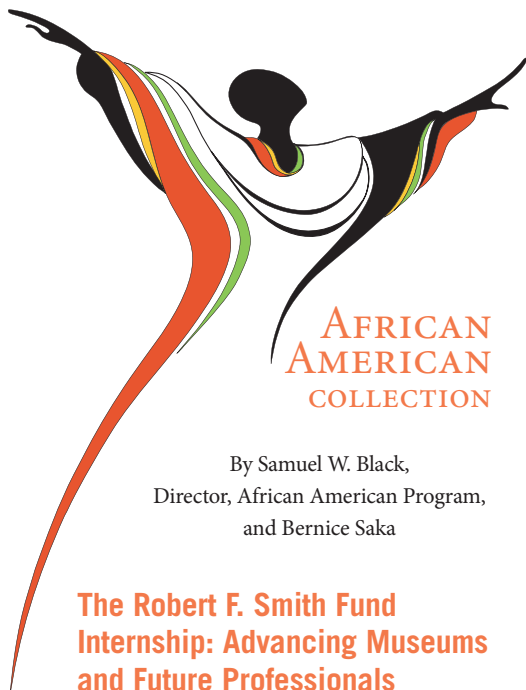


UP FRONT



By Samuel W. Black,
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and Bernice Saka

The Robert F. Smith Fund Internship: Advancing Museums and Future Professionals

As an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, the Senator John Heinz History Center was invited by the National Museum of African American History and Culture's (NMAAHC) Office of Strategic Partnerships to apply for its pilot program, the Robert F. Smith Fund Internship and Fellowship Program. The Robert F. Smith Fund internships are meant to increase participation of groups who are underrepresented in the museum field. The Smith Fund is addressing a need to increase opportunities for people of color in the profession. As a central point of the mission of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) and the Smith Fund, the program started at an opportune time when much media and field-wide discussion is centered on the status of people of color in museums.

The program provides undergraduate and graduate students opportunities to learn more about the museum field through direct experience in internship projects under the mentorship of museum staff. The Smith Fund internship funded a 12-week summer program that allowed for a stipend for salary, housing, transportation, and support to



attend the AAAM (Association of African American Museums) conference that was held in Hampton, Virginia, from August 8–11, 2018. The internship not only provided an opportunity for the NMAAHC to advance its services in the field, but also addressed a need for the History Center to diversify its staff. The popularity and opportunity produced 55 applications for the Heinz History Center although only one intern slot was provided. Nine interns represented five museums or archive programs including the History Center; the NMAAHC; Bethune-Cookman University of Daytona Beach, Florida; Historic Stagville of Durham, North Carolina; and the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African American Culture at Alabama State University. Internship projects ranged from oral history translation and digitization, to integrated marketing and media, and collection management.

Bernice Saka, a senior at Roanoke College in Roanoke, Virginia, was chosen to be the Smith Fund Intern at the History Center. Bernice was assigned to the collections management team of the museum where she worked to research the museum's African American collections and add this information to the History Center's The Museum System (TMS) database. TMS is a collection management system that the History Center recently began using to manage our three-dimensional objects. A publicly-accessible version of this database will be available soon on our website. Bernice Saka



explains her experience as a Smith Fund intern at the Heinz History Center:

My experience as a collections management intern at the Heinz History Center was one that I knew would be deeply impactful in my future career as well as personal life from the very first day. My internship duties had been laid out accordingly in the application information and going into the internship, I held the perception that the duties were going to be just that, duties. I was pleasantly surprised however during the internship as I came to realize that my contributions and tasks were more than duties. They rather became an impassioned period for me full of learning, training, and experience tailored for me to produce a body of work that helped to make the African American Collection one of the fully contextualized and researched collections at the History Center.

As part of the digitization and cataloging process, I was trained to utilize research skills by compiling information

from the collection's object files, curator research files, and online sources for each object in the collection I worked on. I was also trained to photograph, edit, and upload new images of objects to TMS. I was also very lucky to get in depth TMS training which enabled me to catalog objects for public access. Two objects that I cataloged were a 1963 March on Washington banner and an Obama campaign sign displayed in the Obama campaign headquarters for his 2012 re-election. I updated photography of the Gaines Funeral Home Hearse currently on display in the Special Collections exhibit. In addition to learning to catalog and photograph objects, I also received training in handling, labelling, and storing of objects.


My experience during this internship was further enhanced by the different activities I had the opportunity to partake in. I sat in museum division, curatorial, and advisory meetings and got the chance to observe and contribute to processes of installation and de-installation of exhibitions. Being fortunate enough to receive all this training was not the only benefit that came with this internship.

Online seminars for professional development were set up for all the RFS interns and mentors who are great museum experts were paired with each intern based on location. Communication as well as physical meetings with the mentors were encouraged and the constant communication and feedback from my mentors were an invaluable part of this internship process for me.

Not only did I get great advice and leadership tips from my mentors, I also grew professionally from learning more about my strengths and weaknesses through their guidance and honesty. Another experience that came with this internship that completely reinforced my interest and passion for the museum field was getting to attend the Association of African American Museums Conference in Hampton, Va., in August. All the interns were fully funded to attend the conference and that is one benefit I cannot applaud enough due to the staggering number of opportunities the conference opened for us. Getting to build connections and professional opportunities as well as celebrate the continued progress of African American Museums and Historic

sites at the conference was a moment I was proud and honored to be part of and without this internship, I would have missed out on this wonderful opportunity.

I will be forever grateful that I got selected for this internship. I hope the Robert F. Smith Fund's existence will continue to make a positive impact in the lives of other historically underrepresented individuals who have been struggling to learn and build a career in the cultural sector just as it did mine. It therefore goes without saying that the Heinz History Center shall forever hold a special place in my heart in acknowledgement of all the knowledge I gained and the meaningful relationships I built with the people I worked with during this period.

The African American Program has an initiative to advance the careers of underrepresented museum professionals through internship opportunities. The History Center's partnership with the National Museum of African American History and Culture proved to be a successful project. 

LOGO: *Spirit Form Freedom Corner Monument, Pittsburgh, Pa., © artist Carlos F. Peterson.*

Bernice Saka photographing the 1941 Gaines Funeral Home Hearse.

