

COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES:

How the Humanities Enrich Community Life

NOGALES, ARIZONA

RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



National
Humanities
Alliance

Abstract

This report showcases how humanities work is helping three diverse communities address their most pressing challenges and supports advocates around the country in making the case for the public impact of the humanities.

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The National Humanities Alliance (NHA) is a nationwide coalition of organizations advocating for the humanities on campuses, in communities, and on Capitol Hill. Founded in 1981, NHA is supported by over 250 member organizations, including: colleges, universities, libraries, museums, cultural organizations, state humanities councils, and scholarly, professional, and higher education associations. It is the only organization that brings together the U.S. humanities community as a whole.

Community Case Studies: *How the Humanities Enrich Community Life*

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Introduction

In Nogales, Arizona, local leaders are leveraging the humanities to change narratives about life on the border, build local pride, support youth, and invigorate their economically struggling downtown. In Rapid City, South Dakota, organizations working in education, social services, and the arts are leveraging historical research and cultural knowledge to overcome decades of anti-Native racism and division and support vulnerable populations. And in Charleston, South Carolina, groups are leveraging historical research, education, and preservation to acknowledge the city's role in the international slave trade, celebrate the contributions of Gullah Geechee people, and preserve their community in the face of overdevelopment and climate change.

Humanities work is crucial to these three different communities and their examples demonstrate how the humanities can help communities throughout the U.S. thrive. All communities have an interest in preserving and celebrating their histories, addressing injustice, and building bridges and understanding between different community groups. Through the examples of Nogales, Rapid City, and Charleston, this report demonstrates that humanities organizations and humanities work are integral to thriving communities.

While the chapters that follow showcase the public value of the humanities in three specific places, the report is designed to support humanities advocates and practitioners across the country in three key ways:

1. By supporting humanities advocates in communicating the impact of the humanities in their own communities with the goal of building greater public support for the humanities. By delving into humanities work in three diverse communities, the case studies showcase a number of the public impacts that humanities work can have, offering a starting point for considering the potential impact of the humanities in your own community.
2. By helping humanities scholars and practitioners see different types of organizations they might collaborate with to address their communities' challenges. The case studies explore humanities work carried out not only by traditional humanities organizations (i.e. historical societies, museums, and libraries) but also various other non-profit and social service organizations that have drawn on the humanities to achieve their goals, highlighting the wide range of potential collaborators in any given community.
3. By offering a methodology for documenting the impact of humanities work for others interested in capturing the humanities work unfolding in their own communities.

The methodology modeled here explores the contributions of a wide variety of organizations, listens carefully to community voices, and works to understand the many challenges that the humanities can address.



Methodology

This report is based on deep qualitative interview research as well as researcher observations. Between May 2021 and March 2023, NHA staff conducted 128 semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in cultural work in the case study communities: 27 interviews focused on Nogales, Arizona, and broader Santa Cruz County, including partner organizations as far away as Tucson; 38 on Rapid City, South Dakota, and the nearby Black Hills; and 63 on Charleston, South Carolina. In general, interviews lasted 60–90 minutes, though some stretched as long as three hours. Interviewees answered questions about their personal backgrounds and the history of their organizations, programs, initiatives, partners, and funders. They responded to questions about the developments shaping their regions and the roles their organizations played in responding to local challenges, as well as questions about the issues and challenges facing their organizations and sectors.

Interviewees represented traditional humanities organizations, those dedicated to preserving, documenting, celebrating, and exploring human history and culture. These included:

- Libraries
- Museums
- Historic sites
- Historical societies
- Organizations dedicated to cultural traditions and cultural knowledge
- Higher education departments and programs in fields such as history, English, philosophy, religion, anthropology, and communications

We also interviewed representatives from organizations that don't meet the description of traditional humanities organizations but leverage humanities knowledge and practices to pursue their missions. These organizations engaged in activities such as:

- Maintaining archives
- Preserving historical materials, structures, and practices
- History- or culturally-driven tours, exhibitions, documentaries, podcasts, and interpretive signs
- Collecting oral histories
- Discussion programs centered upon questions of history and the human experience
- Curricula development incorporating humanities knowledge (often for K-12)
- Historical and/or cultural research
- Cultural traditions education
- Classes on humanities subject matter

For example, in Nogales, the Border Youth Tennis Exchange (BYTE) teaches children and adults narrative storytelling and documentary editing as part of its broader educational mission and effort to document and highlight local histories and perspectives on border life. In Rapid City, the Human Relations Commission-Mniluzahan Okolakiciyapi Ambassadors (HRC-MOA) uses cultural tours, museum visits, and discussion programs to build bridges between the city's Native and non-Native populations. And in Charleston, the YWCA uses history education as part of its Racial Equity and Inclusion training program.

In addition to the interviews, NHA staff maintained ongoing communication and partnerships with representatives of organizations in each of these case study sites. We subscribed to local newspapers, featured speakers from

each city at our virtual Annual Meeting and Humanities Advocacy Day in 2022, and brought representatives from each city to the 2022 National Humanities Conference in Los Angeles. Between September 2022 and February 2023, we visited the communities, where we toured museums and historic sites and engaged in conversations with representatives of local institutions and government. Over the course of the project, we also supported many of our partners in their work by helping them develop and administer surveys as part of our broader effort to build the capacity of humanities institutions to tell their stories.

Additional Resources for Local Case-Making

Our hope is that these case studies can help you make a strong case for why your own community should want to invest in the humanities. Our accompanying briefing documents can help you make the case for public humanities work to policymakers, while research into the humanities in your region will give you an idea of how humanities work is already having an impact where you live.

We have also created a resource that offers information about how humanities work is already supported at the state and local levels in the United States: *State and Local Policies that Fund the Humanities: A Clearinghouse*. This resource provides an introduction to the mechanisms that fund humanities work, along with examples of where these mechanisms have been implemented and the kinds of work they support. Once you have distilled the impacts of humanities work in your community, these examples provide a starting point as you consider what to ask for when advocating for humanities work where you live.





Nogales, Arizona

Introduction

Situated on the U.S.-Mexico border, Nogales, Arizona, is part of the bi-national Ambos Nogales community. The city is home to the port of entry that supplies most of the U.S. and Canada with produce imported from Mexico. The vast majority of the community is bilingual and, for much of the region's history, have easily crossed the border to access cultural and economic goods and services, as well as to see friends and family. Despite its cultural significance and rich history, Nogales, Arizona, and surrounding Santa Cruz County have been drastically affected by years of border politicization—including negative media and political depictions of the region.

Where Nogales, Sonora, has robust cultural institutions and a growing population, in Arizona Nogales's historic downtown has suffered economically. The U.S. city struggles with population decline and the prevalent belief that young people have to leave the region to establish themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the border for the 18 months this study took place, exacerbated longstanding difficulties and sparked a movement to strengthen access to arts, history, and culturally grounded community events on the U.S. side of the border.

Leaders of organizations in Nogales and surrounding Santa Cruz County are leveraging the humanities to:

- Correct inaccurate depictions of the U.S.-Mexico border by connecting tourists to the region's cultural heritage
- Build local pride by celebrating the region's diverse history and providing platforms for locals—from youth to elders—to share and honor their personal stories
- Support the local school system and young people through direct service programs, partnerships with Tucson-area nonprofits, and programs that showcase local history and knowledge
- Meet environmental challenges by exploring how local landscapes, plants, and foodways are connected to the region's human history, as well as by providing opportunities for dialogue on the local environment

Organizations That Engage With the Humanities in Nogales and Santa Cruz County

Humanities organizations working in Nogales, Arizona, and surrounding Santa Cruz County include historical societies, historic sites, libraries, museums, and organizations that connect tourists to the region's history and culture. Community development and social service organizations leverage the humanities to provide youth and adult services that are both sensitive to and celebratory of local culture. Arts organizations celebrate regional history as part of a broader effort to build pride locally. Environmental organizations contextualize their work within the region's long human history and its impact on the landscape. In addition, state, regional, and national organizations act as significant partners to local organizations, providing start-up funds and sharing expertise as well as collaborating to produce programs locally.

Anza Trail Coalition	Empire Ranch Foundation	Santa Cruz Valley National Heritage Area
Atascosa Borderlands	Hilltop Gallery	Santa Fe Ranch Foundation
Barrio Stories Nogales (Borderlands Theater)	La Línea Art Studio	SEEDS
Border Community Alliance	Nogaleria	Southwest Folklife Alliance
Border Youth Tennis Exchange	Nogales Buffalo Soldiers	Startup Unidos
Borderlands Restoration Network	Nogales Community Development Corporation	Tubac Center for the Arts
Charles Mingus Festival	Nogales Public Library	Tubac Historical Society
Circles of Peace	Patagonia Area Resources Alliance	Tubac Presidio State Historic Park
Colectivo Colmena	Patagonia Museum	Tumacácori National Historical Park
Confluencercenter (University of Arizona)	Patagonia Public Library	
Consulate General of Mexico	Pimería Alta Historical Society and Museum	
Cultural Arts Committee of Nogales, Arizona	Rio Rico Historical Society	

Findings

Celebrating Border Life

Nogales is a community that consistently sees itself portrayed negatively in the national media in the context of drug trafficking, immigration, and border politics more broadly. Reflecting on their own life experiences, interviewees emphasized that learning more about their hometown’s history and culture helped them take pride in the community and imagine a better future. As a result, these cultural leaders see celebrating border life as essential work. From uncovering diverse local histories to showcasing new, rich narratives about border life these efforts provide platforms for local voices and stories.

