



Museum Grants for African American History and Culture

Sample Application MH-249505-OMS-21

Museum of African American History

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$50,000
Amount of cost share:	\$0

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:
<https://www.ims.gov/grants/awarded/mh-249505-oms-21>

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

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NARRATIVE

Project Justification

Needs and Challenges The Museum of African American History (MAAH) preserves and interprets uniquely important historic structures, which we have carefully restored over the last two decades: in Boston, we steward the African Meeting House (built by the city's Black community in 1806) and the Abiel Smith School (1835). On our Nantucket campus, visitors experience the island's own African Meeting House (c. 1820), where nineteenth-century activists fighting for human rights gathered. The meeting house additionally served as a school for the community. We now host our public programs in this meaningful space, for year-round residents and summer visitors alike. Also on MAAH's Nantucket campus is the Seneca Boston-Florence Higginbotham House, built c. 1774 by Seneca Boston, a weaver and formerly enslaved man. He and his wife, Thankful Micah, a member of the Wampanoag Tribe, raised their six children in the house. One of them, Absalom Boston, became a successful whaling captain who continued living in the house as an adult, with his family. Except for a period of less than one year, the house and three later outbuildings were held by African Americans, including early-twentieth-century chef Florence Higginbotham, for the next two centuries.

The rest of MAAH's collections—comprising documents, photographs, fine art, and archeological artifacts, along with some furniture and other objects—are housed in a fine-arts storage facility in Boston and at a second storage facility (non-fine-arts quality) on Nantucket. Among the collections that have been newly consolidated and organized in Boston—through a FY18 Museum Grant for African American History and Culture—are works by notable nineteenth-century artists of African descent; historical documents; archaeological material predating our historic sites; rare nineteenth-century books; the uniform and ceremonial sword of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw; and photographs of African American Civil War soldiers.

Having successfully optimized storage conditions in our Boston facility, MAAH was grateful for the FY20 Museum Grant for African American History and Culture that enabled us to make significant progress in addressing improper storage of our collections on Nantucket Island, as recommended by the 2016 MAP Review conducted at MAAH, thanks to a FY14 Museum Grant for African American History and Culture. These collections include archives related to the history and restoration of the island's African Meeting House, as well as furniture and personal effects that belonged to Florence Higginbotham.

Through the FY20 grant (despite obstacles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic), MAAH has completed major aspects of the needed collections assessment and storage optimization. Key tasks we achieved this year include: cleaning and organizing the Nantucket storage areas, with the addition of one unit for especially fragile items; establishing location controls; cataloging, digitizing, and properly rehousing all furniture and clothing; cataloging most small artifacts and photographs; sorting, weeding, and rehousing archival materials; creation of a Finding Aid and Box list for archival materials, plus their entry into the PastPerfect database; and installation of a data-logger to monitor storage climate. In addition, MAAH's Associate Director of Nantucket

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Operations, Kimal McCarthy, received collections-related best-practices training in object handling, rehousing techniques, rudimentary cataloguing plus data entry, and data-logger installation, along with basic data retrieval.

Beyond these accomplishments, notable challenges remain. Approximately one third of MAAH's Nantucket collections are still uncatalogued. This information is necessary to fully monitor, safeguard, access, and use these historic items. The Associate Director of Nantucket Operations has not received certain additional in-depth training, although care for the collections on-site will be primarily in his hands. He would benefit from further training in such collections care as housekeeping protocols, environmental monitoring, and more detailed cataloguing. By addressing these final issues with the collections MAAH holds on Nantucket, the museum will gain full intellectual and physical control of these objects, in order to serve both scholars and the general public who visit our Nantucket campus more comprehensively.

Specific Proposal MAAH proposes to conduct the second phase of our Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization through a \$50,000 FY21 Museum Grant for African American History and Culture from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). This continued support will enable MAAH to again hire consultants who would work with museum staff to achieve the following objectives:

- Complete a catalogue of the MAAH collections in storage on Nantucket.
- Increase collection accessibility through digitization.
- Increase documentation and preservation standards.
- Continue to implement better location controls.
- Perform preservation maintenance cleaning of the furniture collection.
- Improve collections care and institutional sustainability through continued staff training in cataloguing, climate monitoring, augmentation, and preservation housekeeping.
- Provide an educational experience for one graduate-level Intern.

A principal objective of MAAH's Nantucket Collections and Storage Optimization Project, Phase 2 is to complete cataloguing and rehousing of collections in storage. During this year's Phase 1, the team created a spreadsheet, which provided a top level view of the collections in storage. Now more data needs to be collected and photographs taken. While cataloguing was not an explicit goal of Phase I, we did begin this process, but were unable to finish because:

- We found far more small objects in boxes than apparent from the photographs and documentation of the storage spaces. An estimated 40 cataloger man days are needed to complete the work.
- Some objects had been partially catalogued, but using five different numbering systems. Reconciliation and homogenizing the numbering systems takes extra time.
- The Phase 1 team ended up making six trips to the dump to remove trash from the storage units; originally, it was thought one or two trips would be sufficient.
- Supplies took extra time to arrive with supply-chain issues due to COVID-19, so some rehousing remains to be completed in Phase 2.
- An unexpected quantity of items require additional supplies for rehousing in Phase 2.

