

Staff/Queen City Tours(sm) and Travel

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BLACK HISTORY FOR A MONTH THEN POOF

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I've always had a love-hate relationship with Black History Month.

It's absurdly funny that serious black programs are crammed into February. But on March 1, it all vanishes. It's a rhythm and blues version of "Brigadoon," with everything black turning into a fine mist at the stroke of midnight on Feb. 28 (Feb. 29 in a leap year).

During the month, through Queen City Tours, director Juan Whipple runs two Black Heritage tours each Saturday.

"I do it because it's a way of not forgetting a terrible part of history, not to bring up old wounds but to educate and reflect. And make sure it doesn't happen again."

I took the tour this year, with an interested and integrated group.

As I'm coming to the afternoon tour, Daniel Chisolm is returning from the morning one. The retired physician tries to imagine the money made off the backs of slaves, plentiful in Mecklenburg County in 1860. "Just think of what it would mean to have someone work for you for just one year for free." There's a reason why whites were able to accumulate wealth and pass it along to their descendants and blacks were not.

And the tour hasn't even started yet.

Why is there a figurative whitewash on the plaque at Settlers Cemetery, the historic, city-owned resting place for familiar Mecklenburg County names: Polks, Caldwells and Davidsons? Their graves are marked; those of their "servants" are not.

They weren't servants, they were slaves. Even today, even in death, there's that reflex to soften and protect, to fudge the stark truth on a plaque that will be there when we're all gone.

How could good Christians reconcile the morality of owning a human being? That's something that's always puzzled me, the moral contortions and hypocrisy that would make all God's children go to some segregated heaven.

We visit Hopewell Presbyterian Church, and I get some understanding.

The Rev. Jeff Lowrance patiently explains the sometimes painful history of his historic church, founded in 1762, where the good North Mecklenburg cotton planters and farmers didn't question that you could enslave a person's body but also take care of his soul.

We walk up the slave's entrance, hidden from the front, and sit in the gallery where they worshipped,

apart from their masters.

Lowrance is helping to unearth his church's tangled racial history. He talks with pride of Lewis Phifer, the skilled stonecutter whose work and - unusual for a slave - name survives at the church. He built the stones around the gate to the graveyard, the one that kept slaves out.

Lowrance is trying to locate the unmarked, unnoticed slave graveyards in the area. "It's my mission to find them and make them holy ground again."

In "Brigadoon" the town disappeared for 100 years, but in Mecklenburg County and anywhere in this country, for that matter, black contributions are there to see 365 days a year.

If we look.

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