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The Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture

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Archival Capstone Paper

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Introduction

Mississippi has a rich African American history, and nowhere is the story more centralized than the oldest city on the Mississippi River, Natchez. Natchez is the home of The Forks of the Road (the second-largest slave market), the William Johnson House (African American barber of Natchez), Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Sori, an African prince sold into slavery, the disastrous Rhythm Night Club Fire, and famed author and native son Richard Wright. The Natchez Association for the Preservation of African American History and Culture (NAPAC) is a repository of local history that spotlights the life of black citizens from the turn of the century to the modern-day. It gives voice to a people whose lives and talents tell a story that would not be found in larger, richer museums, such as the Two Museums of Mississippi or the National Museum of African American History and Culture. NAPAC is somewhat of a cultural icon, a place where everyone wants to go when they hop-off the boat or the bus. It allows its guests to walk through history and take away just a whole lot of antiquity amidst the cultural backdrop of everything going on around it, life.

The NAPAC Museum is located in the heart of downtown Natchez, Mississippi, on Main Street, right between the business district and the halls of justice. NAPAC also stands within walking distance of many other historic homes in town. Have you ever heard of the Natchez Association for the Preservation of African American Culture or NAPAC for short? The difference between the NAPAC museum and other

African-American museums is that one woman had a vision for herself and her community to bring forth something that would stand the test of time and become a beacon of light for others to see. One woman plus four other women sharing the same vision of preservation of the unique experiences shared by African Americans also shared a common goal to research, collect, exhibit, interpret, and preserve African Americans' cultural and historical contributions in the growth of Natchez and the nation. What courage! What fortitude these ladies had!

No building and no money, and yet a dream became a reality. The year was 1990, and with a few pieces from this now historical event, the Rhythm Night Club Fire that killed more than 200 people in its wake, a flame was ignited, a story would be told. Where? It was in a temporary building loaned by the City of Natchez. What was the first of many attractions? The iconic memorabilia included a list of names of those who lost their lives, photographs, and a piece of Spanish moss hanging from the shadow box. When one steps inside the NAPAC Museum, it is a chilling sight to behold, so many people dying in one night, but there is a story behind this event, and the Museum exists to tell such stories. Family members still alive want to pass on their stories, so generations to come will know of this tragic event. The individual begins to take in much of the African American community's local history as he/she takes a glimpse back in time at the NAPAC Museum.

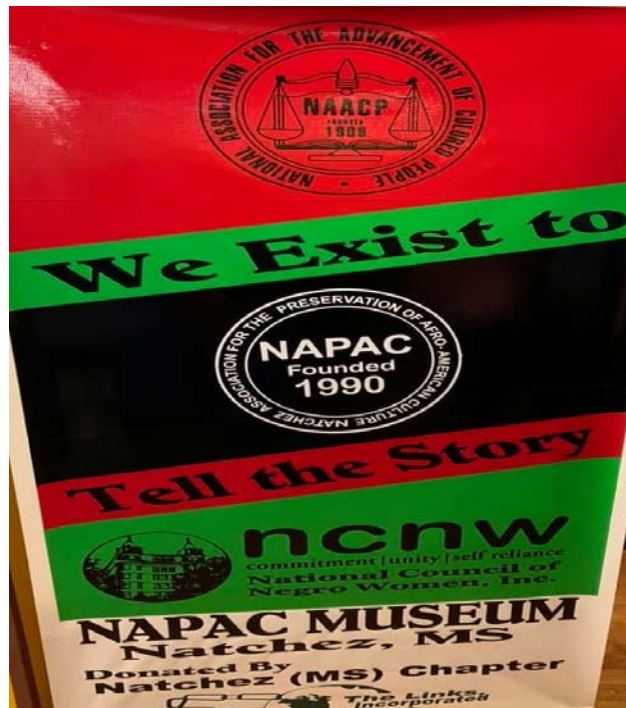


Figure 1. NAPAC Poster (image by Danielle Terrell)

Purpose of the Study

What makes the NAPAC Museum so unique is that it collects history that is only native to Natchez, Mississippi. The rich heritage of the African American culture is interpreted through artifacts and other relics that allow one to focus on what was then and what is now. The purpose of this study is to document the collections, organization, events, and degree of digitization of the museum.

