



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-251674-OMS-22
Project Category: Community Engagement

Schenectady County Historical Society

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$87,100
Amount of cost share:	\$88,519

The Schenectady County Historical Society will survey historical records created by individuals and organizations in the African American community of Schenectady County. A consulting project archivist will work with an advisory committee, museum staff and student assistants to conduct site visits to review record collections, document those of enduring historic value, and log responses to survey questions from creators, collectors, and custodians of historical records. Public programs will promote the project and provide information to the community on topics such as preservation and family history. The project team will analyze the survey data and develop a searchable online catalog that identifies the location of records, their condition, and whether they are accessible to the public. This project will encourage community stewardship of historical records, engage the community to foster archival preservation, and strengthen relationships between the museum and community partners.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion
- Digital Product Plan

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 and project category to which you are applying.

Proposal Narrative – Schenectady County Historical Society

Project Justification

Program goal/project category and associated objective: Goal 2 – Community Engagement.
Objective 2.3

What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?

The Schenectady County Historical Society (SCHS) requests funding to conduct an archival documentation survey of historical records created by individuals and organizations within the African American community of Schenectady County. This survey will lead to a public, online catalog that identifies where those records are, what condition they are in, and whether they are accessible to the public.

According to the most recent census data, African Americans make up at least 13% of Schenectady County and 20% of the city of Schenectady. African Americans have been part of our community since colonial times, and contributed significantly to our history. However, historical records created by African Americans are significantly underrepresented in the collections available to the public in repositories like SCHS. The records available in local and regional repositories like SCHS were largely created by white people and document African Americans through a white perspective. African American organizations and individuals have created their own collections, usually as part of their regular operations, but little has been done to arrange and describe these records or make them known to the wider community. In some cases, these collections have been damaged or unutilized by their creators and custodians due to lack of awareness and underappreciation for their enduring historic value. Record creators and custodians rarely have the resources or knowledge to curate, describe, and preserve their historical collections.

For example, the Hamilton Hill Arts Center is the county's only organization dedicated to art of the African diaspora. It was established 50 years ago, has been continuously led by Black artists since its founding, and has engaged generations of African Americans in art and cultural understanding. Yet, over the years, significant portions of the organization's historic records have been discarded, portions have been dispersed to individuals in the community, and portions have been damaged or lost to technology obsolescence, including a history written by the organization's founder. The remaining collection is stored in the organization's basement and is rarely used due to lack of arrangement and description. Historians, record creators, and record custodians in Schenectady have been discussing the lack of access and awareness of African American community records for at least twenty-five years, but no distinct, collaborative action has been taken to identify and preserve community-held historical records, or to engage the community in developing community archives and preservation plans.

As part of our strategic planning process, SCHS conducted community surveys and focus groups which identified African American history as a key area of interest and an important avenue for community engagement. Recent scholarship, including two books, has focused on African Americans living in Schenectady in the antebellum period. SCHS has seen an increase in the

number of teachers, students, and researchers asking for primary sources related to enslaved people, free people of color, African American organizations, and topics related to the African American community. Several local African American institutions have celebrated major anniversaries and sought records to supplement the oral tradition of their members. Many of these efforts have been hindered by the lack of access to historical records created by African Americans. In the past two years, local reaction to national events and local actions such as the development of the Schenectady Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative have increased the focus on African American lives and experiences, and highlighted the need for better understanding of African American history and access to primary sources created by African Americans within our community.

Who is the target group for your project and how have they been involved in the planning?

The target group for this project is the African American community of Schenectady County, particularly record creators and record custodians. The target group consists of approximately 19,000 people within Schenectady County, including 13,000 within the city of Schenectady. This project will target organizations and individuals within the community who are creators and custodians of historical records. Churches, faith-based organizations, community services organizations, and cultural organizations will likely have the greatest volume of historical records, but individuals and businesses will also be included. We expect that the records identified in the survey will have been created between 1880 and 2020, but the majority will be from the last 70 years.

We convened an advisory committee of 8 community members to plan the project and oversee the implementation. Members of the advisory committee are history advocates, long-time residents of Schenectady, and leaders and active participants in a variety of organizations and groups within the African American community. They are church elders, local business owners, directors of non-profits, artists, and teachers. The advisory committee meets regularly and stays in communication through email. The advisory committee chose the project archivist to create the survey and project methodology and will work closely with the project archivist and project director to implement the survey and develop the catalog.

Who are the ultimate beneficiaries for this project?

Beneficiaries of this project include members of the Schenectady African American community, particularly the creators, collectors, and custodians of historical records created by African Americans. The catalog will help connect members of the community with their own historical records, increase understanding of the value of historical records, promote community stewardship of archival collections, and build context and networks for future collaboration within the community.

