Bus tour highlights famed sites
Houston trip honors city’s black landmarks

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The dashing soldiers who came to Antioch Missionary Baptist Church that summer were different from any black people Hazel Young had known.

They had served in Manila and San Francisco, they were publicly assertive, they came from a world where discrimination, Houston-style at least, was unknown.

“It was a new breed,” Young says of the soldiers from the all-black 3rd Battalion. “They wouldn’t accept segregation. They’d come to our church, these good-looking men in their immaculate uniforms and collars... I’d admire them, and I was only 12. I wasn’t the only one, either.”

The eligible women of the congregation scrambled over each other that summer of 1917, trying to get dates, maybe even engaged, to one of the self-assured, worldly newcomers.

They were the same young men who, just a few weeks later, would kill and be killed in Houston’s blood

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Hazel Hainsworth Young, left, Lulieja Walker Harrison, standing, and Thelma Scott Bryant will be the speakers on a bus tour of African-American historical sites in the Houston area today.
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After racial disaster, the Camp Logan Riot.

Now, Young remembers details from that time that third-hand accounts don’t convey. The rumors that surrounded the soldiers when they arrived, the suspense as Northern black men first waded into languid, misted Houston. And Young can still name the Fourth Ward house his friends fled when rioters crashed through the city.

As a fortune Yates High School principal, will describe that time today during a bus tour of black landmarks for 30 Houston leaders.

Sponsored by Texas Commerce Bank and the Texas Trailblazers Preservation Association, the hour-and-15-minute tour begins a citywide series of activities that celebrate Black History Month. Young and two other Houston black women in their 80s and 90s will help narrate the trip, which will include Mayor Bob Lanier and Texas Commerce Bank Chairman Marc Shapiro.

Patricia Prather, head of the Trailblazers Association, says the idea is to show leaders where Houston’s African-Americans took their stand after Emancipation. Starting at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church at 300 Clay Street, the entourage will head downtown and through the traditionally black Third and Fourth wards.

“We’ll tell it in the form of a story,” Prather says. “These are the communities they built, and this is how they survived after the Civil War.”

Some names, like that of the Rev. Jack Yates, might sound familiar as the executive rolls through Houston’s streets. Few likely know the full history of even well-known sites, such as Antioch, where the pioneering Yates was a pastor.

Houston black churches did more than stake a claim at a time of quiet but implacable segregation, Prather explains. Churches were where politics brewed, civic projects were pressed, and preachers exhorted parishioners to buy land.

And after the Civil War, a passerby near Antioch would have heard a sermon inside. It was the churches, Prather says, that housed Houston’s first schools for ex-slaves.

As Prather and Young describe it, the Houston that their guests will see today is part real and part ghostly. The emotions summoned may be equally mixed.

For every carefully preserved site, like Antioch, the bus will pass through a neglected stretch, such as Andrews Street, once the address of Houston’s black elite. Now the focus of redevelopment disputes, the street still boasts a surface paid for, brick by brick, by its turn of the century residents.

The city had refused to pave it. Downtown, at the corner of Prairie and Milam streets, what is today a parking lot, once showcased the most fashionable shops for black Houstonians. Beauty parlors, businesses and specialty stores reflected the pride of an almost wholly self-sufficient community, and the hurt of segregation.

“I think we accepted Houston as just a good city to live in,” Young says. “It was better than Dallas. Here in Houston, you could try on a hat in some stores. And try on the clothes. You couldn’t do that in Dallas department stores.”

Yet Houston still defined itself through segregation, a way of life that residents such as Young ignored, worried around and carefully undermined.

Thelma Scott Bryant, another narrator on the bus trip, recalls that only department stores stocked fine shoes. Without asking, she says, black Houstonians knew to go to the back of these stores, where they would wait until white clients were served.

Buying hats was harder.

“They really didn’t want you to try on hats, because your hair was greasy” from straightening lotions, Bryant says. Eventually, though, a black woman named Ann Robinson opened her own hat store on the Milam Street arcade.

Surviving a segregated Houston required strength and the ability to block out painful experiences, says Prather, who has interviewed Bryant, Young, and Luluella Harrison, the third narrator.

In some ways, Prather says, the three women grew up sheltered. Bryant and Young, for example, were daughters of mail carriers and grew up to be school administrators. Though they were poor, they formed Houston’s black elite. It was a group that strived, among other things, to educate its daughters so that they had job options beyond domestic service.

Even at age 12, though, the sheltered Young knew that the black soldiers who had been sent to guard Camp Logan, then being built where Memorial Park is today, were from a different world.

“It was a terrible mistake for the government to send the soldiers to a Southern town, where, to be black, you were treated like just nothing,” Young reflects.

Lovingly welcomed by Houston’s black community, the soldiers had come here with superb service records. Having been accepted as equals in the military, they did not suffer the affronts from local police that were typical of the time.

When confronted by officers, the soldiers responded in kind, often resulting in shouting matches, even blows.

Despite the tension, however, no one was prepared for the “droop” reaction to a rumor — later proved false — that a white policeman had killed a soldier.

For two hours, the once-diplomatic soldiers roamed Houston, shooting randomly and killing 27 Houstonians.

By the time the soldiers’ rampage stopped, hundreds of white Houstonians had begun one of their own, looting stores for weapons and swarming through the streets. One soldier was killed by the mob.

Within hours, however, Houston’s leaders had united, declared martial law and mobilized civilians to patrol the streets.

Months later, 118 soldiers were court martialed on charges of mutiny, rioting and murder, and 111 were convicted of at least one charge. Forty-six got life sentences and 13 were hung, without appeal.

Young describes those days clearly.

What she says next does not seem tempered by age as much as the long ago, distinctive Houston she grew up in.

“We were very sorry that happened,” Young says. But after the hangings, “nobody was bitter. Or started another riot. Life went on.”