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Review: Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum and Milwaukee's Bronzeville Cultural Entertainment District

Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum by Clayborn Benson, III; Milwaukee's Bronzeville Cultural Entertainment District

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building decorated with Aztec and Mayan pyramid forms in cast concrete, brick, and wall murals.

At the heart of any community is the kitchen, and our tour stopped for a brief and enticing visit to Supermercado El-Rey Market, a supermarket sized grocery located on South Cesar E. Chavez Drive. Founded by Ernesto and Eriberto Villareal in 1978, the business has expanded to four sites, including a wholesale division and a restaurant. The supermercado is a Mexican cook's dream; aisle after aisle of fresh produce, bottled and canned foods, and a meat case filled with fresh meats cut in the Mexican style.

As the morning was getting late and the tour participants getting hungry (particularly after seeing the supermercado), the tour ended at Milwaukee Public Market. This new attraction was developed as part of the revitalization of the eastside Old Third Ward. But alas, no Paczkis or Pastelitos were to be had. A fishmonger was selling fresh fish on ice as well as roasted salmon on a stick. Shops and cafés offered cheese and sausage, beer, wine, soup, coffee, breads and salads—described by some as the new American cuisine—ethnicity for the contemporary palate.

The tour clearly showed how neighborhoods and community-based groups construct and share their past. Common to all the sites was the ownership and pride of the story being remembered; not for the consumption of a tourist, rather for the strengthening of local bonds. These South Milwaukee public historians are community builders.

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Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum (www.wbhs.org). CLAYBORN BENSON, III, founder and director. Milwaukee's Bronzeville Cultural Entertainment District (<http://city.milwaukee.gov/Bronzeville>). NCPH/OAH Bi-Annual Joint Meeting, April 18–22, 2012, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I looked forward to learning about the African American experience in the “Brew City” on a tour scheduled to the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum (WBHSM) during the April 2012 National Council on Public History/Organization of American Historians joint meeting in Milwaukee. I was also interested in learning about the digital “March on Milwaukee Civil Rights History Project” that was to be discussed as part of the scheduled activity. To my disappointment just before leaving for the meeting I learned the Friday April 20, tour was cancelled due to lack of ticket sales. As this was the only cultural institution of this thematic type I was aware of in the City of Milwaukee, I was determined to visit the establishment even though the tour was cancelled.

It was a cool and sometimes drizzly afternoon when I spoke with WBHSM director Clayborn Benson, III. I learned the museum was open and I was wel-

come to come by that afternoon and join a small group of women—some of whom were attending the conference—for a tour of his facilities. Benson graciously offered to pick me up at the conference center on his swing through downtown. Thus began my tour through the history of “Black Milwaukee” in its varied spatial dimensions.

Avoiding the freeway, Benson opted for a longer route uptown through the streets of Milwaukee. He filled the journey with an impromptu commentary about what we saw out of the windows of his late model automobile. We drove through a vacant area near downtown that did not look like “planned” open space. I silently observed that with only a few trees, this urban space had the appearance of an area where older housing was razed to make way for urban redevelopment and freeways that were never built.

Anticipating my thoughts, Benson explained that once Germans, Jews, and Italians lived with their black neighbors in this close-in neighborhood, until thousands of homes were eliminated and the institutional heart of the community was destroyed in the 1960s. Today the steeples of a historic, German Lutheran church tower above the low-rise landscape in its immediate vicinity, and over sparse new housing constructed with redevelopment funds during the mid-twentieth century. The new freeway was never built. I later learned that this forlorn looking open space area had been part of the “Bronzeville” District, a generic name that many cities at one time or another called the districts primarily populated by African Americans.

Upon reaching the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum, Benson and I had traveled less than five miles from downtown Milwaukee through the lost historic heart of the African American community to the neighborhood where many of those displaced residents moved. The 1967 civil disobedience actions by black citizens and their white allies in the streets of Milwaukee and other cities across the nation during this time contributed to the opening-up of housing options. Milwaukee’s African American community rebuilt itself with a slightly larger spatial disbursement and a desire to create new institutions that recognized, celebrated, and preserved their heritage. The WBHSM was a result of some of this energy to build new community institutions.¹

Founded by Clayborn Benson, III—my guide for the day—the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum was established in 1987 “to document and preserve the historical heritage of people of African descent in Wisconsin.”² Then a “middle career” college student and professional videographer, Benson was inspired to create a central repository of resources associated with the state’s African American history when he was working on his final film project, *Black Communities/Wisconsin*, which featured the history of housing, migration, and trade skills among African Americans in Milwaukee and Wisconsin.

