

ARTS

New exhibit showcases vital contribution of African Americans to Berkeley

The installation will feature businesses, churches, and the political and social scene from 1940-2000.

By Theresa Harrington May 13, 2021, 7:00 a.m.



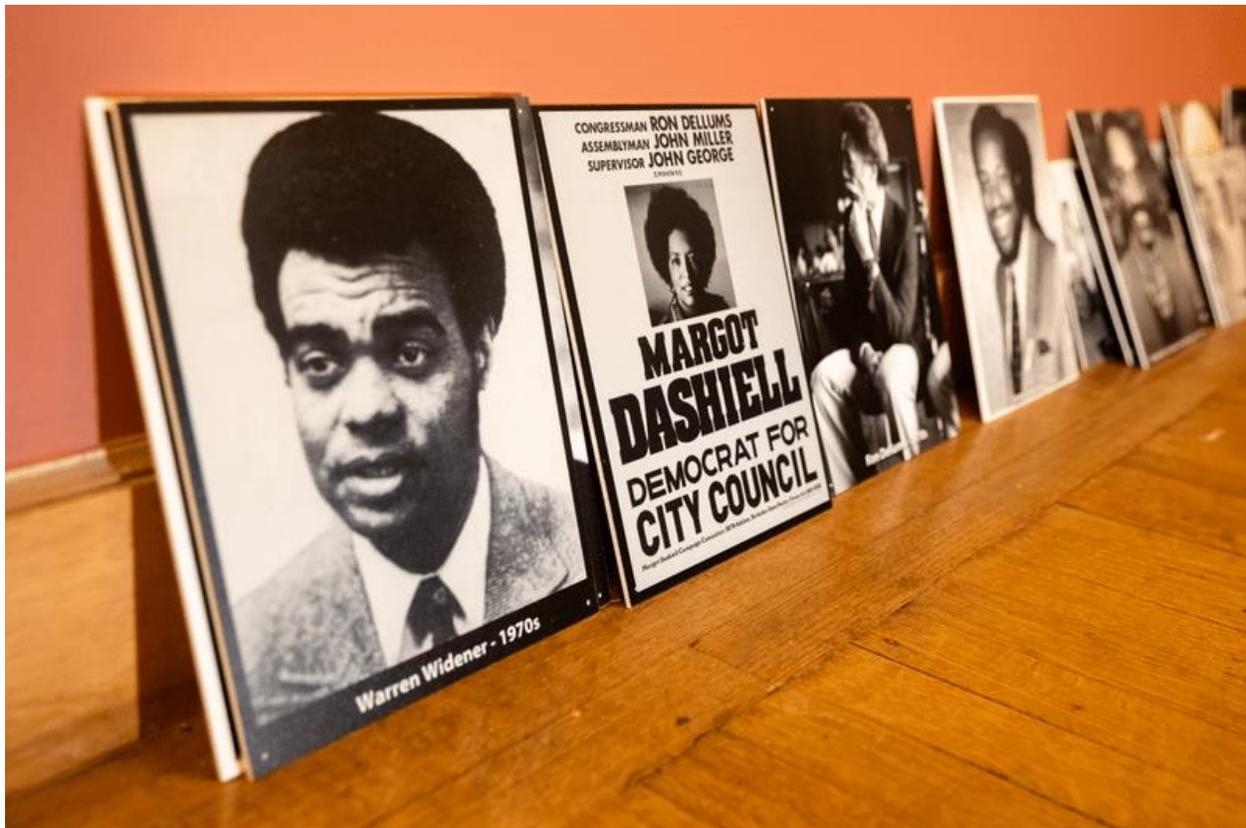
Harvey Smith and Dr. Stephanie Johnson, co-curators of the “African Americans in Berkeley’s History and Legacy” exhibit, make final preparations before the second leg of the three-part series opens Sunday, May 16, 2021. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

A new Berkeley Historical Society exhibit opening Sunday showcases the influence of African Americans in the city from 1940 to 2000, featuring

flourishing business and churches, a vibrant political and social scene, and prominent Black residents who helped shape Berkeley's reputation as a diverse destination city.

It will highlight the Rainbow Sign, an African American cultural and social center that drew influential Black artists and activists from all over the country to Berkeley in the 1970s, which was frequented by Vice President Kamala Harris and her family when she was a child. Other Black political figures who visited the center included Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress in 1968; Ron Dellums, who grew up in Oakland and was a Berkeley City Councilman before representing the region in Congress; and Huey P. Newton, who founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland in 1966.

The exhibit, "African Americans in Berkeley's History and Legacy," is the second of three parts focusing on African American history in Berkeley.



Posters of political figures such as former Berkeley Mayor Warren Widener are shown at the "African Americans in Berkeley's History and Legacy" exhibit, the second of a three-part series sponsored by the Berkeley Historical Society, which runs from May 16 to Oct. 10, 2021. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

“We started before the Black Lives Matter movement became a phenomenon, so we were sort of ahead of the curve,” said Harvey Smith, 75, a co-curator of the exhibit who wrote the book, “Berkeley and the New Deal,” which explores how public structures and parks created in the 1930s and 1940s have impacted the city. “We realized this has never been done before in Berkeley. People are familiar with political figures like Ron Dellums, but they don’t know the whole range of history and they’ve never seen it all in one place.”

