

Seattle University

**ScholarWorks @ SeattleU**

---

Northwest African American Museum

Arts Ecosystem Research Project

---

2020

## **Beyond the NAAM: The Melting Pot Legacy of the Colman School's Transformation into the Northwest African American Museum**

Tyrah Hannibal

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/northwest-african-american-museum>

---

**Beyond the NAAM:  
The Melting Pot Legacy of the Colman School's Transformation  
into the Northwest African American Museum**

Tyrah Hannibal

Seattle University

Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

March 19, 2019

### **Abstract**

The Colman Elementary School was built in 1910 to serve the families of Seattle's Central District. Discriminatory housing patterns made the neighborhood population and the school's student body the most racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse in the city: African Americans from the eastern and southern U.S.; immigrants from Asia; Jews and Catholics from eastern Europe. Following the forced removal of Japanese Americans and the influx of African Americans seeking work during World War II, the Central District became a predominantly Black neighborhood that regarded the school as its own. Closure of the school and attempts to demolish the building were met with fierce community resistance, including its eight-year-long occupation by activists seeking to establish an African American museum and cultural center within its walls. After over two decades of struggle, the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) opened in the Colman School building, securing its future as a Black community institution.

## **Beyond the NAAM: The Melting Pot Legacy of the Colman School's Transformation into the Northwest African American Museum**

The role of the Colman School building to the Central District, a Seattle Washington community, has changed over the course of its initial construction as a school building in 1909 to its resurrection as a museum and apartment complex today. Cultural attitudes from the national and local perspective help understand the symbolism of the school building over the course of 110 years. In her 2015 doctoral dissertation, *Co-Constructing Racial Identities at Seattle's Northwest African American Museum*, Olivia Littles Erickson, PhD gave context to the cultural significance of memory, identity, and place. The old school building stands as silent legacy to Americanism, discrimination, civil disobedience, identity, and triumph over adversity.

### **Understanding a Larger National Climate**

Washington became a state in 1889, during the second immigration boom when 20 million immigrants arrived in the United States (History.com, 2019). The naturalization act of 1906 allowed only Caucasians and African Americans to be naturalized citizens (American Anthropological Association, 2008). The climate was rife with anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic sentiment. The national climate was influenced by Madison Grant's, "The passing of the great race." Congress passed many immigration laws that reflected the Nordic sentiment of the book (American Anthropological Association, 2008). Xenophobic laws were made defining race, and prevented nonwhites from exercising their rights, owning property and social security (PBS.org, 2003). The Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 prevented "people from a large swath of Asia and the Pacific Islands, [as well as] homosexuals, 'idiots,' 'feeble-minded persons,' 'criminals,' 'insane persons,' alcoholics, and other categories" (Rowen &

Chamberlain, 2019). Yet in the Central District, these groups lived together. The Seattle Public School annual report placed Americanism as priority in the school repertoire.

### **Initial Construction**

The Colman Elementary School was built for the Seattle Public School District (SPSD) No. 1 by Canadian architect James Stephen. Stephen moved to Seattle in 1889 after the great Seattle fire and was the school district's resident architect from 1901 until 1910. The school was initially a three-story 'T' shaped Jacobian building, and is a 'fireproof' model designed by Stephen that was adopted by the school district to include terra cotta, masonry and concrete, with modernized bathrooms (Furesz, n.d.). The school site was purchased for \$9,525 and built for \$87,637 (Gordon, 2005). "Buildings hold memories. Memories of a place have the power to connote identities and meanings of belonging" (O. Erickson, personal communication, March 7, 2019). The Colman School building had an initial purpose: to be a school. One distinction between Colman Elementary and other schools is the location where it was constructed. The Central District of Seattle is the oldest surviving residential area (Henry, 2001). Over the course of this building's life, people from many nationalities and of many cultures walked the hallways. It served to educate and unify children and adults with the objective to create outstanding, loyal, American citizens.

### **Americanism**

Central District history begins with immigration. Established around 1890, the Central District was originally home to a large Italian Catholic population. While there were residents in the Central Area well before the 1920s, Seattle experienced a large influx of residents during this time (Henry, 2001). During the 1920s, pupils in Seattle public schools came from many nationalities. In a school with less than 500 students, 25 nationalities were identified. More than

55 percent of the students had foreign-born parents including a significant Japanese population that grew from the 1920s until the 1940s internment (Knauf, 2019). The school district's stance declared a need to establish curriculum focused on citizenship and patriotism.

