

**Western North Carolina Historical Association
Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Committee
Progress Report
November 2021**

IDEA Progress Report

In June 2020, the Western North Carolina Historical Association adopted the following justice statement:

The Western North Carolina Historical Association stands against inequity, injustice, and racism. We acknowledge and support the positive role that recent protests have played in opening the door to real and necessary change.

As an organization rooted in the interpretation of our regional history, we also recognize that there is an ongoing need to better represent the diversity of voices that have shaped – and will shape – Western North Carolina. In a region that has been influenced by and benefited from the contributions of these diverse voices, the Western North Carolina Historical Association must equitably reflect our heritage, history, and aspirations.

We pledge to do that. Beginning immediately, the Western North Carolina Historical Association will re-evaluate how we operate. Moving forward, we are committed to doing the work to become an inclusive organization in all aspects of our operations. That includes our collections, exhibitions, and programs, not only at our house museum, but also in our comprehensive mission of education. It includes our leadership and membership. Over the coming months, we will focus on developing a guiding document to help us intentionally and actively move towards this goal.

We are listening. We are learning. We are committed to doing the work to get there. As we embark on this journey, we will seek the involvement of our community, so together, we can reflect on the brilliant, rich and, yes, sometimes painful, history of Western North Carolina. Please join us.

Adopted WNCHA Board of Trustees, June 17, 2020.

Since then we have been working steadily to fulfil the pledge made in the statement. This document functions as a report of the progress we have made over the past year and a pledge to continue pushing to increase inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility in all aspects of our operations. This is an ongoing process.

Interpretation

We operate our facility, the Smith-McDowell House, as a historic house museum, which contains six period rooms that broadly interpret the history of our region between 1840 and 1900. We maintain two gallery rooms inside the house in which we host special exhibits. We also curate digital exhibits.

We have addressed IDEA in our interpretation in a number of ways:

Historic House Museum

We have dedicated hundreds of hours of staff and volunteer time to research the history of the people who were enslaved by the owners of our facility. Utilizing primary source material, we developed a digital exhibit on our website, which is freely accessible, called “Deep Dive into Archives: Uncovering the Hidden Histories of People Enslaved by the Smith and McDowell Families.” All primary documentation is included to help verify the identities of those identified in our research. So far we have uncovered the

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names of over 60 people enslaved by the families and have worked to track the life histories of nearly half of them.

We have used the information gathered to update the tour of our historic house to include the stories and experiences of those who were enslaved at the house alongside, or in lieu of, the stories of their enslavers. Though many of these stories are based in trauma, we also have sought out stories that tell of family ties, freedom, and resistance. We will continue to research these histories and update our tour and digital exhibit as more material is uncovered. Our goal is to erect a memorial to the lives and legacies of those who were held captive at our site.

Special and Digital Exhibits

We have been intentionally seeking out exhibits that tell the stories of diverse communities in our region and/or equitably represent the diversity of people who have shaped and continue to shape our region. In 2021, we hosted two special exhibits in our gallery rooms. From January - June we hosted Ann Miller Woodford's traveling exhibit, "When All God's Children Get Together: The Lives and Music of African American People in Far Western North Carolina." From July - December we are hosting the Exploring Joara Foundation's traveling exhibit, "Unearthing Our Forgotten Past: Fort San Juan."

In 2022, we will host two exhibits on loan from the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "The Story of BBQ in North Carolina" and "Navigating Jim Crow: The Green Book and Oasis Spaces in North Carolina."

At the same time, we are also participating in the Museum Assessment Program for Education and Interpretation through the American Alliance of Museums. As part of this program, we are evaluating all of the ways we do interpretation and education inside and outside our facility. We are working to determine if our historic house museum is the best way to serve the public or if we would like to transition to a new storytelling model inside our historic house.

Note on Accessibility

We are working to define our primary audience(s) and content area(s) to create programmatic offerings that attract a wider diversity of local residents to our facility.

Admission to the historic house tour and special exhibit is \$10 per adult (with discounts for students and children). To make the museum accessible to more people, we are part of the Buncombe County Public Library Zoom Pass program, which offers free admission tickets to Buncombe County residents with a library card.

Our historic house museum likely will never be fully ADA-accessible because of the historic nature of our facility. However, we have situated our special exhibit galleries in an accessible area of the house and have provided an accessible parking space, restroom, and entrance. We are considering how to create a compelling accessible historic house tour for visitors who cannot climb stairs.

Education

Beyond our exhibits, we offer a variety of educational programs for both adults and youth that feature academics, independent historians, authors, and other experts. We seek to create in-person, outdoor, and virtual programs that encourage discussion and conversation among diverse groups on topics that are historically relevant and sometimes controversial.

