

## **LESSON 4: BUILDING THE HALL OF NEGRO LIFE**

**TOPIC:** Building of the Hall of Negro Life

**OBJECTIVE:** Students will:

Extend their study of celebrations through examining The Texas Centennial Hall of Negro Life and discuss how it supports our definitions of a celebration.

Discover the individuals that helped make this building a success.

Find the problems in the creation of this building.

### **SYNOPSIS:**

The Hall of Negro Life was one of the buildings constructed for the Texas Centennial and one of the most visited buildings at the Texas Centennial, though Texas did not fund it. There were many problems and obstacles to the completion of this building, but the many exhibits exalted the Negro's accomplishments. During the Centennial Celebration there was a brief time of integration of the races which "ignited the spark that became the fire that lit the Civil Rights Movement."

## INFORMATION:

### BUILDING THE HALL OF NEGRO LIFE

The Hall of Negro Life was one of 150 buildings at the Texas Centennial. The buildings were built on 186 acres of land in Dallas Texas. The Hall of Negro Life was built in just three months in 1936. It marked the first recognition of black culture at a world's fair.

The Texas Centennial commemorated 100 years of independence of Texas from Mexico. Dallas was selected as the city for the centennial because it was the oil capital of the Southwest and able to out-bid other cities. The federal government gave three million dollars and Dallas gave three and one half million dollars to build this exposition. The Texas Exposition was built at Fair Park in Dallas.

Even though there were about 900,000 Negroes in the State of Texas and about 48,000 in Dallas, **none of the money given Dallas was used to build the Hall of Negro Life.** Dallas was a very segregated city and did not have much interest in creating a space for African Americans to show their achievements. As a matter of fact, African Americans were only allowed to go to the State Fair on one designated day a year. **African Americans tried to secure money** by contacting the State Legislature, Dallas City Council, and Board of Alderman of the City of Dallas. All these efforts were **to no avail.** When they learned that the federal government had given \$3,000,000 for the exposition, **they petitioned for \$75,000** to support the Hall of Negro Life. When this came to the attention of the Adviser on the Affairs of Negroes in the federal Department of Commerce in Washington DC, he asked for \$100,000. So, the Hall of Negro Life was a federally

funded building **with \$100,000** which meant \$50,000 for the building and \$50,000 for the assembling and transporting of the exhibits and administrative overhead.

There was **difficulty finding someone to build the building** because even though the money had been allocated in August 1935, it was not made available until March 1936, just three months before the Exposition was to open. Plans were made for an African American architect, contractor, and builder to erect the building. Since it was federal money, it was necessary to have **competitive bidding**. As it turned out, **no African American architect, contractor, nor builder was selected**. **George Dahl**, born to Norwegian immigrant parents, was the contractor and the Cross Construction Company built it. Dahl also designed Neiman Marcus and the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. **Frederick Law Olmstead**, landscaper for the Biltmore Estates in North Carolina and New York City's Central Park, was chosen to landscape the grounds.

Even though the Hall of Negro Life got a late start on the construction, it was **one of the first buildings finished**. It was said that the building was constructed **of plywood and plaster**, and never intended to be a permanent building. The **contractor painted it without consulting** with the General Manager of the Advisory Committee regarding the color scheme. He **used deep green and red**. When the contractor was asked why those colors were chosen, he said that it would look nice on the walls since he was certain the **African Americans wouldn't have enough exhibits** to fill the building, and **he understood that Negroes liked loud colors**. When the General Manager proposed **repainting** it in the color scheme of all the buildings, the painter wanted to be paid an extra \$1,289 to repaint. Since this was not a part of the budget, he had to **absorb the cost of painting** the building. This attitude supported the idea that most

**White contractors thought they knew what African Americans needed.**

Another problem was **no fire hoses** were installed **in the walls**; therefore, fire extinguishers **had** to be **placed** in the walls instead. The contractor was told he must address the issue or be fined \$100.00. The **contractor was not happy** because, in the past, **he had disregarded the law and had not considered the welfare of African Americans** in other buildings. But this building was built with federal funding and the **rules had to be obeyed**.