The American public school is sometimes characterized as the melting pot into which children of ...variant racial inheritance [are] cast... through [the] process of amalgamation they eventually become true American citizens. This is a process which individual Seattle schools are being called upon to perform in varying degrees... (Erickson, 2015, p. 3).

...Americanism is more than a system of government; it is the spirit of a national life. The American people believe in self-government tempered with wisdom. They believe also the nation has a right to live its own life without interference by other nations." With such a conception of Americanism in mind, and recognizing that unless the foundation is well laid, the students will not grasp the true meaning of the ideals and principles of our government and... ideals for American citizenship.

Colman offered evening Americanization and English performance classes for adults as early as 1918 to "meet new comers and programs that could give them citizenship training" (Seattle Public Schools, 1921). It was one of few schools that worked in conjunction with the naturalization office. Those who passed received a diploma accepted by the naturalization service of the United States government to declare citizenship.

### **Anna B. Kane**

Anna B. Kane was the principal of the Coleman School from 1912 to 1940. She was known to be stern, progressive and to not differentiate children by ethnicity (Pieroth, p. 107). Her long running career as principal made her a significant community figure. Her influence is undoubtedly a part of the Colman history. You can see her standing in the background of

several the photographs surrounded by young faces that appear to come from all walks of life (see appendix).

### **The African American Community and the Colman School**

The different religions, nationalities, and ethnicities residing in the Central District resulted in Colman Elementary being racially and ethnically integrated since its early years. Redlining and housing covenants beginning in the 1920s gave African Americans little choice of where they could live. “The World War II internment of the Japanese ...disrupted the community as Black war-worker families became a significant part of the population, often occupying homes abandoned by interned Japanese Americans. ...The Japanese population never recovered to its prewar size [and in] 1951 Seattle officials proclaimed the neighborhood the International District to reflect the community’s mix of citizens of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and, ironically, African American ancestry” (HistoryLink, 2005).

By 1940 the African American population had grown in the Central District and continued to steadily rise until the 1970s. “Central area neighborhood... experienced several rapid demographic changes. During a large part of the 20th Century the Central District was... home to the majority of the city’s African American residents” (Erickson, 2015, p. 1). What may have started out as an integrated community became largely segregated. Desegregation efforts were made by the Seattle Public School District in the 1960s. By 1977 a desegregation plan was implemented due to legal threats from the NAACP, American Civil Liberties Union and the threat of federal intervention (Riley, 2016). In 1968, Seattle passed an open housing law that freed African Americans from the confines of the Central District (Berger, 2017). Plans to expand Interstate 90 divided the area in two; the Coleman building was slated for demolition. When the school shut down as an elementary school in 1979, over 75 percent of the students

were African American. It continued as an alternative school until 1985 when construction became imminent (Erickson, 2015, p. 52).

### **Civil Disobedience**

The citizen support committee for the African American Heritage Museum had been trying for six years to create the museum to no avail (“Citizens Support Committee”, 1986). In November 1985, the school became a symbol of civil disobedience when Earl Debnam, Michael Greenwood, Charles James, and Omari Tahir-Garrett and about 40 other activists broke into the now closed school building and declared it an African American Cultural Center (James, 1985; Stevens, 2013). An article from Seattle Post-Intelligencer said “foot dragging by city officials and recent reports showing grades of Black high school students far below those of other minorities and whites” was the reason for the occupation (Klein, 1985). James (1985) wrote, “Since it was obvious to us that the Mayor’s Task Force was not prepared to come up with the site and or money for the museum anytime in the near future and had pulled back on the use of the Coleman with no alternate site in mind, we decided to help the progress along.” Their actions made them subject to arrest and prosecution and they even received death threats over the phone (James, 1985). The political protest was a peaceful resistance decrying the erasure of a community’s distinct personality. They demonstrated a desire to protect and defend Black institutions. The occupants stood for resistance to gentrification. Their civil disobedience demanded a reflection of Black culture and identity for future generations in the Central District. “The loss of place in the wake of demographic changes in urban redevelopment in Seattle Central District disbursed a formerly closely connected African American community and created a deeply felt need to preserve physical spaces and memories of the past” (O. Erickson, personal communication, March 7, 2019). Gentrification caused a sense of



displacement among the African American community. The Colman School building became more than a fight for a cultural center. It became a symbol of triumph over adversity and a symbol of “what the future will be to us and our children (James, 1986). Erickson said, “The building has an emotional pull... because it is a symbol of an historically Black community that’s changing. Keeping the building is like staking claim” (O. Erickson, personal communication, March 7, 2019).