1. Fath Davis Ruffins, “Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820–1990,” in *Museums and Communities, the Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 567–70.

2. From the WBHSM mission statement.

Today, according to the WBHSM brochure, it is “the only institution in the State in the business of preserving African American History in Wisconsin.”

The museum is lodged in a 1924 movie theater with two storefronts and a parking lot on West Center Street. In twenty years, and with unflagging enthusiasm for sharing history but minimal financial resources, Benson and his fellow travelers have managed to rehabilitate the museum’s 9000–square-foot facilities. His accomplishments have come through sweat equity, a dedicated, small volunteer pool, private donations, and foundation and public entity grants. Only in recent years, since his retirement as a videographer from local television, has Benson run the museum as his full time occupation.³

The WBHSM’s relatively inexpensively produced, long-term exhibits focus on key themes that have affected and influenced African Americans in Milwaukee as well as across America. Generally, the artifacts and displays of physical exhibits would especially resonate with the elementary-school-age visitor, but there are exceptions. Exhibits include *Work’n in the Promised Land: The African American Labor Experience in Wisconsin*, and the 2005 NAACP *Civil Rights Tribute Bus*—large graphic image panels designed for each side of a bus that cruised the city with an accompanying brochure commemorating the history of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as Milwaukee as the first-time host of the organization’s 96th annual national convention. In another area, the museum offers a nod to the historical and contemporary Pan-Africanist thought and post modern history about the sense of the connection among and centrality of all African peoples⁴ with the display of George Gist’s mural, *Ancient Egypt to Modern Milwaukee*. The brightly colored, panoramic painting depicts ancient Egyptian civilization to early African American settlers in rural Wisconsin with a glance at modern life of African Americans in Milwaukee.

The 40th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement: March on Milwaukee 2007, a traveling exhibit curated by Benson, highlights the nationalization of the historical “race issues” in American society during the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, and its influence on Milwaukee life at the time. Part of this photography exhibit was on display during my visit. Benson’s black-and-white photograph selections are still visually arresting and emotionally moving today in their chronicle of the history of the Milwaukee riots of 1967, marches to open up housing and for school desegregation, and African Americans’ struggle for equality. Many of these photographs are now part of the museum’s online exhibits programming.

As are many public history venues, WBHSM is currently in a rethinking process of its future programming. Digital technologies and collaborations with other institutions will have an expanding role in the organization’s work to cre-

3. The movie theater interior space is the more impressive from an architectural point of view. One of the storefront spaces contiguous with the theater houses museum exhibits and office space. The other storefront space is rented to a nonprofit organization, which helps to augment the museum’s financial operations.

4. Ruffins, 561–62.



Day after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The NACCP Youth Council and civil rights activist Father James Groppi organized a rally in protest of King's death on Wisconsin Avenue in Downtown Milwaukee. Although mostly Black Americans, the compositions of the crowd included White Americans of many ethnicities. (From *The Journal Sentinel*, April 5, 1968, courtesy of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum Collection)

ate and spread historical knowledge and to engage their current and new audiences. Their website, in addition to a few exhibits, now features learning resources for youth and those interested in researching family histories related to Wisconsin's African American history.

I had initially planned to see a variety of public history programming and sites while I was at the conference, and with the WBHSM tour and program cancelled, I hoped the session *Whose Civil Rights Stories on the Web? Authorship, Ownership, Access, and Content in Digital History*—whose panel included speakers from the cancelled events—would fill in the gap, but it did not. A panel simply cannot offer the same experience as a site visit for understanding shared authority and the professionalization of local history that the NCPH describes as elements of public history.

With this in mind, later in the week I explored the Bronzeville District on foot, with a colleague from the conference. To my surprise, I learned the City of Milwaukee had a development plan for a “Bronzeville Cultural and Entertainment District,” near the “first” Bronzeville neighborhood that was initiated by the Milwaukee Redevelopment Authority in the 1980s. Not unlike the city's Historic Third Ward District, but with a different thematic concept and land use pattern, this district is envisioned as a year-round tourist destination, celebrating a rich cultural heritage with offerings of authentic ethnic music, art, and cuisine. Obviously a positive memory of this lost African American community hub is still strong with a broad array of Milwaukee residents.



