

Interwoven:

African American History
in Fredericksburg, Virginia

Motorcoach Edition



John DeBaptiste circa 1780

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Fredericksburg Area Museum



Introduction:

African and African-descended people have lived and worked in this region since the 17th century. While subject to enslavement, racism, and segregation, African Americans have built community and made essential contributions to the City of Fredericksburg and the Commonwealth of Virginia. African American people and community are deeply interwoven with Fredericksburg's past, present, and future.

This itinerary was produced in collaboration with the Fredericksburg Area Museum (FAM) and written by Dr. Gaila Sims, Curator of African American History and Special Projects. Exhibitions at FAM feature a multitude of stories related to African American history and culture in the area. "These Old Walls: A Town and It's Stories" includes images from the Fredericksburg sit-ins and dishes from local African American restaurateur, Matthew Buckner's, Seafood Lunch. Take the self-guided tour "Black Businesses and Entrepreneurship in Fredericksburg, 1787 - Present", or schedule a group walking tour with Dr. Gaila Sims.



Begin your tour at the Fredericksburg Visitor Center located at 706 Caroline Street, Fredericksburg, VA 22401.

Stop #1 - City Dock

Between 1728 and 1773, ships carrying enslaved people made over 50 voyages up the Rappahannock River. The slave ship Othello landed at the port of Fredericksburg in April 1771 carrying at least 85 enslaved people from the west coast of Africa. Visit City Dock Park to view the wayside panel marking the Othello's arrival.



Stop #2 - Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site)

Next, stop by Fredericksburg's historic churches to learn more about their unique histories and important community achievements. Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) was established in the early 1800s at 801 Sophia Street. Old Site has been home to several highly influential pastors, including Reverend B.H. Hester, who established the Shiloh Herald, and Reverend Lawrence A. Davies, the first African American elected to Fredericksburg's City Council and later the City's First African American mayor.



Stop #3 - Johnny Johnson Mural

A mural created by local artist, Bill Harris, at the corner of William and Sophia Streets features beloved Fredericksburg artist Johnny P. Johnson. Originally from North Carolina, Johnson arrived in Fredericksburg in 1959 and spent more than 60 years working as an artist, art teacher, activist, and community leader. He became the University of Mary Washington's first black faculty member in 1968. In 2018, Fredericksburg's City Council declared July 7th "Johnny P. Johnson Day."



Stop #4 - French John's Wharf

Like other Fredericksburg residents, African Americans participated in the Revolutionary War, including John DeBaptiste, one of the most prominent free Black entrepreneurs of the late 18th century. Check out the French John's Wharf wayside panel at 1601 Caroline Street to learn more about the DeBaptiste family.

TRAIL TO FREEDOM

French John's Wharf

In 1787, a free Black man named John DeBaptiste rented a portion of this property from Henry Fitzhugh. DeBaptiste established a shipping wharf at the foot of this lane and eventually purchased the land in 1796. He came from the French-speaking island of St. Kitts in the West Indies and this site became known as French John's Wharf. In 1792, at a time when no bridges crossed the Rappahannock, DeBaptiste also secured the rights from the local government to operate the Falmouth Ferry.

During the Revolutionary War, DeBaptiste served aboard a schooner called Drogon, built in Fredericksburg by Fielding Lewis. After the war, the family prospered in local enterprises, but a series of harsh laws severely restricted the rights of free Black people in Virginia. John's descendants moved away. George DeBaptiste, his grandson, moved to Indiana in 1838, and later Detroit, where he was a leader in the Underground Railroad, helping nearly 200 people escape enslavement.

John DeBaptiste's grandson, George DeBaptiste, is depicted in this painting. He was a prominent member of the community and a leader in the struggle for freedom. He is shown in the figure at left with hand on hip.

George DeBaptiste is a young man in an unadorned photograph. He is the first member of the DeBaptiste family to be shown in a portrait, and the only one to be shown in a Revolutionary War uniform.

Born in 1740, John DeBaptiste died in 1804 and was buried in Green Chapel in Fredericksburg. His final resting place is located on the Revolutionary War Wharf.

FXBG

Stop #5 - Dorothy Hart Community Center

Walker-Grant students were involved in one of the earliest Civil Rights events in Fredericksburg's history. In 1950, Walker-Grant seniors requested to hold their graduation ceremony at the Dorothy Hart Community Center, but were denied. Eventually, the city relented, but stipulated that students and attendees could only enter through the side of the building. In response, the students organized a protest, with support from members of Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) In 2022, the City of Fredericksburg recognized the importance of this protest by unveiling a marker commemorating the Walker-Grant High School Class of 1950 outside the Dorothy Hart Community Center.



Stop #6 - Original Auction Block Site

Located at the corner of William and Charles Streets, Fredericksburg's Auction Block was the site of at least 20 sales of enslaved people between 1847 and 1862, involving over 300 enslaved people in total. In 2020, the Auction Block was moved to the Fredericksburg Area Museum, (FAM) and the city installed a commemorative marker at the corner. Visit the FAM to view the exhibition "A Monumental Weight; The Auction Block in Fredericksburg, Virginia". A contemplative, interpretive exhibit is planned for the streetscape surrounding the corner.



Stop #7 - National Bank Building

John M. Washington was born enslaved here in Fredericksburg in 1838 and described his experience of enslavement in and around the area in the narrative he wrote later in life: *Memories of the Past*. Visit the newly installed “Great Exodus from Bondage” State Historical Marker at 900 Princess Anne Street to learn more. Copies of John Washington’s narrative are available at the Fredericksburg Visitor Center. Washington was one of over 10,000 enslaved people who freed themselves by escaping behind Union lines during the Civil War.



Stop #8 - 500 Block of Princess Anne Street

Visit the 500 block of Princess Anne Street in remembrance of Fredericksburg’s thriving mid-century Black business district. Situated between the railroad station on one side, Black homeowners, Shiloh Baptist Church (New Site) and Mt. Zion Baptist Church on the other, and located on what was once the bustling thoroughfare of US Route 1, this area housed several Black businesses included the Paris Inn, the Rappahannock and McGuire Hotels, Sonny Dysons Record Store and Brown’s Funeral Home. While few remnants of this community remain, wayside panels mark the landscape including one commemorating the Green Book. Replica copies of the Green Book are on sale at the Visitor Center. Shiloh Baptist Church (New Site) still stands at 525 Princess Anne Street, established in 1890. The first Black high school, the Fredericksburg Normal and Industrial Institute, began in the church’s basement, and Fredericksburg’s first Black physician, Dr. Urbane Bass, was a member of the church. In 2021, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources unveiled a new marker at 601 Princess Anne Street recognizing it at the first stop of the Freedom Rides.



Stop #9 – Walker-Grant School

In the early 20th century, African American youth attended several segregated schools in the area. In Fredericksburg, the city's first publicly supported Black high school, Walker-Grant School, was built in 1935. The original building on Gunnery Road is now on the National Register of Historic Places.



Additional Tour Option:



“Freedom, A Work in Progress”

Learn more about local Civil Rights efforts by following the Civil Rights Trail. Divided into two parts, the trail includes a walking tour through Fredericksburg's historic downtown district and additional stops on the University of Mary Washington's campus. The trail tour can be self guided. Contact the Fredericksburg Tourism Office for more information or search Civil Rights Trail on FXBG.com. The Fredericksburg Civil Right Trail was official added to the United States Civil Rights Trail in February 2024.

Scan the QR code to view the full version of the Fredericksburg Civil Rights Trail “Freedom, a Work in Progress.”

