

Black History in Wisconsin and Milwaukee

Guest Speaker: Clayborn Benson

Wisconsin Black Historical Society, Milwaukee, United States

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*The Department of African & African Diaspora Studies and
the Black Student Cultural Center*

Clayborn Benson is a photographer, historian, and military veteran whose professional career with WTMJ-TV spans almost 40 years.

While working at WTMJ Benson enrolled in MATC's photography training program and, from there, he went to Fort Monmouth, NJ to military photography school. Ultimately, Benson earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in film from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, while working full-time at WTMJ.

Toward the end of his studies at UW-Milwaukee, Benson applied for and received a grant that enabled him to produce a documentary called *Black Communities*, a three-part film on black housing, migration, settlements and trade skills in the United States, Wisconsin and Milwaukee. The award-winning film has been shown on NBC affiliate WTMJ-TV, on public television throughout the state and is available through the Milwaukee Public Schools. It was during the production of this documentary that Benson realized that the history and heritage of African American people in Wisconsin was widely scattered and poorly preserved. This realization became the catalyst for him founding a museum to preserve and maintain the culture of African American Wisconsinites and the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Museum (WBHS/M) became a reality.

Opening its doors in 1987, the overarching mission of the WBHS/M is to preserve the history of African Americans in Wisconsin, with the ancillary goal of embracing the community by serving as a mainstay, neighborhood anchor and beacon of hope. The WBHS/M accomplishes this by offering a variety of community-focused programs and activities that seek to not only foster an open-door policy, but serve as a home-away-from-home for residents, especially the children of the community. An expert in researching genealogy, particularly in South Carolina, Benson also regularly teaches genealogy classes, firmly believing in the importance of people—especially children—knowing their roots.

Benson's professional and personal experiences have enabled him to travel nationally and internationally from annual jaunts to the Milwaukee Brewers' training camp in Arizona, to places as far away as Europe, West Africa, Egypt, Somalia, Russia and China.

The father of two adult daughters, Benson is the recipient of numerous awards, citations, commendations, accolades for his work in photography and contributions to ensure the preservation of history.



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