CURATOR OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Background

• The Mary & Eliza Freeman Center for History and Community (Bridgeport, Connecticut)

Founded in 2009, The Mary & Eliza Freeman Center for History and Community, Inc. owns the Mary & Eliza Freeman Houses (circa 1848) in Bridgeport, CT’s South End. The homes, under restoration (with support from the CT Department of Economic and Community Development, the National Park Service, HUD, the City of Bridgeport, the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Preservation CT and donations) are listed on the National Register of Historic Places for significance to African Americans and women. Leveraging restoration of the Freeman Houses, the Center plans to create a national African American historic site consisting of a museum, education and digital research center, and housing. Our mission is to restore, preserve, and ensure the viability of the Freeman Houses; teach the history of Connecticut African Americans; revitalize the surrounding community; and facilitate the preservation and revitalization of other African American, and greater Bridgeport historic/preservation communities. Our work is driven by commitment to preserving African American historic places, empowering Black and Indigenous people by restoring their narratives, healing through history; and a commitment to Preservation-based Equitable Development. It is also driven by love of our culture, our story, our neighbors; and the belief that even the most marginalized deserve resources to narrate their own stories, in community, on land they deem hallowed ground. The Center is mission-driven and works to accomplish a sequence of strategic priorities. It is in the late “start-up” phase.

• Little Liberia and the Freeman Houses

Little Liberia (known as Ethiope then Liberia in the 1800s), a seafaring community of free people of color, boasted a luxurious seaside resort hotel for wealthy Blacks (cited in a letter to Frederick Douglass), Bridgeport’s first free lending library, a school for colored children, businesses, fraternal organizations, and churches. Of about 36 structures that comprised Little Liberia, only the Freeman Houses survive on original foundations. Mary & Eliza Freeman (of African and Paugussett heritage) were accomplished business women. When Mary Freeman died, the only Bridgeporter of greater wealth was showman P.T. Barnum. The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Freeman Houses on its “11 Most Endangered Places” list in 2018. They are on the CT Freedom Trail and were designated one of the state’s first five Sites of Conscience. The architectural legacies of the Freeman sisters, Mary (1815-1883) and Eliza (1805-1862), enabled the memory of Little Liberia to survive into the 21st century. Important archaeological sites, these homes highlight legacies of freedom, entrepreneurship, and social innovation. Little Liberia was an Underground Railroad destination settlement and home to abolitionist leaders of Connecticut’s Colored Convention Movement.

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The Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs will collaboratively develop public programming/content that supports interpretation goals and aligns with the Center’s mission and strategic priorities. A candidate with an MA in Public Humanities is preferred. Five (5) years of project management and two (2) years in a supervisory role at an interdisciplinary, cultural institution/organization or museum (with extensive community engagement) are required. The ideal candidate will have demonstrated expertise in African American cultural, intellectual, and social history; and will be knowledgeable about economics, freedom movements. Knowledge of Black and Indigenous seamanship and gender roles in 19th century coastal settlements of free people of color in the Black Atlantic world are a plus. The successful candidate will be expected to design programs with strong interpretive and pedagogical aspects, and explore the intersection of ethnic, cultural, and spatial identity in historic, Indigenous and African American Little Liberia. The Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs must also be adept at identifying historical themes that contextualize contemporary social issues to facilitate meaningful dialogue and interaction at public programs that convene disparate groups to promote understanding.
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The Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs is responsible for designing and overseeing all exhibits and public programs to ensure that the Freeman Center’s mission, original research, and archeological findings are fully and effectively integrated into all of its public offerings. Responsibilities include facilitating content development, writing, artifact curation, and construction. The Curator will guide outreach and ensure that program objectives are met with excellence and integrity. Major responsibilities center on exhibition and program design, outreach, administration, and day-to-day coordination of the historic site. Exhibitions combine fine art, performance and history. The Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs will provide professional expertise and work in collaboration with the Historic Research and Collaborative Scholarship Specialist, Freeman Center leadership, consultants and peers to plan and launch the Center’s Public History Institute. From an office in the Eliza Freeman House (once restored), the Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs will facilitate visitor exploration of the placemaking practices of Little Liberia’s 19th century African American and Native American inhabitants. The list of job functions below will be assumed over three years and may be changed with or without notice.

