

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Immigrant Alexandria, Past, Present, and Future

Nature of the request:

The Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) requests a grant of \$65,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in support of a total budget of \$87,000 for the planning of its current initiative, **Immigrant Alexandria, Past, Present, and Future**, a multifaceted program to highlight the history of immigration from the mid-nineteenth century to today in Alexandria, Virginia. The goals of this initiative are the following: 1) document and interpret the experiences of immigrants; 2) explore the various responses to immigration in Alexandria; 3) increase knowledge of the history of immigration; and 4) promote conversations about the complexity of the immigrant experience and the ways in which it impacts our community today and in the future. Funding is requested through the NEH Museums, Libraries, and Cultural Organizations: Planning Grants to support the development of this series.

In order to analyze the history of immigration in Alexandria, **Immigrant Alexandria** will be broken down into five themes. The first three themes are the following: 1) economic opportunities, 2) religious tolerance, and 3) American nativism. All three of these themes played a meaningful part in the decision making process for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants to migrate to Alexandria. It also influenced their experiences interacting with native-born African Americans and whites as well as other immigrants. After World War II, two additional themes affected immigrants who chose to live in Alexandria: 1) American diplomatic and military expansion overseas and 2) the formal development of refugee programs. These two changes in American society facilitated an increase in immigration from all over the world to Alexandria. As of 2010 U.S. Census, about 24% of Alexandrians, or a little over 32,000 people, were foreign born.

To achieve the above goals, **Immigrant Alexandria** will consist of the following components to engage the public:

- Archival research
- Consultation with content experts
- Organization of a symposium
- Oral histories
- Preliminary design for interpretive formats

The overall intention of this endeavor is for the public to have a better understanding of the historic and contemporary significance of immigration to Alexandria and the ways in which it has impacted our social and cultural fabric.

VIRGINIA FOUNDATION FOR THE HUMANITIES

Immigrant Alexandria, Past, Present, and Future

Project Narrative: Oral History Project for Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future

Introduction

The Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) requests a grant of \$10,000 in support of a total budget of \$27,560 to begin implementation of the oral history component of its current initiative, “Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present, and Future”, a three-year multifaceted project to highlight the history of immigration from the mid-nineteenth century to today in Alexandria, Virginia. Founded in 1749 on the banks of the Potomac River, the City of Alexandria has a long history of receiving immigrants. The oral histories, fundamental to the overall project, will focus on the post-1970 immigrant communities in Alexandria. After World War II, American diplomatic and military expansion overseas and the formal development of refugee programs facilitated an increase in immigration from all over the world to Alexandria. As of the 2010 U.S. Census, about 24% of Alexandrians, or a little over 32,000 people, were foreign born.

Since 2010, valuing and recognizing Alexandria’s diversity is one of seven goals of the City’s Strategic Plan. Community leaders recognize the need to have Alexandria’s history better reflect the community and celebrate the variety of people from throughout the world who have made Alexandria their home. OHA, a department of the City government, sees the Immigrant Alexandria project as a way to fulfill this goal and promote a more inclusive history that recognizes the diverse groups within Alexandria.

The overall project will: 1) document and interpret the experiences of immigrants; 2) explore the various responses to immigration in Alexandria; 3) increase knowledge of the history of immigration in Virginia; and 4) promote conversations about the complexity of the immigrant experience and the ways in which it impacts our community today and in the future. The purpose of this first city-wide endeavor is to increase public understanding of the historic and contemporary significance of immigration to Alexandria and its impacts on our social and cultural fabric.

The oral history component is an integral part of the overall initiative, which will analyze and present the history of immigration through the exploration of five themes: economic opportunities, religious tolerance, American nativism, American diplomatic and military expansion overseas, and the formal development of refugee programs. Some of these themes provide insight into the decision-making process for immigrants to abandon the familiarity of their own countries to immigrate to the United States, specifically, to Alexandria, often leaving behind close family members and friends. Other themes highlight the processes of acculturation, along with the interactions among immigrants and native-born African Americans and whites as well as immigrants from other countries. The oral history interviews will explore personal immigrant stories to shed light on how these themes are reflected in individual experiences, including both hardships and triumphs.

Ultimately, the overall project will include the creation of an exhibit, Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future, that will incorporate the results of extensive archival research from primary sources relating to the history of immigration in the City; material objects from immigrant communities; and the words and images of the current immigrant population from oral history accounts. The exhibit will first be shown in The Lyceum, the City's history museum, and will then be transformed into a travelling exhibit for use within the City and beyond. A web-based component will be developed to accompany the exhibit and reach a much wider audience. In addition, the Immigrant Alexandria initiative will include a public symposium or a series of public lectures to bring together scholars on immigration in the South, in general, and on the communities that are prevalent in Alexandria. The exhibits, lectures, and web components will incorporate the oral history accounts and foster public understanding of the immigrant experience and a recognition and celebration of Alexandria's diversity. The funding requested for this initial oral history component, which will continue throughout the project, serves as the first step in the implementation of the Immigrant Alexandria initiative.