

African American Military History Museum and Civil Rights Center (AAMHM)
Strategic Plan Summary

The AAMHM was founded in 1993 for the mission of educating and inspiring the youth of South Mississippi, while recognizing the service that the African American veterans have given to our country. The AAMHM is housed in the East Sixth Street USO Club, a unique structure built during WWII to serve the needs of African American soldiers. The Museum has slowly grown over the years by the dedication of its members and city officials. In 2005, the members of the AAMHM met with members of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission to devise a plan for accelerating the museum's growth.

The partnership has resulted in a collaborative effort of these two parties, along with a broader group of historical preservation, education and economic development entities (Hattiesburg Historic Downtown Association, Hattiesburg Arts Council, University of Southern Mississippi, Area Development Partnership, City of Hattiesburg, EURO Alumni Association, etc.). The Hattiesburg Convention Commission has committed the full financial resources necessary for renovation of the two historic structures. The African American Military History Museum (USO Club) and the Historic Eureka School will be funded, developed and maintained by the Commission henceforth. Further, the Commission will sustain the staffing, operations and management of the facilities into the future. This will allow the project to expand its reach into the community and attract tourists.

Working hand-in-hand with the Euro Alumni Association and the Military Museum Committee, the Commission will initiate development of the USO Club into a first-class museum during the first phase of work, using it as a bridge for the larger development of the Historic Eureka School into an African American Heritage Museum and Civil Rights Center. The USO Club's development will be the catalyst that brings into fruition the full project of these two structures.

In these early stages of development, the partners have identified the following critical steps...

1) *Full renovation of the USO Club and the Historic Eureka School.*

This is necessary to attain National Landmark status for the USO Club building. The USO Club is believed to be the only remaining WWII-era USO Club built for black soldiers in the United States. A renovated building will accommodate more exhibits and better provide the services needed for increased use and visitation.

Likewise, the Historic Eureka School renovation will begin while development work continues on the USO Club. This larger structure will take longer to develop and renovate. However, this time frame affords the partners the opportunity to conduct outcomes assessments and focus groups on the exhibit development prior to placement in its final location at the Eureka School.

2) *Hire Skilled Museum Staff to Operate AAMHM and Historic Eureka School Museum/Civil Rights Ctr.*

Obviously, the next step will be to bring on board, qualified staffing to prepare, consult and develop the desired outcome. This hiring is of a permanent nature due to the plan for ongoing operations. With qualified staff in place, the ability to properly represent the unique history, culture and artifacts is assured.

3) *Identify and Catalog Current Artifacts in Collections at both Facilities.*

Both Museums have an extensive amount of items in their individual collections. Some of the items are displayed, others are not. We believe it is necessary to inventory the existing collections and evaluate the items in storage in order expand access to materials in the collections.

Also, it is important during this process to catalog all existing materials in order to create a cohesive and coherent display scheme. Currently, both Museums are receiving unsolicited photographs and historical objects. This process will allow for evaluation of the objects as they come in, insuring that important elements are quickly preserved and put into the public view.

4) *Recondition Existing Museum Displays*

While the existing displays have served the public well, updating and upkeep is needed to retain the historical and educational value presented to the public.

5) *Identify, Secure and Catalog Additional Artifacts of Note*

Hattiesburg was a center for Civil Rights activities in the State of Mississippi. As such, the organizers are aware of numerous notable collections in storage at the University of Southern Mississippi or in private hands that are available for inclusion in both Museums. Some notable collections are Herbert Randall Photograph Collection (1964 Freedom Summer Voter Registration Demonstrations), Vernon Dahmer Family Collection (Civil Rights Martyr), Osceola McCarty Collection (Wash Woman Philanthropist) and others.

6) *Develop Additional Museum Displays*

Utilizing the resources of the University of Southern Mississippi and professional museum display companies, additional interactive and advanced displays will be developed. Engaging the visitor is a critical element of transferring the wealth of knowledge provided. To do so, interactive, media-based technology will be incorporated into these new displays.

7) *Develop Museum Programming and Outreach*

This phase will expand the reach of the museums by bringing some of their content out of the buildings and into the classroom. But, not only the classroom. Outreach programs will include radio presentations, K-12 school tours, historical presentations and incorporation of other notable civil rights sites into tours that feature the museums. Academic research and involvement will be a critical role of the completed museums.

8) *Investigate and Secure Transient Displays and Programming*

In order to remain of interest over time, appropriate transient displays will be planned. This is critical, because a single visit will not be sufficient to accomplish the mission of these two museums. If National Landmark status is achieved for the USO Club, opportunity for Smithsonian and other national exhibitions will be possible. Development and execution of these tasks will be an important part of staff duties.

9) *Continual Assessment of Activities and Programs*

Evaluation of exhibits and programs is necessary to ensure the achievement of the mission of this project. Academic focus groups as well as target audience feedback will guide the effective operation and development of the museums in the future.