

ASALH: A Bench by The Road

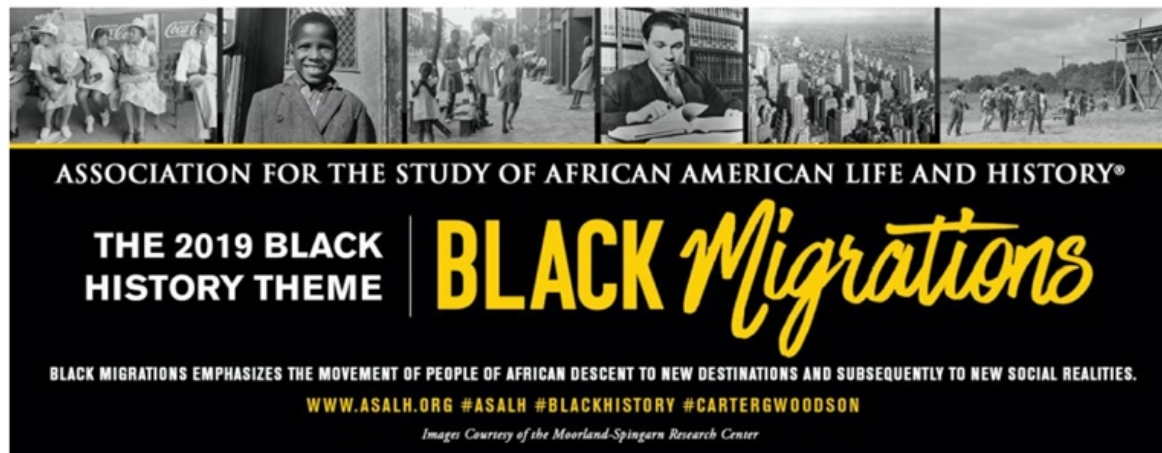
By Anita Russell, MEd, CPLC



Back in 2019, while speaking at a local educational event in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I met a woman by the name of Cynthia Devine-Kepner. It was one of those extraordinary encounters where two people just click. Turns out she was a member of the Dr. Edna B. McKenzie Branch of ASALH (Association for the Study of African American Life and History). She in turn introduced me to Ann Mason, who at the time was serving as the Vice President of the Pittsburgh branch. Those two introductions led me to ASALH, a national organization dedicated to carry forth the legacy of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the Father of Black History. After an engaging meeting with Ann, I decided to become a member at both the local and national levels.

It was such an honor to have Ann as a friend. As a newly inducted member of ASALH, Ann encouraged me to do two things—to attend the ASALH 104th Annual Meeting and Conference in North Charleston, South Carolina, and to participate in the Author's Book Signing Event. Ann had read my book, *I Wanna See Laney's House: A Sibling Story*, enjoying it enough to make the recommendation. On October 2, 2019, I made my way to North Charleston with no real idea of what the experience would be. I simply took Ann at her word. The theme of the conference was "Black Migrations". If I had to select one sentence to sum up my overall experience it would be this: The ASALH organization does an exceptional job of living up to its mission to promote,

research, preserve, interpret and disseminate information about Black life, history and culture to the global community. I was glad to be there!



While attending the meeting and conference, I decided to add the post-conference African American Heritage Bus Tour to my itinerary. Anyone who knows me would know that I have a deep appreciation for African American History—that is the undistorted view; the view that speaks our narrative truth to power; the view that brings into the present our generational contributions, not just in America but across the diaspora and throughout the world. The tour was sponsored by Dominion Energy and the National Underground Network to Freedom. The focus of the “Around Charleston” Tour was African arrival, African survival, African diffusion and African legacy. The tour included multiple stops of historical significance—the McLeod Plantation on James Island, Sullivan's Island and Fort Moultrie near a pest house, and the House at Charles Pinckney National Historic Site.

Though there were many reason for the tour to be filed away in my memory of great experiences, I will only mention a few here, starting with the McLeod Plantation, located on James Island, South Carolina, established in 1851 and best known for the production of Sea Island Cotton. The plantation, recognized as a Gullah/Geechee heritage site, still houses the original slave quarters dating back to mid-1800's. Here we got a lesson on how bricks were made by enslaved Africans, including the children. After the wooden molds were removed, the clay bricks were laid on the drying floor. To help the bricks dry properly, they had to be turned by hand while still damp. Left behind were the fingerprint and handprint indentations of the children who were lifting and turning, documenting the fact that enslaved children often worked on the plantation along with the adults. Throughout Charleston the bricks were shipped and used to build many fine structures, which tourists enjoy today—completely unaware of what was left behind on the bricks.

Ironically built for protection from invaders, Sullivan's Island is now remembered as a major entry point for the arrival of newly enslaved Africans during the 18th century. Fort Moultrie dates back to the American Revolutionary War. Here the African Passages Museum Exhibit includes artifacts such as middle passage charcoal art works, Gullah art, West African objects, leg shackles and slave identification badges. Located near Fort Moultrie was a pest house. Pest houses were established in the early 1700s to quarantine the newly arrived enslaved Africans to ensure that they were healthy, disease-free, and ready to be sold in Charleston.

For me the highlight of the Sullivan's Island stop was sitting on a bench by the road with fellow authors. "Bench by the Road" is a project initiated in 2006 by the Toni Morrison Society. The name is taken from a 1989 interview with World Magazine where Morrison speaks of the absence of historical markers designed to remember the lives of enslaved Africans. An historical marker was finally erected in 1990, commemorated in 1999 to recognize Sullivan's Island



as "A place where Africans were brought to this country under extreme conditions of human bondage and degradation.

... We commemorate this site as the

entry of Africans who came and who contributed to the greatness of our country."

▼ ▼ *There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist . . . the book had to" (The World, 1989).*

Finally, we ended the tour at the House at Charles Pinckney National Historic Site with a delectable picnic, delicious food, and delightful conversations. Charles Pinckney, one of the original drafters of the United States Constitution, owned the property that houses the Charles Pinckney Historical Site. The Charles Pinckney Historic Site demonstrates the role that enslaved Africans contributed to the development of the

United States, particularly in the production of rice and indigo. The site reminded me of a beautiful gold coin with two faces. One face of the coin commemorates a great constitution, a system of principles to become the bedrock of a nation's freedom and liberty. The other face of the coin commemorates the tragedy of constitutional authors who had the capacity to hold two opposing beliefs in their minds—the acceptance of freedom and liberty for some, juxtaposed with the acceptance of enslavement and human bondage for others. Lesson learned here, never take freedom and liberty for granted—for some it's an historical gift, for others a generational battle.



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