

Mart Pays Tribute To Anonymous

BY LOUISE PETTUS
AND RON CHEPESUIK

In 1931 Mariam B. Wilson came south and acquired enough material to open the Old Slave Mart at 6 Chalmers St. in Charleston, the country's first museum of black heritage open to the public on a regular basis. It pays tribute to the artistic and creative accomplishments of the millions of anonymous black slaves who contributed much to America's making.

The Old Slave Mart Museum has become one of Charleston's most interesting and popular tourist attractions. Last year alone, more than 65,000 tourists came through the museum's doors to buy the artifacts and to see the exhibits.

Visitors to Old Slave Mart Museum make their way down a cobblestone street to the inconspicuous entrance of a two-story building, where the ring of a buzzer and three dollars allows entry.

On the main floor is a gift shop that sells Gullah sea island baskets, jewelry, and reproductions of African art to raise money to support the museum. A visitor may be tempted to buy at least one of the sea island baskets, which are made by Gullah blacks of South Carolina's sea island region just north of Charleston. The basket-making is done in private homes or beside the little roadside stands where baskets are sold.

In addition to the art and museum artifacts, photographs reproduced from the museum's permanent collections are on display.

Upstairs, the museum exhibits about a third of its collections, which include not only artifacts relating to slavery, but also those brought by slaves from Africa to America. On display are a host of slave-made items, such as lathes, quilts, metal work, decorative wrought iron, mule bits, linen sheets, and even a rocking chair dated 1788.

The contemporary African pieces include Congolese Bakongo tribal sculpture and Dahoman artifacts. There are also authentic receipts for sales of slaves and two exhibit cases highlighting the history of the Old Slave Mart Building. Constructed in 1820, the building was first used as a firehouse and then opened as a slave market in 1852.

Black Slaves

The Lancaster News Wednesday, March 4, 1987 Page 11-C

South Carolina's Story

The making of a state



When Mrs. Wilson died in 1959, few believed that the museum would stay open. But two sisters, Mrs. Judith Chase and Mrs. Louise A. Graves, shared Mrs. Wilson's energy and conviction that South Carolina needed a museum documenting slavery.

At age 84, Mrs. Graves is the director. She makes sure that the museum is open on a regular basis, supervises the work of part-time staff members, and serves as buyer for the museum shop. Her 79-year-old sister, Mrs. Judith Chase, serves as registrar and director of fund raising and development. The four part-time staff members are all in their 70s and 80s.

During the last two decades of its existence, the Old Slave Mart Museum has become an important educational resource for the study of black history. Mrs. Chase has researched the artifacts, books and manuscripts in the museum and created educational materials, which have been used to teach an eight-week course on black history, develop 12 slide lectures on Afro-American arts and crafts that have been rented and sold all over the U.S., and assemble exhibits that have been loaned to interested schools and organizations.

Trying to handle thousands of visitors each year, administer a heavily used museum, and carry out extensive educational programs could sap the energy of ambitious

curators and librarians 50 years younger than Mrs. Chase and Mrs. Graves. But for that twosome, operating the museum has been a labor of love.

When the ladies took responsibility for the museum in 1960, funds for paid staff were nonexistent. With the exception of one year when the sisters received a pittance, they have worked as full-time volunteers. Money to sustain the museum operation has often come out of their own pocket, even though a Mariam B. Wilson Foundation has been set up to help raise funds. Senior citizens and college students have helped out, being willing to work for low wages.

Volunteers have lent a hand in the museum and library, performing such tasks as typing library cards, stuffing envelopes, and filing in the office. For more than ten years the museum has had a reciprocal program with volunteers from the Gamma Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta. The museum has a yearly art contest for black school children; the society organizing and hanging the exhibits, the museum providing judges and awards.

It is projects like these, supported by many people in the Charleston community, that are helping to preserve artifacts and valuable material documenting and illuminating one of the most important periods in black American history.