

# COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES:

How the Humanities Enrich Community Life

NOGALES, ARIZONA

RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

---

OVERVIEW



National  
Humanities  
Alliance

**Author:**

Cecily Erin Hill  
*Director of Community Initiatives*  
chill@nhalliance.org

Mariel Aquino  
*Research Fellow, Community Initiatives*  
maquino@nhalliance.org

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.

The NHA is a 501(c)(4) non-profit association and is strictly nonpartisan. The National Humanities Alliance Foundation is the 501(c)(3) supporting foundation of the National Humanities Alliance. It works to research and communicate the value of the humanities to a range of audiences including elected officials and the general public.

# Community Case Studies

Throughout the United States, people are leveraging humanities knowledge and practices to address major challenges, build bridges across difference, address past injustices, promote equity and inclusion, and build community members' sense of connection, pride, and trust. In short, organizations and individuals are using the humanities to strengthen their communities and make them better places to live.

Traditional humanities institutions such as museums, libraries, and historic sites are responding to community needs through partnerships and programming. Other organizations in fields such as the arts, sports, social services, and community development are adopting humanities practices in order to make their work more meaningful, accessible, and effective. The National Humanities Alliance has conducted in-depth case studies into three very different communities—Nogales and surrounding Santa Cruz County in Arizona, Rapid City and the Black Hills in South Dakota, and Charleston, South Carolina. These case studies collectively make the case that humanities work is essential to thriving communities.

## Addressing Community Challenges

Organizations and individuals are leveraging the humanities to address some of their biggest and most pressing issues.

- In Nogales, Arizona, people are using history and personal storytelling to showcase positive narratives about life on the border and restore pride in an area that has been negatively depicted by politicians and national media.
- In Rapid City, South Dakota, organizations are using historical research and promoting cultural recognition and dialogue to build trust between Native and non-Native peoples, as well as improve mental health and education outcomes for Native populations.
- In Charleston, South Carolina, organizations are leveraging dialogue and history to address overdevelopment and rising sea levels, both of which threaten the city's livability.

## Supporting Local Businesses

The humanities contribute to local economies by employing locals, attracting tourists, and supporting business innovation. They are also leveraged to promote diversity and inclusion and foster understanding—qualities proven to be essential for thriving businesses.

- Since 2017, YWCA Charleston has hosted racial equity workshops aimed at educating business and community leaders about systemic and structural racism. By increasing cultural competencies across industries, these workshops are helping to create an environment in Charleston that is more inclusive and welcoming.
- Rapid City's Human Relations Commission-Mnizuzahan Okolakiciyapi Ambassadors (HRC-MOA) is working with Elevate Rapid City to decrease bias and foster understanding. Programs such as "Learning Forum: Racial Prejudice and Our Economy" foster better understanding of how racism impacts local organizations and people.



- Startup Unidos in Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora is creating resources for small business owners on both sides of the border that are culturally relevant and feature local resources and experts. In doing so, they promote the region as a space for innovation and economic growth.

### **Supporting Vulnerable Populations**

Addressing past injustice is a significant tool in supporting vulnerable communities. Across case study cities, communities are leveraging the humanities to make social support projects more effective.

- The Charleston Clemente Course provides credit-bearing higher ed humanities courses to low-income students. The course helps students overcome barriers to educational access by offering childcare and technological support and connecting students with healthcare services and food pantries.
- Rural America Initiatives in Rapid City supports Native American youth and their families by providing childcare programs that are centered around Lakota values. In addition to providing cultural learning to young children, childcare ensures that parents and guardians are able to work.
- The town of Tubac, north of Nogales, is home to many retirees. Organizations like the Tubac Center for the Arts, which has many opportunities for volunteering, give seniors the space to come together at a time of life that can otherwise be isolating.

### **Protecting Community Assets**

Many humanities organizations act as community stewards, protecting and preserving their cultural assets. This work ensures that these assets will exist for future generations.

