

NATCHEZ TRACE TOUR FROM RIDGELAND

Immerse yourself in Mississippi culture and Ridgeland's roots as you explore the Old Natchez Trace, one of the oldest and most historic trails and roads in North America. The old Natchez Trace wagon highway ran along the dry ridge between the Pearl River and Yazoo River. Old Agency Road and portions of Rice Road are the Old Natchez Trace through Ridgeland. This day tour leads north 80 miles through the national park to Kosciusko and French Camp, and back to Ridgeland. Along the way, there are opportunities to see historic sites, walk on the Old Trace, enjoy Mississippi foods, and purchase local food products, jewelry, and antiques to extend the memories of your visit. If you are up for short walks, there are also options to walk trails to explore the Mississippi outdoors.

(Milepost references are to the numbered mileposts on the east side of the Natchez Trace Parkway). You can access audio tours of several of the sites at www.natr.oncell.com

Begin at **Ridgeland Visitor Center** – 1000 Highland Colony Parkway, Suite 6006.

The staff at Visit Ridgeland will gladly assist you in your travels and stay in Ridgeland before and after your travels on the Natchez Trace Parkway.

Choctaw Agency. (Old Agency Circle) You will pass by the Choctaw Agency site on the Agency Road circle. Today's retail center Renaissance at Colony Park is on part of the agency grounds where Choctaw Indians gathered to trade goods with travelers in the early 1800's. The U.S. Choctaw agent conducted business with the Choctaw Indians and instructors gave Choctaw lessons in agriculture and weaving. The agency was a large brick building surrounded by acres of fields of corn for travelers' needs and the inn built by Choctaw Agent Silas Dinsmoor. Andrew Jackson and Dinsmoor fought over the agent's insistence that travelers obtain passports to travel through the nation. Jackson even armed his slaves to defend against Dinsmoor's threatened attack. Rather than attacking Jackson, Choctaw Indians that Dinsmoor had recruited welcomed Jackson as an old friend. Jackson rescued other travelers who lacked passports and told them to shoot Dinsmoor's militia posse just as they would shoot highway bandits. Jackson then orchestrated Dinsmoor's removal as agent.

Travel north to:

(Milepost 102.4) **Natchez Trace Information Cabin.** The National Park Service built the cabin in 1951 as the first visitor's center on the parkway. The cabin contains exhibits about the Old Natchez Trace and the Choctaw Nation that existed where Ridgeland is located today. It will provide a good orientation for the day's drive.

(Milepost 104.5) **Brashears' Stand/Old Trace/Carroll's Road.** Walk along a short segment of the Old Natchez Trace in the footsteps of those who will be future presidents, Indian leaders, warriors, and bandits. The Natchez Trace was one of the first highways the U.S. government built for wagon wheels. Though the road had a dirt surface, you will notice how the dirt was sloped for ramps for wagons. You can also walk on a parallel road "Carroll's Road" that intersected the Natchez Trace at this point. Andrew Jackson's troops built Carroll's Road as a short cut to New Orleans during the War of 1812. If you walk to the east end of the segment where the two roads intersect, there is a good spot to take a photo of one of the most scenic views of the sunken roads on the parkway. From this point, a trail also led east to a ferry across the Pearl River to Choctaw Minko Pushmataha's village near present-day Meridian. Because this point was where several major routes intersected in the Old Mississippi Territory, it attracted travelers and merchants. Just to the west of the boardwalk area, Turner Brashears and his Choctaw wife built a large inn for travelers that also served as a headquarters for Andrew Jackson's troops during the War of 1812. After the war, the inn was purchased by a couple said to be part of the notorious John Murrell gang. Highway bandits found it more profitable to rob and murder guests as they slept in the inn than to track them down on the road.

Mississippi Crafts Center. Walk across the boardwalk to see and purchase a variety of Mississippi crafts designed and hand-made by members of the Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi. Some craftspeople still use the skills of early Natchez Trace settlers that have been passed down to later generations. Demonstrations also take place at the center. Additional information about sites and visitor services in the area can be obtained at the center.

(Milepost 107.9) **West Florida Boundary/ Minko Apukschunnubbee's home.** Circle through the wayside stop. This point was once the northeast boundary of land ceded to the United States by Spain. When it was discovered that a large amount of land to the southeast was left out of the treaty, a group of adventurers seized control and declared the formation of their own West Florida Republic. The new country lasted 74 days until the U.S. Army took control. This point is also the southern trailhead of the Yockanookany Section of the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail, a twenty-three-mile trail. If you have time, you can take a brief walk on the trail. This district in the Choctaw Nation was led by Minko Apukchunnubbee. About two-hundred feet down the trail, Minko Apukchunnubbee's house was located just beyond the edge of the water line on land now underwater in the reservoir. The house was close enough that this point on the trail may have been part of Minko Apukschunnubbee's homeplace.

