

# Opinion: A new building in Washington, D.C., honors African-American history

By Rep. John Lewis, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.20.16

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President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama applaud as Representative John Lewis, a Democrat from Georgia, speaks at the groundbreaking for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 22, 2012. Photo: AP Photo/Charles Dharapak

Soon after I was elected to Congress in 1986, I learned about a plan to start a national museum for African-American history.

I have loved history ever since I was a boy. It started when I was so young. To celebrate Negro History Week – now called Black History Month – my teachers would ask us to cut out pictures in magazines and newspapers of famous African-Americans, such as civil rights activist Rosa Parks and scientist and inventor George Washington Carver. Growing up in Alabama near Tuskegee Institute, a historically African-American college, I knew the power of history. Two years after I was elected, Representative Mickey Leland of Texas asked me to help him introduce a law to build the museum. He did not have to ask me twice.

Unfortunately, he died less than a year later. I asked lawmakers to vote to build the museum in every session of Congress for 15 years.

## **Hope In The Face Of Challenge**

Giving up on dreams is not something I do. I see hope in the face of challenge. I knew I would at least do the right thing. At most, I could win a victory for humankind.

So I continued to introduce the law in every Congress and worked to find a way to get the bill through. Eventually, lawmakers approved it. It was signed into law in 2003 by President George W. Bush.

Exactly 100 years ago, a group of people dreamed of starting an African-American museum. The group helped black Civil War veterans. On May 24, 1916, the National Memorial Association held a meeting in Washington, D.C., and talked about opening a museum. The museum would celebrate African-American soldiers, scientists, inventors, writers, artists, and others. This Sept. 24 is exactly 100 years and four months later. On that day, the National Museum of African American History and Culture will finally open in Washington.

## **Museum Deserves An Important Place**

Millions of black men and women built this country through hard labor, sacrifice and suffering. They built it through creativity, willpower and faith. They have fought in every war and defended people's rights, although they themselves could not vote. They believed in something greater than themselves. This museum deserves to have an important place in our nation's capital.

People know so little about African-American history.

Some people think that race is not a problem in America. Why? Because we spent so much time avoiding any discussion of it. We refuse to admit that blacks still feel angry over how they were treated. We believe ignoring the problem would somehow make it go away.

## **We Can't Avoid The Truth**

There is much trouble in our society today, and we can not avoid the truth. We are one people, one family, the American family. We all live in one house, the American house, the world house. We are more alike than we are different. We are not separate, we are one. That is why this museum can have a healing effect on our society.

Let the truth speak to our hearts and minds. Let this museum show the complete truth, without sweeping the uncomfortable parts in some dark corner or under a rug.

The African-American story is a collection of some of the most inspiring stories in human history. African Americans were not treated equally. Yet they gave their lives in every generation for America. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "When the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people - a black people - who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.'"

*Democratic Representative John Lewis of Georgia is a civil rights leader and fighter for the equal treatment of African-Americans. In June, he led a lawmaker sit-in over gun control. He also has co-written novels about the civil rights movement.*

## Quiz

- 1 Fill in the blank. The author suggests that ignoring the problem of race is .....
- (A) good because it has a healing effect on our society.
  - (B) good because it helps problems in our society go away.
  - (C) bad because it makes it difficult for people to know the truth.
  - (D) bad because it shows that people want to stay angry.
- 2 Based on the article, why is the opening of the museum important to the author?
- (A) He thinks the museum can help people avoid the truth about race and history.
  - (B) He thinks the museum will encourage more African-Americans to run for Congress.
  - (C) He thinks the museum will help people by leaving out the uncomfortable parts of history.
  - (D) He thinks the museum can help people understand more about African-American history.

- 3 What is the purpose of this statement from the article?

*To celebrate Negro History Week – now called Black History Month – my teachers would ask us to cut out pictures in magazines and newspapers of famous African-Americans, such as civil rights activist Rosa Parks and scientist and inventor George Washington Carver.*

- (A) to show that the author enjoyed African-American history even as a young boy
- (B) to show that the author wanted a museum for African-Americans when he was in school
- (C) to show that the author's teachers would vote for the National Museum of African American History and Culture
- (D) to show that schools in Alabama taught the complete history of African-Americans

4 Which sentence from the article BEST shows the author's point of view about race problems in society today?

- (A) The museum would celebrate African-American soldiers, scientists, inventors, writers, artists, and others.
- (B) Millions of black men and women built this country through hard labor, sacrifice and suffering.
- (C) We refuse to admit that blacks still feel angry over how they were treated.
- (D) The African-American story is a collection of some of the most inspiring stories in human history.

## Answer Key

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  - (D) The African-American story is a collection of some of the most inspiring stories in human history.