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**MULTI-YEAR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT BEGINS AT THE INDEPENDENCE SEAPORT MUSEUM**

**TO DOCUMENT THE LIVES OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS**

**WHO LIVED AND WORKED ALONG THE DELAWARE RIVER**

***Stories are not only Philadelphian but also reflect the story of America in the mid-20th and 21st centuries.***

Philadelphia, PA (November 28, 2023)—Furthering the Independence Seaport Museum (ISM)’s mission as a maritime museum focused on the Delaware River, its people and the environment and how it connects to the larger world, the museum is embarking on a new, multi-year project, “Breaking Uncommon Ground on the Delaware River,” an initiative that will collect oral histories from African-American Philadelphians who lived and worked along the Delaware River in the mid- to the late 20th- and 21st-centuries. These stories will guide further development and expansion of the museum’s flagship exhibition, *Tides of Freedom: The African Presence on the Delaware River*. When completed, “Breaking Uncommon Ground” will include an audio/visual component, an online presence through ISM’s YouTube channel and an online archive of the stories in the J. Welles Henderson Research Center there.

*Tides of Freedom* opened in May 2013 and has been a cornerstone of ISM’s visitor experience ever since. Originally conceived by a committee of leading African American scholars and curated by Dr. Tukufu Zuberi, the University of Pennsylvania’s Lasry Family professor of race relations and professor of sociology and Africana studies, the exhibition enables visitors to explore the concept of freedom through the lens of the African experience along the Delaware River. Featuring objects from ISM’s collection and organized by four critical periods in America’s history—enslavement, emancipation, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement—*Tides of Freedom* urges guests to bear witness. “Breaking Uncommon Ground on the Delaware River” will extend the narrative of *Tides of Freedom* to present day through the stories shared by elders in the community and by creating a more intergenerational experience for visitors.

“I believe that the only limit to our success with this project is time; with every obituary that appears in the newspaper, the stories of the African-American community in the last quarter of the 20th-century are lost forever,” said Peter S. Seibert, president and CEO of the Independence Seaport Museum. “This is why developing this oral history project has been so exciting and incredibly important for the ISM. Collecting and preserving the stories of this community will be the first and most critical step, and then returning those stories to the community through a number of different avenues, including as part of a substantial expansion of our permanent exhibition, *Tides of Freedom*.”

An important and, perhaps, lesser-known aspect of the story of historical Black life in Philadelphia is the community’s complex connection to the Delaware River. From being pushed inland to become chattel for the Pennsylvania slave trade, moved back to the riverfront to live on the margins during and after Reconstruction, and once again forced out of their homes for the construction of Interstate 95 through the city (1959-1985), many people of African descent have had their lives and legacies relegated to the sides of society. The Independence Seaport Museum acknowledges the pain and glory of these stories and the importance of preserving and telling them as a part of America’s identity, and, therefore, a goal of “Breaking Uncommon Ground” is to locate people who were displaced and document their stories as well as to create a timeline and resources for the public about this facet of history. While the work will focus on the community of Philadelphia, the experience is not unique to the city; it is a national story in the name of “progress” shared by many Black communities around the country for whom society was rendered invisible.

Leading the new initiative is Paul D. Best. Passionate about storytelling and history, Best served two terms as Keepers of the Culture, Inc., Philadelphia’s Afrocentric storytelling group. He also founded Black Boys Makin’ Noise, a storytelling troupe of middle and high school-aged Black boys in Philadelphia. Best also serves as a museum educator at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Penn Museum. Best’s background makes him uniquely qualified to direct “Breaking Uncommon Ground on the Delaware River.” Over the anticipated four to five years for the project, he seeks to locate interview subjects through community outreach, social media and word of mouth. To ensure the project bridges a multigenerational divide, he will hire local high school students—who he believes will be the next generation of story tellers, ethnographers and anthropologists—to help conduct interviews with identified elders and record their stories. Combined with museum artifacts from the period, such as maps of the city from 1877 that identify the exact streets, names and ward numbers of the areas that were affected by the I-95 construction, and specially created educational programming, “Breaking Uncommon Ground” will help to reimagine this seminal exhibition so that it not only continues to inform but also engages its audience in a most meaningful way.

"Through Breaking Uncommon Ground, we are helping change the narrative of this complex relationship of Blacks to the Delaware River,” said Best. “Rather than appropriate their lived experience, ISM is taking the uncommon approach to museum exhibitions by including the voices of the community in the collection, curation, and presentation of these stories to the world. By creating a physical, social, and emotional space for the community to tell and access these stories, this project is a removal of a gate that has separated many museums from the community and therefore is an act of social justice."

Seibert adds, “This project is the fulfilment of one my goals as the CEO of the Museum. Our exhibition *Tides of Freedom* is a cornerstone of the visitor experience at ISM. However, after more than decade, the exhibit stories need to be pushed forward in time to cover the late 20th century. Using the oral histories collected by Paul Best and his team, we will now be able to expand and elaborate upon the rich history of African-Americans along the Delaware.”

Major funding for “Breaking Uncommon Ground on the Delaware River” has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage with additional support from the William Penn Foundation.

*About Independence Seaport Museum*

*The Independence Seaport Museum (ISM), founded in 1960 as the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, encourages visitors to discover Philadelphia's river of history and world of connections. Stewards of Cruiser Olympia and World War II-era Submarine Becuna, ISM is home to interactive and award-winning exhibitions, one of the largest collections of historic maritime artifacts in the world and a boatbuilding workshop. Accredited by the American Association of Museums since the 1970s, it is a premier, year-round destination on the Penn's Landing waterfront. Visit daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and see our full schedule of programs and events at phillyseaport.org.  Visit* [*https://www.phillyseaport.org/admissons-hours-of-operation/*](https://www.phillyseaport.org/admissons-hours-of-operation/) *to learn about ticket packages and guided tour options.*

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