

African-American Heritage Tour

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has a rich and fascinating African American history. The Tour begins at the African American Cultural Center in Uptown Charlotte. Parking is available. The Center is located at the corner of N. Myers St. and East Seventh St.

Take I-277 South, exit at the Fourth St. Exit, take a left and proceed to McDowell St., take a right and continue to Seventh St. Take a left and the Center is one block on your right. If you are staying Uptown, travel east on Trade St., take a left on McDowell, and proceed as above.

Stop # 1. [Little Rock A.M.E. Zion Church](#) (1910-1911)



This magnificent [Neo Classical Revival](#) Church was designed by architect James M. McMichael. The congregation raised \$20,000 to erect the church, which replaced an earlier wooden structure. The A.M.E. Zion Church had its origins in New York City and was the denomination of the Great Emancipators -- Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass. The building now houses the African American Cultural Center.

Turn right out of the parking lot of the African American Cultural Center and continue west on Seventh St. until you reach Brevard St. Turn left on Brevard St. and continue south on Brevard St. until you cross Fourth St. Look for Grace A. M. E. Zion Church on your left.

Stop # 2. [Grace A.M.E. Zion Church \(1902\)](#)



In 1886, some members of Clinton Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church withdrew over the issue of abstinence from drinking alcohol. The leader of the band of prohibitionists who founded Grace A.M.E. Zion Church was William W. Smith, a contractor who designed the [Mecklenburg Investment Co. Building](#) next door. Their motto, "God, Religion and Temperance," appears in Latin on the cornerstone of the present building. Grace A.M.E. Zion Church stood in the heart of what was the Brooklyn neighborhood in the early twentieth century. Urban renewal destroyed the surrounding neighborhood in the 1970s and 1980s. Grace Church is scheduled to move to north Mecklenburg in the next couple of years. The fate of the building is uncertain.

Stop # 3. [Mecklenburg Investment Co. Building \(1922\)](#)



In May, 1922, construction began on a building which was unique in Charlotte. The MIC Building was the first structure planned and executed by some of the African American leaders (C. R. Blake, Thad L. Tate, A. E. Spears, and Dr. A. J. Williams) of the community to accommodate African American businesses, professional offices, civic and fraternal organizations. The designer of the building was William W. Smith (1873-1924). Notice the fancy brickwork on the building. It is called corbeling. Smith's tomb in Pinewood Cemetery has the same look.

Continue south on Brevard St. for one block or until you reach Stonewall St. Turn left on Stonewall St., which will eventually become Kenilworth Ave. Take Kenilworth until you reach Baxter St. Turn left on Baxter St. until you reach Torrence St. Turn left on Torrence St., and you will see the Morgan School on your immediate left.

Stop #4. [Morgan School](#) (1925)



This school, designed by architect Louis H. Asbury, served the [Cherry community](#), an African American community established in 1891. In the days before automobiles and [trolleys](#), African Americans tended to live in the outlying sections of town. Many people do not realize that Cherry is twenty years older than neighboring [Myers Park](#). This building is a reminder of the days of legal racial segregation.

Continue north on Torrence St. until you reach Luther St. Turn right on Luther St. and you will see the Mt. Zion Lutheran Church on your left after about one block.

Stop #5. [Mt. Zion Lutheran Church](#) (1896)



The land on which Cherry was developed was part of a thousand acre cotton farm that John Springs Myers, a prominent white, had assembled since the 1870s along Providence Road outside the bustling cotton town of Charlotte. Mt. Zion Lutheran Church was organized by William Philo Phifer (? -1911), a leader in establishing black Lutheran churches in Charlotte and its environs. Many of the residents of Cherry owned their own homes.

Continue on Luther St. until it ends at Queens Road. Turn left on Queens Road and continue to East Fourth St. Turn right on Fourth St. which soon changes its name to Randolph Road. Continue on Randolph Rd. until it intersects with Sam Drenan Road. Turn left on Sam Drenan Rd. (directly across from the entrance to the Mint Museum) and continue to Leroy St. Turn right on Leroy St., and you will see the Billingsville School on your right.