### **Community Support**

The activists declared “every community has to have a cultural foundation and the people of the community need cultural beliefs and practices to give character to their community. From an interview with Debnam, “... school children lack pride in themselves. They know little about their heritage or about the significant contributions Black people have made to the American Society.” Garrett and James wrote newspaper articles with updates, fundraisers and programming offered at the Colman School (James, 1985). Community meetings were held at the “museum” along with art exhibits and programming including a forum on AIDS and racism (James, 1986). Not everyone supported the occupants. Robert Jackson (1986) of the Seattle Times wrote,

Panhandling for [a] museum while there is carnage in the classroom, the “squatters” mock the memory of the great men and women whose portraits decorate the walls. The crisis confronting the Black community is this: Black children are dying on the vine in Seattle schools. “Cultures” are basically large crisis management teams; museums are only their monuments. When Black Seattle is ready for museum, City Hall should stay out. An institution bought with Black money, and raised my Black hands, would be safer from interference by fickle politicians; otherwise, its cherished contents are

cheapened...the real “cultural centers” are hearts and minds. These, not Colman, deserve renewal. Black history’s house should be a tribute to authentic Afro American culture, a toast to the political ingenuity of the men and women who made it possible.

The city took the position that the Colman School was not an ideal site for a museum. However, in October of 1986 the City Council used \$25,000 in community block grant money to hire a consultant for assessing space needs and cost of possible sites and management options for the museum (Seattle PI, 1986).

### **Triumph Over Adversity**

In 1986 over 5000 citizens gave written support of the occupier’s cause by signing petitions (“African American Museum”, 1986). On Nelson Mandela’s 68th birthday, July 18, 1986, the local community ended their apartheid march at the Colman School. According to the Seattle PI (1986), the African American Heritage Museum, the Seattle Coalition Against Apartheid and the Women’s Coalition to Stop the Green River Murders were among the attendees. Joy Austin, director of the African American Museum Association from Washington DC said, “It is important for the community and these men who are occupying to school to know that they are not alone.” (“Citizen report committee,” 1986, p. 9). In 1993, Mayor Norman B. Rice created a museum committee, officially ending the longest act of civil disobedience in the country (Stevens, 2013). Today the old school building is one of seven surviving structures that would not be standing today if the community did not rally around it (City of Seattle, 2005). The Colman, like a phoenix from the ashes was saved from destruction, and its rebirth as a cultural center looked possible. This symbol of triumph over adversity still faced an uncertain future.

The African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center (AAHMCC) committee consisted of business-oriented members and the four original occupiers. According to a memorandum to the Mayor in 1996, the museum board was able to raise almost \$700,000 of which \$300,000 was offered from the City and \$250,000 tied to property transfer of the museum project from the Plymouth Congregation. The Seattle Public School District and the museum board were negotiating purchase of the building for \$450,000 (Hunt, 1996).

Unfortunately, the AAHMCC board never moved past the planning phase of the project.

President Earl Debnam was voted off the board that same year. Poor governance and infighting eventually lead to the split of the board into two factions with both sides claiming to be the real AAHMCC (O. Erickson, personal communication, March 7, 2019). Funders backed out and the sale never happened. “After nearly a decade of missed deadlines and bitter recriminations, the Black community confronted the appalling possibility that their museum might never get built at all” (Stevens, 2013).

### **Urban League Purchase**

The Colman building remained the unused property of the school district until 2003. President James Kelly of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle declared the dream should not die. By the time the Urban League sought the purchase of the building in 2003 it was in massive disrepair from almost 20 years of neglect. It would cost less to tear down the building than to repair it. However, places like the Colman School are embodiments of a collective history. Community support and a drive to have “something done” and preserve the African American culture of the Central District were factors in the dream becoming reality (O. Erickson, personal communication, March 7, 2019). The Colman School became a designated historic landmark in August, 2005 because of the following three criteria:

- It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, city, state or nation.
- It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction.
- Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city that contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or city (Gordon, 2005).

The Urban League received \$75,000 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, \$100,000 from the Seattle Foundation and \$50,000 from the KeyBank Foundation. The Urban League Village was a \$17 million renovation project aiming to provide social, cultural, recreational activities, and economic opportunities for residents and families living in the area. The Village “big picture” was an African American Museum, affordable housing, and commercial office space, but it was an ambitious goal (Urban League, 2002). The Urban League negotiated the sale of the old school for \$800,000. In 2008, the Northwestern African American Museum and the Urban League Village Apartments opened their doors to the public, consisting of a museum on the ground floor with affordable apartments on the second and third stories.

