VISITING NEW YORK’S AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAST

People of African descent have a long history in New York, a history that predates the current city’s name. From the earliest days of the Dutch colony, New Amsterdam, to the changes of the 19th century, to the Civil Rights era of the 20th century and into the present, the collective and personal experiences of Africans and African-Americans in New York City are rich and diverse. Several organizations around the city afford teachers and students opportunities to learn firsthand how and where New York and American history has happened.

The first enslaved Africans arrived from Angola and the Congo to New Amsterdam in 1627. During the colony’s early years, the enslaved worked for the Dutch West India Company, sawing down trees, tilling the soil, constructing roads and buildings; Wall Street today runs along what was once the wall of the fort, built by slaves. By the 1640s, the Dutch West India Company began to grant partial freedom. Africans were able to own land and sell crops, though, unlike white settlers, they were required to pay a tax to the Company. They also established the Land of the Blacks, a group of African-owned farms, located where Washington Square is today. (Moore)

Though there were a number of free people when the colony changed hands in 1664, slavery expanded under the British. New York became a major slave trading port, and there were more slaves in New York than in any American city other than Charleston. The British eliminated many pathways to freedom and passed slave codes that greatly limited freedom of movement. Despite the restrictions, the city offered opportunities to enslaved people that rural areas did not. They found ways to mingle with other slaves, free blacks, and working class whites. Unlike slaves in rural parts of the colonies, New York City slaves did not live in quarters with large numbers of other black people, but in the back rooms or kitchens of their owners’ houses, often learning a trade. Most enslaved women worked as domestic servants and were illiterate. A slave uprising took place in 1712 and accusations of a conspiracy to revolt in 1741 (at a time in which blacks composed about 20 percent of the city’s population). Following the execution of those convicted, the British responded with harsher rules for the remaining African population, including banning the ownership of property and curfews. New York City remained in British hands during the American Revolution. Promising freedom to any black person who fought for the King, the city became a haven for thousands of escaped slaves. Though the British were defeated, they kept their promise and helped more than 3,000 former slaves leave for Canada. (Lepore)
Black Gotham Walking Tours

Inspired by a middle school student who asked Tenement Museum guide Kamau Ware about the role of blacks in the history of New York City, the Black Gotham Walking Tours trace the lives of Africans living in Lower Manhattan from 1623 to 1898. Organized as a three part series, Ware’s current installment is *The Other Side of Wall Street*. This 90 minute tour follows Africans living through the days of Dutch New Amsterdam and of colonial New York City under the English. It includes a visit to the African Burial Ground as well as background on the colony’s citizens of African descent such as Domingo Anthony and Manuel Trumpeter—the “Captain of the Blacks”—and the Geneva Club gang, reportedly involved in the 1741 conspiracy. Contact Kamau Ware for more information at 646.283.3541 or info@blackgotham.net.

http://www.blackgotham.com

Many of the core principles of the American Revolution—individual rights, freedom, equality—were at odds with slavery. The attitudes of whites gradually began to change in the late 18th century. New York State’s first Gradual Emancipation law passed in 1799, followed by a second Gradual Emancipation law in 1817. Though the legislation was fraught with delayed freedom clauses and conditions, the great majority of slaves were freed by 1827. In New York City slavery ended more quickly than in surrounding areas. By 1820, 95 percent of black people in New York City were free, but in Kings County, half the black population remained enslaved. (Rael)

In the decades following, open discrimination remained part of the social fabric. Free blacks were denied equal voting rights and education, excluded from a number of occupations, and barred entry to leading institutions. Amidst these conditions some fled; others stayed put in the Land of the Blacks or repositioned themselves in nearby places like Five Points at Chatham Chapel, where black and white abolitionists met; Underground Railroad sites such as the African Bethlehem Church; Seneca Village, the city’s first community of black property owners in Manhattan; and Weeksville in Brooklyn. (MAAP)

Weeksville Heritage Center

In 1838, James Weeks, a free man from Virginia, purchased land at the edge of Brooklyn and began the settlement of what became known as Weeksville. A self-sufficient village of free African-Americans laundresses, craftsmen, doctors, and professionals, Weeksville’s residents established businesses, schools, an orphanage, churches, newspapers like the *Freedman's Torchlight*, and a home for the aged. It was a stop on the Underground Railroad and a refuge for black families fleeing the racist violence that spread across New York after the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863. Today, the Weeksville Heritage Center in Crown Heights documents and preserves the history of this community. Their Hunterfly Road Houses, dating from 1840-1880s, are original domestic structures of the historic community. Weeksville Heritage Center provides educational and cultural programs that engage audiences.
The city’s African-American community was organized around its churches such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church, from which grew benevolent societies and literary associations. African Free Schools, established by the abolitionist New York Manumission Society, as well as book lending societies like the Philomethan Society attempted to improve the economic and political standing of blacks, many of whom performed unskilled work. As immigration from Ireland and Germany increased in the mid-19th century, employment opportunities deteriorated for free blacks. Interracial tension grew in working class neighborhoods with competition for jobs. By the time of the Civil War, a series of anti-black incidents occurred. In the summer of 1862, an Irish mob attempted to burn down a tobacco factory in Brooklyn where black women and children were working. In July of 1863 the four day New York City Draft Riots—initially started because of economic inequities in conscription requirements—took on a racial tone when working class white rioters vented their wrath on the homes and businesses of innocent free blacks. Along with military and government buildings, the Colored Orphan Asylum was burned to the ground, and the Riots left 105 people dead. (K. Jackson)

