

COVER STORY

Highlighting Baltimore's History

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ON BICENTENNIAL OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS' BIRTH, CITY'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN LANDMARKS ARE IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Louis Fields has spent dozens of his days so far this year retracing Frederick Douglass' steps throughout Fells Point.

At the corner of Aliceanna and South Durham streets is the block where the renowned abolitionist, born into slavery on the Eastern Shore circa 1818, first started learning to read and decided the skill was key to his freedom. A half mile away

on South Dallas Street are the five rowhouses Douglass built upon his return to the city years later, as a free man and prominent public figure.

"Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity," Douglass wrote in his 1845 autobiography, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave."

Despite Baltimore's significance to his story, "maybe two out of five Marylanders know that Douglass lived here at all," Fields said.

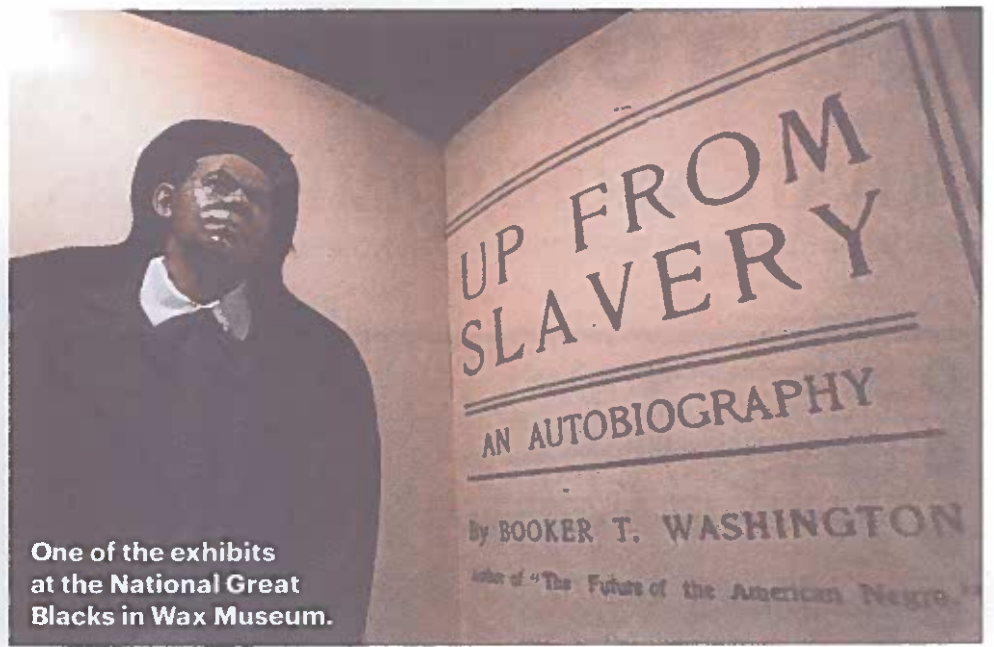
Fields, the founder of the Baltimore African American Tourism Council, has been running tours focused on Frederick Douglass' ties to the city for nearly two decades. This year, the bicentennial of Douglass' birth, has been especially busy.

State and city tourism agencies, as well as local museums and historical sites, have marked the occasion with lectures, re-enactors and other special events. Interest in Douglass' legacy is just one part of a growing niche within the tourism industry that focuses on Baltimore's rich African-American history and culture.



Louis Fields runs tours focused on Douglass' ties to the city.

BY ERIC STOCKLIN



One of the exhibits at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum.

JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

it comes from a visitation perspective.”
 “It’s a big draw for us,” he said.

Interest in cultural sites can translate into dollars spent at African-American-owned restaurants and businesses, Fields said.

“Not only did large groups of African Americans come [last year], but they stayed in hotels, they went to restaurants, they did everything they could to spend millions of dollars here,” he said. “Everybody benefits. It’s one thing to have millions of dollars from consumers and tourists who stay on Pratt Street, and that helps your Pratt Street corridor, but when they get outside of Pratt Street and they come into the neighborhoods, neighborhood businesses see revenue.”

One of Baltimore’s top African-American heritage museums, the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, chose its location as a means of bolstering the surrounding neighborhood and businesses. The museum, founded by university professors Joanne and Elmer Martin in 1983, moved to its present home at 1601-03 E. North Ave. 30 years ago.

“Some of our institutions have to be willing to stay in our communities to make those communities better,” Joanne Martin said. “That’s where our children are, whoever those children may be. Children who need to know this history, whether they’re African-American or not.”

The museum houses 145 wax sculptures of notable African-American figures, like Mary McLeod Bethune, George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, as well as powerful exhibits on lynching and slave ships, and frequently hosts school and youth groups from Baltimore and out of state.

Another of the city’s African-American cultural museums, the 13-year-old Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History & Culture, is home to 10,000 artifacts spanning 400 years of history. The museum focuses specifically on Maryland, but draws a regional crowd as well as national and international visitors with its collection and a roster of special activities

15%

of Baltimore’s visitors in 2016 were African-Americans.

like movie premieres, live jazz and the African American Children’s Book Fair, said Executive Director Wanda Draper.

A recent exhibit featuring 52 works by the prominent painter Jacob Lawrence on loan from Maryland collectors drew one couple who hopped on a \$69 Southwest flight to Baltimore for a day trip to the museum.

“They had never seen so many Jacob Lawrence pieces in one place,” Draper said.

Both Martin and Draper said they have felt the effect of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in Washington, D.C., nearly two years ago.

“One of the things that has been good for us is that sometimes people aren’t able to get tickets to that museum and they’ve heard about us,” Martin said. “We’ve been able to piggyback on that opportunity a bit.”

Draper said tour groups often combine both museums in one trip.

“On their way back, they’ll stop here,” she said.

The national museum has also helped to familiarize a broader audience with African-American history, encouraging them to visit new spots, Draper said.

“What we’re finding is more people from all nationalities now feel comfortable coming in” to the Lewis Museum, she said. “Our visitors are much more diverse now because they know what it is.”

Despite gains in visibility, Fields and others said promotion and financial support for African-American tourist sites is still lacking.

“I think on a collaborative basis between counties and cities and the state jurisdictions that are responsible for showing and telling that history, we could do a better job,” said Michael Haynie, the president of the Maryland Tourism Coalition. “It would be good business to do so.”

The city is home to a wealth of notable sites and institutions: stops on the Underground Railroad, the first Catholic Church founded for African-Americans, the longest-continuously operating African-American community theater. A host of notable African-Americans have also called the city home, from Douglass to Thurgood Marshall, the first black Supreme Court justice, to legendary entertainers like Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway and Eubie Blake.

“In terms of product, we, I believe, are unmatched in any city or any state in the country,” Fields said. “Because we have it all.”

The city’s tourism arm, Visit Baltimore, approaches this heritage “in a comprehensive way,” said CEO Al

Hutchinson. The quasi-public agency has a section on its website highlighting the African-American experience in Baltimore and employs a salesperson dedicated to attracting convention and event business from groups like the NAACP, National Urban League and the American Tennis Association, the country’s oldest African-American sports organization.

“The African-American heritage story... is a tourism sector that’s growing tremendously around the country,” Hutchinson said. “I believe that in Baltimore City, we have a lot to offer in that market.”

About 15 percent of the nearly 26 million visitors to Baltimore in 2016 were African-American, Hutchinson said — “well above the national average when