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Washington State Jewish Historical Society and Black Heritage Society launch complementary digital tours of Seattle's Central District

Timing of tours reflects focus on the histories of two diverse communities in one landmark neighborhood

Seattle, WA (May 31, 2021): [Washington State Jewish Historical Society](#) and the [Black Heritage Society of Washington State](#) simultaneously are launching two new digital tours that focus on the significant heritage of Seattle's Central District. The Jewish historical society's tour highlights Seattle's Sephardic community, the nation's third largest community of Jews who originated from Spain. The [Black Heritage Society tour](#), in partnership with the Washington Trust for Historical Preservation, focuses on landmark locations in Seattle's preeminent Black community.

"There is significant attention right now in Seattle around the loss of spaces that reflect identity, sense of place, and history," said Stephanie Johnson-Toliver, president of the Black Heritage Society of Washington State. "There is grief associated with the loss of tangible spaces that hold our memories. What helps to repair the loss are the creative ways we find to acknowledge and remember them."

The Sephardic Jewish community fled to the Ottoman Empire after being expelled from Spain in 1492, ultimately making their way to Seattle in the early 1900s and settling in the Central

District. Lisa Kranseler, Washington State Jewish Historical Society executive director, marvels at the timing of the two tours. “The incredibly fortunate thing is that both of our historical societies created these tours independently, without knowing what the other was doing. The beauty is that each highlights the important history of this wonderful neighborhood, which played and continues to play such a key role in the history of Seattle.”

Both tours live online and can be accessed from home on a computer, or from a cell phone or tablet while driving or walking the tour routes. Both include written narratives of each stop, archival photos, and video stories from residents who grew up in the neighborhood. The Sephardic Jewish tour also includes an introductory podcast. The organization eventually plans to host in-person tours.

Interestingly, the two tours have three of the same stops, each playing a central role for the two communities – but during different time periods. The three overlapping stops are: Washington Hall, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute, and Douglass-Truth Library (formerly known as Yesler Library).

Seattle’s Sephardic Jews attended Washington Hall for religious services and the arts, including a theater troupe that performed plays in the community’s native language of Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). The Black community activated Washington Hall for music and performing arts, as well as for local labor union meetings and organizing by the Black Panthers. The Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute was built in 1915 as synagogue. Members of both communities spent countless hours studying, reading, and enjoying story times at the library, which still exists at 23rd Avenue and East Yesler Way.

“History reflects the intersections between us, our communities,” Johnson-Toliver said. “The overlaps on the tour show our connectedness and compatibility as well as the endurance of our communities. The tours are a tool for interpreting the past, making sense of it, and understanding it. History informs our decisions, opinions, and the ability to strengthen empathy for one another.”

Other stops on the Sephardic Jewish tour include the original Sephardic Bikur Holim synagogue, now Tolliver Temple, a Black church. Efforts are underway to preserve the building as a historical landmark. Settlement House (now operating as Neighborhood House), and Garfield High School, a landmark institution that continues to serve the neighborhood and is beloved by both communities, are also highlights of the tour.

Other stops on the African American Heritage Sites Tour include the Northwest African American Museum, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and Dr. James & Janie Washington Cultural Center.

“This tour not only preserves history, but brings it to life by allowing people who are alive today to literally walk in the footsteps of their ancestors and get a sense of the smells, sights, and sounds of the old Jewish and Black neighborhood,” Kranseler said. “We invite everyone to please join us in driving or walking these streets so they can learn from the past.”

Washington State Jewish Historical Society is dedicated to discovering, preserving, and disseminating the history of the Jews of Washington state and promotes interest in and knowledge of the life, history, and culture of the Jewish people and communities through publications, exhibits, displays, speakers, tours, and performance. For more information, go to www.wsjhs.org. The Seattle Sephardic Network, Sephardic Studies at the University of Washington, and Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle and many others contributed to the tour. Washington State Jewish Historical will hold a fundraiser and tour launch online on June 3. Register at www.wsjhs.org/tour/tour.html

Black Heritage Society preserves the history and art of Black people of Washington State through exhibits, events, and tours. Learn more at www.bhswa.org. The African American Heritage Sites tour is in partnership with the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation-Revisiting WA. Go to www.revisitwa.org.

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