- In Charleston, organizations and individuals are emphasizing the unique history and culture of the Gullah Geechee people. Throughout the region, cultural expressions that were once derided—like the Gullah language and cuisine—are now celebrated.
- In Rapid City, the Journey Museum and Learning Center safeguards important cultural artifacts from the region. Their programs provide cultural education and access.
- Throughout Santa Cruz County, Arizona, organizations act as environmental stewards, preserving the historical landscape for the future.

### **Building Networks of Support**

Humanities organizations are often small and underfunded, despite their significant contributions to community well-being. These organizations leverage networks to build support for their work and to make their work more effective—to serve the communities using the resources they have.

- In Charleston, institutions like the Clemson-College of Charleston Historic Preservation Program use their greater capacity and resources to partner with smaller, local organizations to preserve historic structures and communities.
- In Rapid City, informal networks of individuals and organizations working on similar issues create a common pool of knowledge and expertise, and facilitate collaboration.
- In Tubac, the town's nonprofit organizations collaborate to maximize the impact of their fundraising and programming efforts in their small community.



# The Humanities in Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston is known as an elegant and historic Southern destination for cultural tourism. But this elegance was built on a tragic history—the Port of Charleston was the largest slave port in the United States. For many years, this history has been obscured. At the same time, tourism predicated on Charleston’s historic architecture has led to gentrification and overdevelopment, threatening the city and surrounding historic communities.

Today, the people of Charleston are looking more carefully at the city’s roots, acknowledging its painful past and celebrating the contributions and culture of the African American community. They are leveraging the humanities, including dialogue and the tools of historic preservation, to improve their city and the historic African American settlement communities located in and around it.

## Reckoning With the Past & Celebrating Local Culture

Charleston holds a rich African American heritage. On the islands surrounding the city, the Gullah Geechee people, descendants of enslaved Africans, retain a distinctive and celebrated culture. Local humanities organizations such as historic sites and research centers work to acknowledge the wrongs of the past while celebrating rich contributions to American life.

- 1 **McLeod Plantation Historic Site** is one of only two in the U.S. that interprets its history exclusively from the perspective of enslaved people and their descendants, showcasing the complexity and richness of their lives. Public programs and partnerships with descendant groups give new life to the site, making it a place for deep community engagement.
- 1 **Middleton Place**, a plantation site and museum just outside of Charleston, engages both White and Black descendants of the site. In addition to hosting reunions that bring the groups together, a full-time genealogist employed by the site helps African Americans make connections to their ancestors that would otherwise have been lost.
- 1 **The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture** is housed in what was once a private school for African Americans, the Avery Normal Institute. The school offered students the chance to receive a classical education and a teacher’s certificate. Today, the research center builds upon that history, offering a site for educators, researchers, and others to organize around community needs.
- 1 The **Seashore Farmers Lodge** on Sol Legare is an active lodge and African American community museum, representing a slice of Gullah history and culture that has historically been left out of museums.
- 1 Many of Charleston’s buildings were constructed with bricks. For those built before 1865, those bricks were hand-formed by enslaved laborers—many of whom were children. The **Ancestor Finger Marks Project** brings this past to light through its tours and its forthcoming app, which bring attention to the visible finger marks left by the enslaved in buildings around the city.



## Increasing Climate Resilience & Preserving Communities

Rising sea levels and overdevelopment each pose an immediate threat to Charleston communities. Organizations are leveraging the humanities to keep communities intact and liveable.

