

## SISTER CITY COMMITTEE MEMBERS RECOUNT TRAVELS TO CAPE COAST CASTLE: A Symbolic Journey through “The Door of No Return” in honor of Black History Month.

Many historians estimate that the majority of Americans who trace their roots to the plantations that once stood in the “Deep South” are descended from those who began their long sad journey from the slave forts of West Africa. Known as “castles,” these structures were built every 4 to 6 miles along the Gulf of Guinea, from present-day Sierra Leone to Cameroon. Inside their walls human beings were bought, bartered and sold as just another local commodity; they were imprisoned under gruesome conditions for weeks, then shipped as cargo to the New World.



Cape Coast, Ghana has one of the few remaining castles from this period. It was restored in the early 1990’s under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, and is now classified as a World Heritage Site. Hundreds of people walk the grounds every year, but for many it is anything but a “tourist attraction”. Instead it is a personal glimpse at a broken link in their family history; for others it is a breathtaking reminder of the resiliency of the human spirit.



Cape Coast Castle is not an easy place to visit. The guides are knowledgeable but they do not spare you the experience. You edge your way down into the dungeons, walking on stone steps worn smooth -- not by the weather -- but by countless bare feet. You are enveloped in the inky darkness, standing uncomfortably close to fellow travelers; you imagine the despair of being chained together, losing all

sense of time. The guide takes you back into the courtyard, and you instinctively reach for your sunglasses; you welcome the breeze and move about freely in the open compound. Your mind turns to another century. How brutal the sun must have been after so many weeks below ground; how incredible to take a long breath of sea air after the stench of existing in excrement.

The guide offers concluding remarks, describing how the captives, still in shackles, were herded out of the castle, onto the lava rock, into wooden canoes then rowed out to the deep water, forced to climb nets onto the sailing ships. The guide explains the symbolic “Door of No Return”. You are invited to step through it.



You stand as a group on the lava rock and look out to sea, far out to the horizon line, far out to what appears to be the end of the world. Once another group of people stood in this same place and saw this same sight, but under such different circumstances. You are silent and feel the connection. When it is time to walk back through the door, you go back in memory of those who were never able to return.

---