

# Using Research to Guide the Development and Marketing of an African-American Exhibit

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## Background

Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village is an indoor-outdoor museum in Dearborn, Michigan, a manufacturing and residential community of 100,000 people that adjoins the City of Detroit. Founded in 1929, it is comprised of a 14-acre indoor museum and 80 historic buildings in an adjacent outdoor setting.

Most buildings in Greenfield Village are original historic structures which were moved to the Village for reconstruction in the late 1920s and 1930s. The variety of structures ranges from Noah Webster's elegant Connecticut home to Henry Ford's schoolmaster's modest dwelling, from Thomas Edison's Menlo Park, New Jersey laboratory (where he invented the first successful incandescent lamp) to sawmills that were staffed by common Americans.

Among these buildings is the Mattox House, originally located in Bryan County, Georgia near Henry Ford's Richmond Hill, Georgia plantation. Henry Ford moved it to Dearborn, reassembled it in the Village in 1943 and displayed it as the home of a white slave overseer. Also on display are two sixteen-foot-square brick slave houses from the Hermitage Plantation near Savannah, Georgia. Henry Ford chose to site the buildings near a courthouse in which Abraham Lincoln had once practiced law. The museum interpreters' manual of several years ago explained that these structures were in Greenfield Village "to serve as monuments to Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves."

Primary research documentation is much more accessible in the age of the computer than it was when these structures were moved to Greenfield Village. In addition, the current museum staff is much more highly trained in research and interpretation than those who were involved in the 1940s. For these reasons Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield in 1981 embarked upon a massive project to systematically re-research and reassess every key structure in the Village. In most cases this has been followed by a more accurate restoration and interpretation. This process will continue for several years.

During research of the Mattox House, it was discovered that the current interpretation was seriously incorrect—that the house is not the home of a white plantation overseer, but was built by a free black family who farmed the homestead and gave it to their son Amos Mattox. He in turn raised his family there until the home was acquired by Henry Ford.

Personal interviews with members of the family and area residents, combined with analysis of photos and inventories of similar homes in the area, revealed that the building's indoor furnishings and yard were not being accurately presented in Greenfield Village. In addition, the proximity to the Lincoln courthouse limited the museum's ability to focus attention on African-American family life and culture. The decision was made to move the house to a more spacious and open site near other homes in the Village, and to concentrate on showing that family, education and religion were very important to the Mattox family.

Meanwhile, the slave houses also were under study. Built about 1845, they were among many that served as living quarters for slaves on an industrial plantation that was a major producer of bricks. During their time at Greenfield Village, these buildings had been interpreted only by a small sign that identified them as slave quarters, and by a few furnishings which could only be seen by looking through a small window into an unlighted interior. The decision was made to move the slave houses and the Mattox House to the same site, so that together they would comprise an exhibit on African-American family life and culture.

It was determined that one of the slave houses would be a memorial providing testimony to African-Americans who were enslaved but escaped to freedom and later wrote of their experiences. Their pictures and quotations from their writings would be featured there. The second house would be furnished with a reproduction bed, table, benches and cookware to interpret the residence of an enslaved carpenter and his family. The bed often surprises those who envision slaves sleeping on the floor, but its high quality is consistent with that which a carpenter would have made during this period.

## The Situation

Many black residents of the City of Detroit and the Detroit area feel they are not welcome in Dearborn. This feeling was reinforced in 1986 with passage by Dearborn voters of an ordinance to close Dearborn city parks to non-residents. The NAACP called for a boycott of all Dearborn businesses, including Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, because it felt that the intention of the park closure was to keep blacks out. A court ruling prevented Dearborn from enforcing the ordinance, but the city's already bad image in black communities was made worse.

Although only a few blacks live in Dearborn today, the city is not a homogeneous community. A third of Dearborn's population is middle-eastern—the largest such population in the United States.

