

**Carnegie Museum of Art**  
**Black Photojournalism Podcast**  
**Episode 2: Baltimore**

**Frances Murphy Draper:** I am Frances Murphy Draper, better known as Toni, and I am privileged to serve as the CEO and publisher of the 133-as-of-today-year-old Afro-American newspapers, better known as AFRO News.

We found a mission statement of sorts that my great-grandfather wrote. It appears in 1920. And he wrote that a newspaper succeeds because it believes in God, in itself, and in the present generation, and that it has no other mission but to expose injustice and expose corruption and to lift up what we would call today Black excellence.

**MARK WHITAKER:** Welcome back to the Black Photojournalism podcast. I'm your host, Mark Whitaker.

**The great-grandfather Toni is referring to here is John H. Murphy, who purchased the Baltimore Afro-American, better known as the AFRO, shortly after its founding in 1892.**

**I'll let Toni describe how the AFRO has used words and images to lift up Black excellence for 133 years.**

**Frances Murphy Draper:** So let me use the March on Washington of 1963 for an example, which, you know, is often lifted up as certainly one of the most significant events during the Civil Rights Movement. The entire editorial staff, the entire photography staff went to Washington. I went to Washington, not as a reporter, but my mother was an editor, so she had three children. She's a single mom. So all of us went, all of us went to Washington. From the fashion editor who wrote about what people wore to the march, to the food person who talked about what people ate at the march, right? And where people stayed, which were, you know, pretty lighthearted, to AFRO journalists who rode the bus to the march and took pictures, to those like my mother who were on the ground. And I can almost hear my grandfather saying to her now, Frankie, don't just report on the same thing that you think the major news media's gonna talk, talk to the people!

See, we could go into the crowd and talk to the people and nobody would look at us and like, why? What do you say? Who are you? You know, we don't trust, no we could just talk to people. And nothing was off the record. Right. You didn't tell people it was off the record. You talked to them and found out who they were, and then maybe at the end said, how did you say you spelled your name, right?

Because we were really intentional about putting names to photos. You couldn't do it if you had a hundred people in the photo, but you certainly could do it if you had three or four. And It was extremely important for the Afro because people were nameless or called names that were not their given names by their parents, right? Names are important because names humanize people. Somebody saying a boy from someplace when it's a grown man is dehumanizing. In our community calling a Black woman by her first name, especially if she's of a certain age, is

disrespectful. You just did not do it. So it was a level of respect for people's names to be there and a level of respect to put a title in front of their names, always.

Now, we don't do that today. We follow, you know, a different style. But that's the way it was then because of the disrespect. So you can get respect in the AFRO, it wasn't based on your pedigree or your degree, it was based on your humanity. And that was important to us. And still is.

So we were very intentional in our photography to capture more than just the 'what,' we wanted to know, the who behind the what, as we did six or eight full pages of broadsheet coverage, mostly photos from that march trying to cover every single angle. So for us, it wasn't just an event on a very, very warm August day in 1963. It was a movement that we, yes, chronicled, but it was a movement and a cause that we championed because it impacted us too.

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**MARK WHITAKER:** Continuing on our regional tour of Black Photojournalism in and around the mid-20th century, we find ourselves, today, in Baltimore, with the *Afro-American* newspaper, which, to reiterate, just celebrated 133 years of publication—and continuous family ownership.

We'll hear more from current publisher Toni Draper in a bit. But first I'd like to introduce her niece, Savannah Wood. Savannah is an artist by trade who first cultivated a passion for archives while working with the artist Theaster Gates, who we'll be talking to in a later episode about his work with the archives of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines.

Savannah now serves as Executive Director of *AFRO* Charities. A 501(c)3 founded in 1963 in support of the *AFRO*'s community programs, *AFRO* Charities now administers the transformative work Savannah is leading around the *AFRO*'s extensive and singular archive of some three million photographs, in addition to hard copies of the newspapers themselves, letters, ledgers, and other critical ephemera dating back to the *AFRO*'s founding.

And speaking of which: let's go ahead and start there...

