

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:



Where Eyes Can See the Glory.

Civil War makes history on the Natchez Trace Parkway.

Call it a straight shot—grapeshot, that is: From its starting point in Natchez to its endpoint in Nashville, the Natchez Trace Parkway leads straight into some of the most exciting Civil War history in America, through the blaze of re-enactors’ muskets and the smoking roar of cannon, and into history-rich towns and battle sites where the course of a nation was determined, and where the stories of courage and dedication are still beautifully preserved, waiting to be experienced by lovers of history and lovers of adventure.

The Trace, in other words, issues some impressive marching orders.

Travel the Natchez Trace and discover where Ulysses S. Grant began his own march to destiny . . . where Nathan Bedford Forrest showed his brilliance and daring. . . where the largest cavalry force ever amassed in the Western Hemisphere poised for invasion. . . where desperate armies clashed by night in what was called “the five bloodiest hours” of the entire war. . . where a widow took upon herself the mourning and remembrance of thousands and where a twenty-first century novelist would meet his own fame and fortune by remembering that extraordinary woman and her charges.

Civil War history threads the length of the parkway. In fact, “people who are knowledgeable about the subject consider the Trace a Civil War Trail,” according to David Carney, Natchez Trace Supervisory Interpretive Park Ranger.

It was in the southern portion of the Trace where General U.S. Grant finally found the needed traction for his conquest of Vicksburg. After several unsuccessful starts, including an ill-fated attempt to canal through mosquito-infested swamps, Grant at last crossed the Mississippi with his troops. After landing in Bruinsburg, the general regrouped at the Bethel Presbyterian Church, then marched south on Old Rodney Road. The fighting began at the Shaifer House before the army skirmished its way into Port Gibson.

In Port Gibson, the city scored a triumph the Confederate Army could not, when town’s charm and loveliness proved so winning they extinguished the victors’ torch. Declaring the town “too beautiful to burn,” Grant spared Port Gibson the inferno that engulfed other towns throughout the South.

After the Port Gibson victory, Grant and General William T. Sherman camped at Dillon’s farm, preparing to march south to Vicksburg, until news reached them from the north of Union General McPherson’s routing of Confederates at Raymond. The victory galvanized Sherman, and he rushed to Jackson, the state capital. Although still a small town, Jackson was a strategic manufacturing and rail center for the Confederate States, and when Sherman arrived, held off briefly by a single company of gray coats to cover the Confederate retreat, he immediately began to wield his infamous torch.

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Later, as the campaign for Vicksburg dragged on, Jackson was caught in a back-and-forth cycle of occupation, repeatedly abandoned then retaken and burned, so often it acquired the name “Chimneyville,” for it seemed a city of nothing but chimneys, standing like sentinels amid the smoking rubble.

Today, much of the Civil War history of this region is still preserved. At the Grand Gulf Military Monument Park, a 400-acre landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places, visitors can explore Fort Wade, the Grand Gulf Cemetery, a museum, as well as campgrounds, picnic areas, hiking trails, an observation tower, and several restored buildings.

At Port Gibson, Bethel Church and the Shaifer House both still stand, the latter still sporting bullet holes in its exterior. Dillon farm has been acquired by the Natchez Trace Parkway as part of a “bracelet” of more than a half a dozen interconnecting historic sites. In this part of the Trace, Civil War history is both as remarkable and as common as the blood stains still visible on the floor of Raymond’s St. Marks Episcopal Church, used as a hospital to treat Union soldiers after the Battle of Raymond and now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Raymond’s efforts in the preservation of the Raymond Battlefield site, which have yielded the addition of a walking trail, have been featured on the History Channel program “Sacred Soil,” and have earned the respect of Civil War writer Jeff Shaara, who has contributed to the cause. Other Civil War sites in Raymond include the Hinds County Courthouse, an imposing Greek Revival structure built by slave labor, and used as a field hospital for Confederate troops.

In Jackson, the Civil War legacy is woven into the fabric of a thriving urban cityscape: Union artillery emplacements are part of the grounds at Millsaps College and at University Medical Center, while structures once pressed into service as field hospitals now serve dual roles in both their current capacity and as historical record. At Provine Chapel, on the campus of Mississippi College, Union soldiers once lay waiting to live, or to die, while Sherman’s horses were sheltered in the basement. And the Mississippi Governor’s Mansion today houses history—as well as the state’s governor—as the second oldest continuously occupied gubernatorial residence in the U.S. Several other historic homes, including the Manship House and The Oaks, managed to escape the Union torches, and are also open to the public.

Further north in the Tupelo area, Nathan Bedford Forrest at first fought with mixed success attacking Sherman’s supply lines from Nashville to Chattanooga. The first battle at Brice’s Crossroads, near Tupelo, Forrest, outnumbered two to one, went on to win a dramatic eleventh-hour victory—a drama replayed every other year at the annual reenactment of the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads. The later battle in Tupelo was a draw.

