

“Establishing the Jane Gates Heritage House”

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PROJECT FOCUS

Frostburg State University will partner with founders of the Jane Gates Heritage House to document its establishment and host public outreach opportunities to help determine how this newly established center for African American History can best serve the community.

PROJECT DETAILS

Course Number, Name, and Instructor:

SOCI 350: Folklore in Appalachia, Dr. Kara Rogers Thomas

Community Partner:

The Jane Gates Heritage House in Cumberland, MD.

Need:

The Jane Gates Heritage House derives its name from Jane Gates, a former slave, who purchased the property in Cumberland, Maryland, in 1871- less than a decade after official emancipation. She lived there with her 5 children, including Edward Gates, the great-grandfather of Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr., a prominent contemporary scholar of African American culture. Since its purchase, the home has served as significant landmark for the Gates family, which is currently in the process of rehabilitating it to develop a community center dedicated to the documentation and celebration of African American History in the Potomac Highlands. Recently, the project received a \$100,000 grant from The Maryland African American Heritage Preservation Program, moving the center one step closer to becoming a reality.

While Appalachia's ethnic diversity is often recognized, particularly in those areas characterized by a strong coal mining history, the region's racial history and heritage is too easily overlooked. This is true in western Maryland as well. In Allegany County, Maryland, a county-wide African American population of less than 10%, according to official 2010 US Census figures, belies the indelible impact African American families, such as the Gates Family, have had in shaping the cultural heritage of Cumberland and the greater geographic region. Founders of the Jane Gates Heritage House hope to use the center to document and share this rich history with the larger community.

Currently, the project to establish the Jane Gates Heritage House is in its early stages- with most of the focus being on securing funding to rehabilitate the residence and purchase surrounding property. Public awareness of the project in Allegany County has been minimal at best, with publicity primarily limited to social media. While the Gates family has been enthusiastic in its support of the Center, they recognize that its future success will be heavily reliant on broad-based community support.

FSU students enrolled in "Folklore in Appalachia," will work with founders to document the center's establishment and document their visions for the Center's future. As part of those endeavors, students will conduct research on the Gates family to document the

family's impact and influence on Cumberland, Maryland, and the greater Allegany County and Mineral County African American community.

Drawing largely from those materials, in late October and November students will co-host with the Center's founders, informational public meetings in the communities of Cumberland, Frostburg, and Westernport in Allegany County-making a concerted effort to reach the county's African American population. In those sessions residents will be invited to give their input on the types of programs and projects they'd like to see the Jane Gates Center undertake. Their comments will be recorded by FSU students. Residents will also be invited to bring artifacts and items for possible display, which will be photographed and catalogued by FSU students for future use.

Working with the feedback gained from those sessions, students will develop an overview of suggested programs priorities for the Heritage House. The overview will include a written portfolio including highlights of the sessions, recommendations for program development, and a preliminary catalogue of artifacts and items for potential display. Students will also develop a PowerPoint presentation featuring these materials and present their findings to Jane Gates Heritage House founders.

Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner:

Monday, September 4 – FSU students will meet with two or three of the founders of the Jane Gates Heritage House to learn about its establishment and progress to date. Students will use this as an opportunity to begin envisioning their own role in the project.

Friday, September 15 – as part of the FSU Appalachian Festival Symposium, students will attend a walking lecture on the history of Brownsville, an African American community in Frostburg located on what is now University land.

Late September – Mid October – students will interview members of the Gates family and other founders of the Jane Gates Heritage House.

Early to mid-November- students and Jane Gates Heritage House founders will partner to host three information sessions- Cumberland, Westernport, and Frostburg, to invite public input, build broad-based community support and begin generating ideas for programming and display.

December 1-2- FSU students will attend the ARC Teaching Project gathering in Washington, DC.

December 12-15- FSU students will provide a PowerPoint presentation of their research and findings for founders of the Jane Gates Heritage House and local tourism and economic development officials. Heritage House founders will also be provided a printed portfolio overview recommending program priorities and exhibit themes for the Heritage House and a short video documenting their efforts.

Overview of the project, including its central focus:

Working with the overriding question, “How do we build community capacity in order to shape a positive future for Appalachia?” Frostburg State University students will partner with the newly established Jane Gates Heritage House to show how a fuller understanding of Appalachian culture and history, which recognizes the deep legacy of African American heritage, can help to overcome racial division and forge a renewed sense of community cohesiveness in western Maryland and the surrounding region.

With the Jane Gates Heritage Center still in its infancy, to date, the Gates Family and other board members have been focused on securing funding to rehabilitate the residence and purchase surrounding property. To date, there is little awareness of the project in the larger community. While the Gates family has been enthusiastic in its support of the Center, they recognize that its future success will be heavily reliant on broad-based community support and understand that the Center’s future programming and exhibits must resonate with the shared- memory of the region’s African American residents.

FSU students enrolled in “Folklore in Appalachia,” will work with founders to research the impact of the Gates family and the lasting influence of western Maryland’s African American population; digitally document the Center’s establishment; and record founders’ visions for the Center’s future. Moreover, drawing largely from those materials, students will co-host with the Center’s founders informational meetings in the communities of Cumberland, Frostburg, and Westernport inviting attendees to give their input on the types of programs and projects they’d like to see the Jane Gates Center undertake. Working with the documentation of and feedback gained from those sessions and their community research, students will develop a PowerPoint presentation and a printed portfolio overview of suggested program priorities for the Heritage House, including descriptions of potential exhibit themes for display items. Moreover, students will present founders with a short video featuring highlights of their research, interviews, and public sessions, which can be uploaded to YouTube and social media for further publicity efforts. Footage of full interviews and documentation of the public sessions will be provided for the Heritage House’s archives.

Goals/Objectives

- **Goal 4: Natural and Cultural Assets**

Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets.

Overall, this project will focus on developing new community development opportunities by focusing on the unique cultural heritage of Cumberland’s long-standing African American population. As part of this project students will:

- be engaged as active learners and participants in community projects.

- engage in active research to assist a local organization in increasing awareness and visibility of their efforts in the region.
- develop leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster community cohesion.
- gain a greater appreciation for the racial and ethnic diversity in the region.
- gain an awareness of the work of the ARC at all levels.

PROJECT OUT COMES:

- Participation in and the digital documentation of three public information programs in Cumberland, Westernport, and Frostburg.
- Creation of an overview of suggested program priorities and themes for the Heritage House, including a PowerPoint presentation and printed portfolio, including a catalog of potential themes and exhibit items.
- Production of a short video documenting the establishment, purpose, and goals of the Jane Gate Heritage House.
- Participation in and presentation at the December Appalachian Teaching Project gathering in Washington, DC.
- Development of a poster documenting the project that will be available at the DC gathering and will be displayed at Mountain City Traditional Arts (a Frostburg venue) and additional public venues in Western Maryland.
- Participation in a poster session or panel discussion, or delivery of a formal paper at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference.