

far away places

# More to Missouri than meets the eye

Story and photos by Sandra Phinney

The thought of being on a coach tour with a score of people is about as appealing to me as eating tarantulas. Yet, I allowed a colleague, Bijan Bayne, talk me into joining some journalists on a trek titled “Forgotten Missouri: What the Books Don’t Tell,” sponsored by the National Black Tourism Network. Bijan had taken the trip before. He wanted to go again and share it with others. So I signed up for the tour—and learned more about African-Americans in one week than I had in a lifetime. There are stories galore; many of them astonishing.

For starters, many years ago, Dr. Katherine Lederer, an English professor at Southwest Missouri State University (located in Springfield), discovered some disturbing information.

On Good Friday, April 13, 1906, the sheriff’s wife falsely accused two black men of rape. The next day, over 6000 people watched as the two men were hanged and burned in the Public Square. The mob returned to the jail, grabbed another black man, set up a mock trial and repeated the atrocity.

By Easter Sunday, hundreds of blacks had abandoned their businesses, homes, properties, farmlands and livestock. Some were city councilmen, school board members, shopkeepers, musicians, farmers and bankers. People from all walks of life feared for their lives and fled the

Ozarks that Easter weekend. (Most headed to St. Louis, Kansas City and Chicago.)

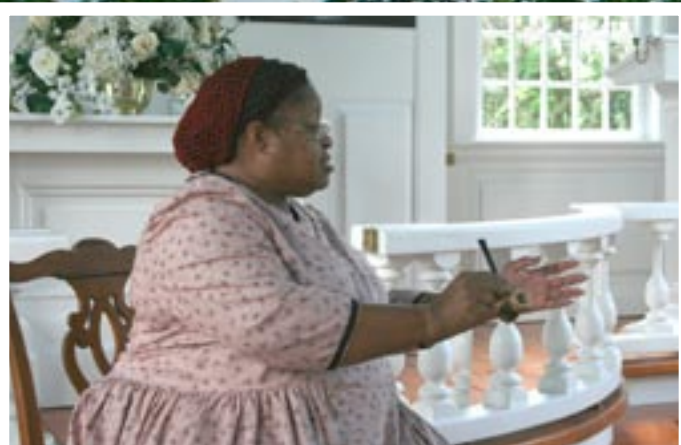
Three days later, an earthquake struck San Francisco. The Springfield atrocities and quiet disappearance of the black community were soon forgotten.

Dr. Lederer wrote in *Many Thousand Gone: Springfield's Lost Black History*, "Those in power write the histories. They preserve what they perceive as important. Springfield is a microcosm of the black American experience at large. The omission or distortion of black history began in white newspapers of the time,

continued with local and county histories, and still continues in state and national histories."

Thanks to Lederer's research, this story and over 2500 photos of the families who took flight (and their descendants) have come to light. The entire collection is housed at the university's Duane G. Meyer Library and is open to the public. Leafing through cases of documents and photos gave me goose bumps. I only regret that our time there was so short.

Another eye-opener was a visit to the George Washington Carver National Monument. Located in Diamond, it is part of the National Park Service and features a stunning trail through woodlands and streams, the famous "Boy Carver"



Tour guide Angie da Silva takes on a different role inside the Old Peace Chapel at Boonesfield Village. Here she takes on the persona of Lila, a slave in the early 1800s and recounts her story. This village hosts courses for Lindenwood University.



A portion of the 50,000 graves that has been discovered and cleared at the Greenwood Cemetery outside of St. Louis. About 10 percent of the graves have been uncovered. Most are still buried under thick underbrush, weeds, shrubs and trees.



One of the 50,000 graves including black slaves, civil war veterans and civil rights leaders recently discovered but yet to be cleared in the Greenwood Cemetery outside of St. Louis. "Stagger Lee" is buried here, as well as Walter Davis, composer, singer and nationally renowned blues pianist.

statue, the Moses-Carver House and the Carver Discovery Centre.

George Washington Carver was born a slave around 1864. He and his mother Mary were kidnapped when he was an infant. He was eventually returned to his owners but was motherless and nearly dead from whooping cough. A sickly child, he spent a lot of time collecting plants and became known as the “plant doctor.” Largely self-taught, he was denied admittance to college due to his race but he persevered and eventually was accepted at Iowa State Agricultural College where he graduated with a Bachelor of Agriculture (1894) and Masters of Agriculture (1896).

