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HONS 381: Black Nationalism and Black Religion

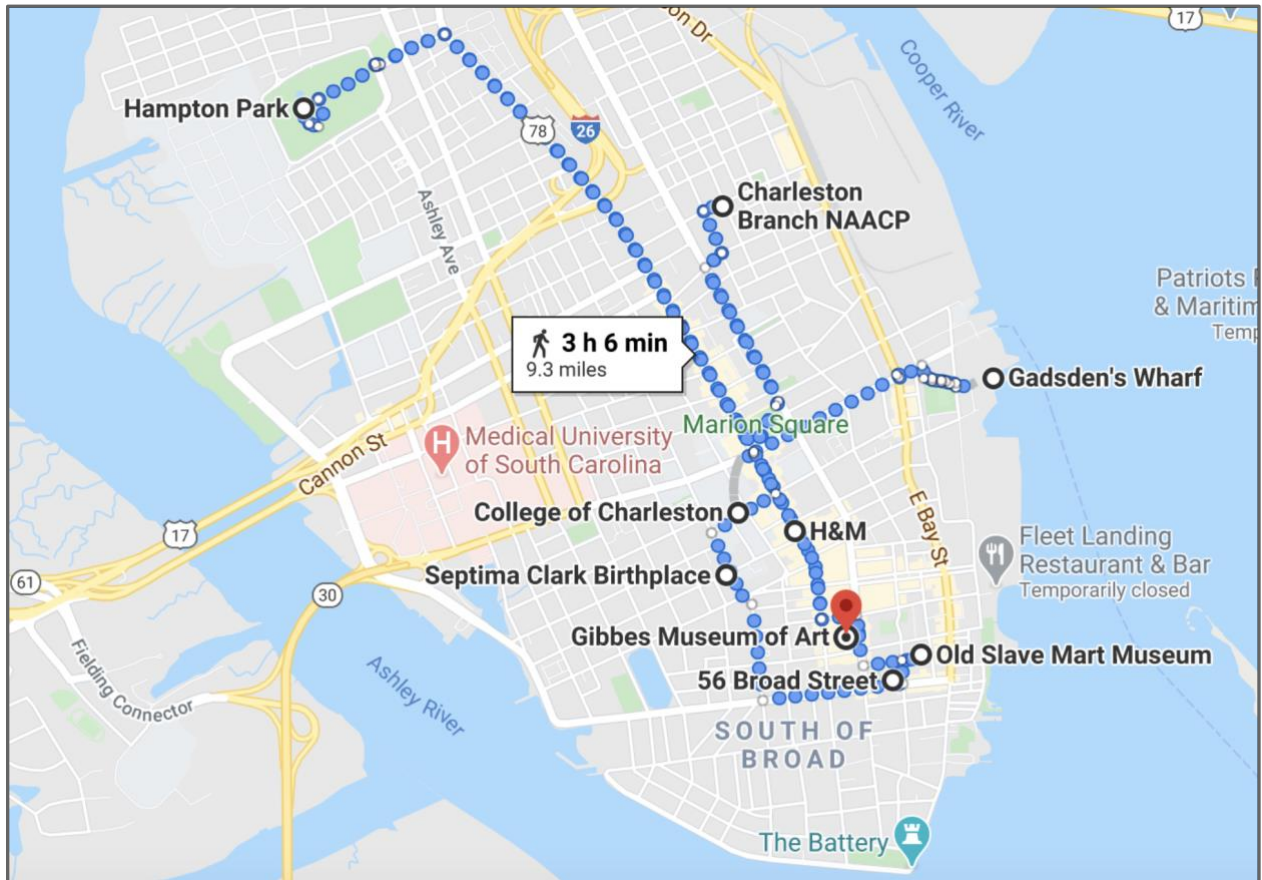
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The Deep Cut Tour: Charleston's African American History

Hi, there! Welcome to Charleston, South Carolina, voted America's #1 small city for the past nine years (and counting)! We are known, worldwide, for our historic streets, fine dining, sandy beaches, and Southern charm (in both senses of the phrase). There are so many things to do in this city, and I am thrilled you've taken some time for this tour. Today, we're going to step beyond the horse-drawn carriages and rainbow houses to explore an often glossed over, but, nevertheless vital, pillar of Charleston's past, present, and future. As we visit nine Charleston sites, we are going to uncover the history of African Americans and the critical role they played – and continue to play – in charting the course of our Southern city.

