

AHA TASK FORCE ONE
2020 REPORT
MAY 28, 2020

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

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Introduction

Created in 1947, the Alabama Historical Association (AHA) is the oldest and most venerated statewide historical society in Alabama. It is volunteer-led, membership-supported and has provided opportunities for meaningful engagement with the story of our state through its publications, meetings, historical markers, and other programs.

The informative articles published in our *Alabama Review* deal with topics that cut across all cultural lines. Also, many of the events and speakers we've enjoyed over the last several years illustrate how inclusive and robust our collective understanding of the past becomes when we diversify the voices heard through the AHA.

Noteworthy attempts to reach out to a more geographically and culturally diverse population can be seen in several recent initiatives. AHA minority members have devoted time and energy to participate in meetings and conduct tours of culturally meaningful sites. These include the keynote speech provided by Dr.

Bernard LaFayette at our annual meeting in Birmingham and the tours of the Civil Rights District there. Dr. John Morrow's keynote address at our Auburn meeting as well as our joint banquet with the Alabama Black Heritage Council in Tuscaloosa also reflect AHA's efforts to reach out to more diverse groups and ideas. The fact that we now have our first African American president should also not go unmentioned.

The history of Alabama is rich and reflects a great diversity of experiences and people. In recent years there has been a growing awareness among AHA members that AHA should better reflect the diverse population that is Alabama today.

Based upon a membership demographic study completed for AHA in 2010 (M.Olliff), 97.8 percent of AHA membership is white and 1.7 percent is black. Further, 81.3 percent of membership is over the age of 55, 30.1 percent over the age of 75. 66 percent of membership are from cities with populations over 10,000.

Present US Census information for Alabama estimates our population to be 69 percent white and 27 percent black or African American. Hispanics are at 4.4 percent and the Native American population is estimated at .7 percent.

Although we have very valuable and active non-white members, their numbers in the AHA are comparatively small and there is a genuine desire across our ranks to do something about it.

An official look at the situation was started under the presidency of Jeff Jakeman a few years ago and it has developed a more intense focus under the current leadership of Frazine Taylor, our organization's first African American president. President Taylor appointed special Task Force One comprised of 12 members representing a wide range of our general membership from all parts of our state. This report is hereby submitted at the President's request after several months of work.

Defining Diversity

Task Force One defines *diversity* as including characteristics represented by people of various ethnicities, cultures, ages, economic and educational levels, geographic locations, physical challenges and sexual orientations.

Task Force One advises that AHA specifically focus on the following demographics (presented in no particular order):

African Americans

Native Americans

Hispanic/Latino

People under 50 years old

Students and teachers from
the Elementary School level
to College

People from rural portions of Alabama,
small towns

The prospect of improving the diversity of our membership opens up a broad concern about the future of our organization and what it should be. Task Force One would like to see AHA have a greater presence in the various demographic groups and communities of our state and be involved in historical functions at a more grass-roots level. AHA should reach out to a wider and more diverse group of people who may not presently be members of our organization.

Although our Annual Meetings may have more of an academic influence on its structure, our Pilgrimage meetings feature presentations and tours that delve into the rural histories of the small towns and places that we visit at such meetings. How can we build upon that and better connect with more diverse people and areas of our state?

Plan of Action

Short-Term Goals and Actions

Short-term goals of increasing membership diversity will likely be oriented to direct recruitment where individuals are identified and specifically solicited to become involved with AHA. We have “boots on the ground” members now who are professors and teachers already in contact with young people and we have members who also participate in other related organizations. We should use these members to identify and invite students or other peers to AHA.

To carry out this plan of action will require several things. An important consideration is the cost of participating in the Alabama Historical Association. Although dues levels are not high, the expense of attending our two yearly meetings (the Annual Meeting and the Pilgrimage) can be burdensome for some of the people we may wish to attract.

Unless you live in the location of our yearly meetings, you can easily spend \$1,000 to \$1,500 to attend both meetings when you consider accommodations, attendance fees and transportation. Giving new recruits a break on such costs is almost essential for creating an effective new recruitment plan.

One option would be to concede some of these charges for new members. The first year or two of dues and some of the meeting charges could be waived for such individuals. For example, we could offer new prospective members the chance to attend one of our day meetings, including a meal, for free. As one Task Force member said, “offer them a try before you buy option for joining AHA.”

Furthermore, as one of our Task Force members said, “we go to these areas and tell people that we are coming here and going to do all these great things here but your people can’t come.” We need to seriously consider publicizing our meetings locally and opening at least some parts of our meetings to the public, particularly the local population of where the meetings are held.