Booker T. Washington invited Carver to head up the new Agriculture Department at the Tuskegee Institute. For the rest of his life Carver taught and conducted research. He wanted to free blacks from the tyranny of “king cotton” and discovered over 300 ways to use peanuts in foods, paper, cosmetics, gasoline and medicines. His trailblazing discoveries helped impoverished farmers of the south.

Later in our journey, we visited a small town called Ste. Genevieve and discovered that the settlement was founded in 1735 by French Canadian immigrants. The town came under Spanish rule in 1762 and was later sold to the United States

as part of the Louisiana Purchase, Ste. Genevieve kept much of its French heritage intact. The first blacks brought into the area came from Haiti and intermarriage with the French was common.

Some of the original architecture still stands including buildings constructed in “vertical wooden post” style by the Canadian settlers. The Bauvais-Amoureux House (c 1792) was built using a method called *poteaux en terre* meaning that the vertical split logs were set directly into the earth, without a foundation. Only fives such homes have survived in the U.S.; three are in Ste. Genevieve.

Another day, while touring the Daniel Boone Home and Boonesfield Village located in Defiance, our tour guide, Angie da Silva, slipped away. We met up with her again in the Old Peace Chapel where, in period attire, she took on the persona of a slave named Lila. With corn cob pipe in hand, Lila proceeded to tell her story while we sat, mesmerized. (A colleague recorded it. *Search for Lila: A Missouri Slave’s Story* is on youtube.com.)

Angie is passionate about telling stories of Missouri’s African-American people. You may have guessed by now, the stories are not always pretty stories. One day, she took us to the Greenwood Cemetery on the outskirts of St. Louis, a place she discovered years ago while searching for her great grandmother’s grave. When she found the cemetery, she also discovered over

The Amoureux House (part of the Felix Vallé State Historic Site in Ste. Genevieve) features vertical log walls which were set directly into the earth. There is a strong Canadian connection here. Bijan Bayne, a journalist on the tour, gets ready to take a closer look.



The city of St. Louis is full of surprises—especially in a section called “The Loop”, a trendy place with lots of art galleries, eateries and entertainment venues. This life-size sculpture on the sidewalk turns many heads.



50,000 graves submerged in a sea of vines and wild shrubbery. People in neighbouring homes didn't even know a cemetery was there yet this was the final resting place of slaves, 'Colored' Troopers from the Civil War, WWI and WWII vets, and other African-Americans. This certainly raises the question of how (and why) 32 acres of cemetery could "disappear." Now, a restoration program is in place led by volunteers, but they have a long way to go to uncover and restore all the graves.



The interior of the Old Court House in St. Louis where the landmark Dred Scott slavery trial began. This story would need an entire page on its own. To get more information on this story, join the author at the Yarmouth Library for a photo journey through Missouri, including gems like this in the city of St. Louis.

