



This Interview has been conducted and digitized as part of the second installment of the Underground Railroad Center's Black Experience Exhibit Series, *Crossing the Line*.

I: This is Rose Iorio of the Underground Education Center. It is April 29, 2026. I'm here with Samantha Hall-Saladino. So the first question, would you like to introduce yourself, what you do?

Sure. My name is Samantha Hall Saladino. I am the executive director at the Fulton County Historical Society in Gloversville, New York.

I: So kind of as a first question, what would you say is the relationship between what you do in Fulton County and the local community?

Great. So Fulton County is a predominantly rural county. There are two population centers in the city of Johnstown and Gloversville. So it's interesting because we kind of get both the element of, I don't want to say urban, but like city life in the actual cities and then very rural out beyond those borders, so a lot of what we do is trying to engage the community, whether that means coming to the museum or going to them. We do a lot of outreach programs. We really just want people to know we are here and we are open for them to come and visit or do research. We also reach out to the community a lot for stories when we're doing projects or exhibits. So we're trying to really show people that this is their hometown museum, whether they've lived there their whole lives or they've lived there a month, and so we really want it to be a community space.

I: And speaking of it generally, what do you think some of the problems or the struggles faced by rural museums specifically?

Well, staffing is the first one I think of because and that's directly connected to funding, of course. Right. So a lot of the museums in Fulton County do not have paid staff. In fact, I'm the first paid professional museum staff that the Historical Society has ever had and I started in 2019. So funding, I think, is a problem for a lot of folks because they can't afford to pay anybody to work at the museum. So a lot of them are volunteer run, which, you know, has its pluses and negatives.

I: Right.

It's very difficult to, I would say, establish best practices and, you know, how a museum should function when it's only run by volunteers who, you know, have other things in their lives going on, so it's definitely been interesting in terms of that. Also, content wise, introducing new stories is sometimes difficult because people are so used to the museum telling one perspective that it has been telling since the 70s. It's that when you want to introduce some new stories, some new perspectives, people kind of push back on that. It's very much, "this is the way we've always done it so this is how we have to do it." So those are really the two main things is staffing and trying to, you know, get people interested in doing something different.

I: And on the note of content, right, so when you started there or for the last 50 years, what would you say the average kind of content that would be happening in the museum?

It's very general. Because we are the full county historical society, we try to tell the story of the entire county. We are located in a 1900 school building, which logistically can be difficult. So a lot of our content is theme based, so we have a military exhibit, we have a Victorian clothing exhibit, we have an exhibit about the railroad. So a very general, broad overview of Fulton County. Unfortunately, skewed more towards Gloversville because that's just where we are. And that tends to be where more people come to us from. But, yeah.

I: And on the note of content, right? So you said, you voiced earlier that there were some kind of difficulties with getting more voices or stories – in part because of the structure of the museum, right? The fact that it's volunteer run and you can get what you get.

Right.

I: But also, so how have you tried to incorporate more of those kinds of stories in the museum?

Well, we have done a few. We haven't done so much in our permanent exhibits in terms of telling those stories – we need to be better about that. But, again, it's a funding and time and staff issue. Most of that content comes out in our programming, in blog posts, or in our temporary exhibit, which usually gets changed every year. So we try to tell those stories in other ways. And especially in ways where we can engage with the audience in a conversation. So I do try to get, you know, we had several programs about indigenous history. And I had people come from Ganodagan, this state historic site, to do a program for us. So it's both trying to get those voices to come to the, to provide a platform for those voices through our other programming and then just getting the community interested in those stories.

I: And, you know, on the note of kind of these stories and whatnot, I think the average person, when they were to think of, say, rural history in upstate New York, they won't instantly think of,

say, African-American history or they might discount indigenous history despite the wealth of it. Why do you think it's important to find and tell these kinds of stories?