**Mark Whittaker:** Tell me the origin story of the *Afro-American* and your family's connection to it.

**Savannah Wood:** My understanding is that the *AFRO* was actually founded in 1889 by a Reverend William Alexander as the *Home Protector*. So that was its original name. By 1892, he had other investors and they renamed the business the *Afro-American*. So we used that 1892 date as the founding date.

I believe at that time, my great-great-grandfather was involved in the paper as a printer, but he didn't come to own it until I believe 1897, which is after his wife's father died, leaving her money, and she lent that money to her husband to purchase the name and the printing press at an auction and it's been in our family since then. So we claim that the *AFRO* was founded in 1892.

We are fairly certain that my great-great-grandfather was involved in the business from that date, and then they actually owned it from 1897 forward.

**Mark Whittaker:** So having a printing press...

**Savannah Wood:** mm-hmm.

**Mark Whittaker:** ...in that era for any local paper, but particularly a Black paper, was extraordinary. How did that happen?

**Savannah Wood:** They purchased it at auction and kept it moving from there. The *AFRO* started out as just a four-page newspaper and then it evolved over time into 16 pages and then even larger from there, several different editions. And at one point all of the operations were housed in their facility on North Utah Street in Baltimore. Huge presses running around the clock, pumping out papers for all up and down the eastern seaboard.

So they really just invested in the technology and I think that's one of the reasons why the *AFRO* continues to thrive today because they've always kind of been ahead of the curve on technology or early adopters and knew they had to keep up with the times in order to be profitable and succeed.

**Mark Whittaker:** So John Murphy was your great-great-grandfather?

**Savannah Wood:** That's right. Yes.

**Mark Whittaker:** And tell me more about what kind of person he was and also about his wife, and why she had that money to loan him.

**Savannah Wood:** John H. Murphy Sr. was born enslaved in Baltimore. His father was a choir director. He published a newspaper for his church called the *Sunday School Helper*, which was actually meant to kind of connect different Sunday schools in the area and get news out about what was going on in the churches. So he was a church man. He was somebody who clearly was literate and interested in reading and writing and industrious.

My understanding is that he was a white washer for a time. He was a Civil War veteran. So those are the details that I know. What I know about his wife, I've been piecing together more and more. It's just been such a fascinating story for me. Her father was also born enslaved, but died a wealthy landowner. And so that in itself is fascinating. They lived in Montgomery County and they were enslaved in Montgomery County, Maryland, which the plot of land that they were on was about 45 minutes from Baltimore city.

And the land that she was enslaved on, her family actually came to own in her lifetime. And when her father died, he left that land equally to his children, including the women. And so she sold her portion of the land that she inherited to her brother and used that money to invest in her husband's business, which is the *AFRO*.

So there's this direct line from enslavement in Maryland to the founding of this historic Black newspaper company that continues to operate today. And that, you know, it continues to be operated by her descendants today, which I think is an incredible story when you think about what she experienced in her lifetime. But then also to think about all these generations later that that initial investment is still paying off, is still providing a place for her descendants to work and to thrive.

**Mark Whittaker:** So a very strong strain of entrepreneurship [Oh, yeah.] on both sides.

**Savannah Wood:** Mm-hmm. Absolutely.

**Mark Whittaker:** And then their sons eventually became involved and took over the paper.

**Savannah Wood:** Yeah, so they had 10 children, I believe five sons and five daughters. And if my aunt tells the story that all five of the sons worked for the paper, but somehow all five of the daughters still collected a salary, which I think we have somehow lost the thread along the way because all of the women are now working in the family business and we're like, we're, we need more of the men in here! Anyway, that's, that's what I know about them. But most of the women were educators. And they all found their place within the business.

**Mark Whittaker:** So talk a little bit about the world that the *AFRO* covered in the early days. What was Black Baltimore like in that era and who were the readers?

**Savannah Wood:** There was a very tight-knit Black community in Baltimore. Obviously there are forces of segregation that, you know, forced that to a certain degree. But there's also just other types of relationships that allow those things to flourish. So there's a lot of very historic Black churches that are in the area. Those would be a huge number of the readers.