Even as the museum presents and shapes local histories, it also reflects the ideas and beliefs of others. The museum is inextricably connected to the discourses of both local and national African American history and community identity, as well as to institutional and professional discourses concerning the work of museums (Erickson, 2015, p. 3).

Cultural museums serve as storehouses of memory and cultural knowledge. They are places we visit to learn about our past, celebrate the present, and imagine the future... it

is important to consider the role they play in the lived experiences of their visitors, and the ways in which they help or hinder the public from understanding of the complexities of racial and ethnic histories. (Erickson, 2015, p. 9)

### **Conclusion**

I first became interested in the Colman building when I learned it was marked for demolition but saved when four people broke into the building and refused to leave for eight years. The state decided to build I-90 around the Colman School, leaving space for a dream to become real. Without the perseverance of four men, the building would not be here today. What, I wondered, was significant about the school building and why would a group of men risk their lives to save it? Research on the Colman School building is often synonymous with the NAAM today. “Oh great! The NAAM is a wonderful place. What an interesting and important topic,” was a response I received. While I agree the Northwest African American Museum is important cultural center, it is a part of the sum. The old Colman School building is a legacy that goes beyond the NAAM.

As a person of mixed race who identifies as being Black, the multi-layered history of the building was important to uncover. Similar to my own experience, knowledge and pride in my African American ancestry does not discount the other parts of my lineage. The entire ‘history package’ enriches my multilayered and multifaceted humanness. The significance of the old Colman School is much the same. It is important to pay homage to the building’s whole life: the people who walked its hallways when it was a school; those who lived within its walls for eight years; the people who now call it home; and the visitors who experience place of cultural pride, identity, and discovery; all contribute to the legacy of this historic building. Its continued existence through multiple layers of Seattle history give it dimension and substance. The

Colman School reflects back to us our past and pays homage to the rich diversity of the oldest residential area in the city.

**Method Note:**

This case study was developed by Tyrah Hannibal, MFA 2019 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman and Bill Moskin. An interview was conducted with Olivia Little Erickson, PhD, as part of this research during Winter Quarter, 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

### References

- African American Museum celebrates Black history. (1986, February 5). *Seattle Medium, The*, p. 4.
- American Anthropological Association. (2008, May 27). 1910s-1920s: Immigration, defining whiteness. *NBCnews.com*. [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/24714378/ns/us\\_news-gut\\_check/t/s-s-immigration-#.XvAGKy3My44](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/24714378/ns/us_news-gut_check/t/s-s-immigration-#.XvAGKy3My44)
- Annette's Political Corner. (1985, November 27). [newspaper column] *The Facts*, p. 2.
- Berger, K. (2017, June 28). The real threat to Seattle's 'hottest neighborhood' -- it's not drive-bys. *Crosscut*. <https://crosscut.com/2017/06/the-real-threat-to-seattles-hottest-neighborhood-its-not-drive-bys>
- Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. (n.d.). About the Seattle Star. (Seattle, Wash.) 1899-1947. *National Endowment for the Humanities, Library of Congress*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87093407/>
- Citizens support committee. (1986, April 2). Buttons, Sambo and sewing at African American Heritage Museum. *The Facts*, p. 3.
- Erickson, O. L. (2015). *Co-constructing racial identities at Seattle's Northwest African American Museum*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington]. [https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/33555/Erickson\\_washington\\_0250E\\_14899.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/33555/Erickson_washington_0250E_14899.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Furesz, S.S. (n.d.). *James Stephen*. Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Washington state. <https://dahp.wa.gov/bio-for-james-stephen>
- Gordon, K. (2005, August 26). Report on designation: (former) Colman School (LPB 353/05). *City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board*.

<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/HistoricPreservation/Landmarks/RelatedDocuments/colman-school-designation.pdf>

Henry M.T. (2001, March 10). Seattle neighborhoods: Central Area - Thumbnail history.

*HistoryLink.org* Essay 3079. <https://www.historylink.org/File/3079>

History.com Editors. (2019, May 14). U.S. immigration timeline. *History Channel*

<https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/immigration-united-states-timeline>

HistoryLink. (2005, January 4). Seattle Neighborhoods - Past, present, future. *HistoryLink.org*

Essay 7196. <https://www.historylink.org/File/7196>

Hunt, D. (1996, May 9). *Memorandum. African American museum update*. Office of the Mayor, Seattle.

Jackson, R. (1986, January 28). School problems are more pressing than Black museum. *Seattle Times*, p. A7.

James, C. (1985, December 18). Staking a claim for the future. *The Facts*, p. 2.