Because they are, I mean, it's kind of cliché to say, but that is our history, right? We had, so in Fulton County, we have Johnson Hall State Historic Site. Johnstown was established by Sir William Johnson in the 1700s and he was an enslaver. There were enslaved people living at Johnson Hall and when that, you know, the revolution came, the Johnson family were loyalists. Many of them did go to Canada with the Johnsons, but some remained behind. And there's a community or a kind of a local, I don't want to say legend, but the story that a lot of those folks that stayed created an African-American community in Johnstown, in the village of Johnstown, in the years after the revolution but there's no documentation of that. It's just, you know, a story that's been told over and over and over again and then, you know, these people are our neighbors, right? We live among— everybody in their community, I view as our neighbors. So we want to include their stories in our museum as well.

I: And specifically on the kind of urban myth legend you were speaking about, how do you talk about “bad” history when there's not really corroborating evidence but that clearly means something to people?

So that actually got me interested in researching the demographics of migration to our area of people who are not white. There were two women named Audrey Bowman and Audrey (Laird), oh, her last name just went out of my head, but I can, I'll find out what it is, who wrote a book called Black Heritage in Fulton County. Have you seen this pamphlet? Okay, so they wrote it a long time ago. Both of them, unfortunately, have now passed away. They were involved with the AME Zion Church. And they did a lot of, I mean, it's an amazing start what they did. It's this little tiny booklet. And it was a perfect jumping off point for researching that. So we can, we kind of talk about like, well, we know Johnson owned slaves. We think this might have been a possibility of a community that existed after the Revolution. But now we know, like, this is how our community has evolved since then. We did to get a lot of folks who came up during the Great Migration that we found who kind of created a community in the area surrounding the AME Zion Church in Gloversville. Um, so we're trying to do it through historic records while still saying, you know, these are word of mouth stories that some started somewhere. So, yeah.

I: So would it be fair to say that such as the AME Zion Church, which is a very prevalent institution in other cities, right? Would you say that there are, that those kinds of African-American institutions present in Fulton County as well?

Yes, um, they were, they built the church. I think they were meeting in rooms downtown and in the, uh, they had a whole fundraiser to build their church, which is still in use and yeah, there's still an active church.

I: And what are some other stories you've told? Historic stories.

Sure, well, particularly interesting to me were, um, the stories of some of the Black Civil War soldiers. Uh, a predominant one was in, um, a book written by a former historian in Caroga, uh, about a man named Amos King who fought with the 54th Massachusetts, um, during the Civil War. Uh, survived, came to Fulton County, was not from here originally, and bought a farm and there were a couple of neighbors that had also followed him from downstate up to this area. And so I'm like, well, Amos King cannot be the only black Civil War soldier that existed in Fulton County. Well, we'd never talked about it. So we started researching who else had Civil War service that either was from the area or came to the area, So we've done programs about, um, some of those folks. There are still more that I haven't discovered yet, or who have very limited information besides the name and some dates. I'd like to eventually incorporate that into, uh, our permanent Civil War exhibit. We also have done programs. We did a whole year about immigration. We had an exhibit about immigration. We held a naturalization ceremony at the museum, actually, which was amazing, that was really cool. We talked about, you know, there was a pretty, a small but active Chinese community in Fulton County, in Gloversville and Johnstown in the early to mid, you know, 1900s that nobody ever talks about. So trying to get those stories out and, and let people be aware, hey, there's a lot more here than gloves and leather, which is what we are known for.

I: And, um, you know, back, back to the, where we kind of started with, right, the legacy of William Johnson and the family that's been enslavers.

Mm-hmm.

I: How is that something that you grapple with in the, through the historical society?

Yes. We don't focus, we talk about Sir William Johnson, but we're really lucky because the Site (Johnson Hall) is literally 10 minutes away from us, so we can work with them. And they do an excellent job with, um, their research that they've been doing and interpretation about the lives of all of the different people at Johnson Hall and, you know, reinterpreting those spaces. So a lot of times we do rely on our colleagues for the, their expertise because they're the ones that have done the research and they're the ones that know. So we do rely a lot on, on folks who are very familiar with the content and can come and speak on that. And grappling, I mean, it's part of our history. We've got to talk about it. Right?

