



CHAMPAIGN COUNTY
African American Heritage Trail

TRAIL **GUIDE**



ABOUT THE TRAIL

The Champaign County African American Heritage Trail is a celebration of the lives and contributions of African Americans in the Champaign County area. The mission is to educate today's residents and visitors about the rich cultural history of a people whose stories have been largely unrecognized, but who directly shaped the place we call home. Our vision is to inspire conversation, expand understanding, and contribute to a better society. An important goal for the Trail is to provide an accessible experience for visitors and all community members.

CO-CHAIRS:

Angela Rivers (top)

Barbara Suggs-Mason (bottom)



ABOUT THE LOGO

The Champaign County African American Heritage logo was designed by graphic designer, Marcus Flinn. In collaboration with the co-organizers, the logo was designed to reflect various components of the history of African Americans in Champaign County.

- The church on the left is Salem Baptist Church in Champaign
- The building on the right is the former Homer High School in Homer
- The corn represents the agriculture industry and farms that African Americans owned in rural Champaign County
- The sun rising represents faith, hope, and new beginnings
- The people represent today's individuals exploring African American history in Champaign County



Angela Rivers' mural, "A Pictorial History of African Americans of Champaign County."

HOW WE ARRIVED AT THE TRAIL

From 1978 to 2011, the Park Street Mural, under the direction of Angela Rivers, existed at Park & 5th, telling the story of the African American experience from Africa to Champaign County, including life in Africa, the middle passage, slavery, tenant farming, African American farmers in Champaign County, religion, and community in the North End neighborhood.

Fast forward to 2020. During an ongoing community dialogue about creating various murals to address racial injustice, Experience Champaign-Urbana was approached about facilitating a downtown Champaign mural celebrating African American history to promote unity and to provide education for generations to come. The mural by Angela Rivers resonated with city council and community members, who wanted something similarly impactful to exist for current and future generations. After several discussions—and realizing there was way too much history to share in one mural—a very small committee determined that the best approach was to include a series of African American history murals centered around themes like innovation, business, education, and music.

While searching for mural locations, an idea sparked to incorporate these murals into a countywide Heritage Trail that would include walking routes and driving trails identified by signage and interactive technology centered around historic buildings, parks, churches, museums, public art, people, and events, making it accessible to residents and visitors alike.

Since then, a larger community committee came together to volunteer their time and efforts to map out this project under the leadership of Co-Chairs Barbara Suggs Mason and Angela Rivers. As descendants of family members who first moved to Champaign County in the 1860s, their knowledge, passion, and steadfast belief in education, history, and the arts, has guided our efforts.

Trails provide time for reflection and perspective on one's place in the world. As you explore the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail, we hope the experience will illuminate your understanding of yourself, our community, and American history.

SOUTHEASTERN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

The first African American in East Central Illinois is believed to be Mary Neal, who arrived around 1832. Champaign County's African American community is considered to have started with the arrival of Wylie Jones. He and his wife, Frances, became prominent and highly-respected businesspeople and community members.

Homer, Broadlands, and Sidney were early hubs for African Americans in the 1800s.



Wylie & Frances Jones



George W. Smith Family

Homer Park, part of what is now known as the Homer Lake Forest Preserve, was a popular destination for African Americans. The park was used for various outings, debates, and activities, including Emancipation Day celebrations.

Over time, and particularly after the Illinois Central Railroad opened, African Americans sought opportunities in larger cities and other parts of the region.

The Smith Family of Broadlands was one prominent African American family that found success and prosperity in southeastern Champaign County.

When George W. Smith, the family patriarch, died in December 1911, his funeral and burial were amongst the largest held in the area.



Homer Park



Champaign Train Depot

THE CITY OF CHAMPAIGN

The Illinois Central Railroad was enormously influential in the development of Champaign-Urbana and in the movement of African Americans to and through this region. The downtown Champaign train depot was constructed in 1899. The railroad not only created jobs, but also opportunities for people and information to move throughout the country.



