Narrator: Dr. John Fleming

Interviewer: Dr. Robby Luckett

Transcriber: Al Wheat

Project: AAAM Oral History

Date: September 14, 2021

Location: Virtual via Zoom Platform

[00:00:03.00] Q: My name is Robby Luckett. I'm professor of history and director of the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University. Today is September 14, 2021. It's approximately 10:36 AM central time. I am joined by Dr. John Fleming. Dr. Fleming, will you state and spell your name for us, for the record?

Fleming: John E. Fleming. J-O-H-N. Fleming is F-L-E-M-I-N-G.

Q: Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Fleming: Yes.

Q: Let's begin with some biographical information, some background info. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you're from, how you grew up, your family background, your education, those sorts of things?

Fleming: Well, I was born in Morganton, North Carolina, in 1944. I grew up in that small town, went to school there…segregated schools, all of my public-school education. I graduated in 1962. I will just mention that doing the sit ins in Greensboro, several months after the first sit ins by A&T students, we were sitting in in my little hometown at the Wolworths and

successfully integrated the public accommodations in the town, the school itself was not integrated until 1965. By that time, I was at Berea College in Kentucky. I received my BA degree from Berea and started graduate school at the University of Kentucky and completed my graduate education at Howard University in Washington, DC, 1974.

Q: And what was your graduate schoolwork in?

Fleming: I majored in history. I concentrated in slavery and the Reconstruction eras. I had a minor in African history, I had gone to the Peace Corps two years…let's see, from 1967 to '69, and got very much interested in African history, which is why I had an African history minor.

Q: Were you in Africa during the Peace Corps?

Fleming: Yes, I was in Malawi, southeastern part of the country bordered by Southern Rhodesia and Mozambique. Malawi had just received its independence in 1964 and I arrived as a part of our agricultural group, first one to be in Malawi, in 1967.

Q: You mentioned 1961, the sit-in movement that North Carolina A and T students, and really your college years, and even into the Peace Corps, you're kind of coming of age at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. I'm wondering how the Civil Rights Movement informed your kind of professional choices in your career?

Fleming: It had a direct impact. When I got to Kentucky, one of the things that we discovered was that there was a block of stores connected to Boone Tavern Hotel that did not cater to African Americans, Black students; and the bus station had a restaurant, and there were several of the restaurants, and it was not long after arriving on campus that we were demonstrating. We felt like the least the college could do was - because they were renting the space - was to insist that they served all students; all people, especially the students. While at Berea, we organized a busload, plus four or five station wagons, of kids to go down to participate in the March from Selma to Montgomery. That was a very enlightening experience. I then became more active in Kentucky politics. We organize a march on Frankfurt supporting the effort to pass a public accommodation law. When I graduated from Berea, I got a call from the director of the Kentucky Human Rights Commission asking me if I was interested in working for him, and I didn't have a job at the time, I graduated a semester early and really didn't plan for my future very well, so when I got the offer I went to Frankfurt, worked for the Commission until I went in the Peace Corps in '67. I got to know people like John Lewis and Roy Ennis and other members of CORE and NAACP, so it did have an impact on my life. I was the highest ranking non-white person in the southern region of Malawi. My job was as an extension aids officer for the Ministry of Agriculture, so I had a lot of conflicts with expatriates, especially those from Rhodesia and South Africa. I really had a problem with being an African country and then still having to deal with racism. So yes, I think the Civil Rights movement had a direct impact on my life. When I came back, I worked for Marion Barry, who was one of the organizers of SNCC, he had started a jobs program for the hardcore unemployed. Then I worked for the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, so you could see the pattern that I had established from the early '60s, to the mid- '70s.

[00:07:27.00] Q: So you come back from the Peace Corps to work with Marion Barry and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. I'm guessing that work was based out of Washington, D.C., and what was that work?

