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Smithsonian selects Lonnie Bunch as its next leader

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After a five-month search, the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents has elected Lonnie Bunch as the organization's 14th — and first African American — secretary.

Bunch, the founding and current director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, will step into his new role June 16, succeeding David Skorton, who stepped down in December to become CEO of the Association of American Medical Colleges.

A public historian for more than 35 years, Bunch has overseen the NMAAHC since its September 2016 opening and has rallied donors and members of Congress to fund the museum and attract 4 million annual visitors with a collection of 40,000 objects documenting African American history.

"One of the most important things about building a museum from scratch is it helps you to learn how to talk to and work with all aspects of the Smithsonian," Bunch said during a Tuesday morning press conference. "Leading that museum gave me the confidence and belief that we can do anything. I realized that the Smithsonian is where I want to spend the last part of my career, because the Smithsonian can do things that no one else can."

Bunch will be responsible for overseeing the Smithsonian's 19 museums and galleries and



REBECCA COOPER

Lonnie Bunch will be the next secretary for the Smithsonian Institution, the first historian and African American to lead the organization in its 174 years. He's shown here discussing the new post at the Tuesday press conference.

the National Zoological Park that collectively bring in nearly 29 million visitors annually.

The regents formed an 11-member committee to search for Skorton's successor, reviewing about 800 people but ultimately electing Bunch due to his aligning commitment to the Smithsonian's 2022 strategic plan, which among other things seeks to expand the museum's footprint and reach 1 billion people a year with a digital-first strategy.

Previously, Bunch served as president of the Chicago Historical Society from 2001 to 2005; held a number of positions at the National Museum of American History from 1989 to 2000; was curator of history and program manager for the California African American Museum in Los Angeles from 1983 to 1989; and started his career as an education specialist and historian at the National Air and Space Museum from 1978 to 1979.

In 2017, Bunch was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, was given the President's Award at the NAACP Image Awards and was presented the Impact Leader Award from the Greater Washington Urban League. He was also appointed to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House in 2002 by President George W. Bush and reappointed by Barack Obama in 2010. He was in the Washington Business Journal's own class of Minority Business Leader Awards in 2016.

Born and raised near Newark, New Jersey, Bunch received his master's and bachelor's degrees in African American and American history from American University. He has held several teaching positions there, as well as at George Washington University.

Spencer Crew, former director of the National Museum of American History, will serve as interim director of the NMAAHC while it conducts a national search for the museum's permanent leader.

"After working at the Smithsonian in various capacities over three decades, and then birthing a wildly successful startup within the Smithsonian, Lonnie has the benefit of knowing the Smithsonian intimately," Board Vice Chair Steve Case said in a statement. "Now Lonnie will bring his insights and passion to reimagining the Smithsonian of the future, and creating a culture of agility and innovation to expand the Institution's impact."