As a whole, the exhibits and galleries that comprise the IAAM, which are explored in further detail below, will provide a comprehensive look at African American history and the way it plays a major role in the greater American story.

One of the main features, and biggest draws, of the museum will be the Center for Family History. In the Center, guests will have access to state-of-the-art technology that will aid them in uncovering their ancestors. While the museum as a whole explores history on a large, global scale, the Center for Family History provides a more intimate, personal experience.

Gadsden’s Wharf has been referred to as the “Ellis Island of African Americans” because so many enslaved Africans entered America on that now hallowed land. The Center for Family History will be a site of reclamation, where people who have been unable to track their lineage due to inadequate records and censuses, will finally be able to draw connections about their family history.

The museum’s galleries, exhibits and interior elements are described in detail on the following pages.
Overlooking Charleston Harbor and the waterways that lead to the ocean, Atlantic Connections is a large gallery that serves as a pillar of the museum. This exhibition roots the IAAM in the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the economic and cultural formation of the Atlantic World. Through educational exhibits and a dynamic media program, Atlantic Connections will reveal the interwoven relationships between key port areas in Africa, Europe and the Americas, including Charleston. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade shaped the economies and cultures of these ports, and they went on to play central roles in the formation of the modern world.

The exhibit’s expansive screens will feature panoramic video that transports viewers to port cities across the Atlantic World, revealing diverse landscapes, individuals and communities. The film, a compilation of contemporary and historic images and footage, will feature segments dedicated to major sites of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Coastlines and waterfronts evoke points of departure and arrival; urban streets and buildings speak to the distribution and legacy of wealth resulting from the trade; and individuals from across the Atlantic World convey both diversity and connections across populations and cultures.

The Atlantic Connections film also includes an animated map of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade voyages over time, from the 16th to the 19th centuries, as well as an emotionally impactful segment on the Middle Passage, featuring images from Tom Feelings’ iconic book *The Middle Passage: White Ships / Black Cargo.*
A series of maps based on the Atlas of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade will be located on the wall across from the gallery’s multimedia screens. This wall will explore the regions and ports interconnected by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and unveil the volume of trade over time, particularly as it relates to North America and Charleston, as well as the domestic growth of slavery in the colonies and later states that formed the United States. Informative panels and artifacts will present the material goods, vessels and individuals involved in the trade.

A gallery rail within Atlantic Connections highlights the history of the Middle Passage — a shared traumatic experience for the millions of Africans forced into the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This rail highlights the struggle, loss and resistance and features the history of Gadsden’s Wharf, the site of the IAAM.

The exhibit rail connects two semi-enclosed spaces representing the beginning and end of the physical journey of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. On one end, the space will artistically evoke a barracoon, a historic enclosure used to temporarily confine enslaved Africans prior to voyages. The other end evokes the Gadsden’s Wharf storehouse, where enslaved Africans would be held after reaching Charleston, while awaiting sale. These immersive spaces will powerfully engage visitors with the conditions of the Middle Passage. As a sensitive historic topic, the development of these enclosed areas and artistic representations will take extensive advisory and community input into account.

Finally, with significant space and seating that features a view of Charleston Harbor, the Atlantic Connections gallery will function as the museum’s main space for events, receptions and dinners.
About half of all of North America’s enslaved Africans entered the country through Charleston, and the vast majority disembarked at Gadsden’s Wharf. Today, millions of African Americans can trace an ancestor back to Charleston, and it is possible that all African Americans can identify at least one ancestor who made their way through Charleston.

Drawing from the significance of Gadsden’s Wharf as a site of arrival and dispersal, the Center for Family History will help visitors trace the journeys of their ancestors. Family history is a focused, personal and accessible way to help visitors make connections with their ancestors as well as with American and World history.

Researching African American family history presents unique challenges. The Center for Family History will provide special guidance for guests seeking to overcome these obstacles, particularly the “1870 Brick Wall.” The census of 1870 was the first to list newly free African Americans by their full names. In contrast, the 1860 census listed only the age and gender of enslaved men, women, and children. Plantation records, wills, estate inventories, and bills of sale are often used in family research, but they too usually list just first names. Once freed, many families refused to adopt the family name of the final slaveholder, making surname a poor indicator of tracking familial ties through slaveholding families’ records. Because of this combination of challenges, many have trouble tracing their family ties beyond 1870.