Fleming: Yes, the Youth Pride Incorporated was started by Marion Barry and several other of his former colleagues from SNCC, and what they wanted to do was to develop a jobs training program for the hardcore unemployed, those people who had been to prison who were ex-addicts, even people who were still on drugs, they put them on methadone, and we had seven levels of training from entry level, that began by teaching people how to get up and go to work on time, to developing management skills. The Pride Incorporated had several businesses including service stations, and we trained people how to operate a service station and to do management of the same. We were there in the midst of the 1970 riots in DC. Pride Incorporated was located at 16th and U Street, and the riots were in the 14th Street corridor, so we were right in the midst of those rights that occurred at the time. And then my involvement with the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, I was a program officer, and I was responsible for federal evaluation. I was in the federal evaluation section, and I handled complaints dealing with the military Selective Services and the Veterans Administration and the Pentagon. I was just thinking about the day, looking at the program from 9-11 at the Pentagon, how things have changed. When I would go to the Pentagon to work with the equal opportunity officer, who was next door to the Secretary of Defense, I would go in with a white guy, I had a big afro, and the white guy - my supervisor - we went through the metal detectors and with no problems, but I was always stopped and given an extra search, but even then that was just a [unknown] of

security, considering what they have today. The other part of my job consisted of looking at how federal agencies enforced the civil rights legislation, and so we did annual reports and studies that were commissioned by the Commission and they were released as public documents, and I did that for about a year and a half before starting graduate school.

Q: So from there, you went into graduate school at Howard, correct?

Fleming: M'hmm.

Q: And what were you studying at Howard? Was that also history?

Fleming: Yes. I was a history major at Berea College, and I studied history all through the PhD program. It's interesting that back in the turn of the century, Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, was a graduate of Berea and I was the second African American to major in history at Berea. There were 60 years difference between when Carter G. Woodson was there and graduated than when I was there and graduated. I initially was going to study at the University of Chicago under John Hope Franklin or even considered C. Vann Woodward at Yale but I decided that, coming from Africa and having been away from the Civil Rights Movement for several years, I wanted to be in the thick of things, so I decided to move to D.C., which at that time was 70% African American and wanted to go to a majority African American school and Rayford Logan was still on the faculty so that was a good choice for me because I became his research assistant and worked with him on several publications, including the *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*.

Q: What was your career path upon leaving graduate school at Howard?

Fleming: Well, the Ford Foundation had just awarded Howard…well, when I started graduate school, it provided a number of fellowships for graduate students to get their PhDs and in my class was James Early, who had a distinguished career at the Smithsonian, and Bernice Reagan, among others. And so after I completed my doctorate, Ford had funded a research institute - the Institute for the Study of Educational Policy - and it was located on Dumbarton campus off of Connecticut Avenue, and I was employed there for five and a half years as a senior fellow and I was the senior fellow in history. I wrote several books; one, *The Lengthening Shadow of Slavery*, which was the history of African American efforts to obtain an education, and then the second was a major report called "The Case for Affirmative Action for Blacks in Higher Education." One evening after a board meeting, the president of Central State University and I were talking and he was telling me about the Ohio Historical Society wanting, or being charged with, developing an African American museum and asked me if I was interested and I told him, yes, I was, and he picked my resume and I didn't hear anything for a year and then I got an invitation, in the spring of 1980, to come out for an interview, and I was interviewed and offered the job at the end of the day, which is how I got into museum work.

[00:15:34.00] Q: Well, you just prefigured my next question, what was it that led you to that. So what was that job title and description, what were you doing when you came into the museum field?

Fleming: I was director of the project; it was supposed to be a national federal state partnership to develop the National Afro American Museum and Cultural Center to be located at Wilberforce. The state had purchased the old campus as the site, but before it's built a new campus after the 1974 tornado. So the state purchased the old site, we had three buildings on campus and we eventually built a new building. I worked out of the Ohio Historical Society for the first six or seven years until the museum was open. I did not have a background in museum work, but the society felt like if they could hire a person who had a good background in African American history, then I could basically learn on the job, which is how most people entered the field. The whole notion of a museum studies program is very recent, and so people had their academic qualifications and then learned on the job, and so I think it was a good experience for me, because I started off with a research assistant and one secretary and we ended up doing everything from education programs to working with architects, exhibit designers, and even cleaning the office, emptying trash cans, so that's nothing that a person hired in the museum field today that I haven't done, in terms of the variety of work that has been involved in my early career. But I've been a museum director all of my life and have had opportunity to develop several museums around the country, so I feel very fortunate from that perspective.

Q: Well, I do want to talk about those experiences opening museums around the country, especially the one here in Jackson, the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, but I would like to know what the experience was like opening that first museum in Wilberforce. What was it like to do that work then?