Stop # 6. [Billingsville Rosenwald School](#) (1927)



In the mid-1920s, the Grier Heights neighborhood petitioned the Mecklenburg County School Board for assistance in establishing a neighborhood school. The school board advised the neighborhood to wait until the land for a school site could be acquired. Subsequently, local residents purchased two acres from local landowner and businessman, Sam Billings (1848-1933), who was also the first African-American to own land in the neighborhood. Billings donated an additional acre of land, and the school was named in his honor for his contribution. Money for the school was also donated by the [Julius Rosenwald Fund](#).

Turn around and return to Randolph Road. Turn right on Randolph Road which will change its name to East Fourth St. Continue on East Fourth Street and take I-277 North. Continue straight, pass I-77, and exit at Beatties Ford Road. Turn left on Beatties Ford Road, and you will see the Excelsior Club on your immediate left. Turn into the parking lot.

Stop # 7. [The Excelsior Club](#) (1944)



The Excelsior Club, located on Beatties Ford Road about one-half mile north of the main entrance to Johnson C. Smith University, was for many years the leading private African American social club in the Southeast, and one of the largest of its kind on the East Coast. In addition to its importance as the only social club for African American professionals in the area, it also became a political focal point of the city and county for both black and white candidates for office, and a meeting place for boosters of Johnson C. Smith University.

Turn around and travel south on Beatties Ford Road until it intersects with French St. Turn right on French St. and continue for one block to Campus St. Turn left on Campus St., and you will see Mt. Carmel Baptist Church just over one block on your left.

Stop # 8. [Mt. Carmel Baptist Church](#) (1921)



The Mount Carmel Baptist Church is part of [Biddleville](#), the village that grew up next to the present Johnson C. Smith University, and was named after the school's former title, Biddle Memorial Institute (1867-1876), later Biddle University (1876-1923). The architect of the church was Louis H. Asbury, who also designed the [Morgan School](#) in [Cherry](#). The church moved to a new location in 1983.

Continue south on Campus St. The last house on your right is the Dr. George E. Davis House. Please note its sad state of repair. Johnson C. Smith University is seeking funds to restore the house.

Stop # 9. The [Dr. George E. Davis House](#) (c. 1895)



Dr. Davis was an important figure in three respects: he was the first black professor at Johnson C. Smith University, and, as Dean of the Faculty, a major shaper of education at that institution; he built a number of houses near his own as rental housing, thus molding the character of this part of the neighborhood; and he was a North Carolina state agent for the [Rosenwald Fund](#), and in that capacity had a direct hand in raising more than a half-million dollars for many of the black schools (including [Billingsville](#)) built in the state which were partially financed through the fund.

Turn left on Dixon Street and proceed one block to the entrance to Johnson C. Smith University. Stop at the guard gate, identify yourself, and arrange to park and walk around the campus.

Stop #10. [Biddle Memorial Hall](#) (1884)



Immediately after the Civil War, white Presbyterians from the North founded Biddle Institute, named for Henry Biddle, a Union officer killed by the Confederates. The purpose of the school was to prepare former African American slaves for freedom. Initially, all the faculty members were white. Among them was Dr. Stephen Mattoon (1815-1886), Biddle's president. It was Mattoon who had the vision and who raised the money required to build Biddle Hall -- some of it coming from white Charlotteans. It was the largest building in Charlotte when it was completed

in 1884. Johnson C. Smith University is now restoring this magnificent structure to its original glory.

Stop # 11. [Carter Hall](#) (1895)



Carter Hall was constructed in 1895. It is the oldest dormitory on the campus. Situated on the northeastern corner of the University Quadrangle, Carter Hall possesses an overall Gothic Revival flavor, especially highlighted by circular pavilions at each corner. Also noteworthy is the structure's wooden cupola. Much of the labor for this 15, 758 square foot building was done by students under the supervision of the Industrial Department of the University. The exterior of the building, except for a modern protrusion on the eastern facade, is original. The University changed its name in 1921 to Johnson C. Smith University in honor of a benefactor.

