

Links Connect History and Heritage along the South Carolina Coast



Jonathan Green painting in the African Passages exhibit, Fort Moultrie, South Carolina

The encounter we had in Charleston, SC on that sunny summer day was more than a tour. It was an experience; one that Wayne O'Bryant, lecturer, author, and our guide for the day, consequently refers to as the Our Story Experience, where he designs on-site lectures to help participants better understand the unique history, troubles, and triumphs of people of African descent. O'Bryant, originally from Charleston, SC, was raised on Smith Street, just three houses away from the home of self-emancipated abolitionist, Denmark Vesey, who lived on Bull Street. He played at Vesey's former home, he went to elementary school across the street from where Vesey was imprisoned, and he attended kindergarten near the site where he was hanged. With such uncanny parallels, O'Bryant believes that, "With a better understanding of many of our root problems, I believe we can solve many of the ills that plague us as a people."

The Aiken Chapter of The Links, Incorporated shares the belief that through education and understanding of our history, we can help preserve our cultural identity and improve the vitality of communities and persons of African descent.

Growing up in South Carolina, I visited Charleston countless times, and I was always aware of its wealth of culture and history. But this visit was different. This time, I felt more of the human experience that is intricately woven into the city's history. The experience began, and steadily, we made our way across what I've often referred to as the *Big* bridge, otherwise known as the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge. We'd learn that the bridge wasn't the only big presence among us. Our guide for the day, Wayne O'Bryant, would later explain that he attributes his historical perspective to his great grandmother, Big, the daughter of emancipated slaves, a 1912 graduate of Allen University, and the principal of several Charleston sea island schools. After retiring, Big kept O'Bryant during the day, while his mother, Dr. Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook, worked and became the first African American and second woman appointed as a full-time permanent member of The Citadel faculty. Big took her great grandson around Charleston and taught him about the history of Black people in the city because, as she put it, "it is not in the history books."

When we arrived on Sullivan's Island, however, I felt an impression deep within that this would be more than a history lesson. We made our first stop at Fort Moultrie. O'Bryant

pointed out a hand-crafted, steel *Bench by the Road*, which was donated by Toni Morrison, Pulitzer-prize winning author of critically acclaimed novels such as *Beloved*. Morrison, along with the National Parks Service established this bench in remembrance of the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans whose first encounter with this country, after being kidnapped from their homeland, was the shore of Sullivan's Island where Fort Moultrie is located today. This was the first of several other *Bench by the Road* locations that the Toni Morrison Society designated as places in American history that have had a significant impact on the writings of Toni Morrison and the history of African Americans in the United States.

Fort Moultrie is generally known as a stationed stronghold that shielded South Carolina troops from battle during both the Revolutionary and Civil wars. However, in the National Parks Service museum at Fort Moultrie, the African Passages exhibit chronicles the lives of enslaved Africans and significant events that have occurred in African American culture since the Transatlantic slave trade, leading up to present day. At its beginning, the exhibit includes a written account of *pest houses*, which were holding places where enslaved Africans and other passengers on slave ships were quarantined because of suspected diseases, such as small pox, before they were admitted entry into the city. If the concept of quarantining ships and their passengers sounds familiar, it is because pest houses foreshadow the Ellis Island operation, which was a quarantine station for free Europeans and other immigrants entering the U.S. through the New York Harbor. In fact, Sullivan's Island is known as the Ellis Island of the slaves. Sullivan's Island pest Houses served as the gateway for nearly 50% of all of the Africans who were brought into what would come to be known as the United States.

As we continued to walk through the narrow path of the exhibit, the jarring images and unthinkable captions that accompany them became our vehicle through a time in history where people of African decent were advertised, handled, and sold on auction blocks; treated like economic commodities, never intended to live as equals and reap the harvest of the proverbial American Dream. Nonetheless, as the exhibit uncovers the richness of Black culture in the Low Country, we began to see how hope, strength and innovation take triumph through images of Phillips Simmons, the world-renowned Charleston blacksmith whose iron gates garnish the city with flourishes and perfectly rounded arches. At the finale of the exhibit, we experienced the work of Jonathan Green, the highly celebrated local artist whose paintings tell beautiful narrations and boast pastel-colored clothing worn by practical people with black faces and an outward expression that likens that of kings and queens.

Behind the museum and just beyond the cannons that line the fort and overlook the Atlantic Ocean, is a field of high African grass, known as Seashore Paspalum. This African grass variety was taken from African soil, used in the slave ships as bedding for captured slaves, and thrown overboard when the ships reached the Sullivan's Island shore. The four-thousand-mile journey did not stop the grass from taking root by the sandy shore, flourishing as if on fertile ground. More than 300 years later, the world-famous Kiawah Island Ocean Course, home of the 2012 PGA Golf Championship, was designed with paspalum in mind because it was noted how well the grass grew under the harsh seaside conditions on Sullivan's Island. Today, what looks like a field of grass to most, is really a sacred burial ground with paspalum as its hedge of protection and reminder of home, for the hundreds of thousands of African souls who did not survive the inhumane conditions, disease, and long journey of the Middle Passage.

As we walked through the path of high African grass, I began to feel grains of sand nestle

between my toes, and suddenly, as we traversed the low-country sand dune, the Atlantic Ocean opened up like the souls of a people who'd just discovered a priceless, family heirloom. Meanwhile, the waves were rolling gang busters, much like the US slave ships that stormed the sandy beaches of the island. Standing there together, a solemn hush fell upon our small group. We, an earnest audience, watched and listened, as the ocean culminated our visit with a most poignant part of American history there on Sullivan's Island.

From the sandy beaches of Sullivan's Island to the cobblestone streets of downtown Charleston was where we found our next stop. Much too large and way too long to be anyone's house, so everyone commented, stood a vast structure that our guide described as The William Aiken House on King Street. Time froze as we passed the never-ending home, and in my vivid imagination, I saw Black women, just like me, working diligently inside the Aiken home, taking care with every detail, with an ornate sense of ownership that naturally stemmed from the fact that it was from African hands that the thriving Southern city was built. Homeowner, William Aiken, Sr., is a familiar name, especially in Aiken, SC. He was the first president of the South Carolina Canal and Railroad company, and his son a former SC governor. The railroad linked Charleston to a small town in Aiken County called Hamburg, which was established by Henry Schultz of Hamburg, Germany. After the Civil War, Hamburg was known as a destination for hope and new beginnings for many emancipated slaves – the Promised Land, perhaps, of post emancipation.

I likened our journey that day, as an African American female myself, to African people's journey from home in West Africa to a foreign land in Charleston. And eventually, through the power of organizing and strategic planning, historical figures like Denmark Vesey, paved the way for emancipation and political power to take root. I was inspired, knowing that a people who entered this country through a quarantine station would make the trek from disease-infested walls of a pest house to the superlative halls of great political minds and world leaders in The White House; overcoming enslavement, debunking the odds of survival, and influencing the United States of America and the world.

As my Link sisters and I concluded the Our Story Experience, we all reflected on what we'd learned and the plethora of emotions that we'd felt. I sat pensively and observed the images of the Transatlantic slave trade, Denmark Vesey, Phillip Simmons, residents of Hamburg, and the small railroad that connected these historic figures as they wistfully passed through my mind. We shall all remember this day and share its memories, each in our own special way, but with a common spirit of pride and truth that will link us with our heritage, ourselves, and one to another always.