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Moton Museum Director Named
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By ROB CHAPMAN

PRINCE EDWARD — The new director of the Moton Museum sits in the enormity of an old school building. There's no staff to answer the phone or a curator to manage an as-yet defined collection.

At least not yet.

There's a sizeable task that lies ahead for Lacy Ward Jr. and the building's high ceilings and vast open spaces is the perfect metaphor.

"This story, this building, this preservation effort has inspired a lot of other programs and a lot of other reflection that we haven't yet gotten about the business of converting the school to a museum," Ward says. "And that's what I want to work on."

The red-brick Moton Museum at the triangular corner of Griffin Boulevard and Main Street, retired as an active school in 1995, isn't remembered so much for the thousands of children who crossed its threshold over its multi-decade run, but rather for the events of a single day.

April 23, 1951 when Barbara Johns led a group of students downtown to protest unequal school conditions for whites and blacks. It was a big step into what would be a long, but tumultuous journey that ultimately becomes a part of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision breaking down segregated walls in public schools.

When the building was discontinued as a school, a group of local leaders and former students pushed for the creation of the museum, named—as the school itself is—in honor of the late educator R. R. Moton, who has deep local ties and left an indelible mark in education on a national scale.

Today, it's used by the community and continues to look much as it did when the last bus pulled out of the parking lot.

Still, there is a vision for something more. A vision that Ward, as the first museum director, will lead.

Three Questions

So what would a museum shell look like and interior and staff look like? If they can answer those three questions, they can be what Ward would consider operational.

The building has been designated a National Historic Landmark, which brings it's own weight of responsibility.

"...The focus of the (museum) board over the next few years is going to be to establish the permanent exhibit within the Moton Museum," Ward said.

What story will they tell?

"You're telling a story of Prince Edward County, just like the subtitle of Bob Smith's book (They Closed Their Schools), Prince Edward County 1951-1964," Ward offers. "And if somebody visits this site, they should understand the sequence of events from the students' strike to Griffin decision."

The building, itself, will be used to address the timeline of events.

Some Steps

In the next few weeks, they'll look to add some clerical work, expecting to partner with the older workers program. They also plan to take a look at a curator of education position.

“And this is the person who makes the museum real particularly to teachers and their students but to the general public, that the learning process is going on,” Ward said.

The Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail opened in a special ceremony at the museum in 2004, effectively making the impact of the museum regional.

“...We have to step up to our regional responsibility as anchor...as lead county and as lead museum,” Ward said.

He sees the educational professional working closely with public and private school districts and home school association and begin to build curricula that emphasizes the local stories.

So if a group of children visit the museum from Mecklenburg, for example, they would have already experienced the local implications of the trail within their county and can visit the museum for a national perspective.

They will also look to teach students how to be a citizen.

“...As you delve into the story of the students strike and you delve into Barbara Johns’ mind, what you’re seeing is that by the time she became a tenth grader, she had a very clear comprehension of what it meant to be a citizen,” Ward cited. “And, yes, it meant rights, but it also meant responsibilities. And what were those responsibilities? Probably the primary responsibility was to be knowledgeable. So she had to understand the state constitution, the federal constitution, the 14th amendment, the Plessey (separate but equal Supreme Court) decision, what was going on in current events, where the NAACP was headed at this particular time. That even in 10th grade, she had to have all that knowledge and be able to fully comprehend it in order to petition for her rights.”

They will also look to have a curator of collection. The plan is to develop a collections management policy this year, which will guide what artifacts come back to the Prince Edward County Story of 1951-64.

“Now the challenge we have is this,” Ward said. “The full name is the Robert Russa Moton Museum, A Center For The Study In Civil Rights In Education. Most of our focus at this location will be museum. This building doesn’t have the greatest environmental integrity. It’s probably not the kind of place where you would keep your collection for the long term. This building has...interpretive value and so you would see it fulfilling much more the museum side of the equation. How do we fulfill the collection side of the equation?”

He suggested high educational institutions within the 14-county service area that are trail sites and in the service area and play some role.

“It’s a question of how do we leverage the high ed capabilities in the region as defined by the trail from the Moton Museum to begin to put together a collections management policy that allows us to gather the resources, protect the resources and make available to the public the resources which help tell their story of Prince Edward County 1951-64,” Ward said.

There is an order—director, clerical, education and collections.

Other positions would be added, such as volunteer management, development, marketing.

“These others, in the interim, we will probably do in partnership with others. You probably won’t see them come on as staff, but we’ll do in partnership with others,” Ward said.

Ward has worked to secure resources. He notes that they have continued to receive support from the County and Town, which they hope will continue. As their efforts increase, he also added, they hope the support of local government will also increase.

They’ve also looked to corporate foundations to find support. (See related story page one.)

It will take longer, but they will look to the state and federal government for funding.

On the federal level, for example, there are options for funds that help once there is a staff in place to carry out the programs. Grants sources are available for collections management, restoration and exhibit design.

Ward believes that, on next year’s cycle, they will “begin to be competitive on that round, once we’ve established our policy and selected our initial staff.

When the goal was to purchase the building from the County, there was tremendous fundraising. That goal was met.