We will need to produce additional hand-out materials as well as enhance our AHA website to more directly appeal to prospective new members who may not be familiar with AHA. A rack card or nicely-done brochure that outlines our organization and the things we do would be helpful.

AHA staff and volunteers have done an excellent job of website and print material production as well as a fantastic job of developing and organizing our meetings. None of these recommendations question, criticize or impugn that great service rendered to AHA.

Another very important thing is for our entire membership to buy-into these efforts and reflect that buy-in at our meetings by being openly friendly and welcoming to new members when they do appear. We've received feedback from cultural minority members who say this is very important and something that plays heavily on the minds of minorities going into a new environment such as a venerable historical organization in which they have not been heavily represented.

Perhaps a special sub-committee or hospitality group could focus on making sure new members are properly introduced and integrated into the activities of meetings that they attend. New member picture profiles could be distributed in advance and special name tags denoting a new member status could be issued before meetings.

The pre-meeting memo report submitted for our now-cancelled annual meeting in Florence (attached as addendum) exemplifies an ideal short-term action plan. We sought approval for inviting a targeted group of 20 people to attend the luncheon and screening of a documentary about African American architect Wallace Rayfield. We also sought to have AHA re-join ASALH for a 3-5 year term and seek a presence at their national convention in Montgomery later this year. In addition, we sought approval to produce a rack card or brochure hand-out piece for AHA. Our Executive Board approved everything we suggested and we will pursue all of those items.

We have past communications with the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) and they would like to explore cooperation with AHA. Their national conference is slated for Montgomery, Alabama on

September 23-27, 2020. AHA should certainly be a part of that and have some presence there. Sponsorship opportunities are available.

There are many things that our organization can and should do to improve our diversity. However, as one of our chairmen who is part of a Historically Black University said, “We can’t take a shotgun approach and try to do everything all at once or we will be overwhelmed. We need to focus on a few critical things and accomplish those first. Then, we build upon them for the long-term.”

Targeted short-term actions:

1. Re-design and produce a concise, informative brochure about AHA that informs about what we do and what we want to do in the state of Alabama. This and an enhanced website with a focus on potential newcomers can be used in both short-term and long-term new member recruitment. The AHA purpose and benefits of membership, particularly for minority populations we wish to attract, should be clearly communicated.
2. AHA should re-join ASALH for a 3-5 year term and immediately begin a dialog with them about what presence we can have at their meeting in Montgomery. Would we have the possibility of sponsoring the Wallace Rayfield video presentation there? Sponsoring reserved table for AHA?
3. Solicit 1-2 history professors at Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as the Native American Studies Program at the University of South Alabama who are AHA members and ask them to identify students who have demonstrated a desire to study Alabama history. These individuals can then be invited to join AHA for a special rate or to be our guests at one of our yearly meetings. Task Force One can provide those contacts.

This program can be expanded after the first year but getting a manageable start to learn from it would be beneficial.

4. Publicize our yearly meetings, particularly in areas where the meetings are being held, and open some of their functions to the public in those areas.

5. Solicit a small group of AHA members who are also members of other related organizations (see below) and have them seek out individuals in those other organizations who meet the criteria we are seeking for new diverse members and directly invite them to join AHA or attend one of our functions. Task Force One can provide those contacts.

Long-Term Goals and Actions:

Looking long-term leads us to an introspective consideration of what we want our organization to be, as mentioned earlier. If we want greater diversity of membership, we must understand what our target audience wants and move our organization into offering those things in order to entice these people to become members of AHA.

AHA should foster an active presence for itself among the people we wish to involve. Our members, with AHA name tags, should attend the events and become involved in the activities of the groups we wish to attract.

We need to be doing things that these various minorities see us doing, things that they like, things that we can put in our solicitation material for prospective new members. As a current Task Force One member who is also part of the Alabama Black Heritage Council has said, "If we do the things they like, they will come and they will be a part of our organization."

AHA should create a special Public Relations Committee that can provide a focused effort to get our story out. Several members have felt that AHA missed an opportunity to better inform the public that Frazine Taylor was elected as our first African American president. Moving forward, AHA needs to emphasize these efforts to place cultural minorities on our committees and task forces and involve them directly in our leadership positions.

AHA should also strive to create a more visible and active presence throughout other related historical organizations and events of our state thereby creating a better awareness of AHA among like-minded people already active in other such organizations. We can create partnership relations whereby we exchange memberships, cooperate with events and meetings, sponsor or co-sponsor

worthwhile events, generally cooperate with and have a physical presence with such groups and efforts.

