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# From a Black Perspective

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,  
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,  
Down to Yamacraw,  
And find Sister Caroline.

-From "Go Down Death,"  
by James Weldon Johnson

By Wanda S. Lloyd

SAVANNAH—In the city from which James Weldon Johnson's "Death" plucked Sister Caroline, the local black heritage is displaying new life and pride.

The Negro Heritage Trail, a tour launched in February by the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, now offers tours of this historic port city from a black perspective. The tour, brainchild of W.W. Law, a postal worker who was president of the local NAACP chapter for 26 years, is available to large groups as well as families and individuals.

It begins at the docks of the Savannah River, where the first slaves in Georgia entered this port in 1749. Among the slaves to arrive here were the ancestors of Roland Hayes (about 1790), who became an American lyric tenor, and John Sengstacke (1847), publisher of the Chicago Defender, one of two black daily newspapers in America.

Also from this port, in the 1890s, were launched two back-to-Africa movements of free Negroes, the last in 1894 under the leadership of African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Henry M. Turner, an agent for the Freedmen's Bureau. Almost 200 blacks left here on the second sailing for Liberia, singing, "I'm Bound for the Promised Land."

The Negro Heritage Trail winds its way along the streets of downtown Savannah, as the little-known history of blacks in Georgia and nearby South Carolina is told by one of five "conductors," a term taken from the Underground Railway. Large groups are ferried about on mini-buses, which the

association rents from a black-owned firm, or conductors travel in private cars with families or individuals. There is no charge for the tour (except mini-bus rental), but the association will accept donations to further research and restoration of landmark houses and neighborhoods.

Association founder and president Law, 56, said the tour and other projects sponsored by the organization "kind of grew out of an experience of seeing many Negro landmarks disappear." The association's goal is to "preserve and protect the last remaining sites" of historic importance.

"I've been a student of Savannah's Negro history since my early childhood," Law said. He recalls riding his bicycle around the city, reading markers on historic buildings and going inside some of the old houses.

The Negro Heritage Trail is a result of Law's curiosity and his desire to share his findings and expand his lifetime research.

The tour conductors highlight landmarks such as Yamacraw, Savannah's oldest and most famous black section, where many free blacks lived before emancipation. The first black Baptist church in America was founded in Yamacraw in 1788 by Andrew Bryan. Part of Bryan's congregation later broke away from the First Bryan Baptist Church and founded the First African Baptist Church on the edge of Yamacraw. There reportedly is dissension even today among the two congregations, who both claim to be the "first" black Baptist church in America.

Savannah's first black public school was founded in the Scarborough House in 1819. Before then black education was limited to private institutions. John Wesley Dobbs, grandfather of Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, attended classes at the Scarbo-

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## The Negro Heritage Trail

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rough House, later named the West Broad Street School.

The U.S. Customhouse, across the street from city hall, was the site of the trial of wealthy merchant Gazaway B. Lamar, owner of the slave ship Wanderer, the last known ship to bring slaves illegally to America. (Lamar was found innocent.) Many blacks were known to hold high positions in the Customhouse during Reconstruction. One was John DeVeaux who, during the yellow fever epidemic that took the lives of all the white collectors, was named by President McKinley to be collector of ports for Savannah and Brunswick, Ga.

The Georgia Infirmary, the oldest hospital for blacks in the United States, was chartered here in 1832. The institution was built at the bequest of Thomas Francis Williams as a home for infirm elderly people of African descent.

The Savannah-Yamacraw chapter of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History was founded in August 1977, at the Savannah headquarters of Gen. William T. Sherman. It was from here that Sherman sent his famous telegram of Dec. 22, 1864, presenting to President Lincoln a Christmas gift: "the City of Savannah with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition and also about 25,000 bales of cotton."

Sherman and Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton later met in Greene Square (named for the American Revolutionary War general) with 12 to 15 newly freed slaves to hear their demands for land and tools after emancipation. This meeting resulted in Sherman's "Field Order 15," which decreed that all the islands from Charleston to the St. John River (near Jacksonville) and 30 miles inland be set aside for newly freed slaves.

Sherman's field order and his now-famous promise of "30 acres and a mule" to all former slaves in this coastal region died, however, with the assassination of Lincoln in April 1865.

A high point of the tour is the building that housed the St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, founded in 1854 as the second black Episcopal church in the South (the first was in Charleston).

The conductor tells the story that mulatto members of St. Stephen's required many who entered the church for worship to take the "comb test." A comb, kept at the door, would be run through the hair of any person believed not to be the "purest" mulatto. If the comb didn't run through smoothly on the first try, the person was said to be not suitable for the congregation.

Another Episcopal church across town, St. Augustine's, was the worship place for darker blacks. The two churches were eventually ordered to merge by the denomination's regional bishop. It is said that for years, sitting as one congregation, the former St. Stephen's mulattos and the St. Augustine members relegated themselves to opposite sides of the new church.

The Negro Heritage Trail conductors wind up the tour in Laurel Grove Cemetery, founded in 1854. The south end of the cemetery, still in use today, is the burial place of many former slaves. One slave to be buried there was "Tom" (last name unknown), whose elaborate marker reads:

"Old Tom, Faithful Servant for Fifty Years of Capt. John F. Wheaton, Died Feb. 11, 1904, Age 96. Men of Confederate."

Old Tom served his master before and during the Civil War, and for many years on Confederate Memorial Day, when Confederate flags were placed on the graves of white soldiers in Laurel Grove North, the "Men of Confederate" would trek over to Laurel Grove South to place a flag of honor on the grave of "Old Tom."

Tours from the black perspective are also available in other cities, including Washington (Soul Journey) and New York's Harlem (Penny Sightseeing International).

For more information on the Savannah tour write W.W. Law, Negro Heritage Trail, 710 West Victory Dr., Savannah, Ga. 31405. Telephone (912) 233-2027.

Lloyd is an editor on the staff of the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service.

\*Poem from "God's Trombones," by James Weldon Johnson ©1927, Viking Press, Inc.