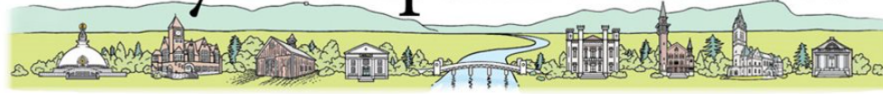


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Events at UMass to mark 20th anniversary of 'Middle Passage' pilgrimage



The Peace Pagoda in Leverett is seen with water lilies blooming in a nearby pond. Recorder Staff/Paul Franz

By [SCOTT MERZBACH](#)
Staff Writer

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AMHERST — Twenty years ago at the Nipponzon Myohoji Peace Pagoda in Leverett, more than 60 people began a 13-month journey to retrace the slave route and to experience many of the painful locations for African-Americans in the United States and on the African continent.

On Thursday, a commemoration of the anniversary of the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage starts when participants in that journey provide some of their original accounts, records and materials to the W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts.

The launch of the Middle Passage archives kicks off a weekend of both public and private events to recall the pilgrimage that began in May 1998 and which is expected to draw people from all corners of the United States, as well as visitors from England, Ghana and India.

Elaine Kenseth, an administrator for the pilgrimage that she describes as a walking prayer, said there is appreciation that UMass is archiving this material and that it is “very poetic” that a walk aimed at confronting slavery and promoting human rights will have material housed in a building named for a sociologist, writer and civil rights activist.

“The university has accepted our archives from the pilgrimage,” Kenseth said. “This launch is a prologue to our reunion.”

The pilgrimage was led by Sister Clare Carter, a Japanese Buddhist nun, and Ingrid Askew, a stage director and activist based in Amherst. When it commenced there were celebrations on the Amherst Town Common and at Pulaski Park in Northampton to honor abolitionist Sojourner Truth.

Kenseth said that the archives will include itineraries, written journals, photos and brochures, along with oral histories.

The public events begin Saturday at 3 p.m. at the theater at the New Africa House on the UMass campus, where a segment of the PBS series “This Far by Faith” that focused on the walk will be shown. This will be followed by a panel discussion by three youths who participated in the pilgrimage and how it changed their lives.

Sunday from 2 to 4 p.m., in the library at New Africa House, John Bracey, an advisor and mentor to the walk and a professor of African-American Studies, will talk about “The Genesis of the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage and the Spirit of Howard Thurman.”

On Memorial Day, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., “Rise Up and Call Their Names” is the title of a sacred ceremony to honor those who have died since the walk, as well as ancestors. This will be held at the Peace Pagoda, 100 Cave Hill Road, Leverett. During the walk, people went to burial grounds, markets where slaves were auctioned and lynching sites.

“It is quite profound to stand under a tree with a lynching rope still on the rim,” Kenseth said.

At these sites, those of African descent would form a prayer circle, while allies from other racial backgrounds lent support. The visits also include the First Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where four young girls in the 1960s died after a bomb exploded in the choir girls’ changing room, St. Helena’s Island, off the coast of South Carolina, where residents have preserved culture and traditions from their African roots, and prisons where a disproportionate amount of black Americans are incarcerated.

Later, the pilgrimage went through the Caribbean, with some sailing to West Africa and then finishing the walk in June 1999 in Cape Town, South Africa.

<https://www.gazettenet.com/Interfaith-Pilgrimage-marks-anniversary-17709652>