



The African American Heritage Museum & Cultural Center

The TRUE AND RIGHTFUL owner of the museum building at 23rd Ave. & Massachusetts St

2012-09-13 Why is Seattle's "African American Museum" NOT Allowed To Celebrate Juneteenth?

WHY IS SEATTLE'S

NORTHWEST AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM

NOT ALLOWED

TO CELEBRATE JUNETEENTH?

DISMISSAL OF FALSE "TRESSPASSING" CHARGE

PROVIDES THE ANSWER:

IT ISN'T THE REAL MUSEUM!

By Leith Kahl

September 13, 2012

(Note: This article assumes that the reader is aware of the African American holiday known as Juneteenth, and why it is celebrated. Those not familiar with Juneteenth should pause here and visit <http://www.Juneteenth.com> before proceeding to read this article.)

On June 19th of this year, as communities throughout the US were honoring the observance of Juneteenth, something very different was taking place at the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) at 2300 S. Massachusetts Street in Seattle, the sight of a historic 13 year civil disobedience campaign for the establishment of a Black museum and cultural center.

The museum was hosting a "town hall meeting" with Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn.

The strange thing is, this town hall was not a Juneteenth event. No Juneteenth commemoration took place at the NAAM at all upon this day. Neither the mayor nor the hosts of the event, who were representing the NAAM, even mentioned the fact that Juneteenth was in occurrence.

Instead, the "town hall meeting" was a lecture from Mayor McGinn about how he felt Seattle's historically Black Central Area neighborhoods should do more to help him and his police force combat crime and "violence". Furthermore, the hosts of the NAAM apparently were not the least bit embarrassed to ask the Mayor to come to their allegedly African American facility on Juneteenth, and to have him deliver this speech to a majority-white audience.

In fact, the only two people at this "town hall meeting" who dared to point out that the day was, indeed, Juneteenth, were both ejected from the building by Seattle Police, at the request of the NAAM hosts. These two were among the very few present who were, in fact, Black. One of them was arrested and charged with "trespassing". Ironically, these two men, Omari Tahir and Wyking Garrett, were also the only two people in the room who are

original veterans of long struggle to establish a Black museum on the site of this formerly abandoned school building. This is a fact that the Northwest African American Museum also chooses not to commemorate.

In contrast to the NAAM hosts, the majority of (mostly white) audience members present actually demonstrated a genuine interest in Black history. When the mayor asked the audience to take a vote on whether they wanted to listen to the rest of his speech or whether they wanted to listen to Omari Tahir answer questions about the history of Seattle's Central Area, they voted by a wide margin to learn about the history.

The mayor then became angry and left the event, but not before gracefully accepting a packet of historical materials about the very building in which this was all occurring, which was handed to him by Omari Tahir. Shortly thereafter, the cops were called in to clear the room, and Tahir was arrested. Several other members of the audience were also reportedly arrested, but never charged with any crime. A video clip from this public town hall can easily be viewed at:

<http://www.kirotv.com/videos/news/hecklers-drive-mcginn-from-meeting/vcP7W/>

The mayor, in blatant defiance of the facts available to anyone with an internet connection, proceeded to declare that this town hall had been "disrupted by anarchists". Kiro TV's anchors decided, for some reason, to back the Mayor up in repeating this ridiculous assertion, in spite of the fact that it is clearly debunked by their own video. A number of clearly white-supremacist gentrification enthusiasts then chimed in on various online forums, such as the Central District News, to join the attack against Juneteenth, claiming that "their" town hall had been taken over or "re-labeled" by a Black agenda. Examples of such posts included:

"I live here too!

This was billed as Judkins Park neighborhood town hall meeting – not the "Mayor's Juneteenth Town Hall" as you want to re-label it. The neighborhood is acutely concerned with the recent shootings – no one but you seems to think that the ownership and occupancy of Colman School is the more urgent topic. The rest of us want to move on to more current topics of concern to ALL who live in our neighborhood.

Comment by [Zebragirl](#),

"Speaking for myself I don't know much about the history of the NAAM but if Umoja was the legal buyer make your case in court. A neighborhood forum probably isn't the best place. If the school board won't give Umoja the Horace Mann school for your programs

then do something within the system. Run for public office or the school board. Maybe "the system" isn't perfect, maybe it is corrupt, but it is the best in the world and it is what we have and what we must work within for real change.