Frederick Douglass



Swannell Drug Store

One prominent national figure who visited the city of Champaign was Frederick Douglass. The formerly enslaved abolitionist, publisher, public speaker, and soon-to-be diplomat addressed an audience at Barrett Hall, now One Main Plaza, in 1869 on the topic of “Self-Made Men.” It is believed that he returned to Champaign for a second visit in 1872.



Bethel A.M.E. Church (year unknown)

Churches have played an important role for many African Americans in Champaign County as places for spiritual, intellectual, and community development. The three oldest Black-led churches in Champaign County are the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (founded 1863), Salem Baptist Church (founded 1867), and St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (founded 1901). All three churches are still active today.

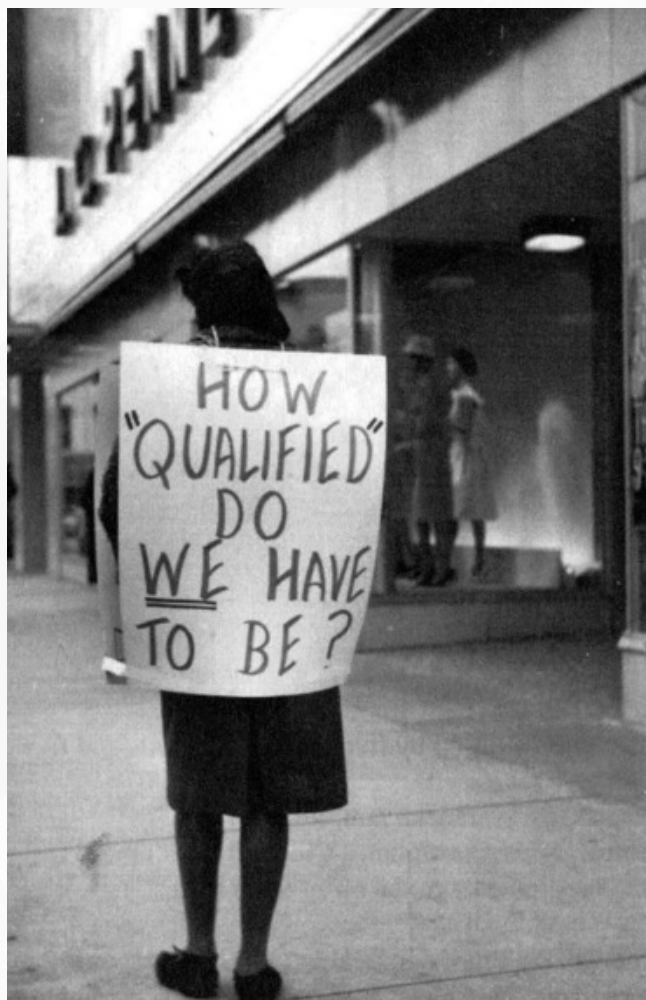


Salem Baptist Church (circa 1950)

The North First Street Corridor is the oldest business district in Champaign, dating to the 1850s. Since its early years, African Americans lived, worked, and owned businesses there. Early Black businesses included barbershops, skilled trades, small restaurants, taverns, and more. By the 1940s, it became the main commercial space for Black businesses and was known as “the Black Downtown.”



Roscoe Tinsley of Tinsley Cleaners



An image of the Penney Picketing Campaign in 1961. Photo taken by Eugene Suggs.

NEW
Majestic Theatre

Foster's Photoplays
and
Mandy's Choice All
Star Colored Cast
All rest of week.

On Tuesday nights
Country Store

Prizes

Friday night Amateur Night

Night Show	Matinee	Night Show
7:45	2:30	9:00

Ad from the Champaign Daily News

In 1961 on Main Street in downtown Champaign, African American residents won an important civil rights victory by picketing discriminatory hiring practices at a J.C. Penney's store. After approximately three weeks, residents won the battle—J.C. Penney's and other downtown businesses pledged to hire more African American employees.



The Douglass Center (circa 1940s)



A crowd listens to the dedication of the new Douglass Branch Library during its official opening on June 17, 1997. Previously, the library was housed in other locations.



The Douglass Center Drum Corps won first place in a national competition in 1968.

