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African-American History Museum Opens Doors.

By Margaret Horton Edsall, for The Capital

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This weekend, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture is hosting its grand opening celebration. Baltimore's newest attraction and the East Coast's largest facility dedicated to African-American history and culture invites visitors to see its spectacular new structure -- located just a few blocks from the Inner Harbor -- its inspiring exhibitions and interactive galleries representing 400 years of history. And today, as the party goes on inside the museum, the merriment will overflow outside onto Pratt Street with continuous musical and dance entertainment from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The museum's atrium-enhanced interior encompasses 82,000 square-feet of space. The major features include: the fourth-floor resource center, complete with an oral history recording studio and distance-learning classroom; an 11,500 square-foot permanent exhibit space, covering the majority of the third floor; the second floor's 3,500 square-foot area for special exhibits, two-story theater, and an orientation gallery; and the main floor lobby highlighted by a cafe and museum shop.

In the innovative permanent exhibition galleries, visitors will explore the diversity of the African-American experience in Maryland as told through individual stories - centuries old to contemporary times. As visitors take this fascinating journey through "Building Maryland, Building America," then "Things Hold, Lines Connect," and finally "Strength of the Mind," they will come upon ordinary people and extraordinary visionaries while hearing about personal triumphs and public victories.

To celebrate the museum's opening, the special exhibit "A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the *Henrietta Marie*" will offer visitors the unique opportunity to view what is believed to be the world's largest source of tangible objects from the formative years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The *Henrietta Marie* was the earliest slave ship wreck to be identified by name, a task completed when the ship's bell was discovered during excavation efforts off the coast of Key West, Fla., in 1972. She was a London-based vessel registered as a 120-ton burden, built to carry goods, supplies, a crew of 18 and approximately 200 slaves.

The *Henrietta Marie* was one of the many merchant ships that participated in the harsh voyages through the Middle Passage which resulted in the largest forced movement of people ever recorded from the continent of Africa. The discovery of the *Henrietta Marie* allowed researchers to uncover a wealth of information and facts about the ship's captain, the crew, cargo, the investors and the benefactors of this brutal enterprise.

This special exhibition will be open to view through January 2006.

In 1994, the Maryland Commission on African-American History and Culture completed a study to identify and evaluate the most important African-American historical and cultural sites, collections and resources in Maryland. While this initiative was taking place, the Department of Business and Economic Development was also finalizing a statewide analysis of existing and potential state resources related to African-American heritage tourism. After combining the historical inventory data and tourism findings, it was concluded that there was a substantial need for a statewide museum to protect and interpret Maryland's African-American history and culture.

By executive order, former Gov. William Donald Schaefer established the Maryland Museum of African American History and Culture Commission, which was charged with determining the feasibility of creating a new museum in Baltimore. In 1998, the commission was formalized into the Maryland African American Museum Corp., comprised of a 32-member board of directors and functioning as an independent unit of the executive branch of the State of Maryland.

Once this entity was in place, the state directed its focus be on education, preservation and interpretation, and tourism. Recognizing the powerful impact the museum could have on the education of Maryland's youth, the Maryland State Department of Education created a partnership with the museum to develop a curriculum and teacher training to help close the African-American achievement gap and increase understanding among all students.

"This is the first time a museum of African-American history and culture and a state department of education have worked together to develop educational materials and museum content simultaneously," said Nancy Grasmick, superintendent of the state Department of Education. "The establishment of this museum provides the opportunity to develop curriculum that informs students of all ages about the contributions and experiences of African-American Marylanders -- past to present.

As plans progressed for the museum, the Reginald F. Lewis Foundation awarded the museum a \$5 million endowment. In gratitude, museum officials and the state Board of Public Works agreed to name the site the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History and Culture.

Mr. Lewis -- attorney, entrepreneur and philanthropist -- was born in 1942 into a Baltimore neighborhood he once described as "semi-tough." His determination to "keep going, no matter what" helped him earn degrees from Virginia State University and Harvard Law School. In 1987, he purchased, for \$985 million, the international division of Beatrice Foods. This deal was the largest leveraged buyout ever of overseas assets by an American company, and Mr. Lewis became the first African American to own a Fortune 500 corporation.

The landmark, now dominating the intersection of Pratt and President streets, visually speaks to the fiber of the Maryland state flag. The museum's award-winning architectural

team -- The Freelon Group/RTKL -- believed it was critical for the structure to accurately represent the spirit, struggle and pride of a people who were among the builders of a nation. The beautiful black granite facade represents the strength and resilience of the African-American community. The dramatic 96-foot high Red Wall of Freedom -- a vibrant metal panel system that originates on the outside of the building and slices its way through the Pratt Street elevation and into the core of the structure -- stands for the tension, volatility and intervention Maryland's African Americans have experienced over 400 years. The yellow accent walls symbolize an enduring truth, faith and hope.

***How to get there:* To reach the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, trek north to I-695 north (Baltimore Beltway); exit onto Route 295 north (Baltimore-Washington Expressway) and proceed into Baltimore; turn right onto Pratt Street and proceed past the Inner Harbor. The museum is located at Pratt and President streets.**