The *AFRO* was also really invested in social uplift from the beginning, and so running programs for young people. Even before the 1930s when the *AFRO* Clean Block campaign gets started, which is like a neighborhood beautification project that the *AFRO* initiated, there were other opportunities for young people to be involved as paper boys, paper girls selling the paper on the streets. At every level of society, the *AFRO* is touching different people. Obviously, as time goes on from the founding, it becomes more popular, more established, and becomes really a community anchor and beacon.

**Mark Whittaker:** The other thing about the Black press in that era was a spirit of advocacy. The *AFRO* and other Black papers were completely unapologetic about taking sides on various issues, having an editorial point of view.

**Savannah Wood:** Yeah. The *AFRO* really emerges in the legacy of the historic Black press. So if we think about 1827 as the beginning with *Freedom's Journal* and their, you know, inaugural editorial, essentially stating, 'We're gonna plead our own cause, far too long, others have spoken for us,' that sets the tone for what the Black press will be.

They are not going to be quote-unquote impartial. It's journalism with a purpose. It's an advocating paper because it has to be, because there's nowhere else where Black people's needs, desires, are being broadcast, are being met where you can learn about where people are organizing, how they're fighting against the injustices that we're seeing—that, by the way, continue today. Um, so there's, from early on, you see that in the *AFRO*.

One example, Baltimore of course had really contentious housing battles. And you'll see that documented in the *AFRO*, talk about quote unquote 'block-busting,' where a Black family would move onto a white block and there would be huge uproar, there would be intimidation. There's all kinds of ways that people tried to keep the status quo and to keep Black people out of these neighborhoods. And the *AFRO* would cover all of that.

And they would document when somebody threw a brick through somebody's window trying to intimidate them to move out, they would help to rally support for that family. Can we rally together to help replace the window? You know, things like that where it's like, could be very small and basic, like we just need to help them get a new window, to we're organizing a mass march to Annapolis and we need everybody to join this. Or here's all of the information that you need to attend the March on Washington.

So they're really in the mix for all of this advocating behind the scenes. And then it's always published in the paper, week to week of how you can be involved, what role you can take, what's needed, all that's there.

—beat/music—

**MARK WHITAKER: Here's Savannah's aunt, *AFRO* CEO and publisher Toni Draper, again.**

**Frances Murphy Draper:** Well, the *AFRO* had a tremendous impact on its community, as did other Black publications. There were not other outlets that were telling our story. We were invisible to mainstream media, yet we know that there were, and still are, vibrant African American communities throughout the United States. So the *AFRO*'s mission was to report on what was happening in the Black community, what was happening to the Black community, what our assets were, certainly what our challenges were.

At that time, all news was local. And our focus was on news that no one else was reporting because there was very little being reported about our community. So we had offices in Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Newark, New Jersey. And then we had 13 editions that came either out of those satellite offices, well, they were really full offices or out of the main building in Baltimore, where we employed 200 people, union employees at that, and had our own printing press.

So the *AFRO* had an enviable position of ear to the ground, if you will, trust in the community, which we still have, people who wanted their stories out and not just on the front page because they had done something wrong. But journalism that said, yes, we have families, we have children, they go to college, they have jobs, they get married, they have cotillions, they have civic organizations, they go to church.

So all of those kinds of things that you would not necessarily find in other media, you found in the *AFRO* and it wasn't buried on the last page somewhere. It was front and center, which helped, I believe, to empower African Americans from all walks of life.

And so being a part of community fueled the *AFRO*'s growth. We weren't talking about what someone else told us. We didn't have to track down sources in a way that some of the other media may have done it if they were interested, which they weren't.

We had people coming to us and saying. Hey, did you know this was happening? Did you know that was happening? Can you write about this? Can you write about that? And they're talking to you across a table, right? Not across a computer, not by mail, but they are actually in your community. And because of redlining, everybody was in the same community.

**MARK WHITAKER: The *AFRO*'s early involvement and leadership in Black civic organizations was crucial, too.**

**Frances Murphy Draper:** My grandfather, Carl, for example, was very, very involved. In fact, very instrumental in the founding of the Baltimore branch of the NAACP. He was even asked to be the president and he said, no, I'm doing what I'm doing at the *AFRO*. However, I will promote and we will identify and we will push someone forward to be leadership who happened to be a woman.