Traditional humanities organizations dedicated to showcasing and preserving local history and culture have consistently supported efforts to forefront diverse histories. **Tumacácori National Historical Park**, located just outside of Nogales, protects the ruins of three missions that were founded during the Spanish Colonial era. With programs that focus on Native astronomical knowledge and mask making, the site emphasizes the history and culture of Native groups including the Tohono O’odham and the Yaqui. Festivals such as the two-day-long December Fiesta celebrate the region’s uniquely blended cultural traditions with a multicultural Catholic Mass, music and dance performances, and traditional craft demonstrations. Nearby, the **Tubac Presidio State Historical Park’s** robust educational programming includes tours, exhibitions, demonstrations, and field trips for local schools. In a town 23 miles from the border that tourists visit for the arts scene, the Tubac Presidio offers visitors a chance to understand the region’s history. Shannon Stone, executive director of the site, reflected, “People come through and they’re from the East Coast, you know, and they’re like, ‘Wow, I had no idea there was so much history out here.’” A short walk from the border wall in Nogales, the **Pimería Alta Historical Society** preserves local collections and hosts permanent exhibitions on regional history in its museum. It also



partners with local organizations to showcase underrepresented local history and introduce new audiences to the region's history.

In recent years, new organizations and projects have stepped up to highlight diverse histories. Donna Jackson-Houston, whose family is from Nogales, founded **Nogales Buffalo Soldiers**, a descendent group dedicated to acknowledging the segregated, African American 25th Infantry and 10th Cavalry Regiments of the U.S. Army that were based in Nogales. Working with the city's mayor and city council, the group established Nogales Buffalo Soldier Day, an annual event honoring this significant element of local history. Nogales Buffalo Soldiers also partnered with the Pimería Alta Historical Society to showcase an exhibit featuring Buffalo Soldier history at Pimería Alta's museum. Reflecting on the need for the group's work, Jackson said, "This is an American history, a component that really isn't getting a lot of notice. ... [There's] nothing like taking pride in your little small town." The city is also taking on some of this work itself, celebrating Nogales-born jazz legend Charles Mingus by hosting an annual jazz festival and dedicating a memorial to Mingus, whose father was a Buffalo Soldier.

Nogales Walks also draws attention to underexplored aspects of local history—this time through social media. An Instagram account founded by Evan Kory, Nogales Walks highlights the unique architecture and artistry of Nogales's built environment, putting contemporary pictures into dialogue with historical images taken from Kory's vintage postcard collection. Importantly, Nogales Walks showcases the town's beauty and culture, creating an alternative to images of the city that focus on the border wall. The account has reached a broad following of Nogalenses on both sides of the border as well as people who have moved away from the area. As Kory reflected, "I'm always getting messages that say how much people appreciate learning about this 100-year-old building that is insignificant unless you're from the area, probably."

A great deal of cultural work is aimed at breathing life into Nogales's economically-suffering downtown, encouraging people to spend time in the space and support local businesses while taking pride in their community's history. At its core, this work also aims to build connections between community members and increase local pride. For example, funding from the University of Arizona's Confluentcenter helped local artist and storyteller Priscilla Nefftyts develop the **Nogaleria**—a series of murals in downtown Nogales that draw attention to the city's culture, including a mural dedicated to Charles Mingus. The project has been successful in reshaping what was a desolate and intimidating alley into a space that people visit and use for photoshoots. **Barrio Stories Nogales** has played an equally significant role in bringing people together around local history and encouraging people to gather in Nogales's downtown. With funding from the Southwest Folklife Alliance, Barrio Stories Nogales supported a collaboration between the Borderlands Theater, the Santa Cruz County Superintendent's Office, and local businesses. Through filmed oral history interviews, Barrio Stories Nogales created an archive of local perspectives on Nogales's past and present—and then drew from the archive to create plays and short films that premiered during a two-day festival in June 2022. With a giant puppet play, shadow theater, film screenings, and individual performances, the festival brought oral histories to life. In an article published in *Nogales International*, the local paper, attendees who were interviewed spoke of feeling a deep sense of pride in their hometown and expressed a desire for more positive representation.

"When you hear about a legend being born where you were born, it makes you feel like 'maybe I can do something.' It's inspiring. I wish I had known more about Charles Mingus when I was a kid, and I went to school near where he was born."

—PRISCILLA NEFFTYTS, CREATOR, NOGALERIA

Highlighting Local Perspectives

Cultural organizations also provide platforms for local stories, encouraging locals to explore their own nuanced experiences. The **Border Youth Tennis Exchange (BYTE)**, for instance, grew out of founder Charlie Cutler's experience as a professional tennis player and his interest in international relations and narrative studies. The youth development organization's mission is to "support sports-based diplomacy, resilient cross-border communities, and a positive appreciation for the border region." BYTE pairs tennis lessons with academics for youth, and those who engage with the program ultimately produce short documentary films that showcase individual perspectives on border life. In 2020, the organization began branching out, offering digital storytelling classes to disadvantaged adults in the region. As Cutler frames it, the pairing of athletics with narrative grew out of his recognition of "the truthfulness of stories, and how misrepresenting stories can also have power. BYTE was always an opportunity to use tennis as a new lens to look at the border and change the narrative of the border." The short films produced by BYTE are screened on both sides of the border as a way of helping build community and sharing perspectives among groups that may have trouble crossing the border checkpoint. The narratives are also shared more broadly with donors and others interested in sports and academic programs, with the aim of changing perspectives on border life more broadly.

Other cultural organizations connect tourists to the region with local perspectives. The **Border Community Alliance (BCA)**, **Borderlandia**, and others leverage storytelling in an effort to offer a different perspective on border life to tourists to the region. Lectures, publications, and cultural tours offer visitors the chance to encounter local perspectives and explore Nogales or cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Reflecting on how tourism can help change public understandings of the borderlands, particularly for people who are not native to the region, Borderlandia co-founder Alex La Pierre reflected, "We really wanted to provide a safe opportunity for people to come see for themselves and make up their own minds about the border." BCA's programs, meanwhile, directly encourage out-of-towners to invest in the region by spotlighting the burgeoning nonprofit sector in Nogales, Sonora, as well as its rich civic and economic life. BCA's Mexico Pass-Through Program facilitates capital investment by making it possible for Americans to make tax-deductible donations to organizations in Mexico, encouraging American donors to think of themselves as—and act as—good neighbors. All of this work is aimed at changing Americans' relationship with the border—and Nogales—from one of fear and distrust to one of curiosity and care.

Supporting Youth

Interviewees consistently expressed concern that Nogales is seen as a place young people may need to leave in order to build lives and careers. And they indicated that they were motivated to provide opportunities for young people on both sides of the border through their work. Veronica Conran of **Barrio Stories**

Nogales, who grew up in Nogales, noted that "just bringing cultural awareness to a community is very empowering and can create this bond between them that makes them not want to leave, like I did, when I wanted to get out of there. There's something that comes back and says, 'I appreciate these things and I love these people.'" To foster this bond, Barrio Stories Nogales partnered with local schools and teachers to involve high school students in the theater productions that made up the bulk of programming for its 2022 festival.

"Everything else that we're doing is in addition to this idea of letting the kids tell their own stories, letting the community tell its own story, being a vehicle and a platform to promote these stories in a way that might engage communities that never hear about the border."

—CHARLIE CUTLER,
FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
BORDER YOUTH TENNIS EXCHANGE



For organizations such as the **Border Youth Tennis Exchange**, serving youth is the primary aim of their programs. Other organizations similarly leverage cultural and historical education as a way to help youth feel pride in their local contexts. For instance, **Startup Unidos**, which focuses on innovation and entrepreneurship in border communities, has proven a key partner to cultural organizations while undertaking its own humanities work. Through a partnership with the **Southwest Folklife Alliance**, Startup Unidos was able to offer ethnography and interview training to youths as part of a program focused on sustainable food systems. The youths used their new skills to learn about food waste on the border through a series of interviews. The interviews inspired them to create a company that converted landfill-bound produce into soap, which they then sold commercially, meeting a need that they learned of during the interviews. This training program, now called Waste Binn, continues to be one of Startup Unidos's flagship efforts.

Leveraging the Humanities to Meet Environmental Challenges

The changing climate and other environmental concerns are ongoing challenges for Santa Cruz County. In and around Nogales, continued modifications to the border wall and construction of new sections are disruptive to the local environment. In Patagonia (a town northeast of Nogales in Santa Cruz County), community members are concerned about the opening of a new mine and its impact on the local environment. Moreover, the natural landscape in this area, which is increasingly affected by both droughts and floods, is a crucial part of the region's heritage. The recently-established **Santa Cruz Valley National Heritage Area (SCVNHA)**, which was established by congressional approval in 2022 and stretches from the U.S./Mexico border to north of Tucson, includes both the natural environment and cultural traditions into its interpretation of the region, arguing that the "natural heritage shaped human settlement throughout the region." Agriculture and foodways play an essential part in local culture. The region's historic sites include several ranches. Tours of Tumacácori National Historical Park led by **Borderlandia** include information about how the region's plants and landscape influenced life in the historic mission. Even hiking trails can be heritage sites, as they mark the movement of historic figures

Local cultural workers articulated a commitment to engaging with these environmental concerns that may be further drawn upon in the coming years. Both the **Patagonia Library** and the **Patagonia Museum**, for instance, see themselves as having a role to play in providing space for difficult conversations about mining and perspective on the town's history of mining. The **Anza Trail Coalition**, meanwhile, showcases the historical and ecological significance of the pathway taken by Juan Bautista de Anza and his followers to establish the San Francisco Bay Colony in 1775-76.

