

# HOW MY FULBRIGHT JOURNEY IN IRELAND HELPED LEAD TO THE FOUNDING OF THE WATER'S EDGE MUSEUM

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## ABSTRACT

The author received a Fulbright Scholar Award to Ireland in 1995-1996. Fulbright scholar awards are about fulfilling your dreams. My goal was to investigate the artistic and scientific achievements of a circle of eccentric 18th century artists and land improvers in Ireland. This experience equipped me with the skills to envision and achieve goals locally and globally. It ultimately enabled me to focus on the overlooked history of founding black families in the Eastern Shore area of Maryland and the founding of the Water's Edge Museum ([www.watersedgemuseum.org](http://www.watersedgemuseum.org)).



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My Fulbright scholarship was a postdoc to rural Ireland during the period of peace negotiations in the mid-1990s. Based in the idyllic Georgian town of Birr, I hiked out into the backdrop of Birr into the picturesque Slieve Bloom Mountains, bizarrely noted as the former tactical training ground of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization). Living in history was to become a normal way of life. On a personal level, there was a history for me here: I was in the Ely O'Carroll, land of my maternal forebears, and in the heart of "plantation" territory – the region settled by Elizabeth I with Protestants to suppress the long-established Catholic population. During my tenure there I witnessed great changes in the country, a kind of awakening among gentle people as they found their voice in beautiful pastoral landscapes and literature and culture among the people of rarified Dublin. This experience was to shape my way of understanding the world and my role as an art historian, academic, and art activist.

My Fulbright allowed me to investigate the artistic and scientific achievements of a circle of eccentric 18th century artists and land improvers. This group of people seemed to have no boundaries of creative inquiry. They brought changes to early theater design on the Dublin stage along with significant improvements in agriculture, scientific experimentation, and the arts in general. Their brilliance spanned across an unimaginable spectrum of disciplines. For me, it was a revelation to see how they could create large-

scale loosely painted theatrical backdrops with a new kind of perspective that brought the highly imaginative settings to life, and within the same studio, craft smaller-scale paintings with meticulous brush lines to present accurate axonometric views of the houses and gardens within the townships and cities of Ireland in the finest detail.

It became clear in examining notes, studies, drawings, inventions, and paintings that the central and most talented figure of my circle of artists experienced mental health issues. My research became more involved in connecting his profound outpouring of work to the mysterious threads of his life which likely ended in suicide. What is the dividing line between creativity and madness? This question grew during my tenure as a Fulbright scholar, and it turned out that this experience represented only a beginning as I continued in a study of creative genius and insanity with Dr. Roy Porter at London's Wellcome Trust.

While the general population of Ireland lacked the kind of racial diversity I experienced in the United States, it became clear to me that there was a new and satisfying way of working together across social, economic, religious, and educational lines. I learned as much from a local historian or a farmer asking about theatrical inventions or early agricultural practices as from my loyal professors who remained mentors until they passed away. It was fulfilling to work with people from varied backgrounds and to attend gatherings where multiple generations of people from different backgrounds gathered to share ideas and enjoy one another. Banished was the American way of working in silos, segregated by age, academic institution, or socio-economic background: Ireland represented a microcosm of a fascinating world where everyone had something to say!

### **LOCAL: TRANSLATING THE FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE INTO THE WATER'S EDGE MUSEUM**

My Ph.D. in the history of art was a pursuit of a deeper understanding of the historical and intellectual context of gardens. Although I was educated as a landscape architect and art historian, and continue to work to this day across both disciplines, other puzzling questions that seemed distinct from my profession occupied my thoughts. Why is history always presented from one perspective? How is it that the dissonant tones and melancholic music of Ireland is as powerful as the early African American spirituals I heard in Maryland? I was deeply moved and intrigued by both artistic experiences. The writings of Frederick Douglass, who grew up ten miles away from my home noted the similarity in this haunting music, and explained it via the connections between the oppression of the Irish and enslaved persons whom he had grown up with on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The music of these two populations, whose journey is about overcoming, serves as a kind of soundtrack to that compelling story of the thirst for freedom.

