FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE
AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE TOUR
TOUR OVERVIEW

From the city's earliest days, the contributions of African Americans built the foundation of Franklin. Our landscape showcases their efforts and skill - from rich fields first cultivated by back-breaking slave labor to the masonry by skilled craftsmen that supports many of Franklin's most historic buildings. This tour reflects how their lives shaped what Franklin is today.

The stories of Franklin's African American history - before, during, and after the Civil War are highlighted through five unique neighborhood routes. Use the included maps, addresses, and information about each stop to navigate your way through each loop. Interesting side trips are also noted throughout.

While not an exhaustive tour of every site from Franklin's African American heritage, it highlights many compelling places and hopes to further the stories that tell our shared history.

Please note that most sites are publicly accessible. However, a few remain private and should only be viewed from the public thoroughfares.

TIMELINE

Before the Civil War 1799-1860
In 1860, African Americans (both slaves and a small free black community) made up more than half of Franklin's population.

The War That Changed Everything 1861-1865
When the Civil War erupted, about 300 of Williamson County's African American men joined the United States Colored Troops (USCT), volunteering to fight for the Union. The war's end brought racial conflict as residents struggled with the tremendous changes sweeping across the country.

After the War: Building New Communities 1865-1950
The freedom of emancipation soon gave way to segregation and Jim Crow laws. African Americans persevered, creating close-knit and thriving neighborhoods. Many practiced skilled trades, including carpentry, stonemasonry, bricklaying, teaching, and chair making. Others became entrepreneurs, operating businesses, farms, stores, and funeral homes.

Vibrant churches were the center of spiritual and social life, and many are still active today. Clubs and organizations such as African American Masonic orders and social groups like the Forget Me Not Club were favorites as well. Long denied the right to an education, Franklin's newly freed African Americans also placed great importance on learning. Although segregated with substandard facilities, schools like the Franklin Training School (the only high school for African Americans in the entire county) became celebrated neighborhood landmarks.

From Civil War to Civil Rights 1950s - present
The civil rights movement transformed the city. In 1962, Franklin's Ninth Special School District began limited desegregation. Schools were not fully integrated in Williamson County until 1968, fourteen years after Brown v. Board of Education.

Integration and urban renewal changed Franklin's historic African American neighborhoods. New opportunities beckoned residents to other places, and many homes and businesses were razed. Today, neighborhood revitalization is injecting new life into these historic communities that made such vital contributions to Franklin's growth and prosperity.

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THE NEIGHBORHOODS

This was a time of community building for Franklin. African American neighborhoods flourished along Natchez Street, downtown along First and Second Avenue South (nicknamed at the time “Bucket of Blood”), and the Hard Bargain area northwest of the square.

Downtown
First and Second Avenues South
First and Second Avenues South once housed a bustling African American neighborhood. Carpenters, railroad workers, gardeners, shoemakers, cooks, nurses, and washwomen called this neighborhood home. The Lillie Mills flour plant (whose towers still stand along First Avenue) provided jobs for many African Americans, and two rows of company houses were built in the early 1900s for mill workers.

Natchez Street
Natchez Street was and still is home to several active churches including Shorter Chapel African Methodist Episcopal, Providence United Primitive Baptist, and First Missionary Baptist Church. It was also home to many professionals including merchants, undertakers, doctors, teachers, and principals. At one time, the neighborhood housed a vibrant theater and many thriving businesses. Before integration, Natchez Street had the only high school for African American students in the entire county.