I: And, uh, speaking of colleagues, were there some other, uh, organizations or groups that you work with or some of you want to work with more in the future?

Um, the library, especially both the Gloversville and Johnstown library, but the Gloversville library, um, we love working with them and Johnstown We've partnered with the Johnstown Historical Society. We work with our local tourism coordinator, pretty much all of the local historical societies in the county have worked with us in one way or another, whether it's I'm going there to present or they're coming to present, or we're working on a program together. Um, so I'd like to get a little farther out West, maybe into the county. We don't really, you know, there are more rural areas that we don't really interact with so much, but definitely have those stories that we're missing. So trying to reach out to those folks and meeting with them is definitely a goal.

I: And, you know, since you want to kind of further this outreach with the more rural parts of the county, what, why do you think rural history and the preservation of it is important?

Well, there's all, there's, you know, the saying no farmers, no food, right? So, um, New York was the breadbasket of the American revolution with the wheat, um, was also one of the largest hop producers. Um, New York really, we are called the Empire State and we wouldn't have without those, those products that were shipped along the canal or the railroads without the folks who lived and farmed those lands. Also, I feel like a lot of times the stories of people who live in rural areas are kind of ignored as not important or uninteresting. And that's not true. So we need to hear those too.

I: And, you know, part of the larger exhibition, right is examining, the Underground Railroad Education Center is examining Black history in upstate New York, right? As someone who works in the sphere of history in upstate New York, why do you think that's important specifically?

The history of Black history in upstate New York, right?

I: Correct.

Okay. I just wanted to make sure I was not missing part of your question. Um, again, it's, uh, it's kind of this going back to filling in the gaps where we missed before paying attention to spots we didn't necessarily look at, but also I tend to feel that a lot of the history we do have about enslaved people or, um, African Americans focuses in large cities like Albany or New York city, which is great. I mean, all of those are very important too, but that's not the only place where people lived and worked. And so telling, if you want a holistic history of New York and upstate New York, you have to include every part of it, not just, you know, the big cities where it's easy

to find, easier to find stuff. If you want a whole history of the nation, of course, as well.

I: Yes. Um, I think I've personally realized kind of with archives is that a lot of times you'll see freedom seekers who are, uh, seeking refuge from enslavement. They go to, say, Philadelphia and they go to New York city and they go to maybe Albany or Syracuse and some go to Canada, but others, um, it's not specified where they go.

Right.

I: And the assumption one can make usually is that some ended up in rural parts of New York state.

Sure.

I: Um, and part of why I think, uh, this kind of rural history is important is that we need to document these things before it goes away and we're working against the clock of it There.

Yeah. We're already at the point where like people say, well, "we think this is what it was," or, you know, but we don't really know, but we do have a lot of, for some reason, we don't talk a lot about freedom seekers in the underground railroad in the past, but Fulton County really wants to have that connection, even though we weren't really on like the direct path.

So people will say, there were, there were tunnels, you know, everybody has a tunnel or wants a Tunnel. But we do have records of folks who did participate in that system. We are just trying to make sure it's the, it's close to the history as possible and not just, you know, an anecdote or a story that someone made up is, is where we have to really focus.

I: What is that experience like kind of having to separate the, you know, the people who are really enthusiastic with their anecdotes and separating that from, you know, what you can actually portray as historical record?

Yeah. Um, it's difficult sometimes. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but sometimes when people share things with me, like, "did you know?" I'm like, "oh no, I didn't know!" Because it's just easier in the moment than saying, "well, actually," you know, um, but if somebody's really interested, I usually recommend resources. I don't necessarily say like, "well, you're wrong", but here are some great books that if you like this topic, you should check out local history related and broader history. So I try to guide them to their own conclusions, I guess I would say, um, without being like, "well, you're wrong," if that makes sense.

I: No, of course, yeah. Um, and that is kind of part of the difficulty of being a historic site. It's, you know, separating kind of the myth or the legend, but also understanding that this is important to people, right? And clearly I think that, say, the Underground Railroad, for example, is important to people. So would you say that part of what you do, right, and trying to incorporate more like diverse voices and all of that is make sure that everyone in the county, no matter who they are, where they're from, sees themselves in this place?

