

Whose History? Who's History?

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[Filene, B.](#) "Whose History? Who's History?" *Greensboro News and Record* (September 14, 2008): H1, H4.

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Edition: News & Record

Section: SUN H

Page(s): 1, 4

Rundate: 09/14/2008

Whose history? Who's history?

How can Greensboro come to terms with its tangled racial history? One story at a time may be the answer. Increasingly, historians are recognizing that ordinary people's life stories can open up a richer understanding of the past and can invite audiences to wrestle with the "tough stuff" of history and its legacies.

No single life is "typical" (or ordinary), of course, but that's part of the point. By learning how real people, with all their flaws and misjudgments and extraordinary circumstances, navigate their way through the past, we can imagine multiple pathways from past to present to future. Personal stories invite ordinary people to reflect on history and their roles within it.

Encouraging that sort of personal engagement with the past is the focus of what is called "public history" — historical work that strives particularly to reach audiences beyond universities. Through museums, historic sites, documentaries, Web sites and walking tours, public history builds links between ideas and audiences, community members and scholars, then and now.

A core principle of such work is that we historians don't have all the answers.

We, too, are struggling to make sense of the past, looking for answers that resonate with our own experiences, building and rebuilding towers of meaning that topple before we can put the last piece in place.

So let's just admit that we all bring a personal investment in history — and that a personal, even emotional stake in the past is a good thing. That's the premise of a free public symposium, "Race, Personal History and Public History," Friday and Saturday at the Weatherspoon Art Museum on UNCG's campus. Sponsored by UNCG's Center for Critical Inquiry, the sessions deal with race in personal, even intimate terms.

Film, panel discussion

On Friday night, Michael Frierson, UNCG associate professor of broadcasting and cinema, will screen “FBI/KKK,” his documentary about his father, Dargan Frierson, an FBI agent in Greensboro, and George Franklin Dorsett, the Grand Kludd of the United Klans of America, who worked as an FBI informant in the 1960s.

Saturday from noon to 5 p.m. will feature panel discussions highlighting projects by citizens, scholars, and museum workers that confront the legacy of racism. George Dimock, associate professor of art history at UNCG, will reflect on the work of his turn-of-the-century ancestors, whites who took photographs documenting the lives of working-class African Americans in South Carolina.

Spoma Jovanovic, a UNCG associate professor of communication studies, will moderate a discussion with grass-roots organizers who have confronted Greensboro’s racial attitudes in their struggles for social change. Panelists will include Claude Barnes, an associate professor of political science at N.C. A&T; Signe Waller, author of “Love and Revolution” and a survivor of the Nov. 3, 1979, “Greensboro Massacre”; and Fahiyim Hanna, an organizer with Greensboro’s Raise the Minimum Wage Campaign.

I’ll moderate the symposium’s final panel, which will explore how public history venues tell stories of race. It will feature Amelia Parker, executive director of the International Civil Rights Center and Museum in Greensboro; Rodney C. Roberts, associate professor of philosophy at East Carolina University and a board member of the Somerset Place Foundation in Creswell; and the work of graduate students in UNCG’s public history program, who created an exhibit about High Point’s Baldwin Chapel School, an African American school affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Together these sessions aim to provoke conversation about race in Greensboro. More broadly still, they aim to model how ideas can make a difference in the public sphere.

UNCG’s role

UNCG increasingly sees itself not just as a knowledge-builder but also as a vital community partner. The university’s planning document, UNCG Tomorrow, envisions an institution “drawing on the people of North Carolina — and giving back more.”

Already a strong current of service-learning and civic engagement runs through UNCG’s curriculum, offering students new ways of thinking about what “counts” as knowledge and about who teaches whom in their work with communities beyond the university’s walls.

Museums, too, are rethinking their missions, pushing beyond the traditional creed of “collect, preserve and interpret.” Cutting-edge institutions such as the members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (including Greensboro’s civil rights museum) see a broader scope for their work.

Museums certainly need to collect, these institutions recognize, but they also need to show they care about the communities within which they work. Museums need to preserve but also to spark passion. It's not enough to interpret; museums need to instill the belief that history matters — in the past, certainly, but also in the present and future.

The power of stories

Small-scale stories, in other words, need not remain small, particularly when dealing with matters of race.

Day-to-day individual interactions may be the way to break down prejudices. Martin Luther King Jr., dreamed of a time when “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” As hard as that sounds, it may be the first step, not the last, in trying to fulfill a broader vision of freedom and justice.

Can a day and a half of discussion on UNCG's campus resolve such vast challenges? Certainly not. But as we haltingly, awkwardly, hopefully talk about our efforts to wrestle with race, perhaps we can prompt further discussions that move from conference tables to kitchen tables. The personal and the private may turn out to be the best route to public understanding.

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Department.

WANT TO GO?

What: Seminar on “Race, Personal History and Public History.”

When: 7 p.m. Friday and noon-5 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Weatherspoon Art Museum, Spring Garden and Tate streets, UNCG.

Information: www.uncg.edu/cci/racepanel.html and www.uncg.edu/cci/panels.html.