## **The New African-American Exhibit**

The new exhibit would contradict the museum's earlier representation of the history of these buildings. It would be the museum's first effort at treating the emotional subject of enslaved people, and would also represent a Gullah African-American culture—which is quite different from the cultural background of many Detroit area African-Americans. Given as well that it was going to be located in a city that is not noted for welcoming blacks, it was clear that this work should be guided not only by historical research but also by on-going audience research beginning with conceptualization of the exhibit idea, and continuing indefinitely after its completion.

This paper will briefly outline the seven different types of research that were conducted, describing for each the purpose, and the ways in which each influenced the development of the exhibit. Key research and planning counsel for this project were provided by Hood Associates (general audience assessment), Moore and Associates (focus groups), Marilyn Rothenberg of People, Places and Design Research (various user studies), and Clifton Associates (public relations work).

### **Seven Types of Research**

#### **Type 1: A Search for Primary Documentation**

**Purpose:** To determine and validate the history of these buildings and the people associated with them.

**How research influenced the exhibit:** This work helped to focus the story treatment by establishing the individuals and the time which would be interpreted. It helped staff members get acquainted with those individuals, their families, their life styles and their work. Contact was made with the families of people associated with the sites, for on-going consultation. This research also helped to authenticate the appearance and furnishings of similar buildings in this region during the time period being interpreted.

#### **Type 2: A Consulting Panel**

**Purpose:** To obtain input from people who were knowledgeable of African-Americans of the Gullah culture as well as those living in Detroit, and from museum professionals who were experienced in interpreting African-American history. Educators from the Detroit public school system participated in this panel as well.

How research influenced the exhibit: This work helped to shape objectives for an informed and effective visitor experience. The process included selection of a site within Greenfield Village and the location of buildings upon that site, as well as the establishing of a varied menu of experience offerings ranging from special-event weekends to daily audio-visual presentations.

It also helped to identify some pitfalls to be avoided, as well as some of the failures and successes at other sites. It clearly established that the history of Dearborn required proactive "bridgebuilding" with several important constituencies in the metropolitan Detroit area. This important step was taken with the help of a new community relations department staffed by an African-American.

### **Type 3: Consultation with a Minority-Owned Public Relations Agency**

Purpose: To help the Museum and Village become more effective and to avoid mistakes while acquainting and engaging the Detroit African-American communities with this new exhibit. During this process it was important for staff members to recognize that there were several different groups of African-Americans in Detroit whose views differ significantly.

How research influenced the exhibit: This phase of the work identified opinion leaders in high-priority segments of African-American communities in the Detroit area, and proposed methods of reaching them including site visits. It also helped to identify potential problems in areas such as securing the understanding and support of the media and of diverse African-American and Euro-American stakeholders and audience prospects. It served as well to validate the importance of the museum's employment of an African-American in the position of project coordinator, and assisted in the opening event by helping to develop invitation lists and plan the activities.

### **Type 4: Focus Groups Conducted by a Minority-Owned Research Firm**

Purpose: To help shape the content of the exhibit and the promotional messages about it, by discussing motivations for, and perceived benefits of museum visitation. This was accomplished by determining the extent and nature of parents' discussions of African-American history with their children, by eliciting reactions to the exhibit plan, and by establishing their interest in visiting the exhibit and exploring attitudes toward, and image of, Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village, and the City of Dearborn.

One focus group was conducted with each of four audience segments: suburban African-Americans, suburban Euro-Americans, Detroit African-

Americans, and Detroit Euro-Americans. All participants were parents of children ages 8-15, and all had participated in a cultural place or activity in the last three years.

How research influenced the exhibit: The results of this phase suggested that the exhibit theme should be focused on resilience and resistance, and other positive characteristics, rather than on the horrors of slavery. It also called attention to African-Americans' concern that we were showing only a low point in the culture without referencing earlier periods of high culture. Participants asserted that the exhibit should demonstrate the proud history of these people.

African-Americans were also concerned that this might be a one-shot program for marketing purposes, rather than an ongoing and broad institutional focus. However, marketing gains, although hoped for, were not a central objective for the exhibit. Interestingly, African-Americans who felt the exhibit was primarily intended to increase attendance from blacks did not view that objective as necessarily negative.

