

## Rev. John Kinard

AAAM Board President: 1984–1986

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Rev. John Robert Edward Kinard (1936–1989) was one of the most influential museum leaders of the 20th century, reshaping how cultural institutions engage with the communities they serve. Born in Washington, D.C., Kinard became the first African American director of a Smithsonian museum at just 31, when he was appointed to lead the newly created Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in 1967. His path to museum work was rooted in development work in Africa and community organizing on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and in Washington, D.C. These experiences shaped his conviction that museums must be accountable to the people whose stories they tell.

Kinard was recruited by Marion Conover Hope of the Greater Anacostia People’s Corporation, who recognized in him the same community-centered ethos championed by her mother-in-law, activist Lugenia Burns Hope. Given the keys to the dilapidated Carver Theater on Nichols Street in July 1967, Kinard transformed the space in just three months. When the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum opened that September, it featured hands-on exhibits designed with direct input from a Neighborhood Advisory Committee. Children could climb into a Mercury space capsule replica, film their own TV shows, handle natural specimens, or visit a small zoo. The museum was lively, accessible, and rooted in the everyday experiences of Anacostia residents. After the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Kinard and his team shifted the museum’s focus toward African American history and the urgent issues facing Black communities. Exhibits such as *The Evolution of a Community: Part II* (1972), which famously included a live rat habitat to expose the political roots of urban neglect, demonstrated Kinard’s belief that museums should confront social problems rather than avoid them. Under his leadership, the museum expanded into nearby buildings to house research, design, and training programs aimed at increasing African American representation in museum professions. Kinard challenged the Smithsonian’s exclusionary practices and pushed the institution to embrace a fuller, more honest portrayal of American history. His work laid essential groundwork for what would eventually become the National Museum of African American History and Culture, cementing his legacy as a visionary who redefined the role of museums in public life.