



## **The Revitalization of Historic Belmont Mansion and the Underground Railroad Museum**

**A Project of the American Women's Heritage Society and  
the Women's Committee for the 250th**

### **Introduction and Background**

The restoration and modernization of Belmont Mansion will transform an iconic cultural landmark and elevate and preserve a three-generation legacy of Black women devoted to interpreting history and creating space for community gathering and celebration.

It all began in 1985, when Audrey Johnson-Thornton, founder of the American Women's Heritage Society (AWHS), saved the dilapidated Palladian mansion in West Fairmount Park from demolition. Over the next several years, Audrey began the first of many restorations to the historic Belmont Mansion estate. During this work, Audrey uncovered evidence of the Mansion's connection to the Underground Railroad, deepening her conviction that its history must be preserved and shared. Through tireless vision and determination, she transformed a neglected, abandoned structure into a living monument of resilience, courage, and cultural pride – one that celebrates the intertwined narratives of American independence and Black liberation.

Audrey Johnson-Thornton passed away in 2019, and the day-to-day care of the Mansion has since been taken on by her daughters, Dr. Naomi Booker and Linda Thomas. Loni Booker-White, Dr. Booker's daughter and Audrey's granddaughter, also serves on the leadership team as creative director. Today, the AWHS remains the only Black-founded, women-led organization actively preserving a historic estate in Philadelphia – arguably one of the city's most significant cultural landmarks. The Mansion predates the American Revolution and is one of only three sites in Philadelphia where the American story of independence intersected with African-American history during a pivotal time in the making of the country. AWHS ensures that Belmont Mansion endures as a beacon of heritage, education, and empowerment, bridging generations and amplifying the ongoing pursuit of liberty and equality.

Thanks to the dedication and service of the Johnson-Booker family, the site has been a cultural center of gravity for the African-American community for the past 40 years, hosting a variety of events year-round – from professional networking groups, political gatherings by local elected officials, civic and neighborhood meetings, and meet-ups of local fraternity and sorority chapters; to personal celebrations such as baby showers, weddings, and family reunions.

As a historic site, Belmont Mansion attracts thousands of visitors annually, including international and heritage tourists, school groups, and walking and bike tours led by historians and park groups. In 2026, the Mansion's place in history will be recognized with the installation of two historical markers: one from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission describing its history as a stop on the Underground Railroad; and one honoring a visit to Belmont by the Marquis de Lafayette, part of the national Lafayette Trail.

### **A Legacy for the Nation's Semiquicentennial: Belmont and the Women's Committee**

The Women's Committee for the 250<sup>th</sup> was launched in 2024 by Philadelphia250 to harness the social, intellectual and economic power of women in support of transformational legacy projects that elevate the contributions of women to Philadelphia and American history. The Committee builds on a long and storied tradition of Philadelphia women playing an influential and outsized role in every one of our nation's anniversary celebrations since 1876: from building a first-of-its-kind Women's Pavilion showcasing women's inventions and innovations at the Centennial World's Fair, to restoring Strawberry Mansion in 1926 and Laurel Hill Mansion in 1976.

To date, more than 300 women have joined the Committee, collectively contributing more than \$100,000. The first project that the Committee chose to support was a programmatic legacy – a small business pitch competition for women entrepreneurs run by the Women's Opportunity Resource Center (WORC). In 2025, the Committee provided WORC with a grant of \$75,000 to launch the program, which offers mentorship and technical assistance to selected businesses. The winners of the competition, who will receive cash prizes, will be chosen by panel of expert judges in May 2026.

Belmont Mansion is the physical legacy project that the Committee has chosen to support for the 250th. It will be the third historic Fairmount Park estate to be preserved by Philadelphia women in honor of our nation's founding. The partnership between AWHS and Philadelphia250, now a program of the Philadelphia Visitor Center, formed in 2024 when Philadelphia250 learned that AWHS was in the process of planning a redesign of the Underground Railroad Museum exhibits with the nationally renowned firm Ralph Applebaum Associates (RAA), who designed the galleries for the National African-American Museum of History and Culture in Washington, DC. However, a tour of the estate revealed that the project was larger and more comprehensive than simply updating the Museum exhibits– the buildings and grounds needed are in urgent need of restoration. It was then that the idea of adopting the renovation of Belmont Mansion as a Women's Committee legacy project was born.

The last time that the Mansion saw significant restoration and upgrades was in the 1990s and early 2000s, when an event space was added to the rear of the property. In recent years, the buildings and grounds have suffered from a lack of funding and begun to degrade and deteriorate, putting the site and its operations at risk. In addition, AWHS would like to modernize its business operations and governance and create a pathway to future growth and sustainability. Together, AWHS and Philadelphia250 have prioritized an inclusive strategy that first addresses concerns regarding the physical infrastructure and

the grounds, which will set the stage for a new museum experience and expanded programming and revenue opportunities.