It was established that museum staff members were sending out damaging non-verbal messages and that sensitivity training would be required. It was revealed that Euro-Americans focused more on negative aspects of African-American history, while African-Americans stressed the positive in teaching about pre-slavery times, including the strength and perseverance of slaves, and the contributions of African-Americans.

When viewing the exhibit plan, both European- and African-American groups perceived that the exhibit would attempt to illustrate progress by exhibiting slave houses and the home of a free black, although this was not an intention of the exhibit. All groups felt that there should be more to the exhibit to make it alone worth a trip to Greenfield Village. All of them felt as well that the exhibit should be staffed by knowledgeable African-Americans in period costume.

Regarding the general image of Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Euro-Americans used words like "great," "educational," and "fun." African-Americans more often used words like "cars," "white folks," and "inventions." For all of them Greenfield Village was an appropriate location for this exhibit. Although some African-Americans said they were not particularly comfortable visiting Dearborn, generally Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village were thought of as not being a part of Dearborn.

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### **Type 5. Formative Studies**

Several different methods were used to test prospective materials, including:

#### **A. Interviews conducted randomly among visitors**

**Purpose:** To determine the expectations and interests of visitors regarding African-American history.

**How research influenced the exhibit:** There was the suggestion of greater credibility for this exhibit if on-site interpreters were African-Americans. At the time the museum employed only two African-Americans out of a total interpretive staff of more than 100. Following an intense recruitment process, 18 were employed.

#### **B. True-False questionnaires distributed to visitors, educators, children, parents and other audience segments**

**Purpose:** To establish peoples' knowledge and misconceptions of African-American history.

**How research influenced the exhibit:** People often thought the word "slave" was synonymous with the word "black." This distanced them from the concept of slaves as people. As a result, all references were changed to "enslaved people." Seldom was there any idea of what enslaved people did after 6 p.m.—there was no concept of enslaved people having a family life.

Participants thought families were not allowed to live together and that enslaved people would not have written stories and books. Generally they were not aware that there were industrial plantations and that enslaved people could be highly skilled.

#### **C & D. Random review of exhibit audio tapes and an orientation label, by Greenfield Village visitors**

**Purpose:** To elicit visitor reaction and determine what messages were being communicated.

**How research influenced the exhibit:** It was decided that each vignette needed to be introduced by a narrator and needed to be shortened. It was also determined that people would not understand the Gullah dialect. The tape was completely eliminated in the enslaved carpenter's home because it became evident that visitors preferred to converse with each other and with the interpreter. People were surprised that African-Americans might have come to the Americas before slavery and that Europeans attempted to

enslave Native Americans. This provided evidence of other subjects that needed to be included in the interpretation.

**Type 6: Random distribution of draft curriculum materials to teachers for review and comment**

**Purpose:** To determine if materials met teacher needs and to gauge the likelihood that they would be used.

**How research influenced the exhibit:** Materials were reformatted to give them a narrower, sharper focus. The most salient points were more clearly called out in the text and the materials were tied into the teachers' curricula by designing a series of visits that would help teachers utilize them in 9th grade Detroit Public Schools. Copies of primary documents were added. In addition, workshops were developed to instruct teachers how to use the exhibit.

**Type 7: Upon completion of the exhibit, testing of fifth and seventh grade students' knowledge of African American history before and after a visit**

**Purpose:** To determine if and how the exhibit influenced children's knowledge of American history. Students were asked to put in writing or drawing their image of what an enslaved person did after 6 p.m.

**How research influenced the exhibit:** It helped to narrow further the exhibit's focus upon three key concepts: resourcefulness, resilience and family. It suggested a need to reconfigure the floor plan in one of the slave houses to prevent people from bypassing it. It further suggested that there was a need to better communicate that the slave houses and the Mattox house are from different time periods.

When compared with pictures drawn before a visit to the exhibit, those drawn afterward suggested that children were being made aware of the resourcefulness, resilience and family life of an enslaved people.

## **Conclusion**

Generally, Greenfield Village staff members feel that the opening activities and subsequent visitation to the exhibit have been successful. However, research continues, especially with regard to daily interpretation and school group programs.