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Take a journey through black history

Tour tells slave stories, anecdotes and trivia from uptown to Huntersville

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Observer File Photo

Settlers' Cemetery at Church and Fifth streets in uptown Charlotte.

I moved here from Philly eager to learn Charlotte's history.

So you can imagine my delight when I met Juan Whipple, director of Queen City Tours, operator of a daily Black Heritage Tour, and Black Heritage Tour and Pilgrimage Feb. 9, 16, 23.

"My tours take you on a journey that starts back in the 17th century...and wind and twist through four centuries of pain, struggle, strife and progress."

I learned a lot on a recent tour with Whipple.

The tours begin uptown, focusing on founding history, then continue to Huntersville and back - pointing out contributions by black people along the way.

"People from Charlotte say there is no history here," Whipple said, but his tours prove otherwise. "Unless you are 250 years old, you will learn something..." Included in the tour is some general Charlotte history.

Journeying forth he pointed out the prominent places and landmarks in uptown's four wards.

"Local folks have no idea of the remnants of slavery that are still around right under their noses," Whipple said. "There are slaves buried uptown in Settlers' Cemetery."

Citing more modern times, Whipple said most of Charlotte's black "firsts" happened in Brooklyn -- the Second Ward. "Black businesses here flourished from 1870 to the 1920s." Because of urban renewal, many were pushed out to Biddleville or Washington Heights.

I learned that the Mecklenburg County Seal was designed by Harvey Boyd, a black man who lives in Matthews.

That seal was at risk of being replaced, but Whipple interceded. "I had to talk to the folks downtown and explain its history," he said. It was largely because of that discourse "they decided not to change it."

And upon arrival at Hopewell Presbyterian Church in Huntersville, you learn about the church's and parishioners' significance to Mecklenburg County, and Hopewell's relationship to slaves and the area's black Presbyterians.

The Trade and Tryon street intersection is not just the city's hub. There is a manhole cover that acknowledges the signing of the "Meck Dec" -- the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence signed May 20, 1775.

"Our (auto) tags used to say, 'First in Freedom.' Some people think that had something to do with slaves being freed . . . (but) it's referring to the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence . . . (our) independence from the British," Whipple said.

The tour and pilgrimage last three hours and are peppered with slave narratives, anecdotes and trivia.

Whipple says his goal is to promote Charlotte's history and to show where landmarks are. "People have a tendency to forget over the years where things are located."