



INTERNATIONAL
STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

Freedom Stories: Exploring the African American Heritage of Appalachia

Freedom Stories is an International Storytelling Center (ISC) initiative that illuminates underappreciated, ignored, or neglected aspects of African American and Appalachian history. The program brings together the folk art of storytelling with humanities scholarship to guide the public through a deeper public appreciation of the roles that African-American stories have played in struggles for freedom, equality, and justice in the Central Appalachian region. This project traces the history of African Americans over time, showing how the past has shaped the world we know today. While conceived of as a regional program based in Central Appalachia, the project's multimedia toolkit will serve as a resource for the nation and the world. We're eager to highlight the diversity of our Appalachian communities, the complexities of Appalachian histories, and the role the region has played in US history—all of which has been subject to misunderstanding and stereotypes.

The Freedom Stories Format

Supported by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Freedom Stories weaves together art, scholarship, and public discourse into an inclusive setting to address histories that had been previously silenced, as well as our roles in the histories and silencing. The program's interpretive goals are to foster a better appreciation of the histories of Appalachia that intersect with the broader histories of the Black experience in the US; the contributions of African Americans to the economic, cultural and religious history of Appalachia; and the role that face-to-face storytelling has played in African American, Appalachian, and Black Appalachian communities.

Virtual discussions (free to the public) about African-American heritage and Appalachian history will include Black scholars, storytellers, thought leaders, and community experts. Each event will feature a live storytelling performance followed by a panel discussion on topics surrounding African-American and Appalachian history, as well as life in the region in the present day.

Freedom Stories Digital Toolkit

All Freedom Stories discussions are recorded, and will be uploaded along with brief interviews with panelists to the ISC website as part of the organization's educational resources. The toolkit will include podcasts, recorded performances, discussion and curriculum guides, and other resources prepared by scholars and experts that organizations and individuals across the globe can use for facilitating similar community collaborations. We hope these materials will help these urgent humanities discussions reach larger audiences in and beyond Central Appalachia. Like a story, which often changes over time, the digital multimedia toolkit will continue to grow and adapt in response to participants' changing needs and demands.

Freedom Stories has been designed to provide a foundation for ongoing engagement and communication across communities, disciplines, and specializations that will contribute to informed, community-driven solutions to contemporary challenges. Stories serve as powerful analytic tools that reflect on culture, helping us grapple with complex and difficult experiences in equitable and accessible ways.



"Coal miner his wife and two of their children. Bertha Hill West Virginia. 1938." Photo by Marion Post Wolcott/Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection Library of Congress.

Join Freedom Stories

From its founding, ISC has sought to promote equality and diversity through its flagship event, the National Storytelling Festival, to represent all communities touched by the storytelling revival. The Freedom Stories project continues this legacy by strategically engaging diverse, long-silenced narratives, while allowing us to critically examine the role we, as an institution, have played in shaping how these narratives are broadly understood. We invite you to join us as we engage in open, honest, and constructive dialogue in how to better understand and nurture our collective narrative.

For more information about Freedom Stories or to be involved, please contact us at FreedomStories@storytellingcenter.net.