Explore the online collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) to find potential project topics on individuals, groups, and events that connect to the 2021 contest theme: *Communication in History: The Key to Understanding*. 

Smithsonian
Looking for a Topic for 2021?

This year’s National History Day theme is Communication in History: The Key to Understanding. Merriam-Webster defines communication as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.” Consider how people exchange information and interact with each other. You have the chance to explore how the methods and modes of communication have changed over time and are shaped by the present.

You can choose any topic from local, state, national, or international history, as long as it fits within the theme. We suggest your topic be at least 15 to 20 years in the past (so no earlier than 2005) to be considered historical enough to create a project. The 15-to-20-year time frame will allow you to explore the short-term and long-term impact(s) of your topic, and there will likely be more primary and secondary resources available.

We at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) have created this activity to help you identify possible topic ideas from our galleries. You will conduct basic internet research and use "The Collection," our online database at NMAAHC, to answer the questions.
How to Use this Topic Hunt

1. The questions are multi-layered. Conduct basic internet research to identify the answer to the main question.
2. Use the NMAAHC Collection database to find the object associated with the subject, group, place, or event from the main question.
3. You may choose to answer the supporting questions that will help you consider how the main question’s answer might be a potential topic and how it connects to the 2021 theme. You may need to conduct basic internet research to answer some supporting questions.
4. If something interests you, then go back to complete the object and supporting questions for a deeper dive into that topic. You do not have to answer all of the questions. We do encourage you to answer all the main questions so that you experience a range of potential ideas for a project topic.
5. You can answer the questions by downloading and printing this booklet, or writing in a personal journal.

Click here to access the NMAAHC Collection database (https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/collection)

Main Question

1. Who am I? In 1759, I was born a free man in Massachusetts. I gained wealth as the owner of an international shipping company.

2. In 1780, I demanded Massachusetts legislature give me the right to vote with this object. What was it?

3. Who else signed this object with me?

4. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

Object and Supporting Questions

All images are credited to NMAAHC/Alan Karchmer, unless otherwise noted.
1. **Who am I?** In 1759, I was born a free man in Massachusetts. I gained wealth as the owner of an international shipping company.

2. **Who are we?** One of us was a famous conductor on the Underground Railroad with the nickname of “Moses.” The other was the ruler of this European nation from 1837 to 1901.

3. **Who am I?** In 1753, I was born in Africa but kidnapped and sold as a slave in Boston, Massachusetts. Within a few years, I had mastered several languages and became one of the first published African Americans.

---

1. In 1780, I demanded the Massachusetts legislature give me the right to vote with this object. What was it?

2. Who else signed this object with me?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

---

1. Around 1897, what object was given as a gift to me for work on the Underground Railroad and actions during the Civil War.

2. What are the materials used to create this object? What is the main color? What is the main shape?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

---

1. In 1773, I published this object. What was it?

2. Why do you think it was published?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
History Galleries

The Era of Segregation

This exhibition explores the years following the end of Reconstruction to show how the nation struggled to define the status of African Americans. This period represents a critical era for the United States and for African Americans. It puts to the test whether African Americans would have full citizenship rights after more than 250 years of enslavement.

1. What am I? I was created to sit outside the building of this company, one of the longest-running black-owned financial institutions in the United States.

   2. What was the name of the company? Why do you think the company chose this name?

   3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. What am I? In 1964, I was written to help persons understand the aims and objectives of this organization. I was co-founded by an influential man involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the early Black Power Movement.

   1. Who were the founders of this organization?

   2. What were some of the aims and objectives of the organization? How does this compare with the more popular protests of the Civil Rights Movement?

   3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. Who are we? We are a mid-western state-level branch of a larger organization, which was founded in 1896. The main goal of our organization is community uplift through community service, educational efforts, and philanthropy.

   1. We carried this object during a parade. What motto is printed on it? What do you think it means?

   2. What are the object’s colors and the materials that it is made of?

   3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond explores contemporary black life through stories about the social, economic, political, and cultural experiences of African Americans. From the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. to the second election of Barack Obama, the coverage is broad. Large scale graphics and original artifacts lead visitors from the Black Arts Movement to Hip Hop, the Black Panthers to “Yes We Can,” and Black is Beautiful to #BlackLivesMatter.

1. **What was I?** In 1968, persons of various races, ethnicities, and of a lower-economic status banded together to protest for better conditions in housing, jobs, healthcare, and education. Their home base was on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

2. **Who am I?** In 1972, I was the first African American to run to become a presidential candidate.

3. **What am I?** In 1968, a group of students decided to stay out of class on April 26th to do this action toward this war.

