, who with great courage and determination, fought against the legalized system of segregation and discrimination that pervaded our society for so long.”<sup>82</sup>

The memorial commemorates the 1951 student-led protest at the Robert Russa Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Virginia.

Public history and art emerged in a new light three years later on the day the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial was unveiled in Richmond's Capitol Square. Applause rose above all Virginians who stood on the grounds of Capitol Square on July 21, 2008. As one walks pass the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial<sup>83</sup> he or she reads the following dedication:

*On April 23, 1951, 16-year-old Barbara Johns and several fellow students led a strike to protest the deplorable conditions at their racially segregated Prince Edward County School. The Rev. L. Francis Griffin united parents in support of the strike and encouraged the students to contact NAACP attorneys Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson. The lawsuit that*

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<sup>82</sup> “First Lady Lisa Collis Launches Fundraising Campaign for Virginia Civil Rights Memorial”

[http://wayback.archive-it.org/190/20060113213834/http://www.governor.virginia.gov/Press\\_Policy/Releases/2005/Dec05/1201.htm](http://wayback.archive-it.org/190/20060113213834/http://www.governor.virginia.gov/Press_Policy/Releases/2005/Dec05/1201.htm)

<sup>83</sup> “The Virginia Civil Rights Memorial”

<http://www.dgs.virginia.gov/DivisionofEngineeringandBuildings/CivilRightsMemorial/tabid/1035/Default.aspx>

*followed was brought before the U.S. Supreme Court and joined with four other cases as Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), in which the Court ruled that racially separate educational systems are inherently unequal and unconstitutional.*

A visitor to this site observed, “what a masterful execution of a very important story! Thanks to the sculptor, Stanley Bleifeld, for this thoughtful and appropriate piece. Richmond must be proud to have this monument.”<sup>84</sup> An anonymous visitor, thus, confirms for all of us that this story has led to new perspectives in Farmville, in Richmond, and across America.

The unveiling of the Civil Rights Memorial “was great leverage, because obviously, if you’re going to memorialize Barbara Johns at one end of the state Capitol and [segregationist U.S. Senator] Harry Byrd at the other end of the state Capitol, the school that’s at the center of their disagreement probably should be preserved and available for people to visit,”<sup>85</sup> said Lacy Ward, Jr. Today, not only does the monument bring a new perspective to the R.R. Moton story, but it also brings a new perspective to museum governance.

### Governance

Two governing bodies oversee the R.R. Moton museum: the board of trustees and the Moton Council. The Board of Trustees is made up of between five and fifteen members. Representation includes corporate executives, legislators (state and national), and a member of the Moton Council. Trustees serve a term limited to three years and are elected by a majority vote. The Moton council serves as the “local advisory, outreach and volunteer management arm.”<sup>86</sup> This group’s primary function is to be the museum’s outreach branch.<sup>87</sup> Unlike the make-up of the board of trustees, the council consists of a more varied group of

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<sup>84</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/>-- civil rights memorial quote

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/>-- civil rights memorial quote

<sup>86</sup> R.R. Moton Articles of Incorporation- DRAFT 3/1/09

<sup>87</sup> R.R. Moton Articles of Incorporation- DRAFT 3/1/09

individuals. Comprising seventeen to twenty-five members who serve one-year terms, the council includes a member from the Martha E. Forrester Council for Women, a student representative from Prince Edward County Schools (circa 1959-1964--- and one who was “unable during those years to begin, continue, or complete his/her education in the public schools of the county”)<sup>88</sup>; a regional hospital administrator; local member of the Prince Edward branch of the NAACP; Prince Edward County representatives from the Board of Supervisors, the Public School system, the Town of Farmville, and the chamber of commerce; University representatives from both Longwood University (the local state-supported university) and Hampden-Sydney College (the local private college); and local residents and descendants of R. R. Moton. The diversity of both groups allows the museum to be influenced by all spheres of the community. In turn, the same levels of societal stakeholders also support the museum, allowing for funding streams to be varied and for public programming to have wide-ranging viewpoints.

