

"Knowledge Increaseth Strength"
Public Memory, Social Forgetting and
the East Bay Negro Historical Society

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This essay was adapted from a talk given by the author on September 21, 2019 as part of the Commons Archive Local Collection Book Launch at the Golden Gate Branch Library in Oakland, CA.

Practices of preserving public memory are embedded deeply in African American culture, from the ritual burial of Union dead in Charleston after the Civil War¹ to the singing of the Negro National anthem, composed in 1900, at civic events today.² For all its struggle as a milieu that rewards the abandonment of the past, California is one of the most important sites for African American remembrance, especially through the vehicle of the organization born as the East Bay Negro Historical Society.

On a bright Saturday morning, the last day of summer, residents of a North Oakland neighborhood assemble on the asphalt parking lot of the Golden Gate branch of the public library. Aqua and white canopies atop steel poles offer the gift of shade. Music from 'Back in Session', a local soul band, welcomes visitors with a gritty bass guitar and sweet keyboards over a jumping drum pattern. Lenin cap shoved onto her black hijab, a female photographer in grey jeans buzzes through the crowd with camera aimed.

The gathering is a microcosm of transformation in Oakland and most of California's cities. However else it is understood, gentrification, and its slow incursion of young white and Asian American homesteaders, is relentless and painful for African Americans representing generations of domicile and all that implies – family, worship, business, and complex social arteries. For the program this Saturday morning, the crowd consists of primarily of young whites whose faces express an earnest search for belonging, older white long-term residents, and grey-haired African American neighbors, mainly retired professionals, one man in a baseball cap and navy *medicins sans frontiers* T-shirt, and a woman considered a leader in this

area whose parents epitomize the great migration to California, having arrived respectively from Louisiana and Texas.

Folks here are celebrating the launch of the *Golden Gate Library Local Collection*, books – really art objects – made from manuscripts that had been languishing as bound photocopies in obscure library collections or in boxes on closet shelves. The publications launch is a culmination of years of activity by artist Sue Mark who created Commons Archive, “a permanent neighborhood memory bank,” to assist residents in recording and making accessible their history, a task made urgent in a locale experience relentless social, demographic and economic change.³

One of the gifts bestowed by Mark and Commons Archive is a connection between today’s preservation efforts and those that have continued from the past. African American history has been assaulted in various ways, but one of the most significant includes what scholar Iwona Irwin-Zarecka calls “social forgetting,”⁴ a phenomenon – or habitude – among Germans, say, to forget the Nazi past, or in Russia to forget the famines accompanying collectivization. In the U.S., this forgetting is practiced by whites, including professional historians, who in their accounts deliberately ignore white depredations against African Americans or the African American presence in historical events.

In California, the East Bay Negro Historical Society (EBNH) stands as a vital example of the work of documenting the state’s African American past. The organization was founded in 1965 by several visionaries who understood that – though the history of their people was excluded from school books and television and even from historic parks and museums – “purposely omitted” as EBNH President, Eugene Lasartemay put it ⁵ – they knew that their people had participated from the beginning in the development and growth of California and in every historical event of importance. They knew that if California can be considered a special place, remarked on for its diversity and relative tolerance and democracy – their people had contributed much to that reputation – and throughout history had helped transform the state’s civic culture.

In a newspaper interview in 1971, Mr. Lasartemay pointed out that people of African descent were in California since the Spanish occupation in the 18th century. In fact, people of African descent lived and worked in Spanish and Mexican California before white Americans started arriving here in any numbers. "We were here from the word 'go,' (Mr. Lasartemay) said...we helped make this great state what it is. It's just as much our state as it is anybody else's until they give it back to the Indians."⁶ (In this case, speaking of the East Bay, that land belongs to the Ohlone, the original people of the area).