Another project, run by media makers out of Tucson in collaboration with local groups, offers a model for how humanities work might help us preserve and engage with our landscapes even during a time of great change. The **Atascosa Borderlands** project uses visual media and storytelling to showcase the natural and human histories of the Atascosa Highlands—a remote region that borders the town of Nogales. By documenting local oral histories and digitizing historical photographs related to the region, this project is showcasing the complex relationships between the land here and its inhabitants, both historically and in the present.

"We make sure that we are always celebrating what we do in a regional sense. So at every event that we have, we have somebody from both sides of the border there, we're constantly looking to offer that multicultural perspective."

—STEPHANIE BERMUDEZ,
FOUNDER & PRINCIPLE, STARTUP UNIDOS

Unique Strengths

Local Leadership

Time and again, interviewees cited the **Santa Cruz County Superintendent's Office** as a key player in fostering collaboration and supporting humanities, arts, and cultural programs more broadly. By moving his office to Nogales's historic courthouse, located in the downtown area, Santa Cruz County Superintendent Alfredo Velasquez demonstrated a commitment to Nogales's economic development and created additional space for exhibitions and events. In the summer of 2022, students from local high schools painted a mural celebrating Nogales's history on the building as part of the Morley Mural Camp, a summer program sponsored by the office in which participants both learn art history and painting techniques.

The office's commitment to history and culture goes beyond the courthouse building. The office has spearheaded an effort to raise grant funding in support of a historic arts district downtown. The project, which has received support from the Arizona Department of Education and through federal American Rescue Plan funding, has brought a range of local nonprofits and cultural workers together, encouraging collaboration and innovation. In partnership with the **Pimería Alta Historical Society**, the office is creating an exhibition on Nogales and Santa Cruz County history at the 1904 courthouse. They are also continuing a partnership with the Borderlands Theater that aims to build on the **Barrio Stories Nogales** program and bring more history-based, collaborative theater to cultural festivals and engaging art and history programs to local schools. Additional murals are being added to the downtown **Nogaleria**, and organizations such as **La Línea Gallery** and **Borderlandia** are collaborating to create a mural and history map and a walking tour of downtown aimed at helping tourists access Nogales stories—all while providing work for local artists and cultural workers.

Effective Arts and Humanities Collaborations

The small town of Tubac, north of Nogales, is known for its fine arts community and is a driver of arts-based tourism and economic investment in the area. Nogales, too, has a growing number of non-profit art galleries, in addition to its annual music festival celebrating Charles Mingus. Crucially, arts and humanities organizations collaborate here in a joint effort to both celebrate local cultural heritage and encourage arts tourists to appreciate border culture and history. The **Tubac Center for the Arts**, in addition to displaying fine art pieces, develops exhibitions that showcase the region's history. **La Línea Gallery**, located in downtown Nogales, showcases exhibitions from the nearby **Pimería Alta Historical Society**, increasing the area's exhibition space and reaching new audiences while putting contemporary artistic expression in dialogue with the past. In 2021, **Hilltop Gallery** worked with **Barrio Stories Nogales** in an effort to celebrate the life and times of local artist and musician Sonny Peters, featuring his art and photography as well as a series of oral history interviews that played on a loop in the gallery. The exhibition sought to recognize Peters's achievements and contributions to the town while bringing the community together in a difficult time. By providing tourists and locals with opportunities to engage with local perspectives on the past and emphasizing the region's rich and diverse history, arts organizations are supporting the community's broader cultural efforts.

"Mining is part of the history of Patagonia and [we] kind of have, in a way, a privileged position to be able to sit as an umpire ... [to] help people think about historical stories."

—GERMAN QUIROGA,
PRESIDENT, PATAGONIA MUSEUM



In addition, the **Cultural Arts Committee of Nogales, Arizona**, and the **Consulate General of Mexico** work to produce street festivals on Morley Avenue (Fiestas Patrias, Fiestas de Mayo, etc.) and other arts and humanities collaborations. Though their cultural work was on hold due to the pandemic during the duration of this study, they have historically been key supporters of Nogales-area cultural programming and their work has picked up again in recent months.

Recommendations

In a rural region without major cultural donors, financial stability is a struggle for most nonprofit cultural organizations. Virtually every person we interviewed emphasized the challenge of finding adequate funding, and many noted that a great deal of funding for work on border culture in Arizona is rarely given directly to the small communities located on the actual border, relying instead on a kind of cultural trickle-down effect from the state's larger cities. As a result, Nogales-area cultural organizations tend to be small, relying on one or two staff members and a great deal of volunteer labor. Volunteers have key roles to play in advancing nonprofit work, and volunteering is well known to help build ties between community members, support civic life, and even improve physical and mental health outcomes in volunteers. Nonetheless, this steep reliance on volunteer support and small staffs increases the likelihood that staff members will suffer from overwork and burnout. Staff turnover, and the consequent loss of local expertise, makes it difficult for nonprofits to function and can be an existential threat to organizations and their work. Funders, partners, and other organizations engaged in work in Nogales and in similar communities would be wise to consider how to provide financial support, including for staff salaries, to these organizations.

Many underfunded cultural organizations rely on local networks to expand their reach and facilitate their work, making it possible to do more with their limited resources. Historically, Santa Cruz County's rural setting and dispersed population have made it difficult for the local community to build and sustain these networks. This is changing locally, as the partnerships between organizations and those led by the Santa Cruz County Superintendent's office make clear. A focus on formalizing and sustaining these cultural networks over the long term and broadening them out to the greater county population may go a long way toward supporting cultural work in the region.

Conclusion

The City of Nogales and surrounding Santa Cruz County are home to significant and compelling humanities work that draws upon the region's rich cultural heritage, traditions, and history. Cultural programs in this area play a key role in shaping narratives about border life, providing opportunities for individual self-expression, and celebrating diverse local histories. The impact of this work has the potential to be wide-ranging, as it is fostering pride in the local community, creating new opportunities, and even providing economic support to the area.

Rapid City, South Dakota

Introduction

Rapid City, South Dakota, is the largest city in western South Dakota and all of the Black Hills and acts as a hub for locals to the region and tourists who travel to the area to visit Mt. Rushmore, Deadwood, and Badlands National Park. The city is situated between the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Lakota Nation to the southeast and the Black Hills National Forest to the west. The region's history has been one of conflict and coexistence. Known in Lakota as He Sapa, the Black Hills are sacred and unceded land; they have also been home to generations of pioneers and their descendants. The region's pioneer and presidential history—including Mt. Rushmore and Rapid City's early-twentieth-century reputation as the location of the "Summer White House"—and the broader U.S. history of westward expansion has long been the primary perspective through which tourists and many locals alike have understood the region. This framing has come at the expense of people living in the area. Rapid City, with its large Indigenous population, has a long history of anti-Native repression and violence that continues into the present. Native American histories, including a rich cultural heritage, have been unacknowledged. In this region, cultural and community organizations see acknowledging and making amends for this treatment as a primary challenge to address and, for some, their ultimate reason for being.

In Rapid City and the broader Black Hills region, cultural and community organizations are leveraging the humanities to:

- Build understanding and repair the harm caused by federal, state, and local policies implemented in the past by documenting local history
- Build trust and bridges across difference by celebrating the history, culture, and current contributions of local Indigenous people
- Improve life outcomes for Indigenous people and support other vulnerable populations by centering Lakota cultural traditions in healing spaces and providing language and historical education opportunities to Indigenous young people
- Break down cultures of distrust by providing opportunities for dialogue
- Support children and families by providing educational opportunities

Organizations That Engage With the Humanities in Rapid City and the Black Hills

Rapid City and the Black Hills are home to traditional humanities organizations that include libraries, museums, and historic sites. In addition, a high portion of arts groups, including film festivals, literary organizations, and art centers take on humanities work as part of a broader mission to act as a space for dialogue and cultural education. Indigenous-led nonprofits, social services organizations, local government, and higher education programs center Lakota history and culture as part of broader efforts to promote healing, build trust and dialogue, and support the wellbeing of Native populations.



