Maury County
African-American Heritage Tour Guide

Top: Dick Porter
Center: College Hill School Group from 1922
Left: The oldest black Baptist congregation in Tennessee

MOUNT LEBANON MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

In October 1845, free blacks in Columbia established Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church, the oldest black Baptist congregation in Tennessee. Edmund Kelly was its first pastor. The original church was built several blocks southeast of this site, and it served as a school during the Reconstruction Era. The present building was built in 1895.
Welcome to Maury County, Tennessee! This guide lists some of the notable places that have played an important role in shaping African-American history and culture in and around the county seat of Columbia. Black people were among the first settlers in this region in the wake of Dearborn's Treaty with the Cherokee in 1806 and have become Maury County's largest ethnic community. More than one fifth of the population of Columbia is African-American and many families still reside in historically black neighborhoods such as Macedonia and East Hill, where the earliest churches and schools were located. Some sites are publicly accessible during posted visiting hours; others require an appointment in order to have a closer look. Several remain under private ownership and can only be viewed from the public thoroughfares. Please check the entry for each particular property in order to verify accessibility or times for visitation.

Reconstructed Freedmen's School at Rippavilla Plantation

5700 Main Street  
Spring Hill, TN 37174  
(U.S. Highway 31 at Saturn Parkway)  
(931) 486-9037  
http://www.rippavilla.org

The advent of emancipation fueled a desire in most African Americans to obtain an education. Next to the ownership of land, most former slaves looked upon schooling as their best hope for advancement. With the help of the Federal government and northern missionaries, the freedmen and women quickly established schools in any available building and sought a qualified person to teach them how to read and write. This restored log structure was moved from a nearby farm where it had served as a place of learning for the ex-slaves that lived in the surrounding area. It has been faithfully reconstructed and furnished in a manner consistent with its original purpose.

Open 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Saturday; 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM, Sunday. Winter hours may vary.
Greenwood Cemetery
West 2nd and North Garden Streets
Columbia, TN 38401

The site of Columbia’s first cemetery was approved by an act of the Tennessee General Assembly in November, 1809. Many of the early citizens of the town were buried here. The white interments occurred at the southern section of the graveyard, and the northern part received the black burials. By the 1850s most of the suitable plots had been used, so first Rose Hill, and later, Rosemount cemeteries were established across town. Recently the old burying ground was discovered to be more extensive than previously thought, and a number of unmarked African-American gravesites are now protected by an iron fence.

The Cemetery may be visited at any time during the day.

Saint Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church
405 Church Street
Columbia, TN 38401
(931) 388-4069

The group of black people that would become St. Paul’s congregation originally met weekly in the basement of the white Methodist Episcopal church. In 1840, these members formed their own organization and erected a house of worship on the bank of the Duck River at 2nd and Garden Streets. Soon after the conclusion of the Civil War, the communicants established the first African Methodist Episcopal Church in Maury County, under the direction of Reverend Gilbert Algee. Although the present structure dates from 1922, an A.M.E. church building has stood on this location continuously since 1870.

Saint Paul Church is only open for tours by arrangement with the pastor.
Maury County Courthouse

41 Public Square
Columbia, TN 38401
(931) 381-3690

Master mason and former slave Dick Porter laid the first trowel of mortar at the ceremony to set the cornerstone of the present courthouse in 1904. Sixty years earlier he had helped erect the previous one on the same spot. This building was the scene of the initial legal proceedings against a number of African-American citizens who were indicted for their alleged participation in Columbia’s nationally significant racial disturbance in 1946. After three months, a change of venue granted by the presiding judge moved the remainder of the trial to Lawrence County, where all but one of the twenty-five men were eventually acquitted. The defendants’ three black lawyers, Z. Alexander Looby, Leon A. Ransom, and Thurgood Marshall, played prominent roles in the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

Open 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

"The Bottom"
(Mink Slide)
Black Business District

East 8th Street, between South Main and Woodland Streets,
Columbia, TN 38401

Morton Funeral Home at the beginning of the twentieth century

Although circumstances have changed considerably, for many years this block-long district was the only area of concentrated African-American commercial and cultural activity in Columbia. On several occasions early in the twentieth century, black educator Booker T. Washington addressed large audiences in churches and meeting halls located in this neighborhood. In February of 1946, local residents rose to the defense of U.S. Navy veteran James Stephenson in order to protect him and his family from the dire threats of a white mob. A number of personal injuries and considerable property damage resulted from the violent response to this courageous effort, but the stated desire of the black community to have "no more social lynchings" became the first step in breaking down the rigid racial barriers that existed at that time.