African American residents often fought hard to build and maintain spaces to learn, grow, recreate, and organize. Few places have more significance for Champaign-Urbana's African American community than Douglass Center, Douglass Park, and the Champaign Public Library Douglass Branch. These spaces have served generations of residents and are often considered to be the heart of the African American community.



Lawhead School

The Harriet J. Lawhead school, built in 1907, was attended only by Black students in the 1940s. It also offered space to Black servicemen stationed at Chanute Field during WWII. The building was razed in 1990. The space is now used for a parking lot.



Booker T. Washington Elementary School was built to replace Lawhead School and opened in 1952. It originally served Black children and employed an all-Black staff. Odelia Wesley, formerly a first grade teacher at Lawhead, was principal. She remained at the school as principal from 1952–1972. In 1968, Booker T. Washington School was established as a magnet program in partnership with the University of Illinois, as a part of Unit #4's desegregation plans to promote voluntary integration.



Sculpture by Preston Jackson

SKELTON PARK

Honoring the legacy of Champaign County's many prominent and influential African American musicians, Skelton Park in Champaign was transformed as a state-of-the-art park, community plaza, performance space, and play area.

The park features a sculpture by acclaimed African American artist, Preston Jackson, reflects a variety of instruments and genres associated with African American music. Additionally the park features new seating and landscaping, alongside new play equipment and musical instruments.

By the end of 2024, a historical monument will be installed celebrating African American musicians who spent time in Champaign County.

Donors generously bought bricks in the park to honor the local African American community, featured along the walkway.

This project was supported by the Experience Champaign-Urbana Foundation, the Champaign Park District, and the City of Champaign, with generous support from Champaign County and the Rotary Club of Champaign in partnership with the Champaign Rotary Foundation, and with the assistance of a grant provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.





Dunlap Farm

SAVOY

Before it was abolished in the United States, people who escaped from slavery would travel north through a vast network of safe routes known as the Underground Railroad. Along the way, sympathizers, free African Americans, and abolitionists provided safe spaces to rest, provisions, and support known as “depots” or “stations.” At least one of these depots was owned by Mathias Lane Dunlap in Savoy.

Around 1855 or 1856, Mr. Dunlap purchased the northern half of Section 36 of Champaign Township and moved his family to the area. The Dunlaps called their new farm “Rural Home.” By 1858, he established an agricultural nursery, planting an apple orchard and ornamental trees and shrubs along belts of woodland groves. As with his other farm in Cook County, he developed an Underground Railroad depot at his home in Savoy from 1857 or 1858 until the end of the Civil War. Stories have been told of fugitives staying with Dunlap and hiding in the basement or partaking of meals in the kitchen when it was safe. According to lore, Dunlap was cutting and selling lumber from his land to the railroads and moving African Americans north along with the lumber.



