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## How Do You Save a Story? By Telling It

Tina Underwood

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**S**ometimes the first step toward preserving history is to pull back the overgrowth — the gnarled vegetation, the layers of memories.

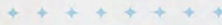
In March, a group of 11 Furman students took that step in Greenville and Charleston, South Carolina, where they uncovered the personal histories of African-Americans whose life experiences were obscured during slavery and its aftermath. In doing so, the students formed relationships with residents who helped the students understand the link between historic events and the present.

The project is part of the “Seeking Abraham: Slavery and Public Memory” alternative spring break, which grew out of the work by Furman’s Task Force on Slavery and Justice.

“I love history,” says **Adare Smith ’20** of Greenwood, South Carolina. “So being able to step in the same places and touch the same things that figures from the past touched was really moving for me.”

In Greenville, the grave markers in Brutontown Cemetery offered stark reminders of segregation and the untold African-American narratives in the Greenville community. Amid a tangle of vines and roots, the headstones point to residents — some believed to be slaves — who were buried at the hillside cemetery carved out for the indigent after the Civil War. The students researched

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*Students researched the lives of African-Americans at historic sites — and learned from present-day residents in the process.*

BY TINA UNDERWOOD



Students gather at the Brutontown Community Center with community resident Shelby Richards (top row, left end) and Brutontown elder and historian Ellen Wright (seated center) to learn about neighborhood initiatives.

family records of those interred at Brutontown, spoke with Brutontown residents, advocated for the preservation of a Jim Crow-era clinic (the McClaren Medical Shelter), and visited the Upcountry History Museum and the Museum and Library of

Confederate History.

The students became engrossed in resources and databases, such as Ancestry.com and FindAGrave.com. When they presented their findings, Brutontown community member Shelby Richards

was “blown away” by the details the students had uncovered. Marriage certificates and records about military service, births and deaths all helped piece together hidden life experiences.

“A headstone doesn’t tell a story,” says **Emilee O’Brien ’17**, who organized the trip with Communication Studies Associate Professor Brandon Inabinet. O’Brien says the experience went a long way toward unearthing stories and building bonds with the community’s residents.

“We have the privilege of great resources at Furman and a strong desire to share those resources in a mutually beneficial relationship,” she says.

In Charleston, the group visited McLeod Plantation, which slaves built in the 1850s, took a Gullah-Geechee culture tour and learned about racial reconciliation initiatives at a local church. They also toured the Old Slave Mart and met with Furman Board of Trustees Chair **Alec Taylor ’75** and his wife, Susan Taylor.

Smith, an English major, was struck by the power of storytelling.

“Stories are gateways into history and can act as agents of change,” she says. “I learned that I can tell stories — stories that educate, that share experience, stories that effect change.”

*(See page 9 to learn more about the latest developments on the “Seeking Abraham” recommendations.)* ♦