The district may be visited at any time during the day.
Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church
218 East 8th Street
Columbia, TN 38401
(931) 388-8744

In October 1843, a slave and ordained minister named Edmund Kelly and six other people organized the first black Baptist congregation in the state of Tennessee. Although the members of the group first worshipped in a church building located several blocks from here on Maple Ash Avenue, the brick structure that serves as the home of today's Mount Lebanon Baptist Church has stood on this spot since 1885. The structure was completed under the pastorate of Reverend J.S. Gilmore. Historic Mount Lebanon has served as the original point of departure for all of the black Missionary Baptist churches in this area.

Mount Lebanon Church is only open for tours by arrangement with the pastor.

Log Cabins on College Hill
315 East 10th Street, Columbia, TN 38401
At the corner of Bridge Street

After the Civil War had ended, members of the Foster family gave some of their former slaves the cabins that they had lived in before emancipation. These houses and the garden plots behind them provided shelter and food for the freedpeople as they began their new lives. Even though the city has grown up around them over the years, the cabins remain as a memorial to the original inhabitants and a testament to the perseverance and vision of those dedicated individuals who have saved them from destruction.

Private, no visitors.
Rosemount Cemetery
South Graham Street,
Columbia, TN 38401
At the corner of
Hardwick Avenue

After all the usable space in Greenwood Cemetery had been exhausted, in 1873 Columbia’s African-American citizens established Rosemount Cemetery adjoining Rose Hill Cemetery. The money to purchase the land was obtained by subscription among the members of the black community. Among those interred here are Martha Bradshaw (the “mother” of White Springs Baptist Church), Braxton Bragg (the body servant of the Confederate general), John Brown (the barber), Isaiah Gholston (the mason), Dr. J.C. Halsey (the first black alderman) and his wife, Italy (the nurse), Reverend William Jordan (the educator), and the Reverend William Kelly (the educator).

The Cemetery may be visited at any time during the day.

Carver-Smith High School
913 East End Street,
Columbia, TN 38401

In 1947, the principal of the old College Hill High School, S.E. Jones, led a community effort to establish a new and better equipped secondary school to educate the African-American children of Maury County. Built over the next two years, it was named for George Washington Carver and the county’s first black educational supervisor, Stella Smith. The doors opened in January 1950, and the first class graduated the following May. The dedicated faculty and staff ensured that the students developed self-respect and learned a sense of pride and dignity in order to assume their places in the world. Due to integration, the school closed as a regular high school in 1969 and has been remodeled for use as an apartment building.

Aurelia Johnson Spraggs, member of Carver-Smith’s first band

Private, no visitors.
Fairview Park and Community Center
871 Iron Bridge Road
Columbia, TN 38401
(931) 380-2740

Built on land donated by the Monsanto Corporation, the park initially served as the athletic fields for Carver-Smith High School. The school’s football team played its first homecoming game here two months before Carver-Smith even began classes in their new building. Over the years the park has hosted numerous special events such as annual exhibition baseball games played by the semi-pro Indianapolis Clowns that featured well-known players like Satchel Paige. High-profile attractions like these drew African-American spectators from all over the region. The city of Columbia took over management of the park in 1963, and it continues to be a source of pride for the whole community.

8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday; weekends, reservations only.

Quarters at Historic Clifton Place Plantation
6197 Trotwood Avenue, Columbia, TN 38401
On the east side of TN Hwy. 243, 3 miles from the intersection with James M. Campbell Boulevard

On most large plantations during the antebellum period, beyond the slaveholder’s mansion and often out of sight, there existed a separate world occupied by black men, women, and children. Although usually unrecognized as such by their masters, the enslaved people created a vibrant communal life amidst the lands they tended. Even before emancipation, many African Americans appropriated a considerable amount of living and garden space for themselves. The descendants of this plantation’s slaves occupied these rare surviving Middle Tennessee quarters until recent times. The quarters were part of the historic Clifton Place plantation, but presently are on the Campbell Ridley farm.