James, C. (1986, March 5, 1986). African American heritage Museum effort in question. *The Facts*, p. 3.

Klein, K. (1985, November 27). Museum supporters plan to say in school. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, p. D3.

Knauf, A. S. (2019, January 15). How did the Central District become Seattle's historically black neighborhood? *The Evergrey*. <https://theevergrey.com/how-did-the-central-district-become-seattles-historically-black-neighborhood/>

Pieroth, D. H. (2004). *Seattle women teachers of the interwar years: Shapers of a livable city*. University of Washington Press.



PBS.org. (2003). Race: *The power of illusion; Go deeper: Race timeline*.

[https://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_03\\_d-godeeper.htm](https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_03_d-godeeper.htm)

Riley, S. (2016, April 13). How Seattle gave up on busing and allowed public schools to become alarmingly resegregated. *The Stranger*.

<https://www.thestranger.com/features/2016/04/13/23945368/how-seattle-gave-up-on-busing-and-allowed-its-public-schools-to-become-alarmingly-resegregated>

Rowen, B. & Chamberlain, L. (2020, June 2). Immigration legislation: A detailed look at immigration from the colonial period to the present. *Infoplease*.

<https://www.infoplease.com/us/immigration-legislation>

Seattle PI staff. (1986, October 14). City boosts effort for Black museum. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, p. D1.

Stevens, J. (2013, November 24). November 24, 1985: The Colman School occupation. *The Seattle Star*. <https://www.seattlestar.net/2013/11/november-24-1985-the-colman-school-occupation/>

Seattle Public Schools. (1921). Thirty-fourth annual report of the public schools, Quintennial report 1916-1921. Seattle, WA

Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. (2002). The Urban League Village at Colman School: Living Landmark [brochure]. Seattle, WA

### Additional Readings

Guilbert, J. (2008, October). Divided it Stands. *Seattle Met*.

<https://www.seattlemet.com/articles/2008/12/19/1008-feat-divided>

Legal Information Institute. (n.d.) Washington. et al. Appellants v. Seattle School District No. 1.

et al. 1982. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/458/457>

Northwest African American Museum (n.d.) History of NAAM.

<https://www.naamnw.org/history>

Seattle Public Schools. (1924). Triennial report of the public schools, 1921-1924. Seattle, WA

Seattle Public Schools. (1930). Triennial report of the public schools, 1927-1930. Seattle, WA

Veith, T. (2009). *History of the Central Area*. Historic Preservation Program, City of Seattle

Department of Neighborhoods.

<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/HistoricPreservation/HistoricResourcesSurvey/context-central-area.pdf>

Figures



*Colman Elementary School students with Principal Anna Kane, 1930.  
Photo courtesy of Seattle Public School Archives, PH 212-7.*



*Colman Elementary School students, 1948.  
Photo courtesy of Seattle Public School Archives, PH 212-123.*

**THE SEATTLE STAR**

**DIVERS GO TO SUNKEN SPANISH VES**  
Fear 450 Lost Aboard Ill-Fated Valdnera

**Silver Brothers, Just Out of Army Open Realty Office**

**COMPANIES ARM TO BEAT STRIKE**  
Police Are Called to Prevent Street Meetings

**Workers Refuse Offer of Factory; Strike for Raise**

**Daniels Admits Fleet Is in E**

**WEAVER CASE GOES TO JURY**  
Talks of Gun Stripped into Jail

**EXPECT 6,000 IN NIGHT SCHOOL**  
Registration Will Continue Monday

**Relay on Women to Win Steel Strike**

**BUILDING TRADES STATE ASKS FOR STRIKE STILL ON BETTER SERVICE**

**Union Men Fail to Accept New Aid Against Gas and Phone Companies**

**Strike Cause of Famine in Sugar**

**WILL TAKE NEW BARK**



**EXPECT 6,000 IN NIGHT SCHOOL**

**Registration Will Continue Monday**

Featuring English for foreigners and industrial work for both men and women as well as teaching all elementary grade subjects, Seattle night schools reopened Friday night. Registration will continue Monday.

Night school was resumed in all high school buildings and in Central, Washington and Colman grade schools. Main st. school will be used by Japanese and Chinese students only.

S. E. Fleming, director of vocational training, with offices at 302 Central building, says he expects in the neighborhood of 6,000 students to take night school work before the year is over. The term is of six months' duration.

Gas engine and machine shops are already overflowing, he said, and an effort will be made to get outside shops for school purposes. Retail selling for girls and boys will be taught at Broadway high school.

1920 newspaper article about Colman Night School.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Chronicling America online collection