Fleming: Well, I would say that it was pioneering work. By the 1960s, there were only a handful of Black museums around the country: Hampton, the DuSable Museum in Chicago, the Afro American Museum in Detroit, those were the early ones, and then came the studio museum, Anacostia. So by the 1970s, there were probably two or three dozen museums, enough to start the Association of African American Museums, or the African American Museum Association, which was the name at that time. So we all were new to the field, none of us had worked in museums; there was Rowena Stewart, who came out of Connecticut, Barry Gaither in Massachusetts, John Kennard at the Anacostia Museum, and so we did a lot of talking, communicating, and supporting each other and advising each other. I had the resources of the Ohio Historical Society and it's interesting that, in looking back and reflecting on that time period, they had a lot of resources, but they never really came forward to say "do this, this, and this." If I needed and knew what to ask for, then I got what I needed, but I had to ask for it. And, for example, I didn't know anything about script writing…I thought that do a major research project and develop a storyline for the museum and that would be the script that designers could use. And so after working for several years developing the storyline, I said okay I've finished the script and only to be informed that that was not a script and at that point they gave me a sample of what a script looked like, which they could have done at the beginning, but they didn't do. But it was a trial and error, we were developing a national museum basically on state money. Congress had authorized a national museum at Wilberforce and set up a commission, but never really funded the Commission that operated for a couple of years, and then sort of went defunct, never issued a report because there were certain members on the commission that did not feel like there should be a national museum located at Wilberforce or in Ohio for that matter, many thought it ought to be in Washington. But we

proceeded and we developed a national collection of artifacts that allowed us to do our first exhibit called "From Victory to Freedom: African American Life in the 1950s" and we thought that was an important decade to deal with because it was a transition period from the post-war 1940s to the pre-Black Power movement in the 1960s, and so we really took a close look at what life was like for Black people during that transition period in which the families were more or less intact, Black institutions like the church and the schools were still intact, and they played a very important role in the African American community, especially in the Civil Rights Movement, so I thought that was a significant exhibit and was our opening exhibit. The President of Senegal and the Governor of Ohio participated in the groundbreaking and then we had the opening in the fall of 1988 and museum has been open ever since then and I spent nineteen years working at Wilberforce before I'm being invited to become director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, and I worked on that project, planning and getting it underway, before becoming the director of the Cincinnati Museum Center, in charge of the natural history and children's museum, as well as their science program and library and education program. That was, I think, my most demanding job because there was so many varied operations that I had to deal with, but it was challenging and interesting and I continued that position until 2007 and I called myself retiring and working on the "America I Am: the African American Experience," which was a 12,000 square foot traveling exhibition that opened at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, and then traveled for two years. And while that project was still underway, I became the director for the International African American Museum in Charleston and worked on that project. Completed most of the planning for it until we ran out of money, and they mothballed the project until the mayor eventually raised $100 million, and the project is now scheduled to open next year. But I went

from there in 2011 to the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson. I thought that, up until that time, that was the most important project that I have ever worked on, because of the significance of the content. The team that we put together met with the Black Caucus of the legislature and the member of the Supreme Court, African American member, and our marching orders was very simple, it was to tell the truth, and there were no other stipulations that we had and I thought that was very significant, because I think that we were able to tell a true and accurate story as to what happened in Mississippi. It was a very difficult project that I worked on, because we were talking to people who had experienced some pretty bad atrocities over time, and so I just had to learn to deal with it as an intellectual project, as opposed to dealing with it as an African American researching and writing about some of these horrendous experiences that people had. And I think that the museum was very successful and it continues to be successful and from there, I went on to become the director for the National Museum of African American Music in Nashville. I thought that project might take four, at the most, five years; it took seven. We had our grand opening in June of this year. It's turned out to be more than a music museum, it is a history museum with a music theme, and what we did was to look at five genres of music and to show the historical context for the development of this music and it has seventeen interactives and seven films, so it is also entertaining. People get an education whether they realize it or not just going through the museum, and I think they find it to be a very enjoyable experience while learning a lot about African American history. And that project, I think, it’s turned out to be successful and I’m very proud of the work that I’ve done there, but it is a different project from the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and if I had to rate the most significant museum that I’ve worked on, I would say it was the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum.

