Walking in their footsteps

Civil Rights Mini-Term shows students that struggle continues

Sarah Tardiff looked at her shoes and marveled at the floor beneath their soles. Her head spun knowing slaves had walked the worn, shale tiles before her. But something about the magnificent antebellum home in Charleston, S.C. didn’t seem right.

“Our tour guide was an affluent, elderly white woman and it was evident she wasn’t used to groups like ours, groups interested in the slave quarters of the house,” said Tardiff ’10, a participant in the College’s first Civil Rights Public History Mini-Term.

“The Aiken-Rhett House was preserved there, mostly untouched, to demonstrate the wealth and grandeur of Charleston’s old, elite families,” she said. “That’s what most tourists go there to see. Our guide didn’t have much to say about the spaces the slaves occupied, yet she could talk endlessly about drapes, gilding and fine art.”

It was an enlightening experience for Tardiff and 11 other students who participated in the 18-day, December mini-term. Their journey through nine cities in seven states—along the path of the fight for equality—would reveal much, some of it hard to handle, some of it wonderful to embrace.

“By travelling to places where the battle over civil rights was fought, students learned more about this heroic movement and the unfathomable courage of its participants than they ever could in a classroom,” said History Department Lecturer Melinda Lawson, who co-led the trip.

The mini-term is part of Union’s new public history program, instituted last year and directed by Lawson. Together with Maggie Tongue, director of the Scholars Program and Office of Post-Graduate Fellowships, Lawson spent several years planning the trip.

Their efforts were supported by students Jared Gourrier, Ewodage Harrell and Peter Haviland-Eduah, all seniors who participated. The mini-
term was also supported by generous contributions from Dr. Estelle Cooke-Sampson ’74 and other donors to the Union College Civil Rights Public History Mini-term Scholarship Fund. This fund allowed applicants to be accepted on a need-blind basis.

“Public history is the way that people outside an academic setting learn about history. It’s the way events are presented to the public, and in some sense, the way these events are remembered,” Lawson said. “Because this is a public history mini-term, we wanted students to think about the way Americans have chosen to remember—or sometimes forget—different parts of the Civil Rights struggle.”

At another Charleston landmark, a plantation called Boone Hall, the slave quarters had been renovated. “What shocked me was how the cabins were decorated with luxuries that would not have been available, most notably a large pantry full of food and nice clothing,” said James Schellens ’10. “Especially provoking for me was a video about progress that ended in a crescendo showing President Obama, signifying the struggle is over.

“I felt as though the historical picking and choosing took away from the significance of Boone Hall,” he added.

There was no picking and choosing in Atlanta, only listening.

**Shaking hands with history**

Dr. C.T. Vivian, a colleague of Martin Luther King Jr. and a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was frank about life at the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movement.

“He said, ‘We looked at death as normal.’ He spoke of death as if it were a daily expectation,” Jared Gourrier ’10 recalled. “It is mind boggling that a black man, woman or child had to fear for his or her life every time they left home because of ignorance and hatred.

Top: Some somber, some awed, all deeply touched, students cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. where hundreds marched for black voting rights and were brutally beaten on “Bloody Sunday.”

Inset: Students burst into freedom songs at the capital building in Montgomery, Ala., the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery march.
Seniors Peter Haviland-Eduah and Ewodaghe Harrell take a moment to reflect on the “Bench by the Road” on Sullivan’s Island, a point of entry for hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans. An estimated 40 percent of African Americans today have ancestors who came to America through Sullivan’s Island.

“This forces me to wonder, are blacks today able to see what their parents and grandparents went through? For whites, are they able to understand that struggle, not for sympathy but for understanding, and contribute to change?” he continued. “We all have an obligation and are equally invested in the future of this country.”

In Selma, Ala., Joanne Bland encouraged students to continue to ponder this obligation to be socially responsible.

Bland, who participated in the march for black voting rights on “Bloody Sunday,” didn’t just relate the harrowing beating of hundreds of marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. She discussed the state of civil and social equality today, and the response she got was passionate.

“I think Joanne was making it clear that the battle is not over yet and that we are the generation that must continue to make changes,” Sarayfah Bolling ’11 said. “I am making a pledge to make her dream a reality through my life’s work.”

Such commitment makes Lawson and Tongue proud. Part of their goal was for students to see that the Civil Rights Movement was carried on.

Students explore the slave cabins at Boone Hall, a plantation in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. just outside Charleston.
out by ordinary people, many of them people their age. They wanted them to understand their power to shape the world. “There was a moment in Birmingham I will never forget,” Lawson said. “At a meeting, the students started strategizing about what they could do to make things right. We had not asked them to. They just came to it on their own, and they've continued that discussion since their return to campus.”

“‘They marched anyway’”
Peter Haviland-Eduah ’10 was humbled to realize that so many crossed the Pettus Bridge between Selma and Montgomery knowing they would be beaten. “They marched anyway, because they wanted to and because they had to,” he said. “There was no other option—living in oppression was not an alternative.

“I doubt I will ever forget what it was like to cross this bridge,” Haviland-Eduah added. “It’s a symbol of moving from the past to the future and I was privileged to make this physical connection to history.”

Another landmark had a similarly profound impact on Georgia Swan-Ambrose ’11. At the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, where Martin Luther King Jr. died, she discovered she knew him better as a person—not just a leader—after visiting so many places he’d been. “We came full circle with the life and death of Dr. King,” she said. “I saw his birth home in Atlanta. I stood at the pulpit where he preached at Dexter Baptist Church in Montgomery. I stood around the table where he formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I touched the bars behind which he wrote the famous ‘Letter from Birmingham City Jail.’ I touched

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On the Web

To learn more about the mini-term, or to read student reactions, visit http://ublog.union.edu/hst277t/.