

# Conference on Black History in the Hudson Valley

Saturday, October 2, 2021 | 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM

SUNY Ulster, Stone Ridge Campus & Virtually via Zoom  
491 Cottekill Rd.  
Stone Ridge, NY 12484

## CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

8:30 AM – Registration opens

**9:00 AM – Keynote Address** – Dr. Myra Young Armstead, Vice President for Academic Inclusive Excellence; Lyford Paterson Edwards and Helen Gray Edwards Professor of Historical Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

*9:45 AM – 10 minute break*

### **9:55 AM – Panel 1 – Building Community**

- “‘God has seen and answered prayer,’ The Church in ‘The Hills,’ the largest, African American Community in 19th Century, Westchester County, New York” - Dr. Edythe Ann Quinn, Emerita Professor of History, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY
- “Calvin Snyder, the First Eagle’s Nester,” - Dr. Lorna Smedman, local historian
- “Tri-Racial Communities in the Hudson River Valley” - Dr. Renate Bartl, University of Munich, Germany (virtual)

*11:20 AM – 10 minute break*

### **11:30 AM – Panel 2 – Black History in Museums**

- “Free Black Men and Voting in 19th-Century New Paltz” - Josephine Bloodgood, Director of Curatorial and Preservation Affairs, Historic Huguenot Street, New Paltz, NY
- “The Black Experience on the D&H Canal” – Bill Merchant, Historian and Curator, D&H Canal Historical Society
- “Changing the Gomez Mill House Story to include Black Lives: Joseph Butt, Child Actor,” - Alicia S. Tether, Research Volunteer and Richard E. Rosencrans, Jr., Site Director of Gomez Mill House in Marlboro, NY

*12:35 PM – 10 minute break*

**12:45 PM – Lunch, Keynote Address** – Lavada Nahon, Interpreter of African American History, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation

*1:30 PM – 10 minute break*

### **1:40 PM – Roundtable Discussion – “Teaching Research Skills with Hudson Valley Case Studies in Black History”**

- Sarah Johnson, PhD, public history consultant and Grace Zimmerman, Vice President, Somers Historical Society, Somers, NY, with guests.

*2:40 PM – 10 minute break*

### **2:50 PM – Panel 3 – Slavery & Jim Crow in the Hudson Valley**

- “The Meaning of Family: Slavery and Domestic Life in the Colonial Hudson Valley” - BJ Lillis, PhD Candidate in History, Princeton University
- “Harriet Myers: Activist on the Underground Railroad” – Paul Stewart, Underground Railroad Education Center, Albany, NY
- “Spaces of Danger: Navigating Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley” - Peter Bunten, chairman of the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project and Vice President of the Underground Railroad Consortium of New York State
- “Elizabeth Jennings: America’s First Freedom Rider” - Jerry Mikorenda, author of *America’s First Freedom Rider: Elizabeth Jennings, Chester A. Arthur, and the Early Fight for Civil Rights* (2019)

*4:25 PM – 10 minute break*

### **4:35 PM – Panel 4 – Being Black in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

- “The Visual Arts” - Stephen Blauweiss, filmmaker and historian
- “The Green Book Project” - Christina Sinclair Jones, Summer 2021 Archival Intern with The Library at the A.J. Williams-Myers African Roots Center

*5:30 PM – 10 minute break*

### **5:40 PM – Conference Closing Address**

## **PANEL 1: BUILDING COMMUNITY**

### **“‘God has seen and answered prayer,’ The Church in ‘The Hills,’ the largest, African American Community in 19th Century, Westchester County, New York”**

“God is about to do the work that has been prayed years and years before we thought about praying for God has seen and answered prayer.” In his letter dated February 15, 1864, to his wife Sarah Jane at home in The Hills, Sergeant Simeon Anderson Tierce of the United States Colored Troops, credited God with answering their prayers to end slavery in the South. In this chapter from her forthcoming book, Dr. Edythe Anne Quinn examines the role of the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of Colored People of the Town of Harrison in the Black community of “The Hills” in Westchester, NY.