Hard Bargain
Local lore suggests the neighborhood received its distinctive name from the hard bargain Judge W.S. McLemore struck for the series of lots in 1873. In 1880, Judge McLemore sold his former slave Harvey McLemore four of these lots where Harvey built one of the neighborhood’s earliest homes. This home now houses the McLemore House Museum, home of the Williamson County African American Heritage Society. Nearby is the National Register-listed Toussaint L’Ouverture Cemetery.
ROUTE 1 (CONTINUED)

Freeman Thomas House
303 Franklin Road
Before the Civil War, Freeman Thomas was enslaved by the James Caruthers family on the Pleasant Exchange Plantation near present-day Cool Springs. Orphaned as a young boy, Thomas recalled that his mother’s funeral was preached at “Farmer’s Bluff,” adjacent to where he would later build his house as a free man. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, the teenaged Thomas fled to Nashville, working as a laborer to build Fort Negley for the U.S. forces. He later enlisted in the United States Colored Troops (USCT), and served in the 12th U.S. Colored Infantry; Company K. Wounded during the 1864 Battle of Nashville, Thomas survived the war and returned to Williamson County. Around 1892, it is believed that Freeman Thomas built this house on the edge of Harlinsdale Farm where he worked. Thomas married and raised two sons and a daughter in Franklin, where he also worked as a stone mason. His daughter attended college and was a beloved school teacher. He is buried under a military USCT headstone in the Toussaint L’Ouverture Cemetery.

ROUTE 1
Harlinsdale and Franklin Road - Gateway to the City

Harlinsdale Farm
239 Franklin Road
(The Park at Harlinsdale Farm)
This 200-acre public farm and park is perhaps the most significant historical farm associated with Tennessee’s Walking Horse industry. W.W. Harlin established the horse farm in 1933, and the farm’s champion stallion Midnight Sun became the first repeat World Grand Champion. The Harlin Family sold the farm to the City of Franklin in 2004, and it was developed into a public park that celebrates its Walking Horse history.

Before the Harlins, William H. Farmer owned and farmed the property after the Civil War. Farmer hired formerly enslaved African American laborers, including the family of Cicero and Julia Ewing in the 1880s and the family of George and Annie Brown in the 1900s. The area around the farm, once known as “Farmer’s Bluff,” was a hub of activity for the African American community. Several families built their homes nearby, and picnics and social gatherings were held on the bluff overlooking the Harpeth River.
ROUTE 2 (CONTINUED)

Franklin Masonic Hall -
Hiram Masonic Lodge No. 7
115 Second Avenue South
Built c. 1823-1826, the Masonic Hall is considered to be the oldest public building in historic Franklin. It was primarily constructed by skilled enslaved laborers working as carpenters and bricklayers. Today, their fingerprints can still be seen in brickwork throughout the Hall.

During the Civil War, the first floor was used by many prominent women and their slaves to make Confederate uniforms for various local regiments. On July 6, 1867, a riot occurred nearby when the primarily African American Union League clashed with former Confederate sympathizers, shuttering the Masonic meeting that night. In response, Masons of Hiram Lodge 7 erected the fence around the Hall in 1868.

Courthouse Square
Before the Civil War, the Courthouse square served as a location where enslaved men, women and children were regularly sold as property. In 1863, A.N.C. Williams opened the first African-American business in downtown Franklin, operating a shoe repair shop on the square with African-American preacher Rev. William Perkins. After the Civil War, the federal Freedmen’s Bureau set up an office on the square, helping to monitor and negotiate new contracts between newly freed men and landowners.

On July 6, 1867, the Courthouse Square was the site of the “Franklin Riot,” a confrontation between white and black members of Franklin’s Union League and former Confederates following speeches by candidates for the state legislature. Events escalated, and shots were fired on both sides. One former Confederate was killed, and dozens of men on both sides were injured. Federal troops were sent to Franklin to investigate and keep the peace.

Additional sites to note along Main Street
Nearby is the current Starbucks (formerly Corner Drug) and Franklin Theatre buildings. During the segregated Jim Crow era, both buildings utilized separate entrances for African American patrons. When the Theatre was first constructed in 1925, it contained a separately segregated balcony that could seat 150 African American customers.