Neil Sullivan, a scholar who focused on the 1963 Prince Edward County Free Schools, wrote *Bound for Freedom*. Robert F. Kennedy wrote the forward to this book where he compared the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. Robert E. Lee, according to Sullivan, “saw education as the hope for his people and dedicated his last years to that cause. Appomattox and Prince Edward Counties are side by side. As one marked the end of a cruel war, how significant it would be if the other symbolized the end of a struggle that has oppressed the Negro and left him less than a full citizen of his own country.”<sup>89</sup> This struggle was met head on by Thomas R. Mayfield, local educator and former President Emeritus of the Robert Russa Moton Museum. His dedication to the museum led to Virginia House Joint Resolution 423. It states: The crown of [Mayfield’s] achievements is the Robert Russa Moton

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<sup>88</sup> (Museums 2011)

<sup>89</sup> (Ward 1996)

Museum: A Center for the Study of Civil Rights in Education, a historic and educational resource to the Commonwealth and nation.”<sup>90</sup>

He was adamant that the tarpaper shacks be recreated in retelling the Moton story. He wanted museum visitors to understand the great lengths to which African Americans were compelled to go to obtain an education.

### Funding

Prior to Lacy Ward, Jr.’s arrival, funds for the museum were nominal under the reign of former Presidents, Thomas Mayfield and Carl Eggleston. It was not until Ward returned to Farmville that the story of R.R. Moton Museum started to pick up momentum. Ward “got the story, and he understood how to build a museum to capture that story, and he was able to raise the money to do it.”<sup>91</sup> He was also able to “build community from the ground up.”<sup>92</sup> Any individual or organization that establishes a museum quickly learns that visitation alone is not going to keep the doors open. Immediately after opening, if not before, a long list of needs becomes evident. One striking example is in the area of revenue. Financially, there must be a diversified funding stream, including public, private, and governmental funds to sustain the management and operations of the institution. By raising the profile of the R.R. Moton museum in Farmville and throughout the Commonwealth, Lacy Ward, Jr. was able to garner the necessary support and funds from stakeholder partnerships, extending the possibilities for revenue.

The museum has made sizeable progress in the last seven years. Looking at the R. R. Moton financial statements from 2006-2007 the reports show that in 2006, membership dues

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<sup>90</sup> R.R. Moton Annual Report 2008.

<sup>91</sup> This statement was made by Leslie “Skip” Griffin, Jr., son of the Prince Edward County, Civil Rights leader, Rev. L. Francis Griffin.

<sup>92</sup> [http://www.timesdispatch.com/news/local/columnists-blogs/michael-paul-williams/williams-builder-of-civil-rights-museum-moves-on-to-next/article\\_491531d8-5d1c-51b4-bef8-1388cf939fa5.html](http://www.timesdispatch.com/news/local/columnists-blogs/michael-paul-williams/williams-builder-of-civil-rights-museum-moves-on-to-next/article_491531d8-5d1c-51b4-bef8-1388cf939fa5.html)

generated \$1,870 of revenue. In 2007 that number dropped to \$810. However, the net assets ending the year were better in 2007 than 2006. In 2007, net assets amounted to \$732,258 and in 2006 they were \$729,200. Just three years later, if one looks at the financial statements from 2010-2011, one sees major increases across all financial lines and a more comprehensive detailed financial report. More importantly, the net asset numbers are astounding. In 2010 the net assets were \$1,746,484 and in 2011 that number jumped to \$3,084,779.

The best way to determine the reasons for these large increases is to analyze the annual reports. An annual report was not produced for 2006 and 2007; however, there is one for 2008. This is where the transformation begins. The pendulum is moving from an image as a local grassroots organization to a nationally recognized Civil Rights museum where corporate investment is pertinent. In the section of the report entitled *Laying a Foundation for Our Future*, Director Lacy Ward, Jr. emphasizes that 2008 was, indeed a transformative year. In addition, he gives credit to those who came before him:

It is crucial to remember that 2008 would not have been possible without years of effort by those who have been a part of Moton's past. In particular, Moton's former president, Thomas Mayfield, built a strong board of directors and overwhelming community support for the museum. He---and many others you will read about in this annual report--- laid the foundation for all that will happen in the future.<sup>93</sup>

