

Staff/Queen City Tours(sm) and Travel

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EXPLORE OUR AREA'S PAST ON BLACK HERITAGE TOUR - SHADOWS OF SLAVERY STILL LINGER IN MECKLENBURG

Charlotte Observer, The (NC)-February 6, 2004
 Readability: 9-12 grade level (Lexile: 1120L)
 Author: OLIVIA FORTSON, STAFF WRITER

Juan Whipple no longer looks at cemeteries as hangouts for ghosts - he sees them as classrooms where history is taught.

That's one of the changes that has taken place inside him since he began leading the Black Heritage Tour and Pilgrimage, a special tour he gives on Saturdays in February. He's been doing this for the past six years as part of Black History Month.

This year's tours are Saturday and Feb. 14, 21 and 28.

"Once you get in this business, you can't pass by a road marker and not stop," says Whipple, a director with Queen City Tours.

One feature of the February tours still affects him deeply, even after all these years. He won't reveal exactly what it is - "I don't want to give it away" - but says it shocks most everyone who's ever taken the tour.

"There's something engraved on a headstone," he hints, "something from the era of slavery."

Queen City offers tours across Charlotte and Mecklenburg County throughout the year, including ones focusing on African American history. But the February tours are more detailed and take participants outside of Mecklenburg County to surrounding historical sites.

Whipple says those who take the annual Black Heritage Tour and Pilgrimage don't fit into one category. What they do have in common is a lack of familiarity with area African American history; even fewer are familiar with the leftover evidence of slavery in Mecklenburg County.

"Local folks have no idea of some of the remnants of slavery that are still around right under their noses," he says. "For instance, there are slaves buried uptown in Settlers Cemetery.

"People don't know or understand the political clout African Americans had in Charlotte after slavery," he adds. "We haven't had that much political clout since then. During that era, there were more African Americans that voted than European Americans. This was before the laws were changed to grandfather clauses at the turn of the 20th century, which meant a lot of African Americans suddenly couldn't vote because their grandfathers were slaves."

One thing Whipple wishes he could change when it comes to media coverage of Black History Month is its lack of inclusion of African American leaders from this area.

"Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth - they definitely have a place in history. But if you're a kid in Charlotte, you might not know that a long time ago there were people right here in this city that were doing similar things, but they don't get as much press."

Whipple hopes the tours inspire others to research on their own cultures.

"Whether you're black, white or Asian," he says, "if you don't know where you came from, you can't know where you're going."

PREVIEW

Get on the Bus

Three-hour motorized tour focuses on African American history.

WHEN: 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Saturday and Feb. 14, 21 and 28.

WHERE: Departs from Levine Museum of the New South, 200 E. Seventh St.

TICKETS: \$16-\$30.

DETAILS: (704) 566-0104; www.queencitytours.com.

Photo

LAYNE BAILEY - FILE PHOTO. Sonya Asbury of Charlotte checks out Settlers Cemetery during a black heritage tour of Charlotte in 2001. Edition: ONE-THREE Section: E+T Page: 30E Correction: The following correction ran on February 7, 2004: Frederick Douglass' name was misspelled in an article about the Black Heritage Tour and Pilgrimage in Friday's E&T.

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