Black Hills Community Theatre	Journey Museum and Learning Center	Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project
Black Hills Film Festival		
Black Hills Pow Wow Association	Literacy Council of the Black Hills	Rapid City Public Library
Black Hills State University	makeSPACE	Remember the Children Monument
Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies	Matthews Opera House	
	Minnilusa Historical Association	Rural America Initiatives
Crazy Horse Memorial	Human Relations Commission-Mniluzahan Okolakiciyapi	South Dakota School of Mines & Technology
Custer County Public Library	Ambassadors (HRC-MOA)	
Dahl Arts Center		Sanford Underground Research Facility (SURF)
DC Booth Fish Hatchery	Native American Nursing Education Center at South Dakota State University	United Way of the Black Hills
Deadwood Historic Preservation		West River History Conference
Deadwood History	Native POP: People of the Plains	Western Heritage Center
Flutter Productions	NDN Collective	
He Sapa Otipi	Oaye Luta Okolakiciye	Woyatan Lutheran Church
First People's Fund	Racing Magpie	
I. Am. Legacy	Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission	

Findings

Documenting Local History

Everyone we interviewed, including university employees, library and museum leaders, and representatives of Indigenous-led nonprofits, cited the region's history of anti-Native racism and its present-day ramifications as the primary challenge facing Rapid City and the Black Hills. In discussions of this topic, interviewees spoke about the challenges created by decades of racist federal, state, and local policies, and the present-day marginalization of Indigenous people, who are not adequately represented in local governments and who face active racist discrimination. They emphasized that the history of Rapid City's government-run Indian boarding school, which operated from 1898 to 1933, and other policies have had lasting effects throughout the region, producing distrust, poverty, segregation, and violence and affecting the economy and business community, harming people both individually and collectively.

While local organizations are using a range of strategies to address these and other challenges, many leaders understand that confronting and acknowledging the region's difficult history is key to building a better future. Local nonprofits are undertaking the research necessary to fully comprehend the region's history of anti-Native racism, and they are working to educate the broader public about this history to build understanding and repair harm. The **Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project**, a leader in this work, began as an effort by Lakota Elders and other volunteers to find the graves of missing Indigenous children who attended the school through archival research and documenting oral histories. For years, volunteers have offered educational workshops and talks to community groups and other regional organizations in an effort to help people

understand that the boarding school not only harmed Indigenous families and their descendants, but also had impacts on the broader community. Profits from the sale of the boarding school's land, which were intended to go to Indigenous people, instead enriched the city, the national guard, and even local churches, contributing to both poverty and segregation in the city. Annual memorial walks bring together Elders, Indigenous tribes, local community members, and boarding school survivors and families, drawing attention to these impacts while keeping the memories of the children alive in the city. The effort has grown into a multi-organization research and advocacy project aimed at understanding Rapid City's history of segregation, honoring the lives lost at the boarding school through the **Remember the Children Monument**, and paving a way forward for the city's Indigenous population through **He Sapa Otipi's** effort to create the Native American Community Center.

Other organizations are documenting local Indigenous histories more broadly, aiming to both preserve more recent history and provide opportunities for students to build new skill sets. In Spearfish, the **Center for American Indian Studies at Black Hills State University** administers a major and minor in American Indian studies, advocates for the well-being of Indigenous students, fosters deeper understanding of Indigenous American people, and provides a space for Indigenous students on campus. In addition to offering mentorship and opportunities to learn about American Indian history, traditions, and language, the center has recently taken on a project to document the oral histories of Elders from the Black Hills region. This program trains students in oral history methodologies, including the digital skills needed to record, transcribe, and preserve oral history interviews. Through the project, the Center for American Indian Studies is helping students deepen their ties to the local community while playing a significant role in preserving American Indian culture and history.

"We called it Pandora's Box. We were looking for the graves [of Indigenous children] and we found the graves, but we found all this other stuff, and I think that for me, to see how that land was divvied up and to see how it contributed to segregation and dislocation. ... And we still see that today."

—AMY SAZUE, DIRECTOR,
REMEMBER THE CHILDREN MONUMENT

Celebrating Indigenous History and Culture

Cultural leaders throughout Rapid City and the Black Hills emphasize that the region's future is inextricably bound up with its ability to recognize and repair past injustices, create space for dialogue, and build trust—and that for any of this to happen, regional entities must celebrate local, Indigenous culture. To these ends, organizations throughout the region are providing opportunities for people to engage with Indigenous cultural heritage. Efforts such as the **Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission's** recent pivot to include preserving local Indigenous history in its work and the **Rapid City Public Library's** programs on Lakota history—including the placement of Lakota words throughout the library—help communicate the importance of Native People to the larger community as well as educate non-Natives. Library director Terri Davis reflected, "We can never do enough. ... Since we put [the Lakota words] on the stairs, I have heard little kids teach their grandparents or their parents what the words are, or I've heard it the other way, with the grandparents teaching the words to the little kids."

Celebrations of local Indigenous culture range from large annual celebrations such as those hosted by the **Black Hills Pow Wow Association** to lectures and educational programs hosted by community organizations.



Racing Magpie, an arts-oriented nonprofit, runs an annual Winter Camp program that provides a platform for Lakota knowledge and culture bearers to share their expertise. Past programs have featured presentations of Lakota storytellers and artists, as well as writing workshops, such as a poetry workshop with Tilda Long Soldier St. Pierre and National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry winner Layli Long Soldier. It also included a series on Native education that featured a panel led by Lakota youth.

For some Indigenous people in the Rapid City area, artistic production is a mode of intergenerational cultural transmission that is crucial to maintaining tribal communities just as it is also a form of individual expression and source of economic opportunity. A number of national and local organizations support Indigenous artists in the region in order to foster these community and individual goals. The **First Peoples Fund**, which is based in Rapid City, supports Indigenous artists throughout the United States through a series of awards, grant programs, and leadership training opportunities aimed at “lift[ing] up and honor[ing] what we now call culture bearers of tribal communities: the traditional artists,” according to Lori Pourier, past president of the organization. Local artists have been recipients of these awards. In addition, the First People’s Fund offers programs on the Pine Ridge Reservation, located southeast of Rapid City. These include Rolling Rez Arts, a mobile art space, and Dances with Words, a program for Lakota youth that offers opportunities for development and self expression through poetry and spoken word programs. **Native POP: People of the Plains**, a locally oriented Indigenous-led organization, provides Lakota artists the opportunity to celebrate and directly sell their work without a middleman—gallery fees can take as much as 50 percent of the sale of a work. And Racing Magpie supports Indigenous artists through curated exhibitions and gallery space. Its podcast *The Heart of Art* features conversations with Indigenous artists.

“[Native POP] is Indigenous led, it's Indigenous run. ... We don't have enough Indigenous-led entities, where the economic impact is direct for our people. ... [The artists] are coming here, learning how to engage with strangers and building those relationships.”

—LAFAWN JANIS,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIVE POP

Cultural Education, Improving Life Outcomes, and Supporting Vulnerable Populations

A significant portion of the cultural work taking place in Rapid City and the Black Hills is centered on helping Indigenous people reclaim their history and cultural traditions with the goal of improving life outcomes for Indigenous people. Erik Bringswhite’s work with **I. Am. Legacy** is rooted in the belief that cultural resources can help Indigenous people recover from harm caused by decades of federal and local policies: “My people ... we have eons and eons of wellness and health and healing that we can tap into when addressing these contemporary issues. [But] it was illegal to be us until 1978.” I. Am. Legacy (or Institute of Indigenous America’s Legacy) supports Native American people who are dealing with trauma and hardship through cultural and spiritual learning programs. Whether they are harvesting mint, participating in a buffalo kill, learning astronomical knowledge at a sacred site, or engaging in a discussion group, participants in I. Am. Legacy’s programs draw upon Lakota traditions as a way of healing from addiction, homelessness, imprisonment, and other traumas, as well as building community. **Oaye Luta Okolakiciye** serves as a partner to the city in an alternative-sentencing program that similarly supports youth, adults, and families in preventing and recovering

from addiction and substance abuse. The nonprofit's programs are grounded in Lakota values of "Waunsila (compassion), Wawahwala (humility), Woksape (wisdom), Wacantognaka (generosity), Wowacin Tanka (fortitude), Wo'ohitika (bravery), and Wa'ohola (respect and honor)." The organization supports healing through culturally-grounded work, including language instruction and spiritual instruction. A year-long mentorship program for youth offers community service opportunities that include instruction in Lakota lifeways, concluding with a coming-of-age ceremony. Reflecting on the program, founder Gene Tyon observed that their participants "get a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, and a lot of education—we even provided language instruction."

Local educators use these strategies to nurture young Indigenous people, providing them with essential opportunities for cultural learning and expression. At **Black Hills State University's American Indian Studies Center**, Urla Marcus and Rosie Sprague provide "a safe space for our students to come so that they do feel safe, ... so that they can learn and be themselves and be proud of who they are; not to hide, and not to try to be something that they're not, but to really use their culture, and to be successful." The **Native American Nursing Education Center (NANEC)** at South Dakota State University's Rapid City campus similarly provides space for Indigenous students to learn—but also to just *be* among Indigenous people. Students are mentored by Elders who also have experience in healthcare professions. In addition, the program offers an annual Sacred Heart ceremony for incoming nursing students, at which they receive a white coat and stethoscope; Yuo' nihap, or honoring ceremony, for graduating students; and a monthly Wohanpi na Wounspe, or Soup and Learn, program that offers opportunities to learn about Lakota culture and values from Lakota people, among other programs. While programs are primarily aimed at supporting nursing students, the Wohanpi na Wounspe program is open to the public and is regularly attended by police officers, healthcare professionals, and others who want to better understand Lakota values and traditions. **The Indian University of North America at Crazy Horse Memorial**, founded in 1978 by Chief Henry Standing Bear, similarly promotes Indigenous student success through financial assistance; a summer bridge program that teaches academic skill sets; and an annual, semester-long experiential education program that is grounded in Native American philosophy and culture. And **Rural America Initiatives (RAI)**, which was founded in 1986, brings cultural education opportunities to younger teens and children in the Rapid City area through its Ateyapi program. Named for the Lakota word for fatherhood, this mentorship program provides after-school activities, field trips, and opportunities for community outreach

"I hear stories all the time from Elders in the community. Here at Monument Health in Rapid City, one in every four patients is Native American. ... There's been a lot of, unfortunately, oh, not that great of health care. A lot of racism, institutional racism. It's pretty bad. But that's what we're trying to address. And once they see a Native nursing student, the Native nurse comes in, they automatically feel comfortable. ... And it's, it's being a good relative. And that's what we promote our students to do too, automatically. We empower them to be leaders in the healthcare facilities that they serve, because they truly are advocates for Indigenous patients."