While the Tupelo National Battlefield is a one-acre site inside Tupelo city limits, lands surrounding the site at Brice's Crossroads have been largely undisturbed, giving the site a panoramic feel. "Standing at Brice's Crossroads you can get a real sense of how things happened," Carney says. "About directions, and about events." Brice's Crossroads also includes a visitor and interpretive center, two battlefield trails and two cemeteries.

In northern Alabama, where the Natchez Trace crosses the Tennessee Valley Civil War Trail, visitors can find Civil War relics at the Edith Culver Memorial Museum; Historic Pope's Tavern which served as a field hospital for both sides of the conflict can also be toured. At Waterloo, stand on the grounds where the largest cavalry force ever amassed in the Western Hemisphere assembled to train before launching an 11th hour invasion of south Alabama and Georgia. Ultimately the force would burn the University of Alabama and capture Jeff Davis at Irwinville, Georgia.

On the Tennessee portion of the Trace, in late November of 1864, the "Gettysburg of the West" unfolded at the Carter Farm in Franklin. It was a decisive battle that left the Confederate Army of the Tennessee destroyed in all but name, as Confederate General John Bell Hood, racing forward to stop the Union Army from reaching nearby Nashville, decided to attack the forces occupying the farm. At four in the afternoon, against both the fading light and the advice of his officers, the general ordered a frontal assault across an acre and a half of open field. The result was brutal, a fierce combat that raged for what was later called the "five bloodiest hours of the Civil War," as the late-afternoon charge dragged on to a savage and bloody contest beneath the moonlight. At the end of it, 9,000 men lay dead, 7,000 of them Confederate soldiers.

During the battle, the home of Carrie and John McGavock at nearby Carnton Plantation became a field hospital where hundreds of soldiers were laid, their bodies eventually covering almost every square inch of the house, grounds and outbuildings. While Carrie proved a tireless and compassionate nurse, it was two years later that she would assume an even more prominent role as an angel of mercy. When a McGavock neighbor prepared to plow under a field that contained the remains of 1,500 Confederate dead, Carrie and John had the bodies re-interred in their own backyard, in what became the nation's largest privately owned Confederate cemetery. In her "Book of the Dead," Carrie recorded the name and regiment of each soldier, and tended her cemetery charges with such devotion that she became famous during her lifetime as the Widow of the South.

Carrie McGavock's story inspired first-time novelist Robert Hicks to write his 2005 best seller *Widow of the South*, and today, Franklin's "Widow of the South" tour combines a downtown walking tour with a tour of the Carnton Plantation, which is open to the public not only for tours but for educational and social programs as well.

As Union headquarters, the Carter House also had its own dramatically mournful history—Tod Carter, a son who hadn't seen his home in three years, shouted to his Confederate comrades, "Follow me, boys, I'm almost home," moments before he was mortally wounded. He died two days later at the Carter House.

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Today, the Carter House is a National Historic Landmark open to the public as a non-profit museum and interpretative center, and is only one of the many fronts of Franklin's successful campaign to preserve the history and character of the area.

After the Battle of Franklin, the armies moved on to Nashville, where a final battle would make official the Tennessee Army's demise. Today the city offers a number of historical attractions, including Travellers Rest, used as a Confederate general's headquarters, Belle Mead Plantation, where a McGavock kinswoman made her home, and Belmont Mansion, summer home of another extraordinary yet quite different Southern matron, Adelia Acklen, who negotiated with both Confederate and Union armies to permit her nearly 3,000 bales of cotton to be shipped to England for a payment of nearly a million dollars.

And it is that subject of cotton which finally takes the Trace's Civil War history full circle, back to the south, to Natchez, where, in a sense, the great conflict began. Occupied by Union troops for much of the war, Natchez escaped destruction, and today the city's preserved antebellum splendor is absolutely unrivaled. Here it is possible to see both the riches King Cotton bestowed and the inestimable price that was demanded. Once boasting the highest concentration of millionaires in the country, planters and merchants whose former castles still line the streets of the city today, Natchez was also home to "Forks of the Road," one of the two largest slave markets in the south. Although the market has disappeared, the marked road still forks in the same spot, and at the Natchez Museum of Afro-American Culture, the struggles, achievements and history of area Africa- Americans are charted from the Civil War through World War II.

One of the nation's longest running tourism events, the Natchez Pilgrimage, this year marks its 75th anniversary, and includes the "Southern Road to Freedom," a inspiring musical tribute to the African-American experience in Natchez, performed by the Holy Family Choir. Today, the Natchez Trace opens on to the world of both a house divided, and a house divided no more.

For visitor information: www.scenictrace.com