Research Questions

- R1. How are the collections in the NAPAC Museum organized?
- R2. What archival materials related to local history are available in the NACAP collections?
- R3. What cultural events are held at the Museum?
- R4. How much of the collection is digitized and available online?

Limitations and Assumptions of the Study

This study is limited to documentation related to the special collection. No website was available at the time of the study; however, a social media link to a Facebook page does exist. Also, there have been articles in the local newspaper about this museum

and its collections. It is assumed that the information in the documentation used in the study is accurate.

Importance of the Study

This study's importance is that it documents the history and the cultural and educational resources that the African American NAPAC Museum provides to the community and state.

Historical Background

Merriam-Webster defines a museum as an establishment devoted to obtaining, preserving, research, and displaying artifacts of educational and historical value (www.merriam-webster.com). According to Fleming (1994), most African American museums grew out of the necessity of preserving a people and their culture and history. In the planning and implementation of these museums, it was the goal to collect, research, and preserve important documents about slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. Although the idea was a worthy one, many artifacts were hard to come by, so many museums asked people to donate items to help get them started (Fleming, 1994).

An article in the *Natchez Democrat* by McCann (2002) dedicated a section on black history in Natchez, which highlighted that black culture was starting to bloom in all corners of the city; for example, The Forks of the Road, The Angelety House, The Mostly African Market, and the dedication of historic black history neighborhoods. It is relevant to highlight that one of the more prominent stops was the NAPAC Museum. Within the article, NAPAC's founder, Mary Lee Toles, talks about how she came up with the idea to start the museum. She stated that while watching the movie *Roots*, she imagined her grandparents' old relics in some type of museum setting. As she and the founders began to wonder how to create the museum and keep it going, there were some roadblocks. The City of Natchez had funded other art galleries and museum spaces, and Mrs. Toles wanted the same for NAPAC. However, in the beginning, many community partners helped get the museum off the ground and running. Dr. Thomas and Joan Gandy brought forth the photographic exhibit known as Black Natchez, the Norman Collection. Other community partners helped to endorse black history awareness with the sponsorship of the Convention Promotion Board. Mrs. Toles also expresses her desire to bring in exhibits through grants and other funding and promote local history makers. She wanted to create a School Room display that dealt with the one-room schoolhouse and those who taught in them and highlight the rise of public education from segregation to integration.

The book *A Prince Among Slaves* by Alford (2007) is not only about Natchez history but a family history. Local history states that Prince Abd al Rahman Ibrahima was a real African prince who fought for his freedom, although he died before making it back to his homeland. He has become a local legend and icon. He has many descendants here in Natchez that keep his legacy alive.

In 2014, former Cultural Heritage and Tourism Director Cheryl Hargrove stated that Natchez was rich with African American history and could rival big city tourist attractions if it wanted to. She suggested that although one could find musicians, Civil Rights history, and unique blends of storytelling at a variety of venues, in Natchez, the NAPAC Museum was the

central setting for all things black history. However, Darrell White, NAPAC Director, stated that the museum was an integral part of the community and tourism. He explained that visitors to the city wanted more details on the historical background than those told in different fashions by other organizations. Because Natchez is so strong in African American history, the very idea that tourism traffic had decreased in recent months was somewhat concerning. With new tourist attractions and tour groups becoming more popular, NAPAC had to fight for visitors; however, with the Delta Queen Riverboat's return and the walking tours, NAPAC was able to stay afloat. According to Hargrove, it is the interesting and unique stories that fascinate travelers, and it is what makes Natchez an immensely popular tourist destination (Guajardo, 2014).

Although many archivists and historians realized the value of oral history as a way of telling the stories of a people and culture, for some, the telling of the story is still relegated to family history, genealogists, and community members. When researching oral histories and griots, the majority of the collections are located on college campuses in the archives department (Wagner, 2016).

In 2016, Darrell S. White, Director of the NAPAC Museum, stated in his article, "Natchez Needs the NAPAC Museum," "that even after 84 years of tourism, the African American story still needs to be a part of the narrative. The African American community has been strong in Natchez since 1716, when the French settled the area with the creation of Fort Rosalie. By 1830 all the colored freemen in Mississippi lived in Natchez. NAPAC, with the help of the National Park Service, has been bringing to life some local legends such as Wilson Brown, Louis Winston, Hiram Revels, John R. Lynch, and William Johnson, the famed Barber of Natchez (White, 2016).

