

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**



**My Country (and Blues and Rock & Roll)  
'Tis of Thee:  
*The Natchez Trace Connects Great Americans  
and Great American Culture.***

Take the following “pop” quiz to test your knowledge of the importance of American popular culture on the Natchez Trace (and vice versa):

*True or false: Without the Natchez Trace, America would be singing the blues.*

Answer: Both, given that W.C. Handy, the father of the blues, was born in Florence, Alabama, in 1873. His home is open to the public today, and the writer of such classics as “St. Louis Blues” and “Beale Street Blues” is celebrated each year at the W. C. Handy Music Festival.

*In the wee hours of the morning on January 8, 1935, what happened in tiny shotgun house in Tupelo, Mississippi that would rock the world?*

Answer: Elvis Presley, the King of Rock and Roll, was born to Gladys and Vernon Presley in a wooden structure that Vernon built with his own hands. Today, that tiny house is part of an official Mississippi landmark that includes a 15-acre Elvis Presley Park and Birthplace Center, featuring a recently remodeled memorial museum, tribute statuary, gift shop and a chapel built from donations of fans. There are, naturally, quite a few of those —50,000 of them come from all around the world every year to make the pilgrimage. The Elvis driving tour takes visitors to the very same Tupelo hardware store where Elvis chose his first guitar as his birthday gift when he turned twelve. The tour also takes visitors to Shakerag, where Elvis first heard the blues, and to the Assembly of God Church where he took gospel into his soul.

*Which world-famous opera house has some of the country’s greatest musicians coming to fiddle around?*

Answer: The Grand Ole Opry, of course, just one of the multitude of powerhouse musical attractions served up every day in Nashville, Music City, USA. The Musicians Hall of Fame and Museum was opened in 2006, and the landmark tribute Music City Walk of Fame on the Music Mile is always a must-see.

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*What young blind girl taught the whole world to see?*

Answer: The courageous Helen Keller, who taught the world to see disability in a whole new light, was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Today, visitors can tour Ivy Green, Helen's birthplace home, and see not only the main house but also the cottage where Helen and Anne Sullivan retreated for their important work; visitors may even touch the famous well pump where Helen first learned to "see" water, as well as hope. So inspirational is the story of "The First Lady of Courage," that every year more than 100,000 people converge on Tuscumbia for the Helen Keller Festival.

Whether in American arts, American history or American life, the Natchez Trace is so rich with greatness both past and present that it's almost necessary to measure it by the milepost. The Trace is the place where visitors can walk in the paths of genius, whether it's at the pump where a splash of well water ignited a deep thirst for learning, or in the bedroom where Pulitzer prize-winning author Eudora Welty drew on her well-spring of imagination to create enduring classics. Welty's Jackson home and gardens in the historic Belhaven neighborhood are now open to the public. That all these homes have been preserved and are shared with the public is not surprising, for along the Trace there is an abiding love of art, music, literature—and greatness in whatever form it takes.

Thus, Jackson museums are not only diverse, but also delightfully interactive. And as downtown Jackson, chockablock with history, continues to revive, education hits some pretty cool notes in the bluesy stylings of the re-energized Farish Street Historic District.

Long prided as the "Athens of the South," Nashville makes good on the promise of the name in a multitude of ways, in the world-class quality of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the beauty of the Cheekwood Botanical gardens and gallery, and, of course, in amazing Parthenon, the world's only full-scale reproduction of the famous Greek Temple. Located in Centennial Park, the Parthenon, part of the municipal art museum, is the home of Athena Parthenos, the tallest indoor structure in the Western world.

But from the biggest structure to small intimate settings, the drive for excellence on the Natchez Trace is the same. You can hear it at the Clinton Visitor's Center, where every month, toes start tapping to the strains of the Mississippi Olde Time Music Society Jam Sessions; you can see it in the brilliant beauty of the stained glass windows of the Mary Ricks Thornton Cultural Center in Kosciusko. In Tupelo, at the Oren Dunn museum, the late Oren Dunn recreated an entire village of artifacts, complete with a Memphis street car that had once been converted into a well-loved local diner. Tupelo businessman Frank Spain was so "driven," he scoured the country for classic gems like the Tucker and the Duesenberg in the Tupelo Automobile Museum.

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In Natchez, the Spring Pilgrimage of antebellum homes offers the Cotton Kingdom's architectural and decorative masterpieces within a deep, rich context that includes the "Southern Road to Freedom," an inspiring musical tribute to the African-American experience in Natchez, performed by the Holy Family Choir. The Natchez Museum of Afro-American Culture is also open, documenting the struggles and triumphs of the community's African American citizens from the Civil War through World War II.

The "No Easy Journey" exhibit in Port Gibson also charts the African American struggle. Just as the multitude of vital Native American and Civil War sites are preserved along the Natchez Trace, so too are important sites from the Civil Rights movement like Woodworth Chapel at Tougaloo College and the home of Medgar Evers, where the modesty of the house both belies and befits a leader of courage and dignity. At the time of his death, young Oprah Winfrey was growing up in Kosciusko. Today, the church where she attended is just one of the popular Oprah-related sites on driving tours of the city.

Echoes of music, echoes of literature, echoes of great conflict and great achievement—this is the great American experience of the Natchez Trace.

"I've worked on other parkways," Natchez Trace Supervisory Interpretive Park Ranger David Carney says, "but the Trace is unique in that I don't believe that any place else can really take you the way the Trace does, into what it really means to be American."

And now for the final question of the quiz:

*What is the meaning of greatness? What is the meaning of being American?*

The answers on the Natchez Trace Parkway are multiple choice, important and fascinating. Take all the time you need to find them.

**FOR VISITOR INFORMATION: [www.scenictrace.com](http://www.scenictrace.com)**