In 2008, the R.R. Moton museum received three significant grants totaling \$5.5 million.<sup>94</sup> The Dominion Foundation, Altria Group, and the Tobacco Commission each

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<sup>93</sup> (Museums 2011)

<sup>94</sup> (Williams 2014)

presented gifts to the museum of over \$100,000. Each gift was used to enhance the capacity of the museum. The Dominion Foundation gift of \$200,000 was designated for the transformation of the Moton School auditorium into a series of exhibition galleries. The Altria Group gift of \$100,000 and the Tobacco Commission gift of \$116,679 were to be used for general operating and capital funds and, for the first time in the museum's history, to hire full-time staff. Charlie Agee, representing Altria Group, explained: "The Moton Museum will help foster greater understanding within future generations about the Civil Rights period in our nation's history and Virginia's role in it."<sup>95</sup>

Corporate giving often gives an institution financial credibility. It suggests that the leadership of the organization is well established, consequently, changing the perception of the organization within the larger community. All that is needed is one transformative gift to take an organization from small to large. These three large gifts given to the R.R. Moton museum in 2008 opened the floodgates for more donors to feel confident that their funds would be used to make a tangible difference. The gifts also allowed other corporations and stakeholders to want to buy into the project. While there were three transformative gifts, there were also sizable gifts by other corporate investors. Wachovia Bank gave over \$10,000, explaining, "The mission at The Wachovia Foundation is to build strong and vibrant communities, improve the quality of life, and make a positive difference. We see the Moton Museum's educational outreach as vital in accomplishing these goals for Southside Virginia."<sup>96</sup> Juan Austin, Community Affairs Manager for Wachovia, made this statement. It speaks to the museum's ability to create a collaborative educational environment in a rural southern Virginia town with a history of a violent racial past. The museum also established

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<sup>95</sup> (Museum, Annual Report 2008: A Year of Achievement 2008)

<sup>96</sup> (Museums 2011)



credibility for public programs. These include reunion of students from Kittrell College,<sup>97</sup> lectures by former Virginia Governor, Linwood Holton, who stopped the Massive resistance regime, and John A. Stokes, who was the Moton Class president in 1959.

In addition to gaining the support of corporations, Lacy Ward, Jr. was also able to secure a number of grants from federal entities. The National Park Service (Save America's Treasures) and the Virginia Department of Transportation (TEA-21 Grant Program) funds were used to install a new roof, renovate restrooms, upgrade HVAC systems, and complete additional interior repairs to the building. The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded R.R. Moton \$40,000 and designated it part of their "We the People Project."<sup>98</sup>

#### Public Engagement/ Community Involvement

Under the leadership of Mayfield and later Eggleston, the R.R. Moton Museum participated in the Network of Central Virginia Museums of African American History and Culture. Participation began in 2006 with a \$106, 076 grant from the Institute of Museums and Library Services. The network provided technical assistance, enhanced cooperation, and enabled collaboration across the Commonwealth to six African American museums. The initiative, created in partnership with the Legacy Museum of African American History in Lynchburg and the Virginia African American Heritage Program (a programmatic division of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities), was the first step in the process of developing a larger statewide network of museums of African American art and history. Members were asked to participate in the following workshops: (1) curation and historical documentation, (2) exhibition preparation and installation, (3) collection management and care, and (4) fundraising and staff development/sustainability.

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<sup>97</sup> When the schools were closed in Farmville, many local students traveled to North Carolina to attend Kittrell Junior College.

<sup>98</sup> The goal of the NEH *We the People* project is to encourage and strengthen the teaching and understanding of significant events and themes in our nation's history and culture.