Students, teachers, and researchers, especially within the Schenectady City School District, will benefit from increased awareness of primary resources for their curriculum and research. Black students are the largest population in the Schenectady City School District, comprising about 33% of the student body. Students enrolled in the SCSD high school and local colleges will benefit from the opportunity to assist with project activities and engage with the resulting data

and collection descriptions. Providing opportunities for student involvement was a high priority for the advisory committee as part of larger community efforts to engage the community's youth and develop relationships between youth and community elders. The project will benefit SCHS by strengthening our relationships within the community and creating a basis for future research, archival description, collection development, and preservation collaborations and projects that focus on African American history.

The general public in Schenectady and the larger Capital Region of New York will benefit as well. Much of the history within the Capital Region is interconnected and the results of this project will likely lead to new information about events, organizations, and movements that impacted the entire region. Researchers will have new resources to help them integrate the underrepresented history of African Americans with the more well-known and documented narratives of the area's history. The general public will benefit from new knowledge created about the historical records of the African American community and access to information about community archives and preservation. A better understanding of African American history can increase empathy in the general public and appreciation of the ways African Americans have contributed to our communities.

How will your project advance your museum's strategic plan?

The Schenectady County Historical Society (SCHS) Strategic Plan identifies community engagement and collaboration as key components of the organization's activities. In the section *Strategic Issue #2: Collaborations, Community Engagement, and Communications*, the strategic plan states that SCHS will "expand and strengthen our working partnerships and community engagement to better achieve our mission, and to position SCHS as a vibrant, outward facing organization." This project supports this element of the strategic plan by working with community partners to identify records of historical significance created by individuals and organizations within the African American community of Schenectady County, NY.

We've convened an advisory committee of community members who are advocates for community participation and African American history. We've established relationships with community record holders and record creators to create proactive and sustained dialogues about their historical records and preservation concerns. These relationships will become the basis for the survey. The survey and resulting catalog will become the foundation for future research, preservation, and education, and will strengthen the connections between SCHS and the African American community of Schenectady County. This project will become a model for future collaborative and community-focused projects that will allow SCHS to serve as a "convener and resource for history advocates in the region," which is another component of our strategic plan.

Project Work Plan

What specific activities will you carry out and in what sequence?

The project work plan has two components: (1) the survey and associated community programs; and (2) the catalog and associated publicity. The majority of the grant period will be spent on the survey activities and community programs. These activities begin with confirming

the methodology we've developed from our current planning activities and training survey assistants. The survey assistants will be students at the SCSD high school or in undergraduate and graduate programs at local colleges. The advisory committee emphasized the need to involve local students, especially high school students, in the project. During our planning activities, we identified an initial set of survey participants, including organizations and individuals with potentially significant collections, such as the Duryee AME Memorial Church, the oldest African American church in Schenectady. Our next step during the survey phase will be to confirm the participation of this initial set of survey respondents, and schedule meetings and site visits to begin surveying their records. The bulk of the project will be spent conducting site visits and working with survey respondents to review their record collections, document the records of enduring historic value, and log responses to survey questions from community partners, particularly record creators and custodians.

As part of the survey activities, we plan to hold events and programs in the community, such as Oral History Days, Digitization Days, and Family History Days. These events will help promote the project and its goals, identify potential survey respondents, and educate the community on topics relevant to the project such as preservation and family history. Several of our community partners have identified oral histories as a necessary component of the project. Community elders are a rich resource of African American history, and this project recognizes the necessity of recording and documenting their stories and recollections.

The catalog portion of the project will begin with compiling, reviewing, and verifying the data collected by survey. The data will be analyzed to determine the most appropriate catalog product and ensure the project is on track to reach its goals. Once the catalog product is chosen, the data will be entered into the catalog. The catalog will then be published online on a publicly available website. We will publicize the catalog and promote its use by the community, researchers, and survey participants.

What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?

SCHS is committed to acknowledging and minimizing the risks and operational challenges in the implementation of this project through effective planning and communication with the advisory committee. The most significant risk to this project is funding. The cost share component of our proposed grant budget relies on grant funding from the NY State Archives and Schenectady County legislature. We will be notified of the results of these grant applications before the September 1 start date, but we may not receive the full requested awards or the award payments may be delayed. If our grant applications are denied or the payments delayed, we will meet the IMLS cost share requirements through fundraising and reallocating portions of our institutional budget.

Another significant risk is hesitancy from potential survey respondents. SCHS is a predominantly white institution. For much of the organization's history, our collecting and education efforts focused primarily on white colonial history. While this project has community support, we must respect that we will likely encounter hesitancy and suspicion of our involvement in the project from the people we approach to participate in the survey. Listening to participants' concerns

and responding with transparency, respect, consistency, and sustained community engagement will help build the relationships and lead to future participation. As we work with survey participants, we will be able to use their feedback to refine our approach and ease concerns of potential participants. SCHS will emphasize the community stewardship of the project and continued community custody of the archival collections. The catalog will be a living, iterative document which will be open to feedback from the community and will allow future participation from potential survey respondents who decide not to participate at this time.