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One of the objectives for Nantucket Collections and Storage Optimization Project, Phase 1 was to train the Associate Director of Nantucket Operations in climate monitoring. Unfortunately, again due to supply-chain issues, the data-logger did not arrive until after the on-site portion of Phase 1 had ended. Therefore, more training on the interpretation of climate data and actions that can be taken to augment collections environments would be conducted in Nantucket Collections and Storage Optimization Project, Phase 2. In addition, each storage space, as well as the Boston-Higginbotham House, the African Meeting House, and the Education Center in the restored and repurposed garage building should all have data-loggers installed. This would allow for active climate monitoring and data analysis to confirm that these sites are appropriate for the display of collections and what, if any, steps need to be taken to augment the environments.

MAAH has again selected Museum and Collector Resource (MCR) to work with us on Phase 2 of this project, after our fruitful work with them on Nantucket this year, and in Boston during 2019. Before founding MCR in 1996, Principal Valarie Kinkade completed graduate work in archaeology at Yale University and worked for fifteen years as a museum professional for a wide variety of institutions, including the Smithsonian and the US Coast Guard Museum. Having prioritized the tasks still to be undertaken at the conclusion of Phase 1, MCR will provide further collections management training and coordinate activities to accomplish the above objectives with Collections Manager Cara Liasson, who will direct the project, beyond her regular duties with regard to the development of a new permanent exhibit to be displayed at our Boston site.

Beneficiaries and Ways Project Addresses IMLS Goals For more than fifty years, our well-regarded museum has linked leading scholarship to the history of how African Americans built bridges across race and class, working to effect profound changes that still resonate from America's past into the present and future. By achieving our goals for the Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization, Phase 2 Project, MAAH will continue building our capacity, particularly in the collections area, which for too many years was not a priority, while MAAH focused on the restoration of our historic buildings. Most importantly, MAAH will further open access to the important objects the museum holds, better allowing study by scholars and the interested public, as well as expanded interpretation for museum visitors.

MAAH's Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization, Phase 2 Project fits within the IMLS goals to improve care of collections and develop more professional management at African American museums. With carefully stewarded and stored collections, MAAH will have deepened capacity to offer lifelong learning experiences. A greater range of the items in our Nantucket-related collections will be available for use in the educational programs we offer, serving students in kindergarten through college by increasing their cultural understanding and civic engagement. The Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization, Phase 2 Project will also position MAAH for conservation while moving the museum forward in the digitization of our collections, as we continue increasing use of technology for discovery of history and cultural heritage.

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Project Work Plan

If awarded this grant, MAAH and MCR staff would conduct a kick-off meeting (virtually, if necessary) in July, 2021, and other planning meeting(s) during August, 2021. Logistics for travel to the island, along with lodging, will also be finalized in July and August. Prior to arriving on the island, MCR will draft housekeeping manuals for the storage spaces and the historic sites. These manuals will be shared with the MAAH Associate Director of Nantucket Operations and Collections Manager so they are familiar with the general principals of this work before it begins. In July, MAAH will post for a graduate-level Intern and subsequently interview candidates, with the help of MCR. While the Intern will be responsible for her/his/their own housing, a small stipend will be provided. The Intern will need to be available on the island for 18-20 days mid- to late September (and possibly into early October), when the on-site portion of the project will take place.

In mid- to late September, 2021, when housing rates decrease on Nantucket, the MAAH Collections Manager and three MCR staff (Curator, Registrar, and Assistant Registrar) would travel to Nantucket and share rented accommodations. Joining in the virtual planning meetings, and then later on-site, would be the Associate Director of Operations on Nantucket and the Intern. In order to allow for the rental of a three-bedroom housing unit, the MCR Curator and Assistant Registrar will switch off for their on-site work, with the MCR Curator coming for the first half, and the Assistant Registrar for the second half. The MCR Registrar will be on site the entire work period. The MAAH Collections Manager will come to Nantucket for the first half of the project. It is expected that the Intern will be on Nantucket during the same period as the MCR Registrar.

Once on site, the MCR Curator will work to revise the housekeeping plans with the input of the MAAH staff and MCR Registrar. The MCR Curator will also train the Intern, along with MAAH staff as needed. This will allow for the introduction of preservation-level cleaning supplies and equipment, along with techniques designed to protect the museum's historic structures and collections. It is anticipated that the Boston-Higginbotham House will be furnished by this time with some combination of reproductions, use collections, and original collections.

In storage, all of the Furniture collections will be vacuumed using a Nilfisk HEPA vacuum to improve preservation maintenance. The MAAH staff and Intern will receive training in this activity. Upholstery will be vacuumed with the addition of a screen. Any condition issues not previously identified in Phase 1 will be noted in the collections database and additional photographs taken as necessary.