The founders of EBNH took to heart the passage from Proverbs, "A wise man is strong; yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength."⁷ They knew that knowledge is a currency of power. Their knowledge of their people's history derived not just from historical artifacts and published accounts. They knew the history because they had lived it themselves. For instance, one of the founders, Mrs. Ruth Lasartemay, descended from a family that had lived in Alameda since the 1880s.⁸ Regardless of their ancestral roots, given their passion for history, the founders knew many of the early black settlers of California, such as Mayme Netherland who was born in Oakland In 1876.⁹ Her grandfather, John Scott, had settled in Tehama County in gold rush days and owned a large sheep ranch. The founders knew the Roberts family. Frederick Roberts had been the first African American legislator in California when he was elected to the assembly in 1918. The Roberts family owned the New Age newspaper and a mortuary in Los Angeles and were descended from Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson.¹⁰ Married to Frederick Roberts was Pearl Hinds, whose parents were wealthy farmers in Tulare County before buying a home in Oakland. The EBNH founders knew the Stevens family whose then-12-year-old daughter Virginia, "gave the name Jewel City to the Pan Pacific International Exposition in 1915, in San Francisco."¹¹

These personal relationships around the state were a source of knowledge, but the EBNH founders were justly afraid of losing such rich history. They knew that history and memory are intertwined. As these pioneers were dying off, the EBNH faced pressing questions. What happens when the people with recollections of historical events are no longer with us? How do we preserve the past when the eyewitnesses are gone?

In answer, starting in the 1940s, the Lasartemays and other associates begin gathering artifacts, oral histories, and materials to preserve this history. By 1965, a group came together in the living room of educator and church woman, Dr. Marcella Ford and her husband, retired Pullman Porter and independent historian, Jesse Ford. That night along with Eugene Lasartemay and his wife, Ruth Lasartemay, E. Harold Mason, Madison Harvey, Jr., and artist and cartoonist Morris Turner, they established the East Bay Negro Historical Society.

Not only had their efforts begun twenty years earlier, but EBNH was part of the movement – in California and the nation – to recover and preserve African American history. In California before EBNH,

- Delilah Beasley had published her book, *Negro Trailblazers of California* in 1919.
- In the 1920s, chapters of the California Federation of Colored Women's Clubs featured lectures on "various aspects of black history."
- Black churches around the state had been commemorating what was then known as Negro History Week since it was first set by Dr. Carter Woodson of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1922.
- In Oakland, Dr. Marcella Ford 'served as chairperson for the Beth Eden (Baptist Church) Negro History Week observance" starting in 1935.
- In Los Angeles, the group Our Author's Study Club began hosting city-wide Negro History Week activities in 1945.¹²
- In 1956, Mr. D.G. Gibson of Berkeley and E. Harold Mason of Alameda established the Carter Woodson Historical Society.

The movement in California followed the lead of Dr. Carter Woodson. Woodson was, after W.E.B. DuBois, the second African American to receive his PhD from Harvard; in Woodson's case in history in 1912. In his classic book, *"The Miseducation of the Negro,"* still in print, Dr. Woodson revealed the underlying motivation for his work. He argued that "denying African American people knowledge of their history and past contributions was a key pillar in the edifice of white supremacy."¹³ In response came the barrage of Woodson's intellectual offensive. Aware of widespread Jim Crow in the academic world, his many activities were

conducted independently of academia. His Association for The Study of Negro Life and History, established in 1915, (still active 104 years later as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History) set the national Negro History Week – now Black History Month – agenda.

Soon after its founding, the Association began publishing what is now the Journal of African American History. The journal was independent and had as its purpose “individual and community empowerment” as the “fundamental basis for sustained social activism against white supremacy.”¹⁴ Compared with the intellectual corollaries to segregation in academia and in public culture, the journal held to a higher standard – one that expanded the understanding of what it meant to be learned in an unequal society. The publication became home to many scholars of all races rejected or ignored by white academia and the mainstream.

What were the activities that made up the work of the EBNHS? The minutes of the organization reveal its work. Its members were:

- Collecting historical materials to preserve the history of African Americans in early California;
- Creating black history displays in Capwell’s in Oakland and co-op stores in Berkeley;
- Giving talks to youth, and speaking in classrooms of the Oakland Unified School District.
- “They spearheaded the rescue from oblivion and established perpetual care of the grave of (historian and author of the Negro Trailblazers of California) Delilah Beasley.”¹⁵
- The society was part of a wide network of civil rights leaders. Participants in society events and activities included Frances Albrier, Byron Rumford and Roy Nichols.
- Several of the founders participated in the statewide committee that with the state of California created Col. Allensworth State Historic Park.
- The society sponsored several landmark exhibits in its own galleries and with the Oakland Museum.