Lillie Mills and L&N Railroad complexes
Along First Avenue, the stacks of the former Lillie Mills flour plant and the railroad depot still stand. Lillie Mills and the railroad were vital downtown industries that employed many African Americans. The site of today’s brownstone condominiums at the corner of 2nd Avenue and Church Street was the original home of Shorter Chapel AME Church. In 1873, Shorter Chapel trustees purchased its sanctuary building from the white Southern Methodists for $1,500. The AME congregation worshipped at that location until moving to the Natchez Street neighborhood in 1924.

Green House
202 Church Street
The “Green House” is the oldest African American-built home still standing in downtown Franklin. The lot was first purchased by prominent merchant A.N.C. Williams, and housed several African American families during the 20th century.

Wiley Memorial Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church
112 Second Avenue South  (Pull Tight Players Theatre)
The Methodist Episcopal Church was built c. 1869 by the Freedmen’s Aid Society of the northern Methodist Episcopal Church to serve as a church and school for the formerly enslaved. It was a vital community institution through the mid-twentieth century, until a dwindling congregation caused the church to close in 1944.
ROUTE 2 (CONTINUED)

Williamson County Veterans Park
611 West Main Street
(on the grounds of the Williamson County Archives)
The Veterans' Park honors veterans who served in American wars from the Revolutionary War through modern day. Bricks are inscribed with each soldier's name and conflict. The largest brick is in honor of Sgt. George Jordan, the only citizen in the county to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. Born a slave, Jordan joined the US Army’s 38th Infantry Regiment in 1866. In January 1870, he transferred to the 9th Cavalry’s K Troop, where he served for the next twenty-six years. He eventually became a Buffalo Soldier, fighting in the Indian Wars in New Mexico. On May 14, 1880, Jordan led a group of 25 men in successfully defending Fort Tularosa, New Mexico, from a much larger group of Apache warriors.

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church
510 W. Main Street
Across from Veterans Park stands St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, built c. 1831-1834 by slave labor. Before the Civil War, the original sanctuary included a slave gallery to allow its congregants to bring their slaves to worship with them. Bishop James H. Otey encouraged church members to baptize their slaves, and the church register includes dozens of their names.

SIDE TRIP

Fort Granger
113 Fort Granger Drive
Behind Pinkerton Park
After the Union army occupied Franklin in the spring of 1862, hundreds of enslaved African Americans fled neighboring plantations and farms and headed toward nearby federal encampments. These former slaves built and maintained much of Fort Granger in the spring of 1863. They were promised $10/month for their nine months of work, but were only paid for one month. Fifteen of those Williamson County men later enlisted in the 15th US Colored Infantry. A contraband camp for other former slaves, including many women and children seeking Union protection, stood a few hundred yards north of the Fort.

A.N.C. Williams’ store
428 W. Main Street
A.N.C. Williams, one of Franklin’s most prominent African American entrepreneurs, purchased sites near present-day Fourth Avenue after the Civil War. He constructed a building and opened a general merchandise store. Williams operated this store for sixty-four years, openly catering to both black and white patrons despite Jim Crow laws and segregation. Due to failing health, he retired in 1928 as the oldest continually operating merchant on Main Street, having owned and managed his successful store for over sixty years.

Old City Cemetery
Intersection of 4th Avenue North and North Margin Street
Established in 1811, the Old City Cemetery serves as the resting place for many of Franklin's earliest settlers. Before the establishment of Toussaint L’Ouverture Cemetery in the Hard Bargain neighborhood, many of Franklin's African American residents were buried in the eastern quadrant of Old City Cemetery. The largest stone memorializes Anarchy Cowles, whose husband Jesse first purchased his family's freedom after raising money from a business he operated as a slave. Headstones reveal notable surnames of Franklin's African American families, and it is likely that many enslaved African Americans were buried there in unmarked graves as well.
ROUTE 3 (CONTINUED)

Carter House Slave Quarters
1140 Columbia Avenue
The Carter House, built ca. 1830 by Fountain Branch Carter, survived some of the fiercest fightings during the 1864 Battle of Franklin. Carter owned 28 slaves, and several of their quarters remain around the main house.

