

For More Information:  
Nancy Carpenter, CEO  
[nancy@visitcolumbusms.org](mailto:nancy@visitcolumbusms.org)  
800-920-3533

**In Columbus, Mississippi, African American heritage**

**promises heart, soul—and pride.**

Start with an African American of exceptional brilliance by the last name of King; add in a bridge.

For many, that description may bring echoes of the 1960s, but in fact more than a century before Dr. M.L. King, a much earlier King actually built bridges that would lead to a better future right here in Columbus, Miss. Although he was born a slave and remained one until he bought his freedom in 1846, Horace King rose to become the premier bridge builder in the Southeastern United States, carving out a remarkable and inspiring career that was effectively launched in Columbus, his home in 1833 when he carried out his first solo project in the design and construction of the Columbus City Bridge.

Today, the former bridge site is just one of the many visible and vibrant reminders that African American history and accomplishment lie at the heart of this friendly, historic and diverse city situated on the banks of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.

**An irresistible taste of history and pride:**

Catfish Alley provides a savory example. The hub of cultural and economic activity for the city’s African American community during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Catfish Alley today enjoys landmark status in Main Street Columbus. Here, catfish caught from the river below was hauled up in horse-drawn wagons to be cooked and sold on street corners where musicians known as buskers also plied their trade. Blues greats like Bukka White and Big Joe Williams honed their craft right here.

Catfish Alley was a place where friends gathered and gossiped, deals were struck, and burdens were lessoned as lively blues music mingled with the luscious aromas of frying catfish filling the air; later on, gospel music filled the airwaves, broadcast from the Alley’s WACR radio station. Thus, the “Catfish Alley” name was both a description and promise, beckoning residents and visitors from around the region.

A few blocks away, the Queen City Hotel, founded by a former slave, drew luminaries such as Louis Armstrong, Bobby Bland, B.B King, James Brown and Louis Jordan, and clubs like the Elbow Room, the TicToc and the Blue Goose also served up legendary entertainment.

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**Roots of achievement running deep:**

Of course, Columbus’ musical and cultural flowering was no accident, but rather the outgrowth of a rich African American heritage stretching all the way back to the early nineteenth century when remarkable individuals like King and others made an indelible mark of quality in religious, economic and architectural achievements. The Shiloh Baptist Church was built on an unshakeable foundation of faith when slaves first gathered under a brush arbor to worship in their Christian faith until land was chartered for a sanctuary in 1821. The enslaved congregants of Missionary Union Baptist Church, Northeast Mississippi’s oldest continuously operating African American church, first gathered in the basement of the city’s First Baptist Church.

These early Columbus citizens had faith in God, in themselves and in the future—and for good reason. Even as slave labor was used in the construction of some of the city’s antebellum mansions, Isaac and Thomas Williams, brothers and “free men of color” built their own home, The Haven, a sterling example of low country cottage-style architecture. The Williams brothers lived prosperous lives in Columbus, thanks to their successful blacksmith shop. And after the Civil War, freed slaves wasted no time in securing their future. The Freedmen’s Bureau set up a school for former slaves, and Union Academy soon opened its doors. The city’s first African American doctor, Theodoric V. James, set up practice and built his gracious Queen Anne style home, which is still owned and occupied by the doctor’s descendants.

**Bridging past to future with preservation, celebration:**

Today, Columbus bridges past to future through citywide efforts at both careful preservation and joyous celebrations of African American history and culture. Since 2011, the R.E. Hunt Museum and Cultural Center, housed in the former R.E. Hunt School, a designated Mississippi Historic Landmark, has continued to assemble and curate an impressive collection of fascinating artifacts. And every year the annual Catfish in the Alley celebration serves as a signature event of the Columbus Spring Pilgrimage. Named a top tourism event by contemporary tastemakers like *Gun and Garden Magazine*, Catfish in the Alley features a catfish cook-off by some of the region’s finest amateur and professional chefs as well as performances by some of the world’s greatest blues musicians. An autumn highlight, the annual Avenue Heritage Festival has grown into “Mississippi’s largest block party,” while Martin Luther King Day, honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., has come into its own as a regional draw.

Known as “The City that Has It All,” Columbus is a highlight of any heritage tour of the Southeast. Visitors come for the celebrations, the museum, the many historic homes and sites. And perhaps most important of all, they come for that bridge to the heart, soul and pride of extraordinary Americans whose accomplishments continue to resonate today.

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