---

1. **This object was created on a stretch of plywood. What is it?**

2. **What are some of the topics, objects, or people that you can see on this object? What do you think they mean?**

3. **How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?**

---

1. **This object was used to promote my campaign, and it was printed with my image and slogan. What do you think the slogan means?**

2. **How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?**

---

1. **The object listed the reasons that the students had for conducting this event, what were they? What was the war?**

2. **Where did this event take place? Where did it start? Where did it end?**

3. **How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?**
I know that:

COMMUNITY GALLERIES
Community Galleries
Making a Way

In this exhibition, themed stories show how African Americans crafted possibilities in a world that denied them opportunities. Taking its inspiration from a popular African American expression, Making a Way Out of No Way explores themes of agency, creativity, and resilience through personal stories of African Americans who challenged racial oppression and discrimination and created ways out of “no way.”

1. **Who am I?** I was one of the first African American journalists to be a full-time reporter at a mainstream newspaper in the South. I was nicknamed the “Jackie Robinson” of journalism.
   1. What object did I use to produce my articles and reports?
   2. In what city and state did I work? What are some of the articles that I wrote?
   3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. **Who am I?** I was the first African American woman to be ordained as a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.
   1. I used this object to assist me during my sermons. What was it, and what was it made out of?
   2. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. **Who am I?** I was the first African American to get a Ph.D. in anthropology. I was a professor at Howard University who used science to disprove the harmful thoughts and practices produced by scientific racism.
   1. I used these objects in my studies. Can you find two or three of the objects?
   2. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
Community Galleries

The Power of Place

A sense of place has deeply shaped African American history and culture. A multifaceted range of African American communities and identities have formed and changed in all corners of the country and in turn influenced the regions around them.

1. Who am I? I was a successful businesswoman in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who sought to make fashionable hats accessible for all women.

1. I made this particular object to protect the wearer from the sun and it is cream-colored. What is it?

2. How did I impact local or national fashion?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. Where were we? We were the Roundtree family. We were an average American family who lived in a settlement that was a free black settlement before the Civil War.

1. We used this object to keep up with baseball. It was purchased so that Mrs. Roundtree could keep up with her favorite team, the St. Louis Cardinals.

2. How has live sports reporting changed or remained the same over the decades?

3. How do you believe that this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. What am I? I was used by the Bell family to identify their livestock.

1. Where was this object used? What sort of livestock was branded by this object?

2. What does this object tell you about the African American experience in the American West?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
Community Galleries

Double Victory

Double Victory: The African American Military Experience conveys a sense of appreciation and respect for the military service of African Americans from the American Revolution to the current War on Terror. It establishes an understanding that the African American military experience shapes opportunities for the greater community and has profoundly shaped the nation.

1. Who am I? I was born in 1807. I was employed on the high seas and carried an object to prove my status as a freeperson.

1. What is the object used to prove my status as a freeperson, and where was it issued?

2. What does this object tell you about the African American experience in the Antebellum North?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. What am I? I was created to honor the contribution of soldiers who participated in a war that America fought in 1898 to 1902.

1. What was the war from 1898 – 1902? How were African Americans allowed to participate in this war?

2. How did African Americans impact the military during this period?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. Who are we? We are an humanitarian organization founded in 1881 in Washington, D.C. During the Second World War, we provided services to servicemembers, such as Clubmobiles, that served hot coffee and doughnuts.

1. What object shows us in action during the Second World War? What do you think we this object to communicate to the viewer?

2. Why do you think the services provided by us were important during the war?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
Sports: Leveling the Playing Field explores the contributions of athletes, both on and off the field. Some athletes have been symbolic figures of black ability, while others have taken their activism beyond the court to the courtroom, boardroom, and the newsroom.

1. **Who am I?** I was an American jockey and the only African American to win the Kentucky Derby, the Belmont Stakes, and the Preakness Stakes.

   - This object celebrates me and my victories. What does it say on this object? What colors are my uniform?
   - When was this object made?
   - How do you believe that object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. **Who am I?** I was the coach of a university basketball team in Washington, D.C. I was a champion for encouraging universities to create education opportunities for African Americans.

   - What fashionable object became a symbol of racial pride in the D.M.V. (D.C., Maryland, and Virginia) and around the nation?
   - What university did I coach for, and why was it mistakenly identified as an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges or Universities)?
   - How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. **Who am I?** I was one of three women to play professionally in Negro League Baseball. I was signed to this midwestern team in March 1954.

   - This object displays me at Martin’s Stadium. Where is this stadium located? What team did she play for?
   - How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
CULTURE GALLERIES
AND TEMPORARY AND DIGITAL EXHIBITS
Culture Galleries

Cultural Expressions

The exhibition introduces visitors to the broad concept of African American and African diaspora culture and five ways through which that culture is expressed. The five forms of expression presented in Cultural Expressions are Style: Image and Identity; Foodways: Culture and Cuisine; Artistry: Craftsmanship and Creativity; Language: The Power of the Word; and Movement: Gesture and Social Dance.