Using various archival resources and databases, the Center for Family History will help guests break through that wall and make connections to their ancestors. The Center’s exhibits will feature examples of resources for researching family and community histories and highlight historic events and movements that shape many African American family histories. The exhibits will also feature examples of successfully constructed family trees, including the First Lady Michelle Obama, who can trace her family back to slavery in South Carolina.

A Story Booth will enable visitors to record oral histories, interview family members, or respond to experiences and questions in the museum exhibits. The Center’s staff will provide guidance in the research areas connected to the gallery and run community outreach programs geared toward helping individuals initiate their own searches for family history.

The International African American Museum is committed not only to exploring the past, but to uncovering relevant information about the present and the future. One of the most significant forward-facing initiatives at the IAAM will be the

Museum Layout - Center for Family History
Center for Family History, which will help countless African Americans discover roots that have long remained elusive. Guests will uncover surprising links and stories that can change the way we understand identity and the unfolding of history.
Located in the heart of the museum building, the IAAM Social Justice Action Lab will collaborate with local, national, and international partners to launch powerful programs, discussions, educational outreach, and resources for addressing social justice issues connected to people of African descent throughout Charleston, South Carolina, the United States, and the African diaspora. Programming may include film screenings, lecture presentations, performances, dialogue sessions, workshops, and symposia.

In addition, the space serves as a changing exhibition space for rotating/traveling exhibitions drawn from local, national, and international organizations, as well as private collections, particularly highlighting local, regional, and international artists whose work addresses race and social justice advocacy.

The dual Social Justice Action Lab and Changing Exhibits Gallery, one of the museum’s largest spaces, will provide one of the most dynamic elements of the International African American Museum.
American Journey – South Carolina Lens takes visitors on a journey through South Carolina’s unique, yet representative and influential history by looking at key moments and movements connected to the state that shaped, and were shaped by, national and international cultures, politics and economies.

This timeline will be punctuated with insights from individual and community voices and experiences. The overall timeline will be organized through a “louver” exhibit system, comprised of informational panels that extend diagonally from the walls. The chronological exhibit will follow a U-shaped path that features a number of diverse approaches to displaying content. The louvers encourage visitors to engage with this exhibition area up close, discovering hidden vistas that reveal unexpected artifacts, images, audio and media.

In addition, through the “Flashpoints” media program, this strong historical context will foster a contemporary dialogue on race and social justice, pointing to the legacies of slavery and its impact on society today. The Flashpoints will consist of large screens throughout the exhibit that show short, thought-provoking films that highlight contemporary race and social justice issues and encourage discussion. The media program will engage visitors directly, posing questions about “why” and “how” certain situations exist or persist in the United States and beyond (e.g., issues in regard to Racial Identities, Racism, Displacement, Voting Rights, Mass Incarceration, Policing, Historic Memory, Health, and Gender). In addition, the Story Booth in the Center for Family History will provide visitors
with an opportunity to reflect on these points and record their responses.

In this way, IAAM will play an important role in encouraging an open conversation about the history and future of race in the city of Charleston, the state of South Carolina, the United States and throughout the world.

Together, the historic events and contemporary issues presented in this gallery reflect a tradition of resilience, survival and innovation. The past helps us to understand the legacies of slavery and the society in which we live today. The spirit of the American Journey – South Carolina Lens experience is to provide honest representations of history that will help create space for learning, understanding and progress.
The Family History Gallery will be housed within the Center for Family History. The Center is one of the anchoring spaces at the International African American Museum, as it will draw many guests interested in tracing their genealogy, perhaps for the very first time.

As Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., noted, “Gadsden’s Wharf is an Ellis Island for African Americans. It becomes one of the few places where African Americans can really go to pay homage to those ancestors.”

The Center will serve as a tool available to the millions of African Americans who can trace their ancestors back to Gadsden’s Wharf and to Charleston. Because of the magnitude of work that will go into tracing these families, the Center will have several supporting elements, including four surrounding rooms that function as research labs or staffed offices, as well as the Family History Gallery.
Examining American history through the lens of South Carolina provides critical insights into the central role of African Americans. In 1708, only a few decades after the founding of the colony, South Carolina featured a Black population majority. By the 1860 census, South Carolina’s population had the highest percentage of enslaved Black people in relation to total population found in the southern United States. This was the result of the state’s long reliance on the labor and skills of enslaved Africans and their descendants, and particularly the massive influx of enslaved Africans through Gadsden’s Wharf between 1783 and 1808.