Stop # 12. The [Carnegie Library](#) on the Campus of Johnson C. Smith University (1912)



In 1907, Dr. Henry L. McCrorey was elected president of the university, and he guided the institution's growth and change for forty years. He was a graduate of the school's preparatory department and theological seminary (1895) and had served as a professor in the college of arts and sciences and the seminary. At the top of Dr. McCrorey's priority list for the university was completion of the drive for a new library. This Neo Classical style building was designed by the Charlotte architectural firm of Hunter and Gordon.

Until now the tour has mostly covered African American urban sites. But one must realize that the great majority of African Americans in Mecklenburg County lived on farms until well into the twentieth century, first as slaves and later as tenant farmers. Mecklenburg County was one of the largest cotton-producing counties in the Piedmont section. About 40% of the people living in Mecklenburg County in 1860 were African American slaves. The remainder of the tour will deal with rural sites. It is important to note that some African Americans owned their farms, like [John Connor](#).

Leave the Johnson C. Smith Campus and turn right on Beatties Ford Road. Continue until you reach the ramp leading to the Brookshire Freeway headed east. Take the ramp and continue on Brookshire Freeway until you reach the North Tryon St. exit. Take the exit. When you reach North Tryon St., turn left and continue north until you reach the hilltop beyond the intersection with 36th St. Rosedale is on your left. Enter the site and tour the house.

Stop #13. [Rosedale](#) (c. 1815)



This elegant plantation house was called "Frew's Folly" when it was built in circa 1815, possibly because of its grand interior woodwork. Archibald Frew was a tax collector, which may explain why he built so lavishly by backcountry standards. The house had been associated with several of the county's notable families: the Caldwells and the Davidsons. It was locally noted for its fine gardens and a horse riding tournament that featured a rather dangerous lance throwing competition. Slaves supplied much of the labor for the plantation. Indeed, plantation agriculture would have been impossible otherwise. For tour information for Historic Rosedale, call (704) 335-0325.



Exit from Rosedale and take a left onto North Tryon St. Continue north on Tryon St. until Old Concord Road bears off to the right, which is one long block past Eastway Drive. Continue on Old Concord Road until you reach Torrence Grove Church Road. Turn left and continue to the end of Torrence Grove Church Road. The Newell Rosenwald School is to your immediate left.

Stop # 14. [Newell Rosenwald School](#) (c. 1925)



This is another Rosenwald School. Remember the [Billingsville](#) Rosenwald School earlier in the tour? Remember the [Dr. George E. Davis House](#)? Twenty-six Rosenwald Schools once stood in Mecklenburg County. This is one of the best-preserved. The schools were built with matching funds provided by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, created by the Chicago entrepreneur who directed the booming growth of Sears, Roebuck and Company. From 1917 to 1932 the building program of the Rosenwald Fund helped construct over 5300 black school buildings across the South, 813 of them in North Carolina. Rosenwald not only provided money and architectural assistance to improve school facilities, but also promoted white-black cooperation in the era of Jim Crow. To receive Rosenwald money, the local black community and the local white community both had to contribute funds.

Return to Old Concord Road and turn left. Continue until you reach the ramp for Harris Blvd. west. Travel on Harris Blvd. until you reach I-85. Take I-85 north and exit at Mallard Creek Church Road. Turn right on Mallard Creek Church Road. As you head down the hill toward U.S. 29 you will see the entrance to the Thornberry Apartments on your right. Turn in and park in the parking lot. Walk past the gates and bear left at the first intersection. The W. T. Alexander Slave Burial Ground is at the far end of the block. There is a black metal fence surrounding it.

Stop # 15. [W. T. Alexander Slave Burial Ground](#) (1840s-1880s)



There are over 70 graves in this burial ground. Some African Americans were buried here after the Civil War. The advertisement and bill of sale illustrated below demonstrate that slaves were treated as "property." It is troublesome and painful to reflect upon the institution of slavery. Clearly, it was a tragic part of our past. Yet the slave owners regarded it as a natural component of the social order. They simply could not conceive how African Americans could exercise the prerogatives of political and economic freedom. History is not the past. History is our consideration of the past. That is why it is so important to preserve places like this.

