

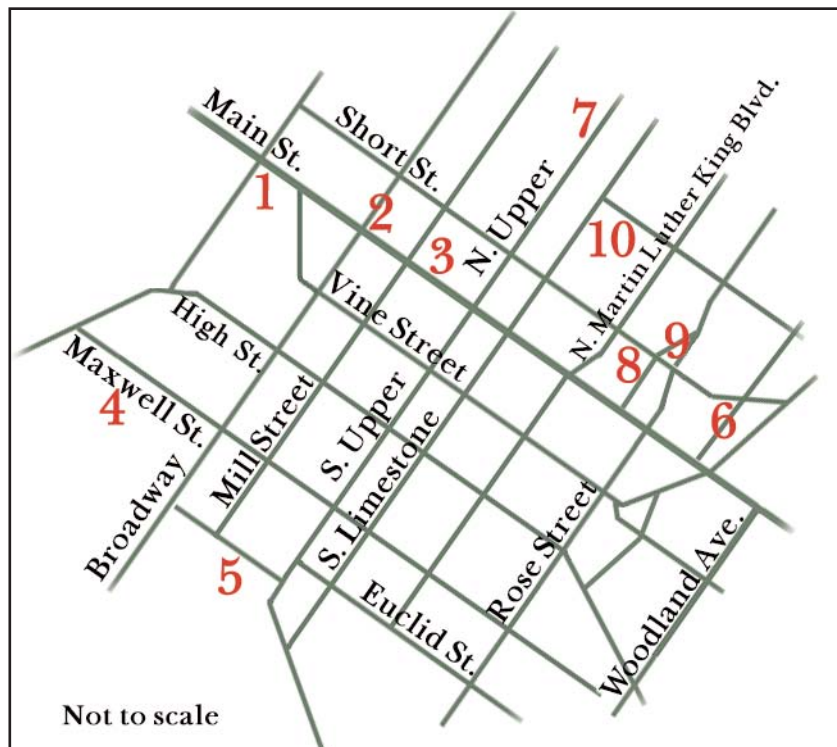
African American Heritage Trail in Downtown Lexington

by Doris Wilkinson

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The "African American Heritage Trail in Downtown Lexington, Kentucky" symbolizes a historic passageway from the site of a 19th century slave auction block at "cheapside" to freedom represented by the Urban League headquarters at 148 Deweese Street. Along the route, African Americans contributed immensely to the rich cultural heritage of the city. Many of their architectural landmarks and historic properties, including cemeteries, may be found throughout the city and in the once rural hamlets of Fayette county.

Source: Doris Wilkinson "A Guide to the African American Heritage in Downtown Lexington, Kentucky."
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1. Main Street Baptist Church, 582 West Main Street
2. "Forgotten Pioneers," A doctor's office that was located at 118 North Broadway
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1. Main Street Baptist Church.

582 West Main Street

Originally the Independent Baptist church, the foundation for Main Street Baptists was anchored in 1862--one year before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Since 1870, the quaint and historic church has been at its present location. Situated next door to the Mary Todd Lincoln House, this notable place of worship has served as a prominent institution in the Lexington community. It is a major landmark in the downtown section of the city.

Photo courtesy of the Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau



2. Forgotten Pioneers: African American doctors in Lexington

118 North Broadway

In the early part of the twentieth century, several African American doctors practiced in Lexington. Many were in the building at 118 North Broadway near West Main Street. The distinguished structure once housed the offices of such well-known physicians as Obed Cooley, John E. Hunter, Nathaniel Ridley, and Joseph Laine from Clark County (Winchester). W.T. Dinwiddie--a dentist--also had his office in the building. Some of these doctors were at the location from 1909-1930--a period in the country's economic and political history that included World War I and the Great Depression.

Photo courtesy of Doris Wilkinson



3. Cheapside

During the dark era of slavery in Kentucky, the section of town in Lexington known as "cheapside" became the largest slave-trading locality in the state. In fact, the area was one of the most well known of the slave market districts in the South. Africans were beaten and families were separated forever as they were auctioned and sold in the courtyard. According to historical narratives, President Abraham Lincoln once observed the selling of slaves at this site. In the post-war period, "cheapside" served as a public square and a market. This photograph shows a court day in November 1887.

