

**ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY  
GRANT NARRATIVE  
FOR  
THE MELLON FOUNDATION**

**Introduction**

The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) was founded in 1915 by Dr. Carter G. Woodson (the Father of Black History) as the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Since its founding ASALH has changed its name from Negro to Afro-American to African American. ASALH sponsored Negro History Week (1926) and Black History Month (1976), published *the Journal of African American History* (1916) and the *Black History Bulletin* (1937) (aimed at K-12 educators.), and hosted an Academic Conference for 109 years to carry out its mission “to promote, research, preserve, interpret and disseminate information about Black life, history, and culture to the global community.” One of its most important efforts has been to educate the public about African American history and to advocate for including the African American experience in the nation’s public schools and colleges’ and universities’ curricula.

Throughout its history, ASALH has partnered with various educational and community organizations. For example, ASALH’s founder, Dr. Woodson, taught at Howard University. Dr Woodson worked with faculty at Howard to develop curricula on African American history and culture. ASALH has an ongoing partnership with Howard University and serves as its primary subcontractor for its Social Justice Initiative. Two branches of ASALH were founded at and sponsored by universities, the College of Charleston in South Carolina and the University of Texas, Arlington (UTA). ASALH has partnered with museums and community organizations such as the African American Museum in Dallas and Girls, Inc. in Sarasota, Florida. ASALH has also partnered with churches. Churches in Florida and Texas have supported ASALH’s Freedom Schools.

ASALH is unique among professional and scholarly organizations that promote and support a specific academic field. Unlike most scholarly organizations, ASALH has a very diverse membership. Its membership includes professional historians and scholars *and* a slight majority of members from the lay community. Its lay members are primarily adults who form the foundation for its branches. ASALH has forty-four branches throughout the United States. For the past 109 years, ASALH has labored to correct the dearth of information and miseducation about Afro-descendant peoples, thereby promoting the study, teaching, preservation, and distribution of accurate knowledge of African American history and culture. Thus, ASALH created its Freedom Schools in response to the legislation by twenty-three state legislatures to ban books and specifically, to restrict the content and teaching of African American history.

**Program Priorities**

ASALH’s annual conference and Black History Month Festival lie at the heart of its public-facing activities. The *JAAH* is the premier journal in Black/African Studies (B/AS). It is targeted toward professional historians, B/AS scholars and lay historians, while *BHB* is focused on K-12

educators. ASALH produces Black History Month kits to highlight the annual theme which in 2025 is “African Americans and Labor.” ASALH TV is another primary vehicle through which we disseminate the African American social and historical experience. For the last decade, ASALH has served as a primary resource for the National Park Service’s ongoing research projects at its historical sites and parks throughout the country. ASALH has assisted the National Park Service in re-interpreting the presentations at its parks and historic sites to include the African American experience and to update their narratives with the most recent historical research.

In 2023, ASALH’s Executive Council voted to make its Freedom Schools Initiative an organizational priority. This new initiative is based on a historical, educational concept that goes back to African free schools in the eighteenth century. This initiative also has another important precursor—the Citizenship Schools started by Septima Clark in the Lowcountry of South Carolina in the 1950s to teach adult learners and prepare them for the literacy test to vote. However, the Freedom Schools developed by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the 1964 Freedom Summer Project serve as ASALH’s recent inspiration. But unlike SNCC’s Freedom Schools, ASALH will deliver a college-level curriculum to adults on African American history and culture.

To implement this initiative, ASALH will hire a part-time coordinator for its Freedom Schools who will work with all of the ASALH branches that start Freedom Schools on curriculum, training teachers, developing resources, and helping its branches to develop and sustain their Freedom Schools. This is a critical way for ASALH to begin and sustain this nationwide initiative. The part-time coordinator will assist ASALH’s Freedom School Committee in developing and implementing a standard, college-level curriculum for the Freedom Schools started by its branches, assist the branches in hiring instructors qualified to teach a college-level curriculum, and provide the committee regular reports and evaluations on the success of this initiative.