The Curator of Exhibitions & Public Programs will shape the strategic and creative vision for all aspects of programming at the Freeman Center – at current Freeman downtown venues, the Mary & Eliza Freeman Houses (opening 2025), and online. This curator is a key member of the leadership team. They are charged with building the institution’s capacity and enhancing its standing by designing and establishing a year-round/ongoing schedule of “next level” interpretive programs for the general public; as well as outreach programs for interns, scholars, and professionals. The Freeman Center strives to provide original and place-based substantive and enjoyable experiences for all visitors regardless of age and background. The Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs will also work with public historians, cultural institutions, archivists, museum curators/staff, preservationists, genealogists, Little Liberia descendants, corporations, and civic organizations to widely disseminate scholarly knowledge about our historic site, and local African American history, in a sustained and systematic way.

The Freeman Center is challenged to tell the many stories that shaped our historic site, and to explain and interpret a cascading number of newly discovered primary sources pertaining to Little Liberia and its residents revealed by: online archival searches, scholar and descendant email, books mailed by historians, names mentioned in Ivy League webinars, images on 19th century coastal survey maps forwarded by NOAA, etc., as well as artifacts and underground features still being unearthed by archaeologists at the site of the Freeman Houses. The stories and legacy of Little Liberia are far-reaching and complex. The Curator of Exhibitions & Public Programs will work with the Historic Research and Collaborative Scholarship Specialist to create physical, emotional, and virtual opportunities for the public to connect with facts and emerging research about Mary & Eliza Freeman, the Freeman Houses, and Little Liberia.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Program Design and Development

• Take the Freeman Center’s program content to a higher level of excellence.
• Develop, implement, and evaluate dynamic public programs/museum education for diverse audiences.
• Design and implement innovative, inaugural, public programs for the Freeman Houses and gardens.
• Design & continue to update a site-focused, full sensory introduction to the Little Liberia story - its people and its cultural geography - based on emerging scholarship, incorporating interactive multi-media platforms and works by contemporary regional artists.
• Work with the President/CEO, staff and consultants to formulate and manage the public programs budget.
• Collaborate with Freeman Center leadership to design and plan programs that advance strategic priorities and mission.
• Foster collaborative relationships with community partners and other stakeholders to design public programs and build audiences.
• Ensure that visitors of all ages know the stories of Mary & Eliza Freeman, learn about lives of women of color in this rare 19th century community, and better understand the importance of preserving African American historic places.
• General Public: Develop programs for a general audience that are dynamic, relevant, site-focused, and invite engagement with the Freeman Houses, primary documents and artifacts.
• Freeman Public History Institute: Oversee delivery of collaborative research and study programs for public historians and history enthusiasts, ensuring content-rich and engaging experiences.
• Develop and institute seasonal, multidisciplinary, and themed public humanities programs that incorporate archaeology, architecture, interpretation of the local landscape, neighborhood walking tours, and historical interpretations of primary documents and artifacts.
• Engage scholars, digital artists, speakers, visual and performance artists to help retell and “re”locate the various narratives, artifacts and episodes that punctuated the place-making practices of this unique 19th century neighborhood.
• Design programs that meet guidelines/requirements of CT Sites of Conscience, CT Freedom Trail, and CT’s America 250 Commission.
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• Provide detailed descriptions of planned program activities including logistical support and coordination plans.
• Identify technical needs for digital programs and in-person streaming.
• Facilitate outdoor interpretive programs in collaboration with the state archaeologist and local urban farmers.

