

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:



***The American Experience, The American Treasure:
Natchez Trace Parkway Leads to the Heart of America.***

It took 67 years to construct the 444 miles of the Natchez Trace Parkway.

It took thousands of years to create the experience.

This is a story of America, a story that began without words. Imagine:

At first there were no words, no human sounds at all, only the dull thrash of undergrowth as the mastodons and giant bison and other creatures moved in steady migration through lush virgin forests, prairies and wetlands. Time passed. And then behind the noise of hooves came the near silent press of moccasins against the trail, as native hunters and gatherers, the people of prehistory, made their mark. And they begat the Chickasaw and the Choctaw, descendants of mound-builders, and the Natchez, who being of mound-culture moved the earth to bury their dead. And then came the tramping boots of the white men, at first proud conquistadors with muskets blasting fire, then trappers, and then the brawny and boisterous Kaintuck boatmen who, after floating their loaded flatboats down the Mississippi, sold everything in Natchez and New Orleans—goods, flatboats and all—and walked north toward home, filling the path with their raucous shouts and laughter. By this time there were other sounds that humans made, too—the blast of highwaymen’s pistols, the pounding hooves of the postal riders, an Army marching south, hungry for victory...returning north ravenous for food.

And then, without warning, came the shrill scream of the steam whistle, and the human noises died away, as travel migrated to the mighty river nearby. The road was quiet, although just alongside it a glittering kingdom arose, and when war severed the land, there came once again the blast of grapeshot along with the thunder of horses’ hooves, the whoop of rebel yells. At the end of it people were set free from bondage, and then, at last, a joyful noise—rhythms and harmonies such as had never been heard before, music that captured the heart of the world.

In May 2005 the last two segments of the Natchez Trace Parkway were completed between Ridgeland and Jackson and the Southern terminus at Natchez, connecting the Natchez Trace in one contiguous 444-mile route from Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee. While the completion was the triumphant endpoint of a construction project begun during the Franklin Roosevelt era, it was also just another chapter in a rich, exciting story begun thousands of years ago.

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It was that story, that heritage, that caused Mississippi Congressman Jeff Busby to introduce legislation, which ultimately created the Natchez Trace Parkway in 1938.

However, as Natchez Trace Parkway Assistant Superintendent Stennis Young points out, “While the primary purpose of the Parkway was to preserve history, to preserve the Old Trace, there was great consideration of other factors, especially how the parkway could attract tourism while benefiting local communities.”

The result was a model of preservation, stewardship and forward-thinking policy that a half century later would earn the Trace double distinction as a National Scenic Byway and All-American Road. Even within the elite category of All-American Road, the Natchez Trace Parkway is a standout. In order to earn the designation, a roadway must demonstrate significance in at least two categories—archeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational and scenic. The Natchez Trace Parkway qualifies in all six.

It is for the last quality, the scenic element, that the Trace is perhaps best known. No billboards, no crass development, just mile after exhilarating mile of gorgeous vistas and gentle curves, through forests, wetlands and prairies, with a generous spread of cropland in between.

That diversity in ecosystems is matched by the diversity and real density of attractions that thread throughout the length of the entire Parkway. Civil War history and Native American culture and history are two important draws, bringing tourists from all over the nation, visitors who stand in awe at the many Indian mounds like Emerald Mound in Natchez, or who travel the path of U.S. Grant’s army in Port Gibson and Raymond—or even leap into the fray at the reenactment of the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads outside of Tupelo.

Naturally, along the Trace there are historic homes, mansions and districts aplenty. There’s antebellum splendor, there’s old-fashioned charm. But just off the Parkway, there are also the bright lights and urban delights of thriving 21st century cities, with world-class cultural attractions and worlds of retail venues.

And when it comes to the cultural attractions, here’s one piece of advice: Be prepared, because the Natchez Trace will rock your world. In Tupelo, there’s the birthplace of Elvis Presley, the King of Rock and Roll, in Florence the birthplace of W. C. Handy, father of the blues. In Jackson, those blues are flourishing in a revitalized and vibrant historic downtown scene, while in Nashville country music fans, hopefuls and superstars come together to sing and celebrate America’s top-selling musical genre.

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Trace talent isn't simply musical, either. In Ridgeland in 2007, the Mississippi Craftsmen's Guild opens a brilliant new crafts center—20,000 square feet of exhibit, educational and meeting space in a beautifully appointed facility overlooking the crystalline waters of the Ross Barnett Reservoir.

The reservoir itself is a man-made wonder, part of the extensive array of recreational options available on the Trace—almost one hundred miles of hiking, horse and nature trails, nationally acclaimed biking, 12 state parks, 10 camping grounds, and thousands upon thousands of acres of azure lake, including the Ross Barnett Reservoir, Wilson Lake, Bay Springs Lake and Pickwick Lake that starts in Tennessee and spreads for miles into Alabama.

And then there is the one attraction on the Natchez Trace that can't be found on a map: the people. Call it the result of the good cooperation, particularly between the communities of the Natchez Trace Compact. Or call it by its simplest name: Good old-fashioned southern hospitality. Natchez Trace communities large and small love to have company, and it shows.

A new class of traveler emerges known to the travel industry as the Geo Tourist, there will be a greater demand for eco-friendly destinations that offer both authenticity and a deep level of involvement. While there may be scrambling in other destinations to create that kind of appeal, the Natchez Trace has already been providing that kind of engaging experience for more than 70 years. "We've been cutting edge all these years without even knowing it," Young says with a laugh.

Not that the Parkway has any intention of resting on its laurels, scenic though they are. When the new Parkway headquarters in Tupelo was renovated in 2005, great care was put into creating new interactive exhibits with what one might call the 4 e's: more education, more engagement, more excitement, and more of the totality of experience that is the Natchez Trace. When the new Visitor's Center was built in Clinton, such was the attention to creating an authentic structure that hand-made bricks were used with wood reclaimed from a century-old sugar mill. This year and in years to come, Parkway rangers will continue more educational programs, more walks-and-talks and more on-site tours.

For those who live along the Natchez Trace, for those who love the Natchez Trace, the last few thousand years have been quite a trip.

And it looks like more adventure lies on the road ahead.

For visitor information: www.scenictrace.com