

Where Past Meets Future

Over three decades, Winston Anderson filled his garage with objects and documents tracing the history of African slaves and their American descendants. Now anyone can see his collection at the Sandy Spring Slave Museum and African Art Gallery in rural Maryland, 20 miles north of his lab at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Exhibits cover African American history from “the slave ship to the space ship,” says Anderson, without exaggeration. A cutaway replica of a clipper ship that transported slaves from Africa to the New World stands on the lawn, while inside the two-story museum a display of African American scientists and engineers includes astronauts Ronald McNair, Mae Jemison, and Michael Anderson.

Winston Anderson’s interest in the story of race in America began when he arrived in the United States from Jamaica at 17 to begin studies at Howard University. It was the late 1950s, and pressure for racial equality was escalating.

“I’m fortunate to have grown up when the civil rights movement was in full flower,” he says.

Now a biology professor at Howard, Anderson studies estrogen’s mechanism of action and biomarkers for breast cancer, among other subjects. With support as an HHMI professor, he also directs a program that will prepare, over a five-year period, 100 selected students from this historically black college for careers in biomedical research.

The idea for the museum germinated slowly.

“At first, I was simply interested in the subject matter, but as the collection grew, I felt it should be presented to a wider audience,” he says.

Anderson traces his awareness of African American origins to his childhood in Jamaica and a mother who refused to be narrowly defined by race alone.

“A different kind of consciousness is bred into you—the exposure of conditions, the fight for freedom,” he

says. “My mission is to enlighten the visitors who come to the museum.”

He built his collection from travels to Africa and visits to antique shops and estate sales around the U.S. On one wall of the museum hang shackles and hobbles used to restrain slaves, including an iron neck ring with three hooked rods that reach out past the shoulders, designed to slow a runaway slave’s passage through dense brush. Another room displays hand tools used by black workers—slave and free—to build America. A basket of cotton is a reminder of the Old South’s economic engine. There are advertisements for slave auctions, bills of sale for slaves, and “letters of manumission” that freed a lucky few. The museum also displays the achievements of African Americans in science, the arts, politics, and law.

Anderson constructed his museum in stages, as he scraped together funds. He bought the property in Sandy Spring in 1988, built the slave ship display in 1992, reconstructed a slave cabin in 1995, broke ground for the main museum building in 1999, and finally opened it for visitors in 2004. (His garage is now nearly empty.) He and

private donors provided most of the funding, along with \$150,000 in grants from the State of Maryland. About 3,000 visitors a year tour the museum, which is open on weekends and by appointment.

One room shows the history of the black community in Sandy Spring. The town was founded in 1728 by Quakers, many of whom refused to own slaves. Free blacks and former slaves gravitated there and were able to buy land and build houses. Sandy Spring also became a stop on the Underground Railroad, the network of safe houses and escape routes that helped slaves flee to Canada and freedom.

With all the horrors of slavery and the Jim Crow era that followed, it might be easy for a visitor to leave Sandy Spring discouraged. But that’s not how Anderson sees his museum and its meaning. “I think people go away with positive feelings,” he says. “They know it’s part of the past, but we have come a far distance, and there is hope for the future.” —Aaron Levin