AHA could also do more to highlight local histories through our annual meetings and other projects. Localized, community-based history projects are to be found in several parts of the state. Some, such as the Shoals Black History project in northwest Alabama, are successfully using social media as a tool for uncovering and propagating historical information about their locality and cultural groups. AHA should be connected with these innovative efforts and seek new members there. Social media can be an important tool for historical organizations.

We should consider such things as offering students at Historically Black Colleges and other institutions special awards or financial incentives to write papers related to Alabama History. Such papers could be vetted and perhaps selected for presentation at one of our yearly meetings. We could do the same for Native American students. The University of South Alabama now offers a minor in Native American Studies.

Another possible thing AHA could do is to help sponsor film projects for people who wish to make a documentary film or video regarding something of historical significance for a minority population.

We could also generate a high level of visibility by sponsoring public commendations of someone or some-thing of great popularity within a cultural community. Such things could also be done in partnership with other organizations while still insuring AHA is a visible and significant part of the effort.

Targeted long-term actions:

1. Compile a list of statewide historical organizations created in small towns or counties as well as local festivals around the state that celebrate a historical aspect of the area in which they are held. Send a periodic notice such as a monthly email or social media post to all AHA members in advance to notify them of such organizations and events and encourage them to become involved and seek out potential new AHA members particularly in geographical areas that need better representation and emphasis on their local histories.

2. Identify current AHA members in related organizations, particularly those with culturally diverse members or activities, and begin a rapport with those organizations to determine ways in which AHA can participate or partner with those organizations in worthwhile, high profile events, joint meetings or programs.
3. Recognize and present public awards to minority students or individuals who have demonstrated significant contributions to the study of Alabama history or to a cultural community.
4. Make an affirmative effort to place cultural minorities on AHA committees, task forces and in leadership positions within our organization.
5. Create a Public Relations Committee that would be very helpful for all items cited here. More periodic communications with members through emails or social media could be a part of this committee's job.

Related Organizations, Institutions and Events of a Historical Nature :

History Faculties at Alabama collegiate and high school levels

Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH)

Alabama Black Heritage Council

Shoals Black History and Project Say Something (North Alabama)

Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area (MSNHA)

American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)

Alabama/National History Day

Alabama Association of Historians

Alabama Humanities Foundation

Society of Alabama Archivists

Alabama Museums Association

ADAH/Friends of Alabama Archives

Pebble Hill at AU

Summersell Center at University of Alabama

Alabama Holocaust Commission

Alabama Folklife Association

Conclusion

The Alabama Historical Association, over 800 members strong, is a commendable organization. The fact that it has initiated this very effort within its ranks reflects a genuine desire to improve our organization's membership composition and its focus as we move through another 70+ years.

This report is intended to present an initial roadmap for where we can take AHA in the future. We would like to maintain Task Force One as an ongoing part of AHA and report back in the near future with additional specific actions that we recommend pursuant to both the short-term and long-term goals discussed above.

Moving AHA forward with the recommendations submitted herein will require a special new effort among *all* our members to join in and be an *active* part in creating change. Doing this the right way will also require a financial commitment on the part of our organization.

In the end, it will be a grand bargain for us. Opening up and expanding our organization to a broader, more diverse membership base will give a much-needed voice to large sections of our society with important links to our history. That will greatly benefit us all as an organization, as a state and as a people.

ADDENDUM

FEBRUARY 11, 2020

MEMO TO PRESIDENT FRAZINE TAYLOR

FROM TASK FORCE ONE, ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

GREATER DIVERSIFICATION OF AHA MEMBERSHIP

President Taylor, our task force has convened and discussed developing a plan for achieving greater diversity in our membership. We will be completing a comprehensive report for you prior to our annual meeting in Florence as you have requested.

That report will discuss details of how we define diversity and it will also outline short term and long term action goals for our organization.

Several items have developed from our meeting that we feel strongly about, are time sensitive and are items we would like to implement before our annual meeting in April. We submit them to you for presentation to the Executive Committee for immediate action. They are:

1. Immediately obtain any required approvals and implement an effort to invite a targeted group of 20 people to attend the luncheon and screening of the documentary about African American architect Wallace Rayfield at the AHA annual meeting in Florence.
2. Immediately obtain any required approvals and have AHA re-join the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) for a 3-5 year term and explore ways for AHA to have a presence at the ASALH national convention in September to be held at Montgomery.
3. Develop a promotional rack card or brochure that can serve as a calling card and also be used to promote AHA at events we create, join or sponsor.

Respectfully Submitted by,
Task Force One
Alabama Historical Association