

# African-American Heritage Tour Visits Alexandria

Fourth Annual Event to Explore City's Historic Black Sites

By Stacy M. Brown  
WI Contributing Writer

The District of Columbia and its surrounding areas enjoy a rich and diverse history, said Washington Informer Publisher Denise Rolark Barnes.

"Sadly, however, too few Washingtonians, especially African Americans, take advantage of the opportunities to explore all Washington has to offer despite the fact that many places are accessible and free," said Barnes, who four years ago decided she would do her part in helping local residents and others experience the unique culture of Washington, Maryland and Northern Virginia.

In 2011, Barnes started an African-American Heritage Tour, in which she and several sponsors invited adults and children to spend the day visiting some of the region's historical and memorable sites.

Held annually during Black History Month, the tours have entertained hundreds of individuals who've been treated to visits to such landmarks as the Frederick Douglass House in Anacostia and the African American Civil War Museum in Northwest.

Last year, the sold out event took participants on a tour of the historically black townships of Prince George's County, Md., where the county's African American Museum and Cultural Center installed an exhibit celebrating the pioneering spirit of the people who founded the four original majority black municipalities incorporated there.

This year, the one-day extravaganza will take place on Saturday, Feb. 8, and will tour historic Alexandria, Va., a city which recently received attention because of the Golden Globes-winning film, "12 Years a Slave."

Those on the tour will be able to explore the Freedom House slave pen, once owned by the same slave trader who sold Solomon Northup into slavery and one in which officials said mirrors the pens featured in "12 Years a Slave," a movie based on Northup's autobiography.

"There's a lot of buzz about the Washington Informer's African-American Heritage Tour here in Alexandria," said Patricia Washington, president and CEO of the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association.

"I approached the Informer to

come to Alexandria because of our history. This year, the attention on Alexandria was heightened because of the '12 Years a Slave,' movie and Alexandria is one of the only places where the public can see a real slave pen and jail and experience the history," Washington said.

Additionally, tour goers will be able to experience the role Alexandria played in the Civil War and they will learn about the many abolitionists stationed in the city, Washington said.

Tour guides will proudly show off the Alexandria Black History Museum, which houses a reading room that provides an environment for learning about the diversity of African-American cultural traditions and an African-American Heritage Park, a nine-acre green space and wetland that officials said offers a place for celebration, commemoration and quiet reflection.

"I'm excited about the tour because we have a story to be told, a story that includes Alexandria as George Washington's boyhood home and the historic Old Town," said the city's first African-American mayor, William Euille, who's served in that capacity since winning the election in 2003.

"A lot of African Americans contributed to the history of this city," said Euille, who noted that he often looks outside the window from his City Hall office to the town's public square where century's ago a slave trading post stood.

"We've had black people over the years contribute to the economic growth of this city and there have also been a lot of brick-layers who helped build the properties we have today," Euille said.

Excitement about the heritage tour continues to grow because it comes during a year in which the city plans to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous 1939 Sit-in, said Audrey Davis, acting director of the Alexandria Black History Museum.

The Sit-in took place on August 21 at the Queen Street Library.

Organized by attorney Samuel Tucker, the event helped to usher in the very early days of the Civil Rights movement.

"People should go on this tour," Davis said.

"It's a wonderful opportunity to network with people who are involved in preserving history. It's fun and educational, the cost is reasonable and it's a great way to

spend a Saturday."

Barnes said the tour has already exceeded her expectations in many ways.

The tour averages more than 200 people each year, including generations of family members.

She said when the tours first began, she held out hope that many would be interested enough in African-American history and culture to brave February's wintry weather to hop aboard and visit the historic sites and network with others.

"It's been great to realize all of the things people already know, but it's greater to be told, 'thank you,' for sharing many more significant [details] that they didn't know, such as Frederick Douglass managed the Freedom Bank which was located directly across the street from the White House," Barnes said.

"Or, sharing that nearly 100

years after the Lincoln Statue was erected in Lincoln Park that it was turned around so that it faced the newly erected Mary McLeod Bethune statue, or that there is a historic school house built for Black children right off of Central Avenue in the historic black township of District Heights, Md., that is being staffed and maintained by members of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority."

Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children. The tour, which is sponsored by the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association, Industrial Bank, Pepco, Southwest Airlines, THEARC, D.C. Lottery, and Capital Entertainment Services, departs from THEARC, at 1901 Mississippi Avenue in Southeast. Registration starts at 8 a.m. and a continental breakfast and lunch are included. For more information, call 202-561-4100.

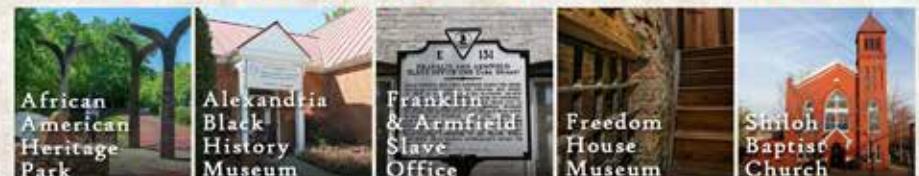


The Freedom House slave pen, once owned by the same dealer who sold Solomon Northup into slavery, is remarkably similar to that which is featured in the award-winning film "12 Years a Slave." /Photo courtesy of R Kennedy for ACVA

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