As a result of this early history, an influential trail of African American heritage can be physically mapped and traced throughout the state, highlighting historic points from slavery, to Reconstruction, through the 20th century civil rights movement, and into the present. Despite the central significance of African American history in this state, many individual sites, districts and regions that are integral to this history in South Carolina have yet to be visibly marked.

South Carolina: Power of Place will feature exhibitions, artifacts and an interactive media table with a large-scale map of South Carolina, where visitors can engage the state’s history through color-coded points (highlighting people, events, sites, themes and landscapes) tied to the power of place and African American experiences. The interactive mapping area reflects IAAM’s role as a central “hub” connecting visitors to sites of interest throughout South Carolina.

Visitors can engage this space individually or in groups to dig deeper into the history and culture of the state. Interactive mapping visually locates points connected to the Stono Rebellion; the Combahee River Raid; African American burial grounds; locations of civil rights sit-ins and protests, and other historic sites marked and unmarked throughout the state’s physical landscape.
This interactive table and exhibition space will provide information on known- and lesser-known South Carolinians, as well as significant places and events. The exhibitions surrounding the interactive table will highlight historic images and artifacts organized by influential themes in the state’s African American history and culture, including: education, activism, craft, work, spirituality, music, foodways and healing.
When guests enter the museum, they can begin their exploration in the Orientation Theater, located directly off of the museum’s central lobby. Here, guests will be welcomed by a 7- to 10-minute film that presents the story of the IAAM, a museum and memorial created to mark and interpret an international site of memory and conscience.

The film conveys the emotional power of the IAAM’s location on sacred ground at Gadsden’s Wharf, where hundreds of thousands of Africans disembarked in North America from slave ships, and where African American and Diasporic experiences are deeply rooted and connected.

This introduction will orient visitors to the significance of Charleston and South Carolina in national and international histories; offer inspiring stories of African American resistance, sacrifice, survival and achievement; and illuminate the central role of people of African descent in shaping the nation and the Atlantic World.
“I AM” HALL

Centrally located near the main entrance of the museum, the “I Am” hall reflects the international, national, local and individual stories at the core of the IAAM’s mission, and highlights how visitors can contemplate, explore and personally connect to major themes throughout the museum.

The ambient experience provides a two-way approach with the help of a series of multimedia panels extending from the walls. As visitors walk toward the Atlantic Ocean, the exhibit activates images of people and communities — contemporary and historic — that appear to move forward from the view of Charleston Harbor at the end of the hall. These images will be presented in themes. For example, visitors might be greeted by a group of activists, local leaders, or faces of people from across the Atlantic World. The multimedia panels will be set to loop, keeping the exhibit in motion.

Another mode for these media panels will feature Pulse Points curated by IAAM staff that highlight current issues relevant to the history presented in the gallery. For example, a Pulse Point might feature a newspaper headline or new research findings relevant to contemporary race and social justice issue.

When visitors walk in the other direction, they will see a number of listening booths, nested into nooks between the exhibit wall and the extending multimedia panels. Each listening booth will have a discussion prompt that is supported by audio recordings of contemporary and historic voices from different geographic locations and time periods. The listening booths will encourage visitors to engage in dialogue about the relevance of historic and contemporary issues to their personal and community identities.

Together, these multimedia elements will create a dynamic, living exhibit that is constantly changing and evolving to remain fresh and relevant to visitors.
MODE ONE

“I Am” Hall Media Modes - Photos or Text

MODE TWO

“I Am” Hall Diagram
African Roots situates Africa and Africans as central to the overarching narrative of the IAAM. Focusing on major regions in the Upper Guinea Coast and West Central Africa, and the diverse ethnicities within these regions that represent the origins of African ancestors in North America, the exhibit will give visitors a picture of the cultures, knowledge and technologies that Africans from these regions brought to the Americas through the forced migration of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

A large-scale map of Africa will highlight regions of origin for the enslaved Africans brought to America. The opposite wall will feature a series of smaller maps accompanied by images and descriptions of marked and unmarked historic sites connected to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in West and West Central Africa, such as Bunce Island in Sierra Leone, as well as sites throughout the African Diaspora in the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas.