During our planning activities, we hired a project archivist to work with us to develop the survey methodology. We plan to continue working with this project archivist through the conclusion of the project, but there is the risk that her circumstances may change and that she will not be available when we start on September 1, 2022. We will then need to hire a new project archivist which may delay the start of the survey meetings. In our planning, we interviewed several suitable candidates for the project archivist role and we will reach out to those people first to see if they are available to pick up the project in this new phase. If necessary, we will conduct a new search. We have budgeted extra time in the survey phase to accommodate a change in this key position.

Scheduling the survey meetings and community events may be difficult given the other priorities survey respondents may have on their plates. The people and organizations we plan to survey are actively pursuing their own missions in the community. We will need to work with their schedules and be proactive about communicating and adjusting as their availability and resources change over the project timeframe. We have budgeted extra time in the survey activities phase to accommodate the varied schedules of our participants.

At this point in our planning, we have ideas about the catalog, but the choice of product and method for data entry is still to be determined. We may run into technological issues with developing the catalog. There are resources available through the state and regional library and museum associations which may be useful in solving these problems or adjusting our approach. We also have members and friends of SCHS with technical expertise who may be willing to volunteer their time. If necessary, we will hire a consultant to address technological issues.

Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?

The project will be planned, implemented, and managed by SCHS and the project advisory committee with support from the consulting project archivist. Marietta Carr, the SCHS librarian and archivist, will be the project director and oversee the logistics and day-to-day operations of the project. The advisory committee is composed of history advocates, long-time residents of Schenectady, and active participants in a variety of organizations and groups within the African American community. They are church elders, local business owners, directors of non-profits, artists, and teachers. The advisory committee will represent community interests as the project is implemented and ensure the goal of community engagement and stewardship remains central to the project.

The advisory committee selected Micha Broadnax to be the project archivist. Ms. Broadnax has significant experience surveying and developing community archives. She focuses on aligning her training as an archivist with the African proverb “until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” Ms. Broadnax has worked with Documenting the Now and higher education institutions on developing resources for community-driven archives and supporting community organizations in archiving their activities. With input from the advisory committee and the SCHS staff during the planning phase, Ms. Broadnax is currently developing the survey methodology. During the survey phase, she will oversee the implementation of methodology, including training assistants and analyzing survey response data. During the catalog phase, Ms. Broadnax will review, verify, and analyze the data collected by survey, and provide input on the selection and development of the catalog product.

What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?

As outlined in our Schedule of Completion, we plan for the project to take 2 years, starting September 1, 2022, and ending August 31, 2024. The majority of the time will be spent on the survey and community events. IMLS funding and SCHS’ cost share will support key staff such as the project archivist, SCHS librarian, survey assistants, and advisory committee. The funding will support the travel costs of the project, the technical equipment needed to complete the project, and publicity materials for the project and resulting catalog. Travel is necessary for the project as site visits are a crucial component of the survey. The project archivist lives out of the area and will need funding for trips to Schenectady. The survey assistants will need funding for travel arrangements such as mileage or public transportation for site visits. The necessary technical equipment includes laptop computers and the catalog product.

How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?

Evaluation of the project’s progress will be a regular and integrated part of our activities. The advisory committee will meet bimonthly to discuss the progress of the project and ensure we are maintaining our focus on community interests. These meetings will also be an opportunity to discuss feedback from survey participants, identify new potential survey respondents, and review selections from the data. We will compile a quarterly report on the number of participants in the survey and community events, the status of the project compared to the Schedule of Completion, and the status of the project funding.

Project Results

What are your project’s intended results and how will they address the need, problem, or challenge you have identified?

The primary intended result of this project is to promote community stewardship of the historical records created by African Americans in Schenectady County. The records documented during this project will receive broader and more intensive attention within the community. Another intended result is the development of relationships between SCHS and community partners. SCHS wants to serve as a resource for the preservation of African American historical records, but we must first understand what records exist and what the community needs from us in this shared goal. The acquisition of new collections for SCHS is not

a goal for this project. We intend to support community custody of the archival collections. Our final intended result is increased access to primary sources for students and researchers, particularly Black students in the Schenectady City School District. Having information and access to primary sources created within their community will help students develop deeper connections to history and see themselves and their community in new ways.

How will the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes of the target group change as a result of your project?

Record creators and custodians within the community know they have records of historical value, but they lack the resources and knowledge to document their collections and spread awareness to the wider community. Individuals and organizations are using their records in isolation for limited introspective purposes, but this survey and documentation project will create a larger context to explore and understand the community as a whole, and open opportunities to integrate the underrepresented history of African Americans with the more well-known and documented narratives of Schenectady's history. Community record creators and custodians will learn about resources available through SCHS to better preserve and describe their collections. History advocates within the community will have access to data about their historical records which will enable better planning for preservation and future access projects.