Ticket required for full Carter House tours.

Carter Hill Battlefield Park
Across the street from the Carter House
Before and after the Civil War, the Carter family's cotton gin was located on what is now the Carter Hill Battlefield Park, site of the devastating clash between armies during the 1864 Battle of Franklin. The invention of the cotton gin made growing labor-intensive cotton easier and more profitable, a key reason for the increased number of slaves in Williamson County before the war. Williamson County was one of only a few counties in Tennessee that contained more enslaved people than free before the outbreak of the Civil War.

SIDE TRIP

Carnton Slave House
1345 Eastern Flank Circle
Carnton reflects the intense toil and skilled craftsmanship of the slaves that built and sustained it. By 1860, Carnton owner John McGavock owned 44 slaves that worked the fields and in the home. Carnton has one remaining slave cabin, an unusual two-story brick structure, believed to be used for both living quarters and a location for weaving, spinning, and sewing.

Ticket required for full Carnton tour.

ROUTE 3
Columbia Avenue/Bell Town

AutoZone
933 Columbia Avenue
Bell Town, along Columbia Avenue, Cummins and Evans Street, housed several black businesses including a grocery store and hotel, churches, and a lodge of black Freemasons. A historic marker in the Cummins Street Church of Christ parking lot stands as a testament to the neighborhood and church founder A.N.C Williams. Lining the Buford St. entrance to AutoZone, several panels outline the fascinating histories of several of Franklin's most prominent African American residents including John Watt Reddick, a former railroad clerk, and leader of the local Mosaic Templars of America chapter.
First Missionary Baptist Church
113 Natchez Street
The First Missionary Baptist Church, organized in 1871, holds the distinction as the neighborhood's oldest congregation. In 1901, the First Missionary Baptist hosted the Colored Missionary Baptist Association, when a group of three to four thousand African-Americans gathered for this religious meeting. This type of gathering for African Americans was unusual in a town whose population was only 3,000 total.

Shorter chapel A.M.E. Church
152 W. Fowlkes Street
(corner of Natchez Street and W. Fowlkes)
The Shorter Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church congregation organized in 1873. In October 1883, the 16th Session of the Tennessee Annual Conference of the AME Church was held in Franklin at Shorter Chapel. Newspaper accounts describe trainloads of attendees coming from around the state, with meetings held in white and black Methodist churches around town. In 1925, the Shorter Chapel congregation moved to its present site on the corner of Natchez and West Fowlkes Streets. Parishioners held a parade through town carrying bricks and windows of their original church building on Second Avenue to their new site, where they built this Victorian-inspired building.

Williams Merrill House
264 Natchez Street
(Private residence)
In 1881, ex-slave Moses Merrill built a large two-story home on land sold to him by his former owner. Growing elderly and unable to maintain the residence, he sold it to well-known entrepreneur A.N.C. Williams and his large family in 1892.

Natchez High School
335 Natchez Street
(Claiborne Hughes Nursing Center)
In 1888, the Ninth Neighborhood School Committee purchased this lot for an African American school, originally named the Claiborne Institute in honor of first principal Willis Claiborne. Rebuilt in 1907 as the Franklin Colored School, it expanded in 1925 to become the Franklin Training School. The present building was built in 1949. In 1962, teachers worked with the Williamson County Board of Education to change the school's name to Natchez High School to reflect how the school had evolved beyond industrial training programs. After years of serving as the only African American high school for the entire county, Natchez High School graduated its last class in 1967.