Wanting to know more about the often-overlooked African American history of Maryland, I worked locally with descendants of Douglass and Tubman to establish The Water's Edge Museum in Oxford, Maryland. Opened in 2021 and recognized as the first museum to honor the founding black families of America, this museum is a direct result of what I learned during my time in Ireland as a Fulbright scholar. Our mission is purely educational, and our target audience is impressionable youth. The museum's message is simple:

The Water's Edge Museum proudly presents Black farmers, professional sailmakers military figures, musicians, watermen, and crab pickers. These Founding Black Families of America harnessed knowledge and power, and placed it firmly and confidently into the hands of their descendants.

The Museum seeks to empower the young people of today to find their place in history and identify their own positive and unique voice when facing contemporary issues and challenges. It encourages young people to see how people of color on the Eastern Shore lived and how their lives mattered.

The museum is about a sensitive collaboration that never ceases to ask difficult questions. It also requires working across many backgrounds and on an intergenerational level to attain a vision that is accurate and enduring. Located in a region so isolated that it is known for being the only place to retain an Elizabethan accent, the Eastern Shore is also home to important leaders such as Harriet Ross Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles Albert Tindley, and Waters Edward Turpin. In spite of a staggeringly long and rich African American history, many of these luminaries have been largely unrecognized as being among the country's founding families.

Elders on the Eastern Shore had a tradition of gathering annually to "honor the ancestors," by sprinkling rose petals into the water at the end of the dock in the small port of Oxford, Maryland. What was the meaning behind this poetic ceremony? Research established Oxford as not only the oldest port on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, but revealingly as the only place of disembarkation on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware for Middle Passage and Intra-American slave vessels. Further inquiry established the fact that the last known documented Intra-American ship, *Experiment*, docked on the fourth of July in 1772. The owners were from some of Maryland's founding families. How could this information not be a part of the curriculum? (1)

Throughout these obvious distortions of the folk-mind, however, one thread of constancy weaves; a somber chronicle that begins in the foul belly of a slave ship, and ends in a gutted ruin.

In 2021, The Water's Edge Museum added two more galleries, Environmental Justice as a Civil Right, which as an EJ museum represents yet another first in Maryland. The galleries examine the environmental health and safety of vulnerable populations, mostly persons of color who live in low-lying areas on the Chesapeake Bay. Giving consideration to the miracle of learning about the Middle Passage stop, we wanted to know how people of African descent were trafficked throughout the state. Where did people go to find freedom? What monuments were left behind? How much has already been lost to climate change? Which areas were under threat? Much to our surprise we learned that there was no comprehensive map. We are now working in a collaborative effort to chart the way to freedom, documenting communities, schools, churches, safe houses, and cultural landscapes to determine at-risk regions. Our EJ galleries begin with a local perspective but expand into a comparison with vulnerable regions within the developing world by taking a look at the island nation of Antigua and Barbuda. These islands are part of a region under threat of total destruction due to the inability to bring about ecological reform in so-called first world countries.

The Water's Edge Museum fundamentally serves as a unique kind of teaching institution that opens up people's eyes in history, culture, and science. Through art, music, and history, visitors learn about the essential role of people of color in using genius, stamina and strength to help found our democracy. The museum pays homage to the mighty ancestors of the incredible team with whom I have collaborated, and is a direct result of my experience as a Fulbrighter in taking the time to listen and to learn from others.

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### **GLOBAL: HOW FULBRIGHTERS TAKE ON THE WORLD**

My Fulbright experience was impactful on teaching cultural understanding at home in Maryland but also abroad. Having traveled a lot on my own I was sensitive to the ways that communities worked and how people in smaller societies tended to have success in achieving a lot with few resources. When things are going wrong among people in a small population you know it—and when things are going right everyone feels it. The Fulbright experience taught me to be observant and respectful of societal ecosystems and I took interest in noting the diversity of leaders in terms of class, education, gender, and age.

