

LESSON 9: HALL DISAPPEARANCE

TOPIC: Celebrations - Hall of Negro Life: Mysterious Disappearance

OBJECTIVE: Students will:

Extend their study of celebrations by examining the ending of the Hall of Negro Life and possibly who celebrated.

Review the 10-month celebration and trace the results of the disappearance of the Hall of Negro Life.

Look to the future (1936 to now) to consider what celebrations have happened for the African American not just in Texas, but nationwide, after the Hall of Negro Life was demolished.

SYNOPSIS: The Hall of Negro Life was a huge success. It was one of the most visited buildings, by blacks and whites alike, at the Texas Centennial. It made a positive impact on the attitudes that Whites had about African American achievements. It also brought a little Harlem Renaissance to Texas. The Hall was quietly demolished and would not be continued for the following year's Pan American Exposition. Two of the four murals of Aaron Douglas disappeared as a result.

INFORMATION:

At the end of the Centennial, Whites and African Americans were excited about the success of the Hall of Negro Life and assumed it would reopen as part of the 1937 Pan American Exposition. There were plans for a pageant to be the "largest and most stupendous pageant ever staged in America by Negroes". The people of Dallas were enthusiastic about African American participation, but.....Negro participation was discontinued.

The Exposition Corporation of Dallas recommended discontinuing the Hall of Negro Life Building because they needed the space for a different type

of exhibit in the new Exposition that would be within the amount of money appropriated. "We do not feel that the Negro Building would be of any value to the new Exposition." It was stated that the federal government was blamed because of lack of funding even though the committee for Pan American Expo decided they did not want the government to fund any part of the 1937 Expo. The Hall of Negro Life was already fully funded by the federal government. Also, it was said that the nature of the 1937 Expo was changed, and the African American participation did not fit. The City of Dallas "does not care for the Negro Building, therefore it seems best, in the light circumstances, that the Negro Building be abolished." Why? No one knows for sure. There is no written documentation with names of individuals who made this decision. The Advisory Committee for the Hall, comprised of ten prominent "colored men and women," were never consulted before the final decision was given to dismantle the exhibits and demolish the building. The administrative staff felt quite confident that they "knew who the guilty person was." They believed that this "one individual was conspiring with local citizens to defeat Negro participation." Powerful people have influence.

In making the announcement to dismantle the Hall of Negro Life, it was stated how pleased the committee was with the Negro participation through the Hall of Negro Life. The announcement further stated that there would be special days at the Pan American Exposition to honor African American achievement with special notable African American guests coming to the Exposition. Assurances were made that there would be African Americans on the planning committee for the 1937 Expo. Concessions were made by stating that African Americans would be welcomed any day at any time to the Expo and they **expected** them to be in attendance on the special days and every day at the Expo.

HALL OF NEGRO LIFE REMOVED

The African Americans were told that the Hall could not be maintained as a separate entity. There were several letters of dissatisfaction written about this decision. Letters were written that questioned who was behind this decision. No one knows for certain.

In the end, it appears that, due to a withdrawal of federal funding, at the urging of local politicians, the Hall was quietly torn down and forgotten.

Following the end of the Texas Centennial, the Fair Park lot on which the hall had sat, was replaced by a whites-only swimming pool. Upon the end of segregation, the pool was filled with concrete lest black and white be required to share it. Thus, the Hall of Negro Life marked the end of a period of African American cultural achievement in Dallas. Interestingly, the Hall of Negro Life was the ONLY building to be demolished from the Centennial.

The writer, stated: "There was someone in the woodpile and he was not a Sambo."

Today, the African American Museum sits on the same land in Fair Park, Dallas, which once was home to the Hall of Negro Life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. If the Hall of Negro Life was such a success, why do you believe it was not allowed to continue?
2. What is a Sambo?
3. What do people mean when they talk about making concessions? What concessions were made for African Americans after the destruction of the Hall of Negro Life? What is the purpose of concessions?
4. Why do you believe the destruction of the Hall was so mysterious?
5. What might be real reasons for the destruction of the Hall of Negro Life, since all the excuses were so easily refutable?
6. Think of a situation where you created excuses, not reasons, why you did what you did, or did not do what you should have? If you are comfortable sharing, discuss this time with the group. What was the reason that you made up seemingly plausible excuses? If you are comfortable, share it with the class.
7. Who might have seen the destruction of the Hall of Negro Life as a celebration? Why? Who might not have seen this as a celebration?

REFERENCES:

Thomas, Jesse O. (1938). The Mysterious Elimination of Negro Participation (pp.117-124). *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition*. Boston: Christopher Publishing.