[00:28:45.00] Q: You talked about the mandate that you had with the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum to tell the truth and you've been at museums where you've told stories and narratives that are laden with historical trauma for people, you mentioned kind of the emotional reaction people have to telling these stories. I'm wondering what your philosophy is in terms of approaching that kind of work, those kinds of complicated topics, a lot of us in this museum field, particularly Black museums are faced with telling those kinds of stories and interpreting them, how do you do that work and what's your philosophy there?

Fleming: Well, I guess my guiding philosophy is to tell as accurate story as possible, no matter where it leads you. When we were looking at the materials from the Sovereignty Commission, and I really have to give the state of Mississippi credit for opening up that archives, not just for us but for the general public, because it really shows just how much effort the state put in to keeping Mississippi segregated and the extent individuals would go to. So, we didn't really have to interpret that history, we allowed the evidence to tell the story, which I think is much more effective. But we also ran across a number of letters from African Americans in Mississippi who had volunteered to serve as spies for the commission and so I guess we were thinking…well, some people raised the question, do we want to portray these people, some of whom were still living, in an accurate and honest way, and to me that was no choice. People made decisions about things that they would do and I think that they had to live with it and live with the consequences and so we showed the heroes and the villains, no matter whether they were Black or white. I think that the overall theme for the exhibit was “This Little Light of Mine” and we struggled to find efforts, especially in the ‘40s and early ‘50s, of people wanting

to let their light shine, and we thought it was important to show that there were whites who were against segregation and who were in favor of integration, but they were few and far between until you get into the late '50s and early '60s, as you know, and then people were a little more willing to be cooperative. But the state had put together a system that repressed any efforts to break the color line, colored areas, and I think that we're all faced with choices…when I was working on the Underground Railroad Freedom Center and we were looking at the slave trade in Africa and we had to tell an accurate story of the role that Africans themselves played in in the slave trade, that if Africans had not been an integral part of the slave trade, then it would not have been as massive as it turned out to be. So yeah, there are always choices, and I think that it is incumbent upon historians and museum curators to tell the truth, no matter where it lands. Back in the summer, I was asked to give a keynote address for the 234th anniversary of the Northwest Ordinance in Marietta, Ohio, and I knew that they wanted this to be a celebration, and wanted to celebrate the fact that slavery was barred from the Northwest territory, but there were too many things going on in the country relating to Black Lives Matter movement, not wanting to teach an accurate history in public school systems, the critical race theory was being denounced, so my presentation basically was yes, the founding documents were ideals that were established by the founding fathers, but it's taken us 200 and some years to try to fulfill those ideals and that it has not been a steady course. One of moving forward ahead, it has been taking steps forward and maybe sometimes two steps backwards, and certainly we're going through a period now, with voter suppression and the like where we're not fulfilling those ideals that were established by the founding fathers. So, I think that was sort of the gist of what I had to say, in spite of the fact that I was speaking in a county

that voted 78% for Trump. So, the fact that no one in the audience got up and walked out, I felt like the presentation was successful.

[00:35:46.00] Q: Well, along those lines, I wonder if you could describe resistance you've met in telling those stories from both sides, from both kind of conservative, as well as kind of more progressive corners, from whites, from Blacks. There were a lot of people who doubted that the state of Mississippi could build a Civil Rights museum that told the truth. So I figured you have some experience in dealing with the resistance to telling these stories.

Fleming: I think that there were two types of resistance…and I also worked on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and one of the things that I told those people, as well as the staff in Mississippi, was that it was very important to document the role that whites played during this period and that, to the extent possible, you know, they should develop an oral history program, to the extent that people were willing to be interviewed, and of course now people who fought against integration and may have been members of the Klan or some other groups, are reluctant to come forward, but that is a part of our history, and I think that we have to understand what motivated these people and what they believed in and why. So that was, to me, just as important as documenting those who were actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement. So, I would say that there has been resistance on the part of whites who actively opposed integration but that shouldn't stop people from trying to document those stories, and I think the Sovereignty Commission records are written record of actions taken, so Mississippi, in one sense, has a heads up on a state like Alabama, where those documents are not available, or at least have not appeared to be available. The reluctance of African Americans in Mississippi to this project was

