

2020 IH Grantee Spotlight with:
SHERRY WILLIAMS
President at the
BRONZEVILLE / BLACK CHICAGOAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PROJECT: *Digitization of Jackson Funeral Home Records, 1922-1949 (awarded April 2019)*

LOCATION: Chicago, IL

ORGANIZATION:

Founded in 1999, The Bronzeville / Black Chicagoan Historical Society (BHS) was started by a small group of enthusiastic family history researchers. BHS began due to an overwhelming concern for the diminishing historical sites in African American communities and continues to raise public awareness about endangered and unmarked historic sites in Bronzeville. The BHS archives include family documents, oral histories, memorabilia, quilts, objects, film, and photographs. BHS has recorded more than 20 oral histories about the Great Migration from community elders.



PROJECT:

Since 2014, the BHS has managed the care of more than 200,000 individual burial records from the Jackson Funeral Home, which opened in 1867 and closed in 2012. Jackson was the oldest and longest surviving Black mortuary business in the United States. The documents are a resource for genealogists, scholars of burial traditions, community storytellers, and historians. BHS would like to provide worldwide access to the funeral home records via an online surname burial database. Processing is needed to organize individual records for digitization. The grant was to support the scanning and organizing of burial registers from 1922 through 1949.



UPCOMING EVENTS:

- Learn about Bronzeville Historical Society: www.bronzevillehistoricalsociety.wordpress.com
- Great Migration Stories at YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYtMWBfymPM&app=desktop



Phillis Humphries and Sherry Williams in 1860s garments at the Pullman State Site.



BHS Board of Directors



Q&A SESSION:

***The Q&A session was moderated by Mark Hallett, Program Manager, Grants on March 11, 2020.*

Question: *What is the most important thing people should know about your work at the Bronzeville Historical Society?*

Sherry: *We are completely community driven. So it's not a top down way of managing programs and projects. We are completely driven by community input and community desire to collect and protect African American materials of Chicago, to make sure these stories aren't lost. There is no other place in the world like Bronzeville – in terms of the contributions that residents have made. For example, in medicine – the first open heart surgery was done in Bronzeville. In terms of music – you have to look at jazz, at blues, that came up from the Mississippi Delta and the use of the electric guitar. Also, the explosion of gospel music with Mahalia Jackson. And when you look at rap – whether it's Common or Kanye West, or our nation's first African American President Barack Obama... we can go on and on. Black Chicagoan artists and politicians are well known globally. There is simply no other place that has this tremendous history.*

Question: *Who makes your work possible?*

Sherry: *I would say number one is volunteers. All our staff are unpaid. They're NOT employees, but actually individuals committed to the care and protection of our archives. Many volunteers have pointed us in the direction of those who have papers and photographs and stories to be recorded. Now we have three YouTube channels with stories online. The videos include family migration stories, WWII stories, Vietnam War, etc. Volunteers knew the importance of chronicling the stories of people coming to Bronzeville from 1916 to 1960. This era is when the largest number of Black migrants arrived in Chicago. So without volunteers we could do nothing. Secondly, the fact that Illinois Humanities and Driehaus and Crossroads Fund and other funders have really taken a look at organizations that have budgets say under \$50,000 in operating costs but who are still doing vital work and committed to their mission. Largely, grantmakers look at organizations that have considerably larger budgets. But if there weren't those small grants available to preservation or to historical societies with no paid staff and smaller budgets there's no way we could further the work the way we do.*

Question: *How do you see the arts, culture and humanities as being essential?*

Sherry: *Wow, well humanity would have no true existence if it couldn't celebrate its own cultural expression. With Bronzeville – without the profound historical and cultural fabric the community would have no breath. It's what keeps communities breathing – the celebration, as well as the cultural and artistic practices. The black community celebrates Emancipation Day, or Freedom Day. In the African American community we celebrate Juneteenth and when you look at Black History Month, it turns out it actually started at the Wabash Avenue YMCA at 37th and Wabash. So, it's history that stands solidly for over 100 years – it's the celebration of arts, music and honoring the elders who contributed before us. These are the things that put breath into Bronzeville.*

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Links to Other Stories on the BHS and founder Sherry Williams:

- www.millenniumreserve.org/Priorities/bronzeville-historical-society
- www.audubonmagazine.org/articles/birds/sherry-williams
- www.npca.org/articles/641-pullman-partner-groups-honored-with-national-award-for-work-to-create
- www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20130404/douglas/stephen-douglas-slaves-be-honored-before-garden-planting