

TRAVEL + LEISURE FAMILY

SUMMER 2007

The Bells have been staging reunions every year since 1967. This commitment to kin had an early exemplar in Wesley Bell, a slave who, after gaining his freedom, bought 200 acres in Johnston County, North Carolina, as a legacy for his children. The rolling tobacco farms and pine forests—today known as Belltown—became not just the clan's ancestral home (some 200 Bells still live there) but also a springboard to success for the family, most of whom reside on the East Coast.

The early Bell reunions tended toward cookouts in a park. But over the years, participants wanted to piggyback a vacation onto the get-together, so the do's became more elaborate. Much.

Take last year's event in Baltimore. A planning committee of D.C. relatives picked a Mardi Gras theme and the hotel, SpringHill Suites BWI Airport, which offered them a group discount as well as the use of two meeting rooms that the Bells decorated with homemade welcome signs, a computer-generated family tree, baseball pennants, and a hot-dog machine. The committee also scheduled activities: an Orioles-Yankees game at red-brick Camden Yards and a bus tour of downtown Baltimore that stopped at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture. At the Saturday-night banquet aboard a chartered paddleboat, a procession of kids wearing sequined masks, feather boas, and purple and green beads kicked off the festivities, which included the ritual singing of the Bells's reunion anthem ("Now we'll sing, we'll eat, we'll talk and play...Today is Reunion Day") to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The anthem isn't the only Bell reunion tradition. At every gathering the year's commemorative T-shirts are handed all around. And there's always a silent auction of quilts and tote bags, stitched by the oldest participants, to raise scholarship money that's distributed among family members about to head to college. A church service provides the final note. Last year's was led by a relative whose sermon touched on how far the Bells had come. Says William Watson, a software developer and great-grandnephew of Wesley Bell, "It really is remarkable how well this story has turned out."



THE BELL FAMILY



*A weekend in
Baltimore*



**SpringHill Suites
BWI Airport**
410/694-0555;
marriott.com;
doubles from \$199,
including break-
fast; inquire about
group rates. If
you're planning
a city reunion, tap
the convention-
and-visitors bureau
for assistance and
deals; see "Reunion
101," page 90.



THE URBAN FIELD TRIP Clockwise from top left: Arrival day; all 75 reunion participants on a tour of Baltimore (reading material: the family newsletter); three in the reunion uniform; rooting for the home team at Camden Yards; entering the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture.

