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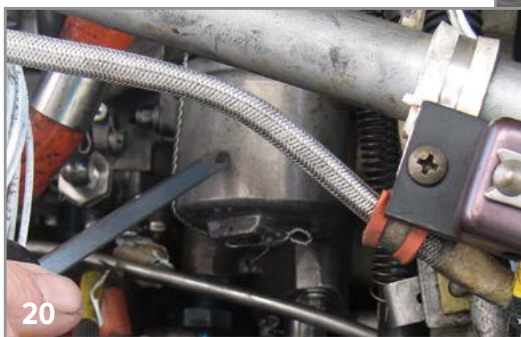
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# Tracing Our Roots

## Flying and Touring the Natchez Trace, Part 2

by Matthew McDaniel

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The entryway into the Vicksburg National Military Park is a preview of the grand scale of the Park and the Siege of Vicksburg that it commemorates.

*Author's Note: In Part 1, we explored many sites along the northern three-quarters of the Natchez Trace full of rich history. In this final installment, we'll wrap up the tour, covering the southernmost 100 miles of the route, some nearby attractions and the city for which the Trace is named.*

If you recall from Part 1 of this series, we left off in Mississippi by either departing Tupelo Regional Airport (TUP) or Houston Municipal Airport (M44) for one of the three airports available in the capital city of Jackson – the Class C, Jackson-Medgar Evers International (KJAN), the downtown Class D Hawkins Field (KHKS) or the pilot-controlled Bruce Campbell Field (KMBO). All are within a short drive of the Natchez Trace Parkway (NTP). Then, we drove north to tour some of the Natchez Trace inns (stands), trading posts and the Cypress Swamp. We now drive the short distance back toward Jackson and resume our tour.

### The Capital City

As in most U.S. capital cities, there is too much to do and see in Jackson to detail here. In relation to the NTP, those things are limited to some stands, scenic viewpoints and visitor/information centers. Within Jackson, the most popular sites are mainly unrelated to the trace. For civically minded tourists, however, Jackson is steeped in eye-opening history.

Of course, when in a capital city, a visit to the capitol building is always popular. If traveling with children, Jackson presents a perfect opportunity to teach your kids/grandkids about the struggle for racial equality. The Mississippi Civil Rights Museum's stated mission is to



“ ... document, exhibit the history of, and educate the public about the American Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. state of Mississippi between 1945 and 1970.” Inside, visitors will learn about such tragic American history as segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, landmark court cases dealing with racially motivated murders and school integration lawsuits, and historical details about the opposing forces of the Ku Klux Klan and the Freedom Riders. Going back even further, the museum touches on the history of the first enslaved people brought to Mississippi in 1721 from the Caribbean. For information on the native peoples, the many sacred mounds they built and left behind, and their way of life, the separate Museum of Mississippi History covers 15,000 years of native history.

### Detour to Vicksburg

A few detours off the NTP to take in some nearby famous places are recommended. One such place is Vicksburg, Mississippi. Vicksburg has two pilot-controlled airports, each with a single 5,000-foot runway, Jet-A fuel and cars available. Vicksburg Municipal (KVKS) is south of the city, while Vicksburg Tallulah Region (KTVR) is west, just across the Mississippi River in Louisiana. Both are certainly capable of accommodating most King Air operations. However, Vicksburg is less than 50 miles from Jackson, making it simpler to leave the aircraft at your chosen Jackson airport and make the 45-minute drive down I-20 to Vicksburg instead.

There, one of the largest and most strategically critical campaigns of the Civil War unfolded the Siege of Vicksburg. The Union needed to control Vicksburg to keep crucial Mississippi River supply lines open. By seizing it, they also hoped to bisect the Confederacy geographically. It was no easy victory, requiring a 47-day siege, multiple battles won and lost by both sides and the engagement of 110,000 soldiers. After over 37,000 casualties

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A portion of the original Natchez Trace, within the Rocky Springs Section of the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail. This area is between mile markers 52 and 59 of the NTP, near the Rocky Springs townsite.

(approximately 32,000 south and 5,000 north), the Union secured victory on July 4, 1863. Combined with the Union victory at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the day prior, the tide of the war turned.

