Civil Rights Scholars Speak in Peterboro on Juneteenth 2023

The National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum in Peterboro NY will open the third day of the Peterboro Freedom Festival: Juneteenth 2023 on Monday, June 19th with ringing of tower bells 19 times in commemoration of June 19, 1865, when people enslaved in Texas were informed, by arriving Union troops, that they were free.

At 10:00 a.m. on Monday, June 19, 2023, Norman K. Dann PhD, author of Practical Dreamer: Gerrit Smith and the Crusade for Social Reform will guide a tour of the Gerrit Smith Estate National Historic Landmark (5304 Oxbow Road, Peterboro NY 13134), a site on the Heritage NY Underground Railroad Trail and the national Underground Railroad trail (Network to Freedom). In the 1800s, the Estate was the home of Gerrit and Ann Smith and their daughter Elizabeth, all of whom gained national prominence in human freedom movements – along with cousin Elizabeth Cady (Stanton) who spent her summers in Peterboro. They worked both personally and politically to mobilize the public in support of the abolition of slavery and equal rights for women.

Dann received his doctorate in interdisciplinary social sciences from Syracuse University, and is the author of several books on the Reform Era, with emphasis on the role played by members of the Smith family. Their passionate efforts to secure equitable treatment for all persons is a model for contemporary human rights efforts. Norm is also the head docent at the Gerrit Smith Estate giving historically based tours to interested parties, has participated as a consultant in televised documentaries, and delivers historical presentations at museums, historical societies, and libraries.

The Juneteenth afternoon sessions open at 12:30 with Kate Clifford Larson PhD presenting on her publication Walk with Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer. Using recently opened FBI records, secret Oval Office tapes, and interviews with Hamer colleagues and family, Dr. Larson reveals new details about how Fannie Lou Hamer, a poor Mississippi sharecropper with a sixth-grade education, faced down white supremacists, and challenged President Lyndon Johnson and national civil rights leaders to secure voting rights for all Americans during the 1960s. The biography has been praised for its research and insights, and was named one of Kirkus Reviews best biographies of 2021.

Kate Clifford Larson PhD is an author of critically acclaimed biographies including Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero, and Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter. With two degrees from Simmons University, an MBA from Northeastern, and a doctorate in American History from the University of New Hampshire, Dr. Larson is an award-winning historical consultant who has worked on feature film scripts, documentaries, museum exhibits, curriculum guides, public history initiatives, heritage tourism products, and numerous publications. She is a primary consultant for the National Park Service Harriet Tubman sites in Auburn NY and Cambridge MD.

At 1:30 Donald Yacovone PhD, lifetime Associate at Harvard University’s Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, will provide an early presentation in New York State of his autumn 2022 publication Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of our National Identity. The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross, which Yacovone wrote with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., won the 2014 NAACP Image Award. The previous year, Yacovone received the W.E.B. Du Bois medal, Harvard’s highest honor in the field of African American studies. He earned a PhD at Claremont Graduate University and has taught at several colleges and universities. He helped edit the Black Abolitionist Papers, and before becoming the Manager of Research and Program Development at the Hutchins Center, Yacovone was the Senior Associate Editor of Publications at the Massachusetts Historical Society where he was a founder and editor of the Massachusetts Historical Review. He has written widely on abolitionism, gender, the African American role in the Civil War, white supremacy, and American cultural history.

In Teaching White Supremacy, Donald Yacovone shows evidence of white supremacy’s deep-seated roots in our nation’s education system with an in-depth examination of America’s wide assortment of texts,
from primary readers to college textbooks and other higher education course materials. Sifting through a wealth of materials, from the colonial era to today, Yacovone reveals the systematic ways in which white supremacist ideology has infiltrated American culture and how it has been at the heart of our collective national identity. Yacovone lays out the arc of America’s white supremacy from the country’s inception and Revolutionary years to its 19th century flashpoint of civil war; to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and today’s Black Lives Matter. The author argues that it is the North, not the South, that bears the greater responsibility for creating the dominant strain of race theory, inculcated throughout the culture and in school textbooks, that restricted and repressed African Americans and other minorities, even as Northerners blamed the South for its legacy of slavery, segregation, and racial injustice. The publication is a major assessment of how we got where we are today and of how white supremacy has suffused every area of American learning - from literature and science to medicine and law - and why this kind of thinking has endured for more than two centuries.

At 2:30 retired U.S. Brigadier General and author of General Robert E. Lee and Me, Ty Seidule will present Our Right to Serve: The Black Cadets Who Challenged a President, Changed West Point, and Inspired an Army. Seidule is currently at Hamilton College in Clinton NY as the inaugural Joshua Chamberlain Fellow. He was former head of the history department and the first professor emeritus of history at West Point. Growing up in Alexandria VA, attending Robert E. Lee Elementary School, and graduating from Washington and Lee University and ROTC, Seidule grew up revering Robert E. Lee. From his southern childhood to his service in the U.S. Army, every part of his life at first reinforced the Lost Cause myth. Seidule joined the United States Army in 1984 as an officer. He served in the military for 36 years during which time he received his Master’s and Doctorate degrees from Ohio State University.

In General Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner’s Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause, Seidule seeks a path to understanding why the facts of the Civil War have remained buried beneath layers of myth, challenges the deeply-held legends of the Confederacy, explores why some of this country’s oldest wounds have never healed, and provides an interpretation of essential truths that our country still has a difficult time articulating and accepting. In his article Black Power Cadets: How African American Students Defeated President Nixon’s Confederate Monument and Changed West Point 1971-76, (The Hudson River Valley Review: A Journal of Regional Studies, Autumn 2019, Marist College, pp.54 – 82.) Seidule explains how the Class of 1972 black cadets at the United States Military Academy worked within the institution to lead toward increased racial understanding, and prevented a Confederate monument on the campus.

19 bells will also ring to close Juneteenth 2023 in Peterboro. Admission to the three Monday afternoon June 19th programs is 19 dollars with paid reservations by May 31 to National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum, PO 55, Peterboro NY 13134 or at www.NationalAbolitionHallofFameandMuseum.org. Admission after May 31 and at the door is $30. Registration and Hospitality is open from noon to 5 pm on Monday, June 19th at the Smithfield Community Center, 5255 Pleasant Valley Road, Peterboro NY 13134. The registration site includes information tables, parity snacks, sales, and exhibits including the Underground Railroad in New York State from the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The exterior exhibits at the Gerrit Smith Estate National Historic Landmark are open dawn to dusk for folks who respect property. For information and updates: www.NationalAbolitionHallofFameandMuseum.org, nahofm1835@gmail.com, PO Box 55, Peterboro NY 13134, 315-380-9969 and 315-684-3262

Jon, images with captions.

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Gerrit Smith Estate National Historic Landmark (Pete Heitzman 2020)

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Walk with Me Cover from Author

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