Southern heritage tourism luring a growing market of black Americans

By Dionne Walker, Associated Press

FARMVILLE, Va. — For years, students crammed shoulder to shoulder into Robert R. Moton High School, holding overflow classes in tarpaper shanties and even school buses — all in the name of segregated education.

Historical revision: Colonial Williamsburg recently opened a plantation in its attempts to freshen history with lessons about slave life.

Steve Helber, AP

Finally on April 23, 1951, the black students organized a walkout. They would later join a handful of schools included in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education, outlawing school segregation.

That bit of civil rights history draws about 1,000 visitors a year to a modest museum at the school. Travel industry experts say it's an example of the kind of historical sites Southern states are promoting as they ride a wave of black tourism.

IF YOU GO ...

A sampling of Southern attractions and events of interest to black visitors:

• Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail: Southern Virginia; www.varetreat.com or (800) 673-8732 or (800) 368-3595. Brochure available describing a 41-stop self-guided tour of schools, churches, homes and other sites relevant to the civil rights era educational experience. Highlights include the earliest known public high school for black Virginians, found in the Petersburg area, as well as the Buckingham County birthplace of noted black historian Carter G. Woodson.

• Tubman African American Museum: 340 Walnut St., Macon, Ga.; www.tubmanmuseum.com or (478) 743-8544. Features 14 galleries detailing black inventors, local historical figures, African influences on cooking and more. Open Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sundays 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Adults, $5; children 12 and under, $3.

• Rust College: 150 Rust Ave., Holly Springs, Miss.; www.visithollysprings.org/visit.html or (662) 252-2491. Oldest historically black college in the state, established in 1866 as Shaw University for the education of freed slaves on the site of slave auctions campground for Grant's troops. Home to over 400 pieces of African art, sculptures and masks; tours by appointment.

• Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site: 600 N. Second St., Richmond, Va.; www.nps.gov/maw or (804) 771-2017. Restored to its original 1930s appearance,
the site features the home of the first woman in the United States to charter and serve as president of a bank. Open Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

* Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site: 1600 Chappie James Way, Tuskegee, Ala.; [www.nps.gov/tusc](http://www.nps.gov/tusc) or (334) 724-0922. Combines audiovisual programs, historic buildings and guided walks to document the experience of the U.S. military's groundbreaking group of World War II era black pilots. Open 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily.

said Rich Harrill, director of the University of South Carolina’s Institute for Tourism Research. He listed nature-based tourism as No. 1.

It’s particularly popular among increasingly middle-class black Americans. In 1999, 1.3 million black-headed households earned at least $50,000 a year in 1989 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That number increased to more than $100,000 by 1999, the most recent numbers compiled.

The result is about $30.5 billion in black tourist spending annually, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. It estimates black travel volume increased about 4% from 2000 to 2002, compared to 2% for overall travel.

Consciousness, not just cash, plays a role, said Angela da Silva, owner of the National Black Tourism Network in St. Louis.

"For so long, our heritage was stripped from us," she said. "There's so many different angles of the truth coming to light."

Da Silva said black tourists are willing to wade through the pain of visiting some of the centers of bigotry to reconnect with their ancestry.

"We go there because this was the seat of our history," da Silva said. "It's th reason why Jews go to Holocaust sites — it's to get in touch."

Travel industry officials say Southern states need to pay attention to preserving important black landmarks and cultural areas such as the parts of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida that were settled by slave descendants.

They'll also have to redefine themselves for a savvy class of tourists, repack their offerings and going beyond the same old slave tales.

Tennessee has focused on upping its black appeal and proving it's more than the capital of country music. The state vacation guide mentions everything from galleries at historically black Fisk University in Nashville to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.

Tourism officials are also a year into an advertising campaign with two spokespeople: country music icon Dolly Parton and soul singer Isaac Hayes.

"By having him as part of that campaign, we think that makes a bold statement of inclusiveness for the entire state," said Phyllis Qualls-Brooks, assistant commissioner of marketing with the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development.

Other attractions are getting creative as they vie for black tourist attention.

A mainstay in Virginia, Colonial Williamsburg recently added a new tool in its attempts to freshen history. Great Hopes Plantation replicates an 18th century middle-income plantation complete with black field slaves and a tiny slave dwelling.

It's touted as a more hands-on approach than older slavery representations at Williamsburg. And black tourists are intrigued, said Jason Gordon, a black visitor to Williamsburg.

"They want to know the realities," he said, as he watched site supervisor Roz Watson Jr. direct a tourist group planting gourd seeds in a mock slave garden. "They don't want it sugar-coated.”
Virginia officials, meanwhile, are revamping their black heritage guide to places such as the Richmond home of pioneering businesswoman Maggie L. Walker and the Booker T. Washington National Monument in Franklin County.

Since May 2004, the Virginia Tourism Corporation has spent more than $300,000 trying to reach the black market, according to public relations manager Anedra Bourne.

For some states, da Silva said, winning over black travelers will also mean changing the negative image that keeps some would-be tourists away.

With the most stinging visions of the segregationist South centered in its cities, Alabama knows that challenge well. Lee Sentell, director of the state Bureau of Tourism and Travel, said officials in that state were the first to distribute a black heritage guide in 1983.

This summer, they will roll out a 24-page booklet titled "The Alabama Civil Rights Museum Trail."

Almost a museum a year is opening in Montgomery, Sentell said, pointing to the year-old Dexter Parsonage Museum, and the Civil Rights Memorial Center, due to open in October.

"People are drawn to sites where history was made," he said. "It becomes much more real."

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