—VALERIAH BIG EAGLE, DIVERSITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR, NATIVE AMERICAN NURSING EDUCATION CENTER



to 4th-12th graders in the Rapid City school system. Crucially, these programs are rooted in Lakota language, values, culture, and traditions, with a curriculum based on work by renowned Lakota historian Joseph Marshall III, who also trains RAI staff. Reflecting on the motivation for these programs, RAI director Bruce Long Fox stated, “As far as education goes, it’s not as important to be successful as it is to be happy. And regaining, relearning the culture is part of that happiness.”

Building Space for Community Dialogue

In an effort to break down a culture of distrust and build bridges across differences, organizations throughout the region are creating space for dialogue. These opportunities often bring together efforts to understand the region’s untold stories with efforts to illuminate contemporary voices and perspectives. The **Human Relations Commission–Mniluzahan Okolakiciyapi Ambassadors (HRC-MOA)** is a public-private partnership between the city government’s Human Relations Commission and local nonprofit Mniluzahan Okolakiciyapi Ambassadors that directly builds community awareness of cultural diversity, educates the community about Rapid City’s history, and provides spaces for open discussion about difficult issues. The organization hosts quarterly educational forums on timely issues such as school board elections and racially motivated incidents. It also holds ongoing programs aimed at cultivating a stronger understanding of Indigenous history through conversations with Lakota Elders and cultural leaders and visits to significant sites—all of their programs include time for reflection and conversation.

A range of cultural organizations offer opportunities for the general public to hear from local leaders and engage in conversations about a variety of concerns. The **West River History Conference**, which takes place in Lead, provides a space for history enthusiasts, both amateur and professional, to gather, share their research, and create a community. In the words of Laura Neubert, executive director of the conference, the organization aims to “educate our community, allow people to hear different voices about and impressions of historic happenings through civil conversation.” In Deadwood, the **South Dakota Festival of Books** offers similar opportunities for literature enthusiasts. Both of these events include and elevate local Indigenous voices and expertise. Similarly, the **Black Hills Film Festival** offers South Dakota filmmakers a place to show their work, providing special attention to films featuring Indigenous perspectives and by Indigenous filmmakers. The festival also includes a robust discussion series that brings together the local community. The **Journey Museum and Learning Center** hosts regular lectures and discussion programs and partners with other local groups that engage local history and culture, helping bring broader audiences to their programs. For example, in 2021, the Journey presented *Reflections on the Massacre at Wounded Knee: Three Women, Three Cultures, Three Stories*, a filmed, one-hour play that was followed by a moderated discussion in partnership with the South Dakota Humanities Council and Dakota Daughters. In 2022, the museum partnered with the city to commemorate the 50th

“We got on the bus with other Indigenous leaders in our community and we went around the Black Hills in South Dakota. We learned about the Native American history. We sat with different cultures, different backgrounds, and we learned together and collaborated in this way. That really went a long way for us to develop the relationships that are needed to make change in our community, so that we can support one another.”

—WHITNEY A. RENCOUNTRE II,
CEO, CRAZY HORSE MEMORIAL FOUNDATION
AND FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE HUMAN
RELATIONS COMMISSION–MNILUZAHAN
OKOLAKICIYAPI AMBASSADORS

anniversary of the 1972 Black Hills Flood with a slate of public engagement opportunities including performances and discussions.

Many organizations leverage discussion programs to forefront and bring the community together around Indigenous perspectives. Others organize discussion programs to provoke reflection on different issues. The **Black Hills Community Theatre** produces an annual play reading and discussion series to provide an inclusive space for discussing contemporary issues—each play reading is followed by a discussion led by a local humanities scholar. At least one play each year directly engages the LGBTQ+ community. Merlyn Sell, who runs the program, reflected that “there were people in the audience that came because they wanted to discuss issues surrounding hate crimes and the ability to be themselves and feel safe. ... When we see things from a distance on stage, we look at them with a little less prejudice. It gives people a safe way to explore different people, stories, and ideas.” Meanwhile, **Flutter Productions**, an all-ability dance theater company in Rapid City, offers facilitated discussion programs that enrich its efforts to encourage community-building among people of all abilities and strengthen broader perceptions of people with disabilities.

Literacy and Early Childhood Education

Many interviewees noted a lack of public funding for schools and for social services more broadly. Tight school system and state budgets have resulted in a lack of opportunity for art or music instruction and few opportunities for early childhood education and extracurricular opportunities. The **United Way Black Hills’** 2019 Community Needs Assessment report identified the region’s top needs as mental health and substance abuse support, childcare and early education services, affordable housing, food security, economic opportunities, and child abuse and domestic violence support services. For Jamie Toennies, the United Way Black Hills’ executive director, the lack of state funding for social services that meet community needs has “forced the philanthropy community to step up and support [it] at a higher level.”

Community members and organizations in Rapid City and the Black Hills are filling the gaps left by budget shortfalls. Matthew Whitehead, a faculty member at the **South Dakota School of Mines and Technology**, volunteers at his children’s school to provide arts instruction. The United Way Black Hills’ work in early literacy encompasses grants to organizations as well as public-private partnerships that help supplement public school budgets and capacity. One of the initiative’s region-wide programs is Young Readers One Book, a collaboration with local school districts and the **South Dakota Humanities Council**.

Students across the district are given a book to read over the summer, along with supplemental materials for parents and teachers. Then, during the fall, the students are given the opportunity to meet the book’s author at the Humanities Council’s annual Festival of Books in person or via livestream. In addition to its museums and historic houses, **Deadwood History** provides programs for children outside of school hours. “There’s just not a lot of opportunity for children [in Deadwood] beyond school,” said executive director Carolyn Weber. “We just try to be that place where kids can go.” The organization serves not only children in Deadwood but those within a 50-mile radius; the region’s extremely rural character means that its resources have to stretch further than they would in a more urban setting. The **Rapid City Public Library**, a vital local institution, hosts storytimes, poetry slams, and Lunch ‘n’ Learns that engage readers of all ages. In the Black Hills, **Custer County Public Library** hosts a 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten program to encourage children to become

“If we're going to survive as a people, we have to start teaching those children. And the place to start is zero to three.”

—BRUCE LONG FOX,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
RURAL AMERICA INITIATIVES



familiar and comfortable with the library. And of course, **Rural America Initiatives'** programs support scholastic achievement in the students it serves as part of its broader mission. Its Headstart program prepares children to enter kindergarten, while its mentorship program supports high schoolers.

Unique Strengths

Local Leadership

Community organizations in Rapid City and the Black Hills are leveraging the humanities to address challenges ranging from a long-term climate of anti-Native racism to a lack of funding for social services and early childhood education. In virtually every area, these organizations benefit tremendously from local leaders who are committed to improving the lives of people in their community, accurately remembering the past, and celebrating Indigenous culture. The bulk of this work is being taken on by members of the local Indigenous community—which is primarily Lakota, including Beverly Warne (NANEC and He Sapa Otipi), Gene Tyon (Oaye Luta Okolakiciye and He Sapa Otipi), Kathy Labonte (NANEC and Remembering the Children), Bruce Long Fox (Rural America Initiatives and HRC-MOA), Amy Sazue (Remember the Children and HRC-MOA), Valeria Big Eagle (He Sapa Otipi), Rosie Sprague (Black Hills State University), Urla Marcus (Black Hills State University), Whitney A. Rencountre II (Crazy Horse Memorial Association), LaFawn Janis (HRC-MOA and Native POP), and many others. As this list alone illustrates, these community members take on multiple roles, working formally and informally with numerous organizations and consulting with still others. Their labor across paid and volunteer positions has created a strong regional network that both facilitates the work of an understaffed and underfunded field and creates continuity in mission and work between organizations and movements.

Recommendations

Many, many people in Rapid City and the Black Hills recognize that the region's legacy of racism needs to be addressed. Cultural workers strive to educate the local community and tourists alike about the active harm done to Indigenous communities in this region, and to celebrate Lakota history and culture. Local officials from the mayor to the police chief support initiatives promoting cultural and historical education and are working to build trust with Indigenous communities. Most acknowledge that this is hard, imperfect, and ongoing work.

