

## **Project Narrative**

On February 10, 1960, nine days after the Greensboro Four re-ignited a non-violent, sit-in strategy that helped usher in a new era in the modern civil rights movement, three smartly dressed students from Hampton Institute departed their campus in the direction of downtown Hampton. They arrived at the city's main thoroughfare, Queens Way, and promptly entered F.W. Woolworth. Their goal: to desegregate the segregated lunch counter and challenge directly Jim Crow discrimination in the south. Though they were not served, the three students remained sitting at the lunch counter for approximately three hours without incident, until it closed, and then returned to the campus where "the student body praised their efforts and pledged themselves to fight discrimination at the lunch counter."<sup>1</sup> The next day, 200 Hampton students returned to F.W. Woolworth where, according to *The Washington Post* article "Virginia Gets Negro Protest," they "stayed to read books and magazines" until the manager closed the counter.<sup>2</sup> Ten days later, on February 20, Hampton students staged the "first mass demonstration" in the city, an event that saw 600 students who "marched into the business district carrying posters that decried discrimination."<sup>3</sup> The original protest at F.W. Woolworth on February 10—the first sit-in demonstration in Virginia—steadily spread to other locales in Hampton and the neighboring cities of Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Newport News. So successful were the students' organization in the local environment and confidence in the budding movement that Hampton students initiated what was to be a nationwide day of protest on March 26, which received support from groups in Washington D.C., New York, and San Francisco. From these initial sit-in demonstrations spawned a movement of picket lines, economic boycott, and voter registrations drives that Hampton students sustained through the turbulence of the 1960s.

"Virginia's First Sit-In Lunch Counter Demonstration: A Public Key to Civil Rights and Responsibilities" is critical to unlocking this silenced history—a story that extends well before and beyond February 10, 1960 to broaden our region's understanding of and role of Hampton students in the modern civil rights movement. Establishing place-memory as a departure point, project collaborators will construct, prepare, and work across three distinct though intimately

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<sup>1</sup> Donne L. Everette and Kennel A. Jackson, Jr., "The Hampton Sit-Ins and Southern Society," 7, undated. Everette and Jackson graduated from Hampton Institute in 1960 and 1962, respectively. Though their report is undated, its content suggests that it was written during the initial months of the sit-in movement in Hampton.

<sup>2</sup> *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, "Virginia Gets Negro Protest," February 12, 1960

<sup>3</sup> Everette and Jackson, Jr.

linked *memory actions*.<sup>4</sup> These actions—community conversations, oral histories, and commemorative art—are best described as deliberate efforts to *do* or *make* community history. The first project pillar comes in the form of three community conversations or “civic dialogues” hosted by the Hampton History Museum (HHM). These dialogues will take a page from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, an organization that holds “the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of [our] sites to contemporary implications” and “views stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting democratic and humanitarian values as a primary function.”<sup>5</sup> With an over-arching theme of Race and Remembrance, these conversations fit ideally into HHM’s institutional mission and vision of community building, whereas history museums should not be about answers but about questions that our history raises. The three-event series aims at carefully constructed dialogues that bring together diverse stakeholders to discuss public issues in a democratic, non-exclusionary manner.

The first conversation, “Hampton’s Civil Rights Movement in Historical Perspective,” will be kicked-off and mediated by the public intellectual Linda Holmes. This will seek to engage the public’s perceptions and experiences of the local movement over time. What did it mean in the 1960s to local residents? And how did it change over subsequent decades? What, in fact, do we know about it now, how do we remember it, and how does it inspire our actions? It will also put in perspective the local movement’s relation to the larger sit-movement throughout the state and region by inviting other citizens working on or with knowledge about similar community projects such as those in Danville and Richmond. The second conversation will be facilitated by Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, titled “The Influence of the Civil Rights Movement in Hampton Roads Today.” The terrain covered in this dialogue will range from voter registration and turn-out in the present to ways spatial segregation/integration still manifest in the local environment. Or, in another way, how far have we come and what work remains? Finally, Professor Robert Watson from Hampton University will help the community tackle “The Future of the Civil Rights Movement.” The pressing issue here cuts two ways. First, community input will help spell out how the movement can be sustained through actions for positive social

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough approach to the theory and practice of place-memory, see Dolores Hayden’s *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Liz Sevckenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi, “Sites of Conscience: Opening Historic Sites for Civic Dialogue,” *Forward, The Public Historian*, Vol. 30. No. 1, February 2008, pp. 9-15

change, what strategies can be adopted from the past for the future, and what sort of education and outreach is needed to engage the next generation. Second, the audience will be challenged to answer how the civil rights movement can be sustained through memory work and cultural transmission. Tying together action and memory, Professor Watson's facilitation will chart movement potentials to avoid movement pitfalls.

These "civic dialogues," will also be complemented by an initiative to collect material evidence and artifacts connected to the lunch counter demonstration in Hampton's civil rights movement. This "collecting campaign" has the potential to not only recover and preserve material culture but also impact the interpretations and telling of the local story of civil rights.

The collecting campaign will be implemented on multiple levels. There will be an awareness strategy using traditional and social media to inform the public of the push for artifacts and the need for preserving these items to share this story with the public. The community conversations involved with this project will also be used as an opportunity to encourage citizens to bring their artifacts to the museum before the events or setting follow-up appointments with museum staff to begin the process of adding these artifacts to the permanent collection.