Below, you will find a map with all the sites we will be visiting today. We will begin at Gadsden's Wharf, then walk to the College of Charleston, the Denmark Vesey statue in Hampton Park, the Old Slave Mart Museum, the Freedman's Bank at 56 Broad Street, Septima P. Clark's birthplace, one of the first NAACP branches in South Carolina, and the former S. H. Kress & Co. building on King Street, before finishing at the Gibbes Museum of Art. We will be travelling chronologically through time, so I hope you're ready to walk and broaden your mind!

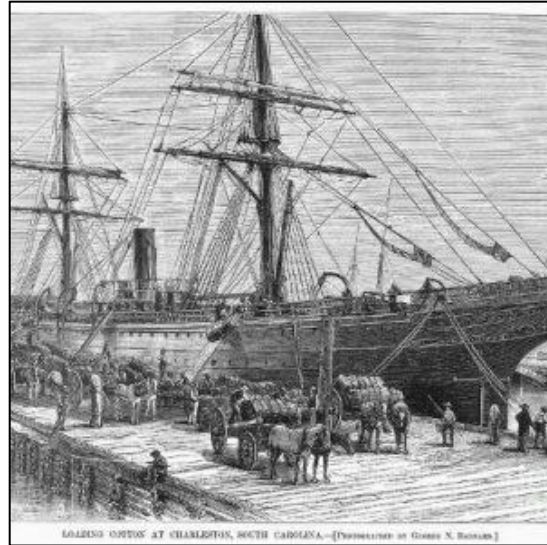
Map



First Stop: Gadsden's Wharf

The first stop on our tour is Gadsden's Wharf, which will soon become the site of the International African American Museum. It is believed that African persons first arrived set foot on the land that would become the state of South Carolina in 1526, forming part of a Spanish expedition from the Caribbean (Battle, White, Gilbert, Mobley, & Flenner, 2013). In 1670, South Carolina was colonized by English settlers, where a plantation economy, relying heavily on enslaved African labor and, by extension, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, was formed (Battle, White, Gilbert, Mobley, & Flenner, 2013).

It is estimated that approximately forty percent of enslaved Africans who came to North America passed through Charleston (Hicks, 2011). This city served as the primary entry point for enslaved persons brought to the United States from the West Coast of Africa (International African American Museum, 2017a). Slave ships first stopped at Sullivan’s Island, where enslaved



persons were held in quarantine, before proceeding to the main peninsula (International African American Museum, 2017b). Gadsden’s Wharf was constructed in 1767, designed to hold up to six ships and thousands of people at a time (International African American Museum, 2017b). People were kept, in some cases for months at a time, in large holding spaces while they awaited sale and it is estimated that thousands of enslaved persons died at the Wharf over the years (International African American Museum, 2017b; Parker, 2017). In 1806, the city of Charleston passed an ordinance requiring all slave ships to dock at Gadsden’s Wharf, making Gadsden Wharf the sole entry point for the final two years of the legal international slave trade, which was banned in 1808 (Parker, 2017).

Second Stop: The College of Charleston at 66 George Street

Moving on, the next stop on our tour is the College of Charleston, the thirteenth oldest institution of higher learning in the United States and “America’s Most Beautiful College Campus” according to *Travel + Leisure* magazine in 2017. However, like much of the rest to the city, there is more to the history of the College of Charleston than originally meets the eye. Like

many other institutions of higher education in the United States, the College of Charleston both “supported and benefitted from” the institution of slavery (Rainville, 2019). Enslaved laborers were involved in the construction of “virtually every historic building” on the College of Charleston’s campus, and the College further benefitted from engaging in the slave trade (Cunneff, 2018).

