

ASHEVILLE AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE TRAIL PROJECT

PHASE I REPORT

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OVERVIEW

In 2018, The River Front Development Group (RFDG) applied to the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) for funding to develop a landmark district that highlights African American heritage. The RFDG plan includes two significant elements, the development of an African American Heritage Museum at the historic Stephens-Lee High School and the creation of an African American Heritage Trail. Seeing an opportunity to help create a more comprehensive representation of Asheville, the BCTDA awarded funding to support RFDG's vision in part through its Tourism Product Development Fund grant program, which provides capital investment to create places for residents and visitors to enjoy. In addition, the BCTDA is providing further funding and dedicated staff for the trail's development. This includes a community engagement process to inform the development of the trail route, its markers, and a corresponding website. The BCTDA will install and maintain the trail markers in perpetuity as part of its ongoing wayfinding sign program funded by the Tourism Product Development Fund.

The successful execution of this project includes the following four phases:

Phase I: Community Engagement – assess existing resources and conduct community meetings/workshops

Phase II: Interpretive Planning – research and select the stories for the trail

Phase III: Concept Design – create the experiences within which the stories will be told

Phase IV: Detailed Design Documentation & Implementation – develop the details of the design so that it can be built

This report compiles and summarizes the efforts of Phase I - Community Engagement.

RESULTS

POTENTIAL INTERPRETIVE CATEGORIES

Through the workshops and online survey, several themes, or types of stories, arose when people talked about the history they felt should be included in the trail. Most of these fell into the following four themes that can be used to guide future content development.

INTERPRETIVE THEME 1: ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Recognizing the accomplishments and contributions of African American individuals and the broader community was mentioned the most throughout all the community engagement efforts. Participants felt these stories were missing from most historical narratives. "The true contributions are often overlooked by telling the greater story of African Americans." Some added that they would like to see the African American business and economic contributions

highlighted in the trail. Many named examples of restaurants, barbers, hotels, dance halls, and pool halls across Asheville. These comments suggest this project would be most successful if it recognizes and acknowledges how the African American community helped shape Asheville.

INTERPRETIVE THEME 2: THE GOOD

Many were concerned that when African American history is portrayed, it is focused on the negative parts of history. It never demonstrates the good or everyday life, individuals, community life, churches, and schools. They expressed a desire to highlight the individuals and groups that supported the community, or the places people could go that didn't have a sign out front, but that would still give people a good meal. Most of the examples were mentioned as pillars of the healthy and vibrant communities that surrounded Asheville. While these communities are outside of the boundary of the planned physical trail, there is an opportunity to include them in the accompanying website that is being developed as part of this project. The trail can strive to tell the positive history of the African American community and focus on highlighting both the well-known community pillars like the YMI Cultural Center and lesser known like the Allen School for Girls, for example.

INTERPRETIVE THEME 3: AGENCY

Agency was another thread that appeared in numerous comments. People said things like, "There is too much emphasis on people as victims of society, instead of the agency they had." People wanted to talk about the small acts of everyday rebellion and "how people used to help each other in our institutionalized racist culture." Agency was often connected to telling individual stories as representations of a broader African American experience. The presence of these comments suggests that regardless of the topics, the trail must depict people as individuals who participated in an independent, active, and vibrant community.

INTERPRETIVE THEME 4: COMBATING MISCONCEPTIONS

Preserving African American experiences and history for future generations was a prevalent thread throughout the community engagement efforts. People worried that younger generations would never know or forget their history or believe there is no African American history in Asheville. During the workshops, the team heard multiple times there is no African American history in downtown Asheville. The trail needs to highlight both the lost or demolished and the still visible presence to reinforce both a historical and contemporary African American presence in Asheville.

Additionally, there is a misconception there was no slavery in Asheville. One person commented that people believe there was no slavery in Asheville because there were no plantations in the area. The team should explore acknowledging the existence of slavery in Asheville on the Heritage Trail further with community input.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS

Throughout Phase One of the African American Heritage Trail Project, the team has repeatedly heard there is a specific need in Asheville to authentically connect with the Asheville community generally and the African American communities more specifically. The team strived throughout this process to connect with the people whose history will be represented on the trail and seek their input and provide opportunities to shape the project.