In the 1870s, some Southern blacks began to move northward. However as the century drew to a close, the black population had dwindled to approximately 2 percent of New York’s population—overshadowed by the city’s 40 percent Irish and 35 percent German population. The city’s African-Americans had little power amid Tammany Hall-dominated politics, despite work by the Afro-American League and the Afro-American Council, chaired by the country’s leading black journalist T. Thomas Fortune. (Burrows & Wallace)

However, the racial composition of New York underwent a significant change during and after World War I. Hoping to escape the tightening of Jim Crow laws, lynching, and the devastation wrought to Southern agriculture by the boll weevil infestation, more than one-tenth of the country’s black population voluntarily moved to Northern cities, answering the demand for labor brought on by the war. Between 1910 and 1920, New York’s African-American population rose by 66 percent. Access to housing became a major source of friction. Residential segregation ordinances kept blacks out of predominantly white neighborhoods. Confined to all-black ghettos, African Americans created cities-within-cities; the largest was Harlem. Anti-black race riots throughout the U.S. in the summer of 1919 fuelled black nationalism and political support of recently founded organizations like the Universal Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey and based in New York, and the NAACP, whose leadership included W.E.B. DuBois. Culturally, writers, thinkers, and artists increasingly gathered in Harlem redefining black identity for what was at the time called “The New Negro Movement”, and is now known as the Harlem Renaissance. (Marks)
Founded in 1991 by graduate students at Columbia University, Big Onion Tours lead a number of walking tours through New York City’s ethnic neighborhoods and historic districts. Their Historic Harlem tour focuses on the Harlem Renaissance era, stopping at locales like the Harlem YMCA—a boarding house for African-Americans who were often denied accommodation elsewhere as well as a meeting place for a writers’ group that included Langston Hughes—the original headquarters of the NAACP and of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA, the former location of the Big Apple (a popular jazz club on 135th Street), and architectural gems like the townhouses of Strivers’ Row. This tour lasts approximately two hours. Contact Seth Kamil at 888.606.9255 or info@bigonion.com. http://www.bigonion.com

The result of this Great Migration, which lasted until 1930, was the first step in the full nationalization of the African-American population. The economic realities of the Great Depression brought the cultural flowering to a halt as unemployment rose. During the 1930s, 50 percent of blacks were without jobs, compared to 25 percent of whites. Migration slowed, and Harlem residents, led by the Greater New York Coordinating Committee, began boycotting white merchants on 125th Street, such as Woolworth’s, who refused to employ them. In Brooklyn, the Democrats of Bedford Stuyvesant became the first effective political group. Meanwhile, New York’s Communist Party played a significant part in the burgeoning Civil Rights struggle with grassroots fights for housing, relief, and public works. (K. Jackson)

Between 1940 and 1950, during a period known as the Second Great Migration, 1.5 million African-Americans left the rural South and headed for the North and the West. New York’s black population rose by 62 percent and with it, the housing shortage and facilitated ghettoization continued. Migrants moved across the Triboro Bridge into Corona and East Elmhurst in Queens as well as into Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant, many looking for work in the area’s thriving wartime industries. However, job discrimination was rife. Black employees at Sperry Gyroscope aviation plants in Brooklyn and at Republic Aviation and Grumman Engineering plants on Long Island numbered less than three percent. There were community protests and legal fights. Nationally, union leader A. Philip Randolph proposed a march on Washington to protest against racial discrimination in the war industries, an act that resulted in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s issuance of Executive Order 8802, or the Fair Employment Act, in 1941 to prevent the demonstration taking place. In New York, the Ives-Quinn Bill prohibiting discrimination in private employment was signed into law in 1945, the first ever in the United States, despite protests from business leaders including the New York Chamber of Commerce.

Politically, African-Americans began to achieve greater representation in government with the election of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and later Communist Party organizer Ben Davis to the New York City Council. Even as gains were made, tensions with the New York Police Department escalated, and, in the summer
of 1943, a white officer shot a black soldier in uniform, inciting a riot in Harlem that left five dead and 307 injured. As community complaints to the New York NAACP rose, activists moved to include Northern police abuses in the fight against racial violence along with the cases of lynching in the South. As the decade ended, the Civil Rights Movement in New York was underway, with the agenda of ending employment discrimination and police brutality, increasing access to education and new housing, and achieving representation in government. (Biondi)

As African-American political mobilization increased, the city gained representatives in local government like Walter Gladwin, the first elected black official in the Bronx, and J. Daniel Diggs, city councilman from Brooklyn along with the election of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. to Congress. Black leaders seized on international realignments brought on by World War II and the presence in New York of the newly formed United Nations. However, amid Red Scare tensions, the NAACP began to distance itself from labor activists and took an anti-communist line, going so far as to dismiss W.E.B. DuBois. The FBI investigated a number of prominent black activists, politicians, and intellectuals including DuBois, Powell, Davis, and the National Council of Negro Women’s Mary McLeod Bethune. On the housing front, members of the New York City planning commission, were vocal opponents against black veterans moving into Stuyvesant Town, a Manhattan residential complex created with a combination of public and private funds to house World War II veterans. (K. Jackson)