Additionally, at least one former College president, Jasper Adams, who served from 1825-1826 and 1828-1836, owned enslaved persons (Parker, 2019). The College of Charleston didn’t admit black students until 1967, after it had converted to a private institution in 1949



to avoid desegregation (Parker, 2019). Today, the demographics of the College do not reflect those of the broader United States, much less so the state of South Carolina – given the College of Charleston is, since 1970, a state school – whereby black people comprise thirty percent of South Carolina’s population, compared to less than nine percent of the student body population at the College (Parker, 2019). In 2018, in a step towards beginning to reconcile its history, the College of Charleston joined the Universities Studying Slavery consortium, which, founded by the University of Virginia in 2014, is a “multi-institution collaboration of nearly 40 universities” (Cunneff, 2018). As a part of this membership, the College of Charleston formed a Center for the Study of Slavery in Charleston to “examine the impact of slavery and race-related issues” in the city and broader region (College of Charleston, 2019).

Third Stop: Denmark Vesey Statue at Hampton Park

The next stop on our tour involves a trek up to Hampton Park. We are going to visit the Denmark Vesey monument. Denmark Vesey was born into slavery in the Caribbean and was brought to the United States by his owner in 1773, where, after winning the East Bay Lottery, Vesey bought his freedom for \$600 in 1799 (Demby, n.d.; Parker, 2014). As a freeman, Vesey became a preacher at the African Church, “a congregation of free and enslaved black people that boasted a membership in the thousands” (Demby, n.d., 1). The Church offered a quiet resistance to slavery, making it a target for raids by the City of Charleston’s white leadership (Demby, n.d.). This violence convinced Vesey that “rebellion was justified,” prompting him to plan an “audacious insurrection” that would have been “the largest, bloodiest slave revolt on American soil” (Parker, 2014; Demby, n.d., 2).



This rebellion, however, never came to fruition, as another member of the African Church revealed the plot to his master, exposing Vesey and his co-conspirators (Demby, n.d.; Parker, 2014). Vesey and thirty-four other were hanged, and the African Church building was burned down (Demby, n.d.; Parker, 2014). Denounced for a terrorist for many years, Vesey’s monument, erected in 2014, is indicative of a shift in the narrative, in ways that begin to recognize the cost of freedom from slavery (Parker, 2014). Today, more people are beginning to recognize Vesey as a “freedom fighter,” as he “risked his life and gave his life to make enslaved people free” (Parker, 2014).

Fourth Stop: Old Slave Mart Museum at 6 Chalmers Street



For our fourth stop on this tour, we are heading back into the heart of downtown Charleston to visit the Old Slave Mart Museum. For centuries, Charleston has served as a tourist destination to people travelling from near and abroad. However, had you visited this city two-

hundred years ago, it would have been a very real possibility for you to observe slave sale on any given street corner (Clark, 2020). In 1956, as a result of pressure from tourists and businessowners to move slave sales off the streets, the City of Charleston passed an ordinance that would fine people for engaging in open slave sales, subsequently pushing slave sales indoors (Clark, 2020).

In 1856, this complex was constructed, serving as a marketplace and holding pen for enslaved persons (Clark, 2020). Stretching from Chalmers Street to Queen Street, the Slave Mart, originally known as Ryan's Slave Mart, operated from 1856-1863, with sales happening every day except Sunday (Clark, 2020). Unironically, enslaved persons were building the churches that discouraged Sunday sales (Clark, 2020). The Civil War and successive passing of the Thirteenth Amendment effectively ended the Slave Mart's operations (Clark, 2020). The Mart then operated as tenement housing, a car show room, and an African-descendant museum before the City of Charleston acquired the space and converted it into the Old Slave Mart Museum in 2006 (Clark, 2020).

Fifth Stop: Freedman's Bank at 56 Broad Street

A few blocks from the Old Slave Mart Museum is the Freedman's Bank. In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln established the Freedman's Saving and Trust Company, commonly referred to as the Freedman's Bank (Washington, 1997; Explore Charleston, 2020). The Freedman's Bank was intended to operate as a savings bank, supporting "land grants and other elements of the Freedman's Bureau Act," for newly freed black men and women in the aftermath of the Civil War (Washington, 1997; Explore Charleston, 2020). Freedman's Bank operated in seventeen different states, and maintained an office in Charleston, South Carolina (Explore Charleston, 2020). However, in 1874, a three-person board of commissioners closed the Freedman's Bank, devastating black communities and creating an "economic nightmare for tens of thousands of African Americans who had entrusted their hard-earned money to the bank," given no federal protections applied to assets held by the bank (Washington, 1997).



