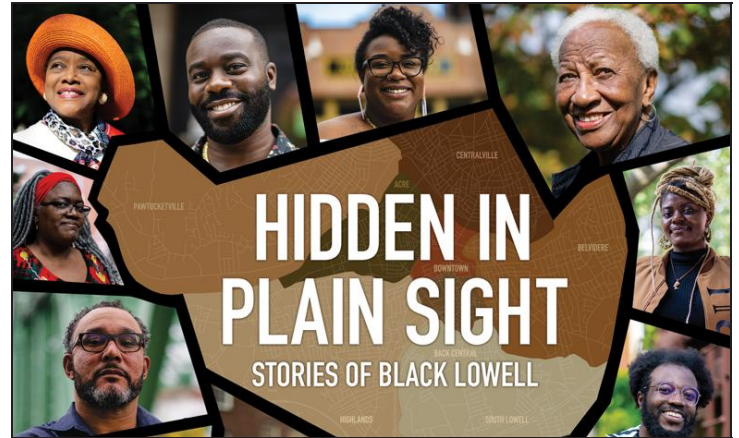


HISTORY

See Lowell's Black history

New 'Hidden' book and exhibit chronicle past contributions



By Jacob Vitali
jvitali@lowellsun.com

LOWELL » The often unknown stories and history of Lowell's Black residents are chronicled in a new book and accompanying exhibit, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Stories of Black Lowell."

To make the book and exhibit a reality, Christa Brown, founder and artistic director of the Free Soil Arts Collective, found herself becoming an interviewer.

The work took on personal significance. Included in "Hidden in Plain Sight" is Brown's story of coming to Lowell around 2012 and working at the Boott Cotton Mills as a museum educator.

"We talked about the mill girls and we talked about several immigrant communities that came here over the years. But, I didn't see myself in the courses and workshops that we would do with students," Brown said. "As a Black woman living here, I understand what it feels like to not feel represented."

For Brown, those untold stories include 34 unmarked stops in Lowell that were on the Underground Railroad.

There is also the story of Birdie Malbory, the first Black woman to run for City Council in 1979. As part of the book, Brown

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COURTESY OF ANI VONG ABOVE; COURTESY OF FREE SOIL ARTS COLLECTIVE, TOP

Free Soil Arts Collaborative Founder and Arts Director Christa Brown is seen at the opening of the free 'Hidden in Plain Sight' exhibit, which is open seven days a week from noon to 5 p.m. at the Lowell National Historical Park Visitor Center, 246 Market St. At top, the cover for the 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Stories of Black Lowell' book was designed by Jannie Touch and photographed by Henry Marte.



COURTESY KEVIN HARKINS

The 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Stories of Black Lowell' features stories of around 27 storytellers. A group of storytellers is seen recently at the exhibit at Lowell National Historical Park Visitor Center at 246 Market St.

Black

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spoke to Malbory's daughter, Valerie Malbory.

Birdie Malbory had been an advocate for social services programs and anti-poverty measures. As part of her work, she advocated for a rent control board and worked alongside Community Teamwork Inc.

When Malbory ran for City Council, her office on Merrimack Street had rocks thrown at it and was set on fire in two separate incidents.

The story has not been forgotten by Lowell's Black community, Brown said, but it is not as widely known outside of it.

"It helps to archive and it helps to kind of prove that we exist. We have this permanent, tangible thing that can't be ignored anymore. I think that's really impactful," Brown said of "Hidden in Plain Sight."

After leaving Lowell, Malbory would find a city that embraced her in Atlanta, Ga.

"She wanted to fight injustice and one point she had to go someplace else to do that to continue that work. But she continued, she still did it," Brown said.

This year, Lowell elected its first Black city councilor — Corey Robinson of Centralville. Robinson is another person whose story is told through "Hidden in Plain Sight."

Stacey Thompson, a former teacher who was elected to the School Committee this year, is another story.

Robinson got involved with the project shortly after announcing his candidacy for City Council. He had been having conversations with many in the community and consistently heard about Free Soil Arts Collective and Brown.

Becoming Lowell's first Black councilor was not a part of Robinson's campaign. He said he preferred to focus on his qualifications and how he could make a difference for the city's residents. However, he said it was an honor to be part of the project.

"I came from a different



JULIA MALAKIE / LOWELL SUN FILE

Lowell City Councilor Corey Robinson campaigns at the Robinson School before being elected.



COURTESY OF VALERIE MALBORY

Birdie Malbory was the first Black woman to run for Lowell City Council.

place than a lot of the others in the community because I became employed by the city of Lowell as one of the few minorities and then I went on to become the basically first Black union president of AFSCME local 1705 while I was employed with the city," Robinson said. "I have different experiences than a lot of others and now it kind of translated into being the first elected Black city councilor."

Brown said "Hidden in Plain Sight," is about providing a complete picture of the Black experience in Lowell.

"We have stories of Black people's experiences and the Black neighborhoods where people were displaced. But that's also juxtaposed with the stories of joy and triumph, despite that," Brown said.

Robinson said as someone born and raised in Lowell, things have

changed throughout his lifetime.

"I think people are a lot more open minded to hearing these stories and they appreciate and respect these stories. I think we need to encourage more of this stuff and provide a stage or a platform for more of this to continue," Robinson said.

To find stories, Brown said Free Soil Arts Collective worked closely with The Kindred Project. Together, they reached out to people they knew personally and through social media. Every time someone was interviewed, they asked "is there anyone else we should speak to?" The goal was to include as many as possible.

Brown hopes the book and exhibition can inspire other voices and other communities to share their history and bring it to the forefront.

Books will be on sale at the Merrimack Valley Black and Brown Voices Holiday Market at Mill No. 5 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sunday. They can also be purchased online at freesoilarts.org.

The free "Hidden in Plain Sight" exhibit is open seven days a week from noon to 5 p.m. at the Lowell National Historical Park Visitor Center, at 246 Market St. It will be open through August.

Brown said funding for the project was made possible by the Merrimack Repertory Theatre, Greater Lowell Community Foundation and the Lowell Cultural Council.