On **June 6, 1936**, the opening day for the Centennial, several Negroes went to see the Hall of Negro Life. But **it was not open**. Rumors began to circulate as to why. Sadly, people did not realize that the Hall of Negro Life was not scheduled to open until June 19<sup>th</sup>, or Juneteenth. Juneteenth is the Emancipation Day for African Americans in Texas, so part of their celebration was to be the opening of the Hall of Negro Life. When the hall wasn't open at the same time as the rest of the Centennial buildings it created doubt as to the ability of African Americans to accomplish things. Because they **had let Whites define them** for so long, even they **automatically assumed** that the comment, "Well, I knew the Negroes would not be ready on scheduled time, so I am not surprised" was true. Others heard that the Government did not accept the inclusion of the building and spread a **rumor** that the **building had been condemned**. Another **rumor** was that the **Assistant General Manager had "taken off" with the money** and they were not able to complete the building. **Rumors were so rampant that even 2-3 months later people were saying the Hall of Negro Life would not open**. People far from Dallas believed this and no one in Dallas tried to verify it or refute it which only furth perpetuated the rumors.

Luckily, the Hall of Negro Life opened with its formal dedication on June 19, 1936 because Juneteenth is one of the oldest African American celebrations. The Hall of Negro Life was finally opened for visitors. During its **five-month lifetime**, over **400,000 visitors**, with 60% being white, entered the Hall. **The Hall only lasted on the fairgrounds for one year and was destroyed.**

The Hall of Negro Life was one of the **first exhibits created exclusively by African Americans to tell their own story and showcase their own achievements, instead of Whites creating the narrative.** It gave many Whites a new appreciation for the contributions by African Americans.

## **ACTIVITIES/ASSESSMENTS:** Choose one to complete.

1. Using the information in bold print about the building of the Hall of Negro Life. Create a board game. Using poster board, create squares around the board with information from the reading. Select a name for the game. Use dice or a spinner to determine how many squares to move. Decide the rules for the game, what the challenges will be that will make it interesting. Decide how it will end. Play the game with your friends. Remember: the purpose of this game is to learn about the Hall of Negro Life (HONL). You should be able to discuss the events around the construction of the HONL.
2. Reread the story of the building of the Hall of Negro Life. What racial generalizations did you find?
3. Read the story of Building the Hall of Negro Life. Using the Problem and Solution Chart, write 5 problems encountered during the construction of the Hall of Negro Life. Find 3 possible solutions to each problem. Think about different areas to address with problems and solutions (i.e., business, security, psychological health, social relationships, arts, education, environment, government, law, recreation, economics etc.) Write your problem in the format below.

EX. Since **“Rumors were so rampant that even 2-3 months later people were saying the Hall of Negro Life would not open”**, it could be a problem if people did not come to see the Hall. This could cause Fair Park to lose money.

**Solution #1-**(Social Relationships) Find the source of rumors and try to stop them.

**Solution #2-** (Businesses) Have newspapers feature an article about the Hall so people will see it and know it has opened.

**Solution #3-** (Economics) Make sure the Hall has enough money prior to opening so it can continue to remain open even if only a few people attend.

4. Review the Texas Hall of State and the Hall of Negro Life fact sheet. Compare the Texas Hall of State with the Hall of Negro Life. Consider builders, building material, time spent building, cost of building, artwork, and any other area you find of interest to compare. Complete the chart. What did the comparisons reveal about the importance of the buildings?