Notice!
Negroes for Sale.
 On the 18th day of December next, at the Plantation of Our late Obedience Dinkins, dec'd. I will offer for sale
12 likely NEGROES,
 viz: 5 Men, 2 Women, 2 Boys, and 3 Girls, a quantity of
Cotton, Corn and Fodder,
1 Horse, 2 Cows and calves,
1 Cotton Gin & Gearing,
Farming Tools,
Household & Kitchen Furniture,
 with other articles not mentioned. The sale will continue from day to day, until all are sold. A credit of twelve months will be given. Bond and approved security required.
Saml. Cox, Executor.
 White Hall, N. C., Nov. 19, 1848.
 N. B. All persons having claims against the late Obedience Dinkins, dec'd., will present them properly attested within the time the law directs, or this notice will be plead in bar of their recovery.
 SAM'L COX, Executor.

Bill of Sale
 This writing certifies that I have this day sold to James Smyth a negro boy named John. I guarantee the said boy to be of sound mind & body, and to be not more than 30 years old.
 Price to be paid \$400⁰⁰
 Henry Carter (S)
 Witness.
 Given Dec 14 1848
 Elmwood N.C.

Return to Mallard Creek Church Road and turn right. Turn right on U.S. 29 at the bottom of the hill and continue to where Harris Boulevard crosses. Turn right on Harris Boulevard and continue on Harris Boulevard for several miles until it crosses I-77. Stay straight, and the road will change its name to Vance Road. Continue on Vance Road until it intersects with Mt. Holly-Huntersville Road. Turn left on Mt. Holly-Huntersville Road until it intersects with Beatties Ford Rd. Turn right on Beatties Ford Road and continue for a couple of miles to Hopewell Presbyterian Church on your right. Turn in the parking lot and walk up to the church.

Stop # 16. [Hopewell Presbyterian Church](#) (1833)



This was the richest part of Mecklenburg County before the Civil War, because the best cotton-growing land was here. Hopewell Presbyterian Church was the cultural centerpiece of the neighborhood. The leaders of the community who worshipped here were all prominent cotton planters and slave owners. There is a side entrance near the front of the right side. That's where the slaves entered to go up to the slave gallery. White owners would not allow slaves to worship in their own churches. Slave owners would serve communion to their slaves to demonstrate humility before the Lord.

Sample Road runs west off Beatties Ford immediately opposite from Hopewell Presbyterian Church. Drive down Sample Road and continue to the end. Latta Place is in Latta Plantation Park.

Stop # 17. Latta Place (1799)



Like Rosedale, Latta Place depended largely upon slave labor. James Latta first came to the area as a peddler traveling between Philadelphia and Charleston, and selling wares from his wagon to the farmers along the way. For a farmer this would have been a valuable site, close to the rich bottom lands of the Catawba River, yet out of immediate danger of floods. Latta's success at business can be measured by the grandeur of the house, which, incidentally, follows the design of a Philadelphia town house. Notice that the entrance is on the narrow side of the house rather than at the center of the long front. Yet the chimneys are located in their traditional Mecklenburg position at each end of the house, competing with the entrance for space. For information call (704) 875-2312

Return on Sample Road to Beatties Ford Road and take a right. Continue on Beatties Ford Road until it intersects with McCoy Road. Take a hard left on McCoy Ford Road and continue for approximately .4 miles. You will see a field on your right. Stop at the tree line on the far side of the field. Park your vehicle carefully on the shoulder and walk up the edge of the tree line. You will see a chain-linked fence ahead of you in the woods. That is the location of the McCoy Slave Cemetery.

Stop # 18. [McCoy Slave Cemetery](#) (1840s-1880s)



This served the same purpose as the W. T. Alexander Slave Burial Ground. The cemetery contains a most interesting marker, probably erected in the 1920s. The family of the slave owner express their devotion to two slaves, "Uncle Jim" and "Aunt Lizzie." Some visitors to the cemetery take offense at the marker and resent it as a token of "paternalism." However, the truth is that slavery was a very personal institution, and there were instances when strong personal bonds developed between slave owners and their slaves. Indeed, Lizzie was famous as a [story teller](#).

Obviously, this tour could not cover all African American Historical Sites. [Click here for a full list](#).

End of Tour. To return to Charlotte, continue on McCoy Road until it intersects with Gilead Road. Turn right on Gilead Road and proceed to I-77. Turn right on I-77 and return to Charlotte.