Highlights may include diasporic sites such as Nova Scotia, Freetown and Monrovia; as well as geographic points connected to watershed liberation movements such as the Haitian Revolution; and sites of cultural practices and forms of syncretization and creolization that resonate around the world today. Soundscapes in this area will highlight a diverse range of languages connected to regions of origin in Africa.
Carolina Gold: Rice Culture in the Lowcountry will highlight the importance of West African influences, plantation agriculture, slavery and the cash crop of rice to the early economy and culture of South Carolina. The wealth of the colony and later state grew as a direct result of rice cultivation, the crop that came to be known as “Carolina Gold.” That wealth, combined with tobacco, sugar and cotton plantation economies in the South based on enslaved labor, went on to fuel the growth of the United States.

Enslaved West Africans brought a rich knowledge of rice cultivation, and their skills and labor transformed much of South Carolina’s coastal wetlands into lucrative rice fields. The striking similarities between the landscapes of the Lowcountry and the West African rice coast, and the cultivation practices shaped by West African knowledge, will be highlighted visually in this exhibit.

Topics will include the labor practices of task vs. gang systems; the engineering of the trunk irrigation system; and the use of tools such as fanner baskets and mortar and pestle based on West African processing methods. This gallery also details the development of plantation agriculture and slavery in South Carolina through rice cultivation; examines how West African knowledge of rice cultivation and labor shaped the development of inland and tidal rice plantations; and considers the arduous, even deadly experience of growing rice as a plantation cash crop in the Lowcountry.

Carolina Gold will also highlight the distinctive features of rice agriculture in the Lowcountry, including a Black population majority. In addition to bringing invaluable agricultural experience, the large numbers of Africans forced to this region brought diverse languages, traditions, knowledge systems and spirituality that shaped the culture of the Lowcountry.
Carolina Gold Diagram

African Roots Diagram
Dedicated to the history, culture and diverse experiences of Gullah Geechee people, this gallery celebrates historic African American communities found along the coasts of northeast Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

This African American cultural identity first formed during slavery through a Trans-Atlantic creolization process, in which African arrivals adapted their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to one another and to the context of American slavery, Native American influences and European/Euro American slaveholders. This resulted in new hybrid cultures, traditions and languages that still resonate with the Gullah Geechee people.

Areas with high population concentrations of Africans and their African American descendants, such as the Lowcountry region, demonstrated particularly strong African cultural and linguistic retentions that became cultural markers for the Gullah Geechee.

After emancipation, Gullah Geechee people continued to preserve and adapt their cultural identities, particularly in rural areas where they could maintain independent communities with strong connections to land and waterways. These communities continued to thrive amid 20th and 21st century changes of Jim Crow laws and civil rights activism, as well as industrial and residential development in rural areas.

The Gullah Geechee Gallery will be co-developed with partners in local communities as an ongoing museum program.

With thoughtful context and dialogue, the gallery will celebrate Gullah Geechee culture and history through the exploration of memories, rituals, crafts, artifacts and traditional practices, while also highlighting the diverse histories and perspectives of Gullah Geechee people and the contemporary issues they face today.

The gallery offers flexibility for programming and includes a bateau (a flat-bottomed boat) installation to engage visitors with stories of the waterways connecting the Sea Islands, home to Gullah Geechee communities, and the Charleston Peninsula.

The Gullah Geechee Gallery will also feature the footprint of a Praise House – an influential place of worship in many African American communities. This tangible element will create a meaningful space for oral histories and storytelling, while fostering discussions of African American spirituality as well as historic and contemporary Gullah Geechee identities.
The culture and history explored throughout the International African American Museum will be animated through hands-on activities and collective engagement in Studio Time, the museum’s interactive workshop. A variety of activities will be offered in this space, from family programs that help pass tradition down through generations to artist workshops that provide lessons in mediums like sweetgrass basket weaving or painting techniques.