Methodology

This study used historical methodology to examine primary-source documents and images related to the history and collections of the NAPAC Museum.

Results

The NAPAC Museum's mission is to research, collect, and preserve the cultural heritage of the African American contributions in Natchez. For over thirty years, the NAPAC Museum has been leaving its footprint on the Natchez community. It has been a long hard road with struggles and triumphs, but victory has prevailed over downfalls and the naysayers. It is still standing tall as the pride and joy of Natchez. NAPAC gives back to the community by sponsoring the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have A Dream" Youth Luncheon, a program for school-age children representing churches, organizations, and other entities. This event takes place every Martin Luther King Day.

R1. How are the s in the NAPAC Museum organized?

Each collection is arranged as an exhibit. The exhibits are set up in categories, such as slavery, the first and second world wars, the Portraits of Black Natchez/Norman Collection, Black Education in Natchez, Natchez Civil Rights Events, The Church, Pinta de Castas Paintings, The Rhythm Night Club Fire, The Ageless Home, and Richard Wright Collection to name a few. Famed author Richard Wright lived in Natchez during his formative years before moving on to Jackson, then Chicago. A new

section is being added that highlights the accomplishments of Blacks right now.

Specifically, the Portraits of Black Natchez Norman Collection (1880-1920), one of the main attractions at the NAPAC Museum, showcases daily life and the rise of the African American community after the turn of the century (Figure 2). These images were donated to the museum by Dr. Thomas and Joan Gandy. Dr. Gandy wanted to contribute to the museum's historical heritage outlook. This collection's archival benefit is that Dr. Gandy had access to the Norman Collection and restored the images himself. According to Friends of the Riverfront, The Gandy Collection: Norman's Collection, Henry C. Norman arrived in Natchez around 1870 and began documenting daily life in the city. Norman operated his studio until 1913, when his son took over the business for the next forty years. It was sometimes during the 1960s that Dr. Thomas Gandy, a local physician, acquired the film negatives and spent the next three decades, restoring them and creating the Dr. Thomas and Joan Gandy Collection. The collections traveled the world. The Gandys wrote several books about the negatives and Henry C. Norman (<https://for-natchez.org/gandy.html>).

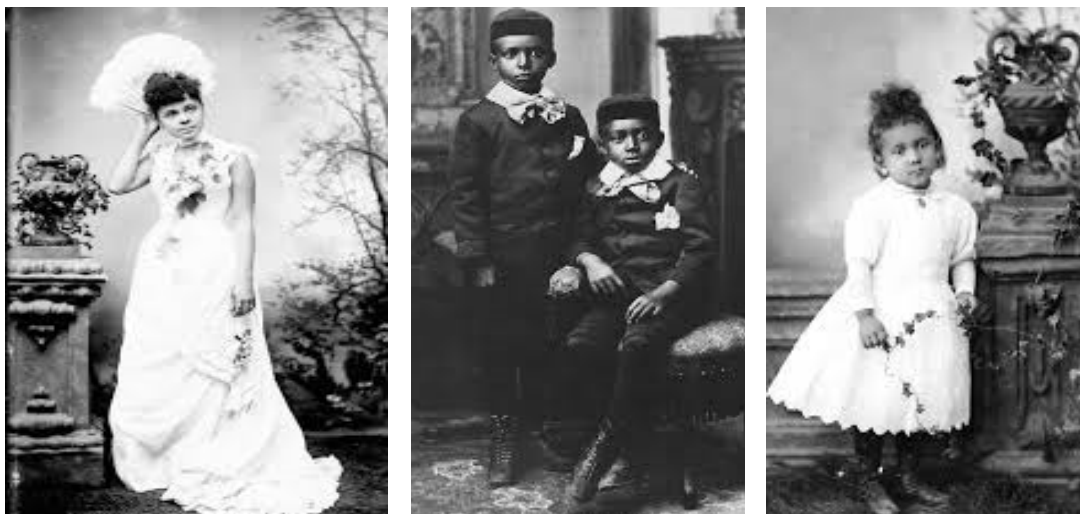


Figure 2. Portraits of Black Natchez (Norman Collection from 1880-1920)

R2. What archival materials related to local history are available in the NACAP collections?

