

Mud-Hut Muddle: Visas Denied for Museum Workers

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Body

On this red-white-and-blue national holiday, we bring you a simple news story to assure you that our borders are safe from immigrants coming over to work on construction projects and build things in 'murca. Even when it's a couple of mud huts. Even when it's for a museum. Even when an actual U.S. senator gets involved.

See, you probably thought that there were, like, millions of immigrant men and women in this country legally or illegally, gainfully employed in the construction trades. You may have noticed entire groups of said workers at pickup sites around the Washington metropolitan region, looking for daywork. You may have read stories about this as being sort of an issue.

To which we can only respond: Not if the U.S. consulate in Nigeria can help it!

The Frontier Culture Museum of Virginia is finding this out the hard way. As Deputy Director Eric Bryan explains it, the outdoor museum in Staunton was looking to add a couple of 18th-century African mud huts to its collection of housing that various American ancestors once might have lived in. This would be an addition to the German exhibit, the Irish exhibit, etc., etc.

The museum tries to bleed authenticity. It features original buildings that have been dismantled in their home countries, brought over to the commonwealth and restored. The German exhibit, for example, dates to the 1600s and is from the village of HÄ¶rdt. It is there to show American schoolchildren on field trips the casual freedom they enjoy to not live in a town with an umlaut in its name.

No, actually, the exhibits are to "increase public knowledge of the diverse Old World origins of early immigrants to America, of how these immigrants lived in their homelands, how they came to America, and how the way-of-life they created together on the American frontier has shaped the success of the United States," the museum's Web site says.

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To recognize the ancestry of African Americans, the museum staff went to western Africa to search out what the average family might have lived in before slave traders showed up. They came up with a simple mud hut with a thatch roof.

Working in Nigeria, they got a consultant to vet several workmen who were conversant with the old ways and implements. This resulted in three apparently impoverished rural men, all apparently over the age of 45, who were from the Igbo region of the country, Bryan said. They had never left the country before.

The museum sent letters of invitation, asking them to come over this summer and build a compound of three huts and a boundary wall and then return home. They helped them get Nigerian passports.

The office of Sen. John Warner (R-Va.) supported their visa applications by making the U.S. consulate in Nigeria aware of the importance of the museum's project, Warner's spokeswoman, Bronwyn Lance Chester, said yesterday. (No one made the men's names available because of privacy concerns.)

Applications were filed about three weeks ago, Bryan said. There was confusion. And then the word came down: Rejection!

The Associated Press yesterday quoted U.S. consulate official Debra Heien as saying one of the men couldn't describe the building project and another filled out his paperwork incorrectly. She said two of them were unable to make a living.

"They ruled 'denied' because the interviewers did not think these men showed sufficient socioeconomic ties to Nigeria in order to assure their return," Bryan said.

Now the museum is scrambling to get their consultant and an architect familiar with the old ways to construct the exhibit. The materials -- the tools, the thatch for the roof -- are already en route. The buildings will be in place by the end of the year, Bryan said. They'll even have real goats wandering the compound, of the same breed that would have wandered such courtyards 200 years ago.

And so our little story ends this way: Real mud, real thatch, real goats, no real rural workmen.

Somehow, we are not surprised. Bryan sums up the state of modern America this way: "We were naive in assuming there wouldn't be any problems."

Graphic

IMAGE; Frontier Culture Museum Of Virginia; The Frontier Culture Museum in Staunton planned to re-create these Nigerian mud huts.

IMAGE; Frontier Culture Museum Of Virginia; A drawing of the mud huts planned for the Frontier Culture Museum, which was unable to hire workmen from Nigeria for the project.

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