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EXPLORE THE NATCHEZ TRACE
MISSISSIPPI ✪ ALABAMA ✪ TENNESSEE

Native Genius.
American- Indian history runs deep on the Natchez Trace Parkway.

When the time came to meet his death, the great Choctaw chief Pushmataha might have wished to meet it on his hunting grounds along the Natchez Trace. Instead it was during an extended visit to Washington, D.C. that death came to him in a fatal case of croup, and he was buried in the nation's capital. Such was his renown that his funeral cortege stretched for a mile. More than two thousand mourners, common people and dignitaries alike—including the chief's old adversary in negotiations, President Andrew Jackson—turned out to pay their respects in a ceremony that included a booming cannon salute.

While Pushmataha's grave lies in Washington's Congressional Cemetery, the site of his most important work is found at the Upper Choctaw Boundary at Milepost 128.4 on the Natchez Trace Parkway, where he and Andrew Jackson signed the Treaty of Doak's Stand, ceding 5.5 million acres of Choctaw lands to the United States. It was the ramifications of that treaty that brought Pushmataha to Washington to protest for more equitable terms, a quest that took two years of his life before it ended.

Today, Doak's Stand is only one of more than a dozen Native American historic sites found along the road that bears the name of the tribe who traveled it as a hunting route for centuries. The Natchez weren't the only tribe or even the first on the Trace. According to Natchez Trace Supervisory Interpretive Park Ranger David Carney, three significant historic Indian tribes, the Natchez, the Choctaw and the Chickasaw, populated the area in the recorded era.

However, those tribes were descended from even earlier people groups. In fact, the Trace's Native American history stretches back thousands of years, at least to a time before Christ, although the exact date is "something of a mystery," Carney says. "We're still discovering things."

There are many places along the Parkway to discover Native American history, but as good a place as any to start is at the top. Native American roots take on fascinating height all along the Natchez Trace in burial and domiciliary mounds. These include:

- **Emerald Mound**—Built by the Natchez Indians around 1400 AD, this ceremonial mound, located in Natchez, is the second largest of its type in the nation, covering nearly eight acres, with a trail leading to the top.

- **Bynum Mounds**—Located thirty miles north of Ridgeland, these mounds are between 1800 and 2100 years old.
- **Pharr Mounds**—A 90-acre complex of eight different burial mounds, built between 1,8000 and 2,000 years ago, Pharr Mounds are located halfway between Tupelo and Muscle Shoals.
- **Bear Creek Mound**—Built between 1200 and 1400, this mound is located about 20 miles north of the Pharr Mounds.
- **Florence Mound**—A domiciliary mound built during the Woodland Period, this mound is the largest of its kind in the Tennessee Valley. An adjacent museum features artifact from the region dating back 10,000 years.

For many visitors, the many overlapping layers of history inspire a deep and varied sense of wonder. "People climb to the top of Emerald Mound, and they can't believe that anything could approach the grandeur," Carney says. "But then others are struck by the sheer number of mounds at Pharr."

A sun worshipping people with rigid class distinctions, the Natchez were the largest and most unified tribe in the region until 1729, when the French, allied with the Choctaw, drove the tribe from the region. While some Natchez were amalgamated into the Creek, Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes, others were captured by the French and sold into slavery.

Today, visitors can get a close-up view of the now extinct tribe at the Grand Village of the Natchez Indians, a National Historic Landmark located in the city of Natchez. The site includes a partially restored mound area, a museum accredited by the American Association of Museums, a reconstructed Natchez Indian house, nature trails and a picnic pavilion.

Near Tupelo, the exhibits of the Chickasaw Village describe that tribe's history and daily life, with a nature trail featuring plants that the tribe used. A few miles away, the Chickasaw Council House is located on the site of Pontatok.

With an evolving portrait provided by on-going archeological cataloguing, the Parkway staff keeps an open dialogue with Native American groups to insure the greatest possible inclusiveness and accuracy. Stennis Young, Assistant Superintendent of the Parkway, says that in the production of the new interactive exhibits featured the recent renovation of the Natchez Trace Visitor's Center in Tupelo, local Native American groups were given an integral role in the effort.

"They reviewed everything. It was a real collaborative process."

When he realized he was at his death, Pushmataha said to his followers:

I am about to die, but you will return to our country. As you go along the paths, you will see the flowers and hear the birds sing; but Pushmataha will see and hear them no more. When you reach home they will ask you, "Where is Pushmataha?" And you will say to them, "He is no more." They will hear your words as they do the fall of the great oak in the stillness of the midnight woods.

Flowers still bloom along the roadway on the Natchez Trace, and the birds still make beautiful songs. And whether in the majestic mounds or authentic villages—or even in the stillness of the woods surrounding Doak's Stand—it's not only possible to hear the echoes of these great American cultures, it's impossible not to be moved.

For visitor information: www.scenictrace.com