

The Library Company OF PHILADELPHIA

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New Exhibition at The Library Company of Philadelphia Explores Lives of Free Black People in Early America

(Philadelphia) -- May 8, 2019 -- A new special exhibition opening May 24th at the Library Company of Philadelphia brings to the forefront an untold story about free Black people during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Entitled “From Negro Pasts to Afro-Futures: Black Creative Re-Imaginings,” the exhibition celebrates the resiliency, faith, dignity, creativity and political activism of African Americans as seen through their own eyes—from the fragments, the rituals, the writings and the prayers they left for us.

“Philadelphia had the North’s largest free Black population in antebellum America, but rarely do we get to see Black self-representation from this period. This exhibition re-imagines the community” explains curator Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens, one of the most ‘acclaimed experts about U.S. history’ (*Time Magazine*) and new Program Director of African American History for the Library Company. “We want to show how Black people turned the tide against crude stereotypes of themselves when they curated themselves in the mediums of their choice.”

“From Negro Pasts to Afro-Futures: Creative Re-Imaginings,” showcases artifacts related to the arts, religion, politics, ephemera and race. It runs through October 18, 2019.

Most of the artifacts in the exhibit have seldom been seen, and some are extremely rare. For example, the Amy Matilda Cassey friendship album is one of only five such items known to exist in the world. Cassey was a middle-class African American female active in the anti-slavery movement. Her collection of poems, watercolors, essays and more allowed her and her girlfriends to think about relationships and heed communal advice--#blackgirlmagic, centuries before the invention of the hashtag.

“I hope that our visitors will leave knowing that the everyday lives and actions of early African Americans were worthy, beautiful, and purposeful. They helped to shape the good parts of what became the United States of America,” says Cooper Owens.

The exhibition will open on May 24th, 2019 at 5:30 pm and will feature remarks by Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens, as well as a performance by Mezzo Soprano Marquita Raley, a nationally-renowned mezzo soprano and graduate of The Julliard School and the Curtis Institute of Music. She has performed for former President William Jefferson Clinton and poet Maya Angelou among many others, as well as with the New York’s Philharmonic and the Curtis Institute of Music.

“From Negro Pasts to Afro-Futures: Creative Re-Imaginings,” commemorates the 1969 Library Company exhibition called “Negro History,” which focused on the great men of African American history—both black and white. In this contemporary moment, the Library Company has included more African American women and girls as well as artifacts about the African Diaspora.

Prioritizing African American History at the Library Company

The Library Company houses the nation’s most important collection of African American literature and history before 1900. The collections comprise almost 15,000 titles and 1,200 images from the mid-16th to the late-19th centuries. In 2007, the institution formalized its pioneering contributions in the study of African American history in early America with the Program in African American History (PAAH) which includes fellowships, internships, outreach measures and a program to enhance and facilitate careers in history for scholars from underrepresented groups.

In 2013, the Library Company successfully embarked on a five year endowment campaign that allowed the institution to partially endow the Program in African American History. In 2018, the Library Company celebrated the successful completion of the campaign raising more than \$2 million to support scholarship and research, acquisition of collections, and public programs and exhibitions. The 2019 exhibition is the first one launched after the completion of the campaign. Additional funders of the exhibition include the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the Pennsylvania Council for the Arts.

“In 2019, we recognized our Program in African American History as an anchor,” said Michael Barsanti, the Edwin Wolf 2nd Director of the Library Company. “A signature of the Library Company is our fellowship program. We give grants to scholars who study and write about the life, culture and experience of both free and enslaved Black communities. The current exhibition supports a team of interns who are students of color at Queens College, CUNY. They have had

the opportunity to work with the collections and assist in curating this exhibition, working under the Library Company's team of experts. This is just one way that the Library Company provides educational opportunities for young emerging scholars from diverse backgrounds in the field of African American History and beyond."

Philadelphia is the first city in the nation to require that its public school students learn more about Black history. That was enacted in 2005. The Library Company continues to spotlight this history for all Philadelphians.

About The Library Company of Philadelphia

Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin, the Library Company of Philadelphia was founded as the first public library with the mission of putting books in the hands of "ordinary citizens." It is the oldest cultural institution in America, the Nation's first Library of Congress and the largest lending library through the Civil War.

Today, the Library Company is an independent research library and educational institution specializing in American and global history from the 17th through the early 20th centuries. With one of the world's largest holdings of early Americana, the Library Company also has close to one million pieces in their collections that relate to early African American history, economic history, women's history, the history of medicine, and visual culture. The Library Company promotes access to these collections through fellowships, exhibitions, programs, and online resources. To find out more, please visit www.librarycompany.org