

Walking Tour Review

Ricki Stevenson's Black Paris Tours, July 4, 2015, Paris, France. Creator: RICKI STEVENSON. www.blackparistour.com.

The Black Paris Tour, offered six days a week most of the year, introduces participants to sites related to key events in the history of the Franco-Black diaspora across multiple centuries, and to the US African American experience in the twentieth century. On foot and by bus, our group travelled through the City of Light as our guide offered an entertaining and informative narrative about some well-known and some largely forgotten individuals associated with these sites, and about noteworthy events in the history of Black Paris. In operation since 1998, Black Paris Tours maintains a helpful website and Facebook page that in addition to their tours and services information includes a general tour outline, historically themed videos, and other resources.

Lead guide and CEO of Black Paris Tours, Ricki Stevenson, steered our tour. An Oakland, California native, Stevenson's dream of living in Paris was inspired by her childhood experience of seeing dancer Josephine Baker perform. A former US television news anchor and reporter, talk show host, and international travel correspondent who earned a master's degree in history with an emphasis on African and African American History from Stanford University, Stevenson built on this foundation to launch her tour company and career as a public historian in 1998. Stevenson and her staff hope the tour sites offer visitors an introduction to the layers of African and African American history in Paris, along with an orientation to the city. The soldiers, historians, musicians, writers, artists, celebrities, and political exiles that spent time at these varied public and private spaces lend significance to these sites, with various monuments and plaques marking their accomplishments. Throughout the city, Stevenson enlivened the stories of historical individuals and events with facts and information on a few contemporary Black individuals in France, and diaspora museums, music venues, and restaurants worth visiting.

To begin the tour, participants met at a charming cafe near the Arc de Triomphe at the western end of the Champs-Élysées. Our guide gave brief histories of the founding and development of the city of Paris (including Haussmann's renovation of the city), French slavery, and French colonial-empire relations. The guide provided an overview of the waves of African American visitors and more permanent ex-patriots that began arriving in Paris in the early nineteenth century. Under various circumstances, many free and some enslaved people of color arrived in Paris from the French American colonies during the late 1700s and early 1800s, both before and after the US Louisiana Purchase in 1803.



The author and the Black Paris tour group in front of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. This nineteenth-century monument is considered the key point of the historic axis to view a sequence of monuments and grand thoroughfares on a route stretching from the Louvre Palace to the outskirts of Paris. (Photo courtesy of Ricki Stevenson.)

A particularly memorable story from the tour is that of Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-George (1745–1799), a major early contributor to the tradition of European classical music, as well as a great swordsman, fashion trendsetter, abolitionist, and civil rights activist. We learned that among the names of military figures engraved on the inside of the Arc de Triomphe, a monument built to honor those who fought for France, is that of General



Alexandre Dumas, père (1802–1870) Monument at Place du General Catroux. Author of *The Three Musketeers* and the *Count of Monte Cristo*, Dumas, père was one of the most prolific and popular French authors in the 1800s. Two other statues on the square honor his father, General Thomas-Alexandre Dumas (1762–1806), and his son, Alexandre Dumas, fils (1824–1895). The Haitian Embassy overlooks the three monuments. (Photo courtesy of author.)

Thomas-Alexandre Dumas (1762–1806). Born in Saint-Domingue, Haiti, the son of a white French lesser nobleman and a Black enslaved woman, Alex Dumas (as he preferred to be called), was one of the most victorious French generals during his era. General Dumas was one of the highest-ranking mulatto men ever in a European army, who led men of white and Black French ancestry before he fell out of favor with Napoléon Bonaparte.

General Dumas is probably best known today for fathering the famous French writer Alexandre Dumas, père (1802–1870) who penned *The Three*



Obama Fashion Hair/Salon de Beaute Afro near le marché Dejean, an open air market in the Château Rouge neighborhood known as Little Africa. Note the signage in French and English, along with the image painted on the window of US President Barrack Hussan Obama as well as the US flag and the colors of both the US and French flags to advertise a beauty and hair salon for Black patrons. (Photo courtesy of author.)

Musketeers (1844), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1845), and many other works that earned great success with the general public. Dumas, père, fathered Alexandre Dumas, fils (1824–1895), another noted French author and dramatist of such works as *Camille* (1853) upon which Giuseppe Verdi based his opera *La Traviata* (1853). Black Paris Tours includes a visit to the Place du General Catroux, where the three generations of the Dumas family are commemorated.

At the start of our day's journey, Stevenson gave participants a sheet of paper entitled "The Black Paris Tours Quiz," which listed about one hundred African Americans who had either visited or lived in Paris. During the tour itself, Stevenson showed pictures of some on the list while giving brief accounts of their Paris exploits and historical contributions, at such sites as Parc de Monceau (8th arrondissement) and The Gran Hotel at Opera Garnier (9th arrondissement). We heard stories about a wide range of sites, including the African Obelisk taken from Egypt by Napoléon Bonaparte at Place Concorde, the oldest monument in Paris, and St. Augustine Catholic Church, named for the African-born theologian and philosopher. Stevenson discussed such notable figures as Sally Hemmings, Norbert Rillieux, William Wells Brown, Fredrick Douglass, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Selma Burke, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes, Nat King Cole, Josephine Baker, Marshall Mayor Taylor, James Emanuel, Chet Baker, Mary McCloud Bethune, and James Baldwin, to name a few. We learned about Black soldiers from the United States, such as the World War I's "Harlem Hellfighters," who fought for France, and those in World War II who liberated France from the Nazis. Our guide also offered a few observations about contemporary racial challenges in France and the efforts to combat them by such politicians as Christiane Taubira, the current Minister of Justice (2012–present), and a Black woman.

The tour ended in the Goutte d'Or/Château Rouge area known as Little Africa (18th arrondissement), a vibrant multicultural neighborhood made up mostly of working class residents who trace their heritage to North and sub-Saharan Africa. We had a delicious, late lunch of West African cuisine from Senegal and Mali, and walked about the colorful le marché Dejean (the open air market on Dejean Street) and the African goods shops.

I have taken cultural tours in past visits to Paris, but, to my surprise and pleasure, this was the first one where I learned of the many contributions of the Black Diaspora to French and world history in the City of Light. The tour guide revealed Paris as the multicultural city it was and continues to be. She provided entrée into the Black Diaspora experience of France's former empire, stretching across the Americas and into Africa, perhaps prompting additional exploration by tour participants. In an engaging manner with limited critical analysis discourse, the strength, and sometimes weakness, of the tour for a generalist audience was the guide's broad brush of the often-overlooked layered heritage of Paris.

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