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The
**Troutbeck
Symposium**

Student historians share the region's rich BIPOC past

BY JAMIE MARSHALL



At a time when it feels like much of this country's history has been erased, denied, or buried, a group of high school students is taking a different tack: They are shining a light on it. In May, 200 middle and high school students from 16 regional public and private schools gathered at the Troutbeck Resort in Amenia for the third annual Troutbeck Symposium. This student-led forum celebrates and commemorates people of color and other marginalized groups whose contributions to the community have been forgotten—or simply ignored.

The symposium might seem a departure for the resort, whose guests come for its beautifully designed rooms, farm-to-table cuisine, and wellness amenities. Yet at its core it speaks to Troutbeck's storied past: Former owners Joel and Amy Spingarn were key players in the civil rights movement and the Harlem Renaissance.

It all started during the COVID-19 lockdown, when Salisbury School history teacher Rhonan Mokriski

challenged his students to find little-known stories about African-American history in the area. He enlisted the help of documentary filmmaker Ben Willis.

Among the highlights that year was a short film called "Coloring Our Past," featuring local resident Katherine Overton, a historian who traced the Cesar side of her family back five generations.

Because Katherine was riding out the pandemic at her daughter's home in Texas, her two grandsons, Issac and Kasai, were enlisted as producers. The project was so successful that a year later the Troutbeck Symposium was launched.

"From the beginning the idea was to give it to the students and let them run with it," said Mokriski.

And run with it they have.

This year's films covered tough topics: modern day lynchings, the silent protest march of 2017, the indignities of a local asylum for the mentally ill, the destruction of the sacred lands of a local indigenous tribe, to name just a few. For Salisbury School senior Kasai Moore (Overton's grandson, who came to the

school as a junior), it was a chance to bring his family legacy full circle.

His documentary, "Roots," traced his family's ties to the area, including his great-great-grandmother, Matilda Cesar Williams, and her brother, Arthur, who worked as a chauffeur at Troutbeck.

"It takes my breath away to imagine my uncle Arthur ferrying Langston Hughes or Zora Neale Hurston from Wassaic train station to Troutbeck," he said.

For Moore, the experience was deeply personal. A gifted soccer player, he arrived at Salisbury hoping to fulfill his dream of playing for a college team. A season-ending injury forced him to pivot; he now plans to pursue a career in cybersecurity.

"It was a difficult transition to come here my junior year, but at the same time it felt like a calling for me to do it," he says. "And then I learned about my family's connections to the area, and how they weave into the tapestry of the landscape. It made me feel like I was part of something and I can take that feeling with me wherever I go."

—*troutbeck.com*

