

# The Great Blacks in Wax Museum

A place to learn more about your own history, or someone else's right in Baltimore

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*Contributor*

The Great Blacks in Wax Museum, today, receives national and international praise as the important cultural and educational site it has become, but it did not begin this way. The museum was founded by Drs. Elmer and Joanne Martin, who were professors at Morgan State and Coppin State University, respectively. They started out by making small papier-mache figures in their home, years ago. But, now, the museum's growth and popularity has initiated a \$10 million fundraising project for expansion.

As you enter the building, a large, renovated firehouse that is an East Baltimore historical site, you quickly understand you've stepped into a one-of-a-kind place. A legend, written on the lobby floor in large black letters reads: "America's First Black History Wax Museum: Taking You Through The Pages Of Time." To the left, a sculptured Hannibal rides a huge elephant — maybe over the Alps. And visitors will probably run into Liz Byrd, the public relations director, who is likely to be right there, eager to talk with them and tell them all about *Great Blacks in Wax*.

"We opened these doors so that people could come and see what African Americans have to offer," Byrd explained.

Behind the double-doors, painted with a multi-colored African mural, you find the first exhibit — the slave ship. Visitors react to this one as among their favorites, Byrd said.

At first, the wooden slave ship replica appears to be something to just observe in passing through the exhibits. But a closer

look reveals a sign that invites you to enter the ship. As you walk onboard, you hear a crew member conversing with the captain about slave cargo.

The impact of this ship strikes the visitor in the slave hold. As you enter, you hear the moaning, crying, and coughing of the men, women and children imprisoned in the cramped space. The anguished sounds just go on and on, non-stop, as you look at the sculptures of men, women and children, packed tightly together, bound in chains, many of them at both the neck and the wrists.

**"Black history is not just for February --- it's for the other 11 months."**

— Elizabeth F. Byrd, Public Relations Coordinator  
The Great Blacks in Wax Museum

The men are jammed so closely together that there is no room to move, barely space enough to allow breathing. The inescapable question is how so many human beings could be confined to such a tiny space and remain alive. But, the wall labels explain that many of them did not survive but died of disease and other effects of the conditions. One label from the ship surgeon, Alexander Falconridge, of 1788 states: "They had not so much room as a man in a coffin."

Near the back of the dimly lit dungeon, a different atmosphere offers relief from the grim, mournful scene in the upper hold. There is a libation area, where visitors can participate in the African custom to honor their dead-relatives, someone admired, a leader, or, as the museum suggests, the slaves who

were victims of the Middle Passage. In this case, the libation ritual consists of pouring provided water from the Atlantic Ocean into a large bowl, and stating the name of the honored person at the same time.

Once outside the ship, no other exhibit evokes the same intense emotional response found inside the wooden structure. The atmosphere shifts immediately from the worst of human suffering and bondage to the power and endurance of human hope and progress.

To the left, the African American and the ancient African

beeswax figures look much more life-like than the ones they replaced, they are much less durable, Byrd said. "They must be handled with kid gloves," she explained.

The figures are created by teams of sculptors and hair weavers around the country. The teeth are made of the same material used to make dentures and the eyes are the same medical glass used to make prosthetic eyes. The cost of making one figure is \$4,000 to \$6,000, not including the cost of period clothing and background displays.

As you move on, the wax

a glass display. A closer inspection of the exhibit label confirms that he is real, now a product of taxidermy. But what is he doing there? It turns out to be a tribute to Matthew Henson, who is recognized now as the man who actually discovered the North Pole.

The last display brings the visitor right up to the present as they walk into a spacecraft area where they find astronauts Guion Bluford, the first black man to walk in space, Mae Jemison, the first black female astronaut, and Ron McNair, who was killed in the space shuttle Challenger explosion. McNair and Jemison, in fact, are seated at the control panels in a simulated spacecraft.

Upstairs, the museum provides a whole room of displays for youth, entitled: "And A Little Child Shall Lead Them: Black Youth In The Struggle." Exhibits here include a variety of black leaders, and Marge Carter Smith, known as Maryland's Official Griot, or African traditional storyteller.

A major feature on this floor is a shrine dedicated to the memory of Emmet Till, the African-American 14-year-old boy who visited Mississippi in 1955 and was brutally murdered for allegedly speaking to or whistling at a white woman. Like the slave ship downstairs, the Till exhibit is the second floor's high-impact



Dr. Benjamin S. Carson, Sr., international neurosurgeon, is represented in one of the wax figures exhibited at the Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore. Carson, an international neurosurgeon, led the medical team that separated the "Bender" siamese twins in 1987. He currently serves as the director of the division of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University and Hospital.

photo courtesy of the Great Blacks in Wax Museum

offering, charged with emotion and stimulus for human reflection.

Just before going back down the stairs, several African American celebrated achievers are clustered in a large group. It is easily possible to make a remark to the older woman who relaxes in a leather easychair before it becomes evident that she, too, is made of wax.

She is Verda M. F. Welcome, the first black woman state senator, who served in Maryland. She is wearing a smart grey suit with a black purse on her arm as if she's just about ready to get up and dash off to an appointment. She wears silver, wire-framed glasses of the 50s and 60s that are making a comeback now. Her eyes are bright and her smile reveals authentic-looking teeth and gums.

With all of these figures, the detailing in the sculpturing of

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