Ross Barnett Reservoir. The Natchez Trace Parkway runs along the western edge of the Ross Barnett Reservoir for about 16 miles. The Pearl River was modified to create the reservoir in the 1960's. It is not unusual to see birds from the Gulf Coast taking shelter on the reservoir. Recreational activities are plentiful at the reservoir.

(Milepost 122) **Cypress Swamp.** A boardwalk provides a leisurely walk just above water level in the cypress swamp. This spot is one of the most scenic nature areas in the park. In cool weather, look for the alligator warming itself in the sunshine on the surface.

(Milepost 122.6) **Riverbend.** Circle through the Riverbend pull off. Step out to get a glimpse of the river landscape of the Ridgeland area before construction of the reservoir. The Pearl River served as a transportation and boating route. Boatmen loaded products on the Gulf Coast and made the return trip with distant goods for sale in this area at the Ratliff Ferry trading post and Norton's Public Stand on the Old Trace.

(Milepost 160) **Kosciusko/Red Bud Springs.** Stop first at the Welcome Center to get an orientation to the Red Bud Springs area that attracted Natchez Trace travelers. From here, it is a brief five-minute drive into Kosciusko and Natchez Street that was the Old Natchez Trace. Kosciusko was one of the towns that sprang up on the Old Trace. Park and walk on the Old Trace from Renasant Park with its impression of a Natchez Trace stand to the Red Bud Springs park. The Great Earthquake of 1811 created five springs at what is now downtown Kosciusko. The springs became an attraction for Natchez Trace travelers. David Choate opened an inn on the Old Trace a few miles south of the spring and began to raise cattle to trade for European goods. Indians were some of the first American cowboys. When the new town was built, Chickasaw Sub-agent John Allen built a two-story tavern on the hill overlooking the spring and the Natchez Trace. Jackson's troops also camped here during the War of 1812. The architecture of the buildings reflects the evolution of the Natchez Trace over the years. Restaurants on and off the public square offer authentic Mississippi foods. Whether you choose Kosciusko for lunch or a late southern dessert, the restaurants provide another way to experience the flavors of the Old Natchez Trace. Antique and collectible shops on Natchez Street offer opportunities to take home some history, jewelry, and local food products.

(Milepost 180) **French Camp.** Before Louis LeFleur and his Choctaw wife, Princess Rebecca Cravatt, opened the trading post that later became Jackson, Mississippi, he operated an inn for Natchez Trace travelers called "French Camp." Period buildings give a sense of what it was like to visit French Camp in the early 1800's. Andrew Jackson's troops camped here during the War of 1812, and some of those soldiers are buried here in unmarked graves. A horse-drawn mill was set up on the grounds to grind corn into corn meal for the troops. According to a former slave, a young Abraham Lincoln stayed here on a return trip on the Natchez Trace from New Orleans. Louis LeFleur gave the State of Mississippi land to build the state capitol. His son Greenwood LeFlore became leader of the Choctaw Nation. Natchez Trace post rider John Donley offered to provide Greenwood an education in Nashville. The seventeen-year-old Greenwood fell in love with Donley's fourteen-year-old daughter and they eloped to French Camp, where they married. When Greenwood became chief, he introduced systems such as trials by jury. He negotiated the final treaty for the removal of the Choctaw, with the provision that Choctaw who wanted to remain in the state would be given land.

Greenwood remained and became one of the wealthiest men in the state. His large plantation house, with its furnishings from Paris, became a landmark. You can see Greenwood LeFlore's carriage, one of the finer carriages that ran on the Old Trace, in the French Camp Historic Village. Greenwood became an influential Mississippi State Senator. The historic Masonic Lodge across the street is believed to have been built with wood from Louis LeFleur's Inn. If you choose to have lunch at French Camp, the Council House Café, built with logs said to have been from Greenwood LeFleur's council house, offers soups, sandwiches, salads, and mouthwatering desserts. The gift shop also offers local food products and crafts. The restaurant and gift shop are closed Sundays. The Pottery Studio creates beautiful mugs and pottery pieces, some of which are made from clay from the area. A nationally registered historic farm home, blacksmith studio, and a cozy bed & breakfast that can accommodate your needs are all available.

Once you have explored the landscape and history, tasted the food and bought your souvenirs, relax for a leisurely drive back to Ridgeland. Enjoy the scenery through the ninth most-visited national park unit.

Interested in exploring nature by foot or by bicycle? Enjoy the multi-use trail that runs along the parkway at several of your stops in Ridgeland. The paved trail runs 14 miles on National Park Service and City of Ridgeland land. Consider staying an extra day to rent a bike and spending more time in the Mississippi outdoors. You may also want to take the twenty-three-mile hike on the Yockanookany Section of the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail.

<https://www.nps.gov/natt/ridgeland-trail-map.htm>

Historical facts / stories provide by Natchez Trace Parkway Association members Tony Turnbow, John McBride and Thomas Watts