



The North Carolina

African American

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Education and Interpretation Specialist

Rodney Dawson

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Rodney Dawson's Introduction

Good day my name is Rodney Dawson, and since November of 2022, I have served as the Education and Interpretation Specialist for the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission. The Education and Interpretation Specialist position has focused on developing and providing platforms and resources for learning. The initiatives have been technology-enriched resources in the form of instructional videos, programming, and promotional items designed to be readily accessible tools for our audiences. We intended to use these tools to reach audiences in the traditional sense by holding in-person events, as well as virtual programming for audiences unable to attend physically. The effort has allowed us to reach and provide instructional tools for viewers statewide. Additionally, we have dispensed literature to schools, libraries, civic and social organizations across the state. To reach educators directly, the Education and Interpretation Specialist will conduct a series of three educator professional development workshops beginning in August of this year. I have also participated in speaking engagements at schools and for civic groups both in person and virtually.

While I will elaborate later, I have sought to strengthen our resources and programming by meeting the needs of our wide and diverse audience by completing training for ADA compliance, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction state aligned educational standards, and to effectively interpret and dispense information. Collaboratively, I have reached out to state and interdepartmental entities to not only introduce myself, but to speak on existing alliances and potential future partnerships.

Overview

Back in January, I spoke about where I saw my role as the Education and Interpretation Specialist. I mentioned that I see the role as one where I seek to learn, teach, and promote learning. Since my start in mid-November, I now recognize crucial elements to the job as learning the landscape around you, being more effective when working within a large entity such as the State of North Carolina and being specific about educator needs and how to best provide them. With the information gleaned from training, research, and associations with heritage institutions and organizations, we hope to always include educational best practices and strategies to better inform and engage all audience members. The goal is to meet the needs while delivering factually based information through resource development, workshops, programs, collaborations, and the art of storytelling.

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Education Resources and Professional Development

One of our initial efforts was to place literature directly in the hands of teachers and students. We dispensed nearly 200 copies of the 1619 Project and 1619 Project: Born on the Water children's book. The books were distributed to libraries, charter, public, and private schools, a home school organization, as well as social and civic groups across the state. Counties covered include Guilford, Davie, Durham, Forsyth, Lenoir, Pitt, and Randolph. Additionally, three videos for instructional use were recorded. The topics covered were how HBCUs fostered an environment for leadership with Dr. Jelani Favors entitled "Empower the Shelter," the contributions of North Carolinians as it pertains to Hip Hop with Hip Hop historians Kyesha Jennings, Rasheem Pugh, and Bryon Turman entitled: From Carolina Grassroots to Carolina Classrooms. And we created a downloadable wordsearch worksheet highlighting artists featured in the African American Music Trail.

As alluded to earlier, the importance of developing relationships with statewide educational institutions, civic groups, museums, and heritage institutions remained essential. We have and intend to partner with organizations such as Carolina K-12, state HBCUs, State Historic Sites, the Department of Natural & Cultural Resources as well as other state departments to include the on not only developing resources but in professional development session. Three such professional development workshop sessions are slated for the Fall of 2023 and two in the Spring of 2024. On **August 23, 2023**, The History of Black Education in North Carolina Professional Development will take place at Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum & State Historic Site, Sedalia, North Carolina. On **March 1, 2024**, The History of Black Education in North Carolina Professional Development will occur at the Western DNCR Office, Asheville, North Carolina, and on **March 15, 2024**, The History of Black Education in North Carolina Professional Development will take place at Queen Anne's Revenge Conservation Lab, Greenville, North Carolina. Currently, we have received support from agencies such as: Carolina K-12, Guilford County Schools, and Winston Salem Forsyth County Schools. These organizations have agreed to promote our professional development series within their network of educators. In March of this year, I was able to present along with veteran teacher Valencia Abbott at the North Carolina Council for Social Studies. At this event, attended by hundreds of educators from across North Carolina, we raised awareness regarding The History of Black Education in North Carolina curriculum, and were able learn ways to improve upon our presentation and delivery. One take-away was how to increase usability and engagement; consequently, we sought ways to illuminate subject matter by conducting a grounding portion for some of the chapters or topics taught. As a reminder our chapters cover:



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- From enslavement to reconstruction
- Jim Crow and Desegregation
- Black Boarding Schools
- North Carolina's Rosenwald Schools
- North Carolina's HBCUs

An example of grounding for our professional development held at Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum & State Historic Site, we have solicited the help of a local fraternal organization to open the chapter on HBCUs by conducting a brief step performance to illuminate the history and contributions of one of our Divine Nine organizations to HBCUs and overall community. Within their three-to-five-minute allotted time, the members will briefly field questions from attendees interested in learning more. We also will collaborate with our host site to conduct the lesson on Black Boarding Schools, in particular Palmer Memoria Institute and Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown.

