

**Meeting of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission
June 27, 2025
Director's Report**

Prepared by Adrienne Nirdé, Director, NC African American Heritage Commission

COMMISSIONER UPDATES

- As of June 30, 2025 Judge Pauline Hankins (Brunswick County) term with the Commission was due to expire. However, a new commissioner has not yet been appointed by the legislature, as such, her term will continue for the time being.

ORGANIZATIONAL UPDATES

Department of Natural & Cultural Resources

Tracey Burns celebrated 36 years of service after a robust career and retired at the end of April. Tracey started her career at DNCR as a frontline employee, working at our very own historic sites. Tracey began her career at DNCR as the assistant manager at Somerset Place. She was there for four years before transitioning to the N.C. Transportation Museum as the administrative services manager. After a couple of years, she was promoted and managed Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum and Historic Site. Tracey spent five years managing the site before leaving DNCR to work in the university system in 2005 —though she always told her coworkers she "would be back."

She did indeed return, becoming an assistant secretary in 2018 before being promoted to deputy secretary in 2021. With such a rich history working at our historic sites, Tracey brought a unique perspective to DNCR's leadership team — she knew what it was like to manage a site and work directly with the public on a regular basis. Tracey says, "I came to this office from a very different lens, I have the experience of working the front line" and counts this as one of her greatest accomplishments. "Working in this field is a labor of love," she said.

Her focus has been making sure that DNCR tells more representative stories of our state and has a staff that looks like North Carolina and who we serve.

In retirement, Tracey plans to travel, do some work around her house, and looks forward to visiting DNCR sites as a guest and seeing projects she worked on come to life in the coming years.

With Ms. Burns' retirement, the NC African American Heritage Commission is now reporting directly to Chief Deputy Secretary Maggie Burns as part of an overall restructuring of the Office of Community Engagement.

African American Heritage Commission

- Anaya Wallace, Black History Month/Juneteenth Coordinator (Full-time, temporary)
- Zoe Young, NC Freedom Park (summer intern)



Budget

Fiscal realities have changed quickly due to several factors across the state and nationally. In recent years, the Commission has been very reliant on lapsed salary to move programming forward. This funding will no longer be available in the same capacity. NCAAHC and other divisions within DNCR have been asked to rely on base budgets for FY 2025-2026. NCAAHC is working closely with DNCR leadership and budget staff to plan for this new financial reality.

MAJOR PROJECT UPDATES

Africa to Carolina

Our Inclusive Public Art Project with support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation is well underway. On May 14th, Director Adrienne Nirdé and Associate Director Natalie Rodriguez hosted a site visit to Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site in collaboration with NC State Historic Sites leadership. The visit served to familiarize Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation trustees and staff with the location and art piece as part of their board meeting in the area. Following the meeting, the foundation confirmed that NCAAHC's additional request of \$24,500 was approved, bringing the total grant award to \$244,250. This additional request will cover design adjustments to improve the visitor experience in addition to rising material costs. At this stage, the construction documents have been approved by the State Construction Office. Their office raised several additional questions regarding accessibility that the project team is currently working to address.

On June 14th, in partnership with Carolina K-12 and UNC's African Studies Department, the Commission hosted a professional development field trip for teachers in Edenton, NC and Creswell, NC as part of the overall project. Education and Interpretation Specialist Dr. Shafantae Desinord led this work to create a teacher workshop, lecture series, and tours of local historic sites. Teachers engaged with the rich history of the Africa to Carolina project and explored ways to incorporate this history into their classrooms across various disciplines within K-12 education. Twenty-two teachers from across the state visited Historic Edenton State Historic Site, a downtown Edenton, the Historic 1767 Chowan County Courthouse, and Somerset Place State Historic Site as part of this trip. Following the trip, teachers are working to create lesson plans connected to this history.

As part of our partnership with NC State Historic Sites in this work through an agreement with the NC State Capitol Foundation, the division is sponsoring four NCAAHC staff members to attend the 2025 Association of African American Museums Conference July 23rd through 25th in Charleston, SC. NCAAHC will be hosting a vendor booth showcasing the Africa to Carolina traveling exhibit and sharing educational resources.

"A Tale of Two Ships: Part Deux"

On February 5, 2025, the NC African American Commission hosted a convening for the second phase of the Tale of Two Ships (TOTS) project at the DNCR Auditorium of the Archives and History Building in Raleigh, North Carolina. The convening was designed to present updates of ongoing research on the history of Queen Anne's Revenge/ La Concorde from both a historical and archaeological perspective. Presented in person to invitees, the convening could also be viewed by members of the public who registered and attended the event virtually. The convening had approximately thirty in-person attendees and fifty-four online registrants. Invitees to the event consisted of DNCR staff and leadership,



NC African Heritage Commission Commissioners, as well as other stakeholders who have a relationship with the goals of the TOTS project, including professors and students from East Carolina University.