Many collections represent various times in the African American story. Many of the exhibits are made up of donated items that tell how people lived in the early 1900s. Effects such as donated kitchen items, a wood table, plates, silverware, preserved foods like figs and pears, an apron, and some cast-iron pots are found in the old-time country kitchen. Then there is the bedroom with a metal-framed bed covered by sheets and a quilt, a dressing table, and a sewing frame.

The first exhibit NAPAC received as donated items and the list of friends and family members of those who died in the Rhythm Night Club Fire. This memorial to those who died is located on the left wall of the front entrance. This chilling and haunting shadowbox display consists of a lady's jewelry, shoes and pieces of clothing and a man's handkerchief, and photographs of a happy couple out for a night of fun and dancing. There on the wall are newspaper clippings and photographs of the aftermath and the names of the 209 men, women, children, and band members who lost their lives in the fire that changed the world and the laws that created fire codes and building capacity ordinance. On April 23, 1940, the Rhythm Night Club had the honor of hosting the famed Chicago bandleader, Walter Barnes and the Royal Creolians. This night was to be a treat for the adults who had worked hard all week and were looking for something fun to do.

On the other hand, parents of many teenagers who snuck out would find out the horrible news the next day. The Rhythm Night Club had only one exit, the front door; there were 21 windows, but management nailed them shut due to people not wanting to pay admission and climbing in through the windows. On this particular night, the front door was the only way in or out. It is said that the decorations caught fire, but within a matter of minutes, the building was taken over by flames, but the band continued to play right up until the very end. It was reported that some people hid under the dead bodies to survive; one young person took refuge in the refrigerator, but once it closed, she suffocated. The night that was supposed to be for fun and dancing ended up being a nightmare to no end. Many families learned the next

day that their loved ones had passed away. Over thirteen fire trucks responded, and many ambulances did what they could, but it was a lost cause. Most of the 209 who lost their lives trying to escape were buried in a mass grave in the Watkins Street Cemetery. Only those who survived and those who helped put out the fire lived to tell the story that changed not only the lives of the families who lost loved ones but Natchez and the surrounding cities, the state of Mississippi, and the nation as a whole. Even after all these years, it is still hard for some people to talk about (Kuk, 2009). The NAPAC Museum exists to tell the story.

R3. What cultural events are held at the Museum?

During summer 2019, several events took place at the NAPAC Museum (Figure 4). The Sadie V. Thompson Class of 1969 celebrated their 50th Class Reunion and their former principal for whom the school was named. Ms. Sadie V. Thompson was an educator and principal in the Natchez area back in the 1940s and 50s (Figure 3). In the 1950s and 60s, Natchez still had the one-room schoolhouses in Adams County. There were African American high schools in the area, but none large enough to fit all the students. So, the Sadie V. Thompson High School, named in her honor, was founded in 1951 with the first graduating class of 1952. It was the largest school in Natchez, and the black community was overwhelmed with joy at having such a school, more modern than any other at the time. SVT served as a high school from 1952-1969.