Leaders throughout Rapid City and the Black Hills emphasize that the region's future is inextricably bound up with its ability to recognize and repair past injustices, create space for dialogue, build trust, and celebrate local Indigenous culture. But to do this work, these leaders need more than a broad appreciation that this work is necessary—they need broad participation in the work. As LaFawn Janis points out “[O]ne thing that is hard is getting non-Natives to participate. You have the select group who is aware and open and loves our culture and wants to know that history and wants to be immersed. But then you’ve got the 70 other percent. And I’m like, I can’t have these people say that they want change in this community, and then not show up! And it goes along with our own people too. Like, show up!”

Humanities organizations are rarely wealthy organizations and this is a region with few major donors and where educational and social services are underfunded. Organizations need ongoing financial resources to sustain their important efforts to effect change on behalf of the entire community. As previously noted, much of this labor is done by a concentrated group of community members, often in a volunteer capacity. Ideally, financial

support would help compensate these community members for their work. Grantors should consider both the financial and volunteer resources required to accomplish major projects and adjust budgets accordingly, recognizing that appropriately compensating victims of racism and harmful policies for their labor to improve these systems is itself an important step in addressing these issues.

Finally, this region is profoundly impacted by a tourism industry that affects how the history of the Black Hills is both told and experienced. The stories that are often told to visitors looking for an experience of the “Wild West” are frequently distorted and incomplete. As demonstrated here, there are many ongoing efforts to help locals reintegrate Indigenous history and culture into their frame of reference. What would it look like to more thoroughly address these questions with tourists? Of equal importance, are there ways this industry can be moved to support ongoing efforts to address issues caused by these narratives, both in the past and in the present?

Conclusion

In Rapid City and the broader Black Hills region, the cultural sector plays a key role in shaping the community and working toward a better future for everyone who lives there. Efforts to document and share unrecognized local histories and celebrate Indigenous culture offer a model for how other communities might also reshape their historical narratives. What is more, efforts by public-private partnerships and nonprofit organizations to promote dialogue and leverage cultural traditions in support of vulnerable populations demonstrate that these interventions can shape communities for the better and go some way toward repairing the harm caused by past federal, state, and local policies. Building bridges takes time and persistent effort, and the work taking place in the Rapid City area demonstrates that it is possible to build consensus through education and cultural recognition.





Charleston, South Carolina

Introduction

Charleston's reputation for meticulous historic preservation has brought wealth to the city and established it as an international tourist destination and a force in the U.S. tourism industry. But while the tourism industry has capitalized upon a white-washed "moonlight and magnolias" depiction of the city, individual people, cultural institutions, and the City of Charleston itself are interrogating the city's past and promoting a more historically accurate and inclusive narrative that acknowledges the city's role in the transatlantic slave trade. Around 40 percent of enslaved Africans entered the U.S. through the city's port. Enslaved Africans leveraged their agricultural knowledge and skilled craftsmanship to create the rice plantations that still shape the region's landscape. The cultural traditions of the Gullah Geechee people who continue to populate the area have fundamentally shaped and enriched both the region and the nation more broadly. As Charleston-area organizations acknowledge and highlight these shaping forces, they are also finding even more ways to leverage humanities skillsets and knowledge to strengthen their institutions and communities.

Charleston-area leaders are leveraging the humanities to:

- Build common ground around the region's past by acknowledging the city's history within the international slave trade and celebrating the contributions of the region's African American people
- Protect the rich local culture by preserving the histories of the Gullah Geechee people and other minoritized communities
- Build a stronger, more resilient Charleston by leveraging the tools of historic preservation to protect communities
- Strengthen the city's international presence through research and communication that illuminate its historical ties
- Promote education and lifelong learning by providing opportunities to learn about history, literature, and culture to youth and adults

Charleston-Area Organizations Engaging With the Humanities

Charleston-area humanities organizations include museums, libraries, historical societies, historic sites, and a high density of organizations focused on historic preservation. In addition, higher education departments play a role in documenting the city's history and promoting its stories. Civic groups and community development organizations document and celebrate local histories and leverage historic preservation to keep communities and neighborhoods intact in the face of development and environmental challenges. Literary arts organizations provide opportunities for dialogue around works of literature. And social service organizations provide history education to help youth and adults alike understand regional history and its impact on life in the city today.

African American Settlement Community Historic Commission	Charleston County Public Library Charleston Friends of the Library	Lowcountry Alliance for Model Communities
American College of the Building Arts	Charleston Horticultural Society	Lowcountry Digital Library
Ancestors Fingermarks Project	Charleston Library Society	Lowcountry Land Trust
Annual Sweetgrass Festival	Charleston Literary Festival	Magnolia Plantation and Gardens
Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture	Charleston Lowcountry & Atlantic World at College of Charleston	McLeod Plantation Historic Site
Barbados and the Carolinas Legacy Foundation	Charleston Museum	Medical University of South Carolina Office of Humanities
Black Ink Charleston African American Book Festival	Charleston Promise Neighborhoods	Middleton Place
Blue Bicycle Books	Charleston Redevelopment Corporation	Preservation Society of Charleston
Boone Hall	Charleston Visitors Bureau	South Carolina LGBTQ Archive at College of Charleston
Buxton Books & Tour Charleston	The Citadel Oral History Project	Seashore Farmers Lodge
BVL Historic Preservation Research	Clemente Course at Trident Technical College	Slave Dwelling Project
Caw Caw Interpretive Center	Clemson History Preservation Program	South Carolina Battleground Trust
Center for Heirs Property Preservation	College of Charleston Oral History Program	South Carolina Historical Society
Center for the Study of Slavery in Charleston (College of Charleston)	Daniel Island Historical Society	Stories of Black Charleston
Charles Pickney National Historic Site	Drayton Hall	The Progressive Club
Charles Towne Landing Historic Site	Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Park	Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Center (The Citadel)
Charleston Area Branch of ASALH (Association for the Study of African American Life and History)	Gibbes Museum of Art Historic Charleston Foundation	Waring Historical Library (MUSC)



Findings

Confronting the Past

Among the most significant work taking place in Charleston is the effort to understand and acknowledge the reality of the international slave trade and its ongoing impact on the city and community. In 2020, Charleston Mayor John Tecklenburg and the City Council established a **Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Reconciliation** that in 2021 called for the city to “increase public awareness and public representation of the histories and cultures of local BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color) individuals and communities” as one in a range of recommendations aimed at making the city more equitable. After decades of effort, the **International African American Museum** opened its doors on Gadsden’s Wharf in the summer of 2023. Charleston’s efforts to acknowledge a more diverse and complex history have received international attention. Meanwhile, a range of individuals and other organizations have been undertaking complementary work, bringing tourists and community members together around the more difficult parts of Charleston’s history. By documenting the fingerprints of enslaved children that are preserved in the city’s brickwork and offering tours and lectures on the history of enslavement, public historians in the city are providing opportunities for tourists and locals alike to deepen their understanding of the complex past. The **YWCA of Greater Charleston** leads a Racial Equity & Inclusion training program that centers local history and culture. And the **College of Charleston’s Center for the Study of Slavery** offers resources for K-12 educators, hosts a social justice working group, promotes research on the history of enslavement, and works to understand the connections between the College of Charleston and the institution of slavery.

The Slave Dwelling Project, a national effort to illuminate and understand the legacy of enslavement in the U.S., was created by Charleston-area resident Joseph McGill and has its home base in the region. The organization, which has been profiled by media outlets such as *Smithsonian Magazine* and *NBC News*, grew from McGill’s individual commitment to sleep in slave dwellings in an effort to understand the lives of the enslaved. Today, McGill engages with people throughout the U.S. around the history of enslavement and with Herb Frazier has recently published the book *Sleeping with the Ancestors: How I Followed the Footprints of Slavery*. With partners such as **Magnolia Plantation**—where McGill worked as a docent—and other historic sites in the U.S., the organization offers opportunities for the public to sleep in slave cabins and works to preserve these historic structures. By hosting conferences with partners such as **McLeod Plantation Historic Site** and the **College of Charleston’s Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World Program**, the Slave Dwelling Project brings together an international community devoted to understanding the history of enslavement and illuminating the lives of enslaved people.

It is significant that organizations that have thrived in the past by presenting an idealized view of the Antebellum South are changing the way they interpret local history and engaging with the descendants of enslaved people, many of whom have deep roots in the region. “From Slavery to Freedom” is now the central tour offered by Magnolia Plantation. Nearby **Middleton Place** is engaging with both White and African American descendant communities, even bringing both communities together for reunion weekends. A recent grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities is helping Middleton Place better illuminate the lives and deep expertise of people who were enslaved on the plantation and nearby. And in central Charleston, the **Historic Charleston Foundation** is using its Kitchen House Project at the Nathaniel Russel House to shed light on the lives of urban enslaved people while also preserving the spaces they lived and worked in.

Among these and other historic sites and museums that aim to deepen their interpretation, McLeod Plantation Historic Site stands out as the only one to offer its interpretation solely from the lives of African Americans who

have lived on the site, ranging from enslaved people to soldiers in the Massachusetts 55th Regiment who lived there during the Civil War. Named an International Site of Conscience in 2019, McLeod welcomes visitors from around the world who visit the site to encounter an unvarnished perspective on its history and to better understand how we all might address the difficult histories enmeshed in our respective communities. McLeod offers exhibitions and guided tours of the building and grounds—many of the tour guides are Gullah Geechee people. Importantly, the site aims to be a gathering space for descendant communities that live nearby. McLeod regularly offers discussion and poetry programs that highlight African American voices and experiences. The site is currently working with descendant communities to properly memorialize a burial site that lies across the street from the main property, including Native American tribes whose ancestors are buried on the site.