The Vicksburg National Military Park (VNMP) consists of the main battlefield, Vicksburg National Cemetery, Grant's Canal and the U.S.S. Cairo Gunboat & Museum. Hundreds of monuments and markers pay homage to the various regiments, commanders and troops that fought and/or died. Much like Gettysburg, the sheer number is a bit overwhelming. A loop drive allows you to cover the acreage quickly (in your car or via NPS tour vehicle), with frequent opportunities to stop and walk among the monuments, artillery pieces and markers denoting the battle lines and troop movements. A few monuments are truly colossal, erected by states with the greatest presence in the battle (such as Illinois, whose troops comprised around 20% of the Union Army at Vicksburg).

Downtown Vicksburg also gives a good sense of the town's historical roots and present status. Several quaint cafes, restaurants and watering holes offer a welcome return to the present after such a somber (but important) tour through the past.

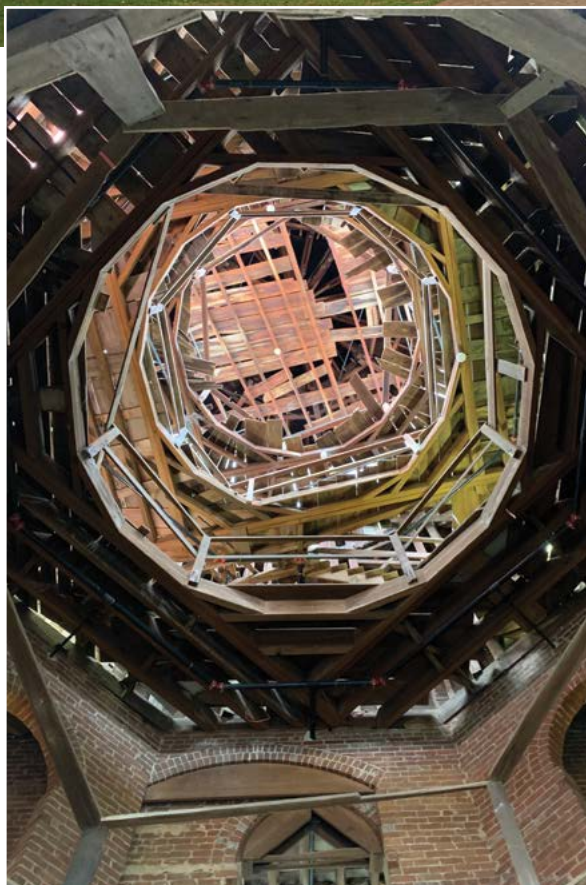
## Triangulation

Leaving Vicksburg, consider a different route that takes you farther from Jackson but back to the NTP. Take US-61 to the southeast, toward the hamlet of Port Gibson. Unlike so much of the antebellum South that was ravaged during the Civil War, Port Gibson survived largely intact. It is said that after the Union victory in the Battle of Port Gibson, Gen. Grant proclaimed the town "too beautiful to burn." Thus, many historic buildings remain, reflecting the multifaceted past of the village first settled by the French in 1729.

A brief but beautiful drive southwest of Port Gibson will get you to the Windsor Ruins. There, 23 Corinthian columns stand; all that remains of the largest Greek Revival antebellum home ever built in Mississippi. It was completed just as the war began and stood for 25 years after; fire destroyed it in 1890. However, the ruins reveal many fascinating details about the unique engineering incorporated and the construction methods employed by the enslaved laborers who built it. Upon returning to Port Gibson, get on the NTP around mile marker 40 and travel north to complete the third leg of this driving triangle.



The largest octagon house in the U.S. The exterior (top) was completed around 1861, but only the first floor was finished by the time the Civil War reached it. Looking up at the upper levels (inset) you will see they are preserved almost exactly as they were when the workers left to escape the war.



Progressing back toward Jackson, the Rocky Springs section of the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail is worth a stop or two (mile markers 52 through 59). This section of trail is 6 miles long, but sections of less than a mile are all that is required to reach the Rocky Springs ghost town. Founded in 1790, around 4,600 people lived there by 1860. After that, the population steadily declined in the wake of the Civil War, crop failure due to boll weevil infestation and a yellow fever epidemic. The sole remaining building is the Methodist church, which no longer has regular services but is usually unlocked for touring and is still used for special services. Scattered around the trails are a few remnants of the townsite. Via the NTP, you'll be back in Jackson in under an hour.

