(Sent to us 4/26/13 from Jeff Hardin, N.C. Credit Union League, via Thad Moore)

**Journey to the Past Reveals Contributions of African-American CU Pioneers**

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[http://www.cutimes.com/2008/11/05/journey-to-the-past-reveals-contributions-of-africanamerican-cu-pioneers](https://outlook.unc.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=WiIbm1yUjECQePkBd20YXMw566IzFtAIo2novzs5N-tqAl92eZbUjsFi-IkccbaVrPCUoZTK0Ew.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.cutimes.com%2f2008%2f11%2f05%2fjourney-to-the-past-reveals-contributions-of-africanamerican-cu-pioneers)

MANCHESTER, N.H. -- Steeped in grassroots and hope, the stories of African-American credit union pioneers are ones of quiet yet bold efforts to help grow a young movement.

There's Dr. S.P. Dean, organizer of the Light of Tyrrell Credit Union in North Carolina, who built an entire community around the cooperative. Tyrrell County residents not only had an entity to house savings but also a hospital, library, one of the first youth credit programs, financial literacy courses, a cooperative marketing group that promoted products and a buying club for supplies.

Dean's legacy, along with many more, is on display at the America's Credit Union Museum in Manchester, N.H. More than a year in the making, nearly 40 people attended the unveiling of the exhibit marking the contributions from African-Americans to the credit union movement. The brainchild of the African-American Credit Union Coalition, the display made its debut on Oct. 16 just in time for International Credit Union Day.

"This project further supports that credit unions have always been on the forefront of serving underserved communities and providing financial opportunities to those who had been left out of the economic equation," said Helen Godfrey-Smith, committee chairwoman of the AACUC archive project and president/CEO of Shreveport Federal Credit Union.

The exhibit depicts African-American contributions from as far back as the early 1900s with the chartering of the first credit union to serve an African-American community in Rowan County, N.C., to the most current efforts of helping the credit union movement raise more than $1.2 million toward the building of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. national memorial in Washington, set to be completed in 2009. Godfrey-Smith said the exhibit is also dedicated to the many "less popular trailblazers," who have labored tirelessly in their local credit unions and made a huge difference in their communities, yet have never been recognized for their contributions.

Representatives from local credit unions, NAFCU, the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, community officials and Peter Hildreth, New Hampshire's state commissioner of financial institutions, attended the exhibit's unveiling. AACUC Board Chairwoman Barbara Stephens, who also serves as president/CEO of Houston Municipal Employees FCU, met with supporters to celebrate the occasion.

Looking back in history, credit unions offered African-Americans access to low-cost, equitable financial products and systematic payroll deductions, which, Godfrey-Smith said "have single handedly done more to pave the way for the march of [African-Americans] into the financial mainstream than [anything else]." Affordable insurance and opportunities for asset building were also drivers toward the American Dream, she added.

"I personally feel that I owe a debt of gratitude to this movement," Godfrey-Smith surmised. "The history of African-Americans in the credit union movement is a living, continuing story. This has been a true eye-opener for me and others."

Some historical discoveries include Harvey Williams, the first paid employee at CUNA of any minority group. John Earnest Johnson of Tuscaloosa, Ala., organized more than 22 credit unions in the south during the height of the civil rights struggle. Their efforts build on those from early founders such as Edward Filene, Alphonse Desjardins and Roy F. Bergengren, Godfrey-Smith noted.

"They were visionaries in that they recognized that serving all of the people was the only way to success for credit unions," she explained.

As the AACUC sets out on the second phase of research, the hope is that the legacy of African-American pioneers will inspire a younger generation to consider credit unions as options for careers and for meeting their personal financial needs.

"There are so many stories that must be told," Godfrey-Smith said. "We will continue to research and compile and see where all of this leads."

The exhibit will be on permanent display at America's Credit Union Museum (http://www.acumuseum.org). A companion DVD is available for $35. For more information, contact Godfrey-Smith at hgsfcu@shrevefcu.org.

--msamaad@cutimes.com

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