Meanwhile, police brutality became increasingly problematic. Investigations of the NYPD were quashed by then Commissioner Monaghan whose tacit agreement with the FBI insured that “civil rights laws only applied south of the Mason-Dixon Line”. After the Civil Rights Act passed and during the Mississippi Freedom Summer, another riot occurred in Harlem in 1964 after the killing of a black youth by a white police officer. The riot spread to Brooklyn and later upstate to Rochester. In the weeks following, most Harlem organizations, local newspaper The Amsterdam News, and white liberals all called for the establishment of an independent civilian review board. Amid the tensions, Malcolm X, newly appointed to the Nation of Islam’s Temple No. 7 in Harlem, frequently made speeches in the neighborhood which had a powerful effect on his audiences, generally African-Americans who were tired of being told to wait for freedom, justice, equality, and respect. (Biondi)

Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial & Educational Center

The former Audubon Ballroom and the site of the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, the Center continues the work of the late couple through human rights advocacy and social justice. Its reception hall contains a life sized statue of the man himself as well as video kiosks with short films about the life and work of the couple; murals upstairs depict scenes from X’s life and floorboards from the spot where he was shot are preserved. In the fall of 2011, the Center will feature Community Works’ Long Walk to Freedom exhibition, an inter-generational, living history exhibit celebrating the work of 12 civil rights activists of the 1960s. In addition, the Center has recently become a site for Smithsonian Travelling Exhibitions. Freedom’s Sisters, a collaboration between SITES and Cincinnati Museum Center bringing to life 20 African American women from key 19th-century historical figures to contemporary leaders, will be featured from January to April 2012. Contact Dr. Mark Harding, Interim Executive Director at 212.568.1341 or info@theshabazzcenter.net  http://theshabazzcenter.net.
New Yorkers participated in the national Civil Rights struggle with student membership in the Congress for Racial Equality on the Queens College campus (including the three young civil rights workers who were murdered in Mississippi). Locally, in 1964, Rev. Milton Galamison led the fight to boycott racially segregated schools—de facto and organized along neighborhood lines. In 1968, in response to growing complaints from parents in poor minority neighborhoods that schools were failing their students, the Ford Foundation helped fund an experimental program in the black and Jewish neighborhoods of Ocean Hill and Brownsville that gave control to local educators and families and decentralized authority from the Board of Education. Charging that Board employees were seeking to sabotage the decentralization effort, black district leaders exiled 13 teachers and six administrators—most of them Jewish—to other districts. As the teachers’ union protested the transfers, the two sides traded harsh accusations of racism and anti-Semitism. Teachers declared a strike that dragged on for months and shut down the public schools for 36 days.

The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) actively campaigned for an increase the number of black workers at local firms like Sealtest-Sheffield Farms and Ebinger’s Bakery. With Operation Clean Sweep, members of the organization worked to get city officials to improve the sanitation in black neighborhoods Brooklyn. Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, a pilot program started by Senator Robert Kennedy, was established as a national model for urban renewal in 1964, and in 1965 Kenneth Brown became the first African-American elected to the State Assembly from Queens. In 1968, Brooklyn voters elected Shirley Chisholm the first black woman in Congress who championed several issues including civil rights, aid for the poor, and women's rights. (Purnell)

As the decade came to a close, like many major U.S. cities, New York had begun to feel the effects of white flight to the suburbs, a downturn in industry and commerce as businesses left for places where it was cheaper to operate, an increase in crime, and an upturn in its welfare burden. Though the city escaped many of the race riots that plagued Los Angeles and Detroit thanks to Mayor John Lindsay’s efforts to promote better race relations, street activists and minority groups like the Black Panthers nonetheless took matters into their own hands and organized rent strikes and garbage offenses, demanding city services for poor areas. One of the city’s most lasting organizations founded during this era, the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center in Queens, was a study in cooperation amongst the Library Action Committee—a coalition of community organizations and churches—the Black Panther Party, and the Nation of Islam. (A. Jackson)
Located in the heart of the African American community of Corona-East Elmhurst, this library center grew out of grassroots community organizing in the 1960s. Organizers pushed to establish a library that spoke to the needs of the African-American neighborhood whose residents historically have included Malcolm X, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Willie Mays. Today the Center houses New York City's largest circulating Black Heritage reading collection, and a special collection of works by Langston Hughes. Since opening day, the library has hosted such luminaries as historian John Henrik Clarke, poet Nikki Giovanni, actor Paul Robeson and author Walter Mosely. Autumn 2011 events include Nat Turner Day in October and a book fair in December. Contact John Crow at 718-651-1100 http://www.libraryactioncommittee.org.

By the 1970s the War on Poverty had been deescalated. The city experienced a fiscal crisis as the federal government refused aid in the face of economic stagnation. With a shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, the job prospects of many African-Americans subsequently shrunk. The brightening fiscal state of the city and the nationwide economic boom of the 1980s had little effect on the black community. New York elected its first black mayor, David Dinkins, in 1989. (K. Jackson)

New York has been a significant center for reform in the African-American struggle for equality. From the early days of the abolition movement to the founding of important Civil Rights organizations to the cultural redefinition of black identity to the passage of a number of important anti-discrimination laws, the history of the city’s black community is also very much the nation’s story—easily accessed by a short trip on the subway.

—Catherine Fletcher, City Lore
BIBLIOGRAPHY


AN INTERVIEW WITH HISTORIAN YOHURU WILLIAMS

Widely regarded as one of the nation’s top history education professionals, Diverse Issues in Higher Education recently hailed Dr. Yohuru Williams as “one of the most exciting scholars of his generation.” An expert on the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, as well as late 19th and 20th century U.S. History, African American History and Social Studies teaching methods, Dr. Williams teaches history at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT, and is the Chief Historian and Vice President for Public Education and Community Outreach at the Jackie Robinson Foundation in New York. Dr. Williams is the author of Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights Black Power and Black Panthers in New Haven (Blackwell, 2006) and Teaching U.S. History Beyond the Textbook (Corwin, 2008) as well as many scholarly articles and the editor of A Constant Struggle: African-American History from 1865 to the Present, Documents and Essays (Kendall Hunt, 2002.)