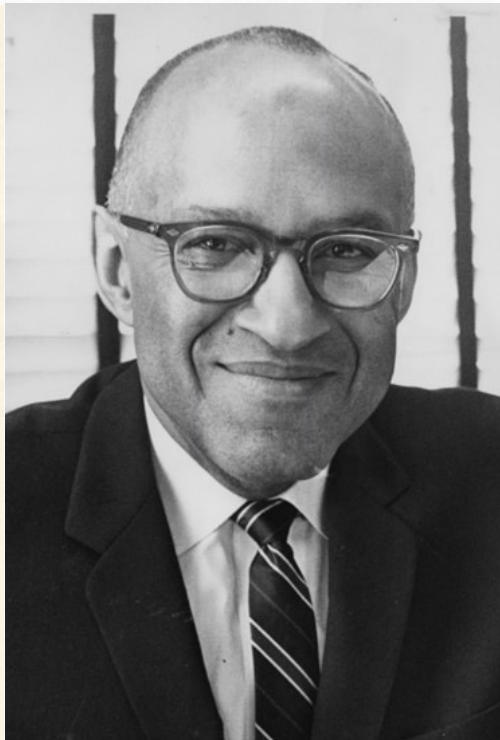
Unkown Soldier

THE CITY OF URBANA

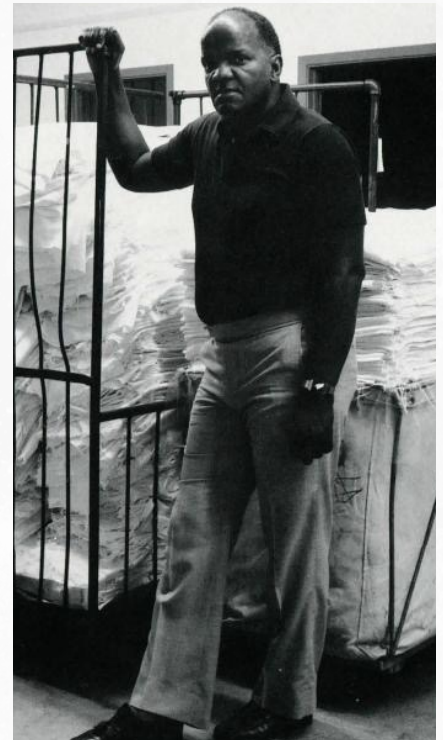
African Americans were able to serve in the Civil War after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. At least nine Black men from Champaign County enlisted into the 29th United States Colored Troops (USCT) at the Urbana Courthouse, with four others enlisting in other “colored regiments” outside of Illinois. Some members of the 29th USCT were witnesses to Union General Gordon Granger’s announcement on Galveston Island, where the enslaved people of Texas were told for the first time of their emancipation two years earlier. The date is now celebrated each year as Juneteenth.

Left: No African American had been elected to a countywide office in Champaign County until 1972, when James R. Burgess Jr. was elected as the Champaign County State’s Attorney. He later served as the US Attorney of the Eastern District of Illinois.

Right: Shelton’s Laundry was one of the most successful Black-owned businesses in Urbana. What started as a way to make extra money during the Great Depression turned into a multi-million dollar enterprise.



