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Discovering northeastern North Carolina's Black heritage trail

Michael J. Solender

8-10 minutes

The Dismal Swamp Canal connects the Chesapeake Bay with the Albemarle Sound and offers recreational kayaking, canoeing, and boating for visitors . The Canal is on the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic Landmark, noted as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, and has received the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Designation. The Dismal Swamp Canal connects the Chesapeake Bay with the Albemarle Sound and offers recreational kayaking, canoeing, and boating for visitors . The Canal is on the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic Landmark, noted as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, and has received the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Designation.

Camden County, N.C./Dismal Swamp Welcome Center

In late 2019, just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, North Carolina's Currituck county tourism director Tameron Kugler had an idea around showcasing the region's rich Black heritage.

"In Currituck County we have a significant African American historical site called the [Historic Jarvisburg Colored School](#)," Kugler said. "It was originally constructed in 1868 on land given to

the community by a free African American, William Hunt. The school was built only four years after the end of the Civil War and there are many fascinating stories with its history.”

She noted that when considering how best to share this place with visitors, she knew the surrounding counties had important Black historical and community assets that would need to be included in a curated guide of spots to visit.

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The Historic Jarvisburg Colored School in Currituck County was founded in 1867 with a land grant from a freed slave, William B. Hunt. Currituck County Department of Travel and Tourism

Kugler then put this idea into practice and reached out to her counterparts in neighboring northeastern counties of Camden, Chowan, Dare, Pasquotank and Perquimans. In early 2020, the cross-county collaborative tourism project they launched blossomed into the [African American Experience of Northeastern North Carolina](#) with the development of a specific [AAENENC website](#), which served as both an app and curated destination guide.

To date, the guide lists more than 30 visitor-ready sites and outlines a self-guided, digital heritage trail that includes interpretive signs and monuments, parks, waterways and museums. This experience was designed with the mission to inspire exploration and appreciation for the experiences of the African American community in this region.

A Juneteenth launch

“We launched the site on Juneteenth, 2021,” Kugler said,

explaining that she picked this date specifically because this was the same year Juneteeth was declared a federal national holiday.

While the trail's sites and inclusion were coordinated by the various county tourism officials, it was community residents with deep roots, traditions and historical connections to the region that brought forth meaningful and authentic experiences for visitors.

“Early on we recognized and acknowledged these stories and experiences were not ours to tell,” Kugler said. “Each county was responsible for identifying at least two members within their community who had connections, knew the history and stories and had roots, who could help us with the project.”

The team created an advisory board that was instrumental in identifying the diverse tapestry of historical sites. “In Camden County, we reached out to our staff members as well as the community to solicit their ideas and guidance as to what we should highlight,” Sarah Hill, chairperson for the Camden County Tourism Development Authority and director of the Dismal Swamp Welcome Center, said. “We relied heavily on the team at the [Camden County Heritage Museum](#). The museum was formed by retired educators, historians, and residents [desirous of] preserving our region's history.”

Drawing together as a community

Hill, Kugler and their tourism counterparts found consensus within their communities that the history, traditions and heritage uncovered through the project belonged to everyone in the community, not one specific ethnic or cultural group.

“There is such a pride of community we are all experiencing as a

result of this project,” Kugler said. “It has been amazing to be part of community-led meetings where we explore aspects of our collective history that many are not fully aware of,” she said, describing that there’s always an open forum to ask questions and learn more from community members about how to tell the stories of this region’s heritage authentically.

That the collaboration and curation was done virtually on Zoom and other online platforms over the course of the pandemic is a feat that underscores the significance the region has placed on the project.

“The project is one that is exciting to be part of,” Hill said. “Camden County is very rural. We are best known for ecotourism, beautiful parks, trails, and, of course, the [Dismal Swamp](#), part of the NC State Park system, and the historic [Dismal Swamp Canal](#), which is part of the U.S. National Park Service Underground Railroad to Freedom program. To highlight these sites and connect with other regional assets is wonderful.”

State and regional tourism organizations have taken notice. Last year, the project was awarded the 2021 Gold Marketing Achievement Award in Group Marketing from North Carolina Travel Industry Association. Further, earlier this year the Southeast Tourism Society bestowed the Shining Example Partnership Award for cooperative tourism on the African American Experience of Northeast North Carolina.

“I applaud the vision, enthusiasm and dedication of the tourism leaders and African American community in developing this project,” Andre` Nabors, VisitNC Partner Relations Manager, said.

Nabors represents the Economic Development Partnership of

North Carolina (VisitNC) and helped facilitate the project by coordinating state tourism support with the various counties. “I thoroughly enjoyed working on this project with our tourism partners,” he said. “It’s rewarding to see that their peers are recognizing their positive efforts. Other communities across North Carolina have quickly seen the value and would like to replicate in their backyards.”

Since launching in 2020, AAENENC has expanded to add three additional participating counties. Gates, Martin and Washington are adding sites to the trail. Kugler explained that the 14-county region was cleaved from the original Albemarle land grant in 1668 from England’s King Charles II to area Lords and Proprietors as a reward for helping him return to the throne.

“Our goal is to have each of the original 14 counties that were created from that initial land grant feature sites as part of the AAENENC,” Kugler said. “I can envision the experience expanding across the entire state of North Carolina.”

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Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte, N.C.-based journalist. His work has been featured at The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, Metropolis Magazine, Salvation South, Southern Living, Charlotte magazine, NASCAR Illustrated, American City Business Journals, Business North Carolina, The Jewish Daily Forward, and others. Read more from him at <https://michaeljwrites.com/>.