*Edythe Ann Quinn, Ph.D. is an Emerita Professor of History, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY (1995-2018) and author of FREEDOM JOURNEY: Black Civil War Soldiers and The Hills Community, Westchester County, New York, SUNY Press, 2015.*

### **“Calvin Snyder, the First Eagle’s Nester”**

There are many myths about the people from Eagle’s Nest Road in Hurley, NY. One of the most common is that escaped Black slaves intermarried with the remaining indigenous Munsee and White Dutch or English colonists. In response to the prevalent disapprobation of White townspeople, the Eagle’s Nesters supposedly kept to themselves, maintaining traditions like herbal medicine and basket making and marrying within their own group.

This presentation focuses on the life of Calvin Snyder, who was one of the first documented residents of Eagle’s Nest Road. His life story confirms some parts of the myth, but information from census records, land deeds, newspaper articles, and interviews with descendants also shows how the first generation of free Black people in the Hudson Valley met the challenges of living in the post-slavery society.

*Lorna Smedman, PhD, is a writer and local historian.*

### **“Tri-Racial Communities in the Hudson River Valley”**

From the earliest European settlement to the 19th century, Black communities the Hudson Valley have developed multi-ethnic identities. From Afro-Dutch and Afro-German to African-American, Dr. Bartl will examine how Black communities integrated with Indigenous communities or sometimes adopted the identity of “Indian” to escape the enforcement of race-based laws. Also known as “tri-racial,” Dr. Bartl will discuss “tri-racial” communities living in Albany, Columbia, Montgomery, Orange, Rensselaer, Rockland, Schoharie, and Ulster Counties.

*Renate Bartl holds a Ph.D. in American Cultural History and Anthropology from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU), Munich/Germany. Her main research areas are Native American Nations, African Americans and Afro-Indigenous groups of the eastern USA, as well as the theory of ethnicity.*

*She teaches eLearning courses in Canadian Aboriginal Studies for the Association of Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries (GKS) and has taught classes on indigenous peoples of North America and theory of ethnicity at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and American Cultural History, University of Munich/Germany and the Institute for Canadian Studies, University of Augsburg/Germany.*

*She is responsible for the American Indian Workshop (AIW) webpage and mail server: [www.american-indian-workshop.org](http://www.american-indian-workshop.org)*

## **PANEL 2: BLACK HISTORY RESEARCH & INTERPRETATION IN HUDSON VALLEY MUSEUMS**

### **“Free Black Men and Voting in 19th-Century New Paltz”**

Who was the first Black man eligible to vote in New Paltz? Until recently, many thought it was John Hasbrouck, born to an enslaved woman named Peg in New Paltz in 1806. However, recent research conducted by Josephine Bloodgood, HHS Director of Preservation and Curatorial Affairs, revealed that at least one man seems to have met the land qualification requirement for Black men in New York State, at the time, and who voted several years before John Hasbrouck. His name was Caesar DuBois. Bloodgood will discuss her recent research, how she came to identify Caesar’s name, and what she was able to

learn about him. She will also highlight some of the other free Black men she is researching, many of whom voted in New Paltz in the 19th century, while sharing images of original polling records and other historical documents.

*Josephine Bloodgood is the Director of Curatorial and Preservation Affairs at Historic Huguenot Street, New Paltz, NY*

### **“The Black Experience on the D&H Canal”**

The D&H Canal was an important industrial enterprise in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. It relied almost solely on immigrants and people of color to construct and operate. D&H Canal Historical Society Historian Bill Merchant will share some of his research on the Black experience on the D&H Canal.