This past fall ASALH developed the model for the Freedom Schools that will instruct adult learners. From October to December 2024, ASALH’s Dallas-Fort Worth Branch sponsored three Freedom Schools. The DFW Branch partnered with the Dallas African American Museum to teach thirteen adults, and with Mount Olive Baptist Church to teach two classes that totaled sixty adults (47 at 10:00 a.m. and 13 at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesdays. The curricula for each of the Freedom Schools were different. The Freedom School at the African American Museum met on Saturday afternoons from 3 – 5 p.m. A UTA History doctoral student (who also has a Ph.D. in African American Studies from the University of Massachusetts) taught an eight-session course based on the Introduction to African American Studies course that he taught at UTA. The two sessions taught to adults at Mount Olive Baptist Church were on two levels—Advanced at 10:00 a.m. and Introductory at 7:00 p.m. The Advanced course replicated a college-level graduate seminar; the adults read and discussed articles and essays from professional history journals.\* In the Introductory course the instructor presented lectures supported by PowerPoint slides and

discussed historical documents from a 100-page handout that the adults received as reading assignments for the class.\*\*

With funding from the Mellon Foundation, ASALH will continue the Freedom Schools for adult learners in St. Petersburg, Champaign-Urbana, and Dallas-Fort Worth and develop additional Freedom Schools for adult learners with other branches. ASALH plans to provide funding to at least seven of its branches to develop Freedom Schools for adult learners. ASALH will develop a competitive process that will enable its branches to apply for funding that will develop schools with paid coordinators and teachers. This competitive process will require branches to work with ASALH's Freedom School coordinator to implement the standard college-level curriculum for adult learners, hire instructors qualified to teach the college-level curriculum; and develop a plan to recruit adults for the courses. Each branch will sponsor three ten-week Freedom Schools from April 2025 through Spring 2026.

### **Potential Challenges**

One of the major challenges that ASALH may confront with its Freedom Schools Initiative is identifying and training teachers. ASALH's DFW Branch confronted this challenge and addressed it in two ways. The Branch recruited a doctoral candidate in History at one of the local universities in Dallas-Fort Worth and provided him with a curriculum and the resources developed by the branch and the African American Museum to teach the Freedom School. He has taught two sessions of the Freedom School successfully. In Arlington, ASALH's leadership (two of whom were retired History teachers) trained a teacher who had taught Social Studies and History on the secondary level to teach the Freedom School. She has taught two sessions of the Freedom School successfully to adults at Mount Olive Baptist Church. Given that most of ASALH's branches are in urban areas where there are colleges and universities, ASALH will require that the branches it funds to teach adult learners and develop a recruitment plan to hire teachers who have teaching experience on the postsecondary level or at least a Master's degree in the fields of History or African American Studies.

Currently, ASALH has a Freedom School Committee that is charged with developing curriculum and pedagogy, identifying resources and materials, raising funds, and standardizing Freedom Schools for each of its branches. The majority of the members of the Freedom School Committee are college and university faculty members who teach in the fields of African American History or African American Studies. Four committee members are or have served as department chairs or program directors. Two members have developed curricula for African American Studies, including the curriculum for the African American Studies course adopted by the State of Texas. One member of the committee wrote the proposal for UTA's Center for African American Studies and the curriculum for the African American Studies Minor. Since the appointment of the Freedom School Committee in the fall of 2023 a subcommittee has focused specifically on developing a standard curriculum for ASALH's Freedom Schools. The subcommittee has gathered syllabi, curricula, handouts, documents, reading lists, and learning resources from the Freedom Schools currently taught by ASALH's branches. The Committee gathered and compiled all of these resources to make them available to the branches. Now, the Committee will use these

resources to develop a standard, adult curriculum on African American Studies based on the model implemented in Dallas-Fort Worth. The members of the Committee have various levels of training for curriculum development. However, one of the oldest members of the committee has taught in the fields of African American history and African American Studies at four universities since 1975. He has worked in the field of Public History since 1985; wrote the curricula for “community history courses” for adults at two museums; developed public history exhibitions at four museums; wrote the course curriculum for the “Introduction to African American Studies” courses at two universities; and of course, developed curriculum for African American History courses with study guides and lesson plans before such resources became widely available on the internet and the world wide web. He will provide the committee with the expertise and experience to plan, develop, and implement a college-level course for adult learners.

### **Sustainability**

The Freedom Schools that ASALH sponsors have developed different methods of sustainability. The Freedom Schools sponsored by the Manasota and Champaign-Urbana branches have obtained grant funding from local funders. The Dallas-Fort Worth Branch has obtained support and sponsorship from the Dallas African American Museum and Mount Olive Baptist Church. Both sponsors have committed to supporting the Freedom Schools as long as people register and enroll in the courses that the Freedom Schools offer.

The ASALH Freedom School Committee has committed to the ongoing task of raising funds to support its Freedom Schools. This is a priority initiative for ASALH and the members of ASALH understand its importance and significance for the organization, its branches, and the communities it serves. ASALH’s Executive Council believes that Freedom Schools will raise the organization’s national profile and help to increase its membership and funding which will help to sustain the organization and its Freedom Schools. ASALH will seek additional grant funding on both the national and local levels and make Freedom Schools a part of the organization’s annual budget.

\*The reading list for the Advanced Course is attached.

\*\*The list of documents for the Introductory Course is attached.