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4. Historic Pleasant Green Baptist Church

540 West Maxwell

Referred to as the "oldest Baptist church west of the Allegheny Mountains," the roots of Pleasant Green were planted in 1790--the year that the first census of the United States was taken. The slave, "Old Captain," Peter Duerett, is credited with having founded the first African Baptist Church in Lexington. In 1822, the land was conveyed to slaves. The present church at West Maxwell changed its name to "Pleasant Green" in 1829. The landmark building was completed following the stock market crash that launched the beginning of the Great Depression

Photo courtesy of Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau



5. Baptism Scene

Around the beginning of the 20th century, Historic Pleasant Green Baptist Church carried out its baptisms in a pond that was once situated between Bolivar and Scott Streets. For many years, rousing baptismal services were held at the pond off South Upper. According to oral tradition, this electrifying spiritual event drew large crowds of families and represented an important component of declaring one's faith.

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6. Isaac Murphy (1861-1896)

Born on a horse farm in Lexington, Isaac (Burns) Murphy is well known in the history of Thoroughbred racing. A leading jockey of his time, Murphy's family once lived in downtown Lexington on "Jordan's Row," which "faced the public square." (In 1805, Henry Clay's law office was also located on "Jordan's Row," the present day 110-112 North Upper.) Later, Murphy lived on Megowan Street near the Thoroughbred Park. In 1884, 1890 and 1891, he won the Kentucky Derby. Murphy is buried in the Kentucky Horse Park cemetery on Iron Works Pike where his remains were moved in 1977.

Photo courtesy of Kentucky State University Special Collections & Archives



7. St. Paul AME Church

251-253 North Upper Street

This most important landmark was an outgrowth of the Hill Street Methodist Church--a place where white slaveholders and overseers gave instructions to African slaves. Around 1826, a small brick building was constructed on North Upper. Throughout the 20th century, the African Methodist Episcopal Church sustained its role as an active and positive force in the community. African American war mothers met here during World War II (1939-1945). Mrs. Lucy Harth Smith, a well-known educator in the city, was a participant in those historic meetings.

Photo courtesy of Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau



8. Site of the Old First Baptist Church

corner of Short and Deweese

For decades, First Baptist--a legendary church--stood at the corner of Short and Deweese, "the heart of the African American" community. It is "one of the oldest African American congregations in the state of Kentucky" and also has roots in the African Baptist church. Established during slavery, the original First Baptist served as a major religious and cultural institution throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This celebrated house of worship has been referred to as "one of the connecting links in the underground railroad." In the latter part of the 20th century, the historic church relocated to Price Road as First African Baptist.

Photo courtesy of Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau (Deweese and Short, formerly the site of First Baptist)



9. Historic African American Health Center: Polk-Dalton Infirmary

148 Deweese

At 148 Deweese, in the center of the Lexington African American cultural and residential community, Dr. John Polk set up his medical practice from 1921 to 1931. He was the first physician to have occupied the historic structure. Dr. J.R. Dalton later established his medical practice in this building where he stayed for many decades. Other African American doctors who joined him on Deweese (Deweese) Street included Dr. Henry Merchant who arrived during the Great Depression and Dr. Marshall Jones who set up his practice in the post-World War II period. This landmark is presently the headquarters for the Lexington-Fayette County Urban League which had its grand opening in 1999.

Photo courtesy of Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau



10. East Second Street Christian Church

146 Constitution

The East Second Street Christian Church began its religious services in an old carriage factory. This small but celebrated house of worship among "Disciples of Christ" originated in 1852 under the leadership of Thomas Phillips. The doors opened at the time of the greatest activity on the "underground railroad." In 1880, the present site was purchased--just two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. This remarkable church represents an intrinsic part of an historical neighborhood that is in close proximity to downtown Lexington.

Photo courtesy of Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau



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Back to African American Heritage Trail in Downtown Lexington map.

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