

Thoughts on a Day at the National Museum of African American History and Culture

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ABSTRACT: The opening of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture provided Indiana historian James H. Madison the opportunity to reflect on the stories that Americans have told about their history as well as the stories—particularly those of slavery, segregation, and violence—left largely untold. Madison focuses on the museum's exhibits that pertain to Indiana, in particular "Power of Place," which features ten "place studies" from across the nation, including the historically black community of Lyles Station, Indiana.

KEYWORDS: African American history, Smithsonian, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Madam C. J. Walker, Lyles Station

A day at the new National Museum of African American History and Culture leaves a visitor overwhelmed. Thoughts and feelings jump in directions of tragedy and uplift, of despair and hope, and of steps backward and forward toward American ideals. A family member who accompanied me one day late last fall used a single word to describe the museum: "dense," she said. So dense, so full that a visitor can only take in bits and pieces.¹

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Three large history galleries—“Slavery and Freedom,” “The Era of Segregation, 1876–1968,” and “A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond”—are chronologically arranged, each on a separate floor. Topical galleries on upper floors offer cultural subjects, community stories, and interactive exploration. For exhausted visitors, the Sweet Home Café provides excellent food choices that reflect the regional varieties of African American cooking.

So much to do. I decided to focus on Indiana subjects, mixed with stories from Massachusetts, Alabama, California, and other places across the nation. Hoosiers are well represented. An attentive visitor will note at the entrance that the Lilly Endowment stands with the handful of the largest donors.

Among the most tragic stories in the museum is lynching, one part of many stories of racial violence. A long list on a wall includes the names of Tom Smith and Abe Shipp, the Marion, Indiana, teenagers who died at the hands of the mob one summer night in 1930.²

The museum aggressively seeks stories of uplift. Madam C. J. Walker receives substantial attention as an entrepreneur and leader. From more recent years, the Gary convention of 1972 and Mayor Richard Hatcher exemplify responses to changing forms of racism from the later civil rights era. Curators have focused a great deal of space on entertainment, particularly music. Jackson 5 artifacts are there, not far from Chuck Berry’s red Cadillac. The music and sports galleries are enormous and packed with visitors.

The most fully developed Indiana subject is Lyles Station, a free black community located in the state’s southwestern corner. The exhibit is set in contexts of the many rural black communities that dotted the Midwest, including the Roberts Settlement in Hamilton County and the Beech Settlement in Rush County. In each place, African American pioneers arriving from slave states before the Civil War built their own separate communities.

of Indiana (2014), which served as the inspiration for a four-part documentary, *Hoosiers: The Story of Indiana*, produced by WFYI for Indiana PBS stations.

¹ The museum offers far too many artifacts and stories, likely a consequence of curators finding themselves unable to make more selective choices. See Edward Ball’s review in the *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2016, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/11/24/smithsonian-black-history-museum/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NYSR%20Black%20history%20self-driving%20cars%20conspiracy%20FBI&utm_content=NYSR%20Black%20history%20self-driving%20cars%20conspiracy%20FBI+CID_da929440f2c87500c9f294b67c663abb&utm_source=Newsletter&utm_term=At%20Last%20a%20Black%20History%20Museum.

² James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York, 2001).



Badge from a Madam C. J. Walker Convention, c. 1920.

Madam Walker, the first black female millionaire in the United States, built her business empire during her years in Indianapolis. Walker is among the women honored at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of Dr. Patricia Heaston

The Lyles Station exhibit includes artifacts similar to those of any nineteenth-century midwestern rural community: agricultural implements, a beautiful quilt, family photographs, and a church lectern. But people in the faded photos are not white, and the podium is from the Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The simplest artifact is the most moving: a jar of soil from the farm of the Greer family, who have worked this Gibson County land since 1849. From that jar radiates the power of land ownership, of place, of freedom.