For the March 1st professional development in Asheville, North Carolina, we had a fruitful discussion with site director, Jeff Futch at the Western DNCR office. Jeff provided invaluable input, ideas and contact information for people who could help illustrate the contributions of local African Americans and events of significance in the region. We connected with Dr. Ashley Carpenter with Leadership and Educational Studies for Appalachian State University. Dr. Carpenter suggested resources and organizations germane to western North Carolina that will help us make the professional development more relatable to attendees. And for the March 15th workshop in Greenville, North Carolina, we held a meeting with Kimberly Kenyon, head conservator, with the site. We intend to work closely with Queen Anne's Revenge Conservation Lab and our very own Jillian Schuler the commission's Research Fellow for our Tale of Two Ships Initiative with the goal of adding an element within the instruction that is of interest to the region.

Collaborations

To grow collaboratively, we actively sought ways to make existing and potential partners aware of our initiatives. We contacted both civic and governmental agencies; however, we also reached out to classroom teachers and administrators, students both K-12 and college level, and parents on how to best meet their needs. To date we have spoken with central office administrators from four county school districts. We have sought advice from home school parents, groups of high school students and college students, plus conversations with K-12 educators in North Carolina. The objective was to make our resources easily implementable into the classroom learning environment.

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By way of example, we spoke with a middle school administrator and former reading specialist regarding what her teachers needed to better do their job. The conversation led to the development of a downloadable wordsearch worksheet. In addition, we spoke in-depth with an area elementary media specialist on how best to gain traction with our literary resources within school libraries. The conversation resulted in a podcast recording that will be made available later. The recording is designed to promote the book “Bountiful Red Acres.” The book published by UNC Press in association with the commission discusses the plight of two farming families in Surry County in 1900 on the grounds of what is now Horne Creek Farm State Historic Site. The book targets grades three through five and gives a glimpse of what it was like for an African American family and nearby Caucasian family in rural North Carolina. In the recording, I moderated a discussion with Esther Glenn, media specialist at Harris Elementary school in nearby Durham, NC, and book author Eileen Heyes.

Training opportunities

As the Education and Interpretation Specialist, I was able to attend training including an Accessibility in Arts training held just before our last commissioner meeting in January. Since that time, I have attended and completed a weeklong Drupal Training designed to teach me how to navigate and manage our website. I attended an interpretation gathering to learn more about William B. Umstead State Park here in Raleigh where we were joined by educators from the Independence School Experiential Education Network which helped increase my ability to interpret and learn the history of the state park. We also heard directly from classroom teachers on how to use the site specifically and others like it to better meet their needs. I benefitted immensely from attending a Juneteenth event at Jones Lake State Park. During that time, I was educated by people like Rodney Lovett with NC State Parks. I developed connections and received input from a large group of interns associated with the event representing universities across the state. I was able to talk with longtime visitors to the park including the son of DeWitt Powell, the longtime and storied park superintendent being honored on that day. Through my monthly planning meetings with the African American Cultural Celebration, I have been able to understand all that goes into the annual gathering but make meaningful acquaintances plus build relationships with folks that have experiences far beyond mine. From these interactions, I’ve been able to receive guidance and share ideas with veteran historians, educators, and interpreters such as Earl Ijames, Michelle Carr, Dr. Arwin Smallwood, Chrystal Regan, and Linda Edwards. These names don’t represent all that has helped me and while these interactions may not be considered formal education, the ability to exchange and bounce ideas off them before, after, and during meetings has paid great dividends.

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In May of this year, I did receive my certification as an interpretive guide under the National Association for Interpretation which helped me enhance my ability to tell stories and infuse them with methods, concepts, and strategies to reach a myriad of audiences. Now, I am better equipped to be intentional about addressing the needs of our audience, seek ways to engage them effectively, and meet key components of interpretation. Another great training that should bode well for upcoming events is the Critical Child & Youth Safety training I attended in early June. The training strongly emphasized being intentional and observant about putting measures in place to keep our young people safe at our sites and events both in-person and virtual. Also in June, the education and interpretation specialist position grew stronger in its ability to align our documents, videos, and educational programs with North Carolina State standards. By attending a NC Department of Public Instruction Social Studies Standards training. I am better able to understand current legislation and policies impacting Social Studies in North Carolina.