- 1 Climate change, development, and rising sea levels are already causing regular flooding in Charleston. In response, the **City of Charleston, Historic Charleston Foundation, Clemson Design Center, and Medical University of South Carolina** worked with architecture and environment firm Waggonner & Ball, Dutch experts, and other partners to bring Dutch Dialogues™ to the city. This effort aimed to build consensus and community resilience. The final report is now informing climate action in the city.
- 1 Clemson University's **Warren Lasch Conservation Center** in North Charleston is hosting a local Alliance for Response network. This program brings cultural organizations together with emergency responders in an effort to prepare for and respond to both natural and manmade disasters.
- 1 The **Progressive Club** on John's Island was an important center for education, voter registration, and activism during the Civil Rights Era. Thanks to a partnership with the **Historic Charleston Foundation**, a local committee was able to list the structure's remains on the National Register of Historic Places, safeguarding it for eventual reconstruction
- 1 When threatened by a highway expansion project, the historic African American **Philips Community** successfully advocated to re-route the highway. As part of this effort, the community joined forces with the **Preservation Society** and the **Historic Charleston Foundation** to have the community recognized as a historic district.
- 1 The **Center for Heirs' Property Preservation** addresses gentrification in Charleston by helping underserved families protect their land from development. In 2020, they used funds from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to award nine grants to local groups seeking to preserve African American and Gullah history.

## Making International Connections

As a major port for the importation of enslaved Africans during the 18th and 19th centuries, Charleston is at its heart an international city, with deep ties throughout the Atlantic world. Charleston area organizations draw on these ties in their work, building connections both within and outside of the United States.

- 1 **The Barbados and the Carolinas Legacy Foundation** showcases the relationship between West African and Barbadian culture and South Carolina—Charleston was founded by English colonists from Barbados. The organization illuminates this history through research and tours, and works to build present-day connections between the city and the island nation.
- 1 The **Carolina Lowcountry & Atlantic World (CLAW)** program at the College of Charleston hosts academic conferences, film screenings, and public programs aimed at illuminating the connections between Atlantic cities and countries.
- 1 **The International African American Museum**, slated to open in 2022, considers the history of Africans and their descendants throughout North and South America. The museum will also act as a jumping-off point for visitors to explore sites of African American history in Charleston as well as further afield.



# The Humanities and the U.S.-Mexico Border

Nogales, Arizona, is a U.S. city that is also part of the bi-national Ambos Nogales community. A border town with a rich history, Nogales is home to the port of entry that supplies most of the U.S. with food imported from Mexico. Nogales and surrounding Santa Cruz County have been drastically affected by years of border politicization—including negative media and political depictions of the region—and by the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the border for 18 months.

The people of Nogales and surrounding Santa Cruz county know that national and international depictions of the border are inaccurate. They are leveraging humanities tools such as history and storytelling to strengthen their communities, build pride, promote narrative change about the border region, and help citizens of the bi-national region build ties with one another.

## Celebrating the Region's Rich History and Culture

Nogales and Santa Cruz County are populated with historic sites and museums that preserve and showcase this unique region's history and landscape—all while providing opportunities for the public to learn and engage in cultural programs. Organizations encouraging stewardship of the region's ecological heritage help spur ecotourism, an important element of the county's economy.

- As a history museum and local landmark, the **Pimería Alta Historical Society** preserves and showcases the history of the Sonoran region. Through partnerships with other local organizations, the volunteer-led institution offers exhibits and events that illuminate the diversity of local history—a 2022 exhibit featured a “Salute to Nogales’ Buffalo Soldiers.” The organization also offers job training for youth interns and underemployed adults.
- **Tumacácori National Historical Park**, a Spanish mission run by the National Park Service, draws tourists to the region. The park's annual festivals, including its Fiesta and Christmas Eve service, are touchstones in local community life that celebrate the region's history and support local artists, craftsmen, and food purveyors.
- Arizona's first state park, the **Tubac Presidio State Historic Park** preserves and interprets an eighteenth-century Spanish fort. The park plays an active role in Tubac's cultural life, with yearly festivals and collaborations with other community organizations such as the Tubac Center for the Arts. The park hosts dozens of school trips a year, providing enrichment for the region's schoolchildren.
- New Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza traveled through Arizona on his famous expedition from Mexico to San Francisco. The **Anza Trail Coalition** preserves this historic route by obtaining conservation easements and maintaining the trail. They also conserve the region's unique ecology, which fuels a robust ecotourism economy.





### Bringing Back Main Street

Nogales's Main Street relies upon exchange between U.S. and Mexico, and the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the downtown economy. Today, Nogales citizens are leveraging the humanities and arts to revitalize the street.

