

Bob Moore

Museum Programs at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

What is the best way to teach the history of African Americans in a museum whose themes are not specific to African-American heritage? Should the faces of important African Americans, along with quotes, be placed in a special exhibit, perhaps near the entrance, for all to see? Or should a more integrated approach be taken, in which general museum exhibits are used to tell the African-American story?

At Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (JEFF), we have chosen to blend information on African Americans into our themes, which encompass the entire sweep of Western American history. In the Museum of Westward Expansion under the Gateway Arch, interpreters present generic and specific exhibits and educational programs on African-American themes.

The inclusion of the African-American story, along with stories of other ethnic and national groups, provides a larger context for programs and information unfamiliar to most visitors. Inclusion of all groups associated with the West makes each visitor feel that the history reflects a diversity of peoples and not just an exclusive set of Americans. The museum is not dedicated to the "great men" of history, but to the average "Joes" and "Janes" who settled the American West. In fact, the museum utilizes reflective text panels

throughout, in an effort to make visitors see themselves, literally, in American history.

Although an effort is made to include all groups in interpretive programs about the West, the story of African Americans is a recurring theme. Why highlight African-American heritage in a general museum on American history? The answer lies in the unique experience of African Americans, which is different from that of any other group. No other group suffered the degree and longevity of exclusion and prejudice. Further, the experience of African Americans has been seen as the acid test of democracy. The saga of African-American heritage forces us to take a long, hard look at what America stands for and how well we live up to our high ideals.

While we do not include a separate section on African-American heritage in the Museum of Westward Expansion, that heritage is nonetheless represented in the exhibits. Since African Americans were such an integral force in the exploration and settlement of the West, a special exhibit would divert attention from one of the most important facts: that African-American heritage is so intertwined with Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, and Euro-American heritage in the West as to make these individual stories inseparable.

For example, at least one out of every five cowboys who participated in the "long drives" from Texas to the railheads in Kansas were African Americans. One of every five cavalymen in the U.S. Army between 1866 and 1900 was an African American. In addition, African Americans explored, trapped, and homesteaded beside people from every corner of the globe in the American West. The very first American exploration of the far West, led by Lewis and Clark, included an African-American slave named York, who enjoyed the full privileges open to the other men, even receiving an equal vote when decisions affecting the group were made. Thus, African-American heritage is unique enough to be discussed as an important aspect of westward expansion; yet its importance cannot be seen if it is removed from its place within the context of the entire westward movement.

The Museum of Westward Expansion, created in 1976, was purposely designed without

Photo of JNEM interpretive program courtesy NPS.



labels, leaving interpreters with the responsibility of answering questions and elaborating upon the individual stories of the westward experience. The staff at JEFF is confronted with unique challenges. Some exhibits address African-American heritage directly through the use of historic photographs and quotes, while other, more general exhibits, such as a replica of a sod house of the Great Plains, do not. Yet the sod house exhibit is used by interpreters to tell the story of the "Exodusters," African-American pioneers during the 1870s and '80s. The house itself need not be the dwelling of a Euro-American pioneer, but could just as easily be the home of an African-American settler.

In a similar manner, the Mountainman exhibit is used to talk about the experience of African-American mountainmen, who used the same types of traps, clothing, saddles, and accoutrements as Euro-American mountainmen. The Lewis and Clark exhibit can be used to discuss York, the cowboy exhibit to discuss African-American cowboys, and the exhibit on the military to talk about Buffalo Soldiers. Altogether, a very impressive overall program dealing with the hardships and triumphs of the African-American experience in the West can be presented. In a program on a distinct group, such as cowboys, the African-American experience can be contrasted with other groups who worked as cowboys.

Thus, interpreters in the Museum of Westward Expansion use the overall exhibits creatively. The treatment tends to mainstream the African-American experience. The path to mainstreaming can be followed in a variety of museum settings bringing the African-American experience to life. Initiative rests on the shoulders of the individual interpreter to ensure that African-American experiences are discussed. At JEFF, writing individual outlines for each program, and having these outlines reviewed, gives supervisors an opportunity to comment on areas where interpreters might include information on African Americans. In addition, our audit process has been helpful in identifying places where inclusive language can be added. The park historian has encouraged the use of inclusive information in interpretive programs by presenting history sessions, written reports, and bibliographies of sources on ethnic and national groups in the West. Armed with the necessary information and the interpretive skills to use it, the staff is better-prepared to present accurate, informative, and inclusive programs.

The basic interpretive technique used at JEFF is that of the verbal inclusion of information on African Americans in programs covering each aspect of westward expansion. Verbal inclusion is used in informal visitor contacts as well. Enlargements of historical photographs of African

Americans are used in each of the major areas of the museum, allowing visual and verbal information to be presented. Demonstrations of historic clothing and tools are often made with the stipulation that these tangible objects were used by African Americans as well as Euro-Americans. This type of comparison can be made with subtlety. For instance, an interpreter can spend a bit of time in his/her mountainmen program talking about the famous African-American trapper Jim Beckwourth. When demonstrating how a beaver trap worked, the interpreter can say that, "when Jim Beckwourth and other mountainmen trapped a beaver, they followed these steps to trap and kill the animal for its pelt."

JEFF has also followed this mainstreaming model in its educational programs. Teacher Activity Guides (TAGs) have been prepared by the staff for each program. These TAGs contain three pre-visit activities and three post-visit activities for each age group. The TAGS provide exercises for students which are inclusive and mention the importance of the African-American experience. In the "African Americans of the West" TAG, for instance, students in grades 7-12 actually set up a frontier town government and infrastructure and, in a cooperative learning exercise, decide such important matters as whether the town will segregate its African-American citizens and commercial districts. Historically, segregated, integrated, and even all-black towns existed in the West. As a result, actual historical fact allows educational programs to deal with controversial issues in a non-threatening and positive way.

Programs similar to these, which contain material of an inclusive nature, should be possible at virtually any NPS historical areas. African-American heritage need not be interpreted only in February, or in special exhibit areas set apart from the "mainstream" of history. Existing exhibits and programs can easily weave African-American heritage, as well as the heritage of other ethnic and national groups, into a story line, presenting a balanced and inclusive interpretation of history. This type of balanced interpretation brings us one step closer to fulfilling the high ideals upon which our nation was founded.

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