One of the museum’s most important functions will be to educate its visitors, particularly school-age children. The workshop will be an integral component to providing dynamic, interactive learning opportunities for school groups. This will give students a chance to learn through experience and actively engage the importance of African American culture, history and tradition.
South Carolina: Power of Place will feature a state-of-the-art Heritage Map, an interactive media table with a large-scale map of South Carolina, where visitors can engage the state’s history through color-coded points (highlighting people, events, sites, themes and landscapes) tied to the power of place and African American experiences. The interactive mapping area reflects IAAM’s role as a central “hub” connecting visitors to sites of interest throughout South Carolina.

Visitors can engage this space individually or in groups to dig deeper into the history and culture of the state. Interactive mapping visually locates points connected to the Stono Rebellion; the Combahee River Raid; African American burial grounds; locations of civil rights sit-ins and protests, and other historic sites marked and unmarked throughout the state’s physical landscape.
The International African American Museum will feature a café that will serve coffee, beverages and light fare for guests. The café will be in a high-traffic area accessible from the lobby, across from the gift shop.
NORTH & SOUTH HARBOR BALCONIES

The International African American Museum will feature two Harbor Balconies that overlook the Charleston Harbor as well as the beautiful land linguistics of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden that weaves around the museum’s exterior.

The Harbor Balconies are located adjacent to the Atlantic Connections gallery, which explores the history of the Atlantic Ocean, North America and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. After viewing such an emotionally charged exhibit, guests can exit out to the second-story viewing terrace for reflection and contemplation.
GIFT SHOP

The International African American Museum will include a gift shop to give guests the opportunity to take home something special to remember their visits.

The shop will be tastefully curated and will include Charleston’s trademark sweetgrass weavings or baskets — one of the most recognizable hallmarks of Gullah Geechee culture — as well as artistic reproductions, wall art, stationary, crafts and food items produced by local artisans.

Museum gift shops are a favorite final stop of most guests’ visits, making them popular, heavily trafficked spaces.

Renderings of the Gift Shop are not currently available. This image of the Action Lab shows the design and furniture that will be used in the Gift Shop.
FAMILY HISTORY ROOMS

The Center for Family History is one of the most important and defining features of the International African American Museum. In addition to the exhibit and programming areas, this Center will feature Family History Rooms that serve as crucial support labs for guests as they trace their lineages. The content of each room will vary, but together, they will house museum staff trained in genealogy as well as technical equipment to access databases.

The International African American Museum will feature two large family history rooms, as well as two smaller family history rooms, to accommodate multiple guests and staff.
The Gullah Geechee Gallery will feature the footprint of a Praise House – an influential place of worship in many African American communities. This tangible element will create a meaningful space for oral histories and storytelling, while fostering discussions of African American spirituality as well as historic and contemporary Gullah Geechee identities.

Inside the Praise House, a series of multimedia elements will bring Gullah Geechee culture and traditions to life through different video modules.
The Oral History Story Booth, adjacent to the Center for Family History, provides opportunities for visitors to contribute their personal histories to the museums’ databases. In this Booth, up to four people may gather to share family stories, interview each other, discuss the past or record information about their ancestries.

Oral history – a powerful way to express family memories – has long been used to pass down information from one generation to the next. Because of the dearth of records relating to African American ancestry, oral history is particularly significant in African American communities. As family elders age, it is imperative that their stories are recorded and their memories preserved.

An incredible example of the importance of preserving memories and the impact of hearing stories from their original sources exists at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

A few years ago, the museum reached out to Holocaust survivors, who were prompted to answer a series of questions about their experiences. Their responses were recorded, and the audio and video was inputted to a database. The museum has developed an interface that uses voice recognition software, similar to the technology that allows you to ask your cell phone questions. Visitors can ask questions and then see and hear responses from Holocaust survivors.

That history is now permanently available, a part of our collective memory.

The IAAM hopes to do something similar by recording stories and making them available on the IAAM website and throughout the museum itself. In this way, the IAAM will continuously yield novel information about African American history.
RESPONSE STORY BOOTH

The Response Story Booth will serve as a space for visitors to respond to their experiences in the museum, particularly to address prompts on the monitor and to the questions posed in the Flashpoints and “I AM” exhibit areas. These exhibits will ask questions about a wide range of topics and urge visitors to consider why and how certain situations exist or persist in society. For example, prompts might cover issues regarding racial identities, racism, displacement, voting rights, mass incarceration, policing, historic memory, health and gender.