What products will result from your project?

This project will produce a catalog of historical records created by the African American community in Schenectady that identifies where those records are, what condition they are in, and how researchers can access them. The catalog will allow the survey data to be searchable and easily accessed by the public. We will produce a report on the project's methodology, community engagement, and plans for sustained dialogues. Other products include digital photos, project reports, digital files of survey data, oral histories, and digitized historical records.

How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project beyond the conclusion of the period of performance?

This catalog will be a living document maintained by SCHS in collaboration with our community partners. This work of the project will be sustained through integration with the existing duties of SCHS staff and future grants. SCHS staff will continue to add and update information in the catalog on a regular basis. We expect that there will be new survey respondents, but the number will be significantly smaller and handled by existing SCHS staff. SCHS will continue to work with the advisory committee and community partners to maintain and grow relationships established in the project, and to continue discourse on preservation and access. Part of our vision for the sustainability of the project beyond the grant period includes ongoing conversations and support for preservation, particularly digital preservation of the photos, oral histories, and digitized materials created during this project. Future grant writing will focus on using the catalog and survey data to develop preservation, oral history, description, digitization, and access projects.

Schedule of Completion – Schenectady County Historical Society
 Year 1

Activity	Sept 2022	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug 2023
Confirm initial survey participants and methodology	x	x										
Train survey assistants		x	x									
Schedule survey meetings with participants		x	x	x								
Surveying records and site visits			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Year 2

Activity	Sept 2023	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug 2024
Surveying records and site visits	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					
Compile the data collected by survey							x	x				
Review, verify, and analyze the data collected by survey								x	x			
Develop an online, public catalog using the survey data									x	x	x	
Publish and publicize the catalog											x	x

Digital Products Plan

Type

The digital products created by this project will be an online catalog, digital photos, project reports, digital files of survey data, oral histories, and digitized historical records. The catalog product has not been chosen yet and we expect the results of the survey activity will inform the decision. We plan to use open source, archival cataloging software. We plan to store the survey data in .csv files. Digital photos capturing the project process and site visits will be saved as Camera RAW files and JPEGs. The reports will be saved as PDFs. We will process the oral histories following the best practices and guidelines published by the Oral History Association. Digitized records will be saved as PDFs or TIFFs. We will collect metadata for each of these items according to archival best practices (drawing from published guidelines, including DACS and NY Heritage’s metadata guide). We are unable to give quantities for the survey files, digital photos, oral histories, or digitized records at this point. These quantities depend on the number of survey participants, the data generated by survey, the number of community events, and the level of participation at community events.

Availability

The online catalog and reports created by this project will be made available to the public through public websites including schenectadyhistorical.org and nyheritage.org. [Schenectadyhistorical.org](http://schenectadyhistorical.org) is a Wordpress site. [NYHeritage.org](http://nyheritage.org) is a repository for hundreds of digital collections from different libraries and organizations across NY state. It is a collaborative project of the Empire State Library Network. SCHS is a member of NY Heritage. We will also work with our community partners to make these products available through their websites wherever possible. The online catalog will be the public access to the survey data. The raw survey data and digital files will be housed at SCHS and made available upon request.

The digital photos, oral histories, and digitized historical records will be the property of our community partners. We will work with them to develop broad access while respecting their intellectual property. This will likely include hosting access copies on SCHS’ NY Heritage site and on the community partners’ websites.

Access

The catalog and reports generated by this project will be made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA) license. This license will allow a wide variety of uses of the products, including replication and derivatives, and will encourage all users to engage in open content creation.

The digital photos, oral histories, and digitized historical records will be the property of our community partners. We will work with them to develop broad access while respecting their intellectual property. We expect that most of the digital products will be usable under the “In Copyright—Educational Use Permitted” statement from RightsStatements.org.

Sustainability

The online catalog, reports, digital photos, oral histories, survey data, and digitized records will be long-lived, permanently preserved. These products will be stored in formats that are considered archivally stable such as PDFs and TIFFs. At SCHS, we save multiple copies of digital files in three locations: a local server, a separate hard drive, and a cloud storage site. SCHS is currently evaluating and developing our digital preservation plan, including migration processes, organizational funding, and technical documentation. We will ensure preservation of our copies of these products is included in the SCHS digital preservation plan. Other products such as communications, preliminary analyses, and drafts will be retained in the medium-term, up to 7 years after completion of the project.

Acquisitions for SCHS collections is not a goal of this project, so control of the digital products will remain in the hands of the community custodians. Part of our vision for the sustainability of the project beyond the grant period includes ongoing conversations and support for preservation. These efforts will include working with community partners on preserving their digital products.