The island nation of Antigua and Barbuda reminded me of Ireland in many ways—small populations of multiple generations of people worked together with few resources and great vision toward common goals that were in alignment with my own philosophies. Similar to Ireland, the lack of diversity (most people are of African descent) made little difference as our objectives

were clear as we sought to preserve the often-overlooked history and artistic achievements of the people there. Eventually the Prime Minister and his Cabinet honored me with an appointment to serve as their Cultural Envoy. Serving in this capacity has allowed me to work with Antiguan and Barbudans to promote their incredible culture and history on a global scale. My closest collaborators and teachers there have been nonagenarians and women who have helped me to understand the subtleties of art, history, and culture harkening back to my early lessons as a Fulbrighter.

For three years, I served as curator to the National Pavilion of Antigua and Barbuda at the Venice Biennale where our message was well received by global audiences, many of whom were learning about Antigua and Barbuda for the first time. Our three exhibitions dealt with 1) The Last Universal Man, exploring the work of Antiguan artist Frank Walter, who was a genius and with perceived mental challenges, 2) Environmental Justice as a Civil Right, where we featured the photography of Mohammid Walbrook, the gifted Barbudan artist, and 3) Carnival as Resistance.

Our work in Venice placed Antigua and Barbuda on a global map of excellence in culture and the arts. Beyond featuring a Caribbean artist who served as one of the founders of Modern painting, we worked with Antiguan and Barbudan women on early African seedwork—beautiful complex patterns of wild tamarind and jumbie bead seeds sewn together to make spider web patterns for jewelry and table decorations. The same craftwork turns out to be present in the African American tradition of Maryland and is now a part of a larger initiative to empower the women of Antigua and Barbuda through a program to transfer this artistic tradition to youth in the Caribbean and the US.

Most importantly for me, the Fulbright experience prepared me for the meeting that changed my life. The reclusive Antiguan artist and philosopher, Frank Walter (1926-2009) lived in paradise on an isolated hillside accessible only by hiking. Escorted to him by his family members who saw to his care, I quickly recognized his genius and spent six years in his company, discussing art, agriculture, and history, but mostly learning about his fascinating life.

Wealthy people from the United States who had a second home on the island informed me that he was “crazy” – however, for me that title was not only insulting, it was inappropriate. My closest friend of thirty years and I had spent considerable time in think tanks where there are numerous examples of “crazy” individuals. However, for my friend and me, Frank Walter’s unconventional behavior was just a part of his high IQ and keen artistic temperament.

Again, there were many questions that my time as a Fulbrighter helped me to ask—and to answer: How does one draw a line between genius and madness? How is this expressed in other societies? How does one work respectfully in a developing country? Working with the artist’s family, gallerists, and art historians, we began an international conversation celebrating the ar-

tistic and intellectual achievements of Frank Walter via exhibitions in New York, Miami, London, Frankfurt, Edinburgh, and Hong Kong, and he is now recognized as one of the most important Caribbean artists. I am now collaborating with Hilton Als on an exhibition in June in New York, two exhibitions in Brussels in November, and an exhibition in the Garden Museum about the artist as gardener and agriculturist in 2023.

Being a Fulbrighter helped me have the experiences that equipped me with the skills to envision and achieve goals locally and globally. Reflecting on lessons learned after nearly thirty years after my time as a Fulbright Scholar, my philosophy is confirmed: we are here to work respectfully with others and the more diverse, the better.

## NOTES

1. It turned out that people of African descent always knew this story about the disembarkation of slave vessels in Oxford but repressed it due to fear of reprisal. Further truths emerged about this. Born in Oxford in 1910, Morgan State University Professor Waters Edward Turpin was a person of color who had deep roots on the Eastern Shore. In his final novel, *The Rootless* (1957), he evoked the haunting memories of slavery and its aftermath.



Barbara Paca on Fulbright in Ireland in 1996

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Barbara Paca is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. She serves as an art and environmental justice activist, locally and globally. Locally, she is Trustee to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies Member's board; a Commissioner to Maryland's Commissions on African American History and Culture, The Maryland Historic Trust, and the Maryland Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities. Globally, she serves as the Cultural Envoy to Antigua and Barbuda. She can be contacted at [barbara@preservationgreenllc.com](mailto:barbara@preservationgreenllc.com).

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