

TOP STORY

Interactive map in works to tell broader story of African-American history in Charleston

By Adam Parker aparker@postandcourier.com Jan 27, 2018 Updated Jan 27, 2018



A historical marker on East Bay Street memorializes Robert Smalls' escape from Confederate Charleston aboard the CSS Planter. [Buy Now](#)

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Visitors to Charleston interested in history typically are told only part of the story, and too often it's the white part. That's a problem, Blan Holman said.

That's not to say slavery and segregation aren't mentioned, or that black leaders such as Denmark Vesey, Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins are ignored altogether. But the narrative has tended to minimize the contributions of African Americans. So Holman and a few others are trying to do their part to provide more balance.

Charleston soon will have the International African American Museum. The South Carolina African American Heritage Commission recently has published its "Green Book" of black history sites throughout the state. And the Holy City has seen historical markers and statues pop up across the peninsula in recent years, even as historic sites modify their presentations to be more inclusive.

Holman, an environmental attorney, now is making his small contribution to this effort. He was part of the Riley Institute's 2016 Diversity Leadership Initiative, and his team came up with an idea for a project: to develop an interactive map of black history sites on the Charleston peninsula.

The team consisted of Holman, International African American Museum director Michael Boulware Moore, attorneys Christiaan Marcum and Laura Evans, educator and consultant Barbara Dilligard, Trident United Way Chief Operating Officer Merridith Crowe and The Post and Courier's Brian Hicks.

Inspired by efforts elsewhere, they came up with a preliminary list of sites and conceived of a way to present "undertold history," Holman said. The project is called the Charleston Justice Journey. Go to www.charlestonjusticejourney.org.

"Here, we've had lots of history and a certain type of telling of the story for a number of years," he said. "We've got a lot of work to do to complete it, but we want to make it inspirational."



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That means emphasizing more both the suffering and challenges black people have faced and their remarkable accomplishments in the face of fierce opposition, Holman said.

"The idea is that Charleston needs to be known, as it emerges as a pretty modern city, for more than moonlight and magnolias."

It was serendipitous that Moore was part of this team. Recently, the museum decided it would sponsor the project, becoming its fiscal agent, and Moore agreed to appear in two of the short videos associated with each of the 13 selected sites. Those two videos are completed; the rest still need to be made.

Don Gordon, director of Furman University's Riley Institute, said the Charleston Justice Journey project fits in nicely with the goals of the Diversity Leadership Initiative, a statewide program that addresses racism, gender bias and other obstacles that hold South Carolina back socially and economically.

"While there have been somewhat similar projects undertaken in other states ... the Charleston Justice Journey project, situated in the epicenter of slave trading in this country, is of national and international importance," Gordon said. "When finished, this remarkable project will highlight important parts of a forgotten journey of black South Carolinians whose history has been ignored or lost."

That history belongs to all of us, he said. And it's critical to embrace it so that the state can properly celebrate all of its citizens and leverage its diversity to improve South Carolina's economic standing.

"In addition to the International African American Museum, the project will be part of a major historical attraction for thousands of tourists who wish to understand and help us celebrate the true history of our state," Gordon said.

Other cities and organizations have made an effort to embrace the African-American experience as they develop strategies to educate and increase tourism. Museums large and small across the country share aspects of black history; visitor centers include historic churches and other sites in brochures and along designated trails; nonprofits and government agencies install monuments, markers and memorials that pay tribute to important black figures and events.

Holman said his DLI team was inspired by efforts elsewhere, including in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, states that each have defined civil rights itineraries (though they amount to little more than a list of sites), and by the United States Civil Rights Trail, an effort by the National Park Service, Georgia State University and Travel South USA to identify important sites and create a user-friendly website.

He said advances in technology make it easier than ever to create a virtual "journey." He hopes to find additional sponsors and supporters so the project can expand beyond its initial 13 sites and add more historical information.

Helen Hill, CEO of the Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, said her staff has been brainstorming for a decade about how to tell a more inclusive story.

"Now we have a whole new plan as we lead up to the opening of the museum to create content and convey that depth of the African-American experience in Charleston," she said. "Updating the scope of history and how these stories relate to the current day is important."

Many of Charleston's historic sites and organizations already have been introducing black heritage tours and other opportunities to learn about the African-American experience. Now the CVB is striving to tie it all together — the attractions, narrative, foodways, art — so that history might be presented in a more comprehensive and respectful way, Hill said.

Aspects of this history are difficult, unpleasant, even traumatic, but they are part of what makes Charleston unique, she added.

"We (the CVB) haven't hidden from the ugliness of our history," Hill said. "The real stories are what people really want. Part of what makes Charleston special is our past, both the good and bad."

Holman said he hopes the Charleston Justice Journey, now in its beta phase, will gain partners and supporters, become an integral part of the visitor's experience and assist educators with valuable information they can share with their students. If all goes well, it will be launched officially in the spring, he said.

It begins with an interactive map of historic sites, but it can develop into much more, Holman said. Over the summer, more content will be added and a mobile app developed if enough money can be raised.

"The natural next step is to bring these points together in these constellations and tours," he said.

Eventually, the project can develop maps for other parts of the city and state.

"There are some big dreams that can be realized here, but we are starting small," Halman said.

Contact **Adam Parker** at aparker@postandcourier.com or 843-937-5902.

First 13 black history sites

The Charleston Justice Journey has identified 13 initial black history sites for its interactive map:

- Robert Smalls historic marker on East Bay Street
- Judge J. Waties Waring marker on Meeting Street just south of Broad Street
- Gadsden's Wharf on Concord Street, the future site of the International African American Museum
- Justice Jonathan Jasper Wright historic marker on Queen Street, and his grave on Line Street
- Kress lunch counter sit-in marker on lower King Street
- Emanuel AME Church on Calhoun Street
- Cigar Factory "We Shall Overcome" historic marker on Columbus Street
- Hospital Workers Strike historic marker on Ashley Avenue at MUSC
- Cannon Street All-Stars site on Cannon Street and at Stoney Field
- Grimke sisters historic marker on George and East Bay streets
- James Petigru office on St. Michael's Alley and grave at St. Michael's Church
- Septima P. Clark memorial park on President Street near Spring Street
- Denmark Vesey statue in Hampton Park

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