

Rowena Stewart

AAAM Board President: 1980–1982



Rowena Stewart (1932–2015) was one of the most influential museum leaders in the preservation of Black history, culture, and community memory. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, and raised in nearby New Berlin, she grew up in a close-knit environment shaped by the legacy of Black resilience.

After graduating from Edward Waters College in 1955, Stewart began her professional life as a social worker, serving in settlement houses and community centers in Jacksonville and later in Boston. These early experiences grounded her lifelong commitment to public service, cultural education, and community empowerment.

Her museum career began in 1975 when she became the first Director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society in Providence. There, Stewart helped establish the organization as a vital steward of African American history in New England. Her success in Rhode Island led to her appointment in 1985 as Director and Curator of the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia, one of the nation's premier institutions dedicated to Black history. She guided the museum through a period of growth and increasing national visibility.

In 1992, Stewart moved to Detroit to lead the Motown Historical Museum, where she helped preserve the legacy of one of America's most influential musical movements. Three years later, she was recruited to Kansas City, Missouri, to oversee the development of the American Jazz Museum. Under her leadership, the museum opened in 1997, and she became its first Executive Director, shaping its mission and public presence.

After retiring in 2002 and returning to Jacksonville, Stewart continued to serve her community as President of the A.L. Lewis Historical Society Board, Coordinator of the American Beach Community Center and Museum, and as a consultant to museums nationwide. She was a fierce advocate for Black museums nationwide and was AAAM's first woman board President. Her career left an enduring imprint on cultural preservation and African American public history.