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During our 2020-2021 program year we offered a variety of programming for adults, including a “Lit Cafe” series which highlighted authors who were nominated for our Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award (see next section) as well as an Introduction to WNC History Lecture Series, which included topics such as Native American Mounds, African American Resistance, and Literature and Stereotypes. Other programs of note included our Symposium on Monuments, which resulted in community conversations about the history, legacy, and future of Confederate monuments in WNC, as well as our Panel on Shiloh History. This moderated panel, a conversation between an elder and a younger member of a historically African American community in the Asheville area, was particularly notable as a prominent newspaper columnist covered the panel. His resultant article noted that he (and the larger Asheville community) needed to rethink their stereotypes of the community as crime ridden.

Awards

Since the 1950s, we have annually awarded the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award (TWMLA) to recognize excellence in literature from our region and the Outstanding Achievement Award to recognize excellence in preservation of our shared history. During our 2020 cycle for the TWMLA, we specifically reached out to all eligible publications, whether published through a “big name” publisher, a small local publisher, or self-published, to reach authors who may not have known in the past that their work was eligible for this award. The number of nominated authors increased substantially as well as the diversity of authors (in academic background, gender identity, ethnicity, age, etc.) and subject matter. The 2020 award was given to Dr. Sandra Muse Isaacs for her nonfiction work, *Eastern Cherokee Stories*. We are working to continue to diversify our selection committee to better represent the breadth of diversity of our nominees.

During our 2020 cycle for the Outstanding Achievement Award, nominees represented a broad range of expertise, academic backgrounds, ethnicities, gender identities, and methodologies. Ultimately, the award was given to Ann Miller Woodford for her work preserving and promoting the history of African Americans in far western North Carolina throughout her career, through music, artwork, writing, community work, and exhibition. As with the TWMLA, we have diversified our selection committee.

Youth/Student Programming

Due to COVID-related restrictions, most of our school programming is currently on hiatus. However, our traveling trunk program continues. We have focused on updating our trunks to better serve area students and to represent a more complex and complete history of regional topics (with particular emphasis on our Woodland Indian and Civil War trunks).

Internship Program

We run an internship program for high school and college students. Over the last year, we have hosted students from UNC-Asheville, UNC-Greensboro, Asheville Christian Academy, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation through the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

Note on Accessibility

For our virtual and off-site programs we have a no-cost ticketing option known as a Community Fund Ticket. Anyone registering for one of our events can choose this ticket option with no additional barriers. The ticket is funded by donations from attendees who purchase tickets.

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Collection

We are nearing the end of a collection inventory. We hope to begin a deaccessing process within the next year. After deaccessing extraneous objects, space will be available in our facility to begin actively collecting objects and other materials from individuals and communities that are currently underrepresented in our collection.

Collaboration

In all areas, but most specifically our interpretation and education programs, we seek to collaborate with a diverse array of organizations and individuals. In 2020 and 2021 we have collaborated with the Railroad Incarcerated Laborers Project, the South Asheville Cemetery Association, African American Experience in the Smokies project, Western Regional History Day, Conserving Carolina, Buncombe County Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, Swannanoa Valley Museum, Guastavino Alliance, Appalachian Studies Association, Vance Birthplace Historic Site, Thomas Wolfe Memorial Historic Site, Mountain Gateway Museum, Mountain Heritage Center, Western Regional Archives, NC Dept. of Cultural Resources, Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County, East Asheville Public Libraries, AmeriCorps, Montreat College, Museums in Partnership, NC Federation of Historic Societies, Old Buncombe Genealogical Society, and many others.

Communication

We are in the process of thoughtfully considering a rebrand of our facility and historic site. In the interim, we are working to ensure that the language used in exhibits, programs, and media materials reflects our commitment to IDEA.

We make much of our educational and interpretive content freely accessible on our website and/or social media. We plan to begin adding alt-text to new images uploaded to the website and social media and begin updating images already online as staff and volunteer time allows. We have adopted social media standards to ensure a welcoming environment for respectful discussions. All virtual programs are recorded and subtitles are added.

We recently adopted a land acknowledgement statement, which is posted on our website and will be displayed inside our facility. We are considering also reading the acknowledgement during all our live programming. We are working on a long-form statement.

Land Acknowledgement

We honor and celebrate the ancestors who came before us, the original inhabitants of the land now known as the western portion of North Carolina. We honor and celebrate the many cultures that existed on this land when Europeans first arrived, and we acknowledge the thousands of people who lost their lives and their land. We honor and celebrate the present-day Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and all indigenous peoples of Western North Carolina.

Adopted WNCHA Board of Trustees, May 19, 2021.

Leadership

We ensure that the members of our board of trustees represent the diverse communities that make up western North Carolina.