

Danville Omitted History Research

The “Omitted History” video for the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History was created to address the inequities present in information and representation at the museum. In 2018, the Charlottesville Civil Rights march stopped in Danville and visited the museum. The Charlottesville Delegation was organized to “visit civil rights sites in Southern communities and hear from local anti-racist activists about efforts toward improved equality, as well as to encourage local residents to study civil rights history,” according to Register and Bee reporter Denice Thibodeau, who attended the Delegation visit to the museum in 2018.

The delegation was critical of how the introductory video failed to represent the complexities of both the Sutherlin mansion and Danville, and felt that it upheld a specific, white narrative. Charlottesville’s group drew attention to the reality that the Danville museum was silencing the narratives of those who did not match the normative conceptions museums and other institutions uphold. The Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History needed to address the complexities of the Sutherlin Mansion’s histories and the connections that it has to the greater Danville community.

The Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History “Omitted History” video works to introduce narratives that have been historically repressed and ignored. There is a focus on African American narratives and experiences in Danville with the intention to give light to their experiences. It focuses on the 1883 Danville Race Riot that allowed for the African American population of the Dan River Region to be disenfranchised, while ushering in Jim Crow, to 2019 when the first civil rights timeline was permanently displayed at the Danville Museum. The Omitted History video aims to tell people that the collections the museum has are larger than what initially assumed, and invites people to enter these collections that can expand their understanding of the greater historical context of Danville and Pittsylvania

County. It also invites the public to consider indigenous groups from the Dan River region and reminds us that they are still here and must be remembered.

The “Omitted History” video also demonstrates a shift in focus for the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History. It has been known as a house museum, which directs the focus towards the Sutherlin Mansion and its builder, William Sutherlin. The introductory video in 2018 followed this pattern, which created a disconnect between the museum and the community it intended to serve. By shifting the focus towards those whose narratives are not represented, the Danville Museum is working to shift the overall focus of the museum towards the greater Danville community. This allows the museum to continuously feature inclusive arts and histories that are representative of Danville and the surrounding area.

The research involved in the “Omitted History” video focused on African American narratives, specifically those related to the Sutherlin mansion. It began with researching for narratives from enslaved peoples on the Sutherlin tobacco plantations, using websites such as the University of Virginia Virgo Library, ProQuest, and the Library of Congress. Research quickly led to narratives focused on the Reconstruction Era in Danville. It revealed to those working on the “Omitted History” video, the importance of the Danville Riot of 1883. This event led to the ousting of legitimate Black politicians in Danville and the beginning of the Jim Crow Era in the city.

The fact that such a pivotal event in history was practically unheard of throughout the Danville museum opened many eyes towards the lack of information present about African Americans. This revelation turned the researchers’ focus to black activism within Danville, beginning with the Sutherlin sit-ins in the 1960s. The Sutherlin Mansion was converted to a whites-only public library in 1928. During the Civil Rights movement, black Danville high school students performed a sit-in at the library. While legally bound to integrate the library

years later, library officials removed tables and chairs from the building. These injustices drew Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to Danville in 1963 to plan and inspire civil disobedience in the community to protest racial inequity. This manifested in an event known as “Bloody Monday,” a day in which an attempted protest resulted in a series of arrests and violence against protestors in Danville. The incident went intentionally unreported in local newspapers; the official silencing of the protest kept many residents of Danville from speaking out about the atrocities they witnessed.

The Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History had not previously discussed these events in depth through their exhibits and collections. It did not realize the impact the physical museum had on community both in the past and in the present. The failure to recognize this impact led to the museum upholding a biased and patriarchal understanding of both the Sutherlin Mansion and Danville as a whole. They continued to perpetuate the cycle of silence by maintaining the narrative of Sutherlin and his mansion as something to only be proud of, refusing to criticize Major Sutherlin’s actions, specifically those involving his interaction with enslaved peoples. The museum has not talked about these historical events, as doing so would completely disrupt this image of the museum as a “white space.” The act of openly addressing the histories of peoples who do not fit a white image directly works to “decolonize” the museum, creating an environment that can become more inclusive to those who have felt that these spaces are not for them.

The “Omitted History” video is one step towards rectifying the omissions, intentional or otherwise, perpetuated by the museum. It works to change the direction of the Danville Museum, and to focus on underrepresented communities in the city, such as African Americans and Indigenous peoples. The video works to reorient its visitors’ conceptions of museums, and turns the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History into an institution that is beginning to do the work necessary to uplift voices that are otherwise unheard. It exposes the

community to a history many do not know, as well as invites those who are familiar with these stories to discuss the ways in which they have experienced the world. The museum is working to change the relationship it has with the community, such that it can become a space that represents Danville as a whole, not merely a space accommodating white narratives of communal history.

A Work Summery Essay by Nara Holdaway, University of Virginia, 2020