

# Looking back

## Former mayor plans for a museum to bring African American history into curricula in Charleston and across the country

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Hub of the slave trade. Home of the Confederacy. Walter Scott. The Emmanuel Nine. Charleston has burned a mark in African American history for appalling cruelty. But the Lowcountry is also home to Gullah and Geechee culture, civil rights activism, renowned blacksmith Phillip Simmons, sweetgrass basket weaving. Acknowledging the crimes of the past but focusing on strength and heritage could prevent further negativity from festering.

The proposed International African American Museum (IAAM) hopes to offer insight to the richness of African American history and highlight Charleston's pivotal role in the events of the past and present. Spearheaded by former Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley, the project expects to break ground in 2017, with a grand opening in 2018.

According to Project Manager Lauren Crawford, the IAAM capital campaign has met two-thirds of its \$75 million goal.

The IAAM seeks to connect the community with both the history of the country and of the individuals that compose it. According to the IAAM website, the museum will send visitors to other significant sites in South Carolina and partner with institutions, like the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C. Crawford said in an email interview on Feb. 22 the IAAM will also include resources for visitors to trace their own ancestry.

"The Family History Center will offer unprecedented access to genealogical programs and allow individuals to trace their origins," Crawford said. "The IAAM will tell the complete and accurate story of the pain, struggle and incredible triumph of a race

of people that built the very fabric of our Nation. The movement to create the IAAM came about after former Mayor of the City of Charleston Joe Riley, read a book called Slaves in the Family by Edward Ball. After reading that book and seeing the influences that Charleston played in slavery, he felt it was appropriate for Charleston to show and explain its true history. Because of slavery and the economics of the rice industry, Charleston was the richest city in the United States for over 100 years."

The IAAM would serve as a symbolic institution, Mayor Riley said, especially for its location, at the site of Gadsden's Wharf. Riley said, in a telephone interview on Feb. 9, "44 per cent of all enslaved Africans who came to North America came to Charleston," adding to Charleston's responsibility to right the wrongs of the past, he said.

"Ellis Island was a place where people came really in search of freedom, but there's a physical place that commemorates the immigration," Riley added. "This here, which will be built on the site of Gadsden's Wharf, which was the largest wharf in the colonies and where more enslaved Africans were brought than any other place. This museum being here gives us and gives a knowledge that there is a place where you can learn and also where you can honor and respect and pay homage to those who were brought here."

The museum will feature an in-depth view of the history of African Americans, Riley said. An exploration of the various periods of African American history, including the cultures enslaved peoples originated from, will improve upon the single-faceted history that is often presented.

"The focus of the museum will be a comprehensive story from starting in Africa, and the different places and countries in Africa

where those who were brought to Charleston came from, and the history of those communities and countries, the civilization, the traditions, which were diverse," he said, "and then from there, the middle passage, the work during enslavement in Charleston, in the Lowcountry and then each chapter, Slave Resistance, Emancipation Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights."

A lack of knowledge of other cultures can lead to grave repercussions, Riley said, one of which could have been the tragic shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME Church. Awareness of the resilience and richness of cultures affects young people's perception of the world and possibly prevent further atrocities.

"Take the unthinkable act that occurred on the 17th of June here," Riley said, "I believe if then, when he was a child, if his history classes taught him African American history, what those Africans who were brought here suffered through and what they did, and the rich cultures that they came from. So many people think they came from some kind of race of slaves, of course, the cultures in Africa built pyramids and had great advancements in architecture and development and science so to understand..."

The IAAM will be more than a building, and visitors only a fraction of its audience. Riley said the museum will expand the scope of its impact by developing a curriculum for elementary and secondary school history classes. The curriculum will be available online and implemented first in local schools, then nationwide.

Social studies department head Jason Brisini said curricula like the one developed by the IAAM have been incorporated into Wando classes before as case studies that supplement the existing curriculum and grow in complexity as students advance. The plans for the museum are thoughtful, Brisini said, for the inclusion of features like the ability for visitors to trace ancestry that will attract people from beyond the immediate Charleston community.



The building is designed by Moody Nolan an architectural firm based in Columbus, Ohio. The exhibits would be designed by Ralph Applebaum and Associates. The total cost of this project is estimated to be around \$75 million with an estimated completion date of 2018, contingent on getting the funding for the project.

photo/rendering by Moody Nolan provided by Lauren Crawford

Brisini said he encourages students to form a group that would get directly involved in the IAAM effort by contributing ideas.

"One really cool thing would be if you made a list of things that would be really cool or really useful or really interesting to the museum and submit it to the committee that makes decisions," he said. "They would legitimately look at that things that you say."

Explorations of ethnicity should be central to education, Brisini said, because ethnic ties offer insight to cultural influence.

"We need to talk about race," Brisini said, "but more importantly ethnicity because ethnicity's your cultural background. The fact that we are different, it's cool because we can talk and understand what connections we have among each other and what we're missing out on each piece of this humanity. If we don't do that we never know why anyone thinks the way they do currently."

African slaves, imbued with the societies of their home, passed on their values, which permeate the collective American culture. Though African Americans have shaped the fabric of American society at every level, the pivotal role these Americans played in history often goes unrecognized.

"The history of Africans being brought here and African American lives is American history," Riley said. "The First Lady's, her paternal line, descendants were enslaved Africans brought to Charleston and sold to a rice plantation in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. These are people whose descendants helped build our country. Every facet of our country, from the Super Bowl, that 100 million Americans watched, to the arts and music and civic leadership. Their descendants have become such important parts of every community in America."

The history of African Americans is as integral to American history as other aspects, not a restricted list of token accomplishments to be mentioned on occasion.

"We have Black History Month, which is very good, but Black history needs to be taught every month. We know about the Pilgrims, the Mayflower, we know about the wagon trains and we know about the Erie Canal and we know about the Revolution and so many phases, but we don't know this history," Riley said, "what the Ku Klux Klan really did. They hanged people, they killed people, they terrorized people. We all need to have

the understanding and the appreciation of what occurred."

Riley said understanding can also have resounding impact.

"The broader necessity for creating acceptance and understanding is that we create an environment that all people can have a greater chance, all people, for a happy and successful life," Riley said, "because if we understand someone else better, then we're going to be better and do better, and those who may be the subject of discrimination or unfair treatment, well, their lives will be better to."

The change that is needed can be exemplified everyday, Riley said. "What we all can do is this," he said, "we reject any sense of intolerance or any aspect of insensitivity and if we are in a circle or an experience where people are spouting any kind of racial intolerance or insensitive feelings, that we speak up against that."