- 1 **Nogales Walks**, a public history and art Instagram account, showcases the beauty of Nogales's vibrant architecture and murals along with historical images and context. The popular account is renewing a sense of pride and place in Nogales's historic downtown.
- 1 **La Línea Art Studio**, located on Morley Avenue, provides the local community with the chance to put works of art in conversation with the realities of life on the border, in addition to providing space for community gatherings.
- 1 **Nogales Community Development (NCD)** is revitalizing downtown Nogales by highlighting the city's unique history and architecture. Through culturally-grounded programs such as a farmers market and historic building adaptation, NCD is giving local organizations and entrepreneurs the resources they need to thrive.

### Building a Strong Bi-National Community

Humanities organizations in this region do important work in showcasing good news about life on the border by offering people the chance to tell their own stories and creating opportunities for learning and communicating. These programs increase community pride and help address the persistent problem of brain drain by helping young people see Nogales as a place of cultural and economic possibility.

- 1 **Borderlandia** publishes a magazine and offers cultural events and cross-border tours aimed at building public understanding of the borderlands. Through programs that emphasize local history, feature Sonoran thinkers and creators, and encourage citizens of the U.S. and Mexico to engage with one another, the organization promotes citizen diplomacy in the region.
- 1 Through after-school programming that engages students in sports and digital storytelling, the **Border Youth Tennis Exchange** encourages youth and adults alike to reflect on and share the richness of life on both sides of the border while building digital skills.
- 1 **Startup Unidos** is an entrepreneurship program that engages communities on both sides of the border. Their culturally-anchored resources and programs are helping to reframe the border as a space for innovation.





# The Humanities in South Dakota's Black Hills

South Dakota's Black Hills have a rich history 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. To the east, Rapid City, the region's largest urban center, has a large Indigenous population as well as a history of anti-Native repression and violence.

But people in this region are leveraging the humanities to make the Black Hills a better place for everyone to live in. Humanities organizations work to provide cultural access and educational opportunities to the rural area. Meanwhile, the local population is using Lakota history and culture to overcome divisions and improve mental health and education outcomes for the region's Native population.

## Building Trust, Overcoming Divisions

More than 10 percent of Rapid City's population is Indigenous, but generations of mistreatment by the U.S. government and settlers created an environment of mistrust. Today, organizations throughout the Black Hills are leveraging culture and history to build trust and overcome divisions.

- 1 A partnership between the city government and a local nonprofit, the **Human Relations Commission-Mniluzahan Okolakiciyapi Ambassadors (HRC-MOA)** was created to bridge the cultures of Native and non-Native people. Through cultural education, leadership training, and dialogue about discrimination issues, HRC-MOA has seen improved relations with law enforcement, health care, youth, businesses, and greater participation in activities around Native culture.
- 1 Through research into the history of a local U.S. government residential school for Native children, the **Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project** is working to gain public acknowledgment of this painful history and its ongoing harm. The project has had a great deal of success, and is raising funds both for a memorial honoring the children who died at the school and a community center for the city's Native youth.
- 1 In Spearfish, the nonprofit **makeSPACE** offers programs in arts, cycling, and equity. Programs such as Equity Training for Educators and community conversation topics such as "Indigenous Dispossession in the Black Hills" center history and culture to build awareness about social justice and equality. A recent partnership with the **Matthews Opera House** is allowing the organization to expand the reach of these programs.



## Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Peoples

Throughout the Black Hills, organizations and programs draw on Lakota history and culture to improve outcomes for Indigenous peoples, having impacts on education, mental health and wellness, and community safety. Advocacy organizations like **NDN Collective** are also helping to broaden the conversation by drawing national attention to these issues.

