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**“BREAKING UNCOMMON GROUND ON THE DELAWARE RIVER,”**

**INDEPENDENCE SEAPORT MUSEUM’S AMBITIOUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT,**

**EXPANDS ITS SCOPE OF DOCUMENTING THE LIVES OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS**

**WHO LIVED AND WORKED ALONG THE RIVER**

Philadelphia, PA (January 6, 2025)—In November 2023, Independence Seaport Museum (ISM) announced a multi-year oral history initiative to further its mission as a seaport museum focused on the Delaware River, its people and the environment and how it connects to the larger world. “Breaking Uncommon Ground on the Delaware River” is a multi-generational endeavor to collect the stories of African-American Philadelphians who lived and worked along the river in the mid- to the late 20th and 21st centuries. The stories will guide further development and expansion of the museum’s flagship exhibition, *Tides of Freedom: The African Presence on the Delaware River*, which currently focuses on the history between the 1800s-1920s. The oral histories will also be preserved in an audio/visual component, an online presence through ISM’s YouTube channel and an online archive in the J. Welles Henderson Research Center there. In addition to the original focus of gathering stories of people who were displaced by the construction of Interstate 95 through Philadelphia, the project is expanded to include two additional categories of stories: Black women who contributed to Black culture in Philadelphia and did work connected to the Delaware River, such as selling food and other items, babysat river worker’s children working in offices that operated on or near the river; and Black people who worked in labor unions along the river, such as dock workers and employees of shipyards and boats.

““Breaking Uncommon Ground” is a project that is not only central to the Seaport Museum’s core purpose, but it is personally important to me and our staff,” said Peter S. Seibert, ISM’s president and CEO. “These personal narratives will be critical for us to use in future exhibitions and programs telling the stories of those who lived and worked along the Delaware River in the last fifty years. Collecting them now before they are lost makes this a truly imperative project.”

Paul D. Best, ISM’s director of the oral history project, noted, “Time has shown that the oral history tradition is a device that brings truth, change and social justice. Throughout American history, when there was a call to action, Black women were the first to take charge. Stories of their initiative and impact are often put in the shadows and out of the history books, but they remain primarily through the oral tradition. This project uplifts stories of both women and men living and working along the Delaware River from 1950-2015.”

Since June 2024, most of the oral histories that have been recorded have consisted of Black women creating culture along the Delaware River. Best said the influx of these stories can be easily explained: “You can always find a Black woman working.” Following this direction, Best has been recording stories of Black women who are merchants, artists and who create community through the various cultural events that happen along the Delaware River. One such story is of Carla Wiley, 62, a folk and teaching artist who is also a former librarian. She has spent over 25 years telling stories around Philadelphia through her voice and her quilting abilities. She assisted the late Denise Valentine with the Middle Passage Project, an annual gathering and reenactment of the enslaved Africans who arrived and landed in Philadelphia along the Delaware River during the Pennsylvania slave trade. (The project resulted in a state marker being installed at Penn’s Landing to remember those held captive.) A. Marcy Francis, 80, is another woman who has shared her story for “Breaking Uncommon Ground.” Francis is a world-renowned bassist, known as “Lady Fingers,” from the legendary Uptown Theater of North Philadelphia to the North Pole. She has performed the electric bass and sang songs of love, hope and inspiration. Francis spent a significant amount of time at Penn’s Landing performing with the Women’s Shekere Ensemble, an all-Black woman percussionist group in Philadelphia. A third Black woman who is creating culture along the Delaware River whose story is included in the project is 71-year-old Rashida Watson, a local merchant with an international reach. As the founder of The Silk Tent and Ultra Silk Art Gallery, Watson has been a merchant of jewelry, textiles, home décor and gifts to the Philadelphia community and beyond. She has vended at most festivals at Penn’s Landing and currently has a boutique in West Philadelphia. She shared touching memories of growing her business, raising her family and staking her claim in a male-dominated industry.

The stories of Philadelphia’s Black union workers of the Delaware River are equally important and fascinating. Janet Elam, 52, is one such participant in “Breaking Uncommon Ground.” To her knowledge, she is the first woman member of the International Longshoreman’s Association Local 1291, and Elam attributes earning this title to her tenacity and work ethic. In her oral history project interview, she shared stories of facing opposition of a patriarchal organization, mentoring other women and always making noise when something is not right. Her family not only has a legacy of Longshoremen, but also ran a restaurant called The Longshoreman’s Grill near the Delaware River. Marcus Cooper, 35, did not have the benefit of a family legacy in the union, but his story of perseverance is no less captivating. For four months, Cooper sat inside the hiring center of the Longshoreman union in hopes of getting a job. He did not realize that his streak of bad luck was simply due to not having a sponsor to vouch for him. Through the kindness of a veteran Longshoreman, Cooper earned his stripes as a dockworker and became a member of the union, creating a career legacy for himself rather than resting on one. Helena Butler, 37, is an entrepreneur and the daughter of a late Delaware River longshoreman. A Philadelphia native, Butler shared her memories of her late father and spoke passionately about how his career at the docks built his character and work ethic while bringing a sense of pride and stability to her family, which led to his passion of traveling on cruise ships.

Assisting Best in recording the oral histories are three local high school students and two students from Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania, bringing a multi-generational component to “Breaking Uncommon Ground.” Elders pass their stories down to the young people who Best is training to interview and process the stories for visitors to learn from in the future.

Best said that the ebb and flow of this project is a story in itself that speaks to what he wants visitors to ISM to understand when the exhibition opens in Fall 2026. “We need to realize that the real history of any people lies in their stories and how they get by. While 1-95’s construction may bring up the pain of the past, “Breaking Uncommon Ground” is bringing to light the joy and hope that Black people bring to America in real time.”

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.

For further information about “Breaking Uncommon Ground” and to learn more about contributing a story to the oral history project, please visit <https://www.phillyseaport.org/breaking-uncommon-ground/>.

***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 the Olympia, a nineteenth-century cruiser, and the Becuna, a World War II-era submarine, 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 adjacent to Spruce Street Harbor Park on Penn’s Landing. 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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