“...We just haven’t conceptualized for people yet what that continuation goal is,” Ward said. “But, when we conceptualize the continuation goal is the shell, the exhibit and the staff, I think people will understand and the same ones who rallied to purchase, when that was a completed goal, will rally to support when the goals are shell, exhibit, staff.”

He is familiar with firsts.

Ward was the first superintendent at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site.

“When I got to Moton Field, there actually was no office at Moton Field. My office was in town at Tuskegee University. And, so, the first order of business was find construction funding and put an office at the site,” Ward recounted.

They were able to get a \$100,000 grant and put of a temporary visitor facility and have someone on site.

He would also become the first Vice President for marketing and communications at Tuskegee University, which grew from himself and a secretary to eight people in a year. They would take on visitor services, had a director of media and public relations, a director of publications, a webmaster for the first time.

“...This is very similar to—Ok, you’ve got concept, you got place and you have no resources, what are you going to do? So I feel comfortable in that regard,” Ward said.

Personal Background

Ward’s late mother, Grace, grew up in Prince Edward, but married and moved to Philadelphia where he was born. He lived there until he was 11.

“Philadelphia teachers went on strike, which essentially meant—as I was going from sixth to seventh grade—no schools in Philadelphia,” Ward recounted.

So Ward, in an interesting twist, came to Prince Edward to attend school in the seventh grade—at least until the strike was over.

At least that was the plan.

“But, I loved it, so I graduated from high school here in ’78. I didn’t move back to Philadelphia. But family roots in this County go back to the mid 1700s,” Ward said.

He sits, of course, in Ms. Venable’s office, then the principal and reflects that it was probably the “absolute best time” to be in Prince Edward County Public Schools back in the 1970s.

They had an integrated school system but they also had a link back to the segregated system.

“So we had everything good of the segregated system and everything good of the integrated system in the school system at the same time,” Ward said.

Teachers who had lived through the history and didn’t need a book to teach real life.

Rev. L. Francis Griffin’s wife was Ward’s 10th grade homeroom teacher. (Rev. Griffin, who died in 1980, was the leader in the court case that wound its way to the Supreme Court’s Brown decision in 1954 and a second Court decision in 1964 that led to the opening of an integrated public school system.)

Rather than integrate, schools were closed from 1959-1964.

And Ward remembers having people in his class who were 20 or 21 years old when they graduated who simply couldn’t go to school when they should have started.

While he has taken on some special projects in the past, he has a personal connection here.

“And it’s not just me. It’s my community, it’s my family. I mean...it’s my teachers. I think it’s vitally important the people remember what happened here and I think it’s an inspiration way beyond that region we’re going to focus on to figure out the mechanism and it’s bigger than Southside, but we want to get a grip on how to share the story and inspire people by first focusing on Southside,” Ward said.

It’s a story for all students, the collective.

Ward envisions having then Principal M. Boyd Jones’ office, as it would have been April 23, 1951. (Students lured Jones away from the auditorium so that the meeting could be held.) The idea for the auditorium area is for museum visitors become students who be told why they are going on strike.

“As I understand it, the students passed notes to all the classrooms that said ‘Come to auditorium important meeting BJ,’ which meant Barbara Johns except those notes would always pass around and BJ meant Boyd Jones,” Ward said.

Maybe, he suggested, they’ll hand out little notes as they come in.

“Now here’s a challenge,” Ward said. “This young girl, this 16-year-old girl from this stage, has to convince 400-plus people who’ve crowded into here — all students, no teachers, the teachers were sent back to class — you have to convince them...as a collective body, as a student body, we need to take this action. And they agree.”

Ward also envisions utilizing classrooms as a walking tour in time. The first stop “the tar paper shacks” offers the background, the reasoning for the strike—the Constitution of 1870 establishing public education, Plessey Decision establishing segregation, overcrowding conditions within Moton High School, tar paper shacks, a bus crash in Elam in March of 1951.

The second stop “Brown v. Board of Education” would explore what happened at the federal level after the Barbara Johns’ speech and the students walked out.

The third stop looks into the state response in “massive resistance,” exploring the governors, speeches, laws passed by the General Assembly, the posture of the state.

The fourth stop on the tour deals with the reaction of local government in the “They Closed Their Schools” room. It deals with County actions, the opening of Prince Edward Academy, the closing of the public schools, Quakers, and where people went.

The fifth and final stop—ending at 1964—deals with free schools and the Griffin Decision.

While the journey begins with the hope to inspire students, it ends with the hope to inspire teachers.

“...I think it’s a remarkable study of educating in the most dire circumstances and being results oriented and achieving results,” Ward said.

They plan to fly a 48-star flag in the museum on stage in the different classrooms, which is era specific and symbolic. The free schools were leased back from the county. The superintendent in 1963 came into the school and took note that the flag had 48 stars. The schools closed in 1959; the same year Alaska and Hawaii came into the union.

The school building is a place where time stood still.

“I think it’s got to be done by April 23, 2011,” Ward says of the timetable, “which is the 60th anniversary of the student strike.”

And he’s even hoping that, perhaps on a monthly basis, they could have a living orientation—that someone will play Barbara Johns, the strike leaders, and the principal (otherwise, for regular visitors, it would be presented in a type of audio-visual presentation in a theater type environment.)

Perhaps even a play with scenes from other historic events.

A monumental task.