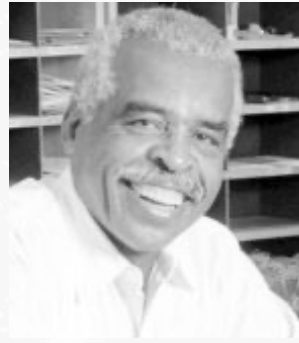
James R. Burgess



Shelton Laundry



Dr. Harry Ellis



Carlos Donaldson



Wiletta Donaldson



Paul Hursey



Shirley Hursey



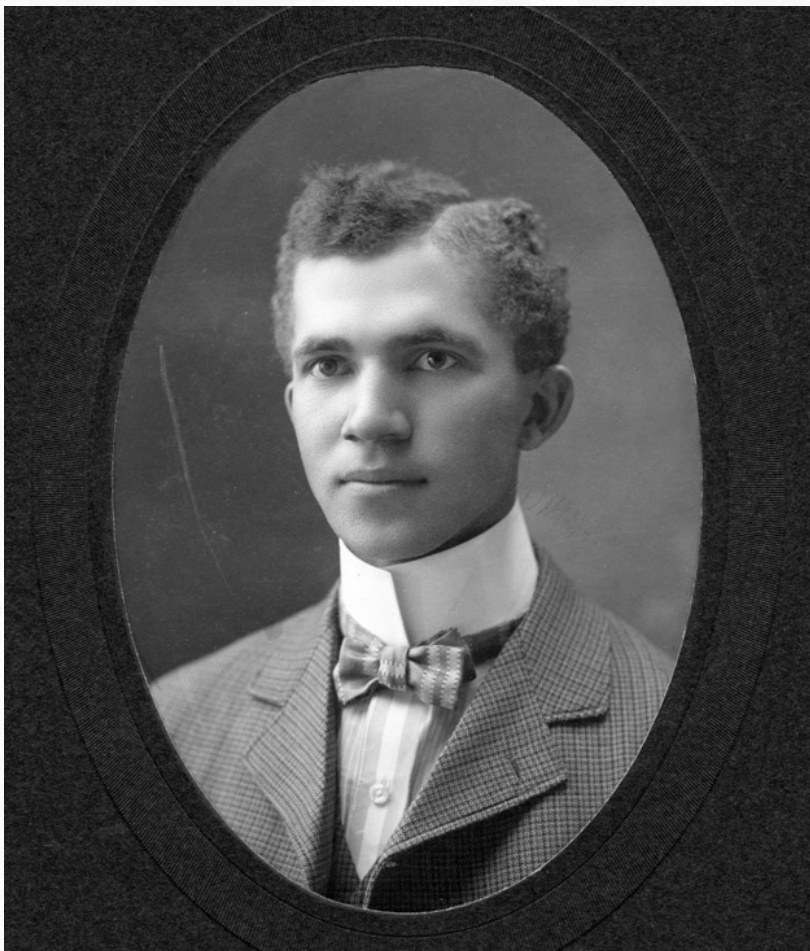
Jo Ann Jackson



Rev. Dr. Evelyn Underwood

The Dr. Ellis Subdivision is the third single-family subdivision created for African Americans in Champaign-Urbana. It was named after Dr. Harry Ellis, the second African American doctor to practice in the twin cities. In the early 1900s, he serviced the healthcare needs of African American residents at a time when they were not always guaranteed service from area hospitals.

In the 1960s, a group of residents in the Ellis Subdivision became aware that African American children at the local Hays School were not receiving an equal education to white students attending other schools. They became known as the Ellis Drive Six, and they successfully petitioned the Urbana School District 116 to become the first school district statewide to institute a desegregation program.



William Walter Smith

THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Since 1900, when William Walter Smith became the first African American to graduate from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, countless African Americans who attended the university have gone on to become important leaders, innovators, artists, and thinkers.



Walter Thomas Bailey

Walter Thomas Bailey graduated in 1904, becoming the first African American with a degree in architectural engineering from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.



Colonel Wolfe School



Chicago's First Church of Deliverance

Left: Bailey helped design the Colonel Wolfe School (403 E. Healey St., Champaign).

Right: Chicago's First Church of Deliverance was Bailey's last major project.



Beverly Lorraine Greene graduated in 1936, becoming the first Black woman to receive a degree in architectural engineering from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is believed to be the first licensed African American architect in the United States.

Greene worked on Chicago Housing Authority buildings and renovated the Unity Funeral Home in Harlem where services were held for Malcolm X and, later, Greene herself.

Beverly Lorraine Greene



Chicago Housing Authority

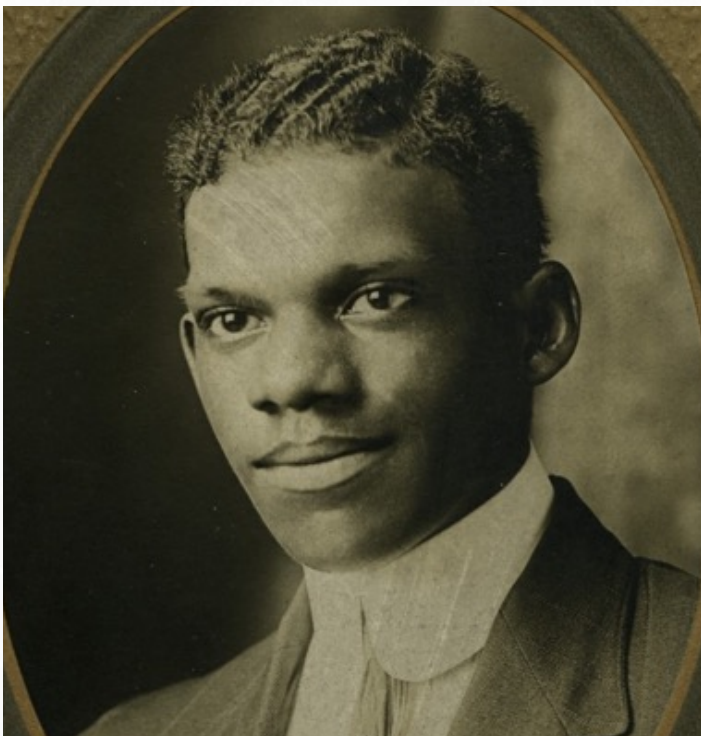


Unity Funeral Home



Top: Bousfield Hall; Right: Maudelle Bousfield

Maudelle Tanner Brown Bousfield became the first African American woman enrolled at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1903. She went on to a successful and influential career as an educator in Chicago, becoming the first African American Dean of Girls in the Chicago Public School system and the first Black principal of a Chicago high school. In 2013, the University of Illinois opened a new residence hall named in her honor.