Curators were wise to give Lyles Station such attention. The community still exists. Descendants of the early settlers and other volunteers, led by Stanley Madison, have ensured that the AME church stands and that the school has been preserved as a superb local history museum, a place to learn far more about this community than one can on the Mall in Washington. The Lyles Station exhibit attracted media attention, particularly when a busload of family members and friends travelled to Washington for a preview.³

One exhibit label tells us that Lyles Station “offers a window into the largely unknown story of free black pioneers on the American frontier.” That’s true in the sense that so many Americans know only tidbits of African American history—perhaps the Underground Railroad, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr. Beyond that lies a wasteland of ignorance, some of it willful. Racial injustice may be America’s greatest failure, but it remains one too painful for many whites to contemplate.

Americans can no longer offer the excuse that we just don’t know. Historians began decades ago to find African American stories and put them in contexts of American history. In the 1950s, Emma Lou Thornbrough built the foundation for a changing Indiana history that included the Lyles Station story. A 1980s documentary put Lyles Station onto PBS television screens; the Roberts Settlement stands as the centerpiece of an excellent book.⁴

³ *Washington Post*, September 25, 2016, <http://wpo.st/s34M2>; National Public Radio, September 22, 2016, http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/09/22/494984116/in-indiana-the-last-remnants-of-americas-free-african-american-settlements?utm_source=npr_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20161213&utm_campaign=npr_email_a_friend&utm_term=storyshare.

⁴ Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana: A Study of a Minority* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1957); Wilma L. Gibbs, ed., *Indiana’s African-American Heritage: Essays from Black History News and Notes* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1993); *Joshua’s Battle: The Story of Lyles Station* (Bloomington, WTIU, 1988); Stephen A. Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765-1900* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999); James H. Madison, “What Is Our History Today?” *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 28 (Fall 2016), 4-11.



Podium used at the Wayman Chapel A.M.E. Church in Lyles Station, Indiana.

The museum's "Power of Place" exhibit presents ten "place studies" offering "intimate views into distinct moments of the African American experience." One of those place studies features the historic African American community of Lyles Station, Indiana.

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Lyles Station Historic Preservation Corporation

We remain ignorant partly because we all want happy stories. We want a narrative in which differences and conflict are smoothed over or ignored. Despite decades of good scholarship, Americans still find it hard to understand that our greatest conflict, the Civil War, was about slavery and race. Many whites can't quite comprehend the thousands of lynchings in our past or the hate crimes in our own day. This new museum is full of stories of progress and uplift (perhaps too many, as one reviewer has suggested), but signs on the wall still read, "images outlined in red may not be suitable for younger or more sensitive visitors."⁵ Much of our history might be outlined in red, even if we can still believe that America is the "last best hope of earth," as our great Hoosier statesman claimed.

At the entrance to the history galleries is a quotation from historian John Hope Franklin: "We've got to tell the unvarnished truth." Our National Museum of African American History and Culture is a necessary response to our failures to tell truths. Had we done a better job long ago, black history would have been fully incorporated into American history and into other museums, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, adjacent to the new institution. Our failure to teach and learn opened the way for this grand new place on the Mall.⁶ Some will rightly see it as a stick in the eye to white America, standing proudly near the Washington Monument, the White House, and the Lincoln Memorial. Looking unlike its neighbors, the spectacular building offers a permanent reminder of our tangled history of race even as it presents an open door and warm welcome to all Americans to enter and learn.⁷

In large letters on the high atrium wall are James Baldwin's words: "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it . . . history is literally present in all that we do." No other museum I know makes that point so convincingly.

⁵ A reviewer in the *Wall Street Journal*, Edward Rothstein, found the museum "flawed" because it "grows out of the Identity model, in which history plays a subsidiary role and self-celebration is the main point." Some online comments on Rothstein's article reveal an appalling ignorance, even crude racism, demonstrating why the museum is so necessary today. *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture-review-a-moving-but-flawed-accounting-of-history-1473893066>.

⁶ The museum's website includes resources for teachers and students, including help with National History Day research.

⁷ Because of large numbers of visitors, the museum requires timed entry passes.



A sign displayed in some of the exhibits at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The museum warns visitors of visual images and objects that may be difficult for young and sensitive viewers.

Courtesy of the author