The project's second memory action involves collecting ten oral histories from sit-in veterans and other Hampton residents who experienced the student initiated demonstrations, picket lines, and economic boycotts. With Holmes at the helm of this component, the work builds on the successful oral history panel hosted by HHM on January 28, 2016, where seven sit-in veterans shared their stories with an audience of close to one-hundred people. The auditorium setting, expertise, and technical equipment for the oral history project provided by the HHM is crucial to capture the personal experiences that fill historical gaps in the archival records. This "shared authority"<sup>6</sup>—the eye witnesses accounts and memories of the Hampton movement and the collection, transcription, and dissemination of these stories by the Hampton History Museum—lend credence both to the power of testimony in bringing history to new audiences and the institutional responsibility of a leading museum. Student sit-in veterans and Hampton citizens already contacted include but are not limited to Dr. Willia Daughtry, Dr. Mary Christian,

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<sup>6</sup> See, Michael Frisch's *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990)

Lynn Stuart, Thurman Davis, John and Gloria Hamlette, and Robert Long. These interviews will be video-taped and recorded at the HHM. Non-African Americans, like Robert Long, will also be included in the series. Holmes has reviewed the Smithsonian Civil Rights Oral History Project for thematic substance and will use archival evidence from the Norfolk Journal and Guide, Daily Press, and Hampton student newspaper, in addition to any archived television footage, to inform her interview questions. These interviews look to be organic conversations based on the following topics: Jim Crow experiences prior to the sit-in demonstrations, non-violent training and campus organizing, involvement in other civil disobedient acts in Hampton Roads, personal and collective influences, responses by family members, and the relationship to SNCC, CORE, and Hampton's Committee of Human Dignity. The transcripts from these interviews will help inform museum educational brochures, website text, and a three-panel traveling exhibit in conjunction with collected artifacts. Rescuing ten voices of Virginia's first sit-in demonstrations is all the more urgent given the time between the 1960 event and the present.

Finally, a commemorative art project represents the project's third pillar. In the form of a free-standing mural based on photographs from 1960, locally renowned artist Lynwood Pettaway will employ his expertise to publicly signal the current structure as a recognizable symbolic site of civil rights struggle—and fit into the City of Hampton's goal to add murals to the urban landscape. This *marking* and *making* of the site through public art is part of a larger though often less-appreciated cross-disciplinary strategy of historical remembrance that unites artists, scholars, and community members to interpret and commemorate history. A principle stakeholder and prime example of this collaboration involves the building's current owner, Robert E. Long, who not only saved the building from destruction in 1984 but did so because of his personal connection to it. Attorney Long, a European American, remembers eating at the counter as young boy while it was still segregated and is responsible for the small, bronze commemorative plaque noting the significance of February 10, 1960, the day Virginia's sit-in demonstration began. The mural will be a significant sign-post to capture not only this history of the sit-in demonstrations but also future commemorative activity. On February 10, 2016, Hampton University Professor Zachary McKiernan and sixteen students participated in the First-Annual Commemorative March to celebrate the sit-in veterans' fight against Jim Crow. The

Hampton History Museum looks to pick up this torch and continue to build an Annual March in order to build a commemorative tradition to increase recognition important civil rights site.

Community conversations, oral histories, commemorative art, preservation of artifacts bringing this history to life, and a traveling exhibition teaching this story are our outcomes and also at the heart of raising the visibility of Hampton Virginia's ground breaking sit-in demonstrations.

A view of the past also opens opportunities to increased understanding of contemporary issues around race, voting, inclusion/exclusion, and ideas of equality and equity. From his public-scholar role, McKiernan will provide scholarly insights regarding the significance and impact of the project in institutionalizing remembrance of civil rights activities, raise the visibility of Hampton's sit-in demonstrations in civil rights historiography, and write the history of the present memory actions. Turning memory to action opens awareness to and allows the documentation of African American (hi)story which has yet to be included in Hampton's public school curriculum, Hampton historic walks, or museum exhibition. The project, informed by and building on previous scholarly work and community collaboration, aims to be a springboard for continuing public engagement in the future. By creating a public key to civil rights history in Hampton, this project provides new perspectives on and opportunities for civic action, community building, and civic dialogue. That the public key to civil rights history in Hampton opens new perspectives on community building and civic dialogue through the prism of F.W. Woolworth and the story of sit-in students, so too does it speak to our civic responsibilities to translate our memories of it to action.

With this project we focus on diversifying our audience. The nature of this project allows us to not only teach about this important story but also understand how people experienced these events and help build a larger understanding of how people create meaning and how people influence and are influenced by such events. The multiple pillars of this project provide different entry points so that citizens can make intellectual, emotional, and personal connections between historic events and decisions made by ordinary people, like you and me. This project reaches into the community to share a new way of understanding history. In doing so, it will attract a broader audience because it will give voice to otherwise hidden or voiceless people, truly embraces the ideals of democracy because it redistribute who is telling the story so that history's

authorship might be shared rather than serve as an instrument of power or hierarchy and facilitates a sense of closure to issues not adequately dealt with by our community.

Our promotion of this project will be as diverse as its audience. We will use traditional and social media to share the different aspects of the project with the community. We will use networking and partnerships to disseminate information through strong relationship we have with the local churches, school systems, local colleges and universities, local military organizations, civic organizations and a strong support system of promotional efforts from both the Hampton Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Marketing Inc.