

Staff/Queen City Tours(sm) and Travel

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CHARLOTTE'S COLORFUL HISTORY

Charlotte Observer, The (NC)-February 10, 2007
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In a perfect world, there would be no Black History Month. There would be no need.

Historical contributions of blacks, as well as whites, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans and every other color and nationality, would be seamlessly woven into history lessons.

But the world is far from perfect. We still have too many "I didn't know that" moments of astonishment.

This week, I watched "Forgotten Genius" on PBS, part of the "Nova" science series. The two-hour tale, a documentary that mixed re-created scenes with the usual photos, talking heads and narration, introduced me to chemist Percy L. Julian - the grandson of a slave - considered one of the most important scientists of the 20th century.

His hand was involved in the synthesis of cortisone and a drug used to treat glaucoma.

Julian, who was denied jobs in research and academics because of his color, turned to industry in the 1930s when he was named a director of research at the Glidden Co. in Chicago. There, his discoveries on the uses of the soybean led to the U.S. Navy's firefighting foam and - what else - new and improved paints. Spred Satin, anyone?

I didn't know that.

In the month that includes the birthdays of Frederick Douglass (Feb. 14) and Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12), this country can surely take a moment to learn about Julian and others, especially since we benefit from their knowledge and sacrifice.

As I was reminded during a tour by Juan Whipple, director of Queen City Tours (www.queencitytours.com/blackheritagetour.htm), Charlotte's black history runs deep.

You need not look far for your own personal "I didn't know that" experience.

Riding through what once was Brooklyn, the center of black life in Charlotte, words bring alive a part of the city that once contained 200 black-owned businesses but now seems sterile. Urban renewal demolished the neighborhood in the 1960s and most of those businesses never reopened.

But so much history remains.

Black doctors, lawyers and professionals established their own three-story brick office building, the MIC, or Mecklenburg Investment Co., which still stands on Brevard Street.

The Mecklenburg County seal was created more than 40 years ago by Harvey Boyd, an African American graphic artist - and he still lives in Mecklenburg County.

At Settlers Cemetery in uptown, a who's who of Mecklenburg history, Thomas Polk, a Charlotte founder and Revolutionary War colonel, rests not far from the unmarked graves of his family's slaves.

Visitors to Hopewell Presbyterian Church - officially founded in 1762 - walk through stone cemetery gateposts cut by Lewis Phifer, a slave and skilled mason. He cut the first steps to the renovated church building in 1859.

"I wish Charlotteans would stop telling people there's no history here," Whipple said.

That's what it is, not black history or white history, but the history of Charlotte.

That's something I did know.

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