MEDIA ADVISORY

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Sandy Spring Museum Awarded Groundbreaking Grants to Unlock Local African American History from Museum’s Archival Collection

Sandy Spring, Maryland -- Sandy Spring Museum, a community-driven cultural arts and educational center, was awarded two grants from The Institute of Museum and Library Services and Maryland Heritage Areas Authority to unlock the history and contributions of the local African American community. In addition, the grants will enhance access to the museum’s archival collections that is publicly accessible through a generous partnership with Digital Maryland.

The grants totaling $91,616 will support the museum’s “Equity in Metadata” project that aims to build a more inclusive and equitable archival collection by redressing the systemic issues of bias and racial inequities in the cataloguing of the museum’s historical documents and other research materials.

The museum has a vast archival collection of more than 10,000 historical documents including letters, photographs, ledgers, and diaries from the Sandy Spring community, dating back to 1650. The “Equity in Metadata” project was born from the recent digitization of the museum’s archives. The process uncovered, within the individual pages of historic documents, rich information explicitly related to the local African American community. In the past, these documents were exclusively associated with the early White settlers who created them, yet they contain valuable information about specific African American families on topics such as tenancy, wages, skills, health care access, and the local barter economy.

“This exciting project will provide us with the opportunity to tell the full Sandy Spring story for the first time, particularly how the African American and White communities of Sandy Spring were mutually dependent upon one another. The historic gap is significant,” said Allison Weiss, the museum executive director.

The Sandy Spring community was once the largest settlement of free people of color in Montgomery County, Maryland, at the turn of the 20th century. The museum is partnering with the Sharp Street United Methodist Church, the oldest African American church in Montgomery County, on the project. The church is marking its 200th anniversary this year.
“We’re thrilled to partner with the Sharp Street United Methodist Church community on this project to tell the full story through the overall findings. Partnering with the Sharp Street community will ensure that we use appropriate and accurate language and terminology that could be missed by a community outsider,” said Weiss.

Rev. Dr. Diane Dixon Proctor, pastor of Sharp Street United Methodist Church, emphasized the importance of ensuring that local African American history is recognized and preserved in the museum’s historical records and collections.

“As we celebrate our 200th anniversary this year, members of the Sharp Street community look forward to working closely with the Sandy Spring Museum to ensure equity in cataloguing research materials to shine a light on the historic significance of African American families in the community – many of whom are ancestors of our church members,” said Rev. Dixon Proctor.

The project will dramatically improve the patron experience in accessing historical data relevant to African Americans in Sandy Spring. The project includes five critical components:

1. Identify archival materials containing references to specific African Americans and their families living in Sandy Spring, Maryland in the 19th century;
2. Compile a list of all enslavers and free African Americans in the Sandy Spring neighborhood from 1800 to 1864 as well as all African American citizens in the area from 1865 to 1900. U.S Census data will be leveraged for this aspect of the project;
3. Apply page-level descriptive Metadata (data that facilitates the identification, discovery and understanding of archival items) to increase findability of information on African American men and women;
4. Prioritize transcribing these materials so content is more accessible; and,
5. Establish partnerships to communicate findings and encourage community interpretation.

ABOUT SANDY SPRING MUSEUM: Sandy Spring Museum supports community-driven cultural arts and educational programs. We gather community to build a sense of place and belonging. The Museum master plan vision is to connect people across differences; building bridges that cross racial, age, economic and cultural boundaries.

ABOUT SHARP STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH: Established in 1822 in Sandy Spring Maryland, Sharp Street United Methodist Church is the oldest African American church in Montgomery County, Maryland. Called the “heart of the neighborhood,” the church has been ministering to generations of African Americans and the broader community for 200 years.

ABOUT DIGITAL MARYLAND: Digital Maryland is a collaborative, statewide digital preservation program of the Enoch Pratt Free Library / Maryland State Library Resource Center. The project facilitates the digitization, digital preservation, and access for historical and cultural documents, images, audio, and video that record Maryland’s history.