



By Alastair Hagger

CULTURAL CONTINUUM

THE BOUNDLESS JOURNEY OF THE INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM AND DEEP CURATION OF A SHARED HISTORY.

In January 1861, the estate of a deceased landowner called William McKenna was auctioned at the local courthouse in Lancaster County, South Carolina. According to the auction poster, McKenna's property included 182 'Negro Slaves': toddlers as young as three; a shoemaker aged 'about 50 years'; a woman named Charlotte and her six children, available for \$800 each.

This faded document, ambered in a kind of matter-of-fact horror, belongs to the International African American Museum (IAAM), opened in 2023 in Charleston at Gadsden's Wharf, the first destination for 40% of the enslaved Africans who landed in the United States (U.S.). It's an architectural choice that recognizes both an unflinching apprehension of the site's tragic history, and its potential as a place of healing for visitors whose descendants began their American journey in an exhausted step from the slave ship to the jetty.

Malika N. Pryor is the IAAM's Chief Learning and Engagement Officer, providing strategic direction for its programs: the cultural history of West and West Central Africa; the "nuanced historical connections throughout the Black Atlantic World"; the memories of the enslaved Africans who worked in South Carolina's lucrative rice industry; and the Center for Family History, which assists African Americans interested in researching their own ancestry.


"Our first goal for the Center is to break down the 'wall of 1870' – 1870 being the year newly-minted African Americans are included en masse in the U.S. Census," she says. "Many African Americans find it difficult to trace their ancestry beyond this point. Disembarkation is an equally critical goal: our researchers have traced African-descended ancestors to the 1600s. And the grand thoroughfares of the more recent past – the civil rights movement, Black Power, or the Great Migration – are the natural aggregation of a million re-

spective decisions. When people know the role their family played in these moments, they can place themselves on the map of humanity."

To that end, the museum has been developing relationships with West African countries as part of a deep curation of a shared history. "Whether in Sierra Leone, where we are working to secure relics connected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade; Ghana, where we foster knowledge exchange in cultural studies; or by hosting dignitaries from Togo: we are working intently to engage with the African continent," says Pryor. "While we are not a philosophically pan-African institution, it's difficult to imagine a museum that frames the African American journey within the context of the larger diaspora without the advocacy of a unified African identity. In many respects, it is the legacy of pan-Africanism that gives way to this idea of an African cultural continuum across the oceans."

African visitors to the museum have also felt empowered by its affirmation of their own cultural integrity. "They've told us IAAM is the first museum where they see themselves: where their stories are prominent and clearly related to Black people in the Americas. That was such important feedback."

In an era where so many in power push back against the idea of restitution, could the museum have a role to play in an intellectual recalibration of the U.S.' understanding of African American culture?

"South Carolina, for much of its history, was a numerical Black majority," Pryor says. "Enslaved Africans developed the rice economy, constructed much of the architecture that dots the Carolina coast, fought to preserve our democracy, seeded the origins of jazz. The contributions of African Americans are clear, but they are not always evident. Our mission is to honor the untold stories of this journey. If we do that well, the museum's potential to inspire visitors to become the story-keepers of these incredible narratives is boundless." 

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