Catherine Fletcher of City Lore recently spoke with Dr. Yohuru Williams about his work on New York City history and the African-American Civil Rights era in his office at the Jackie Robinson Museum.

This past academic year the Critical Themes in American History Program chose the idea of history’s turning points as its theme. Attempting to put the African-American Civil Rights Movement on a timeline, in your opinion, when did the Movement begin? What are its key turning points?

It’s a difficult question primarily because historians are in a disagreement about how to date the Movement. Twenty-five years ago, if you were to ask someone when the Movement began, consensus would have been Brown v. the Board of Education. It was the beginning of the stirrings that led to Montgomery and then later protests. There was a significant change that began with historians in the late eighties that said, “We’ve got to extend this narrative somewhat.” What really began to take shape was that they said we really need to look at pre-World War II… we’ve got to look at A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement; we’ve got to look at the desegregation of the military and the armed forces under Truman. We have to look at Jackie Robinson’s integration of baseball. And that gained currency for some time. Right now we’re in the midst of another revision where people are saying we’ve got to extend the narrative even further. A lot of the ideas, the organizations, the foundations of the Movement developed in the nineteen teens, and so now the argument is maybe we should be looking at 1919, 1920 or the Harlem Renaissance. So historians are constantly debating about where the Movement begins. So the best way to talk about this is to talk about one of the critics who wants to extend this and that’s Sundiata Che Chau at the University of Illinois—if everything’s everything; nothing’s nothing, which means movements are organic; they have to have a beginning and end. If we push the narrative too far, we’ll end up talking about the Civil Rights Movement beginning in 1619 when the first Africans are put off the boat… so he says we need a more precise definition, and post-World War II still provides the best means of looking at the Movement…”

There are a lot of key turning points. In the post ’45 era, clearly Truman’s desegregation of the military would be key. The March on Washington Movement that’s spearheaded by A. Philip Randolph, any
number of really significant cases that are brought by the NAACP. The two that come to mind immediately are *Brown v the Board* and a case called *Morgan v. Virginia*, a transportation case for the 1940s… Montgomery is critical… the emergence of national leaders and national organizations like Martin Luther King and the Congress of Racial Equality, founded in 1947; people like Bayard Rustin on the national scene. One of the problems with trying to locate this within a particular period is that so many of these people transcend one time period. So if we’re looking at someone like Ella Baker, she’s involved in New York in the nineteen teens, and then she’ll be a critical part of the founding of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s. These people reappear; they’re doing so many things at the same time that it’s hard to say.

**How has the history of the Civil Rights Movement in New York and the North been different from that in the South?**

Ella Baker was one of the unsung heroines of the Movement. She’s someone who begins her work as a labor organizer, working with organizations like the NAACP here in New York. She was someone who understood that race struggle was really also class struggle. She looked at issues of employment, housing being connected to issues of race and equality. In the 1960s what’s interesting about her is she immediately recognized the potential of the student sit-ins that were taking place across the South, and she said, “If we harness that youthful energy, there’s a lot we can accomplish, particularly if we can get these kids to agree to two things. Number one: to coordinate their activities. If the kids in Raleigh, North Carolina are successful, it’s not just a victory for Raleigh if they are simultaneously striking in Florida and in Texas and in South Carolina; a victory in North Carolina is going to be a victory everywhere. Secondly, they really have to embrace non-violence.” She saw that as one of the cornerstones of the Movement. It’s interesting because… we don’t often talk about the contributions of women in the Civil Rights Movement. This is the really important foundational person, and without her the Movement history would be very different…

We have to be mindful of the geographical differences, the economic, social, and political cultural differences that make up the North versus the South. Martha Biondi wrote a great book on New York called *To Stand and Fight*, and one of the things she talks about regarding New York is that it’s a cosmopolitan, international city. There are so many people here, so much going on here, and in a lot of ways, Peniel Joseph deals with this too in his book *Waiting Till the Midnight Hour*. Because of… the presence of the U.N. here, there’s an intellectual currency, as the cultural center of the nation with jazz, art, and poetry. New York is somewhat special. There is kind of a New York exceptionalism, because this is where all the major Civil Rights organizations were headquartered. Garvey’s UNIA was here, the NAACP was here. At the same time, New York is simply a reflection of what’s going on, in a smaller degree, all across the nation; even in places like Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, New Haven, Connecticut, where you have this flowering of Black culture that’s linked itself to this new political consciousness among African-Americans. But… this is one of the critical differences between the North and the South): in the South, you’re dealing with *de jure* (by law) segregation, so it’s very clear what the issues are and how they’re defined. In the North, it’s *de facto* segregation, segregation by practice and by custom. There’s tremendous economic opportunity in terms of jobs, tremendous opportunity in terms of education, and education generally speaking not being segregated, but there were these more insidious forms of segregation that presented themselves -- police brutality, housing, African-Americans being barred from unions. So the Movements were very different just in the manifestation of how segregation played out. But really,
segregation, when we’re looking at North and South, is the demon with a thousand faces. At the end of the day, it’s still inequality, just by another name.