- 1 South Dakota State University's **Native American Nursing Education Center** in Rapid City supports Native student success through mentorship and other services. Their monthly *Wohanpi na Woundspe* (Soup and Learn) program creates space to share and learn about Lakota history and culture and is contributing to a stronger culture of understanding in the local medical field and on campus.
- 1 **Oaye Luta Okolakiciye** centers Lakota spiritual ceremonies and practices to help promote healing among Rapid City's Native population. Camps and mentorship programs address issues such as substance abuse or prisoner reentry in a way that is culturally grounded and, ultimately, more effective in addressing problems at their roots.
- 1 **The Center for American Indian Studies** at Black Hills State University (BHSU) provides a home for Native youth on campus, supporting their success in higher education, in addition to offering degree programs and courses on American Indian Studies. Programs such as American Indian Awareness Week provide cultural education to BHSU students and the broader community.

## Providing Cultural Access and Education

In rural areas, organizations often take on multiple roles in an effort to support cultural access and provide educational opportunities that are not always as readily available as in more population-dense areas. In South Dakota, where schools often lack funding for arts and culture, this role is especially important.

- 1 **Racing Magpie** in Rapid City is an arts and culture organization that provides space and programming for Native people. Its Winter Camp program offers virtual programming focused on Lakota voices, histories, and values, and provides a valuable opportunity for the community to engage in cultural programs during the harshest months of the year.
- 1 **The Journey Museum** in Rapid City provides access to the Black Hills' natural and cultural history from the earliest times to the present through exhibitions and cultural programs. In addition to lectures for adults and programs for families, partnerships with other non-profit organizations ensure the museum is serving the needs of the whole community.
- 1 **Deadwood History** runs five museums and a variety of historical programs in historic Deadwood, promoting tourism and providing cultural opportunities for children and adult residents.
- 1 Rapid City-based **Flutter Productions**, an all-ability performing arts company, showcases the history and culture of people with disabilities and illustrates the importance of providing inclusive cultural programming.
- 1 The yearly **West River History Conference** brings historians from across the region together to discuss local history. In addition to public programs such as lectures and keynote discussions, the conference provides scholars, both amateur and professional, the opportunity to get to know each other and form new networks.



# Our Approach

## Understanding the Landscape

The National Humanities Alliance (NHA) works with members of case study communities to understand both the humanities landscape and community needs. More than 100 semi-structured interviews with organizational leaders and community members in Arizona, South Dakota, and South Carolina have contributed to our findings. For smaller organizations, these interviews also provide space to think about their work holistically and in new ways.

## Documenting and Communicating Humanities Impact

NHA staff work directly with community partners to create and implement survey instruments. NHA builds robust survey instruments that are uniquely tailored to documenting the impact of humanities programs: cultural and historical lectures, tours, community conversations, and other programs. We work with partners to implement the surveys, and write full reports documenting the impact of the programs. For some organizations, this is the first opportunity they have had to document and fully understand who is participating in their programs.

Our quantitative and qualitative surveys are aimed at more holistically understanding humanities interventions and offer respondents the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share their thoughts. Together, we reach a better understanding of how the humanities impact community life.

We offer all of these services to our partner organizations for free, with the aim of building capacity in the field to document humanities work and offering them the specific support they need to apply for grants and maintain strong programs. Past partners have included Borderlandia, the Barbados and Carolina Legacy Foundation, South Dakota Humanities, Charleston Clemente Course, and McLeod Plantation Historic Site.



## Showcasing Community Voices

In each case study community, organizations are leveraging the humanities to undertake inspiring and innovative work. One of our priorities is to highlight this work at every opportunity. Humanities innovators from case study communities were featured at the NHA Annual Meeting and Humanities Advocacy Day in March 2022. Representatives from Borderlandia and the Border Youth Tennis Exchange in Arizona, Racing Magpie in South Dakota, and the College of Charleston's Center for the Study of Slavery in South Carolina spoke about their initiatives for a national audience.

## Providing Professional Development

Partners in case study communities participated virtually in the National Humanities Conference in 2020 and 2021, as well as in NHA's Annual Meeting in 2021 and 2022. These events provide access to panels on best practices, training in communications, fundraising, and advocacy, and opportunities to learn about innovative humanities work being undertaken throughout the U.S.