extremely high. You mentioned that many people felt like the state of Mississippi - and this was a state project - could not, or would not, tell a true and accurate story, and they were reluctant. We interviewed people from northern Mississippi all the way down to Biloxi, and many of these people were what were called foot soldiers, had been actively involved, and initially they were reluctant to be interviewed. There were a number of white members of our team during the interviews, and these people had to be convinced that we were going to tell a true and accurate story, and even when they were willing to be interviewed, many were reluctant to come forward with artifacts. Why entrust a state that had suppressed you with some of the most valuable things in your possession? So up until almost the very opening of the museum, we were still searching for artifacts and slowly they did come forward, and the good thing is that once the museum opened and people had a chance to see it, then they became true believers that this has turned out to be a good project, and I'm assuming that many more artifacts have come forward than we were able to receive initially. The other positive thing, I think, was putting this together as a joint museum, the Two Mississippi Museums, and redoing the old state museum. I remember being in Mississippi in Jackson for the Farish Street conservation-restoration project and going by the state museum and seeing first graders run out of the museum carrying Confederate flags and I said how sad it is that little Black children don't understand the significance of the flag, and I did go through the museum at the time, and it did not tell an accurate picture, or a comprehensive picture, of Mississippi, and when museum was redone, I was very pleased with the way that the museum has incorporated all of the stories of Mississippi. So, taken together, I think those two museums are a an excellent source for learning about the history of Mississippi, learning about a true history of Mississippi.

Q: Shifting gears a little bit, what are you doing these days?

Fleming: Just before we started the zoom call, I was working editing the first draft of my Peace Corps memoir that I had finished the first draft about a couple of weeks ago, and I'm now doing the editing. So, I have that, which I hope to get published either the end of the year or early next year. I'm working with the board of the Museum for the Peace Corps Experience plan for Washington D.C., and I'm still active on the board of the American Association with State and Local History, I'm the immediate past chair, and that has been taking a lot of time, as well as serving on the board of Berea College in Kentucky. Those are some major projects I'm currently working on. And I hope to get around, one day, to doing more research and writing about my museum experience. I did a fairly large article for the *Public Historian* some couple of years ago, and I would like to expand on that to make it a little more comprehensive, and then I do projects from time to time as I'm called upon.

Q: I'm wondering, over the course of your career, what are some of the biggest changes you've seen in how the museum field has evolved? Of course, we now have the experience of being in a post-COVID world, which is forced some major evolution in a short period of time, but what are some of the biggest changes you've seen in the evolution of museum work?

Fleming: I think moving from a few dozen museums to…I heard that they're around 400 African American museums and historic sites and around the country; that's a tremendous number. Seeing the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington open; seeing significant museums, like the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, the

Maryland African American Museum…these museums are large, substantial, they are well done, they are well run, and it's a long way from some of the storefronts that we called museums back in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and we're seeing more and more African Americans who are professionally trained. In some instances, I think that some of these museums are more integrated than mainstream museums, for example, the one in Washington certainly has a substantial number of non-African Americans working there. I think that we've made great progress in terms of the quality of exhibitions that are being produced. I think the greatest impact that anything has had on the museum movement, as well as American society generally, has been the Black Lives Matter movement. It has made organizations reassess, in terms of its commitment to equality and equity. You have a state, like the Alabama Department of Archives and History that issued a statement, not only in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, but a statement outlining its role in terms of perpetuating segregation, perpetuating inequality through its own state actions, and I think that's unprecedented. Other thing is the removal of Confederate statues and monuments and the latest one being the Robert E. Lee. I never in my lifetime thought I would see the Robert E. Lee statue, even after some of the other statues came down from Monument Row in Richmond, Robert E. Lee’s remained. I never could understand how this country could tolerate devoting monuments and statues to people who had betrayed the country. So I think that the Black Lives Matter movement has definitely had an impact and has contributed to the statues coming down and contributed to people really assessing just what role they have played and continue to play with perpetuating systemic discrimination. Back in the ‘80s and’ 90s, when I served on such boards as the American Association of Museums, they were always willing to have token Black representation, and I think things have changed to the point where…take, for example, the American Association for State and Local History, I

became, several years ago, their first African American chair of the board and I think that some of the programs and projects initiated by state and local history, even before I came, are getting at some of the roots of the problems that the field has suffered from for a number of years, and trying to be much more comprehensive in terms of telling a more inclusive story for all Americans, not just Black and whites, but Asians, and Hispanics, and the like. I think that this, in spite of what we see in some of the Republican controlled legislatures, I think that this movement will continue, and I think it's one of the bright spots in American history today.