**MARK WHITAKER: That woman was Lillie May Carroll Jackson. She held the position for 35 years and Thurgood Marshall counted her as an advisor and mentor.**

**Frances Murphy Draper:** In terms of the Civil Rights Movement, you know, it's the Civil Rights Movement really is still going on, by the way. But the *AFRO* advocated very, very strongly for the Civil Rights Movement in lots of ways. Relentlessly covered as many things as we could, not from a distance, not from wire service, but from being involved. So if there was a community meeting, for example, to organize a march, we were there. And Carl Murphy was known for also being a convener.

A young Martin Luther King wrote to my grandfather. We had the letter and said, 'We're trying to organize in the south. We need your help. We need your publication to help us to do that.' This is not Civil Rights Movement, but Booker T. Washington wrote to my great-grandfather, and said, would you say a word about the need to teach Black history in the schools of Baltimore?

He didn't call it Black history, he called it Negro history. So during the Civil Rights Movement, we still had people coming to us and saying, would you help us organize? Would you say something about this? Thurgood Marshall—we have a recording of Thurgood Marshall and my grandfather where they are talking about the Brown versus Board of Education brief.

It's a big reel to reel recording and when we discovered it about, hmm, five years ago, it just said Thurgood. We didn't have anything to listen to it, you know, we didn't have that kind of equipment, but we sent it out and we have this transcript that came back where Thurgood Marshall is asking my grandfather, 'Well, what do you think about that brief? And my grandfather says, oh, I think it's a very fine brief.' So Thurgood Marshall says, 'You can ask me

and I'll tell you anything you need to know about it. But if the boys from the white press call, I don't have any comment.' Now that's on tape. My grandfather recorded everything.

So he was a strong force during the Civil Rights Movement, hand in hand rather with the NAACP and others who took leadership. And so the *AFRO* would be the source, because as I said, we could get the stories that other people can't get. We can still get some stories that other people can't get. We still have people who call us first because they trust the Black press. And it was the same thing during the Civil Rights movement, that the Black press was at the center of that movement.

—beat/music—

**MARK WHITAKER:** In some ways, the stories *behind* the stories the *AFRO* covered could reveal as much—if not more—than the stories themselves.

**Here's Savannah Wood again.**

**Savannah Wood:** Where to even begin. I'll start with the sports. Sam Lacy, of course, is like our guy at the *AFRO*. He's a hall of famer, he covered Jackie Robinson breaking the color line, but he covered it, as I understand it, from on top of the press box because the press box was not integrated yet.

And so there's all of these like very interesting stories about how they actually even were able to tell these stories, and just the trials and tribulations that the reporters had to go through in order to get to that point. That to me, is fascinating and you don't necessarily see so much of that in the paper.

Occasionally they'll run a story about how they did the story. For instance, there was this effort to desegregate Route 40 in Baltimore. This was right around the time that African nations were gaining their independence and so they were sending, you know, new dignitaries to Washington, D.C., who would travel along Route 40 and try to get service and be denied. And this was very embarrassing for the U.S. at that time. But the U.S. still had de facto segregation policies in place. And so the *AFRO* actually sent reporters dressed as dignitaries from a made-up country in Africa, and they tried to see if they could go get some service or not. And so they wrote about those types of things so that you do get the behind the scenes stories occasionally, and they're fascinating. So it just helps to tell a bit more about what these journalists had to go through in order to even cover issues that were of importance to Black readers.

And with the women's pages, I think they're absolutely fascinating. You get so many details about people's comings and goings. So and so is visiting from Newport. And so you understand a bit about like Black leisure through those pages. But what I think is also an interesting subtext that doesn't necessarily come through is that even though these might be social hours, nobody really knows what kind of organizing might be going on in there because women are always organizing something and so you might think it's just a tea, but on the back end of it, there's a big push that's happening in terms of social justice that might just not have been covered directly.

So I think you get some of those little tidbits in those pages as well. And you might be able to piece that together more fully with other types of archives, of personal journals, personal papers, club papers, those type of things might fill in the gaps there.

**Mark Whittaker:** But that's also where you would get photographs of weddings, [Yes] sweet sixteens or other sort of rituals.

**Savannah Wood:** Just the goings on of life, you know? It's really a wide range of all of this history that was covered by the *AFRO*.