In the Response Story Booth, visitors will have the opportunity to video and audio record their responses and play back their recordings. With appropriate permissions, recordings acquired through the Response Story Booth will be processed by museum staff and curated selections could be featured online or in relevant exhibition areas. For example, the “I AM” listening booths – located in an exhibit dedicated to identity and contemporary issues – invite users to listen to audio and may be populated with responses from the Response Story Booth.

This question and answer theme engages guests in participatory history. The IAAM is not a passive experience documenting what was, but an interactive experience that urges visitors to think about what is and why. This will advance the IAAM’s goal of serving as a platform for useful dialogue about enduring issues of race and racism, as every visitor has the opportunity to engage in problem solving and further their own understanding of the world we live in.
MEMORIAL GARDEN
The African Ancestors Memorial Garden, a collection of gardens and artistic installations that sprawls across the IAAM grounds, will be free and open to the public. The museum will be raised to provide room for these dynamic land linguistics and to commemorate the sacred location of Gadsden’s Wharf. It will include a series of outdoor features that give visitors the opportunity to honor and commemorate African ancestors and reflect on the historic significance of Gadsden’s Wharf.

Lauded historian and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. dubbed this space “ground zero of the African American experience,” while Lonnie Bunch, the director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture calls it “one of the most sacred sites of African American history in the western hemisphere.”

The Memorial Garden will link Charleston to a growing network of global sites of memory interconnected by the history of slavery and its legacies.
The International African American Museum’s (IAAM) most unique and defining feature is its location at the historic site of Gadsden’s Wharf.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade carried hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans across many miles of ocean, through the perilous Middle Passage, and into the calm waters of Charleston’s Harbor. Many of these voyages ended at Gadsden’s Wharf, where men, women and children disembarked ships and entered this country.

The IAAM will harness the power of place to commemorate their lives, and the lives of many more who did not survive those deadly voyages.

Out of respect for the hallowed ground of Gadsden’s Wharf, the IAAM will be raised by pillars, and the land will be honored and accentuated by a number of land linguistics, microclimates and sculptures. Celebrated artist, designer and educator Walter Hood is directing the design of the museum’s exterior elements, which will collectively comprise the African Ancestors Memorial Garden.

One of the most impactful features of the Memorial Garden will be the Tide Tribute.

As visitors approach the IAAM from the harbor boardwalk, they will be met by the Tide Tribute, a shallow pool of water that fills and empties hourly, reminiscent of the ebb and flow of the ocean.
In the eighteenth century, British abolitionists published the now-famous diagram pictured below, which depicts cross-sections of the Brookes slave ship with hundreds of enslaved Africans lying on their backs in incredibly and inhumanely close proximity to one another.

The Brookes was permitted to carry about 450 slaves. To achieve maximum capacity of its human cargo, the Brookes diagram reflects the space allocated for each man (6’ x 1’4”), woman (5’10” x 1’4”) and child (5’ x 1’2”).

Historic documents show that even these scant dimensions were not honored, as the Brookes carried as many as 609 enslaved Africans during one voyage across the middle passage.

Brookes figures will cover the Tide Tribute’s floor, each figure representative of a man, woman or child who laid side by side in the bellies of ships that were once anchored just steps away in the harbor. As the depth of the water changes, Brookes figures will be masked and revealed in relief. When the Tide Tribute is full, the Brookes figures will be covered in several inches of water. When it empties, the water will only fill the relief, leaving pools of water in the shape of those men, women and children whom the Tribute honors (see next page).
A walkway will carry guests through the middle of the Tide Tribute, inviting them into this emotional experience. Here, visitors will reflect on the courage and the fate of those men, women and children embodied in the Brookes figures.

The Tide Tribute will be bordered by the actual historic line of Gadsden’s Wharf, conveying the fluid nature of past, present and future.
The Tide Tribute will be bordered by the historic line of Gadsden’s Wharf.

The water memorial will extend along the eastern edge of the museum, the area closest to the harbor. Guests can interact with the Tide Tribute by walking through the Tidal Path, which carries visitors through the emotional installation. As they travel through the memorial and approach the museum’s entrance, they will cross over the Gadsden’s Wharf Line, demarcating the historic line of the wharf with a 24-inch wide stainless steel band that extends nearly 200 feet, cutting through the museum’s property on a slight diagonal path.