Illuminating Rich Community Legacies

In Charleston, efforts to understand the region’s difficult history are complemented by efforts to preserve and illuminate its rich community legacies, particularly the legacies of marginalized groups whose histories and cultures have historically been overlooked. These efforts take a range of forms. The **Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor**, which was based in Charleston until 2022, promotes Gullah Geechee heritage on the Atlantic coast from North Carolina to Florida. As a National Heritage Area, the corridor acts as a facilitator and a convener, highlighting and supporting the work of individual organizations and communities throughout its four-state service area. Other efforts are more localized. The **Daniel Island Historical**

Society, for instance, developed historical markers that bring attention to important sites on the island and offers educational programs that illuminate local history. **The Citadel’s Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Center**, meanwhile, showcases the diverse histories that have contributed to the 190-year-old military college while also offering CitListens programs that aim to build community around open conversation.

While much of Charleston-area organizations’ work reckons with the legacy of the Antebellum period, many organizations are dedicated to preserving the broader legacy of the region’s African American communities. **The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture** grew out of the historic Avery Normal Institute, a private school for African Americans established in 1865, and is located at the **College of Charleston**. The center operates “as a cultural center for Black experiences and Black lives here in Charleston,” according to executive director Tamara Butler. Avery hosts exhibitions that forefront African American experiences, ranging from historical exhibitions drawn from its collections to exhibitions of contemporary artwork. Through internships and programs for K-12 teachers, the Avery Research Center continues to advance the original mission of the Avery Normal Institute. Partnerships with institutions such as the **Medical University of South Carolina**, **McLeod Plantation Historic Site**, and **Explore Charleston** help introduce new audiences to the Center and deepen its work, while regular Avery family reunions foster community among the institute’s alumni, many of whom became leaders locally and in the national Civil Rights Movement, and their descendants.

“I want [the descendant community] to feel that this is their home. ... I want them to feel like they can reclaim the space and I hope that we will continue to uplift the descendants, include them in conversations and narratives, and model how to deal with this sensitive place’s legacy.”

—TOBY SMITH,
CULTURAL HISTORY INTERPRETATION
COORDINATOR, MCLEOD PLANTATION
HISTORIC SITE



The **Seashore Farmers Lodge** on nearby Sol Legare Island illuminates the history of the Sol Legare Seashore Farmers' Lodge No. 767, a fraternal order created in the early twentieth century, and the broader Gullah Geechee community. The recently restored lodge acts as a museum, cultural center, and testament to the community's resilience. Ernest Parks, a fourth-generation lodge member who led efforts to preserve the lodge and now curates exhibits within it, reflected on the significance of these efforts: "I do it for the love of our people's culture, the family calling, ... our past, our forefathers, ... so we could tell people the story of how the lodge was a part of the culture, part of the history of a people who have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, so to speak." With funding from the **Donnelly Foundation** and in partnership with **Clemson University's Historic Preservation Program**, which is based in Charleston, the lodge is offering preservation education opportunities to local community members. The Johns Island **Progressive Club**, founded in 1948 and dedicated to education and voter rights, is similarly working to restore its club building as a way to preserve and continue its significant Civil Rights legacy.

And throughout the Charleston area, organizations are preserving and making the histories of marginalized communities accessible. Working with the Progressive Club, the **Historic Charleston Foundation** spearheaded an initiative to document oral histories on Johns Island. Called *Tangled Roots*, the series of documentary films that resulted from this project are available for free online and they are being used in local school systems. Other organizations, including the **Charleston County Government**, the **Heritage Community Development Corporation**, and the **Center for Heirs Property Preservation**, have also created initiatives to document local African American histories. Meanwhile, **The Citadel's Charleston Oral History Program** documents the history of Charleston's growing Latinx community and the histories of low-wage workers in the region as a way of preserving their stories and building awareness of immigrants to the region. The **Preservation Society of Charleston's** Justice Journey project, which was initially conceived in collaboration with the **International African American Museum**, is mapping Charleston sites that are significant to African American history and the struggle for justice, including African American burial grounds. The society has also documented the oral histories of African American business leaders. Finally, collecting programs at the College of Charleston help preserve and make local histories accessible. The library's **SC LGBTQ** archive project is collecting the history of South Carolina's LGBTQ+ community, with an emphasis on the Charleston area. And the **Lowcountry Digital Library (LCDL)** supports the digitization of collections of organizations throughout the region. Organizations with collections hosted by LCDL include the Avery Center, the **Charleston Library Society**, the **City of Charleston**, **Middleton Place**, **Drayton Hall**, and The Citadel, among many others.

"Everybody that I know of, that I've seen, who's been aware of this project has been excited about it. So it's sort of like dropping a pebble in a large lake and it has many, many waves going on from it. I would say that the community is thrilled to see their young people and see their lives and their stories and the way in which it's been recorded. My relatives and churches around here have taken a great interest in it, and to see their own church filmed and their own community filmed draws people in very powerful ways to that project."

—J. HERMAN BLAKE,
SOCIOLOGIST AND ADVISOR TO
TANGLED ROOTS

Advocating for Stronger Communities

While discussing challenges to the Charleston community, interviewees consistently emphasized that much of what makes Charleston a lovely place to visit is also making it a difficult place to live. The region as a whole is struggling with tourism and overdevelopment that is threatening the longevity of local communities.

Strengthening Charleston's existing community—in particular low income, historically Black communities—is a common cause for humanities and non-humanities organizations alike. Community organizations such as the **Center for Heirs Property Preservation** engage in humanities practices such as documenting oral histories as part of their work, while others leverage historic preservation and research in their broader advocacy efforts.

The Lowcountry Alliance for Model Communities' Hear Our Voices project is preserving local oral histories and creating story maps as part of a bid to promote sustainable tourism in the seven historically Black North Charleston communities that it represents. According to Omar Muhammad, the Alliance's executive director, this project is designed "to elevate the collective story of all our communities [including] how the communities were established, why they were established, and why they look the way they do today." The communities themselves, including Union Heights and Liberty Hill, are leveraging historical research to have historical markers placed in significant locations.

The **Historic Charleston Foundation** has been a key player in efforts to advocate for local communities in the face of environmental and other challenges through its own initiatives and by supporting community-driven efforts. The Foundation worked with the **City of Charleston**, the **Clemson Design Center**, and **Medical University of South Carolina** to bring Dutch Dialogues, an initiative to build consensus and policy recommendations around climate change, to the city. (Charleston is situated on a peninsula and a number of low-lying islands, and is deeply threatened by climate change and sea level rise.) The Foundation's Common Cause Loan program, a partnership with the City of Charleston, the **Charleston Redevelopment Corporation**, and the **Palmetto Community Land Trust**, offers forgivable loans to low-income homeowners in support of structural repairs such as new roofing or windows. In a region rife with gentrification, the program is designed to help low-income families keep their homes. The Foundation supported the **Phillips Community Association** in its application to the National Register of Historic Places—part of a broader effort to preserve the community in the face of the South Carolina Department of Transportation's bid to place a highway through it. The Foundation is also working with the local community to preserve historic Mosquito Beach, an African American beach during the Jim Crow era, through a national register nomination and the rehabilitation of the Pine Tree Hotel. These partnerships model a way by which well-resourced humanities institutions can be strong partners to communities that may not have access to grant writers and researchers, strengthening the organization's impact but more importantly, helping even a long-inequitable playing field.

"Charleston, ... the city and the residents and government leaders, and everybody was really able to gel around this topic. It was really a grassroots effort, and it was an exciting process because people could come and talk about flooding from their backyard perspective and didn't focus on one area of the city in particular, like the peninsula, but it looked at five different areas of the city, and it made recommendations, and put together a long term plan. It gave marching orders."

— CASHION DROLET,
CHIEF ADVOCACY OFFICER,
HISTORIC CHARLESTON FOUNDATION



Fostering International Connections

Charleston's international ties are significant to the region's history and to understanding its present. The opening of the **International African American Museum** is a particularly significant achievement in a long effort to understand Charleston's history as a fundamentally international history. The **Barbados and Carolinas Legacy Foundation**, which has been led by Rhoda Green since the 1990s, exists to highlight the connections between Charleston and the Caribbean nation. Throughout her work, Green emphasizes that Charleston was deeply influenced by Barbados: the region was colonized by Barbadian-English settlers, who brought with them Barbadian slave codes and enslaved people. In 1997, the group celebrated the official recognition of Charleston and Speightstown, Barbados, as sister cities and in the intervening years has encouraged continued dialogue between the two places, even leading delegations to each place. Working with virtually every historic site in the region, the Barbados and Carolinas Legacy Foundation deepens interpretations of local culture and the histories of enslaved people and illuminates their previously-untold stories. At the **College of Charleston, the Carolina Lowcountry & Atlantic World (CLAW)** program promotes research on the Lowcountry and facilitates international connections. The program sponsors lectures and a book series with the **University of South Carolina Press** and offers an annual book prize. Working with local organizations, CLAW hosts and co-sponsors conferences and symposia that encourage community building around and research about the relationship between the Lowcountry and the broader Atlantic world and the history of enslavement that these regions share.