Comment by Ian"

"Luckily, my side is winning. There's more and more normal people like me in this neighborhood everyday, and we're not going anywhere. (yes, I know that will be twisted into a racist statement reflecting my colonial paternalism or something, since that's all you got. Have at it)

Comment by Same old song",

These individuals will undoubtedly be dismayed to learn that the "trespassing" charge against Omari Tahir was dismissed this Friday, September 7th, by the Seattle Municipal Court.

Commenting Monday on the false charge now dismissed, Tahir said "This is a classic example of how they are undermining African American survival in the US. They make sure you don't have any institutions, they sabotage or shut down your businesses to cut off your money supply, and then they try to push you out of your own part of town."

Tahir believes that the reason it is not feasible for the court to prosecute him on such a "trespassing" charge, is that he is, in fact, the legal owner of the building that houses the NAAM according to the letter of city, county, state, federal and international law. Some of the very documents that he handed to Mayor McGinn shortly before his arrest actually prove this to be true.

One of these documents is a legal purchase-and-sell agreement between the Seattle Public School District and the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center (AAHM&CC), signed by both parties in 1998. It is a matter of public record that Omari Tahir is an officer of AAHM&CC, which today is still the only organization with a clear legal claim of title to this building, under the letter of the law.

The AAHM&CC was physically located in this building and produced a high quality and quantity of cultural programs there from November of 1985 until June 4th of 1998, when it was shut down and displaced by then Mayor Paul Schell's administration in an illegal Seattle Police Swat Team raid, which seized, impounded, and ultimately stole most of the AAHM&CC's physical assets, including history exhibits, library, public access computers, portable buildings, youth athletic equipment, state of the art display cases, carvings brought from Africa, and a custom Hammond organ worth over \$8,000.

The city power structure, acting illegally through an institution called "Urban League Village LLC", then proceeded to give physical control of the building to a white development firm known as "Housing Resource Group". Housing Resource Group and Urban League Village LLC have transformed most of the building into expensive condominium units, and have also apparently received approximately \$800,000 of city money that had originally been set aside by the Norm Rice administration as a bloc-grant for the AAHM&CC.

Around the same time, the entity known as the NAAM was invented. It was given stewardship of a small gift-shop sized corner of the building's ground floor, and of the billboards on the exterior of the building, in order to create the illusion that a Black cultural institution was still in existence there.

A look at the NAAM's board of directors, however, will show any observer that the NAAM is neither owned nor directed by Seattle's Black community. Rather, it is overseen by representatives of Seattle's most powerful white-led ruling class institutions including the Gates family, The Boeing Corporation, The University of Washington, The Seattle Art Museum, State Farm Insurance and City Hall itself. It is worth mentioning that NAAM's former Executive Director, Professor Carver Gayton, has proudly and publicly boasted of his record as the very first African American FBI agent in the Pacific Northwest.

Tahir dryly observes that this explains why the NAAM's masters don't give it permission to celebrate Juneteenth. "They are not interested in any historic struggle against white supremacy, past, present, or future," he says, "They are no more interested in commemorating the Black soldiers who died fighting the Confederates than they are interested in the fact that my son grew up living in and fighting for the building that they now occupy, looking down the barrel of the white man's gun when he was just a kid. They basically are only interested in Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen, who either killed Indians or did something else to help and serve the cause of white supremacy."

Another document that was handed to the Mayor on Juneteenth is a City of Seattle Ethics Department paper produced April 20th, 2000, discharging ethics complaint number 99-1-0312-1. Omari Tahir filed this complaint in response to the illegal police raid, and many other illegal acts of sabotage carried out by the Seattle power structure against the AAHMCC both before and after that raid. In this document, the City of Seattle openly admits that all of these acts of sabotage were indeed carried out by the very people whom Tahir accuses of carrying them out. The City contends, however, that it has no jurisdiction to adjudicate Tahir's complaint, and that all his accusations are therefore dismissed in spite of their accuracy.

The real museum, the AAHM&CC, survived this attack, and is very much alive today, although it continues to be denied physical access to its own building.

To understand how such an apparently illogical series of events could transpire, it is useful to have some background knowledge of Seattle's overall recent cultural history.