The community's interests and thoughts have driven this process and we should expect there are different and often contradicting opinions on how it should be done, what it should include, and opinions on the final product.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS #1: VISIBILITY AND BELONGING

As with many communities in the United States, there has been a lot of change in Asheville that has resulted in the City looking like a different place from where many in the community grew up. There is a sense that Asheville has lost the identity that many are familiar with and is becoming something new. This is perhaps most overtly seen in discussions centered on tourism. The project team repeatedly heard that for some, it is difficult to see their childhood neighborhoods or familiar businesses disappear.

The project team also heard about young people moving away and "outsiders" moving in. Costs have gone up; and there is a sense that benefits for locals have gone down. While what this looks like in Asheville is unique, this is something that many communities are feeling across the United States. People want to see and remember the places and people they grew up with. People want markers or physical reminders of the past. The overarching recommendation is that because people have an intensified need to see themselves, to know they belong; this project should put that at the center of any storytelling and physical/digital components. The ability of this project to create a sense of belonging while highlighting the lost aspects of Asheville will be an indicator of success.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS #2: COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICATION

Through public and private partnerships, historically African American neighborhoods and organizations have been diligently working to make their place in Asheville's history more visible. In efforts to further encourage their own visibility and belonging, neighborhoods and organizations have each developed their own ways of acknowledging their past. While a lot is going on, there is a lack of visibility for what is happening in Asheville. During the listening sessions, participants often wanted to know about the other projects and who might put together a list of all the different initiatives. The overarching recommendation is to continue to create an understanding of the other initiatives in Asheville and how they potentially overlap, complement, or even detract from each other. While this is not Explore Asheville's

responsibility solely, it may have more ability to bring people together than do other organizations.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS #3: STRATEGY AND ACTION

Asheville is a very active city. Neighborhoods and organizations are working, often together, to shine a light on the importance of African American history and culture in Asheville. There is also a sense that each initiative prides itself on being unique and having unique strengths and challenges. However, with the variety of projects and approaches, there is no overall strategy for Asheville. Not everyone wants the results of the initiatives to be uniform, and there are many benefits to individuals and communities in the current situation. However, because of the confusion, there is a sense that bigger projects are not getting done, that things are falling through the cracks. People worry about previous projects in the city that have taken years to get underway and have not yet been completed. The project team heard over and over that people want to be informed, and they want to be involved. To meet this concern about timing, the overarching recommendation is to clearly communicate an action plan that community members can reference, a clear point of contact for questions, and clear ways in which individuals may participate during the remaining phases of the project.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS #4: CONTENT AND BOUNDARIES

Often, during the listening sessions, the PGAV team heard this project would not be able to solve “everything” in Asheville. This is true. It is important to recognize what this project is solving for and communicating clearly about that intention. Likewise, there are “boundaries” to this project, just like any other. There is only a finite amount of money, time, and space. The reality of this project, as based on RFDG’s proposal, is that it is meant to be a walking trail through downtown and areas proximate to downtown Asheville, and therefore must be focused on the stories and spaces in the walkable area.

Knowing the people in Asheville want to stay informed, it would serve everyone if people clearly knew the content boundaries and interpretive themes in which this project must work to be successful. The project team needs to communicate how these boundaries will influence the stories that are collected and the content that ultimately needs to be cultivated. The overarching recommendation is to communicate the framework and parameters clearly as the project continues.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS #5: TRUST AND TIMING

It is important to acknowledge trust is something that often takes a long time to build and tends to be fragile. Explore Asheville has been well-intentioned with funding the African American Heritage Trail Project. There are still some “grey” areas when it comes to who the decision-makers are, who the key stakeholders and influencers are, and on what timeline this project

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will proceed. In Phase One, this is natural - especially when there is a concerted effort to hear from the community and to ensure the community is able to give voice to what it wants. Phase One is always a gathering of diverse voices, and visions of all of the ways a project could move forward. The overarching recommendation is to set a clear framework, timeline, and how community members can work with the project in the future.