### Antebellum Mansions

Anyone who loves architecture, engineering, antiques, history, fine dining, unique accommodations or any combination thereof will enjoy a stay in Natchez, Mississippi. The flight down from Jackson will be a quick 75-mile hop to Natchez Adams County, Hardy-Anders Field (KHEZ). The county-run FBO provides parking, fuel and rental cars. More beauty remains in the final 40 miles of the NTP between Port Gibson and Natchez, with



many bluffs, creeks and burial mounds to see. Natchez State Park is also accessible at mile marker 11. Natchez is the official southern terminus of the NTP and the Old Trace. Near mile marker zero is “The Forks of the Road.” It is there that Natchez became the second most prolific slave trading city in the U.S. (only surpassed by New Orleans) due to its proximity to the Trace, the river trade routes and the cotton and tobacco croplands. Today, it is where the difficult history and suffering of enslaved people are detailed and recognized. While the Natchez Trace tour ends there, this quaint city will hold your attention, eliminating any rush to return to the airport.

Founded by French colonists in 1716, Natchez was controlled by France, Great Britain and Spain before the American Revolution. Natchez would prove vital in the development of the entire region. Especially as the Trace was developed and steamboats began transporting the region’s crops upriver. Enslaved were, of course, the heart of the economy, making so many cotton growers in the area exceedingly wealthy. So much so that in the 1850s, Natchez had more millionaires than any city in the U.S. and half of all U.S. millionaires lived there! Thus, the proliferation of mansions in the area.

*Antebellum* means “Before [a specific] war.” In this case, the U.S. Civil War. Life after the war could not exist

the way it had before. Many of the wealthiest growers in the area were secretly aligned with the North to protect their property holdings. Many knew their business models would have to change in a post-slavery economy but also felt the Confederacy could not prevail. Those who cooperated with the North often carried secret papers to that effect, which they hoped would save their homes and crops when the time came. Of course, it did not in many cases, as war is ruthless. However, more than any other Southern city of wealth, Natchez did escape the scorched-earth devastation that engulfed so many others. As a result, today it contains one of the most representative collections of antebellum mansions, homes and buildings in the South. The preservation of this has become a point of pride for Natchez.

It is the antebellum mansions people come to see. The grand homes built by the wealthiest 1% in the decade preceding the war. Many were lost, of course, after the war, when their owners lost their fortunes. The owners who were able to adapt their business models remained successful and many were able to stay for generations to come. However, these homes require massive resources to own, maintain, power and improve. Thus, today, most are either a museum or a business. Lucky for travelers, the most common business is bed-and-breakfast (B&B) style lodging. There are dozens to choose from and we

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The author's chosen lodging for the tail end of the Natchez Trace tour was Brandon Hall (circa 1856).

picked Bradon Hall (completed 1856) mainly because it is immediately off the NTP. Brandon Hall's owner lives there and interacts with guests throughout the tourist season. Everything about the experience was charming, from the delightfully mixed company at the breakfast table to strolling the rolling grounds to evening drinks on the upper veranda with the owner and/or fellow guests. Many such mansions are available for guided tours, whether museums or B&Bs. Some are opulent beyond description, while others are more subdued. Our favorite one was never even finished.

Longwood Mansion is the largest octagon house in the U.S., containing six levels and 30,000 square feet of living space, topped by an onion dome. The exterior was completed during 1860-1861. Artisans from the northeast were in the early stages of interior work when word of the war reached them. The men dropped their tools and escaped north while they still could. Only the first floor (a semi-basement level) was completed. Owner Haller Nutt lost much of his fortune in the war years and died in 1864. His widow lived in the finished first floor until her death in 1897 and her children for decades more. The upper five levels were never finished and are preserved almost exactly as they were the day the workers left. Today, the living level remains much as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The unfinished upper levels offer a fascinating glimpse into the engineering and architectural genius designed into the unique mansion, with all the exposed structures (consisting of 1 million bricks) in full view. Any tour of Natchez history would be incomplete without a visit to Longwood.

The food choices in Natchez will not disappoint either. Enough options of local, non-chain restaurants exist to

allow you never to need to eat at the same place twice. From casual fare to fine dining, palate-pleasing meals are the norm in Natchez.

A tour of the Natchez Trace is a fascinating trip through history. It covers an area not normally thought of as "touristy." However, that is part of the appeal of the Natchez Trail Parkway: no throngs of tourists, quiet and natural places and nearly constant opportunities to learn things new to you while seeing things quite old. Whichever direction you decide to tour the trace and however you decide to subdivide the trip into air versus ground movements, you will almost certainly discover things that appeal to your particular interests and curiosities. 

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