Unfortunately, this is just one example of unfair banking practices that perpetuate black poverty as a "special, and particularly destructive form of American poverty" (Coates, 2017, 43). Over the years, a combination of legal and extralegal barriers have contributed to the expanding wealth gap between black Americans and white Americans, amplifying the long history of the piracy of black wealth, both in terms of assets and labor (Coates, 2017). Beyond the centuries of slavery, these measures, intentional or otherwise, have perpetuated the theft of the livelihoods and monies of black Americans.

Sixth Stop: Septima P. Clark Birthplace at 105 Wentworth Street

Next, we will head back in the direction of the College of Charleston, to Wentworth Street, which hosts the birthplace of Septima Poinsette Clark. The daughter of formerly enslaved persons, Clark was born in 1898 here in Charleston and served an educator and civil rights activist (Stanford University, n.d.). She taught in both Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina for over forty years before she was forced to step away from teaching due to her involvement with civil rights organizations (Stanford University, n.d.). Over the years, Clark worked with a number of civil rights groups, including the YWCA, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), serving as one of the founding members of the Charleston branch, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as she additionally conducted social justice education workshops (Stanford University, n.d.). After a long career in education, advocacy, and organizing, Clark passed away in 1987 (Stanford University, n.d.).

From the beginning, women have played a key role in movements for black rights, whether or not they've been recognized at the forefront. Septima Clark made incredible contributions to the black struggle for freedom, and she was not alone in doing so. For example, Black Lives Matter, an international black nationalist movement, was founded by three black women – Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi – where, the organization thrives under mostly female leadership, “many of [whom] are Queer [and] some are Trans” (Khan-Cullors & bande, 2018, 202-203).



Seventh Stop: NAACP Office at 81 Columbus Street

It's now time to walk back up the peninsula to Columbus Street, where we will find one of the first NAACP branches in South Carolina. Founded in New York on 12 February 1909 by a combination of black and white organizers, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the NAACP seeks to “secure for all people the rights guaranteed in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments[...] to ensure the political educational, social and economic equality of minority group citizens of [the] United States and eliminate race prejudice” (NAACP, 2020; Explore Charleston, 2020).

In 1917, the first South Carolina NAACP branches were organized in Charleston and Columbia, holding seventy-five members (Explore Charleston, 2020). As mentioned earlier, Septima Clark was one of the founding members of the Charleston branch (Explore Charleston,



2020). Today, the NAACP remains fully operational, serving as one of the nation's most prominent civil rights organizations and, within South Carolina, expanding membership and branches to cover large swaths of the state (NAACP, 2020).

Eighth Stop: Former S. H. Kress & Co. at 281 King Street



Next, we will walk to the former S. H. Kress & Co. building on King Street, which currently functions as an H&M, a fast fashion retail chain. S. H. Kress & Co. was a department store that operated throughout the United States from 1896 through the 1980s (SC Picture Project, 2013). This particular location, however, would become the site of a civil rights demonstration (SC Picture Project, 2013). On 1 April 1960, after six months of secret planning, twenty-four black students from the nearby Burke High School staged a sit-in at the “five-and-dime” store’s segregated lunch counter (SC Picture Project, 2013). Though the students were arrested later that afternoon, the act of civil disobedience saw little retaliatory violence – an anomaly given the violent reactions to similar sit-ins elsewhere (SC Picture Project, 2013). Ultimately, the charges against the students were dropped and their actions spurred other demonstrations throughout Charleston until the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (SC Picture Project, 2013).

Ninth Stop: Gibbes Museum of Art at 135 Meeting Street

The last stop on our Deep Cut Tour of Charleston is the Gibbes Museum of Art. Located on the outskirts of Charleston’s French Quarter, the museum was established in 1858, though it didn’t open the doors at its current location until 1905. It boasts a collection over 10,000 strong, using art to recount the complex history of Charleston, South Carolina, and the southern United

States (Explore Charleston, n.d.). The Gibbes highlights art from a number of prominent African American artists, as well as local Gullah artists.

