



Black Lives Matter – Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

America is once again facing the reality of systemic racism and violence against Black Americans in the wake of George Floyd’s horrible murder by a police officer in Minneapolis. The passionate protests and calls for change flowing from this tragedy have roiled people and places across the nation and the world. This is right and proper, and it’s not new. Many have protested the hate and hostility inflicted on people of color in our country long before Mr. Floyd’s death, including here at home. Such activism has been necessary because our region shares the same history and pervasiveness of racism as the rest of America, and has done so for a very, very long time.

When SNHA’s historic home at the Zimmerman Center for Heritage was constructed along the Susquehanna in York County around 1750, slavery was legal in Pennsylvania, with over 6000 Black Americans held in bondage. Slavery was not abolished here until 1780. Even then, it was only phased out, with many remaining enslaved well into the 19th century. For over thirty years after our area and people played a key role in securing freedom and independence during the Revolutionary War, Black Americans were still enslaved here.

We should be proud of those who strived for racial justice in the two centuries that followed. Black businessmen like William Goodridge, William Whipper, and Stephen Smith, Quakers like the Wrights and Mifflins, and many lesser known Underground Railroad supporters who assisted those escaping slavery. We should be proud of the Christiana Resistance of 1851, when black and non-black Lancaster Countians clashed with a Maryland slaveholder to ensure freedom for his fugitive former captives. We should be proud of those who fought to end slavery in the Civil War and abolitionists like Thaddeus Stevens who helped advance equality for Black Americans. We should be proud of local citizens who strove for justice in the civil rights era, desegregating Lancaster pools and facing racial strife in York in the 1960s. And we should be proud of the Black Lives Matter movement today.

The very need for such heroes and actions throughout our history demonstrates one thing we should not and cannot be proud of – the persistent and still-prevalent racism and injustice experienced by people of color in our community. Since our founding in 2001, SNHA has sponsored projects highlighting the importance of Black Americans in our region’s history and hosted programs that bring young people of color to the river for fun and learning. But we have not done nearly enough. As we embrace, learn from, and take part in the historic Black Lives Matter movement sweeping across America, our organization must, and will, stand against racism and for racial justice and equity – in our storytelling, our community projects, our partnerships, and our workplace.

First, we will engage our staff and Board to assess and update our policies and practices to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion in our programs, projects, and leadership. SNHA staff have recently participated in excellent forums on these issues through the National Park Service and Alliance of National Heritage Areas. We will apply this learning and other relevant resources and guidance to make our organization better.

Second, SNHA will soon launch a year-long Management Plan effort for our newly designated National Heritage Area. This plan will guide our work for the next 15 years - the stories and places we showcase, the partners we work with, and how we do it. In this process, we will ensure our consultant and advisory teams are diverse, our community engagement process is inclusive, and the contributions of people of color are heard and addressed.

We look forward to working with our community and partners as we take these and other necessary steps to make certain that our organization promotes racial equity and celebrates cultural diversity.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark N. Platts".

Mark N. Platts, President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Walter R. Rowen".

Walter R. Rowen, Chair, Board of Directors

June 15, 2020