In the 1970s and 80s, the people of Seattle made a series of widely popular decisions to allocate a combination of both their public and their private resources to the construction of cultural institutions that would showcase the histories, struggles, achievements, and contributions of the many nationalities that make up the city. These facilities were also created to assist our many peoples in the preservation and rejuvenation of their respective positive identities. In some cases, the people had to use forms of struggle, such as public occupations of disused buildings, in order to establish these centers. In every case, the natures and structures of these institutions were shaped by some kind of compromise between the grassroots movement and the Seattle power structure. But the institutions were built.

Daybreak Star, El Centro De La Raza, and the Wing Luke Asian Art Museum's second building are examples of the important institutions established during that period. Older cultural institutions that also benefit from Seattle's desire to feel multi-cultural are the Nordic Heritage Museum, The Seattle Russian Community Center, and the Polish Home Association.

Of all the major demographic ethnicities in the Seattle area, African Americans are the only group that does not possess such a comparable cultural institution. This is not for lack of trying on the part of Seattle's African Americans. It is because collective African American initiatives in Seattle have been and continue to be impeded by a local power structure that encourages, or at least allows, similar collective initiatives to move forward in non-Black communities.

Other historic Black-led initiatives that have been attacked in similar ways by the Seattle power structure include Liberty Bank, the Seattle Opportunities Industrial Center, and perhaps most importantly, the Central Area Public Development Authority (CAPDA). The CAPDA once existed as an elected entity, similar to the Seattle Chinatown International District Public Development Authority (www.scidpda.org) that protects and administers Seattle's Chinatown and Little Saigon. (The story of the CAPDA's destruction by Seattle's barons of investment capital shall be the subject of a future article.)

Commenting on these historic patterns on Monday, Tahir said "The downtown power clique basically always uses the same strategy. They say that they will support whatever project you're working on, but only if you put some of their hand-picked people on your

board. Then, those people try to take over your board and kick you out of your own organization. If they don't have the votes to do that, then they start boycotting your meetings to try to prevent you from having a quorum. If that doesn't work, then they accuse you of 'fighting amongst yourselves', based on the ruckus that they have raised, and set up their own fake institution to replace the real one that you were building and steal all its resources."

The AAHM&CC is the most determined and longest running secular collective initiative that Seattle's Black community has launched. The initiative started in 1981 as a neighborhood defense campaign against a downtown proposal to install a police station at 23rd and Yesler, where the Cannon House now stands. The community responded by occupying the proposed building site, taking over four abandoned houses, moving formerly homeless families into them, and proposing a positive institution – an African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center – instead of a police station. By 1984, the police station had been defeated, one of the greatest grassroots victories ever won in the Pacific Northwest. The AAHMCC proposal had gained popularity, and even the politicians were paying lip service to it.

The proponents of the Black museum decided it was time to establish it. They identified a large disused public building in the heart of the Black community, occupied it on November 23, 1985, and proceeded to build their museum. The thirteen year and two month period from then until January 1998, when the legal purchase-and-sell agreement between them and the School District was finally signed, constituted what many believe to have been the longest running campaign of civil disobedience in the United States. Ironically, the illegal SWAT Team raid that displaced the museum occurred less than a year after that museum's presence in the building had been officially legalized.

Some bloggers have said, and may continue to say, that the fact that no court of law has yet restored the AAHM&CC's physical control of the building must mean that this writer is wrong, and that the AAHM&CC cannot really be the legal owner of the building. Doubtless, some will denounce this article based on such circular false-logic, without ever bothering to do their own investigation of the facts presented here.

This author would merely remind all honest readers, however, that the letter of law is just that – letters. There is no physical force that necessarily compels governments, courts, police forces, armies, companies or banks to follow the letters of their own law.

For example, Juneteenth allegedly celebrates a day upon which the slaves in Galveston, Texas, were finally told that they were free, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued. But if Black people in America are free, why are they greeted with such hostility just for seeking to assert the same kind of right to an

institutional land base that other communities are encouraged to assert? Furthermore, why does this occur not just in places like Texas, but even in allegedly liberal northern metropolitan trading centers like Seattle?

We will all be in better positions to answer these and many other questions once the facility at 2300 S. Massachusetts Street is restored to the full control of the real African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. Until then, all true lovers of liberty will do well to support the people who agitate for that day to come.

As Frederick Douglass said, "Men who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing the ground. They want the rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean's majestic waves without the awful roar of its mighty waters."



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