

Addressing Racism in Historic Places and Heritage Organizations



Heritage organizations including museums, historic sites and downtowns, libraries, and archives are critical community resources. Museums are consistently documented as trusted sources of information. Historic sites and downtowns define community character. Libraries and archives provide access to information. They are all places of community gathering

They are also places with a history of racism. The stories they have told and the resources they have collected reflect the race and view point of Oregon’s majority. These institutions were generally built exclusive of people of color and other under-documented and under-recognized people. Traditionally, the history of oppression and abuse has not been interpreted and recognized. Nor have the contributions, triumphs and successes of people of color. Whether purposefully or not, these spaces have likely been oppressive or unwelcoming to members of your community.

Over the last several years, many heritage organizations have started to recognize and change this inequality. They are looking at who makes up their community and working to better reflect that diversity. They are purposefully collecting and telling more stories of people of color and cultural minorities. They are working with organizations that represent communities of color, not only to tell the stories more completely, but to invite people to visit, research, and explore.

Heritage organizations and historic places have a responsibility to dismantle racism and inequity. Oregon Heritage is committed to this effort. The Oregon Heritage Plan’s four goals directly support heritage organizations move forward in this effort. Here are ways to take action now.

Goal 1: Include More Voices

Expand the narrative of history told and preserved in the state to capture previously excluded or marginalized voices for a more complex and accurate depiction of Oregon’s historical events.

Historic Downtowns

- When you highlight the history of the building also talk about the business owner who is there now (historic downtowns have some of the most diverse business owners in the state).
- Ensure that your downtown revitalization is for your entire community, by inviting their participation in the plan for design, events and business make-up. The [Alberta Street Black Heritage Markers](#) is a permanent public art installation that honors and documents the history of the African American community on Alberta Street and included extensive public engagement in its development.
- Research workers and tell their story. The Springfield Museum shared a photo of the largely black road crew that paved the downtown.

Museums

- Walk through your museum and ask whose stories and perspectives are missing. Invite other potential partner organizations to do this with you.
- Uncover and tell stories of historically marginalized people in your newsletter.
- Work with other organizations to learn how to research history of people of color.
- Tell the full range of the story of daily living, the struggles and the triumphs. Linn County Historical Museum worked with Oregon Black Pioneers to [incorporate black history](#) in their permanent exhibit.
- Start intentionally collecting underrepresented stories and items from your community.

Archives and Libraries

- Collect the stories of the broadest history. [Latino/a People and Culture](#)- Oregon Multicultural Archives
- Highlight collections through newsletters and programs.

Goal 2: Increase Access to Heritage

Strive to engage more community members and visitors in local heritage by increasing awareness of resources and making them available to diverse audiences and potential stakeholders.

- Make a board level commitment to serving everyone in your community.
- Identify who makes up the community and barriers that stop members of the community from accessing the organization and its resources.
- Evaluate physical and social cues for visitors: images, welcome signs in other languages, etc...
- Provide customer service and unconscious bias training, so everyone who walks in the door is welcomed.
- Advertise by supporting nonprofits that serve people of color.
- Offer special opportunities or discounts to organizations that serve people of color.

Goal 3: Promote the Value of Heritage

Share the economic, cultural, and educational value of heritage with the public and decision makers to inspire awareness, funding, and respect for long-term preservation of Oregon's heritage.

- Historical perspective is a tool for understanding. Provide that historical backing to support social movements in your community.
- Historic places are an economic resource for low income communities and downtowns in distress. Use preservation of those places to support minority business owners.
- Historic places can be a sanctuary. Offer your special place as a one to recover and continue the work of social justice.

Goal 4: Pursue Best Practices

Pursue professional standards and best practices related to heritage process, standards, and organizational management to ensure healthy, sustainable heritage organizations.

- Have a discussion about racism and white privilege with your board.

- Use the [“Talking about Race”](#) resources from the National Museum of African American History and Culture or other reliable sources.
- Use Nonprofit Association of Oregon’s [Equity & Inclusion Lens Guide](#)
- Establish an inclusion and equity plan.
- Ensure your board reflects your community. Complete an exercise to consider this using [board management tools](#).
- Provide resources and training for staff and volunteers.
- Ensure your planning processes engage the community.

Tools

[Researching Historically Marginalized Communities](#)

[Nonprofit Association of Oregon resources](#)

[The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook](#)

[Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Resources- American Alliance of Museums](#)

[Facing Change: Advancing Museum Board Diversity & Inclusion](#)

[Council of Nonprofits Tools](#)

Organizations

[Oregon Black Pioneers](#)

[Japanese American Museum of Oregon](#)

[Oregon Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association](#)

[Oregon Commission on Indian Services](#) - Nine Federally Recognized Tribes (museums, cultural resources, language programs, etc.)

[National Trust for Historic Preservation](#)

More Examples

[Welcoming Challenging Conversations: An Oregon Historical Quarterly Issue about White Supremacy and Resistance](#) – Oregon Historical Society

[Racing to Change: Oregon’s Civil Rights Years - The Eugene Story](#) – UO Museum of Natural & Cultural History

[Our Story: Portland through an African American Lens](#) – Multnomah County Library

[Building Institutional Awareness of Why Telling Diverse Stories Matters](#) – High Desert Museum

[Settling In](#) – Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education

[Building Community Support](#) – City of Canby

[Oregon Chinese Disinterment Documents Collection](#) – Oregon Multicultural Archives Oregon State University

[Alberta Main Street Renewed Call for Racial Justice](#) – Alberta Main Street