

TOP STORY

## Southern Civil Rights Trail launched to draw international visitors to places like South Carolina

By Dave Munday [dmunday@postandcourier.com](mailto:dmunday@postandcourier.com) Feb 17, 2018



Thousands of people visited Emanuel AME Church after the fatal shootings in 2015. The church is one of the sites on a U.S. Civil Rights Trail that includes South Carolina. File/Staff

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Southern states that once downplayed the struggle for equal rights by their black citizens now are marketing it to curious travelers around the world.

Tourists from far and wide are booking trips along the recently announced U.S. Civil Rights Trail, and South Carolina is scrambling to get a piece of the action.

"We found that international travelers are fascinated by the Civil Rights movement," said Duane Parrish, director of the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

The trail, announced on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday last month, includes stops in 14 states and the nation's capital. Nine South Carolina sites are among them.

"We already have U.K. and French tour operators that have added programs featuring the Civil Rights Trail," said Travel South USA executive director Liz Bettner.

For instance, Bon Voyage Tours of Southampton is touting the U.S. Civil Rights Trail as "What happened here changed the world." The tour includes sites in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana.

The French travel site La Maison des Etats Unis is advertising a 14-day tour "in the footsteps of Martin Luther King." The route includes sites in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana.

The French travel website Routard is encouraging tourists to "travel in the footsteps of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. or other activists in the struggle for American civil rights," according to Google's translation service.

Barbara Boltoukhine, managing director of Express Conseil, a Paris firm that promotes the French travel industry, says she expects interest in the Southern tours to grow.

"We do believe that French people (consumers as well as tour operators ) will find great interest in the Civil Rights Trail as they are known to be keen on history, and not just their own," she said in an email.

The Italian travel site Alidays is also promoting the U.S. Civil Rights Trail.

"We are very excited too about this project," Alessandro di Falco, Alidays' marketing director, said in an email.

### **Tourism trend**

In South Carolina, the trail initiative is the latest effort to combine tourism and black history.

In Charleston, historical markers and statues have popped up across the peninsula in recent years, while historic sites modify their presentations to be more inclusive.

Also, the S.C. African American Heritage Commission has named 10 top black history sites to visit in the state, including several associated with the Civil Rights movement. The group also has compiled a much larger list of about 300 sites for its online travel guide at [www.GreenBookofSC.com](http://www.GreenBookofSC.com).

And local participants in the Riley Institute's Diversity Leadership Initiative developed an interactive map of black history sites at [www.charlestonjusticejourney](http://www.charlestonjusticejourney) as part of a project called the Charleston Justice Journey.

Alabama and some other Southern states have been promoting their own Civil Rights tours for several years. None of the international advertisements for the Civil Rights Trail packages include sites in South Carolina yet.

The state's tourism officials are working to change that. Parrish said he will push the state's attractions next month at ITB Berlin, which is billed as the world's leading international travel show.

The idea of the trail started about two years ago when Jonathan Jarvis, who was the director of the National Park Service at the time, urged historians to document surviving Civil Rights landmarks. Researchers at Georgia State University identified 60 sites, and states added about 70 more.

### **An appreciation**

The S.C. African American Heritage Foundation worked with the state Tourism Commission to get the nine South Carolina sites on the trail. Drawing international travelers was a big part of the plan, executive director Janie Harriott said.

"I think international travelers appreciate what we have more than we do," she said.

Some of the South Carolina sites on the trail have already been luring international visitors. For instance, the trail includes Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston, which drew visitors from all over the world after nine black parishioners were gunned down at a Bible study by a self-described white supremacist in June 2015. The congregation has been raising money for a memorial — designed by the same man who did the World Trade Center Memorial — that should make it an even more heavily traveled stop for visitors.

The International African American Museum on the Charleston waterfront is likely to be added to the list when it's finished, said Parrish.

Other sites are also significant but not as well known. For instance, Liberty Hill AME Church in the small town of Summerton in Clarendon County was the site of meetings that led up to the U.S. Supreme Court's historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that led to the desegregation of schools.

"The original movement for school desegregation started in Summerton," says the church's pastor, the Rev. Robert China.

He's been working to get a marker on I-95 that says "Welcome to Summerton, S.C., the birthplace of school desegregation in America."

China said he's already seen tour groups from Charleston stop in Summerton. Can he imagine Germans and Italians walking the streets of this town of less than 1,000 residents?

"We haven't thought that far, but, as they say, the more the merrier," he said.

### **S.C. Civil Rights Trail sites**

- **St. Helena Island: Penn Center**, formerly Penn School, was founded in 1862 to teach freed slaves trades and how to read so they could support themselves.
- **Charleston: Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church** has a rich Civil Rights history and was the site of a deadly shooting in 2015. A memorial is planned to honor the nine victims.
- **Summerton: Liberty Hill AME Church**. Meetings held here in the 1940s and 1950s led to local court cases that helped bring about the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling desegregating public schools.
- **Orangeburg: South Carolina State College Historic District** was the site of the Orangeburg Massacre.
- **Columbia: Modjeska Monteith Simkins House** was home to a matriarch of the Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina.
- **Columbia: South Carolina State House**. A monument on the grounds tells the story of blacks in South Carolina, from their arrival as slaves to their later successes in science, the arts, law, education, sports and politics.
- **Greenwood: Benjamin E. Mays House Museum**, the childhood home of the civil-rights leader and former president of Morehouse College.
- **Greenville: Springfield Baptist Church**, founded in 1867 by newly freed slaves, the oldest historically black Baptist church in Greenville was headquarters for non-violent civil rights protests in the 1960s.
- **Rock Hill: McCrory's Five & Dime** was the site of sit-ins by students who were denied service and eventually arrested.

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