## REFERENCES:

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# PROBLEM AND SOLUTION CHART

## PROBLEMS

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 |  |
| 2 |  |
| 3 |  |
| 4 |  |
| 5 |  |

## CHOSEN PROBLEM

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## SOLUTIONS

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|---|--|
| 1 |  |
| 2 |  |
| 3 |  |

## Texas Hall of State Facts

- Designer: Donald Barthelme. Altogether, eleven Texas architects Cost: \$1,250,000 - \$1,000,000 to build and another \$250,000 to furnish.
- Erected in 1936 and was the most expensive per foot construction project in Texas at the time.
- The building was in the shape of an inverted "T" and was 360 feet long by 180 feet deep by 88 feet high.
- The building was constructed using "bas-relief", an Art Deco style of carving that is used to create three-dimensional murals and shows six soldiers marching around the columns.
- A carved Frieze encircled the building and contained the names of historical figures and Texas flora.
- The building is a monument with a group of rooms: The great Hall of Texas, The Hall of Heroes, four regional rooms representing East, West, North, and South Texas, and a lecture room.
- The semi-circular opening had a roof supported by six eighty-foot columns and was surrounded by three wings extending to the left, right and rear of the structure.
- Five bronze doors between the columns served as entrances to the Hall of Heroes.
- The front wing encloses the Hall of Heroes and the four regional rooms representing East, West, North, and South Texas. Each room is decorated with murals reflecting the history of its area.
- The Hall of Heroes was decorated in colored marble, aluminum and inset with six life sized bronze statues of: Stephen F Austin, Sam Houston, Mirabeau B Lamar, Thomas J Rusk, Colonel JW Fannin and William Barrett Travis. It was 20 feet wide, 140 feet long and was the center or hub of the three wings. The rear wing was 160 feet deep.
- The central portion of the building was called The Niche of Heroes and contained, amongst other notables, an eight-foot decorated statue of an Indian.

- Sculptures in front of the Centennial building were designed by Lawrence Tenney Stevens.
- A 70-foot wide and 700-foot-long reflecting pool divides the sculptures and buildings.
- The Great Hall of Texas (aka the Hall of the Six Flags) occupied the entire central wing. It was 66 feet wide by 90 feet long with a forty-five-foot ceiling. In contrast, the ceilings of the other wings were 22 feet high.
- At the far end of the Great Hall was a 24-foot bronze disc weighing several tons that was suspended from the ceiling. It represented Texas and its colorful history.
- Built-in skylights illuminate the murals.
- Eugene Savage of New York painted the murals on the north and south walls. He was assisted by two local men, Reveau Basset and James Buchanan Winn, Jr. They are 30 feet tall by 80 feet long.
- The Lecture Room was in the basement. It had a marble stair entrance, a lecture stage and seating for 800 people.
- The materials used in building the monument came entirely from Texas - cement, granite, limestone, marble and timber. The only exception being the steel framework.
- The state of Texas leased the Hall of State to the city of Dallas after the Exposition.
- The lower level of the museum, the lecture room, contains a library and archive of rare Texas books and manuscripts.
- The Hall of State is now home to the Dallas Historical Society.

## HALL OF NEGRO LIFE FACTS

- Funded by the Federal Government at a total cost of \$100,000. \$50,000 for the building and another \$50,000 for the exhibits.
- Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia contributed to the exhibit.
- The Negro Advisory Committee planned the exhibit. Eugene K. Jones was the Chairman and Jesse O Thomas was the General Manager.
- Construction began on March 9, 1936, and was completed June 12, 1936 - 95 days. And was formally dedicated on June 19, 1936.
- It contained four exhibition halls, each 26 feet wide and 100 feet long.
- The main building was in the shape of an L and designed by George L. Dahl.
- The concrete stage was outside in the bend of the L and had open-air seats that could handle 2000 people.
- A large, sculpted plaster seal hung over the entrance. It was 10 feet in diameter and portrayed Negro life in America (that's what it says in the official guidebook).
- Altogether there were six exhibit groups: agriculture, art, business and industry, education, mechanic arts and progress in curtailing diseases among African Americans.
- Aaron Douglas painted the four murals depicting black history in Texas that were displayed in the lobby.
- The Hall contained: A 2,000-seat outdoor amphitheater, restaurant, dining room and dance hall.
- The building was razed after the Exposition.

## Let's Compare!

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