

# Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society



Students conduct oral history interviews with Kalamazoo citizens as part of the “Telling the Kalamazoo Race Story.”

Concerned that the African-American heritage of southwest Michigan was being overlooked, Kalamazoo-area residents established the Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society (SMBHS) in October 2003. Per its mission statement, the non-profit organization aims “to nurture respect, appreciation, and the study of African American heritage and contributions to Southwest Michigan history.” To achieve this goal, the society has educated the community through exhibitions, workshops, seminars, publications, and curriculum. It has also established resources for genealogical and historical studies.

During its first three years, the SMBHS conducted a series of community workshops that focused on the importance of creating and preserving one’s family history. The society also hosted “First Families” and “It’s a Family Affair” programs in which descendants of the earliest black settlers of Southwest Michigan were able to share artifacts and stories from their family’s inspiring histories.

As SMBHS gained momentum and recognition, several collaborative events took place. In 2005, the society partnered with the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and YWCA of Kalamazoo, among others, to offer “History Detectives.” Through this program, local middle school students chronicled the history and current events of the local African-American community.

Other collaborative projects have included:

- The Annual African American Book Fair (2006 to 2009), a partnership that included Kalamazoo Public Library, the

Douglass Community Center, Waldenbooks, and the North-side Association for Community Development.

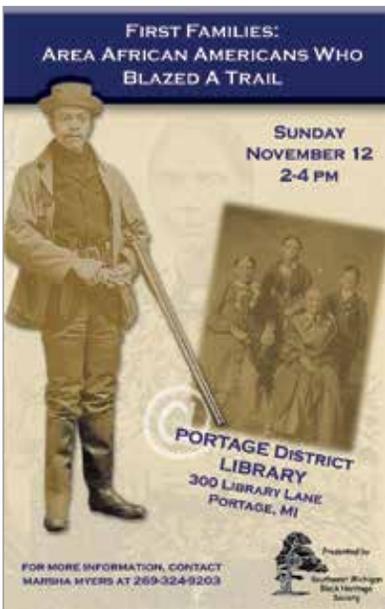
- The African American Women’s Writing Group (2006 to 2010) with the Kalamazoo Public Library. The group focused on writing memoirs from an African-American perspective.
- “African Americans Who Blazed a Trail” (2007). This program recognized African-American residents who paved the way by being the first blacks to achieve high levels in their career areas. In 2009, SMBHS partnered with the Kalamazoo Maple Street Magnet School for a unique six-week-long project. During this time, 11 members of the African-American community were interviewed and their oral histories were compiled. At the completion of the project, the society published “2009 History Detectives Oral History Project,” which highlighted segments from each of the 11 interviews.

To date, the most successful SMBHS program has been the “RACE Exhibit Initiative,” which occurred in 2010 and was designed to encourage dialogue about healing racism. During the “Inheriting Trade” program, attendees watched the Emmy-nominated documentary “Traces of the Trade: a Story from the Deep North” and participated in a discussion led by Thomas DeWolf, author of the film’s companion book “Inheriting the Trade.”

As part of the initiative, the society also organized the “Telling the Kalamazoo Community Race Story.” This oral history



High school students gather to discuss and share the Kalamazoo Community RACE Story.



A program from 2006

interviews with Kalamazoo citizens of all ethnicities.

In 2010, the Annual African American Book Fair was replaced by “Read All About It,” which offers roundtable discussions led by area book groups. With the help of Portage District Library and Kazoo Books, the discussions focus on books that “continue to garner spirited and inspiring thoughts about multiculturalism, ethnicity and diversity.” This program continues to garner support from the local community today.

In 2011, SMBHS partnered with the Kalamazoo Valley

project for high school students provided young people with the opportunity to learn about diversity and community, to build on their skills and aptitude in writing, to connect them with members of diverse communities, and to allow them to collaborate with one another to learn about diversity and community. The students, who were mentored by Western Michigan University journalism interns and the Kalamazoo College History Department, conducted oral history

Genealogical Society and the Portage District Library for the “Finding Family” seminar, during which Tony Burroughs, author of “Black Roots: A Beginner’s Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree” spoke. Due to the success of the program, the society later hosted “Finding Family II” with the Kalamazoo Public Library in a continued focus on ancestral research.

Today, the Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society continues to serve the community of southwest Michigan through programs and presentations intended to further the understanding of the importance of African-American contributions to the history of Southwest Michigan. These programs range from genealogical workshops to presentations by local African-American community leaders. For more information about the organization, to view upcoming events, or to become involved, visit [www.smbhs.org](http://www.smbhs.org).

*Submitted by Steve Rossio, Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.*

### Early African-American Families in Southwest Michigan

The following families settled in Michigan in the 1800s:

Ampey	Harris	Sanders
Evans	Kersey	Staffords
Hackley	Phillips	Wilson

\*Information taken from [www.smbhs.org](http://www.smbhs.org)