### **Scope of the Project**

The goal of the revitalization legacy project is a thoughtful restoration and modernization of Historic Belmont Mansion and its grounds, and a redesign of the Underground Railroad Museum. This initiative will help ensure the preservation of this nationally significant landmark and enhance its role as a place of education, reflection, and civic pride. This multiphase, multiyear effort will cover not just essential physical upgrades and improvements to the buildings and grounds but will also include strategic plans to address governance, operations, and maintenance; as well as expand revenue generation opportunities for long-term sustainability. The Women's Committee will collaborate closely with AWHs to ensure that the existing community and cultural partners who rely upon this space are involved in the process.

The project has four main phases of work:

- Phase 1 - Site Evaluation and Assessment: December 2025 to March 2026
- Phase 2 - Design, Planning, and Budgeting: March to August 2026
- Phase 3 - Capital Campaign and Strategic Planning: March to December 2026
- Phase 4 - Restoration of the Building and Grounds: Begins January 2027

A comprehensive and detailed assessment of the existing building and grounds (Phase 1) will inform the design, preservation and renovation plans (Phase 2) for the restoration of the Mansion's historic integrity, as well as addressing accessibility requirements, health and safety, and energy performance, among other concerns. The plans will integrate historic preservation, visitor experience, and community access. A new landscape design will improve circulation and wayfinding, expand outdoor gathering areas, and incorporate lower-maintenance plantings. Museum exhibit plans will create a renewed interpretive experience that weaves together the site's Underground Railroad legacy with contemporary themes of freedom and civic engagement.

Parallel to the design phase, a construction budget, project schedule, and a project delivery framework will be developed to ensure a seamless process. A business and operations strategy will ensure the sustainability and growth of the site based on a reimagined revenue model that explores new and expanded uses for the site, such as educational programming, events, and partnerships, to support ongoing maintenance and community access (Phase 3).

A critical step in advancing the initiative, the design phase will also inform and inspire a multi-million dollar capital fundraising campaign. Architectural renderings of the renovated campus will bring the vision to life and inspire major philanthropy required to raise the expected \$10 million dollars needed to complete the physical restoration and strategic planning.

A coalition of private and public partners will lead this multiyear effort and guide the process through coordinated planning and implementation efforts:

- **The American Women’s Heritage Society (AWHS)**, led by Audrey Johnson-Thornton’s daughters and granddaughter, will ensure fidelity to the organization’s strategic priorities, so that the project remains in service of current community beneficiaries while expanding its capacity to attract and engage a broader audience of stakeholders.
- **The Philadelphia Visitor Center/Philadelphia250** will lend strategic oversight, vision, fundraising and advocacy efforts and will position the Mansion within the city’s broader cultural and tourism audience and framework.
- **The Women’s Committee for the 250th** will serve as platform for engagement by women, tapping into their networks and expertise to help advance the project through subcommittees focused on fundraising, programming and events, and marketing and communications.
- **Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation**, the owner and landlord of this treasured asset, will help guide this project to success as a long-term partner.
- **AR Spruce**, a minority and women-owned Philadelphia-based real estate advisory firm, will oversee project management and consultant coordination.
- **Ralph Applebaum Associates (RAA)**, a renowned exhibit design firm, will lead museum and interpretive planning, connecting historical narrative to physical design.

### **Project Status and Fundraising Strategy**

Thanks to seed funding provided by Belmont Mansion and the Philadelphia Visitor Center, the project launched in late 2025 with a site assessment and evaluation by a team of architects and engineers. To help keep the project moving, the William Penn Foundation has committed funding for the Design and Planning (Phase 2), with additional funds urgently needed to complete this critical step.

Leadership at the City and State have expressed strong interest in helping this project come to fruition. Funding has already been secured from City Council in support of museum programming and community engagement. Advocacy for significant, multiyear commitments is ongoing at both the City and State level with the goal of ensuring Belmont is added into their long-term capital budgets. The goal is to acquire 60%-70% of the funds needed through these public commitments.

To close the remaining funding gap, the Women’s Committee will launch an anniversary “Campaign for Belmont” in the spring of 2026 as a collective call to action. The Committee will serve as the primary platform for engagement and participation by the Philadelphia community, inviting members and non-members to join three advisory groups:

- A capital project subcommittee will provide guidance, connections, and other support to the project management team as they lead the design, planning and budgeting process;

- A fundraising and events committee will design and execute a capital campaign and host a Belmont Block Party in the summer of 2026 to accelerate the fundraising and invite the broader community to support the project; and
- A marketing and communications committee will focus on creating a groundswell of awareness and support to raise the profile of the project significantly across the city and the region.

This project to revitalize Belmont Mansion and reimagine the Underground Railroad Museum is an ambitious legacy, but one that is achievable thanks to the alliance of women, leaders and organizations who stand behind it. The campaign is already attracting major interest from influential private and corporate donors, as well as the public sector. Both AR Spruce and PDP, who are leading the team of architects, designers and engineers, volunteered to heavily discount their services in recognition of the symbolic importance of Belmont to Philadelphia and American history and the need to ensure it stands for generations to come.

The Committee continues to welcome members, supporters and partners throughout 2026. After the anniversary year, it is envisioned that a core of active Committee members will continue to support AWHS and its partners in formal and informal capacities, as part of AWHS's reimagined governance structure.