Yes, that's really, I, that is really it. You know, people are like, "well, it's my family's story. It's not that important." I'm like, "but your family was here. They worked here. They lived here. They contributed to our county and, you know, our history." I want, I like to give people the opportunity to share their stories, no matter how they do it. If it's through, um, you know, having, we had, um, when we did the exhibit on immigration, we had a form people could fill out where they could share stories about their family's history, or if they were new Americans themselves, what was their experience like? We don't always get, um, engagement there, which is a difficult part, but we're trying to, so.

I: Of course.

Yeah. Engagement's really difficult.

I: So how do you keep people engaged?

We try to offer a number of different programs that speak to folks, um, interests, um, and a variety of different formats. So we do virtual talks in the winter when nobody wants to go out, but we still want people to, to know we're here. Um, we do hands-on, uh, a hands-on history series for kids of the summer, um, presentations. We go out in public and have tables at local events. So, um, it's really just constantly just trying to talk to people. I haven't found, like, the key to getting people to come in the door, but it's each year more people have come. So I think we're doing okay.

I: I want to go back to, um, the exhibition you guys put on with the Black Civil War veterans. Yes.

I: Um, and obviously the Civil War happened not that long ago, but quite some time ago.

Yes.

I: And so a lot of people's histories, right, you, you were kind of alluded to, are lost

in many ways. And in some ways you're working against the clock, um, with people's personal stories. You know, there are some people where, you know, they're the last generation who knows of something.

Right.

I: So are those stories you kind of actively seek out people who, stories you think might be on the verge of being lost?

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Yes. And stories that I've noticed we don't sometimes include, which can be difficult sometimes, engaging with the community that you're not part of, right? Trust building.

Um, we, like, for example, we don't have any LGBTQ plus representation in our collections, on our exhibits, in our programming. And I, I'm like, they're clearly we're LGBTQ people.

There are still that live in Fulton County. Like, where is that history? And I don't know where to start. I mean, we don't have a pride center. We didn't really have any kind of organizations that were publicly known, I guess, on a broad scale that were, you know, advocating for these rights. So, um, that's one of my goals is to try to tap into that history a little bit more.

Um, and then, yes, for, you know, for things like the Civil War is just trying to talk to people who know something. Look back at what historians had previously done.

Of course, you fact check because things written in the 80s are not always correct in 2026.

But, yes, so places where we don't have anything is what I'm trying to address.

I: And as kind of the last question here, on the topic of trust building. Whether it's, you know, um, no matter the community in the area, what is your method for building trust with people who might be weary at first?

Yeah. Uh, definitely connections, I think, are really important. It's weird to say networking.

But if I don't know somebody, there's a good chance that somebody I know has that connection that is also helpful because it provides us with some legitimacy – and I know this person and they are connecting me too. So, trying to find those contacts is really, um, where we focus on, I guess I would say.

I: When you do, finally, you're building that trust.

Yes.

I: You have someone who's open to sharing their story or their family history. Do you feel that's a rewarding process?

Yes. Um, I love when people come into the museum and, uh, tell me things that I never have heard of or knew about. Um, so, I think being able to say we didn't have anything here before and now we do and we also have a new connection and that with a group that we can collaborate with and we can support them however they need. That is, that's one of the nice things about, about working in a museum.

I: And just to close off are there any upcoming exhibitions or in the next year or two that you're excited about?

Yeah, so, actually, our temporary exhibit, our special exhibit for this year is, um, from the spirit of 76 to America 250, American memory and commemoration in Fulton County. And talking about how the world of the 70s compared to 2026 and the two different celebrations, um, which I'm excited about. But there's also a concern, you know, always a concern because we do live in a rural conservative area and talking about current events, sometimes, um, we can get a little pushback. So, trying to be accurate, um, without being incendiary, I guess, is the balance that we see.

I: Thank you so much.

Yes, thank you. I hope I answered all your questions.

I: No, thank you. It was wonderful.

Great.