



## A JOURNEY THROUGH THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY OF HARRISONBURG

Harrisonburg's African American community has a long and rich history. The contributions of African Americans can be seen all over Harrisonburg, from the Lucy Simms Center to The 150 Franklin Street Gallery, a multicultural art gallery. Harrisonburg is also home to The Furious Flower Poetry Center, the first academic center in the United States devoted to the preservation and promotion of the work of Black poets. The center hosts readings and performances by outstanding Black poets at all stages of their careers. Check out their website for readings or events during your visit (<https://www.jmu.edu/furiousflower/readings/index.shtml>). Come to Harrisonburg and discover this important part of both our history and our daily life.

### Day One

Start your tour at the [Hardesty Higgins House Visitor Center](#) to gather maps and information. Here you can visit the Civil War Orientation Center to learn more about the history and experiences of the people of this Mennonite area during the civil war. Union generals were hosted by the town's first mayor in this house. You can tour the Valley Turnpike Museum and learn more about the building of Rt. 11, starting in 1834. Then gather brochures and consult the Travel Specialists in the Visitor Center for more sites that might interest you.

A short walk down the street, step into The [150 Franklin Street Gallery](#). A multicultural art gallery featuring exhibits from local painters and photographers as well as works by nationally known artists, 150 Franklin Street is a quiet haven for the arts. On permanent display is the Furious Flower Quilt, a piece honoring African American poets. This massive piece alone is worth a trip for its colorful and symbol-filled depiction of some of the most prominent writers in American literature. The Gallery is open Wednesday 10-5, Thursday and Friday 5 - 8pm, Saturday 10 - 2 and by appointment. (540-435-2791)

Before you venture into the Northeast neighborhood for more rich history, stop by the Lucy Simms Mural on the west side of the Elizabeth Street Parking Deck in downtown Harrisonburg. This ground-breaking educator's name also adorns the Lucy Simms Continuing Education Center which you will visit later in your trip. You can watch the mural's creation [here](#).

Across the street from the mural you can pick up lunch at the [Friendly City Food Co-op](#) for a picnic in park, or eat in the co-op and chat with the locals.

There are many sites in town that offer insight into the history of African American people in Harrisonburg. Court Square once served as the site of slave auctions and the punishment of enslaved peoples.

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Several centers offer historical information on the foundation of communities on the part of freed slaves after the Civil War. Work has begun on a [Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Center](#) to be located in the Newtown area of Harrisonburg (425 Hill St.). You can read more about the center on their website and consult their itineraries (<http://www.valleyblackheritage.org>). The [Northeast Neighborhood Association](#) also plans to open a museum in the Dallard Newman House on Kelly Street in the future. Consult their website (<http://www.nenava.org/history.html>) for information on their history and programs.

If you choose to picnic then your next stop is Ralph Sampson Park, located on East Washington Street and named for one of Harrisonburg's own. Ralph Sampson was born in Harrisonburg and played for the Harrisonburg High School Blue Streaks, leading them to two state championships. He was the NCAA College Player of the Year three times while playing for the University of Virginia Cavaliers. In the NBA, he was Rookie of the Year, four-time NBA All-Star, and MVP of the 1985 NBA All-Star Game. He is a much-admired son of Harrisonburg!

[Ralph Sampson Park](#) covers 31 acres. The park has two picnic shelters, restroom facilities, two tennis courts, three basketball courts, playground equipment, a sports field, and horseshoe pits. A recently added, natural surface walking trail (0.3 miles) runs through the park as well. This park surrounds the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center. The annual African American Festival is held here each June.

Next stop is a tour of the Lucy Simms Center. The Center houses a continuing education program as well as an exhibit commemorating the contributions of the Lucy F. Simms School and the Northeast neighborhood to the city of Harrisonburg. Lucy Simms, featured in the mural on the Elizabeth Street parking deck, was an educator who studied at Hampton Institute along with Booker T. Washington. She began teaching in Harrisonburg at the age of 17 in 1874 and continued, here and at Zenda, until her death in 1934. You can read more about the Lucy Simms School and the education of African American students in Harrisonburg [here](#).

For more of the history of Harrisonburg, stop at the Newtown Cemetery (297 Kelley Street). Several historic markers in this cemetery, opened in 1868 as the burial place for the freed slaves who founded this African American community, offer testimony to the life of community members and the history that is still alive here. The cemetery is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Harrisonburg offers genuine, well-appointed lodging options. Wherever you choose to stay, you'll find friendly folks to check you in and make sure your stay is pleasant. Many of the major national brands that you know and trust can be found in Harrisonburg. Some are located near the interstate while others are near a campus or downtown.

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### **Day Two**

Rise and Shine! It's time to visit a unique cultural center which will offer you insight into the Civil War experience in Harrisonburg. While Harrisonburg was located in the Confederacy, the Brethren and Mennonite population in the area was opposed to slavery. This made for a complicated history. To get a more in-depth understanding of the pacifist point of view visit the [Crossroads, Brethren Mennonite Heritage Center](#). Here you can see a cobbler's shop, antebellum houses and a one-room schoolhouse as well as learn about the faith communities that struggled through the Civil War.

Just across town is the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center. Here, a small building (2065 Reservoir St) consisting of the remains of the Mabel Memorial Schoolhouse, houses exhibits and films that capture the life of Harriet Tubman, famous for her work on the Underground Railroad which helped take slaves to freedom before the Civil War.

Grab lunch at one of our delicious restaurants on University Blvd. Try O'Neill's Grill, Outback Steakhouse or, located on Reservoir St, the Wood Grill Buffet.

A bit outside of Harrisonburg, but worth the trip, is Zenda ([1340 Fridleys Gap Road -near the intersection with Indian Trail Road](#)), a community founded by formerly enslaved people on land confiscated from a plantation owner. People bought the land from the government and built a community and a church, Long's Chapel. The chapel served, also, as a school since the government made no provisions for educating African Americans. Lucy Simms taught here for a short time. A cemetery here contains the remains of some of the original founders of Zenda.