*Bill Merchant is the Curator & Historian at the D&H Canal Historical Society in High Falls, NY*

### **“Changing the Gomez Mill House Story to include Black Lives: Joseph Butt, Child Actor,”**

For decades, visitors to the Gomez Mill House have learned the story of Martha Gruening, suffragist, civil rights activist, and owner of the Mill House from 1918 to 1925. Martha, a White woman, led a fascinating life. But she would never have purchased the Mill House if it hadn't been for a 5-year-old Black boy, Joseph Butt. Martha first saw Joseph on stage in April 1917. He was the only child actor in the first Broadway show with an all-Black cast. He impressed the theater critics -- and he must have charmed Martha as well because she soon adopted him.

By some accounts, Martha rescued Joseph from a life of poverty in a family of hapless minstrel performers. That is far from the truth. Joseph's family was part of the Great Migration with a network of support in Yonkers. We will demonstrate that Joseph did not need to escape a dire family situation. And yet, the adoption – perhaps a controversial one -- did occur, with the understanding that Martha would provide an exceptional education for Joseph, a gifted child. Martha, her teaching partner Helen Boardman, Joseph's family, and even W.E.B. DuBois were all in favor of the arrangement.

Research volunteer Alicia S. Tether and Site Director Richard E. Rosencrans, Jr. will share these and other stories from their recent research into the lives of Martha and Joseph, including the opening of an interracial school at the Gomez Mill House.

*Alicia S. Tether, Research Volunteer and Richard E. Rosencrans, Jr., Site Director of Gomez Mill House in Marlboro, NY*

## **ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION**

### **“Teaching Research Skills with Hudson Valley Case Studies in Black History”**

This interactive roundtable will discuss how to develop or improve history research skills at any level by examining Black history case studies and the research steps we have taken in developing stories for publication, social media posts or blogs, or illustrated talks. The discussion will present case studies in Hudson Valley Black history research, as well as offer advice, tools, and resources for conducting your own Black history research and help document Black history in the Hudson Valley more fully.

*Roundtable will be led Sarah Johnson, PhD, public history consultant and Grace Zimmerman, Vice President, Somers Historical Society, Somers, NY, with guests including a museum curator, an investigative journalist, and a family member of a case study subject.*

### **PANEL 3: SLAVERY & JIM CROW IN THE HUDSON VALLEY**

#### **“The Meaning of Family: Slavery and Domestic Life in the Colonial Hudson Valley”**

This presentation considers slavery and the family in the colonial Hudson Valley. Drawing on two seminal women writers from the early Hudson Valley, Sojourner Truth and Anne Grant, the presentation connects insights drawn from their analyses of slavery to colonial-era letters discussing the sale of enslaved women and children. I argue that in the context of the family, slavery incorporated itself into the heart of Hudson Valley society and economy, even where it appeared economically marginal. Understanding northern slavery in the context of family relationships—both those enslaved people created for themselves, in defiance of their enslavers, and those that their enslavers forced on them—is key to clarifying slavery’s significance to colonial society.

*BJ Lillis is a historian of colonial America with a focus on the intersections between slavery, indigenous dispossession, and settler political economy. His dissertation follows the colonization of the Hudson Valley from the late 17th-century to the Revolution, tracing the valley’s transformation from a world of indigenous homelands, scattered Dutch villages, and sprawling refugee camps to one increasingly dominated by proto-capitalist agricultural estates, culminating in a wave of rebellion against Landlords’ power on the eve of the Revolution. BJ is currently a PhD candidate in history at Princeton University. Before returning to school, BJ worked in public history at the Museum of the City of New York, where he was Project Assistant for New York at Its Core, the City Museum’s groundbreaking three-gallery permanent exhibition on the past, present, and future of New York City.*

#### **“Harriet Myers: Activist on the Underground Railroad”**

The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence was a headquarters for Underground Railroad activity in the Capital Region in the mid 1850’s, as documented by a Vigilance Committee flier that has survived from that period along with other historic records. Although the life of Stephen Myers is well-documented as one of the most important figures in the Underground Railroad movement in the Northeast between 1830 and 1850, his wife Harriet was equally important. Paul Stewart reveals new information about her activism as a Black woman in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and her role in the Underground Railroad movement.

