

July Fourth and Beyond:



Queen City “Historytelling”

by **Dee Grano**

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Talking to Jay Whipple about Charlotte’s history, you hear the standard “history book” facts and a little something extra.

“There are actually several Queen Cities in the country,” said Whipple, listing Buffalo, New York; Cincinnati, Ohio; Plainfield, New Jersey; and even Queen City, Texas. “But we’re the only one named after a real queen,” he said, referring to namesake Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg, Germany, and the wife of King George III of England.

Whipple offers a variety of tours under the trademark “Queen City Tours.” His company offers tours by demand and can sometimes accommodate same-day requests by text message. Find more information on tours, pricing and availability at www.queencitytours.com.

“Ninety percent of history is boring,” Whipple declared. “... always the classes everyone skips first.”

To keep tourists interested, Whipple incorporates stories, innuendo and sometimes a little gossip. Entertainment is secondary; he checks his facts and verifies his information from multiple sources.

Originally from Florida, Whipple was moved to North Carolina (via Uncle Sam) in 1979. He moved to Charlotte in 1985 to take a job with (then) Duke Power. A history buff co-worker accompanied him to the old Charlotte Museum of History to see an exhibit about the African-American history of the region. He started making trips to the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library Uptown. It soon became his favorite place.

“I was like a kid in a candy store,” said Whipple, who spent more than 100 hours of research creating his first tour on African- American history in Charlotte in 1992.

Today, Queen City Tours offers African- American history, Charlotte history and more. Whipple presents ghost tours that feature haunted houses and neighborhoods, Civil War cemeteries and hospitals and a Haunted Revolutionary War and Slave Cemetery tour.

One such spooky story starts in 1781, when General William Lee Davidson led a band of Catawba Valley farmers against General Charles Cornwallis during the American Revolution. Early in the battle at Cowans Ford (near Huntersville), Davidson was shot and killed. His family quickly buried him in the cemetery of Hopewell Presbyterian Church, the resting place for many early settlers.

“People report seeing the ghost of General Davidson at Hopewell,” Whipple said.

Similarly, the spirit of General Thomas Polk still stands guard outside Settlers’ Cemetery near the Fourth Ward where he is buried.

Polk and Davidson were two of the 26 signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. Polk is said to have read the document aloud to Charlotte residents on Saturday, May 20, 1775. Though the existence of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence is disputed, it is one of Whipple’s favorite historical tidbits.

Whipple’s tours offer different perspectives, even stories that some would like to forget.

“Those people with streets and schools named after them, many of them owned slaves,” Whipple said.

On the African-American history tour, he shares the story of slaves who were skilled tradesmen like Louis Pfeiffer, a mason who did stonework on Hopewell Presbyterian Church (Huntersville) and First Presbyterian Church in uptown Charlotte.

“First Presbyterian Church was actually not the first Presbyterian church in Charlotte,” Whipple said. Of the first seven Presbyterian churches in the Charlotte area, only one remains at the corner of Sugar Creek and Tryon streets. The Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church is the oldest remaining church congregation in Mecklenburg County, dating back to 1755.

Whipple’s challenge is to animate the past of a city with a history of tearing it down.

“We have to do an excellent job of painting the picture because that stuff is just not there anymore,” he said. Often he sees people walk past historical markers without a second glance. Sometimes these markers are stolen, and only replaced if someone cares to call.

“If you don’t know your history, how can you know the present and the future?” Whipple asked. “The present and the future are history, they just haven’t happened yet.”