**MARK WHITAKER:** As for coverage of major world events, we'd be remiss not to mention the *AFRO*'s historic coverage of World War II, to which its reporters also brought their particular life experience and lens.

Here's Toni.

**Frances Murphy Draper:** We had the largest contingency of war correspondents to cover World War II, including one female, my mother's sister, my aunt Elizabeth Murphy Moss, the first Black female war correspondent. Now, if you read her story, you'll know that she became ill in Europe and was not able to complete her tour there.

But] the journalists on the ground, and they had jackets that said press, they also went to the front lines. And they emphasized that they were treated better in Europe than they were in the United States and gave firsthand accounts of that.

So it was yes, coverage of what was happening in the war, but it was more than that. It was coverage of the people that they met in Normandy whenever they could get off the base. Coverage of how they were treated, coverage of the camaraderie. And I find this part fascinating, when they came across a soldier from a geographic area that the *AFRO* covered, like Baltimore, the person would say, my name is so and so, I live... and give us their address. And when you go back to Baltimore, would you call my mother? Would you stop by my mother's house and let her know that you saw me and I'm okay? That's what makes the *AFRO* different. We humanized stories and sure enough, when those reporters came back, I'm a hundred percent confident that they made that call to that service person's home.

And the same thing with lynching. We covered lynching so much differently than other media. If the white media covered lynching, their coverage was always from looking at what the Black person did. Our coverage was always from, we sat down at the kitchen table with a mom who could tell us about her son in the midst of the tragedy. So we put a human face to people in our community, which changes, we hope, people's perception of the news. Because if you don't have that, you'll just have a limited lens, no pun intended, but you'd have a limited lens around who people are and what their contributions are. And doesn't mean we sugarcoated it if they had done something wrong, but in a lot of cases people were lynched, not because they did something wrong, they were lynched just because they were Black.

**MARK WHITAKER:** This all connects to the necessity of original photojournalism at the *AFRO*.

**Frances Murphy Draper:** African Americans were not represented well in wire service. We still are not to a certain extent, except for major, major national kinds of news, right? So to do the coverage that we did and still do, we needed images that accurately reflected the people that we were writing about. And we were intentional about that, taking photographs. We have people now who will come to our archives and mention something from their life. And more than likely we have a photograph. So you didn't have to be famous and you didn't have to do something horrendous, you didn't have to be a household name to get your picture in the *AFRO*. So it's important. Representation matters.

So visual storytelling has always been crucial. And we had the privilege of having our own dark room and our own photography staff, which was huge. And so we sent photographers all over the world to cover important events. Whether it was the unfortunate murder of Emmett Till or Jesse Owens running in the Olympics. They were photojournalists of sorts, but it wasn't like the day where you say to report, okay, whip out your cell phone and go in and take your picture. No, these were people who had honed the craft of photography, could develop their own negatives, right, and get them in on time. And had a passion for capturing the unusual photograph or the one of most interest. Because we didn't write just generic stories, we didn't just pick up stories. We had wire services, of course we did, but we didn't just pick up stories. We had to answer the 'so what?'

And sometimes the 'so what?' was answered by the photograph, you know, people, we say it as cliché, but a picture is worth a thousand words. The picture that our photographer took from the top of the monument of the March on Washington is priceless. The pictures that our photographer took at Nelson Mandela's inauguration when we sent him to South Africa are priceless. Because the wire services focused on Mr. Mandela's formal inauguration, on stage, stilted, you'd see the same photo all over the world. We had pictures of the villagers and then we found out who people were and we put their names under the picture.

So our archives currently have three million photographs, that's our best guess, some were published and many were not, just because we only needed one, but somebody took 10 or 20 or whatever. Some of the listeners may be too young to remember, but you had to use up that whole roll of film before you could develop it.

–beat/music–

**MARK WHITAKER:** The *AFRO* continued to be a beacon for the Black community throughout the 1960s, which of course saw the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964. And for the struggle for true equality and opportunity that persists to this day. Yet moving into the 1970s and 80s, the *AFRO*'s homebase of Baltimore began to change, along with cities and communities like it around the country.

I asked Savannah about this, as well.