Providence United Primitive Baptist Church
377 Natchez Street
Providence United Primitive Baptist Church stands at the corner of Natchez and Granbury Streets. In 1883, Aha Thomas sold the land for this church to Wallis Bradley, Randal Brown, Harrison Scruggs, Jack Wilburn and Aaron Blakely.
McLemore House
African American Museum
446 Eleventh Avenue North
Built in 1880 by former slave Harvey McLemore, this was one of Hard Bargain's earliest homes. The house stayed in the McLemore family for 117 years and was sold through a joint purchase by the Heritage Foundation of Williamson County, Williamson County Habitat for Humanity, and the African American Historical Society in 1997. The building currently houses the McLemore House Museum, which tells the inspiring story of Harvey and his descendants.
Ticket required.

Toussaint L'Ouverture Cemetery
820 Del Rio Pike
In 1884, a group of African American residents purchased four acres to establish a neighborhood cemetery. Prominent citizens buried here include former Carnton slave Mariah Reddick, Dr. C.C. Johnson, entrepreneur A.N.C. Williams, Principal James K. Hughes, and three United States Colored Troop veterans - Freeman Thomas, John Dubuisson and Peter Ratcliff. With headstones dating to the late 1800s, the cemetery also houses veterans from both World Wars, the Korean Conflict, and the Vietnam War as well as members of the many African American Masonic and social organizations. The cemetery is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

ROUTE 5 (CONTINUED)

Primitive Baptist Church
604 Mount Hope Street
The Primitive Baptist Church was established in 1867 as a centerpiece of the Hard Bargain neighborhood. This congregation was famous during the 1890s - 1950s for hosting large homecoming celebrations and foot-washing ceremonies on the Fourth Sunday in May. Thousands of African Americans would assemble at the church, many coming by train from Nashville and Columbia, for a full day of worship, picnicking and fellowship.

Green Street Church of God
915 Green Street
This church's congregation was established in 1910, first organizing in tent meetings and later in rented space near the Old City Cemetery before settling permanently in Hard Bargain as the Holiness Church. The present building was built in the 1950s and became the Church of God in 1954.
TOUR MAP & KEY

ROUTE 1: Harlinsdale & Franklin Road
1 The Park at Harlinsdale Farm
2 Freeman Thomas House

ROUTE 2: Downtown
3 Lillie Mills and L&N Railroad complexes
4 Green House
5 Wiley Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church
6 Franklin Masonic Hall
7 Courthouse Square
8 Old City Cemetery
9 A.N.C. Williams’ Store
10 Williamson County Veterans Park
11 St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

ROUTE 3: Columbia Avenue/Bell Town
12 AutoZone
13 Carter House Slave Quarters
14 Carter Hill Battlefield Park

ROUTE 4: Natchez Street
15 First Missionary Baptist Church
16 Shorter Chapel A.M.E. Church
17 Williams Merrill House
18 Natchez High School
19 Providence United Primitive Baptist Church

ROUTE 5: Hard Bargain
20 McLemore House African American Museum
21 Toussaint L’Ouverture Cemetery
22 Primitive Baptist Church
23 Green Street Church of God

SIDE TRIPS
★ Carnton slave house
★ Fort Granger
★ Visitor Center ★ Public Restroom
Interested in learning more about Franklin's African American history? Check out these locations.

**Battle of Franklin Trust**
1345 Eastern Flank Circle
(615) 786-1864
90-minute guided tour focusing on slavery as an institution and the specific people who were enslaved at each site. Offered Tuesdays at Carter House and Thursdays at Carnton at 10:00 am. (Please arrive at the gift shop 15 minutes prior to tour).

Tour Tickets: $25

**City of Franklin Cell Phone Audio Tour**
(615) 216-1597
Includes additional information about African Americans buried in both cemeteries.

**Williamson County Archives**
611 W. Main Street
(615) 790-5462

**Williamson County Public Library Special Collections - The Thelma Battle Collection**
1314 Columbia Avenue
(615) 794-3105

**Heritage Foundation of Williamson County**
112 Bridge Street
(615) 591-8500
Purchase Rick Warwick's Williamson County in Black and White and Natchez Street Revisited by Thelma Battle here.

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With Special Thanks

**Photos provided by Rick Warwick**

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