

Lonnie G. Bunch III: Influential African-American Museum Professional

Sheryl White

New Life Fellowship Church

November 12, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Lonnie G. Bunch is the director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, located in the Nation's Capital (Washington, DC). In this position, he promotes the museum's mission to help audiences see African American history as American history, and provides strategic leadership in areas of fundraising, collections, and academic and cultural partnerships. As a public historian, a scholar who brings history to the people, Mr. Bunch has spent nearly 30 years in the museum field where he is regarded as one of the nation's leading figures in the historical and museum community.

The Early Years

Lonnie Bunch III was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1952. He grew up in Belleville, New Jersey, where his family was the only African Americans in their neighborhood. His grandfather, a former sharecropper, moved into the area as one of the first black dentists in the region, and Bunch's father and mother were school teachers. As a child, he experienced racism from white teenagers in his neighborhood. Bunch credits his childhood experiences with local Italian immigrants and his reading of biographies as a youth with inspiring him to study history. Bunch wanted to give a voice to those who were "anonymous" or not written about. In 2011 Bunch reflected on the early exposures, "I was in junior high and we were reading biographies of historical figures. I remember one on Gen. 'Mad Anthony' Wayne, and one on Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix. I thought, 'Were there no histories of black people?' One day, I was going through my grandfather's trunk and I found a book about black soldiers in the

First World War. I devoured it." Mr. Bunch graduated from Belleville High School in 1970.

Bunch attended Howard University but transferred to American University, where he earned his B.A. and M.A. in American history and African history. He earned his Ph.D. in history in 1979, and started working at the Smithsonian Institution while he was completing his Ph.D. After graduating, he was hired as a history professor at the University of Maryland. In 1983, he became the first curator at the California African American Museum. He worked at the National Museum of American History from 1989 until 1994 as a curator. Shortly after that, Mr. Bunch became an educator and Professor at the University of Maryland.

Museum Career

Before his July 2005 appointment as director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Bunch served as the president of the Chicago Historical Society (2001–2005). There, he led a successful capital campaign to transform the Historical Society in celebration of its 150th anniversary, managed an institutional reorganization, initiated an unprecedented outreach initiative to diverse communities and launched a much-lauded exhibition and program on teenage life titled “Teen Chicago.

In addition to his career as a museum curator and director, Mr. Bunch is a prolific and widely published author. Bunch has written on topics ranging from the black military experience, the American presidency and all-black towns in the American West to diversity in museum management and the impact of funding and politics on American museums. Lectures and presentations to museum professionals and scholars have taken him to major cities in the United

States and many nations abroad, including: Australia, China, England, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Scotland, South Africa and Sweden. Bunch has held several positions at the Smithsonian, including Associate Director for the National Museum of American History and as an education specialist and historian at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. Bunch served as the curator of history for the California Afro-American Museum in Los Angeles from 1983 to 1989. There he organized several award-winning exhibitions including "The Black Olympians, 1904-1950 and "Black Angelenos: The Afro-American in Los Angeles, 1850-1950." Committed to making history accessible, he also produced several historical documentaries for public television. In 2010, he published the award-winning book "Call the Lost Dream Back: Essays on Race, History and Museums." "Slave Culture: A Documentary Collection of the Slave Narratives" was published in 2014 and in 2015 he published "Memories of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives." In 2016, Bunch co-authored "From No Return: the 221-Year Journey of the Slave Ship Sao Jose." In 2017, he authored for the World Economic Forum in Davos Agenda (blog), "America, Slavery and how Museums can help to find Fractured Societies.

Conclusion

Since the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in September 2016, over 2.5 million visitors have come through. That's an average of 8,000 visitors a day! It's nearly impossible to get through the newest Smithsonian in a few hours, let alone a day. The museum has collected more than 36,000 artifacts, many of which can also be viewed online.

Reference(s):

Alim, Teta & Cloherty, Megan. (2017, Sept. 17). *WTOP.com*. Retrieved Nov. 9, 2017, from:

<http://www.wtop.com>

Bunch, Lonnie (2016). *NMAAHC.Com*. Retrieved Nov. 7, 2017, from:

<http://www.nmaahc.com>

McCrae, Carolyn (2017). Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. *53rd National Convention Program*,
pg. 12.