**How do these versions of the Civil Rights Movement differ from depictions in elementary and secondary school textbooks?**

Unfortunately, it takes a long time for the new scholarship to permeate the narrative that exists in the textbooks, and so our textbook is still a ’54-’68 paradigm. The Civil Rights Movement begins with *Brown* and ends when Dr. King is assassinated in Memphis, where he is protesting on behalf of sanitation workers. The other problem with it is that it never really talks about Dr. King as a labor organizer. One of the critical pieces for historians is that, by 1968, Dr. King had come out against the war in Vietnam, which is critical, but he’s also talking in terms of a rainbow coalition to address poverty in the nation… This is part and parcel of an extension beyond this limited concept of civil rights, which Dr. King in his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, says, to some extent was a failure… ; we want rights on paper, we got a Civil Rights Act and a Voting Rights Act, and those were in place to enforce those provisions, but at the same time, they didn’t really guarantee equality because there was no economic equality. People didn’t have the means to pursue those things, like housing, like education, which takes money, and as long as employment was missing from that discussion, as long as any kind of active intervention from the government was missing from that discussion, those civil rights are unavailable. That’s not just for African-Americans, that’s across the board. So one of the problems that we have in primary education today, secondary education today is that historians are concerned that that new narrative isn’t permeating the ’54-’68 paradigm that’s presented in textbooks.

**In your book Teaching U.S. History Beyond the Textbook, you offer strategies such as ESP and SCOTUS. Could you give us a summary?**

SCOTUS… I stole from the Supreme Court of the United States. Court cases are about great dramas. And if you really want kids to get it, to make an argument… how do you get them to do that? Well, apply that in a court scene. Make it appear that there are stakes involved. It’s not just that you’re writing a satisfying letter to Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So. It’s that you’re trying to win an appeal for Sacco-Vanzetti. It’s that you’re trying to make the case that blacks shouldn’t be segregated. So that was my idea behind it.

And so what I did was I came up with this fictional character, SCOTUS. And he would sit in my classroom, or on the wall. And whenever we had one of these great Constitutional issues that would come up, I would say to the students… “Well, we have to ask SCOTUS.” And literally that meant, we’ve got to go find the court case, or we’ve got to go ask him what this means. Sometimes that would result in mock trials, which would be very mini and very manageable. Sometimes it was a little bit more extensive with my high school students, where literally I’d say, “You’ve got to find me the court cases associated with this.” And that helped them become better researchers. Number one, it acquainted them with areas of the library that traditionally they were not going to be acquainted with, and number two, it actually gave them some experience in looking at and being able to say, “This is a huge amount of information I’m looking at, but I have confidence that I know what I’m looking for and even if I don’t get exactly what he wants, part of the process is asking the question.” So SCOTUS wasn’t me. So it was kind of like going beyond the teacher and looking for answers beyond the classroom, which was the impetus behind that.

ESP is a little different. One of the problems that I had with my students was I would give what I thought were marvelous lectures. And I’d give them this great reading and they’d come back and they’d have no
idea, you know, what it was that I was trying to communicate to them. And I felt like a failure as a teacher, considered going into government service or something else, because I just wasn’t getting back from them what I thought were the cornerstone ideas that really defined the period. And what I realized is that, as teachers, we never really show students the sausage being made. We never really communicate to them how it is that we’re going about crafting narratives. And three of the things that we almost always look for are social, economic, and political implications. And so I said, “Wow, I’m going to play with that.” And I came up with ESP, kind of a sixth sense about what it is that’s always going to be important. So if you’re studying the Civil War, your sixth sense about it is there have to be economic causes, there have to be social causes, there have to be political causes. And that’s how ESP developed.

I loved it for two reasons. Number one: no matter what I was teaching, no matter what the students were reading, it was always a way for them to organize their notes. So everything was in ESP—the New Deal. World War I, the American Revolution—always in ESP. Secondly, as a writing tool, it was great. I’d give these assessments, and I’d say, “Discuss the economic, social, and political contributions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” And my students would know: and write a perfect, 5-paragraph essay. Here’s my thesis statement, I’m going to discuss these three things, and this is my conclusion. It worked so well that by the middle of the year, the first year I was doing it, my students literally sounded like graduate students. It was great. And I think what ended up happening is that I got so used to doing it with them, and then I got feedback from other people who were using it, and it just became pretty overwhelming to me. Critics have always said, well what about culture, what about religion? For me, it’s basic. Kids can remember it, they understand it, and my interest is always middle school students; you build on that later on. The more complicated any mnemonic is, the more difficult it is for kids to apply. They’re often looking to apply religion in circumstances where religion may not have been a factor. So I like to subsume some of those under “social”, and just get kids involved in a basic framework. And eventually, they move on, they outgrow it. By the end of the year, or into the second year, I had students coming back, going, “Well, this doesn’t really fit.” And those are the kind of conversations I really want to have.

Thinking more about your own writing, some of your work has explored what’s often perceived as the more radical side of the Civil Rights Movement, especially the Black Panthers. What are some common misperceptions?