[00:49:17.00] Q: Last set of questions, and you've mentioned the Association of African American Museums, I'm just hoping you'll expand a little bit more on your relationship with that organization over the years and how you've seen it change and grow. And I don't know if you've heard the news, but we've just crossed 1,000 members in the Association of African American Museums this year.

Fleming: Yes, I think Vedet mentioned that to me. I've been working with her over the last five to six months, in terms of strengthening leadership of the Association. Initially, well, the association was formed in 1978. I came in the field in 1980 and immediately became a member, but faced severe hostility from the members because of the project that I was involved in in Ohio; the whole notion that we were going to develop a national African American museum was really attacked and I was attacked personally by members of the of the association and I remember that John Kennard, at a meeting, told the group that "why are you against this project?" Allegedly because they felt like we would siphon off all of the federal dollars into the Wilberforce project and that, later, was translated into opposition to the national D.C. museum.

But John noted, he asked the question “how many of you are now receiving federal dollars?” and the answer was none, so he said “well, they can't take away something that you don't have,” and that he thought that any national museum would do a lot to support other museums around the country, and I think that that has turned out, in terms of the current National African American Museum, I think it's been very supportive of the association and other museums. AAMA was doing well in the 1980s and then ran into some difficulties toward the end of the decade. Poor leadership, poor management, lost the executive director Joy Ford Austin, who was our first executive director. There was an effort to move the 1990 meeting from Dallas to Washington and that nearly destroyed the association, but I insisted that Perry Robinson had made a commitment to host the convention in Dallas and I was against moving it to Washington, even if they got Colin Powell to be the keynote speaker, which was the rationale for keeping it in D.C., which didn't make sense to me. We had the meeting in Dallas and the president resigned, so there we were as a national organization with no executive director, no president, and we felt like, unless action was taken before the end of the meeting, that the whole association would just collapse, and we were meeting around the clock trying to come up with a solution and I remember early one morning, around 2:00, I said “well I’m through for the night, I’m going to bed.” And when I got up the next morning, I was greeted by “hello, Mr. president.” They had elected me, by consensus, to be the new President and then voted to move the organization's headquarters to Wilberforce and that lasted for seven years. The Internal Revenue was claiming back taxes owed by the association, people were having their checks garnished, and that was a serious threat to the association. I had a friend who was an accountant who had connections to a legal firm, and based on that advice, they suggested that we dissolve the association, dissolve AAMA, and reconstitute it as the AAAM, which is the current name,

and interesting enough, we did that, that got the Federal Government off our backs, and we were able to start afresh without having the burden of owing some $90,000 plus and interesting enough, very few people knew that we had even changed the name. The name was so similar that it really went unnoticed, and we were able to, over that seven year period, when it was in Wilberforce, we were able to begin having successful conferences, raising money, and in… I think it was 1997…I said, well, I need to step down as president, and people wanted to elect me to another two-year term, and my position was that if I had not, if we had not strengthened the organization so they could operate without me being as head, then what I had done over the last seven years was going to be a failure. So, they did elect a new president and, eventually, you know, we had staff, and eventually the offices were moved from Wilberforce back to D.C. and, as you know, the rest is history. But that was a very critical period in the association's history, and I think many organizations get into financial difficulty that nearly destroy them, but we were able to save the association. We weren't able to get funding from NEH, NEA, and ILMS because we had taken the money and had not have fulfilled the agreement to carry out those projects. I remember Rowena Stewart and I were writing newsletters so that we would have some evidence that we had continued the newsletters and we were struggling to put together final reports for these grants that we had received…and I will say that I think that those federal agencies leaned over backwards in order to help us out and we were able to get those reports done and to be in a position where we could apply for additional funding. So, I think that today the association is stronger than it's ever been. It has excellent leadership on the board, an excellent executive director doing fantastic programs, I can't wait to get back to live, on site conferences. I think that one of the reasons why I felt like the association was so important was during its early years, it was like a refuge for those of us who were working in mainstream

museums and other museums. We’re able to get together to have fellowships, camaraderie, a place, and time to be refreshed to go out and fight the good fight for another year, and I think that's something that the association has done. It's an intangible thing that people may not appreciate, or even realize, but it has been very important in terms of supporting individuals in in the field.