1. **Who am I?** I published this book of poems in 1949, and I won the Pulitzer Prize for this publication in 1950. This made me the first African American to win this prize.

2. **Who am I?** I was a famous designer. I had a store on the fashionable 5th Avenue in New York City. I made a wedding dress for First Lady Jackie Kennedy.

3. **What am I?** I was the first object collected for the NMAAHC. I was created and used in Ecuador.

---

1. **This object is a book of poems I published in 1949. What is the name of this publication?**

2. **What is the subject matter of the publication?**

3. **How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?**

1. **This object is one of many items created by me, but this object is on display in the museum. What is this object made out of? What are some of its decorative elements?**

2. **Search for other objects created by me in the NMAAHC collection. Choose one that you find fashionable and state why you like it?**

3. **How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?**

1. **Who created and used me? What is my primary purpose and function?**

2. **How is this object related to family and culture?**

3. **How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?**
1. What am I, and what is my name? I was created during the Harlem Renaissance by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller.

2. Who am I? I was an artist and scholar in African American art. In 1956, I created this piece of art to memorialize this pivotal event of the Civil Rights Movement.

3. Who am I? I was an artist from Georgia in the United States. My style is described as expressionist and compared to Italian Renaissance painters. In 1940, I created an exhibition called “The Art of the American Negro, 1852 – 1940.”

1. Who had this work of art commissioned?

2. What does this art represent?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

1. This object is what I created to memorialize this pivotal moment of the Civil Rights Movement. Who is the subject of this artwork?

2. What was their (the subject of the artwork) impact on the Civil Rights Movement?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

1. I created this object as a ‘mirror’ of myself. What do you think I am attempting to communicate with this object?

2. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
Musical Crossroads tells the story of African American music from the arrival of the first Africans to the present day. In exploring how the intermingling of musical and cultural traditions, styles and beliefs, brought forth new modes of American musical expression, the exhibition expands the definition of African American music to include African American music-makers in all genres and styles.

i. Who am I? I was a Blues singer who became an early pioneer and innovator for Rock and Roll. I was the first to record "Hound Dog" in 1953, but it was taken and sung by other singers. It made them famous.

1. This object is a recording of that famous song. What are some of the other songs I recorded?

2. How do you believe that this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. Who am I? I was born in the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1889, and in 1917 joined the U.S. Navy. I became the navy’s first black bandmaster.

1. What sort of information is recorded in this object related to my military service?

2. Find and listen to a sample of one of my songs. What did you think?

3. How do you believe that this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. In 1956, amid the Cold War, the United States Department created the Jazz Ambassador program to use jazz as a cultural influence to promote democracy and the interests of the United States around the world. I was the first jazz musician hired to become a jazz ambassador.

1. This object came to me from Edward R. Murrow. What are some locations mentioned in this object?

2. Why do you think the State Department wanted to use jazz to promote democracy? How does this connect to the Civil Rights Movement?

3. How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?
1. Who am I? I was an internationally famous Shakespearean actor during the Antebellum Era and Civil War. I had the nickname of “The African Roscius.”

What object was used for advertising my performances? What are some of the performance and parts I played?

Where was this object printed?

How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. Who am I? I starred in a television show called Julia, which was one of the first depictions of an African American woman character who was not a slave maid, but as a nurse.

This object depicts images from the show and is something students would take with them to school. What is it?

What was the reception to Julia by the African American community?

How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. Who am I? I was the first African American woman playwright to have a production on Broadway.

This object prepared the audience for viewing my acclaimed production. What was the name my stageplay, and what was the subject matter?

Did my production win any awards? What were they?

How do you believe that this object explores the theme of communication in history?
1. Who am I? I was a corporal in the 369th Infantry Regiment (nicknamed the “Harlem Hellfighters”) during the First World War. My middle name was Leslie.

This object was awarded to me by the U.S. Army. What is it?

How many days did my regiment spend in combat? What nation was the 369th assigned to during the war? What did this nation’s government award to us at the end of the conflict?

How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

2. Where am I? In 1971, James Baldwin permanently settled in this European nation. What is the name of the city where James Baldwin found a place of peace where he could gather with friends and family, heal, and write?

This object shows James Baldwin sitting at a worktable in his home. Use evidence from the object to explain why you think he considered it his “worktable.”

What are some of the works that James Baldwin produced from 1971 – 1987, and how might they have been connected to the place where he settled?

How do you believe this object explores the theme of communication in history?

3. What movie am I? In 1937 I premiered and was billed as the first “all-colored” western musical. My story highlighted the African American cowboy experience and countered the image of an all-white American west.

This object helped to promote the film in a colorful fashion. What is it? What are the main colors used?

Find a synopsis of this film. What is this film about?

How do you believe that this object explores the theme of communication in history?
YOUR FINAL THOUGHTS

List two or three objects you found interesting and why.

What is something that you learned?

Write two or three possible project topics to explore.