This guide highlights several points of interest that help explain the heritage of Knoxville’s African-American community. Going back to the days when Knoxville became an established river town in the late 1700’s, the images and descriptions show that African-Americans have been an integral part of everyday life in the community from the beginning.

This map guide, which is not an exhaustive resource, draws from information obtained from Mr. Robert Booker and the Beck Cultural Exchange Center, primarily through the mobile tourism application, Knoxville African American Tours of Cultural Heritage, which was developed by the University of Tennessee Community Partnership Center (go to http://isse.utk.edu/cpc/beck/ for more information and a link to this free tour guide iphone app).

1 BECK CULTURAL EXCHANGE CENTER
1927 Dandridge Avenue
2 HALEY HERITAGE SQUARE
1620 Dandridge Avenue
3 GREEN SCHOOL
(Green Magnet Math & Science Academy)
801 Town View Drive
4 CAL JOHNSON PARK
507 S. Hall of Fame Drive
5 THE OLD CITY
Jackson Avenue/Central Street intersection
6 THE GEM THEATRE
Summit Hill Drive/Central Street intersection
7 BLOUNT MANSION
200 W. Hill Avenue
8 BJOU THEATER
803 S. Gay Street
9 TENNESSEE THEATRE
604 S. Gay Street
10 RICH’S DEPARTMENT STORE
(University of Tennessee Conference Center)
600 Henley Street
11 KNOXVILLE COLLEGE
901 Knoxville College Drive
CAL JOHNSON PARK

505 S. Hallie Drive

Dedicated to one of Knoxville's leading citizens in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, Cal Johnson Park recognizes the achievements of a successful businessman, race horse enthusiast, and real estate investor. Calhoun Fackler Johnson was born a slave in 1844 and lived with his family on the site of the old Farragut Hotel, at the corner of Gay Street and Clinch Avenue. His interests included several saloons frequented by some of Knoxville's leading men, the city's only horse race track, and real estate buildings that included several downtown. Johnson served as a city alderman from 1883 to 1885 and contributed a house for the city's first black YMCA building. The park was established in 1922, and a recreation center was built there in 1957. Johnson died in 1925.

THE OLD CITY

Jackson Avenue/Central Street intersection

Stretching in four directions from the intersection of Central Street and Jackson Avenue, the Old City was the center of commerce after Knoxville was founded in 1791. With the arrival of trains in the mid 19th Century, loading docks, saloons, warehouses, and retail shops sprang up and flourished. Also known as "The Bowery", the area included several bars and clubs and was a place where the color line was lightly regarded. The only thing that mattered, for both black or white, was whether one had enough money to pay for a drink. Early establishments included the Tri-City Barber College, JFG Coffee Company, and Sullivan's. Black businesses included the Palace Grill, the Elks Pressing Club, H.W. Keaton's Barber Shop, Royston Brothers Auto Service, and the Gem Theatre.

THE GEM THEATER

Summit Hill Drive/Central Street intersection

The city's premier black movie house, the Gem Theatre, was established in 1913 at 102 W. Vine Avenue. After moving to a larger space at 106 E. Vine Avenue in 1922, the 800-seat Gem began a long run as a movie house, a performance venue for the likes of blues legend, Ida Cox, the Five Royals, and the ever-popular films by plays presented by Knoxville College. An additional feature of the Gem Theatre was the fact that the stage and movie screen were located near the front entrance. All theater patrons had to walk in front of the screen to get to their seats; everyone could see who came and went at the Gem. With the desegregation of downtown movie theaters, the Gem became a night club and restaurant in 1965 and was demolished in 1972 for the expansion of James White Parkway.

Bijou Theater

803 S. Gay Street

Built in 1909, the Bijou began as a venue for high class Vaudeville shows. Over time, it grew to be a performing arts center, attracting such stars as John and Ethel Barrymore. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine, various stock companies, and later the Knoxville Symphony and Knoxville Opera Company. Giving way to the much larger and newer Tennessee Theatre, the Bijou underwent several transformations until it became in the 1930's the only white theater that admitted blacks, although they had to purchase tickets at the Cumberland Avenue entrance and sit in the second balcony.

TENNESSEE THEATRE

604 S. Gay Street

The Tennessee Theatre, one of the South's grand movie houses, was built in 1928 and opened to a packed house of moviegoers. The movie house played a pivotal role in the segregation of the city's public facilities and was one of the last venues to open its doors to all Knoxville residents. Performers such as Cab Calloway and Lionel Hampton could entertain in the theatre, but neither could watch a movie there. The theatre was the scene of protests in the early 1960’s, until the Tennessee finally opened its doors in 1963 to all Knoxville citizens.

10 RICH’S DEPARTMENT STORE

(University of Tennessee Conference Center)

606 Henley Street

Few people realize that the structure housing the University of Tennessee Conference Center was the first location outside the state of Georgia for the Atlanta-based retailer. This 1955 example of mid-century modern commercial architecture was the scene of largely peaceful protests to integrate the store's dining facilities, which were open only to white patrons. In July of 1960, and after several demonstrations and sit-ins at other whites-only eating places, Rich's and other Knoxville retailers desegregated their facilities.

KNOXVILLE COLLEGE

901 Knoxville College Drive

Founded in 1875 by the United Presbyterian Church of North America, Knoxville College is a historically black liberal arts college. The college is rooted in a mission school established in 1864 to educate Knoxville's free blacks and freed slaves and was initially located on Gay Street in the former site of the First Baptist Church. The school was designated a college by the State of Tennessee in 1887 and received its charter in 1901. In 1957, Knoxville College was among the first group of predominantly black institutions to become members in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. During the summer of 1960, students from the college engaged in sit-ins to protest the segregation of lunch counters in downtown Knoxville which resulted in most downtown businesses ending the practice. Noted alumni include Dr. Edith Irby Jones, first female president of the National Medical Association, and Jake Gather, legendary Hall of Fame football coach at Florida A&M University.