



STAFF PHOTOS | PAUL STEPHEN

Harold Beatty has contributed hours of labor in helping African American Heritage Foundation director John Battle revive the historic Richter's Building at the corner of North Fourth and Harnett streets (below) for future use as one of three African-American history museums in the region.

Exhibits envisioned

Local group plans to open African-American museum

By **Angela Mack**
Staff Writer

John Battle isn't sure what exhibits Wilmington's African American Heritage Museum will showcase.

Historic 1898 race riot documents.

Personal stories from members of the Wilmington 10.

Taped recordings about what it was like growing up in the Port City's black communities.

Right now, it's still a vision to him and members of the African American Heritage Foundation, the local group whose mission is to bring the museum to life.

In 2004, the group purchased the roughly 6,000-square-foot Richter's Building on North Fourth Street to use for the museum.

"I can just see buses pulling up there," said Battle, the foundation's executive director. "It's gonna hap-



MUSEUMS

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pen. No doubt in my mind it's gonna happen."

About 25 of North Carolina's more than 300 museums are specifically related to black history. Wilmington's black history museum will be the third of its kind in Southeastern North Carolina. Black history museums in Kinston and Jacksonville focus on contributions blacks made in the military.

Officials say the state is rich with black history, but these stories are missing from large

public museums. Obstacles with funding, staffing and community support can make it difficult to get many museums, especially a black history museum, off the ground.

Harry Harrison, executive director of the YMI Cultural Center in Asheville, has seen the rise and fall of some black history museums. He's been in the museum field since 1975 and has worked for four black history museums.

"It's a tough business," he said. "A lot of people have great ideas about what to do and what they'd like to have showcased in their facility. But a lot of times they have not researched. A lot of them live grant to grant, from week to week."

In Jacksonville, the Montford Point Marine Museum at Camp Johnson captures the history of black men who joined the Marine Corps between 1942 and 1949.

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STAR-NEWS | SUNDAY, JULY 2, 2006

About 20,000 black men trained at Montford Point, which during that time was a segregated boot camp.

The Montford Point Marine Association, a national nonprofit veterans organization, turned the camp's mess hall into a museum in 2001. Money to run the museum is raised at a national convention each year, which equates to about \$1,600 each quarter for the museum budget. The government provides no funding.

"Some months are better than others. It's not bad, but it's not where it should be," said Louise Greggs, the museum's assistant director. She and her husband, Finney Greggs, run the museum by themselves.

She said school and church groups and families visit the museum, which is open three days a week. The facility is also used for military training classes and retirement parties.

"It's not a lot of steady traffic all the time," Louise Greggs said. "A lot of days we sit there and nobody comes in. Some days there's someone in there all the time."

For the past two years, the Montford Point association has been working with the University of North Carolina Wilmington and the University of South Carolina to produce a documentary about the Montford Point Marines, including interviews

with local "Montford Pointers." A grant from Congress made the partnership possible, Louise Greggs said. The documentary could be released sometime this fall.

In Wilmington, the African American Heritage Foundation has co-sponsored numerous local events to boost its name recognition and to show the community it's serious about establishing a museum.

Some renovations to its building have been completed. The building is believed to be where the first death in the Nov. 10, 1898, riot occurred. Union Missionary Baptist Church rents the first floor for its thrift store, The Samaritan Shop.

Future curator

A museum curator could be hired by the end of the year, and a capital campaign to raise funding for the museum is slated to begin in 2007. The museum's doors could open by 2010, Battle said.

Shirlene Spicer, curator for community history with the N.C. Museum of History, has worked in the museum field for 15 years and is a Wilmington native.

She said sometimes it's difficult for the community to buy into the museum idea and for people to donate items vital to a museum collection.

"It's going back into the community and explaining what role that item plays in the overall view of the history of that particular area," she said. "It's the school yearbooks, school sweaters, the shoes you wore to the school dance when you were 19. We all are unique and different. To appreciate that we need examples.

"We need evidence of existence of times past, times present and where we're going," Spicer said. "It's going to be the ordinary that helps tell the story."

Harold Beatty, a member of the African-American History Foundation board, said the idea of a museum has been talked about for years but until recently there have not been enough people interested in making it happen.

"We need to have some place to tell the story of the black community in context," he said adding that local libraries and existing museums don't offer the wide array of details the black history museum would provide. "We just want to retell the stories that shape our community."

Some Wilmington residents said they're anticipating the museum's grand opening.

"We're certainly excited about the prospect about having an African-American history museum in New Hanover County," said Connie Nelson, communications and public relations director of the Cape Fear Coast Conven-

tion and Visitors Bureau. "It's certainly an area of history that needs interpretation."

She said many visitors from all walks of life are interested in local black history. Having the museum as an attraction could bring in visitors who wouldn't normally take a trip to Wilmington, she said.

Melton McLaurin, a UNCW history professor emeritus, said there's no question that the Wilmington community needs a black history museum.

"The African-American past needs all the recognition it can get. It's been ignored for so long in this community," he said.

McLaurin does, however, have some concerns about the economics involved with the continuity of the museum. He said it will have to compete with existing facilities such as the Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington Railroad Museum and Children's Museum for funding.

"You're not developing an institution that's a one-stop thing. You've got to have a source of income over the years to staff and operate it. I think that will be the big challenge for the group developing it," he said. "Is there enough money in the Wilmington area to sustain it? Probably. Is there the will to sustain it? That's different."