

African American Imprints

A Bus Tour of the Missouri History Museum

Led by Dr. John Wright July 16, 2011

The tour started at 9:00 with a 45 minute walk through the Tavis Smiley Exhibit, *America I Am*. Only one side could be seen as there was quite a bit to see and read. The decades highlighted notables on backlit exhibit panels as you entered. Actual doors from a slave dungeon were on display. Most people will have to return to see the whole exhibit.

The bus had problems releasing the brake. It appeared for a moment that we may have to get another bus, which would have totally changed the timing of the trip and opportunities to see everything as planned. However, on the wings of a prayer (or two or more) the answer came and the brake released. We left about 12 minutes late but were able to see everything.

The first stop on the tour was to the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. The director greeted us and the program director gave an overview of the history. The skating rink was a big deal and a great memory. Gold skates were on display for us to see as well as a wall of pictures depicting the women who ran and supported the Y over the years. It ended with a beautiful section showing Phyllis Wheatley in bronze bas relief.

A block away was the Scott Joplin House. Well preserved, we went upstairs to his living quarters. He was a border there. Three pianos are in the house, lovely furniture in the parlor, a wonderful period kitchen, a gift shop, and a framed picture of Scott Joplin in the parlor. We stayed there about 40 minutes and divided the group in two with guides.

Dr. Wright shared how Mr. Joplin played at a bordello owned by Babe Conley. She was a Madame and paid him to play in her establishment. Babe passed for white and went to places off limits to blacks. He said she had a box at the Veiled Prophet Ball. He discussed how some very light skinned blacks “passed” known by their friends but unknown to whites with which they mingled. She likely attended with one of her managers who was white.

Next stop, The Gateway Classic Black Walk of Fame. Dred and Harriet Scott are there, and many, many St Louisans who contributed to this city and beyond. Each person’s recognition has a diamond with the names in it and a square below describing their accomplishments.

We had lunch at Central Baptist Church where Dred and Harriet attended church. -Lynne Jackson, great-great granddaughter of the Scotts gave a brief presentation of the history of her ancestors and shared about the statue to be built for them.

We entered the Ville which was the affluent black neighborhood in the early 1900s until @ 1960s. It is rich in history and firsts. Unfortunately, time and circumstance has taken its toll on parts of it, but a revitalization effort has made some excellent improvements in certain quarters. Meanwhile, some of the mainstays continue to rise above the calamity and some have been

resurrected. Cases in point, Homer G. Phillips Hospital was nationally known for training black doctors and nurses. It was a premier training ground and a few doctors still practice today who got their start there. The mammoth building was constructed of a beautiful light colored brick although it was closed in 1979 amidst much protesting and concern for neighborhood healthcare; it was reopened @ 20 years later as a Senior Citizens Apt Building. We got to go inside this gated community and the internal transformation was breathtaking. I was proud to see what had been done for our elderly. It was quite a comeback.

Around the corner, we also got to go inside the first black high school west of the Mississippi River, Sumner High School. It was named for Charles Sumner the abolitionist Congressman who spoke out against slavery and was almost killed on the floor of the house by a pro-slavery congressman. He survived but always bore the marks of that beating. He continued to speak out. How fitting. Yet most people do not know who Mr. "Sumner" is!

Inside we walked the halls and saw many, many drawings by the students of famous Sumnerites. There were around 100! I even saw my piano partner with whom I took classical music from the incredible Alleda Ward Wells two blocks away. He has become an international musician.

Sumner's teachers were considered the cream of the crop. They were blacks who got an education in science, chemistry, engineering, earned degrees and doctorates but could not get hired due to racism. They opted to teach and could get hired at this all black high school. Therefore the caliber of instruction was par excellence and the education the students received was renowned. To this day, the proud alumnae of Sumner High School will tell you they are and remind us of days gone by when discipline and learning were the norm and not the exception.

We went to the riverfront off of Hall Street near the McKinley Bridge to see the only authenticated Underground Railroad (UGRR) site in the city. We did not get off the bus but saw the site where Mary Meacham and others were actually caught trying to cross the river. The slaves belonged to Henry Shaw and most likely were returned to him. Mary was the wife of pastor John Berry Meacham. She went to jail but did not stay there long. Every year in May there is a Mary Meacham Crossing Anniversary re-enactment of the story and the history of this site.

We returned to the history museum around 3:15. It was a lovely (but hot) day and the chance to get out and visit every location was quite a treat.

I met Mrs. Erma Brasfield, educator herself and wife of a past principle of Beaumont High School.

Thanks to Miss Laura X for this wonderful experience. I am most grateful to have gone and shared this day with her. Mom was getting over a bad cold and could not make it. She sent her regrets and thanks as well.

Submitted by LMJ 7/26/11