

Heritage Trail Loops Open Amidst MLK50 Preparations

By Bill Dries

As city crews were moving the Mountaintop sculpture into place at the new MLK Reflection Park and the nearby I Am A Man Plaza was getting one last patch of cement Friday, March 30, a tour bus came through as preparations were being made for the city's MLK50 observances.

The tour bus, with city and county dignitaries and media, amounted to a rolling opening of Memphis Heritage Trail.

[Elaine Turner](#), owner of Heritage Tours, provided commentary about some of the civil rights and entertainment-themed sites in the area around Beale Street and south of it.

And [Felicia Harris](#), the city Housing and Community Development Division project manager for the heritage trail, guided those on the bus through the interactive app for the trail.

"We have events, locations and people and we have a map," she said. "Throughout the app we have hundreds and thousands of photos and videos. As you go through all of the app you will notice that when you get to some places you will have a video. Sometimes you will just have a picture with text."

The app can be viewed anywhere. There are also beacons that notify digital devices within 200 feet of a historic site and offer varying levels of information.

There are four loops of the trail, each dealing with a specific area of history in the area of Beale Street to south of FedExForum and into South Memphis: commerce, financial, civil rights and entertainment. The civil rights and entertainment loops made their debut Thursday.

There are also conventional markers at the historic sites that include instructions on the app and other ways of diving deeper into the history of a site.

"On the signage you will have information about the site that you are at, the map giving indications of what other cultural assets are near," said Harris, who also pointed out a telephone number on the markers "Not everyone has a smartphone. Not everyone knows how to download an app and all of that. ... They can just dial a telephone number and listen to the audio recording. We have a QR code and other information that will be added shortly."



Memphis Heritage Trail project manager Felicia Harris shows one of the beacons used to signal digital devices that are part of the app for the set of historic sites that had its soft opening last week amidst preparations for MLK50 observances this week in Memphis.
(Daily News/Bill Dries)

A Memphis Heritage Trail marker is outside the Universal Life Insurance building on the northeast corner of Danny Thomas Boulevard and Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue](#), near a conventional historical marker.

As the bus tour stopped at the corner, work crews were inside and outside the Egyptian-style building that was the early to mid-20th century heart of black business enterprises in the racially segregated city.

The renovated building will be the new home of city government's minority business efforts as well as the headquarters of Self+Tucker Architects. A dedication ceremony is Tuesday morning, April 3.

"My hope is that it is really used as a way to improve the economy of Memphis," said [Paul Young](#), director of the city's division of Housing and Community Development. "It's also embracing who we are, the things that have happened, good and bad, and using it as a way where the world is able to learn from us. The app is going to help us tell that story. But it's not just the app. It's also the buildings. It's the people. We want people to come to this city and experience it."

Young said Memphis Heritage Trail is also an integral part of South City – the mixed-use, mixed-income public and private development of a large swath of South Memphis that includes the city's last two large public housing developments. Cleaborn Homes has already made the transition to Cleaborn Pointe at Heritage Landing. The neighboring Foote Homes complex is being demolished for another phase of South City.

"There's no more investing in large projects in a silo," Young said. "It's how can each project that we invest in compliment each other and create a bigger and better story."