Oh, wow. First of all, I think the reason I was working on the Black Panthers (and now I’m working on a book on lynching) is, like my students, it’s those things that capture attention, those things that are, for me, most dramatic and interesting. And so, that’s part of it. For the Panthers, first is the notion that they’re a reverse Ku Klux Klan… Nothing could be further from the truth. When they were founded in 1966 by college students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, they’re unique in the sense that they’re addressing manifestations of segregation and racism that were unique to the North and to the West. And so, police brutality, for example, was very different in Oakland, California, than it played out in Mississippi. Having said that, they were never an organization that denied the participation of whites. In fact, they welcomed white participation, Latino participation; they created social programs like their Breakfast for Children program that were never discriminatory with regard to race. But they’re tagged with that label because they, at least initially, called themselves the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, and they espoused what many people assumed was a Black Nationalist agenda. One of the things that bothers me most is that people think of them as being this kind of anti-white organization.
I guess the second one is that the Panthers didn’t have any real impact other than promoting this kind of violent revolutionary image, and that their real value to the Civil Rights Movement was simply in providing a violent alternative to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King. So basically, these were the people that scared America into doing the right thing. They have had a very lasting impact… People look at the organizing tradition of groups like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panthers and they need to understand that aside from their rhetoric, at the ground level, at the grass roots level and in communities all over the country, the Panthers were responsible for doing some pretty amazing things. In Winston Salem, North Carolina, where you didn’t have ambulatory service in the black community, the Panthers set up a free ambulance service. In New Haven, Connecticut, they had a Breakfast for Children program, they had that all over the country, but one of the things that I love about New Haven is that they also had a Freedom School. Their idea there was, if kids were failing, then the best way to address that was to extend the school day—not to ask to teachers of the school district to do it, but for the people in the community to do it, which is amazing. So part of their program was Breakfast for Children in the morning with a little education mixed in, and then after school care. I mean, these are issues that today we’re still dealing with and grappling with, and yet, as a community organization, they were concerned with them and promoting solutions that fit into that at the time, which was again, quite significant. Free grocery giveaways—their argument was that if a business existed in a community, it should have a responsibility to the community, and so one of the things that they asked was that local businesses provide, if not free services, reduced costs services to the people that lived in the community. The problem they ran into is the way that they asked sometimes came across as strong arm tactics, and many times it was strong arm tactics. But, you know, these are the growing pains of any organization. But ultimately, if we look at their contributions in American history and what they were able to accomplish at the grassroots level, a lot of those things are still with us today. Operation Headstart had started before the Panthers, but really took off as a result of the Panthers trying to provide a similar service, so we owe them a lot in terms of those types of things.

**Returning to our timeline and turning points, how do the Black Panthers fit into that timeline?**

**Does the Civil Rights Movement yet have an end point?**

It interesting, those are two really tough questions, Catherine. The Panthers fit into the Civil Rights timeline in a couple of different ways. Traditionally, the Panthers generally emerged in the timeline in 1966, and they were seen as the children of Malcolm X. And this was the old ’54-’68, good early 60’s and bad late 60’s paradigm that everyone used to teach, where the Black Power movement emerges in 1965 with Malcolm X. When he’s assassinated, along come the Panthers, and they destroyed all the good things that were going on in the nation with regards to Civil Rights.

Historians now say “Not quite.” The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements weren’t mutually exclusive; they were actually parallel movements. They grew up at the same time, and the Black Power Movement really existed for many years as a movement with no name. People kind of know what it is, because we have to consider someone like Malcolm X. Malcolm X was a Muslim, and the Muslims were making headway in Northern communities and in Northern cities in the late 50’s and early 60’s. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement was building momentum and building steam. You’ve got the Van Duyn Conference, against racism, where you’ve got all these heads of state, including Adam Clayton Powell from New York, who were going to talk about Black and Brown peoples and their struggles against colonialism and racism. So the argument now is that these movements are really parallel movements, that
they grew up alongside one another. The Panthers then fit in as part and parcel of the Black Power Movement, as an organization that inherits this call for armed self defense that we saw with people like Marcus Garvey and earlier, Henry McNeal Turner. But they’re also seen as an organization that buys into the concept of revolutionary Black Nationalism—that the only way to overcome oppression in the United States was through violent, revolutionary armed struggle. They gave that idea up in 1968, and they came up with this whole “serve the people” initiative, and they became much more of a reformist organization that looked to make their impact through community service as opposed to violent armed revolution. Yet they’re most remembered for that violent armed revolution, so that’s kind of how they fit in both ways. But they’re problematic because they don’t fit neatly. Some people call them a Black Nationalist organization. Some historians chaff at the idea that they would ever be considered Nationalists because in 1968 they ran their Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, for President with the predominately white Peace and Freedom Party. The Panthers had alliances with all these different groups: the Young Lords, the Gray Panthers (headed by a woman named Maggie Kuhn)… so the Panthers have that kind of currency.

Your second question was…. “the end point of the timeline, is there one?” There are two schools of thought right now: the ’68 argument, which is still where textbooks end… has pretty much been discredited, but then the question becomes, really where does it end? Is it ’76? Is it Jesse Jackson’s first run for the presidency? Is it the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American President of the United States? Generally speaking, the argument is that the Civil Rights Movement in some sense hasn’t ended, because many of the cornerstone issues that we sought to address, beyond access… haven’t been answered. We look at the Voting Rights Act—it didn’t stop the widespread corruption and disenfranchisement that we saw as a result of the election of 2000 with those pregnant chads in Florida and all that foolishness. It hasn’t stopped political inequality as practiced at the local level, even at the national level. And so there are many areas, certainly in terms of economic inequality, where we haven’t made tremendous strides. Unemployment, particularly for African Americans is the highest it’s been in decades. And so in a lot of ways, the argument that legislation has achieved parity, is flawed. The Movement continues, but it continues in ways that are less visible; the visible signs of segregation are gone. It’s easy to attack the colored waiting room sign. It’s a lot harder to get at the structural inequality that produced and sustained segregation for so many years and continues to this day, with or without an African-American President.