William Frank Earnest

William Frank Earnest was a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign student and athlete. He enlisted in the National Guard in May 1917 and became the first African American from Champaign County to die in WWI. A column bearing his name stands on the east side of Memorial Stadium, exactly aligned with the 50-yard line of the football field.



Albert R. Lee

Albert R. Lee attended the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1894, and in 1895 he became the second African American hired at the university. He started as a messenger but then became the clerk for the Office of the President. He served under six university Presidents throughout his career. At a time when African Americans were not allowed to live on campus, he took it upon himself to assist them with housing and maneuvering through school, becoming known as the unofficial Dean of African American Students.

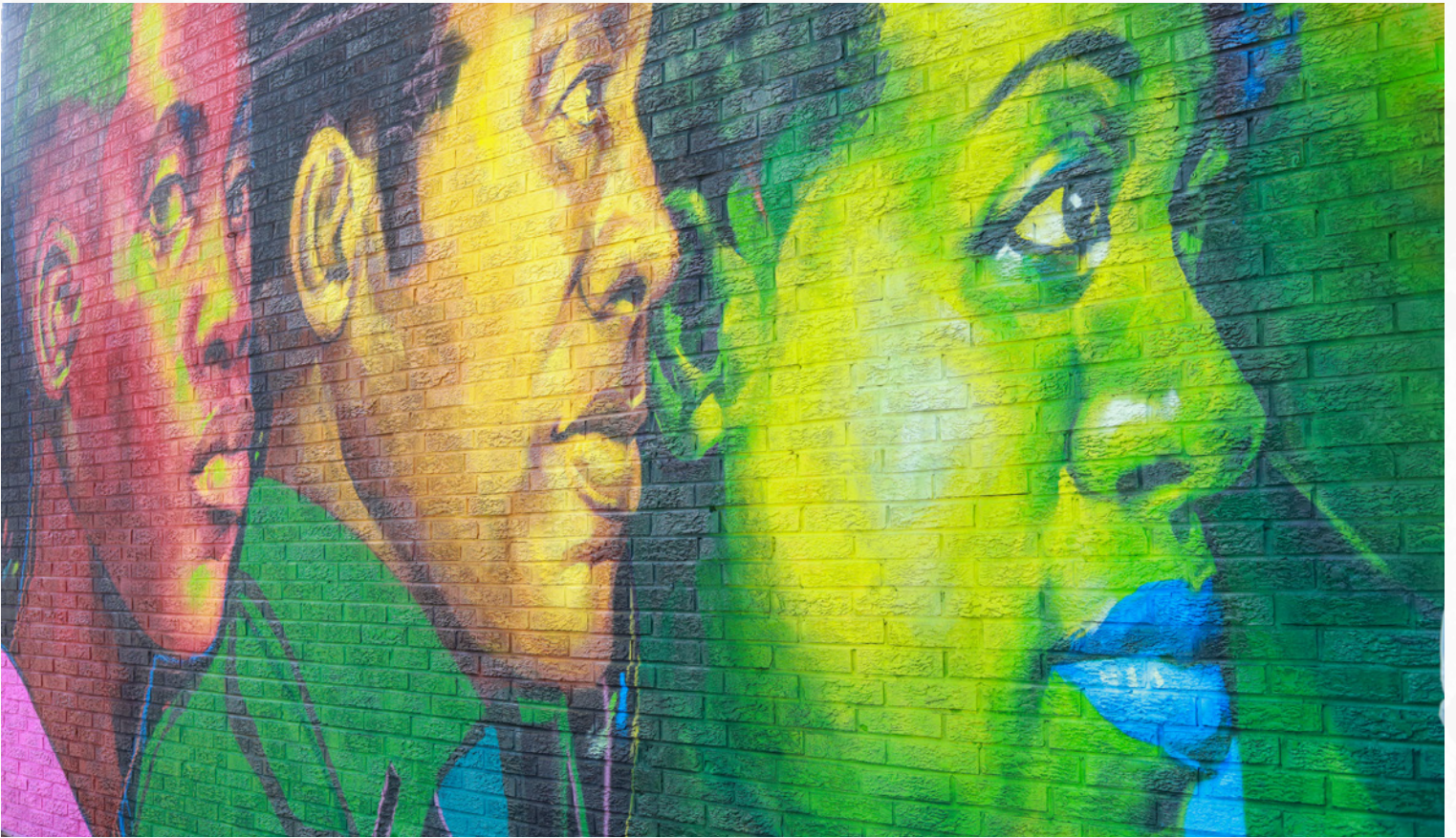
The house where Lee lived still stands at 605 N. Walnut in Champaign. A portrait of Lee, painted by artist Patrick Earl Hammie, stands on the second floor of Ikenberry Commons.