**Mark Whittaker:** I saw a talk that you gave and you made a remark and you kind of censored yourself in the middle of making it. [Oh, no. [Laughs]] And this is something that I think a lot of us who have spent time studying this period end up feeling, but I think the way you put it was what was lost in, you know, the push for integration, Civil Rights and so forth.

[Mm-hmm.] So when you hear the term segregation, this was an era of segregation. There was a lot of injustice and hardship that came with that. But it's hard when you look back at these communities, particularly in the north where folks had migrated from the south. Baltimore is interesting because you have both migrants and then you have people who, you know, are descendants of slaves from that area. But for all the things they had to deal with, the life was full, it was vibrant. It was, you know, pretty self-sufficient in a lot of ways. A lot of those same neighborhoods today are in really rough shape, have never really come back.

It's very, very hard not to study those neighborhoods in this period, particularly through, you know, the resources of the Black press that covered it and, and not feel a sense of loss. So I think you were trying to make that point and then you said, oh, I'm gonna get myself in trouble...

**Savannah Wood:** ...I just always.. **Mark Whittaker:** why don't you get yourself in trouble now?

**Savannah Wood:** ... get myself in trouble. I do. But no, I mean it's, I think this has become a more widely accepted viewpoint also that there was a lot lost in integration. And we can say that out loud. You know, it's true, it's true. And part of the reason why I hesitate on it to a certain degree is because I can see how involved the *AFRO* has been historically as an engine for integration, particularly Carl Murphy, who was the second publisher, my great-grandfather, was very actively involved in the fight to integrate public schools, for instance. And this is their cause of that era. And so I know that it was a huge push and felt really optimistic at the time. I think all of that optimism was important and probably, you know, not naive even, you know, it was just like, yes, we did it.

Looking back after having been through so much as a people in this country, you can see that every single win comes with this massive backlash. And so we see that as a historical cycle happening over and over and over again. So there certainly was something that was lost in integrating, but I think the initial goal was noble. And I think part of it was economic also. You know, it's like we're paying taxes, we should have access to these things. There should be an equal representation in these spaces. All of that makes perfect sense, except for the fact that none of the systems are truly operating logically. It's always operating from a logic of keeping you below. So they're gonna find another way to change the rules and keep you where you're supposed to be.

**Mark Whittaker:** The new Jim Crow.

**Savannah Wood:** Yeah. Over and over again.

**Mark Whittaker:** You know, I think it was also this perfect storm. When you look at the great migration, Black folks, you know, by the millions migrated from the South looking for employment, looking for a little more freedom. They settled in these cities in the north, they survived the Depression. They fought in the war, they supported World War II. They thought they would come back from the war to even more opportunity. And just at that moment, those industries went into decline, jobs started to be shipped overseas, white folks fled to the suburbs.

Once these neighborhoods were predominantly Black, they got fewer resources. Urban renewal, often at the beginning, something that people thought [Mm-hmm.] would be a positive,

including some Black leaders. [Mm-hmm.] Ended up, you know, with highways running through these neighborhoods, public housing that ended up further segregating those folks. It wasn't just one thing. [Oh, no, certainly not]. It was a combination of things. [Certainly not], but they ended up ironically leaving a lot of these in neighborhoods worse off...

**Savannah Wood:** Yeah.

**Mark Whittaker:** ...even than they had been in the pre-World War II period.

**Savannah Wood:** I would agree with that. And one other thing that comes to mind that we haven't mentioned, and speaking of photojournalism, there's a great book by the photographer, Jamel Shabazz. And the title of it is just *A Time Before Crack*.

**Mark Whittaker:** Yeah.

**Savannah Wood:** And the images are so vibrant, so beautiful. New York City before the ravages of crack, you know, like that is a whole other era that we haven't even gotten to.

**Mark Whittaker:** And then that begets mass incarceration. [Hello?] Which begets. Which begets, yeah...

**Savannah Wood:** There are so many things to fight for and to try to make better. You can't know what the repercussions are gonna be. You can't know every move that everyone else is going to make. So they were doing what they thought was best at the time. But I do feel that there was something lost in that era, for sure.

**Mark Whittaker:** But even from an image point of view, I think it's still instructive and inspiring to look back and see what these neighborhoods were [Mm-hmm.] at a certain time.

