“Documenting and Promoting the Jane Gates Heritage House”

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Project Date
August 28, 2018 – May 31, 2019

Date Submitted
5/4/2018

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PROJECT FOCUS

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

PROJECT DETAILS

SOCI 350: Folklore in Appalachia & SOCI 307: African Americans in Appalachia, Dr. Kara Rogers Thomas

Community Partner
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.

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. Moreover, organizers hope to use the space as a community center, offering social service oriented programs, such as tutoring, and cooking and nutrition courses, to its patrons.

Currently, the project to establish the Jane Gates Heritage House is in its early stages - with most of the focus on the rehabilitation of the residence and 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,” and “African Americans in Appalachia,” will work with founders to document the center’s establishment and document founders’ visions for the Center’s future. These efforts are a continuation of last year’s project, which documented Allegany’s first African American Heritage Weekend in an effort to understand the importance of the Jane Gates House in its deeper context.

In late October and November students will co-host with the Center’s founders, informational public meetings in Allegany County-making a concerted effort to reach the county’s African American population. In those sessions residents will learn about the region’s rich African American history and 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.

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.

**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 rehabilitating the residence and surrounding property. To date, there is little awareness of the project in the larger community, however. 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,” and “African Americans 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 community 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 programs priorities for the Heritage House, including descriptions of potential exhibit themes 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.

**Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner**

Friday, September 13 – As part of the FSU Appalachian Festival Symposium, students will meet 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.

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

Late October-November- students and Jane Gates Heritage House founders will partner to host two educational and information sessions in the county to invite public input, build broad-based community support and begin generating ideas for programming and display.

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

The week of December 12-15- FSU students will provide a PowerPoint presentation of their research and findings for founders of the Jane Gates Heritage House. 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.

**Goals/Objectives**

This project directly supports **Goal 4 from the ARC Strategic Plan**: 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.
- participate in the December Appalachian Teaching Project gathering in Washington, DC.
- develop a poster documenting 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.
- participate in a poster session or panel discussion, or delivery of a formal paper at the Appalachian Studies Association’s Annual Conference.

**PROJECT IMPACT**

The Jane Gates Heritage House is in its infancy as a non-profit and community center. Our hope is that this project will help to increase the center’s visibility in the region while providing its board community responses and feedback to assist them in future strategic planning and program development. Moreover, we hope that this project will serve to solidify a relationship between Frostburg State University students and the Jane Gates Heritage House that could lead to future partnerships in the form of internships, directed studies, and experiential learning opportunities.

More directly, this phase of the project will lead to the creation of an overview of suggested program priorities for the Heritage House, including a PowerPoint presentation and printed portfolio, and a catalog of potential themes and exhibit items. A short video documenting the establishment, purpose, and goals of the Jane Gate Heritage House will provide the board a record of its early history and development.

Overall, we believe this project will raise awareness of and garner a renewed appreciation for the rich legacy of African American heritage and culture in mountain Maryland.