For African Americans seeking their history and others seeking the nation’s "other story," these sites can be places of healing and introspection.

By Reginald Owens

Kathie Hamrick stood on the Mississippi River levee and gazed at Tezcuco Plantation, framed by 200-year-old oaks.

"Chills ran from my head to my toe," she said.

That evening in 1991, Hamrick, 37, a native of Gonzales, La., was depressed about the history that surrounded her and neglected African Americans.

"It was as if I could feel the spirit of my ancestors. I could also see them standing in the sugar cane field and standing under those oak trees."

She cried uncontrollably for 15 minutes.

In time, she said, "Peace came through me and I stopped crying." Then, Hamrick thought the other story of the South - about the contributions of African Americans - needed to be told.

Millions of African Americans like Hamrick are searching for their heritage, and that is a major factor fueling the rapidly-growing $30 billion-a-year tourism industry aimed at African Americans.

A non-entity as late as 1985, states, local communities and African-American entrepreneurs see their history and culture as a source of business.

New Orleans is a pioneer in the movement, due in part to the efforts of the Greater New Orleans Black Tourism Network, founded in 1990.

New Orleans' Essence Music Festival, July 14, drew 142,000 to three days and nights of music and seminars.

The movement across the South began with small moments, such as Hamrick's 1991 visit to Tezcuco.

A former IBM telecommunications analyst, Hamrick had reluctantly come home to Gonzales to take care of her dying father. She felt ashamed living among old plantations. She was appalled that, whenever she visited the sites, guides would not mention that African Americans had worked the fields, built the houses, made the furniture.

Finally, it seemed to Hamrick that the only way to address the issue was to start the museum.

She talked to state arts officials, museum directors and historians. Debbie Purifoy, a high school classmate, managed Tezcuco and introduced Hamrick to its owners, Keith and Annette Harland.

The Harlands loved the museum idea.

"They donated the space and said I could do anything I wanted to do with it," Hamrick said.

It took two years to open because Hamrick had to hunt for items through public records and libraries. Local residents have also been major contributors.

"People will leave stuff on my door step," she said, including photographs, documents and artifacts.

More than 4,500 people have visited the museum since it opened last year.

"What is happening is that people are beginning to realize that historic preservation is really becoming important to African Americans," said Joyce Robinson-Hubbech, executive director of the African American Museum Association in Wilberforce, Ohio.

Black people are traveling more and spending more money, especially in the past decade.

"That was something that we obviously could not ignore," said Liz Flournoy, editor of Black Traveler magazine, a publication with a circulation of 26,000.

Alabama is the leading state in the industry.

Alabama published its first African-American heritage guide in 1983. It has become the model for others, said Frances Smiley, who produced the guide for the state Bureau of Tourism and Travel.


Birmingham's biggest tourist attraction is its Civil Rights Institute, a $13 million museum in the city's seven-block Civil Rights District. The institute, which opened in 1992, is across Kelly Ingram Park from the 16th Street Baptist Church where four black girls were killed in a 1963 bombing.

Last year, 19.1 million tourists visited Alabama, up 5.8 percent from 1993. They spent $4.3 billion, up 7.5 percent from 1993.

Promotion of African-American heritage has not just been a "black thing," said Sara Fuller, Birmingham's director of tourism.

"When we look at Alabama's black history, it has become more of a community effort."

For African Americans seeking their history and others seeking the nation's "other story," these sites can be places of healing and introspection.

"We want people to know," Fuller said. "It hasn't been that long ago. It is certainly not something that we want the people of Alabama or the nation to forget about."

Hamrick has similar feelings.

"The museum is a healing place, people have told me. Some people cry and some people laugh. It is the same thing many Jews feel about Auschwitz."