Gadsden’s Wharf Line will reflect the sun’s natural light as water lightly flows across the hard infinity edge and into a hidden drain. The water that fills and drains from the Tidal Tribute will be recycled in this manner.
Perhaps one of the most moving and historically significant features of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden will be The Warehouse, which will be composed of a number of distinct elements, including the two Granite Mirrors, five Kneeling Statues, the Warehouse Frame, and the Boardwalk.

When enslaved Africans arrived in Charleston, they were often transported to holding areas or storehouses where men, women and children would remain until they were sold.

Over the course of the winter of 1806-1807, hundreds of enslaved Africans were being held in a warehouse at Gadsden’s Wharf. There, they awaited the slave market, where they would be auctioned off to the highest bidder. In less than three months, upwards of 700 enslaved Africans died in that warehouse as a result of the harsh weather, close confinement, insufficient food and scant clothing, meeting inhumane and tragic early deaths.

The Warehouse and its carefully designed elements will commemorate those lost lives and give visitors a place to pay homage to their memories as well as to the countless other lives lost to the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The Boardwalk is a long wooden path that stretches along the southernmost border of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden, ushering guests through The Warehouse and the Palm Grove, over The Gadsden’s Wharf Line and through the Tide Tribute toward the harbor.

A segment of the Boardwalk will be encapsulated in the Warehouse Frame, leading visitors through the heart of the Warehouse, directly between the Granite Mirrors.

Two rectangular blocks of polished black granite will comprise the Granite Mirrors, which will stand on either side of the Boardwalk. The granite will be buffed to a shine, allowing the stones to function as dark mirrors. As guests move between the Mirrors, they will meet their own reflections as well as those of the Kneeling Statues that are positioned between the Mirrors.
on the section of the Boardwalk that travels between the granite walls.

The five Kneeling Statues, childlike structures cast in molds of concrete, will evoke the spirit of those enslaved Africans who died during the winter of 1806-1807, as well as the hundreds of thousands of lives lost throughout the course of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Guests will interact with these statues as they pass through the Granite Mirrors, offering an opportunity for reflection.

Together, these elements of the Warehouse will deliver a personal, intimate and emotional experience for each person who visits the African Ancestors Memorial Garden.
One of the most deliberate and artistic features of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden will be the Stele Terrace. A stele is a stone or slab that sits upright, often featuring inscribed or sculpted surfaces. Steles are often used as monuments or commemorative tablets. They have a long history across a number of cultures: In ancient Greece and Rome, steles were used to communicate government notices or as boundary markers along property lines; in Egypt, they published laws and decrees, recorded the honors of rulers and marked sacred territories; in China, they can be found at most historical sites, including tombs and temples.

Here, in the Garden, the Stele Terrace will feature about 25 of these structures, some emerging from a wooden deck and others interspersed past the Serpentine Wall that borders it among the foliage. Each stele will be unique, ranging in height from 40 to 72 inches.

This space invites guests to individualize their experiences. Some might see the steles as representative of those who came ashore on the sacred site of Gadsden’s Wharf, or as tributes to the lives that were lost on the arduous voyages of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Others might interact with them as altars, leaving small tokens to commemorate their trips, or pausing to reflect near them.

For all, the Stele Terrace will be a meaningful and impactful space as they meander through the emotional land linguistics of the African American Memorial Garden.
The Sweetgrass Field will extend along the northern border of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden, creating soft movement and delivering a signature Lowcountry greeting with waist-high sweetgrass.

A winding path will direct guests through the field and allow visitors to enter through the Lowcountry Gardens, the Oasis or the Live Oak Grove.

Separated from the other elements of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden by the Serpentine Wall, the field will be a beautiful, secluded place to take a stroll as part of a visit to the International African American Museum.
PALM GROVE

The International African American Museum’s landscape architect, Walter Hood, is carefully selecting the flora that surrounds the museum, including the collection of palm trees in the Palm Grove, which will deliver the signature Southern look of the Lowcountry and of South Carolina. Visitors can stroll past this grove on the boardwalk that lines the southernmost side of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden, or seek out some shade under the palm fronds on a warm summer day.
The northern border of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden will be delineated by the Serpentine Façade, constructed with beautiful, light-colored bricks, reminiscent of Charleston’s defining architecture. Broken into four winding walls, each segment of the façade will feature a dynamic mixture of positive and negative space, producing a pattern that gives a nod to the sweetgrass basket weavings found in the Lowcountry.

