A jazzy clarinet tune was playing over the intercom of a tour van filled with chatting sightseers when part of Southern University's history stepped aboard.

Mamie Alice Morrison is the oldest person to ever get a degree from the university. Her appearance aboard the van and the stories she told took the half-dozen tourists by surprise.

Morrison said she literally taught herself during her days as a cleaning lady at Southern. While tending to classrooms, she also copied notes from chalkboards into her notebook. Eventually, she joined the student body. She received her bachelor's degree in 1993 at the age of 86.

"I enjoy knowing I've got it. So many people are walking around with their lights out," Morrison told the tourists.

She then insisted they try a slice of pound cake she'd brought on board.

Tour guides Emma Thomas Pitts and Charles L. Liddell regularly include local black figures on their tour packages.

"Our older people are our historians," said Pitts, president of the Louisiana African American Odyssey Inc., a touring company specializing in African-American history throughout Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Natchitoches.

The Rev. Burnell James Offlee stepped aboard the tour bus to talk about his one-man cab service.

"I've got over half a million miles on this '57 Chevy cab," he told the group.

Offlee earned a reputation as the "singing and preaching cabdriver" through the years always toting his trademark gold cowboy hat.

"I was the first man in Scotlandville to run a cab with insurance, the first with a meter and the first with a car telephone," he said proudly.

He concluded his conversation with a smile and a wave.

"Through our service, we give older people a chance to tell a story because it's a rarity and sometimes never done," said Pitts, who also is an education professor at Southern.

"We feel that African-Americans and others don't know the magnitude of black history and African landmarks," she said.

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Rev. Burnell James Offlee steps aboard a touring van to talk about his one-man cab service that he's been operating for about 47 years out of his '57 Chevy. He's gained a reputation as the singing and preaching cabdriver. From left, Emma Thomas Pitts, president of Louisiana African Odyssey and far right, Charles L. Liddell listen in.
Two sightseers on a tour of the LSU Rural Life Museum observe the varying building styles used in pre-Civil War slave cabins. Most cabins were made of wood or mud and moss, but this one is made mostly of brick. At least four to five slaves would occupy a one-room cabin.

**Tours**

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Each person on the tour received a photocopy of a historical scrapbook containing slave stories, was assigned to read about one of the slaves and then relate the slave’s experiences to the others.

“I’d taken an earlier tour and the group failed to talk about the African American experience and so we felt we were qualified to render that service,” said Liddell, a consultant specializing in public policy and procedures.

The tour stopped at a number of predominantly black neighborhoods in the city, including the Scotlandville, Scenic Highway, Harding Boulevard and the East Boulevard-Thomas H. Delpit Boulevard areas.

Tourists learned that Scotlandville was once called Scott’s Bluff after a local plantation and that the Southern Heights subdivision along Harding Boulevard is the area’s oldest subdivision.

A trip to the LSU Rural Life Museum gave several of the tourists a sense of understanding about the earliest contributions blacks made to Louisiana.

“Most of what we’ll be talking about today is somewhat sensitive. But you’ve got to realize this is still history,” Liddell, vice president of the touring company, told the tourists.

Liddell led the tourists to a circular clearing of authentic slave cabins, a schoolhouse, a blacksmith’s shop, a small church and a store.

“On some plantations, slaves were given chips or pennies or coins. Some did have purchasing power,” he said.

Plantation owners’ mistresses or wives tended to the needs of slaves who were ill. The one-room slave cabins had dirt floors, a fireplace and a horse-shoe hanging above the cabins’ main entrance for good luck, Liddell said.

Slaves also ground their own meal to feed themselves for lunch while tending to the fields they worked in, he said.

A ranking system was used to place some slaves in bigger cabins, depending on their worth to the slave master, Liddell said.

Cauldrons outside each cabin were used to store water for cooking and washing. Slave masters sometimes used the cauldrons for cruel purposes; they would boil the water and scald disobedient slaves, he said.

Church was perhaps the most anticipated event of the week, Pitts said.

“The black preacher was the most dominant figure in the community. If church started at 11 a.m. and wasn’t over until 5 p.m., they (members) would stay there until 5 p.m.,” he said.

“Baptist service was a highly spirited one where the people could let out their frustrations — they could come and shout and fall out,” Pitts said.

By the time the Civil War broke out, 21,000 Louisianaans owned ‘slaves and some owned as many as 300, Pitts said.

Barry Stewart, a Baton Rouge native and one of the tourists, was taken aback when he stood inside one of the slave cabins.

“Three people — two sheriff’s deputies and three Muslims — were killed and 31 people were injured. ‘I remember the riots. I was in school in the fifth grade. My dad lost a couple of days of work because of that,’ said Stewart, as the bus pulled away from the site.

The tour continued to Southern, where Pitts and Liddell swapped stories about historic sites and incidents there.

The three-hour tour ended at noon, but the history learned wouldn’t end.

“This is the first time I’ve been given a tour by African Americans and it enhances it. This is the first time I’ve gotten this much detail and history,” said Beverly Aaron, a tourist.

Tours must consist of a minimum of six people for a van or 35 people for a motorcoach. For more information, call 338-6309 or (800) 385-6309.

Other touring companies listed by the Baton Rouge Area Convention and Visitors Bureau offering tours of the general Baton Rouge area include:

- Dixieland Tours accepts groups of 30 or more people for a two-hour local customized tour. For more information, call 272-8075.
- Hotard Coaches offers group city tours, call 273-0080.
- Tiger Taxi offers small tours of various local sites, the LSU campus and history of the various sites, including the river, call 521-9199.