**What changes would you like to see in the way Americans learn about African-American history and the Civil Rights Movement in the future?**

First and foremost, I’d like to see a more inclusive history, period. I would love if we were able to begin talking about Civil Rights with John and Abigail Adams in the American Revolution. If we were looking at the contributions of people like Phyllis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker, not simply as representatives of what Blacks were doing, but as this critique of American independence that says “Hey, you’re leaving people out, and we’ve got to address this issue…” Number two, I just wish that the history itself wasn’t so compartmentalized, which is difficult because we understand restraints that teachers are under, particularly in the social studies. I can’t tell you the number of teachers that I’ve talked with over the years who aren’t teaching social studies full time but are splitting their time between social studies and some other subject, who see time for social studies cut because of mandated testing in other areas. One of the things that TAH was best in addressing is the fact that history and social studies are essential to democratic society,
particularly to developing students who are informed citizens. To the extent that this is not a cornerstone of our educational system, we are always going to be at a disadvantage because our kids are growing up in an environment where history can always be shunted aside for other things, but it’s so foundational to everything that we do.

What’s next for you?

I am working on a major book on lynching called *Six Degrees of Segregation*, which is on lynching and capital punishment in America from 1865 to 1965. Then I’m working on a book on these Black Power Movements with Peniel Joseph. It’s called *Debating Black Power*. We’re basically both taking two different and distinct looks at the Black Power Movement, its successes and failures, its flaws and its ultimate contributions to American society. And then I’m working with the Jackie Robinson Museum and just really trying to make this a reality, trying to ensure that it’s a place where teachers, young people, and just people of all ages can come and learn, not just about the contributions of Jackie and Rachel Robinson, but a little bit about Civil Rights in the 20th century and a little bit about themselves.
FEATURED LESSON FROM CRITICAL THEMES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Teaching Turning Points: the Role of Local Activists in Civil Rights History

A successful format for our institute sessions has combined scholar talks, hands-on workshops, and discussion of classroom application in a full day of learning. During one such session in February of 2011, Leah Nahmias of the Gotham Center and Catherine Fletcher of City Lore presented a workshop on exploring the role of local activists in Civil Rights history through document analysis and the creation of a timeline of key events. Prior to the workshop, historian Dr. Yohuru Williams gave a lecture on different approaches to understanding the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. The workshop built on issues raised in Williams’ lecture. Over fifty NYC public school teachers from grades 4, 5, 7 and 8 took part. We’re pleased to share this teaching strategy with you.

Objective: To create a Civil Rights timeline of events from 1941 to 1971 highlighted in primary source documents from different regions of the United States and to select the movement’s turning points from among these events.

Materials:
- regional packet of primary source documents (researched prior to the workshop)
- document analysis worksheet
- time line cards
- time line
- markers, tape, stickers

Overview: We will explore the role and contributions of local activists in 6 areas of the country by analyzing photographs, maps, letters, and the like, and then place our findings in context on a time line from 1941 to 1971.

- Activity 1: Analyzing Documents
  With a partner, you will analyze 2 documents from the regional packet provided. Many of the documents used can be found at the American Social History Project's HERB database under the topic “Civil Rights and Citizenship”: http://herb.ashp.cuny.edu.

- Activity 2: Comparing Findings
  With the group on your table, you will compare your findings from the different documents you looked at and create cards from your region for the time line.

- Activity 3: Identifying Turning Points
  After a gallery walk of the completed time line, the whole room will have a discussion about their observations and then identify the turning points among the events on the time line.
• Activity 1: Analyzing Documents

With a partner, you will analyze 2 documents from the regional packet provided. Regions included in the workshop are Alabama (model), Mississippi, New York, California, Detroit, Seattle, and Chicago & the Midwest.

1) Begin by looking at one of your documents:
   --What’s going on in your document?
   --What do you see that makes you say that?

2) On the reverse side is a citation.
   --What more can you infer based on this additional information?


• Activity 2: Comparing Findings

With the group on your table, you will compare your findings from the different documents you looked at and create cards from your region for the time line.

1) Compare documents with other members of your group. Consider:
   --Based on your analysis of ALL the documents, what was the major issue (or issues) that activists addressed in your city/region?
   --What people or groups of people were important in the Civil Rights struggle in your city/region?
   --What strategy (or strategies) did local activists pursue to address the problem(s) you listed earlier? Were they successful?
   --How did studying your documents add to or change what you already knew about the Civil Rights struggle?

2) Out of all the documents in your packet, pick the 4 that you think are the most significant and complete the color coded time line cards provided. Consider:
   --WHERE did the event(s) represented in your document take place?
   --WHEN did they occur?
   --WHO were the key players?
   --Give a summary of WHAT HAPPENED.
   --Share any MEMORABLE QUOTATION(S).

3) Tape the cards (see sample below) to the large time line.
Activity 3: Identifying Turning Points

After a gallery walk of the completed time line, the whole room will have a discussion about their observations and then identify the turning points among the events on the time line.

1) After all the groups have finished taping their cards to the time line, take a gallery walk.
   --What did you already know?
   --Are there any surprises?
   --Do you have any unanswered questions?

2) The whole room will share and discuss their findings.

3) After a discussion of the group’s findings, we will pick the turning points and key moments from the events depicted on the cards, reflecting on—
   --Out of all of your findings, what do you consider to be the most significant information? Why?
   --Could any of these actions or events be considered turning points on a national level? Why?

The Gotham Center’s Julie Maurer confers with teachers. Teachers place event cards on the timeline.
TIMELINE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA (1954-1971)

1954: In Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, the Supreme Court rules unanimously against school segregation, overturning its 1896 decision in Plessy v. Ferguson.