Lee Portrait in Ikenberry Commons



Lee's Former Home in Champaign



EPOCH



Breaking Barriers—African American Firsts



KOFENA



Each One Teach One

MURALS

Four nationally-recognized artists brought their talents to Champaign-Urbana to create murals for the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail.

EPOCH: An Interpretation of the Historical Timeline—Oscar Joyo, Chicago, IL, 1801 W. John St., Champaign (*top left*)

Breaking Barriers: African American Firsts—Jeremy Biggers, Dallas, TX, 212 E. White St., Champaign (*bottom left*)

KOFENA: The Power of Black Women—Georgie Nakima, Charlotte, NC, 511 E. White St., Champaign (*top right*)

Each One Teach One: Educational Excellence—Rob “ProBlak” Gibbs, Boston, MA, 1401 E. Main St. in Urbana (*bottom right*)

SELF-GUIDED TOURS

The African American Heritage Trail is still in development, but we do encourage self-guided tours to visit key locations. Interpretive signs have been installed in these locations:

City of Champaign

Frederick Douglass' Visit (1 Main Plaza)
Illinois Central Railroad (57 E. Main St.)
N. First Street Corridor (204 N. First St.)
Skelton Park (101 E. Washington St.)
Bethel AME Church (401 E. Park St.)
J. C. Penney Boycott & Picketing (15 E. Main St.)

Salem Baptist Church (500 E. Park St.)
Albert R. Lee (605 N. Walnut St.)
Douglass Community Center (512 E. Grove St.)
Champaign Public Library Douglass Branch
(512 E. Grove St.)

City of Urbana

African Americans in the Civil War (101 E. Main St.)
The Ellis Drive Six (1108 Fairview Ave.)
Dr. Ellis Subdivision (Ellis Dr. between Goodwin Ave.
& Wright St.)

African American Elected Officials (101 E.
Main St.)
Black Businesses in Urbana (120 W. Main St.)

Rantoul

99th Pursuit Squadron (John E. Baermann Memorial Parade Ground)

Homer

Early Achievements (107 N. Main St.)
Homer Park (S. Homer Lake Rd., off County Rd. 2700 E.)

Savoy

The Underground Railroad (350 Burwash Ave.)

Campustown

William F. Earnest (1416 S. First St.)
Maudelle Tanner Brown Bousfield (1214 S. First St.)
Architects (608 E. Lorado Taft Dr.)
Project 500 (Inside the Illini Union at 1401 W. Green St.)
Student Demonstrations for Equal Rights (631 E. Green St.)

FEEDBACK

Your feedback is important to us!

This tour guide highlights some of the incredible African American history in Champaign County. As we are always looking to improve, we would appreciate your feedback on what you liked, what you didn't like, and anything else you want us to know.

Please email your comments to info@ccafricanamericanheritage.org.