*Paul Stewart is the co-founder of the Underground Railroad Education Center, located in the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence in Albany, NY*

#### **“Spaces of Danger: Navigating Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley”**

Across the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean and North America, enslaved Africans lived their lives under constant threat to themselves and their families. Even for free men and women, everywhere lay the risk of death, danger, and displacement. Often, their response was to flee, to run, to self-emancipate, sometimes with help from the Underground Railroad. Peter Bunten examines aspects of

the Underground Railroad story as it played out for people in the Mid-Hudson Valley of New York and posits how – even to this day - America remains a space of danger for Black men and women.

*Peter Bunten is chairman of the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project, located in Dutchess County, and is the current Vice President of the Underground Railroad Consortium of New York State. He is a Trustee of the Dutchess County Historical Society and is affiliated with Celebrating the African Spirit in Poughkeepsie. Before his retirement in 2018, Mr. Bunten was the Education Manager for Historic Hudson Valley. He has a Master's degree in Historical Studies, with an emphasis on Public History, from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is a native of Poughkeepsie and currently lives in the Bronx.*

### **“Elizabeth Jennings: America’s First Freedom Rider”**

In 1854, traveling was full of danger. Omnibus accidents were commonplace. Pedestrians were regularly attacked by the Five Points’ gangs. Rival police forces watched and argued over who should help. Pickpockets, drunks and kidnapers were all part of the daily street scene in old New York. Yet somehow, they endured and transformed a trading post into the Empire City.

None of this was on Elizabeth Jennings’s mind as she climbed the platform onto the Chatham Street horsecar. But her destination and that of the country took a sudden turn when the conductor told her to wait for the next car because it had “her people” in it. When she refused to step off the bus, she was assaulted by the conductor who was aided by a NY police officer. On February 22, 1855, Elizabeth Jennings v. Third Avenue Rail Road case was settled. Seeking \$500 in damages, the jury stunned the courtroom with a \$250 verdict in Lizzie’s favor. Future US president Chester A. Arthur was Jennings attorney and their lives would be forever onward intertwined.

*Jerry Mikorenda is the author of America's First Freedom Rider: Elizabeth Jennings, Chester A. Arthur, and the Early Fight for Civil Rights (2019).*

## **PANEL 4: BEING BLACK IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

### **“The Visual Arts”**

In this multimedia presentation, filmmaker Stephen Blauweiss will present three separate but related stories, including a short film on local photographer Mickey Mathis, the Harlem Renaissance and its connections to Ulster County, including 1930s film footage of Arthur Schomburg and sculptor Augusta Savage, and finally the role of Ben Wigfall, the first African American professor hired at SUNY New Paltz, in the Ulster County arts community.

*Stephen Blauweiss is a documentary filmmaker and historian best known for “Lost Rondout: A Story of Urban Removal,” which cataloged the destruction of the integrated neighborhood of Rondout in Kingston, NY through historic images and oral history interviews.*

### **“The Green Book Project”**

The Green Books were travel guides geared specifically toward Black travelers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, communicating safe places to eat, rest, and stay while on the road. Although commonly associated with the Jim Crow laws and overt racism of the South, Green Books were also necessary for travelers in the

North, including the Hudson Valley. Businesses listed in these travel guides, many of which were Black-owned, catered to all sorts of needs; sites range by type, including restaurants and bars, hotels and motels, tourist homes, beauty parlours and barber shops, nightclubs, and even golf clubs. The goal of this project has been to tell previously untold stories of Black travel in the Greater Kingston Area of Upstate New York, using the Green Book system as a lens through which to study and to think with intention about the safety - physical, mental, and emotional - of Black travelers, and where it was safe for Black people to exist during their travels in the Hudson Valley.

*Christina Sinclair Jones is the Summer 2021 Archival Intern with The Library at the A.J. Williams-Myers African Roots Center in Kingston, NY; Bard College Conservatory of Music Class of 2021; The University of Cambridge Class of 2022.*