On the northern side of the pierced wall, the Sweetgrass field – full of soft, waist-high grass – will calmly sway in the wind, and on the southern side, visitors will explore a number of gardens and groves, including the Stele Terrace, the Live Oak Grove, the Oasis and the Lowcountry Gardens.

The negative space in the Serpentine Façade will cast beautiful shadows on either side as the sun rises and falls over the African Ancestors Memorial Garden.
Guests will enjoy the distinct feel and flora of the Lowcountry in this garden. Located at the museum’s northeast entrance, with a soothing view of the Tide Tribute, the Lowcountry Garden will provide a beautiful oasis to walk or sit and enjoy the calming ambiance of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden.

The Garden will feature a series of Teardrop Pods, teardrop-shaped storm water planters in a number of variations. The Pods, filled with local plant varietals that thrive in heavily watered conditions, will offer comfortable seating for guests. They will also serve as a functional solution to South Carolina’s rainy season, as they collect water during showers and storms.

This open-air space provides soothing views of the Serpentine Wall, which leads out to the Sweetgrass Field. The wall, which curls along the museum’s northern side, will be made of light bricks in a pattern that allows guests to see through to the billowing sweetgrass from the Lowcountry Garden. This tranquil space will be a welcome space for visitors to walk through or sit and reflect.
Nestled between the Stele Terrace and the Lowcountry Gardens, The Oasis will provide a quiet, private haven for guests to sit alone or in groups. The Oasis will feature a number of enclaves, created by cast aluminum frames draped in the Lowcountry’s signature Spanish moss. There will be Hassocks, modern block seating for individuals, and Convertible Benches, which can be configured in groups of one, two or four and positioned alone or facing each other, providing visitors with a variety of seating options to relax, reflect or read.
THE BOARDWALK

The Boardwalk is a long wooden path that stretches along the southernmost border of the African Ancestors Memorial Garden, ushering guests through The Warehouse and the Palm Grove, over the Gadsden’s Wharf Line that marks the historic border of the wharf and through the Tide Tribute toward the harbor.

A segment of the Boardwalk will be encapsulated in the Warehouse Frame, leading visitors through the heart of the Warehouse, directly between the Granite Mirrors.

THE EAST BOARDWALK

As guests walk toward the museum grounds from the Harbor, they can enter the African Ancestors Memorial Garden through the East Boardwalk. This path carries guests past the Gadsden’s Wharf line, through the Serpentine Façade that lines the Garden’s perimeter, and into the Lowcountry Garden. There, guests can enjoy the distinct feel and flora of the Lowcountry. Teardrop Pods, storm water planters filled with local plant varietals, will provide comfortable seating.
THE CENTRAL BOARDWALK

Visitors may walk over the Central Boardwalk to access the African Ancestors Memorial Gardens through The Oasis, which is nestled between the Stele Terrace and the Lowcountry Gardens. The Oasis will provide a quiet, private haven for guests to sit alone or in groups. The Oasis will feature a number of enclaves, created by cast aluminum frames draped in the Lowcountry’s signature Spanish moss.

African Ancestors Memorial Garden Blueprint - The Central Boardwalk

THE WEST BOARDWALK

If guests are looking for a shady entrance to the African Ancestors Memorial Garden, they can walk along the West Boardwalk. This path traverses the Live Oak Grove. Here, young oaks will be planted, maturing along with the museum over the coming years, providing a beautiful canopy and welcome shade on the museum’s grounds.

African Ancestors Memorial Garden Blueprint - The East Boardwalk
The Lowcountry Gardens will feature a series of Teardrop Pods – teardrop-shaped storm water planters in a number of variations. The planters, filled with local plant species that thrive in heavily watered conditions, will offer comfortable seating for guests. They will also serve as a functional solution to South Carolina’s rainy season, as they collect water during showers and storms.

Interspersed throughout the Lowcountry Gardens, the Teardrop Pods offer calming views of the Tide Tribute as it fills and empties throughout the day and the Serpentine Wall, which looks out through a geometric pattern of bricks to the Sweetgrass Fields, where the Lowcountry’s trademark sweetgrass billows gently in the wind.