Private, no visitors.
St. John's Episcopal Church

6497 Trotwood Avenue
Columbia TN 38401
TN Hwy. 243 at Zion Road

Built entirely by the skilled slave craftsmen of Leonidas Polk and his three brothers, this Gothic-style brick church took two years to complete. Blacks and whites worshipped here together from the time of its consecration in September 1842 until well after the Civil War had ended. The African-American communicants were active participants in the congregation and usually outnumbered the white members. Large numbers of black children and adults were baptized and received religious instruction here. The graveyard behind the church contains the remains of members of both races, buried beside each other in family plots.

St. John's Church is only opened for religious services on Whitsunday. The Cemetery may be visited at any time during daylight hours, but the church building may be entered only on special occasions or on previously arranged visits.

Zion Presbyterian Church

2322 Zion Road
Columbia, TN 38401
(931) 381-1272
http://www.pcazion.org

The original settlers in this neighborhood came to this area from South Carolina by way of Franklin in 1807. Immediately upon their arrival, they erected a log church here, the first one in Maury County. Dating from 1849, this brick structure is the third building on the site used to hold religious services for the Zion parishioners. The community’s slaves performed much of the construction work, and galleries were built on three sides of the church in order to accommodate the large number of African-American worshippers. Baptized and enrolled as permanent members since 1810, these devout black people made up more than half of the congregation on the eve of the Civil War. In 1873, the African-American communicants withdrew and established the New Salem church and cemetery nearby for their own use. This church was abandoned about 1940 and has been razed.

Zion Presbyterian Church is only opened to the public for tours on certain special occasions or by arrangement with the staff.
"Daddy Ben" Slave Memorial
2322 Zion Road, Columbia, TN 38401
Near east entrance to
Zion Presbyterian Church Cemetery

This stone monument marks the location of the earliest burial plots of the slaves of the Zion community’s settlers. Particular mention is made of Daddy Ben, a black man who achieved lasting fame during the War for Independence from Great Britain. Born a royal prince in his native Africa, he was enslaved and brought to America, where he became the property of Colonel Scott, a South Carolina officer. While being interrogated by British soldiers, Ben was hanged and then revived three times, but still refused to reveal the hiding place of his master. He received a gold medal in recognition for his faithfulness and devotion. Ben came to Maury County in his old age with the Mayes family (Mrs. Mayes was Colonel Scott’s daughter) and died in 1829, at the age of ninety.

This monument may be visited at any time during the day.

Zion Settlers’ Slave Memorial
2322 Zion Road
Columbia, TN 38401
Behind Zion Presbyterian Church on the east side

When the section first set aside for African-American burials had filled with graves, a second cemetery was started at this location. This stone monument commemorates the loyalty and service of the early settlers’ slaves, many of whom were commingling members of Zion Church. Several well-crafted individual markers remain, and the words inscribed upon them, as well as the respect and care shown by generations of church members to the burying ground, demonstrate the affection that many of the parishioners had for their devoted “servants,” as they usually referred to them. It was a matter of common knowledge in the county that black people were treated well in this community.

This monument may be visited at any time during the day.
Canaan School
3046 Ashwood Road,
Columbia, TN 38401
Near the intersection with
Canaan Road

This restored schoolhouse is one of the few surviving representatives of the county's one and two-teacher frame buildings where African-American children in rural areas received their educations during the time of racial segregation. One teacher taught all eight grades here using textbooks that had been discarded by the county's white schools. The construction of the Canaan school, and others like it, was partially funded by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a philanthropic foundation that offered financial incentives to southern black communities and states to improve educational facilities for African-American students.

The property may be visited at any time, but the building itself may be entered only on special occasions or on previously arranged visits.

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Clarke Training School
Bluegrass Avenue
Mt. Pleasant, TN 38474

In January 1918, the City of Mt. Pleasant acquired property on Scott's Mill Pike on which to build a school for its black population. Originally known as the Mt. Pleasant Colored School, the four-classroom building with an auditorium was completed by the fall of 1922. The school provided training in home economics and vocational education, as well as special instruction in music, art, and drama. The Maury County Board of Education changed the name of the facility in 1931 to the Clarke training School in honor of Dr. C.Y. Clarke, who had played an important role in the establishment of the institution. As a result of the end of racial segregation, Clarke graduated its last class in 1969, and all public school children attended school together throughout the county. After a period of continued neglect, the building was razed. Today, a Tennessee Historical marker at the site commemorates the school's history and significance.

(The site may be visited at any time during the day.)
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