**Savannah Wood:** Yes.

**Mark Whittaker:** You know, because there are a lot of people who only know these areas, you know, in the last half century, who probably would never have imagined [Right.] that they were as, you know, lively and vibrant, and full of life as a community [Mm-hmm.] as they were in that era.

**Savannah Wood:** Yeah it makes the images so much more important and it's part of the reason why we are so invested in making sure that people have access to these photographs so that everybody else can see them too.

One of the things that's really special about the *AFRO* archives is that so many of the captions that ran with the images are actually pasted to the back. So, you know, from a preservation standpoint, it's not the best thing for the photographs to have glue on the back of them. But from the information standpoint, it's really fascinating because then you have within the caption information about the people who are photographed there, what street they're on, potentially, what building they're in, what the event was.

There's so many contextual details that are there. So you have all this rich information. So when we have young people come into the collection, for instance, one of the things that we'll do is be like, did you grow up here? Is your family from here? Okay, what's your parent's name? What's your grandparent's name? And we'll look up their family and see if their family's in the collection. A lot of times we'll find somebody, but if they're not from here, we'll find something that they can relate to there.

And the images of these places might be familiar, but also very different. And so to be able to see it in that light, you can start to imagine what's possible in this space or what has already been. And I think that's really powerful. So that's a huge reason for me to want to make these collections more accessible more broadly, because you have to see something else to be able to imagine what could be.

**MARK WHITAKER: For Savannah, it's critical that artists have access to the AFRO archive, too.**

**Savannah Wood:** My entry point into archival work came through art. So I've seen firsthand the ways that artists look at history, which can be just different than a historian might. They're making different kinds of connections. They're making connections about material and about more, like, humanistic things often. And so for me, I think it's really interesting to see, what is it like to invite an artist into a historical archive, but one that is so focused on documenting people.

What might an artist find in there? What's gonna set off their imagination? What connections will they make? What histories will they unearth? They're gonna be attracted to things for different reasons than a historical researcher who's writing a book. And so I think that's also just another entry point.

And that they might find just unanswered questions in these collections that they just didn't ever know about. So a visual cue can be the portal into that inquiry. And I also think it's just important to support creative people wherever you can.

**MARK WHITAKER: The AFRO persists as a media organization as well, with Toni at the helm. The publication—which also produces newsletters and podcasts—continues to publish original reporting in service of its original mission, which, again, is to:**

**Frances Murphy Draper:** ...expose injustice and expose corruption and to lift up what we would call today Black excellence.

So I'm passionate about that. I'm also passionate about collaborating with other Black newspapers in this current generation. So we have a digital startup called Word in Black. I chair that board as 10 legacy papers have come together to make sure that we push out our news collectively in a way that's digestible and searchable because in this political climate regardless of people's political bent, we need credible information, we need trusted information. We need to recognize that there is what appears to be an organized attack against free and independent media. So when we say we want critical, valid information, we need to support those organizations that we believe present that.

**MARK WHITAKER:** Both *AFRO* Charities and the *AFRO* American newspapers will soon share a home in Old West Baltimore's historic Upton Mansion. In addition to housing the archives, a public reading room, and the newspaper's staff and operations, a gallery will host regular exhibitions engaging the collection, as well as family programming.

There's a reciprocal effect happening with the Upton Mansion project, too. Toni talked earlier about how the strength of Baltimore's Black community is what allowed the *AFRO* to thrive in its earliest days. Now, she and Savannah also see the Upton Mansion as a way to return the favor and rebuild something of what was lost in the second half of the 20th century.

**Savannah Wood:** I mean, we talked a bit about integration, segregation, historic Black neighborhoods, like the vibrancy of them. So Upton, where the Upton Mansion is located, which we're renaming the Martha E. Murphy Research Institute after an early investor in the business,

**Mark Whittaker:** That was John H. Murphy's wife who [Yes.] Who, donated, what was it, a thousand dollars?

**Savannah Wood:** \$200.

**Mark Whittaker:** \$200 from her portion of her father's estate.

**Savannah Wood:** Exactly.

**Mark Whittaker:** And so now she's getting the payoff.

**Savannah Wood:** Absolutely. She deserves it. She birthed all those children too. Come on. So Upton was a really, like, thriving Black community for a very long time. It is a place where John and Martha lived. Thurgood Marshall grew up in the area. All of these luminary figures from Baltimore were in this part of Baltimore. And so it has this really rich Black history. Like many places that have had a rich Black history in urban centers over the years, it's suffered from intense disinvestment.