The Regal Theater shown in this image was at the heart of the Milwaukee Black American cultural, social and commercial district, “the original Bronzeville,” near the intersection of Eighth and Walnut Streets. Today, none of the buildings in this photograph are in situ. (Photograph by Archie White, ca. 1950, courtesy of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum Collection)

After a walk to the Milwaukee Art Museum then through the Brady Street District, we wound our way back over the river until we reached Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, the heart of the newly conceived Bronzeville District where there is a large statue of the late Civil Rights leader. It appeared that some of the planned residential and institutional revitalization was slowly being realized. Information contained on the City’s website indicated that the revitalization process is dependent upon the City’s ability to leverage local assets—ranging from historic, cultural, and architectural resources—into local enterprises and community pride.

I came away from the conference puzzled by this missed opportunity on the part of NCPH/OAH organizers, who did not include a Bronzeville District presentation or tour of this public history–inspired, community development, cultural tourism, and historic preservation project. Bronzeville was implicitly discussed in some of the Labor and Working-Class History Association sessions, especially with historian Joe W. Trotter’s contributions to the field discussed in a session (Friday, April 20), and at a reception honoring him and his work.⁵ These two occasions presented perfect opportunities to have

5. Joe Trotter is the author of several books and number articles, including *Black Milwaukee, The Making of an Industrial Proletariat*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985, 2007). He is the Giant Eagle Professor of History and Social Justice at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, and is a past president of the Labor and Working-Class History Association.

a field workshop and/or reception at a venue outside of the downtown conference center and hotel, say, at a place like the WBHSM. The conference programming could have engaged practitioners to examine varied levels of the use of public history work inside and outside the academy as well as stakeholders and financial issues in Milwaukee, and could have showcased the collaborative approach so regularly invoked as “a fundamental and defining characteristic of what public historians do.”⁶

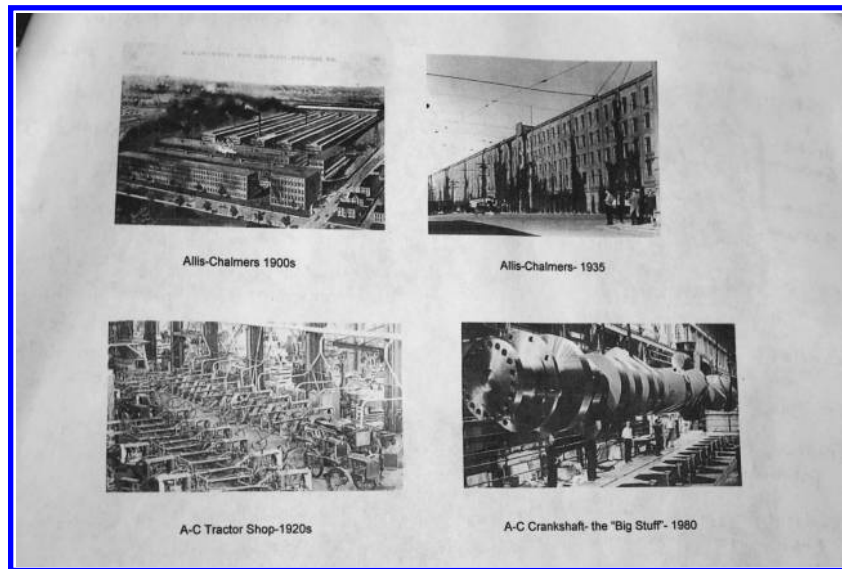
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6. National Council on Public History, “What Is Public History?” page. From the Internet: <http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history/>, 22 June 2012.

Labor History Bus Tour, OAH/NCPH Annual Meeting, April 19, 2012, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Tour Leaders: STEVE MEYER and MICHAEL GORDON.

The bus was filled with historians, and a fair number of umbrellas. The rain was coming down Thursday afternoon of the conference, which didn't affect the Milwaukee Labor History Bus Tour so much as it dampened this reviewer's ability to take clear photographs from her window. The tour was scheduled from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., and was ably led by Steve Meyer and Michael Gordon—professors emeriti of history at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee—whose complementary interests and deep knowledge of in-



A detail of four images featured in the handout. (Photo courtesy of the author)