

## *Public Involvement: Freedman's Cemetery - Then and Now*

In the late 1990s, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) faced several challenges in moving a large portion of Freedman's Cemetery out of the path of North Central Expressway in Dallas, Texas. One of these challenges was responding to the African American descendant population who wanted greater involvement in the direction of the project. Key TxDOT personnel (Ms. Dianna Noble, Ms. Ann Irwin, and Dr. Nancy Kenmotsu) and a Geo-Marine, Inc. team were determined to address this challenge in a manner that provided the African American community with a strong voice. Geo-Marine proposed public involvement in the form of an Attic Fair, a Steering Committee that reflected the perspective of the African American community, and a major exhibit at the African American Museum. The result was a success, as noted by the local community and awards from Preservation Texas, the Council of Texas Archeologists, and the American Cultural Resources Association, for we conveyed the story of the African American community represented by the 1,150 burials that were moved.

The Freedman's Cemetery project adopted a multidisciplinary approach, using an ethnically diverse scientific team, to conduct a holistic, in-depth study of nineteenth century African American urban life. The research team consisted of the following:

- Steering Committee
- Historians
- Archaeologists
- Ethnographers
- Osteologists

Results of the study were presented in a comprehensive technical report, educational materials, and a museum exhibit.

The Steering Committee provided essential guidance concerning the production of a history that reflected the perspective of the African American community, not just that of the larger society. Dr. Robert Prince, local historian and member of the descendant community, Dr. Maria Franklin, Professor of Anthropology and History at the University of Texas at Austin, Dr. Louis Williams, Professor of History at Prairie View A&M, and Ms. Sonya Ramsey, Ph.D. candidate in United States History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, provided their expertise and cultural perspective. The Steering Committee was responsible for determining the direction of the project and the means of encouraging public involvement. Public involvement was achieved through the following:

- African American Museum-sponsored Attic Fair
- A project logo contest
- *A City within a City*, an educational curriculum for the third grade
- Brochures
- Poster
- Museum exhibit

The Attic Fair was designed to solicit artifacts, memorabilia, and oral histories from the descendant community. The means of reaching out to the community included radio spots on local stations, newspaper ads, and good old-fashioned social networking (we told people about the event). The African American Museum at Fair Park made certain that churches within the local African American community were aware of the event which was hosted at the museum on a Saturday afternoon.

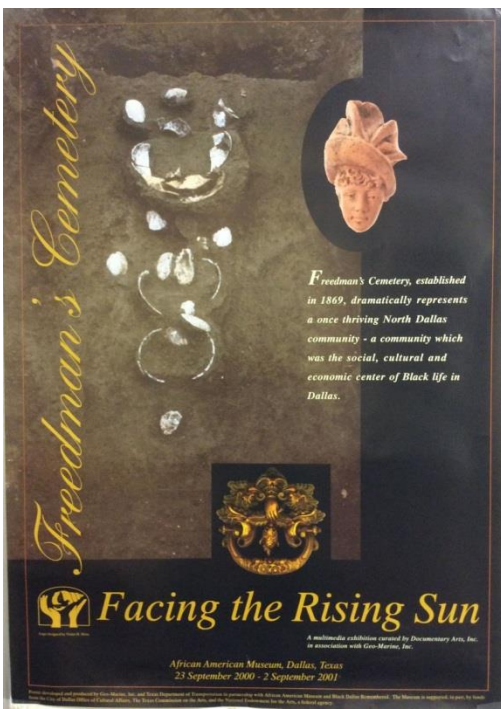


The steering committee also sponsored a contest for the design of a logo for the project. This contest was advertised throughout the local school systems, and response was very good. The African American Museum exhibited the artwork and local newspapers announced the event and the eventual winner.



The development of an educational curriculum, *A City within a City*, for third-grade students was designed to provide students with specific information about the contribution of African

Americans to the development of Dallas, while simultaneously encouraging an appreciation for people of all cultures and demonstrating to students the research methods for collecting cultural and historical data. The African American Museum uses the curriculum within its educational outreach program.



A brochure and a poster were also developed to raise public awareness of the project and the public exhibit. Their distribution, however, was limited primarily to visitors of the African American Museum.

Of course, the primary means of public involvement was the development of an exhibit that would convey the story of Freedman's Town to the public.

The primary designers of the exhibit were Dr. Alan Govenar and Phillip Collins, an art curator at the museum. Consequently, the exhibit reflected the perspective of an art curator rather than that of an

anthropologist; however, the interactive kiosks stationed throughout the exhibit conveyed the story of Freedman's Town and the task of moving the cemetery.



community. The interactive kiosks fortunately provided the story and the narrative necessary to educate the public at large about "a city within a city" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Personally, I was slightly disappointed at the time, for I wanted to convey more information to the public and have a less curio-cabinet approach. According to Leslie Bedford (2014:51), I was in the classic mode of "exhibitions are about education." In hindsight, however, Dr. Govenar and Phillip Collins were spot on, for they created scenes or venues that evoked vivid memories (both pleasant and not so pleasant) for the descendant



The end result of these efforts was a happy descendant community that was very pleased with how the team had conveyed the story of Freedman's Town and the burial site of many of its residents. Public involvement in the developmental process, however, was limited primarily to the educated and elite of the African American community due to the means of outreach and the time required for involvement. Today, the use of social media and a dedicated website would broaden the audience who could participate and would expand the information provided by the local community. Poster and brochure concepts could be widely disseminated to a much larger audience today. One would likely provide a weekly blog today that would provide information regarding new findings and announce events as they are developing. With this ability to use social media, however, there is an increased responsibility regarding the dissemination of information. The use of inappropriate wording or the lack of sensitivity to the targeted population could quickly create a charged environment that could not be easily resolved.

Our use of technology at the time was limited to the interactive kiosks and sound cones at selected stations within the exhibit. Whether our kiosks were truly state-of-the-art at the time may be questioned, but they were effective. Exhibit technology today would aid in the immersion of the museum visitor in the story. The static display of a fresh grave site within the cemetery can be replaced today by a three dimensional image with associated video and sound to recreate the experience of being present at the burial ceremony. As Leslie Bedford (2014: 120-121) notes, "Technology creates the feeling of being there."



Technology, however is not the key to success for public involvement. Technology enhances our ability to facilitate public involvement; it is merely a tool, albeit an effective one. The key to success in 2000 and yet today lies within the people managing the project and public involvement. Prior to 2000, the scientists working on the Freedman's Cemetery project felt that they owned the data and were largely ignoring the local community which had a vested interest in the results. True public involvement requires scientists who are able to leave their egos at the door, are open to the perspectives of the local community, and can work collaboratively with the local community.

#### References:

Bedford, Leslie

2014 *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California.