Q: What is your vision for the future of the field now?

Fleming: I would like to see something that I suggested when I was on the board of the American Association of Museums, that mainstream museums, and at the time I suggested curators that they train…if the largest museums would train one African American curator, it could double or triple the number in the field, but that could go across the board: educators directors, etc. Major museums could do this without having a strain on their budget or anything like that and to increase the number of professionals in the field. I think that’s still greatly needed, and especially now that mainstream museums are hiring African Americans and Latinos and others; often times, we see that they take professionals from African American museums who have been trained or had on the job training and they remove them from these Black museums and become part of the mainstream, leaving the museums that have less resources to sort of cope on their own, and I think that this is something that they can do for the field, these mainstream museums. And I think that we're going to see more integration of minorities in mainstream museums and we're going to see more majority people working in African American museums, and I think that's going to be a good thing. And I personally would like to see more cooperation between Black museums and majority white museums, and I think

that the 250th anniversary of the nation is an opportunity to do that. I know that it's being promoted by NEH, and that the American Association with State and Local History is taking the leadership and providing some guidelines for the types of programs and projects that can be initiated, and especially partnerships between various museums, and I think that this would do a great service to the country and would certainly help all types of institutions to develop cooperative programming around the 250th anniversary.

[01:02:59.00] Q: So great segue into my very last question: recommendations, closing comments for people who want to enter into this work, and I will note that my students this semester are reading your article in the *Public Historian*, so this will pair nicely with the students who were in my Introduction to Museums class. So recommendations for people want to enter this work and closing comments?

Fleming: Well, I think that museum work is very, very satisfying. Developing exhibitions and developing museums, all of these things began as an idea, and the whole notion that you can take an idea and, over a few years, turn that idea into three-dimensional form is… it's really gratifying. I initially entered the history field thinking that I would be a history professor, and I would have my summers to travel and do research and the like, but I have no regrets in terms of the work that I've done. I don't think that I could have had a more gratifying career. I would say that, often times, I found that I'm working seven days a week, and ten, twelve hours a day, but it didn't seem to matter because I was always doing something that I loved and enjoyed. And I would see a number of people who would enter the museum profession…I know a couple of museum directors who started off as being lawyers and did not find the law profession very

gratifying, and gave up their career and large salaries to work in the museum profession. You're never going to get rich, but you would have an experience that you could not get in any other field, so I think that I like the idea of young professionals being exposed to museum work, especially through museum studies programs. When I was college aged, I had visited museums, but if you had asked me to name more than three types of jobs in a museum, I would be hard pressed to do so. I suppose director, maybe I knew about a curator, and a janitor, but I didn't know what other opportunities there were. And when I was head of the Cincinnati Museum Center, we had a science program that was first rate, and we had a number of paleontologists who would go out to Montana to a dinosaur dig that we had leased from the federal government, the dinosaurs were 60 million years old and I was invited by a scientist to join the group one summer, and I cannot tell you how elated I was in uncovering a dinosaur claw. I mean, it was just fantastic, and I think that if I had come along at a time when things weren’t so segregated, I think about the opportunities that I could have, the fields that I could have gone into that would have been very gratifying. But I don't regret going into the museum field as a director and I think that I’ve made a small impact on the field - I hope that I have. In terms of the future, to the extent that I can mentor or encourage younger people to go into the field, I certainly plan to do so. I indicated to Vedet that I thought it would be good if the association could match senior people in the field, especially those of us either retired or going into retirement, with our younger colleagues so that they could meet on a regular basis, either at their institutions or where we're located. I think it would do a lot to help pass on knowledge that we've gained over the years to the next generation that's coming up.

Q: I'm sure that Vedet Coleman-Robinson, our executive director of the Association of African American Museums, is already working on that, so I'm confident you'll see that coming, and we do have a vibrant emerging museum professionals organization with the association these days, I'm very happy for that. Dr John Fleming, thank you so much for joining us today, grateful for your time.

Fleming: Thanks for the opportunity to participate in your great program down there. Hopefully I'll get to Jackson sometime in the near future.

Q: I hope so to.