1955: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white person, triggering a successful, year-long African American boycott of the bus system.

1956: The U.S. Supreme Court rules that the segregation of Montgomery, Ala., buses is unconstitutional.

1957: The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., helps found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to work for full equality for African Americans.

1957: For the first time since Reconstruction, the federal government uses the military to uphold African Americans' civil rights, as soldiers escort nine African American students to desegregate a school in Little Rock, Arkansas.

1960: Four African American college students hold a sit-in to integrate a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., launching a wave of similar protests across the South.

1961: The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) begins to organize Freedom Rides throughout the South to try to de-segregate interstate public bus travel.

1962: African American radical Malcolm X becomes national minister of the Nation of Islam. He rejects the nonviolent civil-rights movement and integration, and becomes a champion of African American separatism and black pride. At one point he states that equal rights should be secured "by any means necessary," a position he later revises.

1963: More than 200,000 people march on Washington, D.C., in the largest civil rights demonstration ever; Martin Luther King, Jr., gives his "I Have a Dream" speech.

1963: Four African American girls are killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

1963: Martin Luther King, Jr., writes his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," his famous statement about the civil rights movement.

1964: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), CORE and the NAACP and other civil-rights groups organize a massive African American voter registration drive in Mississippi known as "Freedom Summer." Three CORE civil rights workers are murdered. In the five years following Freedom Summer, black voter registration in Mississippi will rise from a mere 7 percent to 67 percent.

1964: President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, which gives the federal government far-reaching powers to prosecute discrimination in employment, voting, and education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Martin Luther King, Jr. is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>One year after splitting from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X is assassinated in New York by gunmen affiliated with the NOI.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>King organizes a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, for African American voting rights. A shocked nation watches on television as police club and teargas protesters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>In the wake of the Selma-Montgomery March, the Voting Rights Act is passed, outlawing the practices used in the South to disenfranchise African American voters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Race riots break out in the Watts area of Los Angeles, leaving 34 dead and roughly a thousand hurt. The immediate trigger is the arrest of a young African American man charged with reckless driving; the underlying cause is probably mass unemployment and poor living conditions among L.A,'s African Americans, combined with widespread racism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, calls for &quot;black power&quot; in a speech, ushering in a more militant civil rights stance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale found the Black Panther Party, a radical black power group, in Oakland, California. Although it develops a reputation for militant rhetoric and clashes with the police, the group also becomes a national organization that supports food, education, and healthcare programs in poor African American communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Thurgood Marshall becomes the first African American justice on the Supreme Court.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Edward W. Brooke becomes the first African American U.S. Senator since Reconstruction. He serves two terms as a Republican from Massachusetts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. His murder sparks a week of rioting across the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Shirley Chisholm becomes the first African American woman to be elected to Congress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Fifteen African American members of Congress form the Congressional Black Caucus to present a unified African American voice in Congress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from PBS’ *African American World*:
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/timeline/civil_01.html
CRITICAL THEMES IN AMERICAN HISTORY PARTNERS

The Critical Themes in American History e-newsletter and the Gotham Fellows Program are part of Critical Themes in American History, a Teaching American History grant awarded to New York City Community School District 28 from the U.S. Department of Education.

City Lore (www.citylore.org) is a cultural organization located on Manhattan’s Lower East Side whose mission is to document, preserve, and present the living cultural heritage of New York City. Education is central to our mission and informs all of our programs, both school and community-based. Contact: Amanda Dargan, Education Director, 212-529-1955, x304, adargan@citylore.org.

Gotham Center for New York City History (www.gothamcenter.org) sponsors programs to make the city’s rich history more accessible to a broad public, and Gotham’s educational programs take that mission to the city’s public schools. The Center’s educational website GothamED (www.gothamed.org) pools the talent and energy of teachers and scholars, as well as educators from the city’s cultural institutions, to promote and support quality history instruction. Contact: Julie Maurer, Education Director, 212-817-8467, gothamed@gc.cuny.edu.

Houck Educational Consultants, LLC, provides comprehensive evaluation services in collaboration with many different school districts in the New York Department of Education, as well as a range of community based organizations, universities, and other non-profit and for-profit agencies. Evaluation services have been provided for a wide range of programs, including evaluating elementary, middle, and high school students and their families, program and partner staff, and professional development programs for K-12 teachers in social studies and the sciences. Contact: Claire Houck, Lead Evaluator, 917-374-8297, cphouck@gmail.com.

St. John’s University/The School of Education (www.stjohns.edu/academics/undergraduate/education) Established in 1908, the St. John’s University School of Education was the second school in New York State to award graduate degrees to teachers. Today, the School has three departments: Department of Curriculum and Instruction; the Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership; and the Department of Human Services and Counseling. In 2002, U.S. News and World Report featured the School in its list of "America’s Best Graduate Schools." Contact John N. Spiridakis SPIRIDAJ@stjohns.edu or Patricia Haas, Professional Development Center, 718 990-5395, Haasp@stjohns.edu.

Community School District 28’s Teaching American History project staff includes Critical Themes in American History’s Project Director Denise Sontag. For more information, contact dsontag@schools.nyc.gov.

FALL 2011 COURSES

More courses on Critical Themes in American History will be offered this school year for 50 social studies teachers, grades 4-8, beginning in November. For more information or to put your name on our mailing list, please email gothamed@gc.cuny.edu or dsontag@schools.nyc.gov.