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Once a Hub of Strife, Boston Woos Black Tourists



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

The black experience in Boston has many faces, from the monument honoring the 54th Massachusetts Regiment of Civil War fame to a performance of "Black Nativity" at the Tremont Temple.

By JOSHUA KURLANTZICK
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ON a warm November weekend morning, some 35 people from Massachusetts, New York, Missouri and Pennsylvania pack the benches of a trolley rolling through Roxbury, a historically black neighborhood in Boston. For two hours they listen as the tour guide explains how residents are building on vacant lots created when the neighborhood disintegrated in the 1960s.

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The trolley, part of a tour organized by the local group Discover Roxbury, passes restored 19th-century mansions and red-brick row houses, and the tourists audibly "aah" with delight. When the tour finishes, the group gathers for lunch, where James Guilford Jr., a 95-year-old lifelong resident of Roxbury, still dapper in a bolo tie and gold earring, retells stories of vibrant local life in the 1930s and '40s.

"There were so many black barbershops here, so much business," said Mr. Guilford, a former barber. "I opened,

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Visitors line up for “Black Nativity,” above, and Theresa-India Young comments on her art at the Paino Factory, top.



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

The Colonial-era Dillaway-Thomas House, top, and the 40-year-old Nubian Notions store reflect Roxbury’s varied history, above.

and I couldn’t keep out the customers.”

Ten years ago, it would have been tough to find a tour of Roxbury or any other black neighborhood in Boston. For many black travelers, Boston meant not only John Adams and Paul Revere but also Ted Landsmark, the Boston businessman assaulted by a group of whites in 1976, a time of fierce local conflict over school integration. Someone in the crowd struck Mr. Landsmark with an American flag, a scene captured in a famous news photograph that distilled Boston’s image as a place hostile to black Americans.

“There was a racial overtone in the city, and people didn’t necessarily want to come,” said Carole Copeland Thomas, head of the multicultural committee of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Darnell Williams, president and chief executive of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, said that in the past, when he would suggest to black people that they visit Boston, “They’d say: ‘Do I want to come here? Are you out of your mind?’ ”

Today, Boston is trying to change its image among black Americans. By supporting programs and attractions like the Roxbury trolley tour and a number of other initiatives, the Convention and Visitors Bureau hopes to draw more black travelers to a city that the longtime Boston Celtics basketball star Bill Russell once called “a flea market of racism.”

“The city of Boston and its leaders have to recognize the fact that Boston has a reputation of not being that welcoming for minorities, but we’ve made extraordinary gains,” said Julie Burns, director of arts, tours and special events in the office of Mayor Thomas M. Menino.

Larry Meehan, vice president of the convention and visitors bureau, said: “Boston has had a perception problem for years. I believe it’s going to change. The African Meeting House, the 40th birthday of the Black Heritage Trail and other events we are promoting for 2007 will have a tremendous appeal.” Mr. Meehan also cited the recent election of Deval L. Patrick, who will become Massachusetts’s first black governor, as having a positive impact on the city’s image.

BEYOND the social and cultural need to repair Boston’s reputation among black Americans, there is also a financial incentive. According to a 2003 study by the Travel Industry Association of America, a national trade group, travel by blacks in the United States is growing twice as fast as travel by Americans over all. And Target Market News, a publication that specializes in the black consumer market, estimates that blacks in the United States annually spend around \$5 billion on leisure travel.

Cities like Boston that court black travelers will reap the benefits, said Andy Ingraham, president of the National Association of Black Hotel Owners. “African-Americans’ share of the industry is big enough that you have to pay attention,” he said.

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In the past, according to Angela DaSilva, founder of the National Black Tourism Network, a travel company, “the only way that we could get to learn about black culture was to ask the black doorman or the black maid. The visitor bureaus didn’t care.”

But over the last decade, with the recognition of the social and commercial importance of black travel, [Dallas](#), Milwaukee, [Philadelphia](#) and other cities have started campaigns to promote themselves to black tourists. Black-themed museums have opened in several cities, with new ones soon to come, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture in [Washington](#) and a United States National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, Va.