I believe it's estimated that one in three homes is vacant in the area. Vacant properties are of course a really big issue in Baltimore in particular. And so this building that we are restoring has been vacant since 2006, and it's a huge property that sits on an acre in this urban setting, on top of a hill. It's a very complicated project to pull off for a lot of different reasons. It's on the National Register of Historic Places. It's a Baltimore City landmark. So it has all this red tape around it also, what you can and cannot do there. So it's a challenge for sure to restore this place, but there's really not many other organizations or institutions that could do it, I don't think. The specific history that the *AFRO* has in that neighborhood, the specific ties to that community, the goodwill that it has from all these different places. The desire for the city to have more vacants be redeveloped. All of those things are factors in the success of this project so far. And then the fact that it will be used as a site for learning about neighborhoods like these, I think also just adds to that.

And part of what we've seen so far, is that there is development that's happening because we've decided on this location. So to have a big site like this remain vacant, becomes a problem for the rest of the neighborhood because why would anybody else invest there if you're gonna be looking at this eyesore forever? So for us to make this commitment to this project means that other places nearby will also start to pop up.

So we've already seen that across the street. There's three single family homes that are vacant that are being developed for home ownership. And then in the neighborhood, there's all this other push from the Upton Planning Committee, which is our neighborhood community development corporation to do similar projects with home development.

And so there's a lot happening right now. So we're hoping, we're hoping that other people will follow our lead, and start to develop nearby.

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**MARK WHITAKER:** As we all eagerly await Upton Mansion's projected 2026 opening, I had one more question for Savannah about another critical role that the *AFRO's* archive can play right now...

**Mark Whittaker:** It's pretty clear that we are in the midst of a war on Black history right now. A government that wants to control what kids learn in schools, that wants to control what they can see in museums, including in our nation's capital, what books can be read. You talked about the cycle of progress and backlash, but what do you see as the importance of the work you are doing and the archive that you oversee in that context?

**Savannah Wood:** It's absolutely critical, the work that we're doing right now and it's important that we're independent. It also is challenging that we're independent. Because we're not attached to a university, we don't have a parent university to tell us what we can or cannot say. We don't have them saying, 'Your grant funding has been rescinded because our grant funding has been rescinded.' So we have a little bit more flexibility than some other archives, I would say. But it also makes it a challenge because we need everybody to help maintain our independence, so that we can continue to do the work the way that we're doing it.

You know, there's the potential that it puts a target on our back because we hold this history that cannot be refuted. You know, it's just, it's there, it's written, it's in all of the documentation. So if you try to scrub wall plaques, if you try to scrub like the, the information in these institutions at the Smithsonian or elsewhere, that's fine. Do that if you want to. We actually have the receipts and we also have the documentation of what the Smithsonian in the past has licensed from us to use. So we know what it used to say because we have it, you know? So it's like we have the documentation and I think it's really important that we let people know that.

So if they're looking for other resources, maybe you can't teach a particular curriculum in your classroom, but you can bring your class to our site potentially. I don't know. You know, like maybe there's a workaround or it's extra credit if you can go to a cultural institution in your neighborhood that might be teaching something else. It's just an alternative site, it's an alternative place for people to come to, and I think that's really important.

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**VO:** Thank you to Savannah Wood and Toni Draper. To learn more about Savannah's work, the *AFRO* archive, and for updates on the Upton Mansion project, please visit [afrocharities.org](http://afrocharities.org). You can read and subscribe to the *AFRO* itself at [afro.com](http://afro.com). Please also check out the site Toni mentioned earlier, [wordinblack.com](http://wordinblack.com), where you can find a range of great content from Black publications across the U.S.

**Black Photojournalism** is a production of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. For more information on this podcast and the Black Photojournalism exhibition, please visit [carnegieart.org](http://carnegieart.org). We'll see you next time.

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