The Gullah Geechee are descended from formerly enslaved persons from West Africa who, in the United States, labored on isolated islands in the coastal areas of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida (Gullah Geechee Cultural



Heritage Corridor Commission, 2020). The nature of this isolation has enabled the Gullah Geechee language and culture to persist over the years, showcasing bold resilience in the face of the multitude of issues discussed previously (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, 2020). The Gullah Geechee language has influenced Southern speech and you will observe various elements of their traditions in music, art, and food throughout Charleston, in both formal settings, like the Gibbes Museum of Art, or less obvious settings, like restaurants, given that many of our notions of “Southern” food comes from the “creativity and labor of enslaved cooks” (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, 2020).

Thank You!

Thank you for accompanying me on this Deep Cut Tour of Charleston, where we observed various components of the history, past and present, of African Americans in this city. I hope you were able to gain some insight into the complex history of this town and, by extension, this country, in ways that are, in a lot of cases, ongoing today. The final thing I want to pull your

attention to before I set you free is the number of sites we visited today. Our tour purposefully covered nine stops, in recognition of the nine lives that were lost on 17 June 2015 when a white supremacist terrorist opened fire during a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church on Calhoun Street. Though this country no longer kidnaps and imports enslaved persons from around the world, we are still observing many of the consequences of such a system today. The places we visited today attempt to highlight, in addition to this city's – and country's – history, both how far we have come since the sixteenth century and how far we, today, in the twentieth century, have to go. Thank you again for your time on this tour today, and I hope that, if you take anything away from this Deep Cut Tour, that you begin to question one-sided narratives and look beyond the surface to gain a better appreciation of the world around you. ☺

Creator's Statement

As I begin to write this Creator's Statement, the soundtrack to Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* fills my ears. "Look at where we are; look at where we started," he sings in "It's Quiet Uptown." As a graduating senior, I've been doing a lot of looking at where I am now relative to where I was almost four years ago when I began my undergraduate career at the College of Charleston. I've experienced a lot, learned a lot, and changed a lot, in both positive and negative contexts. This class on Black Nationalism and Black Religion presented significant opportunities to learn about new things and to approach old things through different lenses. In reflecting on these things as I decided how to approach this final project, I found myself thinking about the topics we discussed in terms of things that I was very intrigued to learn about and things that I was frustrated and, in some cases, angry that I hadn't really learned about them prior to this class. One thing that continuously stuck out to me as frustrating was the ignorance that many of my peers and I have in appreciating the full history – in all its complexities – of the city we are living in, especially given its branding as a historic city.

Therefore, I chose to design a tour around that narrated the multidimensional history of African Americans in Charleston. The sites I selected demonstrate a combination of suppression and resistance, where I hope readers (tour-goes?) gain a sense of both the atrocities unacceptably imposed on the black community in the United States by those in power, while also gaining a sense of this community's resiliency over the past four centuries. Ta-Nehisi Coates's text, "The Case for Reparation," really struck me when I read it, particularly in regard to his (accurate) accusations of state-supported piracy against black Americans; thus, I considered it necessary to discuss, on my tour, practices, post-slavery, that suppressed black Americans and robbed them of some of their agency as citizens. Furthermore, in examining resistance, especially with regard to

black nationalism, insofar as we defined it in class as the “black struggle for freedom,” I wanted to present it on the spectrum that it is, through Vesey’s unrealized rebellion and the students’ civil disobedience, where both showed different approaches in the fight for freedom, but the fight for freedom, nonetheless. Additionally, Patrisse Khan-Cullors’s book was, for me, one of the most impactful texts we interacted with this semester, and, resultantly, I wanted to highlight the role and resistance of black women, insofar as they must overcome, at minimum, two forms of oppression: that of race and that of gender. In conjunction with all of this, I wanted to demonstrate that the black community in the United States is not a monolith, insofar as there are different communities within the black community, different experiences, different perspectives, etc.; therefore, I concluded my tour with a brief discussion of the Gullah Geechee community.

Broadly, this class has reinforced the need to question the narratives and systems that surround our lives, particularly those rooted in hierarchies and subordination. In reflecting on the history of the United States, it is clear that we have come a long way from sixteenth-century North America in a number of different ways. But, having come however far we have doesn’t mean that we don’t still have a lot farther to go, as demonstrated in the racism that both subtly and blatantly weaves through the fabric of our society. In starting from our own lives, in our own cities, we, within the agency we have, may begin to grapple with certain narratives given to us and to unravel these systems of oppression from the ground-up (though this doesn’t mean that we don’t need broader, structural change and unravelling, as well).

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