Administration and Management

• Participate as a member of the Freeman Center’s leadership team.
• Ensure the smooth day-to-day administration and operation of the Freeman Houses (once open).
• Stay current with best-practices in the museum/public history and civic engagement fields.
• Document program outcomes and evaluate program success.
• Help track and report visitor data/participation required for monthly and annual reports, development and publications.
• Develop future program goals based on program results: attendance, implementation challenges, formal evaluations, etc.
• Assist with grant writing, fundraising events, and solicitations as needed.
• Attend, represent, and present at conferences and speaking engagements.
• Oversee training and management of program interns, volunteers, docents, and staff to ensure high-quality learning opportunities in a safe and engaging environment.
• Help ensure that content on the Center’s website is current, accurate, and inspiring.
• Work with colleagues to advance innovative outreach practices that connect the organization, Little Liberia’s historical legacy, and the modern South End community.

Qualifications

• Master’s degree in Public Humanities (or another relevant field), strong background in 19th century African American history, American Studies, or closely related field.
• Minimum 5 years’ experience in program development, management, coordination, historic interpretation.
• Minimum 2 years’ experience cultural/museum management, and supervision.
• Work experience/education in program administration, non-profit administration, or business administration preferred.
• Digital humanities experience and knowledge of current research trends and applications is a plus.
• Knowledge of museum education practices, as well as program and exhibition evaluation preferred.
• Strong leadership skills, entrepreneurial spirit and skill set a plus.
• Strong presentation skills and effective verbal communication.
• Demonstrated success engaging with socio-economically/educationally diverse colleagues and stakeholders.
• Must communicate effectively about identities such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, ability, or gender in plain, specific terms as they relate to cultural heritage.
• Some background in historic preservation and knowledge of museum-based environmental programs preferred.
• Travel and/or living experience in the African diaspora, fluency in a language in addition to English are a plus.
• Kindness, courtesy, and patience are required.

Skills and Competencies

• Excellent writing, spelling, grammar, and proofreading.
• Excellent organizational and work management skills, attention to detail.
• Ability to track several projects simultaneously and to prioritize workload.
• Strong analytical and problem-solving skills, including issue identification.
• Ability to carry out tasks to completion and communicate effectively with leadership as questions arise.
• Ability to help establish and follow administrative/financial policies and practices.
• Can generate, organize, and maintain records that meet state and federal standards and guidelines.
• Strong interpersonal skills with scholars, contractors, interns, volunteers, colleagues, and neighborhood residents.
• Must work both independently and collaboratively (as a creative and effective member of a diverse team).
• Enthusiastically learn about Little Liberia, and African American history and culture.
• Ability to adapt and be flexible, handle unscheduled tasks with accuracy in a dynamic work environment.
• Continually develop skills related to use of rapidly changing technology and communications best practices.
• Intermediate knowledge of Microsoft Word and Excel required. Constant Contact, WordPress, Adobe, Photoshop, a plus.
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Salary: $65,000 - $75,000, based on experience, plus healthcare. This position is fully funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation for the first three years.
Exempt Status: Exempt
Hours: Full Time, 40 hours a week, with some weekend and evening work required
Job Location: Bridgeport, Connecticut
Start Date: January 2, 2024
To Apply: Cover letters and resumes and/or CVs can be emailed to maisa@freemancenterbpt.org, or mailed to The Freeman Center; 1019 Main Street, Suite 210, Bridgeport, CT 06604

- The Mary & Eliza Freeman Center for History and Community has mandated COVID-19 and influenza vaccines, as applicable.
- Driver’s license strongly recommended.
- Background check prior to hiring.
- We are committed to an inclusive workplace and actively seek to employ a diverse group of people who embody our organizational values. We welcome and encourage individuals of all backgrounds to apply and are proud to be an equal opportunity employer. All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to age, ancestry, color, disability, ethnicity, familial status, gender identity and/or expression, genetic information, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, veteran status, or any other protected status.