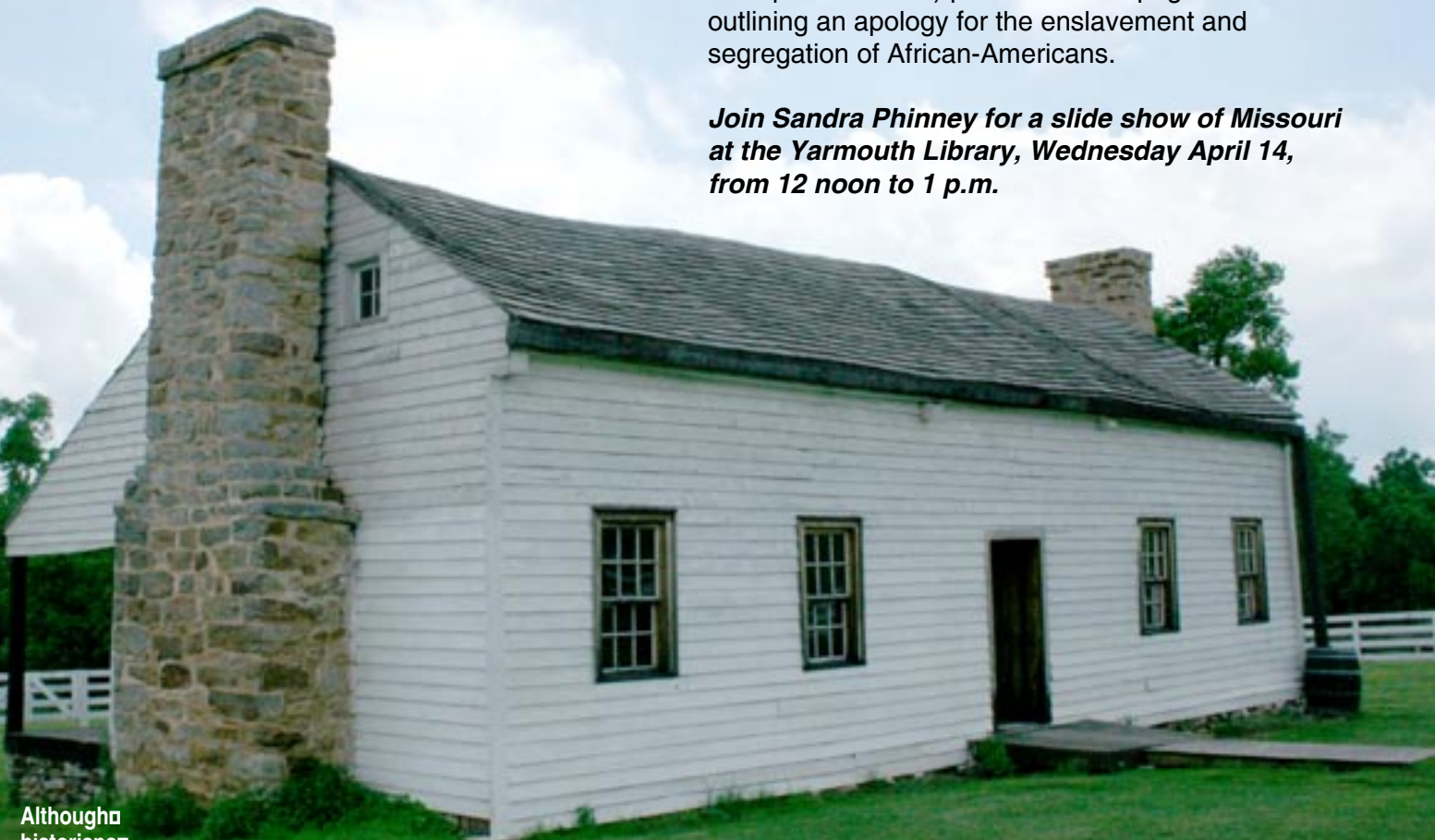
Alas, I've touched on less than a quarter of this journey. There was so much more, including a walk on the banks of the Mississippi at the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing, a historic Underground Railroad site. We visited the Nathan Boone Homestead (I found his story more interesting than his father's) and also met Father Moses Berry, a direct descendant of Nathan Boone and the only Black Russian Orthodox priest in the U.S. He runs a small but impressive museum stuffed with artefacts in Ash Grove.

Of course if you go to Missouri set aside a few days to visit St. Louis—home to Scott Joplin, the king of ragtime, and other world-famous musicians like Ike and Tina Turner, Josephine Baker and Chuck Berry. (Berry still plays at Blueberry Hill in a section of town called "The Loop.")

Oh yeah—we also saw where Frankie shot Johnny. It's a true story—a black story—and it happened in St. Louis. But you'll have to discover the rest of "Forgotten Missouri" on your own. Get in touch with Angie da Silva. You'll find her at the National Black Tourism Network in St. Louis. ([www.tourism-network.net](http://www.tourism-network.net)).

**Postscript:** On July 18, 2009, the US Senate (House of Representatives) passed a three page document outlining an apology for the enslavement and segregation of African-Americans.

**Join Sandra Phinney for a slide show of Missouri at the Yarmouth Library, Wednesday April 14, from 12 noon to 1 p.m.**



Although historians life. This home was built by Boone, his three sons and two of their slaves in 1837, and became the hub of a huge Ozark farm.