Presentations

The convening consisted of four talks and a panel discussion. The first talk was presented by Kimberly Kenyon, Conservator of the Queen Anne’s Revenge Conservation Laboratory and Principal Investigation of the Queen Anne’s Revenge Shipwreck project, who presented an overview of the archaeological work completed on the wreck site (31CR314). This was followed by Elise Carroll, a conservator at the QAR Conservation Lab, who provided an overview and update of the ongoing conservation of the material from the QAR/LaC site that has been excavated, highlighting artifacts with interpretive value related to the TOTS project. This was followed by Jillian Schuler, the TOTS research fellow, who presented her archival findings in the French and Martinique archives (see Figure 13). In addition, Michaela Hoots, a recent graduate from the Maritime Studies program at East Carolina University, presented on her master’s thesis research, looking at foodways aboard slave ships, utilizing La Concorde as her main case study.

Finally, the convening hosted a Q&A panel featuring contributors to the 2022 book, *Excavating the histories of slave-trade and pirate ships*, edited by Dr. Lynn Harris and Dr. Valerie Johnson. As the book was published during the pandemic, the convening presented an opportunity to meet with four of the book’s contributors and discuss their chapters as well as future applications of their research. In addition, the panel, facilitated by NCAAHC Director Adrienne Nirdé, discussed questions related to La Concorde, interdisciplinary approaches to slave ship histories, the archaeology of slave ships, and the de-romanticization of piracy. Both Dr. Harris and Dr. Johnson were participants on the panel alongside Dr. Hannah Francis, a former research fellow for the TOTS project who published a chapter on her research, and Kelsey Dwyer whose chapter contribution centered around studying evidence of gender within archaeological slave ship assemblages, adapted from her master’s thesis that she wrote while attending the Maritime Studies program at East Carolina University. Dr. Francis and Dwyer were able to call in via Zoom, given they both live out of the state.

On February 6, 2025, the NC African American Heritage Commission (NCAAHC) hosted a TOTS-themed workshop for DNCR staff and TOTS-affiliated stakeholders. Scheduled the day following the convening, the workshop allowed for attendees to consider how to apply to their associated institutions the research presented during the convening. Attendees for the event included staff from major institutions associated with the TOTS project, including the NC Maritime Museum in Beaufort, the Queen Anne’s Revenge Conservation Laboratory, the North Carolina Museum of History, and East Carolina University.

The workshop provided four presentations centered around interpretation strategies and public programming related to the research and history of QAR/LaC. The first presentation, provided by Jillian Schuler, provided an overview of the interpretation strategies she observed during the TOTS-funded travel she completed in France and Martinique, considering how the cultural institutions in these locations interpret this history and what strategies may be applicable to the TOTS project in North Carolina. In complement with Schuler’s presentation, Dr. Tamara Brothers, Director of Program and Outreach for DNCR, provided a presentation of her experience and recommendations having travelled with the research fellow for the France portion of the TOTS travel. Following Dr. Brothers, Daniel Lowery, the QAR Lab Office Manager at the QAR Conservation Laboratory, provided an overview of the public programming and educational



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resources provided by the QAR Lab. Finally, Khadija McNair, NC Freedom Park Manager for NCAAHC, presented on her experience attending the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History Ethics Workshop, providing valuable strategies and recommendations in interpreting a history with a painful and complicated subject matter.

Brainstorming Session

Following the morning’s presentations, the participants engaged in an afternoon brainstorming session led by the TOTS research fellow. Attendees were organized into groups based on their affiliated organizations, consisting of four groups: 1. NC African American Heritage Commission Staff, 2. NC Maritime Museums, 3. QAR Conservation Laboratory and East Carolina University, and 4. DNCR Leadership and NC Museum of History. The groups were tasked with answering a series of questions and provided a notepad and marker to record their answers. Afterwards, the groups came together to share their responses. Following the convening and workshop, DNCR staff shared that they appreciated the opportunity to gather and discuss this work, as well as identify potential next steps.

Per previous communications shared with commissioners, the conclusion of this grant was impacted by the “Continuing the Reduction of Federal Bureaucracy” Presidential Executive Order from March 14, 2025 which impacted funding and support available from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. However, NCAAHC staff requested to draw down the remaining grant funds prior to this order and the funds were eventually made available on April 23, 2025. Research Fellow Jillian Schuler was able to complete her work through the end of May completing a final white paper documenting the history of the grant, and a research article that was published in the most recent edition of the *North Carolina Historical Review*. After completing this work, Jillian Shuler accepted a full-time permanent position with the NC Office of State Archaeology as an Assistant State Archaeologist with the Underwater Archaeology Branch.

Heritage Celebrations: Black History Month & Juneteenth

Black History Month 2025 was celebrated with our annual release of the Black History Month Toolkit featuring a community calendar of events across the state, a reading list Assistant State Librarian Dr. Tiwana Nevels, and other resources. 2025 marked our first collaboration with Governor Josh Stein’s office to celebrate the holiday and recognize Black entrepreneurship with a reception at the governor’s mansion with support from the Legislative Black Caucus.

