

Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative hosts conversation on 'forgotten history'

By STEVE SMITH HARTFORD COURANT |



Julia Evelina Smith, left, and Abby Hadassah Smith. (Historical Society of Glastonbury)

GLASTONBURY — The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative routinely holds community conversations on social issues and important current topics. In a slight twist on its usual approach, the GMLKCI presented a conversation in which the expert presenters spoke about slices of history not found in most textbooks. The conversation was held virtually, on the Zoom platform, with approximately 60 people in attendance.

“Those people whose story has been forgotten in our history, or whose story never made it into our history,” said Robyn Guimont, GMLKCI treasurer, who introduced the conversation.

Dr. Dexter Gabriel, who is on the faculty of the Africana Studies Institute, spoke about the 1619 Project and the study of African-American history itself, which he said was because it had come up in recent conversations. What the New York Times Magazine’s project aimed to do, he said, was to re-frame American history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contribution of African-Americans at the very center of the country’s national narrative. “The project created quite a buzz,” he said. “It also created quite a controversy.”

The project was also spoken about on the campaign trail this past summer, when President Donald Trump signed an executive order to create a 1776 Commission to “promote patriotic education.” That and other extreme criticisms, Gabriel said, made clear to him that the controversy wasn’t about historical accuracy (he said it’s a given that some facts may have needed correction) but about how African-American complicates the American history narrative. “It got me thinking on the very concept of Black history... and as a field of interest of how it came about,” he said.

The first segment of black history, pre-abolition, was important among communities in the north, and was very inclusionary, asserting that African-Americans should have citizenship and were tied into the formation of the nation.

Post-abolition and post-Civil War Black history also tries to include Blacks and recover stories that had been lost. “After the Civil War, we had the desire to be seen as citizens,” Gabriel said. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, African-Americans often turned to Black history as an answer to racism, pointing out their contributions to the country and its culture. “There was this understanding that African-American history was important, both for people of African-American descent, and for the larger American society. It was seen as, in some ways, a curative or a shield against racism,” Gabriel said.

Dr. Manisha Sinha, the Draper Chair in American History at the University of Connecticut and the Mellon Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the American Antiquarian Society, gave a short presentation titled, “the Forgotten History of Black Women’s Activism.”

In the presentation, she said that poet Phyllis Wheatley, a slave later purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston - who taught her to read and write - was not only one of the first African-American women to be published, but one of the first females to be published. “She talked about what the new American Republic should be like for Black people. She really opened up not only a way of looking at American History through the eyes of Black Americans, but that this history has always been interracial and women have always played a very public role,” Sinha said.

Black women abolitionists, Sinha said, played a big role in the movement. The first female abolitionist society was formed in Salem, Massachusetts, and was filled with only Black women, later allowing white women to join. “Besides Black women resisting slavery in various ways, there’s a lot of new literature

on ways in which Black women tried to regain control over their bodies,” Sinha said. “They were used not just for the production of stable crops, but for the reproduction of the slave labor force.”

Dr. Julian Madison, an associate professor of history at Southern Connecticut State University, spoke about the work and life of Paul Robeson, who he said is a person who should be better known today than he is. Robeson, a former minister and athlete, and a very skilled debater, also earned a law degree and was a stage and film actor. “He was considered to be the finest ‘Othello’ to every grace the stage,” Madison said. “He was a world-class singer. He sang at Carnegie Hall and on famous stages all over the world.”

In fact, Robeson was such an accomplished orator and singer, that he impressed people all over the world, and that helped people see some universality. “[When traveling abroad] Robeson was able to speak the language of that country without an accent,” Madison said. “In other words, he spoke like a native. This is one of the reasons he was such a popular singer. He would sing folk tunes of the country he was in. He studied the origins of folk tunes in different countries, and found that many of the origins were the same. Everybody could identify with others’ experiences through music. He believed that by learning someone’s language, and being able to communicate, that could bring people together.”

Diane Hoover, of the Historical Society of Glastonbury, spoke about Abby and Julia Smith - two of the five locally-famous Smith sisters. “Abby and Julia Smith are perhaps the most undeservedly-neglected figures in 19th Century feminism,” Hoover said, citing what the National Parks Services wrote in 1974, when the Smiths’ home, Kimberly Manor, was designated a historical landmark. Hannah, mother of Abby and Julia, became involved in trying to create abolitionist groups in Glastonbury, but was frustrated at several failed attempts. The sisters wrote to local newspapers (which they continued to their deaths) and circulated anti-slavery petitions, and wrote their own publications.

When abolition finally passed with the 13th Amendment in 1865, the Smiths were elderly and could have sat by and enjoyed their golden years, but continued their political activism, working for women’s suffrage. “They had an extreme sense of righteousness,” Hoover said. “The fact that women could not have the right to vote was something that needed to be addressed.”

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