



# For The Sake of Posterity

*Thought leaders convene in Amenia—again—for the Troutbeck Symposium*

MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO, Colonel Joel and Amy Spingarn hosted a meeting of the NAACP at Troutbeck, their estate in Amenia. Civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois later wrote of his experience there: “It was in August, 1916...[and] our own battle in America, that war of colors...was forming in certain definite lines.” One hundred years later, when junior Clarence Nurse enrolled in “Searching for Slavery” at Salisbury School, he hardly considered the legacy he and his classmates would leave in their wake.

“It’s an odd feeling to have gone from a typical student to a ‘historian’ over the course of the two years I’ve been doing this learning,” says Nurse of his experience in Rhonan Mokriski’s project-based learning course in public history—one that proved a brilliant solution for engaging high school students during the pandemic and culminated in the Troutbeck Symposium, a two-day event celebrating the ignored, forgotten, and erased stories of the free and enslaved African Americans who once called the Northwest Corner home.

“It was [akin to] Paul on the road to Damascus,” says Mokriski—a life-long Nutmeg-

**Student presenters pose with panelists and other esteemed guests at the inaugural Troutbeck Symposium.**

BY HANNAH VAN SICKLE / PHOTOGRAPHS BY FLYNN LARSEN

ger—who, after getting his hands on the 1774 Salisbury colonial census, learned there had been 37 enslaved people living there in 1750. Rather than eschew this newfound knowledge, Mokriski and crew embraced it.

Many prominent families—among them clergymen and lawyers—kept Black people captive, putting them to work in fields, chopping wood, tending animals, and keeping house. James Mars, born into slavery in Canaan in 1790, later fled to Norfolk with his parents and siblings when their owner, the local Congregational minister, tried to smuggle the family to Virginia. Mars, who was granted freedom in 181, went on to have a career in dry goods in Hartford and raise a family in Pittsfield, MA.; he returned to Norfolk to pen his autobiography, “Life of James Mars, A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut,” published in 1864. On May 1, 2021—now known as James Mars Day—a witness stone was placed outside the Norfolk UCC to memorialize his life. Soon after, students turned their attention to Troutbeck.

The historical marker, located just west of Leedsville Road on Route 343 in Amenia, bears no mention of the NAACP conferences in 1916 and 1933. After sharing a documentary of his students’ efforts to date, Mokriski and Charlie Champalimaud, director of programming at Troutbeck, began envisioning what would become the Troutbeck Symposium.

“We knew this idea had tremendous power and traction,” says Mokriski, as evidenced by 150 students from seven schools who convened in Amenia—a fitting tribute to Troutbeck’s legacy of hosting creative thinkers and activists—for three days in April to present narratives relating to the region’s BIPOC community. Topics ran the gamut from the history of Black and Native American lacrosse players to a 1935 exhibition, *An Art Commentary on Lynching*—and myriad others in between.

“It’s important from our positions of privilege that we do this work,” says Mokriski who will shepherd another group of budding historians into the fold this fall. Nurse, now a first year student at the University of Miami, is humbled by the momentum.

“Our hearts are in this work...[and] my hope is that our small footprint [in Amenia] will inspire other students at schools [across the country] to get involved,” he says. His former teacher concurs.

“Every community has these stories,” Mokriski says, pointing to the power of young people to elicit change. “The arc of history is long but only bends toward justice if people push it that way.” ■



Dr. Hasan Kwamie Jeffries, from The Ohio State University, addresses students in April 2022.