

Black History Month - Explore Missouri's Rich Heritage

Written by Tom Uhlenbrock

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Jefferson City, Mo. — The [Duck Room](#) is a basement nightclub at [Blueberry Hill](#) restaurant in the Delmar Loop area of St. Louis. But one night each month, it becomes a living history museum with a performance by rock music pioneer Chuck Berry.

“He’s by far our most famous citizen,” says Joe Edwards, owner of the restaurant and music club that anchors the six-block entertainment and shopping district. “He was the first poet laureate of rock ‘n’ roll. Not only did he write his own songs, but he was a heckuva guitar player. Still is.”

February marks Black History Month, and Missouri has its share of important figures, from Dred Scott and George Washington Carver to jazz and ragtime musicians and Negro League baseball players. Their museums create an interesting itinerary for observing the special month. But you might also consider a stop at the Duck Room.

At age 86, Berry still performs his signature hits, and does the impromptu duck walk across the stage. His daughter, Ingrid, and son, Charles Berry Jr., perform in the band and help out when Dad sometimes misses a lick. The adoring audience doesn’t mind, greeting those senior moments with shouts of “We love you Chuck!”

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While music critics disagree on the first rock 'n' roll record, Berry gets unanimous credit for being the entertainer who took the music worldwide, starting with "Maybellene," his first single released in 1955. Berry was the first inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, and recently received its American Music Masters Award at a tribute concert.

"He not only changed music, he helped change culture," said Edwards, Berry's long-time friend and part-time manager. "His music reached across the dividing line between blacks and whites. It also helped bring down the Iron Curtain. The Hungarian ambassador visited Blueberry Hill and said eastern and western Europeans listened to Chuck on their transistor radios. It did more to bring them together than any military threat."

Scientist Carl Sagan paid homage to Berry in the late 1970s, when he chose the recorded sounds that would be aboard the Voyager space probes headed outside the solar system. "He included samplings of some of the best of what was on Earth," Edwards said. "There were sounds of Brazilian jungles, some classical music and, for the 20th century, it was 'Johnny B. Goode' by Chuck Berry."

Admission to the Berry concerts at Blueberry Hill is \$35. Visit BlueberryHill.com for a schedule.

While a trip to Blueberry Hill to see Chuck Berry represents a pop-culture focused experience, there are plenty of sites in Missouri for more traditional exploration during Black History month (and year-round, for that matter). Here's a quick sampling:

George Washington Carver National Monument, in Diamond: Tucked away in the southwest corner of the state, the [national monument](#)

is at the site of the Moses Carver farm, where George Washington Carver was born to a slave girl in 18

64. As an infant, he and his mother were kidnapped by Civil War guerillas. George was returned; his mother was never found.

The monument includes a state-of-the-art visitors center that tells the inspirational story of Carver's arduous struggle to rise from his humble beginnings to become an artist, scientist, educator and humanitarian. His research showed that rotating crops of peanuts and soybeans with cotton could revive Southern soil. To encourage the practice, he developed more than 300 uses for peanuts.

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The 240-acre site includes a short walk through woods near a spring-fed stream where young George discovered his love for botany. Later, George wrote of the experience: "Day after day, I spent in the woods alone in order to collect my floral beauties and put them in my little garden I had hidden in the brush not far from the house, as it was considered foolishness in that neighborhood to waste time on flowers."

George Washington Carver National Monument is the first national monument to mark the birthplace of anyone other than a U.S. president, and the first to honor an African American. For details, visit www.nps.gov/gwca.

Battle of Island Mound State Historic Site, near Butler: Dedicated in October 2012, the plot of rolling prairie near the Kansas border is Missouri's newest state historic site. It honors the African-American soldiers who fought a small but important Civil War battle.

The 240 soldiers, many of them escaped slaves, were members of the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry. In October 1862, they won a battle against a larger force of Confederate guerillas, marking the first time black troops were used in Civil War combat.

At the time, there was a national discussion about whether black soldiers would fight against whites. This skirmish, known as the Battle of Island Mound, answered that question, and made headlines as far away as New York City.

A white officer assigned to the unit wrote: "We have demonstrated that the Negro is anxious to serve his country, himself and race."

The state historic site, south of Butler, has a circular gravel path that leads around some 40 acres of reclaimed prairie. Interpretative panels along the way explain what happened, and the significance of those events. Visit MoStateParks.com for more information.

The 18th and Vine Historic District, in Kansas City: A magical musical trip across Missouri

ri could start at the Duck Room, in St. Louis, and end at the Blue Room, in Kansas City.

The 18th and Vine area was the center for black culture and life in Kansas City from the late 1800s to the 1960s. The Negro National League was founded near the district in 1920.

The [Negro Leagues Baseball Museum](#) opened in the early 1990s, and the complex was expanded in 1997 with the addition of the [American Jazz Museum](#), which showcases the city's musical heritage. The two first-class museums contain hundreds of photographs, artifacts and film exhibits that tell their stories.



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