

LAKE FORESTER

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Effort underway to chronicle history of Lake Forest's Black families; 'There is a more diverse history (than) what people are aware of'

By Daniel I. Dorfman
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The History Center of Lake Forest-Lake Bluff's Carol Summerfield senses there are misperceptions regarding the population of Lake Forest, particularly its racial composition.

It is something she wants to change.

"There is a stereotype of what Lake Forest is, which is rich, white, established," said Summerfield, the History Center's executive director. "Even within Lake Forest, there is a little bit of that mythology, and there is a more diverse history (than) what people are aware of."

In an effort to change those perceptions, Summerfield said later this year, the History Center in collaboration with Lake Forest's Ragdale Foundation is set to embark on a project chronicling the history of the area's Black families.

Ragdale spokesman Sam Lewis said he found information online about some of the earliest Blacks to move to Lake Forest in the late 1800s. He thought their stories would be appropriate for the annual Ragdale Ring performance series.

"I found their stories fascinating," he explained. "I thought that telling and celebrating those stories during the 2022 Ragdale Ring would be informative to the community of Lake Forest, and a vehicle to feature related programming. It would also go a long way toward Ragdale taking action on DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion) initiatives that are a priority for us at our organization."

The effort received a boost on March 29, when the History Center announced it had received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant where the funds will be used for expanded research and public programming, Summerfield said.

Summerfield believes the first Blacks who arrived in Lake Forest were small business owners. Those who followed often worked in the large estates of the time allowing for integration of the local schools, setting a path for the children to have the opportunity to become professionals in different types of industries.

“That access to education is such a critical part of the story of why Lake Forest has success,” Summerfield said. “It’s really important that not only do we tell that story, but we celebrate that.”

Among the people to be discussed as part of the series includes Samuel Dent, the area’s first Black businessman who operated a livery company; and Walker Sales, who was the city’s second police officer, according to Summerfield.

Some of the earliest Black families in Lake Forest were the Lawsons. Many of their descendants remain in the area today, and the program is set to launch June 2 honoring them.

“It is wonderful that they are recognizing the generations, longevity and contributions of African-American families in the growth and development of Lake Forest,” said Lake Bluff’s Sue Lawson, who noted her sister still lives in the Lake Forest house built by her grandfather in 1925.

With plans for lectures and historical conversations as one part of the series, Summerfield added the grant funding would also allow the History Center to hire a graduate student to assist officials with research and writing of self-guided walking tours in the area.

Highlights of those tours will feature information about Dent at the Deerpath Road location, where he ran his business, plus a display honoring Sales near the city’s police station.

Plans are also in place for displays outside Lake Forest Baptist Church, the oldest Black Baptist church in Lake County, and some other information inside offered at some of the city’s neighborhoods.

“It is a way to build general awareness as people go about their lives,” Summerfield said.

Finally, Summerfield promised that a permanent online series would offer oral and written histories provided by families, with the goal of providing a deeper understanding.

“One of the things that is important to me is the stories we tell and collect are the ones that derive our understanding of history, and are driven by everyone’s experience, and we want everyone to be defined broadly,” Summerfield said.

“The reality is when most people study history, it is not the grand and glorious moments. It is what everyday life was like. It is incumbent on us to collect those stories so that they are there for historians for the future.”

