

## The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

*Procure, collect,  
and preserve  
historical  
material that  
illuminate the  
legacy of Blacks  
of Rhode Island;  
promote the study  
of black history  
and culture  
through  
exhibitions,  
lectures, and  
other public  
programs.*

This is the mission that has driven the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society [Society] for nearly three decades. Since 1974, the Society maintains extensive collections and artifacts of significant historical value.

### ***Collections***

The collections consists of more than 45,000 items, including public records, legal documents, newspapers, periodicals, and books. The materials range from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Colonial Black Yankees to the more recent black cultural influences of Africa, the Caribbean and the Cape Verde Islands. In the area of cultural history, the archives contain photographs, musical recordings, oral histories, manuscripts, paintings, sculptures and carvings. The Society's collections have been rated among the finest of African-American museums.

### ***Exhibits and Programs***

The Society has gained a national reputation. Many organizations, including the Smithsonian Institution, and noted scholars have used the collections as a source for lectures, exhibitions, plays, musical programs, publications, and include but are not limited to *The New England Journal of Black Studies* and documentary films. National projects include Smithsonian exhibitions: *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Rise of Black churches in Eastern American Cities, 1740-1877*, *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration*, and featured during the Smithsonian National Tour culminating in Providence; and the African-American Museum of Philadelphia's *Three Generations of African-American Women Sculptors: A Study in Paradox*.



The Society has developed a wide range of thematic offerings: on slavery: *Slave Documents from Virginia to Vermont and Amistad Speaks*, an exhibit of drawings created for the *Amistad* Movie; highlights of black military contributions including, the 1st RI Black Regiment, "Free To Die"; on black women: *Myths & Images*, *Against All Odds* and *Women of Courage*. In 1999, internationally renowned artist Elizabeth Catlett visited the Society to speak on her retrospective of graphic prints, in conjunction with the RI Foundation and RISCA's support in Blackside's 6-part PBS Series *I'll Make Me A World*. The Society created a local *Black Alliance* to support arts and cultural programs funded by Rockefeller PACT.

*The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society's work has begun to fill an embarrassing gap in our awareness about our collective selves.*

Editorial, *The Providence Journal*, 1977

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Over the years, public forums at Brown University include collaborations with the Afro-American Department and *Rites and Reason Theatre*; including, *Amistad; Its Legacy and Impact of the People of African Descent*, featuring Sierra Leone Ambassador John E. Leigh. Fall 2001 at URI, *Cultural Share-Cropping* an exhibit on racial stereotyping was mounted, accompanied by Lecture and public programming; and in 2002, these were followed by additional forums on *Religion and Race*.

The Society has hosted prominent speakers, scholars and authors. In addition, the Society, as *Keepers of the Story*...conducts many community forums state-wide in its quest for artifacts and documentation of Black Oral Heritage. Such projects include, *Project FolkTalk* and *Roots And Remedies: Afro-American Folk Medicine in Rhode Island*. Cultural Arts projects through community outreach have been conducted over the decades, including, *What Have They Done to My Song* (1981), documenting sacred/church

music traditions as well as the *Quilting Project*.

Tours of the *Black Heritage Trail* recently revived with guided tours of *Black Historic Eastside*. These exhibits and public programs enrich the Society's collections. These vast archival and program resources are invaluable tools for Black History programs for schools, organizations, individual scholars and researchers, and corporations.

### ***Creative Survival***

*Creative Survival: The Providence Black Community in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* is the Society's landmark permanent exhibition and the cornerstone of its educational programs. It is the story of the Black community's strength, which enabled its survival and its continuing growth. Opened in 1984, it is considered a groundbreaking effort, in that it documented new sources, utilized oral histories, and gave interpretation to historical events and important figures in the African American community—the wider spectrum made visible. *Creative Survival* received the *Award of Merit* from the distinguished American Association of State and Local History.

Through this exhibition, students from primary schools to college encounter history not mentioned in their textbooks. Many others from the community, including teachers, genealogists, churches and clergy, as well as the public-at-large, tour

the exhibit. *Creative Survival* utilizes the Society collections to document life of the black Community from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the present day.

*“The Genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structure of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities.”*

-Cornel West

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The Society relocated its office and *Creative Survival* Exhibit to the Providence Arcade, 65 Weybosset Street, Providence, RI 02903, where its public programs continue to produce a lasting impact on our cultural landscape.

The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

For Volunteer opportunities, Membership and Program information, contact The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society 401-751-3490