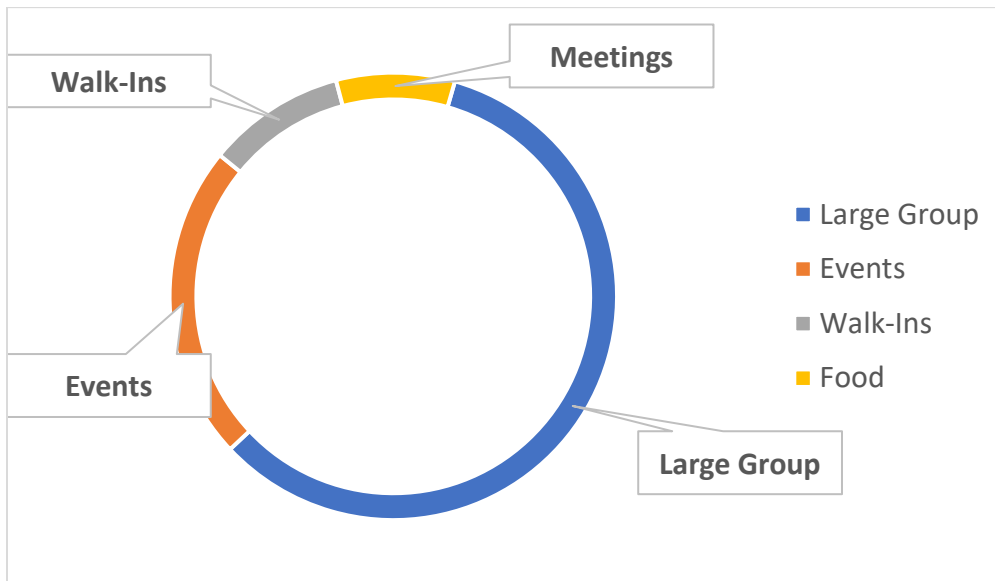


Figure 3. Former Educator and Namesake of Sadie V. Thompson High School

Another popular exhibit with most visitors and especially the Class of 1969 is the "The School House" display. This exhibit tells the story of black education in Natchez, with such donated items as photographs of the one-room schoolhouses, teachers, yearbooks, desks, an old briefcase, and a modeled replica of the Union School Building that was the first high school for blacks in the city limits. One visitor from the Class of 1969 found a yearbook photo of his father, a principal at one of Natchez's local schools. Another class member located a hand-drawn photograph of

his grandparents on display in the Civil War exhibit. With all the buzz and excitement, NAPAC started to take on new life and meaning, and there is some truth in the saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Another lady who attended the event found a photo of her father, who had once served as a teacher and principal of the Sadie V. Thompson High School. Everyone at the event searched the museum for evidence that one of their loved ones may have once been photographed or donated an item to the museum.

Figure 4. Visitors to NAPAC Museum, Summer 2019



NAPAC volunteers spent countless hours spent going through old photographs, newspaper clippings, and yearbooks, helping to identify former teachers, students, and coaches that may have been around the area in 1969. The Class of 1969 enjoyed themselves while reminiscing about being the last graduating class of Sadie V. Thompson High School before becoming a middle school. The building currently serves as the Thompson Head Start Center (All About Archives Blog, 2019).

R4. How much of the collection is digitized and available online?

At this time, none of the museums' collections are digitized or available online. One would think that in this day of the COVID-19 coronavirus that the NAPAC Museum would upgrade by moving to a digital

platform by digitizing its collections and bringing in kiosks that are motion-censored and provide narratives for each exhibit. However, digitalization is not for everyone - it requires time, effort, concentration, and many volunteers plus equipment, and right now, NAPAC does not have the funds to tackle such a project. What drives people to love the NAPAC experience is the telling of the Natchez story from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond. It is an oral history about the people, places, and things that cannot be replaced by digitalization are online websites; the human encounter means so much to so many. Hopefully, as time goes on, NAPAC will think along the lines of maybe going online even if it is just a website, but that is still a long way off.

Discussions and Conclusion

In closing, yes, the NAPAC Museum is a diamond in the rough and a great tourist attraction beloved by people worldwide. The town of Natchez acknowledges the fact that tourism, especially Fall and Spring Pilgrimage, is the leading economic development in the city. Still, smaller tourist attractions also contribute to the economic growth of tourism. Pilgrimage is the opening of historic antebellum homes, pageants, and telling the Natchez story from an African American perspective and explains why there was a need for slavery in Natchez and why life was the way it was during those times. By any standard, the NAPAC Museum is needed. It fulfills a need for the African American community by continuing the legacy that the late Mrs. Mary Toles started. By creating new displays like Natchez First, which represents African Americans in such positions as the Postmaster, Newspaper Publisher and Editor, Fire Chief, Sheriff, Police Chief, Hospital CEO, Supervisor, and Aldermen. With these new images, NAPAC hopes to inspire young people to go forward and create businesses and community awareness here in Natchez. On a small scale, the NAPAC Museum is seen as a place to have meetings and social events.

On the other hand, NAPAC is viewed as the birthplace of local history, and as new board members and volunteers come on board, the story will continue to be told and live on for generations to come. This quote from Marcus Garvey says it all, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." I think if the late Mary Toles, founder of NAPAC, were here today, she would probably conclude with this quote from former U. S. President Barack Obama, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." The Natchez Association for the Preservation for African American Culture has existed to tell the story, and it will continue to be a presence to reckon with in the days, months, years, and decades to come.

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