

Feeling ‘the spirit of the ancestors’

The history of the Hayti Heritage Center

By Caroline Bowyer

We all know the Hayti Heritage Center as a cultural arts center, but it didn't start off as one. It started as a church built in 1868 by Edian Markham, a former slave. What began as four posts anchored to the ground with boards and branches for a roof eventually became a log church. More people joined, and the church became Union Bethel AME Church.

After Rev. Markham left in 1870, “two more frame churches were built, the first by Rev. George Hunter. As the congregation grew and more pastors came, it was decided by the members and pastors that a brick structure was needed,” according to Hayti’s website. The construction commenced in 1891, and the church’s name changed to St. Joseph Church.

Hayti Executive Director Angela Lee said the church remained St. Joseph Church until it relocated up the street.

“When the church left, the facility was in danger of being torn down by the City,” she said. “There were community folks who felt that too much history was in this building that it could not be destroyed.”

With the help of the city and community members, enough funding was generated to renovate the building into a performance center.

Hayti Heritage Center’s performance hall opened in 1992 and continues to offer all kinds of community events including concerts, dramatic productions and speaking engagements.

“It’s just kind of an everything for people who realize it’s a beautiful space,” said Lee. “The acoustics are virtually flawless, so anything that has sound in it is just amazing. We have concerts in here and it’s also a really popular facility and rental space.”

Lee said the performance hall, which is listed on the National Historic Registry, is a reverent space.

“When you think of some of the folks who have graced that stage or that space, you just cannot help but go in there and just feel the spirit of the ancestors,” she said.

Lee said she is thankful for those who saved the building from demolition decades ago.

“It’s just a beautiful space, so I thank God for the visionaries who decided this place couldn’t not exist, who really fought to preserve it, who incorporated the organization to manage it and to make this a vibrant cul-



From the Hayti Heritage Center’s beginnings as a humble church to its place as a cultural and historical community center, Executive Director Angela Lee is a wealth of knowledge regarding Hayti’s history. (Staff photo by Caroline Bowyer)

tural arts venue,” she said.

Cynthia Mebane-Watts is a longtime volunteer at Hayti and has been involved in the Durham arts community for years. She was the coordinator for the opening of the performance center.

“Hayti is something that’s very close to my heart, because it is about Durham history,” said Mebane-Watts. “Hayti is really important to Durham as a community, and I think it’s important that we preserve that history, that we teach our young people about Hayti so they are familiar with its history.”

Director of Operations Melody Little has worked for Hayti for over 20 years. She was also present at the performance hall’s opening.

“It was absolutely beautiful,” she said. “We had at that time a lot of excitement around the opening of the performance hall. There was a lot of excitement about the possibilities that were going to come from the opening of the performance hall, in addition to the support of the community. We had an awful lot of support. The event itself was very well attended, so it

was great.”

Mebane-Watts said Hayti has come a long way since its opening.

“I remember when Hayti first started, and I’ve seen it grow through the years,” she said. “I’ve seen its programming grow, I’ve seen its audiences grow, and I think it’s important that we promote Hayti, not only for the African-American community, but for the community as a whole so they are exposed to African-American creativity and culture.”

Little said Hayti has been beneficial to the Durham community in many ways, like its support of local artists.

“They may not have the opportunity to showcase their works any place else. They can always come here,” said Little. “I think we’re just a homeplace on the corner.”

The Hayti Heritage Center is open seven days a week, hosting a variety of events throughout the year. For more information on the different core programs and events offered at Hayti, visit its website at www.hayti.org, email info@hayti.org or call (919)-683-1709