In 1970, EBNHS established “quarters at 3651 Grove Street” in Oakland “to serve as the society’s meeting place and historical center.”¹⁶ In 1982, the Society began operating out of the Golden Gate Branch of Oakland Public Library – and became The Northern California

Center for Afro-American History and Life. In 2002, the organization opened its permanent home as the African American Museum & Library at Oakland in the splendid restored Carnegie Library on 14th Street, where it continues to serve the community and scholars from around the world.

The society represents a significant part of the story of the grass roots movement that has profoundly changed public knowledge and understanding in the United States. Dr. Marcella Ford taught the first black history class at Berkeley Adult Evening School in 1962. By 1968, the Black Student Union Strikers at San Francisco State and Berkeley High School had established the first Black Studies courses in the nation. That opened the door to Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies in colleges and universities around the country.

Now, in academia and popular culture, we encounter the presentation of African American history. And thousands of books and scholarly works have been published. The work of the East Bay Negro Historical Society and organizations like it underlie these efforts. For instance, without EBNHS, we wouldn't have a Black Power exhibit now at the Oakland Museum or the Black Panther exhibit that preceded it. When the Panthers were most active in the late Sixties and early Seventies, the closest they could get to the Oakland Museum was the lawn outside the court house across the street during the Free Huey rallies. When J.S Holliday, the Founding Director of the Oakland Museum, collaborated with The East Bay Negro Historical Society on traveling exhibits, he was fired. Especially because of "his efforts to involve Oakland's black community in the governance of the museum."¹⁷

For decades in Jim Crow America, the history profession was dominated by white supremacist, exclusionist practices. Practices that justified the genocide of native people, erased the presence of LGBTQ people, romanticized slavery, degraded people of color, trivialized women, or that simply, ruthlessly "forgot" the role of African Americans in constructing the narrative of the making of the U.S. and California.

The East Bay Negro Historical Society is still with us in remembrance and in the documentation of collections held by the African American Museum & Library at Oakland. So are the lessons absorbed by its founders, who taught us to never forget.

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¹ David Blight, "The First Decoration Day: The people's history of Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina during Reconstruction, Zinn Education Project, <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/the-first-decoration-day/>

² Imani Perry, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2018.

³ Commons Archive web page, Golden Gate Branch, Oakland Public Library, <http://www.commonarchive.net/>

⁴ Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*, Transaction Publishers, Brunswick, N.J., 1994

⁵ Sue Mark, Preface, "I Must Not Forget: Eugene Lasartemay," Commons Archive, Oakland, 2019, unpaginated

⁶ "Treasure Trove of Black History Awaits Visitors," *Oakland Post*, August 26, 1971, 11

⁷ Proverbs 24:5, *The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version (1611)*, Collins Bible, printed in Great Britain.

⁸ Mark, "I Must Not Forget," Family Album, photo and caption of Ruth Lasartemay's mother, Marie Ada Parks Hackett

⁹ *Oakland Post*

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., *African American Families of Monticello*, Frederick Madison Roberts, <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word/people/frederick-madison-roberts>; Guide to the Roberts Family Papers, MS 2, African American Museum & Library at Oakland, https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8q24113/entire_text/

¹¹ December 17, 1965 Minutes, East Bay Negro Historical Society Records, MS 32, African American Museum & Library at Oakland

¹² Marcella Ford, "A History of Black Studies in Oakland," Jesse W. and Marcella Ford Papers, MS 10, African American Museum & Library at Oakland

¹³ Ruffin, 18 – 19

¹⁴ Fath Davis Ruffins, "Building Homes for Black History," *The Public Historian*, Volume 40, Number 3, August 2018, 16

¹⁵ Scrapbook, East Bay Negro Historical Society Records, MS 32, African American Museum & Library at Oakland

¹⁶ February 20, 1970 Minutes, East Bay Negro Historical Society Records, MS 32, African American Museum & Library at Oakland

¹⁷ Andrea A. Burns, "Confronting the Tyranny of Relevance," *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Boston, 2013, 101