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The search for Sybil Dunbar

A research request was the catalyst for a quest to discover the identity of Sybil Dunbar, Naperville's first known African American resident. Join Naper Settlement's Curator of Research Bryan Ogg as he describes the search for elusive historical information about Dunbar, the hunt for her grave in Naperville Cemetery and the meaningful collaborations along the way.

The search also led him to invite special guest Dr. Sybil J. Dunbar of Baton Rouge, La., former assistant professor of English at North Central College and a published poet, to be part of this special 90-minute presentation. After his talk, Dunbar will read from her work.

This 90-minute presentation of the History Speaks Lecture Series: Finding Sybil Dunbar will be held from 4 to 5:30 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 28 at Naper Settlement's Century Memorial Chapel, 523 S. Webster St. in Naperville. Day of event tickets are \$7 adults and \$6 students, youth ages 4-12 and Settlement-6 members. Advance tickets save \$1 by calling (630) 420-6010. Learn more at www.napersettlement.org.

Ogg received a research request in 2012 asking the question: who was the first African American in Naperville? He knew the name, Sybil Dunbar, because of a reference in a letter that was written by a Civil War soldier and sent to Naperville's Hannah Ditzler, who kept it in her diary. In the 1960s, *Naperville Sun* columnist Genevieve Towsley wrote about Hannah's diary and this letter was reproduced in a commemorative album.

"I'm a history detective, so I first went through the censuses," he said.

After 1850, the census included household income, occupation and race. While looking through the 1860 census, he found Sybil Dunbar's name. Over the next three years, Ogg worked with over a dozen genealogical historical societies in addition to combing through census records and property records.

When he finally located her grave in Naperville Cemetery, only 9 square inches were visible. Because of its fragile condition, the stone couldn't be moved, so a commemorative marker placed near the headstone tells what is currently known about Dunbar's life. She was born Sept. 5, 1799 in Braintree, Vt., and died Jan. 20, 1868. She was a caregiver, employee and friend of the Loomis, Peaslee and Butler families of Vermont and Naperville.

Ogg's research also led him to Sybil J. Dunbar, who serendipitously, had a Naperville connection. While an assistant professor of English at North Central College in the 1990s, Dunbar gave a poetry reading that was publicized in one of the local newspapers. A resident who read the article called her and asked if she was related to the Sybil Dunbar who had lived in Naperville.

"At the time, I had absolutely no idea about her," Dunbar said.

To find out more information, one of her students took her to Naper Settlement, located just a few blocks away from the college. While there, they asked about her namesake, but there was no information available at the time.

"My niece did a little research, but I put it on the side," she said.

Last October, she received a phone call from Ogg, who asked if she would come back to Naperville to join him for the History Speaks Lecture Series.

Dunbar will be reading poetry that touches on various subjects and is influenced by nostalgia and jazz. She was one of the first poets published in the initial publication of "Callalou" and her work has appeared in "Obsidian," the "National Poetry Anthology," "Essence" and many other publications. She has just completed a poem about the 19th century Sybil Dunbar that she will be reading and then present as a gift to Naper Settlement.

"I am much into the jazz idiom," she said. "It is very much a performance."

Dunbar holds a B.S. degree in English from Grambling State University, an M.Ed. from Southern University in Baton Rouge, an M.A. in English from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Kentucky. After leaving North Central she worked at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and Nova Southeastern University, based in Ft. Lauderdale.

About Naper Settlement and the Naperville Heritage Society

Naper Settlement is a nationally accredited, award-winning outdoor museum set on 12 magnificent acres in the heart of Naperville, where history comes to play and community comes to connect. The Naperville Heritage Society is the administrator of Naper Settlement. With a commitment to the community and a focus to the future, the mission of the Naperville Heritage Society is to collect, document, preserve and support the history of Naperville, Illinois, past and present. For more information, visit www.napersettlement.org or call (630) 420-6010.