

STATEMENT OF THE SMITHSONIAN AFRICAN AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LIBRARIES AND MEMORIALS
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Statement from the Smithsonian African American Association

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the following testimony before you on behalf of the Smithsonian African American Association (SAAA). The Smithsonian African American Association is comprised of the Institution's employees who have organized to project a united voice and to have an impact upon pan-institutional policies that affect African Americans. In Congressional hearings held in March and April 1989 on minority hiring and promotions at the Smithsonian, Secretary Adams testified that it is his belief that the Institution "should provide leadership in both the personification and the representation of American multicultural diversity and pluralism. It does not do so. It cannot shirk the challenge to do so." He stated further his "commitment to enhance minority representation on the staff, illuminate the history and achievements of minority communities in our public activities, and provide universality of access to all who want to share in those activities." The Smithsonian African American Association hopes to facilitate and expedite the development and use of human resources both inside the Institution and within the larger community to address these issues. SAAA is equally committed to encouraging and creating fresh attitudes and stronger programs, and will assist in ensuring equal opportunity and equal treatment of African Americans at the Smithsonian.

The Smithsonian African American Association would like to go on record wholeheartedly in favor of the establishment of a free standing Museum on the Mall in Washington, dedicated to the history and heritage of African Americans.

For several months now, there have been ongoing informal discussions within the Smithsonian Institution, on one hand, which focus on the general agreement that some "enhanced African American presence" is needed on the Mall. With its objective to generate and sustain this "enhanced presence", the Institution is engaged in formulating a cohesive strategy to increase the integration of African American materials, collections, research, and public programs in all Smithsonian bureaus. There is also the beginning of a formative process to increase minority representation on boards, commissions, and staff at all levels of the Institution. On the other hand, there is the larger issue of erecting a new museum devoted to African American history and culture on the Mall and the role the Smithsonian should play as plans for establishing such a museum unfold. The most recent concession at the Smithsonian is that rather than erecting a free standing entity, the alternative to add a wing onto an existing museum should be considered. It is clear that a wing, whether as part of some larger administrative unit, or as an independant entity, will have to compete with other areas within the unit. However, this idea is plausible in that a number of Smithsonian bureaus might consider creating a wing within their existing structure that would adequately address the

contribution of African Americans. A free standing African American museum on the Mall should not preclude any other museum from addressing the subject from its own perspective. To this end, the Smithsonian African American Association hopes that the Institution will continue to press on in a spirit of creative ingenuity to achieve an "enhanced African American presence" on the Mall, from the Museum of American History to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

It is imperative that African American institutions nationwide have an active, vital, and determinative role in shaping the plans for a National African American Museum. There must be an on-going dialogue between the African American Museums Association (AAMA) and the organizations it represents, as well as with historically Black colleges and universities and other research and collecting entities. With its immense professional and technical resources, the Smithsonian Institution should be a key player in developing plans for creating a free standing African American museum.

Establishing a National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Mall in the nation's capitol brings to fore some challenging concerns that hinge on the issues of governance and collections. To determine future steps toward resolving these concerns, federally appropriated monies, adequate for the task, could be used to establish a high level Commission of at least fifteen members,

appointed by the Secretary of the Smithsonian. Two thirds of the members should be external to the Institution. The staff of the Commission would be senior specialists representing museum professionals, scholars in art and history, and individuals from the business, financial, and educational communities. The Commission should be co-chaired by individuals whose reputations are respected across scholarly, political, cultural, and social lines. The Commission would convene over a 2 - 3 year period and would be charged to put forth a research initiative to assess the African American material culture that should be collected and shared with African Americans and the nation as a whole. The Commission would also be responsible for negotiating a master plan for creating a stable base of public and private financial support, development of exhibits, space, collections, architectural plans, and staff. Once this data is collected, the Commission would submit an analytical report on its findings, complete with recommendations for moving the process for establishing the museum forward.

What is envisioned is a world class American museum with its particular focus and commitment to preserving and sharing the history and cultural heritage of African Americans. A National Museum of African American History and Culture would serve as an ideal repository for collecting and preserving materials, documents, and artifacts. This museum in collaboration with existing African American institutions, would also serve as a national resource and a

center for the exchange of ideas, training, and support services.

The unique story of African American survival and achievement in the nation is an experience that all people can learn from, an experience that all Americans should embrace; it is after all, the quintessential American story. It is time for the proper forum to proclaim the African American heritage of this country.

That forum can only be a free standing, National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Mall in the nation's capitol.

Thank you.

Submitted by:

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