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Magnolia Mound

Beyond the Big House

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Magnolia Mound, one of Louisiana’s premier attractions and a direct link to the state’s early history, will open its newest tour, “Beyond the Big House,” next Sunday, Feb. 7.

In keeping with a national trend, the tour presents life on a Louisiana plantation from 1800 to 1830 from a multicultural viewpoint. On this plantation, located at 2161 Nicholson Drive between downtown Baton Rouge and LSU, life for slave and master was never easy.

“It is very powerful to be walking the same path as the slaves walked,” said Suni Jones, a junior at Southern University, studying English and psychology, who was a member of a recent preview tour.

For Marcus Jones, a Southern junior studying biology and microbiology, it was his first visit to a plantation.

“Just getting an idea of how a slave would live is emotional,” he said as he looked at the newly opened slave cabin. “They were the life force of this plantation, but just imagine their torment and pain. Imagine two families in this little house, with leaking roof, cold weather and darkness.”

Cultural tourism continues to grow as people seek museums and attractions that tell the real story. While theme parks and created “villages” are fun, numerous statistical studies show that, for better or worse, both American and foreign visitors much prefer the real thing.

Magnolia Mound’s newly acquired and restored slave cabin presented an opportunity to create the new tour which focuses on the daily life of African American slaves on the plantation.

Docent Gayle Smith demonstrates 19th century cooking methods in the Magnolia Mound kitchen, located in a separate building behind the main house.

“It wasn’t easy to find accurate information about the days of the profitable plantation, because there are virtually no written records,” Magnolia Mound director Gwen Edwards explained. Wanda Barber and Kay Harrison spent two years researching before writing the tour narrative, which is followed by volunteer docents.

“Charles Vincent, professor of history at Southern, was very helpful and gave us several pointers,” said Harrision.

Armita Bolden, retired educator and president of La Capitale chapter of Links Inc., was one of the community leaders who worked with the Magnolia Mound staff and volunteers in planning the tour. “We took a sample tour, and then sat down and had a discussion about what was needed.” Harrison said she and Barber tried to pin every statement a docent would make to a primary source.

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This single room, above, in the slave cabin at Magnolia Mound was home to slave families of six or more people during plantation days.

The overseer’s house, right, had two rooms and a gallery for the plantation overseer and his family. Above, the Magnolia Mound Plantation House, now a museum, was the home of the plantation owners.
minded the level of his success, and discipline was critical, Pavageau explained.

While the infamous Code Noir prescribed cutting off an ear and branding a slave for first offense, and death for a third offense, many plantations were more lenient, she added. She described a master who made a slave dress in women's clothing for a week in lieu of harsh physical punishment.

"After all, slaves were property," she explained. "They didn't want to lose them."

The lesser punishment upset Marcus Jones because of his humiliation.

"Think of being stripped of his native land, and then to lose his dignity," he responded sadly.

That was better than losing an ear," Sunni Jones said. "This (the tour) makes it more of a reality, to look at slave quarters and see how they actually lived."

After a visit to the overseer's more spacious two-room house, the tour concluded with a stop at the kitchen garden and a survey of the main house from the point of view of a slave's duties there.

"You know a mother had to cook for the slave owner and then come home and cook for her children," said Marcus Jones. "It's unimaginable."

Docent Josie Gray explained that house slaves were responsible for cooking, cleaning and keeping up with such chores as mending and washing clothing. They were also charged with child care, and often slept on a pallet at the door of the room where small children were sleeping so they could care for them if they woke during the night.

Spices, and the china and silver were kept in locked cabinets, and each day the mistress would unlock and count everything to be used. The slaves were responsible for seeing that nothing was broken or lost and would be punished for a broken dish or forgotten spoon.

Standing on the front gallery, where the Duplantiers could relax and watch the Mississippi River flow by before the levee was built, visitors talked about the tour.

Students and others making the tour commented on the lack of detailed factual information about the slaves who lived at Magnolia Mound.

Gray said that some names of slaves have been found in property transfers, but no information about their lives or what happened to them can be found.

Despite a lack of specifics, tour members welcomed the new approach to presenting a total history of the plantation.

"Seeing life behind the big house makes it more important. I wish there was more information one could be given about the life of the slaves, since that was where the real force of the plantation lived, breathed and slept," Sunni Jones said. "Touring a plantation is a spiritual experience. As a free African-American and a college student, I'm walking in the same paths my ancestors walked. This makes me curious to tour more plantations."

She said African-Americans making the tour need to use their imagination and "be in the right mind set. Most black people would have to be very open minded."

In contrast to the harsh life of slaves, Suni Jones plans either to go to law school or pursue graduate degrees in psychology.

"For me, it's limitless what I can do," she said. "But I think it's important to remember.

Marcus Jones, who plans a career in medicine or in neurobiology research, said he was glad he made the tour. He found nothing offensive in the view of slave life.

"It was not offensive, but more emotional. Think of a whole family huddled up in one room, the harshness they endured cutting cane day in and day out. If a person doesn't experience this, they can't truly imagine the whole atmosphere where a slave had to live. You get a new look at the life."

"It gives you a sense of pride that a race of people can endure so much hardship and still come out on top," Bolden said she was encouraged by the tour. "If we continue to tell this section of history it will help us to heal. Let's tell the truth. The upside of that is to recognize the talent we brought from Africa. This plantation was built by a laborer. The tour lets the public, especially school children, get off the written page and see real history."

The tour officially opens Sunday, Feb. 7, from 1 to 5 p.m. with area choirs performing African-American gospel music and storytellers presenting African-American folk tales. Tours will run throughout the afternoon.

Actor O'Neal Isaac will present traditional African-American tales and legends from 2 to 3 p.m. and three choirs will perform gospel music as follows: Shush Babu Church Mass Choir, 3:15 p.m.; Louisiana's Absolute Pitch community youth choir, 4:30 p.m. and Southern University Laboratory High School Experience Choir, 4:30 p.m.

Regular tour fee of $5, $4 for seniors, includes all activities.

The tour will be offered during regular museum hours, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 1-4 p.m. Sunday.