In addition to the participation of the Robert Russa Moton Museum in Farmville, other institutions included: the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum in Lynchburg, the Harrison Museum of African American Culture in Roanoke, the Carver-Price Museum in Appomattox, and the L.E. Coleman African-American Museum in Halifax. Each of these museums is special in its own right, but the one thing they shared in common at the time was the determination to succeed with limited resources and budgets. The workshops were designed to develop an active community of African American history museums within the Commonwealth. “The new network is going to help all six museums do things we could never afford to do on our own,” said Cheryl Stallings, then museum administrator at the Legacy Museum. “All of us are going to become stronger institutions as a result of this grant.” As a result, when Lacy Ward, Jr. arrived, the board of R.R. Moton realized that the beginning is only just that---a beginning. They still needed time, talent, and resources far beyond their local stakeholders to survive. Consequently, the goal was set: develop a nationally recognized museum that can be sustained for the future. Ward contends, “Civil Rights Museums aren’t necessarily African American museums.”<sup>99</sup> He believes “Civil Rights Museums by their very nature are American political science or American history museums. Although he still thinks that, more people see the narrative as ethnic.”<sup>100</sup> It is this multi-layered approach that allows for the viability of the R. R. Moton Museum.

### Capacity Building

First, the African Americans of Prince Edward County collaborated to establish a school for their children. Next, in 1951, students of R.R. Moton collaborated to start a school strike for equal facilities. Today, the R.R. Moton Museum is exploring the possibility of becoming a partner with Longwood University. Many universities and colleges have

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<sup>99</sup> (Williams 2014)

<sup>100</sup> (Williams 2014)

museums on campus. Often these on-campus museums are dedicated to the school's history or to a collection given by one of the school's generous, illustrious alumni. However, there is a new type of partnership on the horizon in Farmville, Virginia. If it comes to pass, Longwood University will be instrumental in continuing the success and growth of the R.R. Moton museum. Lacy Ward, Jr., now former Director of the R.R. Moton museum, was also a member of the Board of Trustees for Longwood University during his time as Director. Prior to his departure from the museum, both governing boards (the University's and the R.R. Moton Museum's) endorsed an explorative motion, in which the Moton Museum "would become affiliated with Longwood while maintaining its 501©3 philanthropic entity status."<sup>101</sup> The two will essentially help each other. The Museum would acquire the University's administrative, academic, and research support. The University, with the Museum's collaboration, would continue to develop citizen leaders with stronger foundation in American history and a deeper understanding of Virginia's role in the modern Civil Rights Movement. A new associate director, Justin G. Reid, is at the helm. Lacy Ward, Jr, trained him. Prior to Reid's new post, he served as the special projects manager for the museum's regional school initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Reid leads an institution that is an *equal opportunity* provider and employer.

### Conclusion

"Hambone, hambone, where you been? Round the world and back again." This chant from African American vernacular culture refers to the resource sharing that sustained black people during slavery. Used to season vegetables, the hambone was passed from one household pot to another until the flavor was all boiled out. This multi-layered approach can be seen in the origin and development of Civil Rights Museums, in particular, that of the

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<sup>101</sup> <http://www.motonmuseum.org/motonlongwood/#more-5369>

Robert Russa Moton Museum: A Center for the Study of Civil Rights in Education, located in Farmville, Virginia. It has a central place in the Civil Rights Movement.

A movement full of memories that are two-fold: memories that bring to light a turbulent and unnerving time in American history, but also a time of immense courage and unwavering faith for all who experienced it first hand and those who watched from afar. What happened at that site---Don Baker of the *Washington Post Magazine* challenges us never to forget: “[The 1951 Moton Student Strike] marked the start of the modern civil rights movement ... [and] forever changed the landscape of American education.”<sup>102</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, R. R. Moton Museum is the *hambone* of Virginia museums.

The R.R. Moton museum will continue to amend the social and political historiography of the local and national Civil Rights and education narrative. Its collaborative institutional core continues to lead to a steadfast organization full of promise and sustainability. Current scholars of the Civil Rights Movement will build upon the Civil Rights scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s --- scholarship grounded in the important work of the local Civil Rights organizations and the residents who support them. Future generations will come to carry on the R.R. Moton Museum legacy. They will move toward a narrative. It will become a narrative where local meets national; social meets political; where grass roots meet foundations; and where memory and race intersect to create community. Visitors and scholars to the R. R. Moton Museum will take away memories and they will create narratives, inspired by the treasured stories preserved and protected by those who gave meaning, worth and value to an irreplaceable cultural heritage.

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<sup>102</sup> (Baker 2001)

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