Juneteenth 2025 was not supported by the same budget we had access to in previous years. NCAAHC was not able to sponsor external events or contract outside presenters for our Speaker’s Bureau and travel costs needed to be minimized. Despite this, staff presented or tabled at 13 Juneteenth events, in addition to 2 other programs. NCAAHC was able to fundraise \$1500 to go towards education and promotional materials. Black History Month/Juneteenth Coordinator Anaya Wallace, who joined the team in March, created a Juneteenth Toolkit featuring resources, detailing emancipation stories from North Carolina, and a community event calendar. NCAAHC Juneteenth events consisted of:

- Voices of Freedom Walking Tour, a collaboration between NC Freedom Park and the NC State Capitol
- Dr. Hari Jones Memorial Lecture, NC History Center on the Civil War, Emancipation & Reconstruction
- NC Emancipation Stories, virtual with Wake County Public Libraries
- US Bank’s Charlotte Black Heritage Business Resource Group Lecture, virtual
- The Echoes of Emancipation: Juneteenth and North Carolina, Chatham Community Library
- Juneteenth Celebration, Moore Square and Marbles Kids Museum

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- Juneteenth: Joyfest with Fortrea, *virtual presentation*
- Zebulon Juneteenth Annual Celebration
- Triangle Cultural Awareness Foundation keynote, Shaw University
- Juneteenth: A Chavis Celebration at Chavis Park
- Southeast Regional Library Lecture, *virtual presentation*
- 8th Annual Juneteenth Festival, Pittsboro
- Songs of Liberation, NC Freedom Park

NC Freedom Park

- 2024 Total Visitation: 12,046
- 2025 Total Visitation to date: 19,043

NC Freedom Park Manager Khadija McNair launched the first public programs at Freedom Park beyond the grand opening. These events included weekly Black History Month tours, and Rooted: Sowing Seeds of Freedom, a family program. Additional there were two Juneteenth programs: Songs of Liberation featuring performer Mary D. Williams, and Voices of Freedom special tours in collaboration with the NC State Capitol. The programs were well attended; we look forward to additional offerings in the future. Additionally, spring marked the launch of our Junior Docent Program in partnership with Exploris School. A unique charter school based in downtown Raleigh, they focus on project-based learning and using the city as their classroom. Led by 8th graders, the program has been an excellent opportunity for students to engage with the space, learn about interpretation and history. We aim to continue the program in the 2025-2026 school year.

Zoe Young has joined our team for Summer 2025 through the DNCR internship program. She is a rising junior majoring in history at North Carolina Central University. Her summer project is to complete research on historical figures connected to the park and create a new themed interpretive tour.

With rising attendance numbers this spring, we have experienced vandalism and graffiti within the park. In collaboration with State Capitol Police, we are working to mitigate continuation into the future. They have agreed to increase patrols and work with NCAAHC staff to properly report and document damage. Additional signage has been placed in the along with an updated visitation guide to educators leading trips to communicate expectations while visiting. NCAAHC staff have also been equipped staff with materials to clean small areas of graffiti.

NCAAHC has been working closely with the Friends of North Carolina Freedom Park to support programming and purchasing materials. With support from DNCR leadership, we are working to formalize a Memorandum of Agreement and the relationship between the 501(c)3 with the Commission.

NC Civil Rights Trail

In the spring of 2020, the NCAAHC received funding from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation to develop and launch the NC Civil Rights Trail in partnership with Visit NC and the NC Office of Archives & History. The project works identify and mark (digitally and physically) North Carolina sites key to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, or critical to advancing civil rights in the state. This project has created one interactive, evergreen digital map of North Carolina civil rights sites. The



initial goal of the project was to create fifty physical, community-based markers. Currently thirty-eight markers have been awarded. In the eyes of the Pomeroy Foundation, though we not yet awarded 50 markers, they have monetarily met what was initially proposed in our Memorandum of Agreement which has expired. They are willing to explore additional markers on a case-by-case basis. NCAAHC staff are currently exploring how the remaining markers will be fulfilled.

Education Outreach

Since joining our team in August 2024, Education & Interpretive Specialist Dr. Shafantae Desinord has kept a full schedule leading our division’s educational outreach. Beyond her work with our Africa to Carolina initiative, she has tabled and presented at various events including the Black Education Summit hosted at Charlotte Hawkins Brown State Historic Site, the North Carolina Council for Social Studies, and the North Carolina Museums Conference. Additionally, she has created a close partnership with DNCR’s Education Team for outreach programming at area schools with a goal of identifying sites for future programs. To date, outreach programs have been held at Doris Henderson Newcomers School and the NCWorks NextGen Career Center.

HBCU Outreach Plan

Per our strategic plan, NCAAHC has been working towards formalizing an engagement strategy for Historically Black Colleges and Universities to create sustainable collaborative relationships. To begin, NCAAHC Program Coordinator Vincentt Sutton worked to create and distribute surveys to institutions across the state. These surveys offered valuable insights into institutions current needs and interests. Follow up conversations will be scheduled throughout FY 2025-2026 to begin discussion of next steps.