Boston’s effort to draw black travelers is among the biggest undertaken by any city in the country. The city, where Crispus Attucks died in the Boston Massacre and where Frederick Douglass lectured, already boasts plenty of important black historical sites, including the Museum of Afro-American History, a memorial to a famous black regiment from the Civil War and a meetinghouse where prominent abolitionists plotted strategy.

Yet, despite the presence of so many black heritage sites, other hurdles to attracting black tourism have proved tough to overcome. One is the relative scarcity of some commonplace aspects of black life.

“The biggest thing that Boston lacked, particularly in terms of African-American travelers, is nightclubs,” said Candelaria Silva, director of the ACT Roxbury Consortium, a group that promotes art and culture. “I send out an e-mail to people coming here about where to get soul food.”

The portion of Boston’s population identified as black is 25 percent, a small segment compared with some other major cities.

This works against Boston, according to Thomas Dorsey, publisher of [SoulOfAmerica.com](#), a leading black travel Web site. “African-Americans don’t feel comfortable in Boston, especially when they see how white the tourist areas are,” he said.

Black travelers prefer cities with sizable black populations and a strong black cultural presence, he added. The Travel Industry Association of America study found that [Atlanta](#), more than 60 percent black, was the most popular city among black tourists.

“The black culture, the black night life, the black colleges are all in Atlanta,” Ms. DaSilva said. “Atlanta says, ‘We’re black anyway, and here’s where all your black tourist dollars are going.’ It’s not like some kind of trickle-down thing in Atlanta.”

The multicultural committee of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau has created a guide to ethnic neighborhoods, film festivals and tours, and it is developing programs to educate local concierges and tour guides about Boston’s black history and attractions. The Massachusetts Cultural Council, meanwhile, has provided financing to groups like ACT.

The Convention and Visitors Bureau has recently also attracted the conventions of prominent black organizations, including the National Association of Black Accountants and the East Coast wing of Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority.

Ms. Burns, of the mayor’s office, also cited Boston’s staging of the 2004 Democratic National Convention as key to rehabilitating its image. Black business leaders and state legislators at the convention got the word out in an effort to draw convention business from black organizations.

THEY were just trying to acknowledge the fact that Boston did have busing — we didn't try to hide our past," she said. Their message, Ms. Burns said, was, "Despite what you think, why don't you come here and see what's changed?"

But much of Boston's effort is aimed at the grassroots level. "In terms of making tourism grow for African-Americans, it's really the nitty-gritty day-to-day work of who guides the tours, who runs the tours," Ms. Silva said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ingraham, president of the black hotel owners group, said Boston has been aggressively encouraging black hotel ownership, including working with one of the association's board members to develop a hotel with majority black ownership.

"They'll reap the benefits of it in people coming to those hotels," Mr. Ingraham said. "African-Americans are becoming more discriminating in where they stay."

To address the question of entertainment, young black Bostonians have begun Web sites and listservs to popularize nightclubs and restaurants. One of the best-known sites, Downtimeonline.net, lists 30 to 50 events each week.

Neighborhoods like Roxbury now get visitor traffic: Discover Roxbury events sell out, and the area has started the Roxbury Film Festival, which features films focusing on people of color, as well as actors' workshops and other events.

These efforts might also help change Boston's minorities' perception of the city. One third, according to a Harvard study, say they have at least occasionally felt out of place or unwelcome at a local arena or museum because of their race.

But many black Bostonians don't necessarily feel that way. "I really think Boston gets a bum rap," said Darius McCroey, the founder of Downtimeonline. "I won't say there are no racial issues, but I don't think it's so different from other cities."

Younger travelers, perhaps less aware of Boston's contentious history, also seem more comfortable going to the city. "If you lived through the busing in the 1970s, that's going to be a benchmark," said Ms. Thomas, of the convention and visitors bureau multicultural committee. "But if you're younger, that won't be your benchmark."

And Ted Landsmark, the man in that famous photograph from the time of strife over busing students to achieve school integration? He still lives in Boston and has risen into the city's elite. Today he is chief executive of the Boston Architectural College, a prominent design institution.

"Busing? That was 30 years ago," he said, adding that the election of Mr. Patrick was changing outsiders' perceptions. "They hadn't realized that Boston had changed that much. People will realize that Boston is not the city it was in the 1970s."

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