The other main activity in storage will be the continued cataloguing of the collections. The following data will be collected on each object or its component parts: object name, measurements, description, photograph, object ID number, author/manufacturer and maker's marks, associated individuals/people, keywords, medium/materials, condition, and location. Objects needing rehousing will also be handled at this juncture. Cataloguing will allow for greatly improved collections access for the staff, facilitating the ongoing furnishing and interpretation of the Boston-Higginbotham House. Data and image quality control checks will be instituted throughout the project.

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In addition to education on collections stewardship the proposed internship will consist of a term paper and a museum site visit. While on Nantucket, the Intern will be encouraged to identify a project or topic relating to the collections to form the basis of a term paper due at the conclusion of the internship. MCR will arrange for a site visit with the Intern and MAAH staff to view collections storage at the Nantucket Whaling Museum. This visit would also provide an opportunity to forge stronger connections with Whaling Museum staff, while learning about another institution's storage spaces and challenges.

After returning from Nantucket, the MCR Curator will develop a final report detailing the work completed, number of items catalogued, number of objects receiving preservation maintenance cleaning, and any challenges to full realization of Phase 2. The report will also contain recommendations and next steps for improving MAAH Nantucket collections stewardship. The Intern will submit her/his/their paper for review by MCR and MAAH staff. MCR will work with the MAAH Collections Manager to complete the Intern's work review for her/his/their university or program. The Housekeeping Plan will receive its final edits and both documents will be transmitted to MAAH.

This proposed Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization, Phase 2 Project is time-sensitive in that the work must be conducted after the high tourist season on Nantucket, when housing rental is cost-prohibitive, but not during the coldest months because the storage spaces are minimally heated.

MCR Experience MCR has catalogued numerous collections, and specializes in historical collections. MCR also has experience with African American history collections including those of Tougaloo College, Mississippi; National Park Service Selma to Montgomery March National Historical sites visitor centers; Rhode Island Black Heritage Society; and two previous collections projects with MAAH.

MCR regularly works with clients, including house museums, to monitor environmental conditions. They install data-loggers from various manufacturers, review climate data and make recommendations for adjusting set points and other methods to improve preservation conditions. MCR has also produced several historic housekeeping plans over the past 20 years, including plans for several historic sites and storage facilities.

The MCR Curator has extensive experience running internship programs and supervised two successful internships under the FY18 IMLS grant awarded to MAAH for collections stewardship and storage optimization in their Boston storage facilities.

In terms of project risks, MCR consultants have more than sufficient experience—having worked with the numerous museums listed above, as well as the MIT Museum and the Denver Art Museum—to carry out this project with professional attention to all details and potential pitfalls. Regular status meetings/calls will allow clear, continuous communication, along with a forum for immediate updates, adjustments, and/or corrections to the project.

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Project Results

The Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization, Phase 2 Project will further advance MAAH's best-practices stewardship of our holdings on Nantucket through MCR's specialized expertise. The proposed project will also continue building museum capacity and improving sustainability for the MAAH Nantucket collections.

Beyond these results, another positive outcome of this proposed Phase 2 project will be additional progress toward a future digitization project for the collections. The project will also ready MAAH to handle any needed conservation of items in our Nantucket collections. Most significantly, completing the project's proposed cataloging, rehousing, and staff training in collections care will mean that MAAH can make more frequent use of the items we hold for exhibitions and education programs. As with any museum, MAAH needs a detailed understanding of our collections in order to showcase items via on-site, digital, and/or social-media-based exhibits and interpretation. MAAH's focus on teaching with objects from our collections strengthens our ability to share the history of African American life and experiences on Nantucket. With improved knowledge of individual objects, along with these objects' links to other items in MAAH collections, we are better able to serve the island's schools, the general public, international visitors, and scholarly researchers.

Sustaining the Project's Benefits Our grant request to IMLS will support MAAH as we wrap up the principal tasks needed to stabilize our collection, while helping the museum grow through in-depth understanding our Nantucket holdings. These benefits will be maintained through a more knowledgeable staff, particularly the Associate Director of Nantucket Operations, who will have built additional skills and expertise by working alongside MCR staff. The Intern will gain valuable first-hand experience within the fields of collections and historic museums.

At the end of the Nantucket Collections Assessment and Storage Optimization, Phase 2 Project, MAAH will have assessed, properly organized, inventoried, catalogued, and rehoused the vast majority of our collections, both in Boston and on Nantucket, through the important capacity-building grants awarded to the museum by IMLS. We remain truly grateful for this support. IMLS has greatly helped MAAH become a more informed museum, so that we can make the best use of historic objects or archives to fulfill our educational and interpretive mission. Thanks to IMLS, MAAH continues moving forward, better and better equipped to expand the American stories we tell by employing our collections in order to showcase links between the African American history of New England and the rest of the United States.