The first installation, displayed in 2019, looked at housing and employment from the perspective of four Black families who lived in the city during the early 1900s. The second part, opening Sunday, will be the first in the series to be available for in-person viewing and online. It will focus on businesses, politics, education, social organizations, and religious institutions from 1940 to 2000. The third part, to open next year, will dig deeper into the arts, entertainment, literature and sports that took place in Berkeley’s Black community from 1940-2010.

Organizers are planning to supplement the exhibit with films and panel presentations, including one focused on “How Berkeley Nurtured the Political and Cultural Development of Kamala Harris,” comprised of Berkeley residents who played key roles in the vice president’s early years. Harris wrote about the Rainbow Sign in her book, “The Truths We Hold: An American Journey,” which will be on display in the exhibit.

South Berkeley including Sacramento Street, Adeline Street, Julia Street and San Pablo Park “became the heart of the Black community,” said Dr. Stephanie Johnson, 68, a longtime Berkeley resident who is co-curating the exhibit. “San Pablo Park was a focal point for gatherings.”

Berkeley’s growth during World War II included the migration of African American people from the South, who were only allowed to live and operate businesses in certain areas of the city due to redlining, restrictive “racial covenants,” and exclusionary zoning ordinances, Smith said. But in 1963, the Berkeley City Council passed an anti-segregation law and Assemblyman William Byron Rumford, a Berkeley resident who owned a pharmacy on Sacramento Street, introduced a bill that became the precursor to the Federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, which ended redlining, Smith said.

Rumford was the first Black person elected to the California Legislature from the Bay Area and his family has continued to play an important role in Berkeley and the East Bay. His grandson, Byron Rumford III, serves on the Berkeley Historical Center advisory board and helped place a bronze

sculpture of Rumford on Sacramento Street near the original pharmacy, which is now a medical center.

Sacramento Street was considered by some to be a “Harlem of the West,” with thriving Black businesses including Greer’s Jewelry and a Five and Dime store. Nearby, a beauty parlor called “Ratha’s Charm House” run by Ratha Watkins, specialized in styling Black women’s hair, Johnson said. Paul’s Shoe Repair on Shattuck Avenue is still operating, she added.



Buttons of influential political figures in Berkeley’s history are displayed at the “African Americans in Berkeley’s History and Legacy” exhibit. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

Harris, whose mother immigrated from India and father from Jamaica, was part of “a very supportive community of African American families and immigrants who looked out for each other,” Harvey said.

The Rainbow Sign’s success came at a time when the highest percentage of Berkeley’s population was Black – at nearly 24%. The city’s Black population grew from 4% in 1940 to its high in 1970, then dropped to about 14% at the end of the 20th century. The Black population is now just under 8% of the city’s total residents, according to estimates from the latest census.

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A large interactive map in the exhibit shows the locations of Black-owned businesses and offers visitors the opportunity to add businesses or look up more information about them on a computer database.

Johnson is planning to create city proclamations for some of the people who played important roles in the city’s Black history, including Mary Lee Widener, wife of the city’s first Black mayor, Warren Widener, who was elected in the 1970s and died in 2013.

Eugene Gus Newport was the city’s only other Black mayor from 1979-86. And Carole Davis Kennerly, the city’s first and only female Black vice mayor, served alongside Widener on the City Council in the 1970s,



Mimia Ousilas (from left) and Luce Collymore Abbas, curatorial assistants of the “African Americans in Berkeley’s History and Legacy” exhibit, make preparations before the May 16 opening. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

Johnson said the public has shown great interest in the exhibits and organizers are reaching out to local Black organizations including churches and hair salons to get the word out about it. She is especially excited that local interns called “curatorial assistants” are helping to research Black history in Berkeley and to design displays, postcards and posters for the exhibit this year.

Celeste Knott, a 20-year-old student at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising who was born in Berkeley, said she is fascinated by what she has found out about the city’s Black history by working on the exhibit. She hopes other young people will visit to get a better sense how the city has changed and evolved.

Knott said she enjoys looking at photos and finding out about businesses that once thrived in the city, then walking down Sacramento Street and Shattuck Avenue to see how they have changed.

“It does make me sad,” she said, noting that many businesses have closed and that the Black population has shrunk in Berkeley and neighboring Oakland due to gentrification. Now, she noted, some Black people are part of the homeless population living in city parks.

“It’s very important to understand the culture and history of Berkeley,” Knott said. “It’s important to connect what’s here now with what was here before.”

Mimia Ousilas, 15, a sophomore at Berkeley High, said she has also enjoyed researching Berkeley’s Black history as a curatorial assistant. Mimia has found that some prominent Black political figures such as Davis Kennerly do not have Wikipedia pages, so she is working to create them.

Like Knott, Mimia lamented that the presence of African Americans in Berkeley has diminished as the city’s demographics have shifted. But she said it’s valuable for young people like herself – who weren’t alive in the 1970s and 1980s – to learn about those who helped shape the culture and politics of the city and region.

“Getting into the history is really important,” she said. “And it’s important to acknowledge what’s missing nowadays.”

“African Americans in Berkeley’s History and Legacy”



The Berkeley Historical Society

1931 Center Street, Berkeley

510-848-0181

Sunday, May 16-Oct. 10 (onsite and online)

Opening event: 3-5 p.m. Sunday, May 16, 2021