Education & Lifelong Learning

Organizations throughout the Charleston region make it possible for people of all ages to access rich educational and cultural opportunities. Many of these organizations exist to broaden educational access. The **Charleston Clemente Course**, which is hosted by **Trident Technical College**, provides free higher education humanities courses to low-income adults in the city. In weekly classes, students learn from college faculty, complete writing assignments, and engage in discussions about literature, philosophy, art, and history. Part of a national effort to break down barriers to higher education and provide transformative educational experiences, the Charleston Clemente Course provides students with access to technology, medical care, and healthy food in addition to regular classes and trips to museums and other cultural organizations. Reflecting on the need for the course, director Mary Ann Kohli said "That's what literature does, ... you see choices and you see the consequences of choices. And you see philosophy, ways of looking at the world, and ways of moving through the world. ... The more awareness a person has, the more choices they have and the more possibilities are opened up to those students so they see other possible futures than the intergenerational poverty that they've experienced." The **Charleston Promise Neighborhood**,

"People don't understand that before rice was discovered to be the commodity that would make South Carolina rich, the British who settled Barbados [and then] came here, they actually brought enslaved people from Barbados and from the other Caribbean islands. And it was only when rice rose, that they started getting people directly from West Africa. ... So now we have to tell that story, we have to connect those pieces, because we are so trained to see them as stories, standing on their own, and not seeing the support system or not seeing what came before."

— RHODA GREEN,
FOUNDER, BARBADOS AND
CAROLINAS LEGACY FOUNDATION

which aims to help children overcome educational barriers, similarly ensures that students in its programs have access to cultural education. A partnership with the **International African American Museum** has provided charter memberships to 1,700 Charleston-area school students. And in partnership with the **Historic Charleston Foundation** and the **Charleston Museum**, Charleston Promise Neighborhood produces an annual Social Studies Bowl, which CEO Sherrie Snipes Williams described as “a Jeopardy-style social studies quiz based on South Carolina history.” The bowl is held at the Charleston Museum, which opens two hours prior to the event to encourage families of participants to visit. These partners also support Charleston Promise Neighborhood’s after school programs, which provide education in local cultural traditions such as sweetgrass weaving in addition to athletics.

Festivals are a cornerstone of Charleston cultural life that provide educational access. In addition to the **Charleston Literary Festival** and the internationally-renowned **Spoletto Festival**, both of which provide opportunities for learning and discussions, **Black Ink Books** spotlights local and national Black authors. Run by the **Charleston Friends of the Library**, Black Ink Books aims to provide a platform for Black voices and build a community around their work. Meanwhile, YALLfest, which is run by **Blue Cycle Books**, celebrates young adult and middle grade fiction bringing YA fans from around the country to Charleston each year. The **Charleston County Public Library** offers free public programs, including a series of public history programs ranging from lectures, book signings, and a regular podcast called *Charleston Time Machine*.

Unique Strengths

Local Leadership

Charleston-area governments invest in humanities work throughout the region. Beginning with Joseph Riley, Jr., who was mayor of Charleston from 1975 to 2016, through to the current mayor, John Tecklenburg, the mayor’s office has invested in local history and culture, acting as a key partner to local organizations and a driving force for the creation and opening of the **International African American Museum**. These partnerships and investments are forward-thinking and expansive, going far beyond the marketing of local history as a tourist attraction to emphasizing how investments in the humanities promote more equal and just communities. In this way, the local government is a model for how other governments might engage with and support humanities

“We have a wonderful partnership with our friends at the Library Council, and they have a program called Black Ink, which celebrates black authors and writers and black stories, and our black communities and readers. We really want to make sure that people are represented. ... We now have a way for people to submit the novels ... to our collection development department authors. So that's something that we have been working on a long time. To, say, get some representation in our catalog and to celebrate our local authors and to support Black Ink, which has always done a great job with our local communities, and then how can we extend that into our catalog for a more permanent basis.”

—ANGELA CRAIG,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
CHARLESTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



organizations—and for why they should be driven to do so. Meanwhile, Charleston County Parks and Recreation supports both **McLeod Plantation Historic Site** and (further afield) McLeod’s sister site, **Caw Caw Interpretive Center**. Local civic groups and community associations play a key role in preserving local history and culture.

Professional Networks

Networks connect Charleston-area humanities organizations and extend the reach of its cultural sector. The **Gullah Geechee National Heritage Corridor**, for instance, connects historic and cultural sites throughout the region around the mission of promoting this distinct American culture. The **Lowcountry Alliance for Response**, which is run out of **Clemson University’s Warren Lasch Conservation Center**, brings cultural organizations together around the shared aim of saving historic collections and places in the face of natural and man-made disasters. The **Lowcountry Oral History Alliance** brings together people who research, preserve, and use oral histories. The **Charleston Heritage Federation** both promotes and connects local historic sites. Beyond these formal networks, Charleston is rich in informal networks and organizational partnerships that bring people together around the shared goal of understanding and interpreting local histories and exploring local culture. These dense networks are particularly important support for professionals working in a challenging field and dealing with challenging subject matter. Time after time, interviewees pointed to the means by which formal and informal networks alike strengthened their work by offering opportunities for partnership that both facilitated their work and expanded its reach.

Local News

At a time when the independent press is under threat in the United States, Charleston is unique in retaining a locally owned newspaper, the *Post and Courier*. Its lifestyle section goes beyond reporting on arts and culture, and includes regular, long-form content on local history and the organizations that are involved in humanities efforts—these articles cover the history of enslavement, the Revolutionary War, historic preservation, and the Civil Rights movement, among other topics. Virtually every organization covered in this report has been featured in its pages and many of those we interviewed have been recognized by the paper for contributions to local civic culture. The *Post and Courier* brings this work to broader audiences throughout the region, helping make humanities work and its impacts visible and celebrating the humanities practitioners who are deeply engaged in work that betters their community.

Recommendations

This region is more densely populated than the others in this study and receives more revenue from tourism to the area. Nonetheless, interviewees consistently emphasized a need for more financial support. Indeed, in a field that overwhelmingly lacks funding it is no surprise that even relatively well-resourced institutions can struggle to make ends meet and nonprofit humanities organizations can struggle to pay their staff living wages. This is especially true for small organizations, some of which are run in a volunteer capacity or by one or two dedicated leaders. It is no secret that inequalities between cultural organizations mirror the inequalities inherent in the rest of our society. In the case of Charleston, as in other parts of the country, small and under-resourced organizations are predominantly run by disadvantaged groups. Here, they tend to be run by the Gullah Geechee people whose history and culture so many in the region are dedicated to recognizing and preserving.

The dependence on unpaid labor is an existential problem for these small community groups. During the period we spent researching this report, we saw multiple organizations stagger under the unexpected loss of their leaders. Others worried about what would happen to their life's work without anyone to take their place. Charleston organizations are excellent at leveraging their networks and experience to support work being done by community groups and smaller organizations. Now, more attention needs to be paid to how to better financially support these individuals and volunteer-led organizations, whether that is by carving out room in budgets for consulting services or by encouraging funders to set up special funding categories for smaller organizations that support their operating costs.

Conclusion

The Charleston area is rich in humanities organizations that are making significant progress in understanding the legacies of enslavement and celebrating the region's rich and diverse local culture. Moreover, these organizations' long experience with historic preservation and related advocacy is helping the community address a range of local challenges, including overdevelopment, gentrification, climate change, and sea level rise. Their work demonstrates that large and small humanities organizations alike have a key role to play in addressing issues that affect communities' long-term livability and offers models for how established humanities institutions can partner with a range of groups and government entities to promote a better future.



Conclusion

The examples of Nogales, Arizona; Rapid City, South Dakota; and Charleston, South Carolina, offer a compelling case for how humanities organizations contribute to the public good of their communities. Humanities work supports education and lifelong learning at all levels. It is key to helping us understand how the actions and beliefs of the past have ongoing ramifications for the present. It celebrates the richness and diversity of our cultural traditions, provides people with opportunities for dialogue, builds pride and bridges across difference, and helps us work collectively toward a better future.

The projects, organizations, and communities highlighted here offer insight into how humanities work contributes to stronger communities and bolster the case for increased financial support for humanities work. Chances are, organizations near you are also engaging with your community and the challenges it faces through the humanities. As you look for these kinds of organizations in your own backyard, consider how your local museum or historical society is branching out from its traditional work to serve the community in new ways. Look for small humanities start-ups—organizations that are being run by a few passionate volunteers. Consider how minority-run organizations are bringing to light and preserving history and cultural traditions that might not be preserved elsewhere. Think about how organizations in adjacent fields might be leveraging humanities practices in their work.

Ultimately, our hope is that these case studies can help you make a strong case for why your own community should want to invest in the humanities and that our *State and Local Policies that Fund the Humanities: A Clearinghouse* will help you identify policies to work to implement in your own community. Our accompanying briefing documents can help you showcase the kinds of public impacts humanities work has on communities, while research into the humanities in your own region will give you an idea of how humanities work is already having an impact where you live.

