

*Preserving the Past,
Preparing for the Future*

Natchez Looks Forward



Dunleith Mansion, Natchez, MS

In 2008, the National Geographic Society’s Center for Sustainable Communities ranked the top 109 Historic Places around the world that met the criteria of “populated communities possessing a historic character, district or dominant place.” In this formidable competition, which included Aix-en-Provence and Dijon in France, Edinburgh in Scotland, York in England, San Gimignano in Tuscany, and Munich in Germany—Natchez, Mississippi ranked number 40. The Society chose Natchez because it “has fantastic architectural heritage and the stories, of all cultures, to back it up”- quite a tribute to Natchez’s historical and architectural assets.

Many people and organizations have gone to great lengths to preserve these treasures, both for cultural and for economic reasons. But, before the assets and economic impact are outlined, a look at the history is an important first step.

The History

Human habitation of the Natchez area dates back to early Native American tribes, although it was the later Natchez tribe that lived in the region of southwest Mississippi for 800 years prior to the first European contact. Originally a territory of France, Natchez was traded among European powers as New World land became a precious commodity. In 1798, Natchez, and the entire state of Mississippi, were taken by the United States in an effort to expand the country’s western borders.

Natchez became the first capital of the new territory and in 1817 was established as the first capital of the new State of Mississippi. Although the capital was moved to Jackson a few years later, Natchez remained a center of economic activity for Mississippi throughout the 19th century and was a major agricultural and shipping hub for a young nation.

The naturally fertile soil around Natchez gave birth to a booming cotton production industry. With its strategically important location on bluffs high above the Mississippi River, Natchez also became an important port for shipping the cotton crop to mills in the north, and its plantation owners accumulated great wealth. Prior to the Civil War, Natchez had more millionaires per capita than any other city in the United States.

The opulence of the cotton planters’ lifestyles can still be seen in Natchez today, and the area has one of the best preserved concentrations of architecturally distinctive antebellum estates in the United States. Many of these palatial estates are preserved, thanks to the support of civic groups and private foundations, and serve as important representations of Greek-revival architecture in the Southern style.

Historical Assets

The scale of Natchez’s historical and cultural assets, for a city of less than 20,000 people, is impressive. Nearly 80 sites are on the National Register of Historic Places, but because some districts include several hundred historic homes, the real number is closer to 1,300. These include 13 National Historic Landmarks, the highest historic designation given by the federal government.

The Natchez National Historic Park has 102,000 objects in its collection, with approximately 81,000 archeological artifacts and documents found in the Melrose Estate, William Johnson House, and Fort Rosalie. Melrose Estate, one of the grandest of the Greek Revival mansions from Natchez’s plantation past, is complete with historic furnishings and original outbuildings throughout the nearly 80-acre site. Since construction in 1845, the mansion has been owned by only three families prior to National Park Service (NPS) acquisition, which helped preserve the property over the past 150 years. William Johnson House, a small Greek Revival townhouse in urban Natchez, was home to a slave freed by a white planter thought to be his father. Johnson’s 2,000- page personal and business diary provides important glimpses of antebellum southern life and relations between whites and freed blacks. His home is presently maintained by the NPS as an important center for interpreting Natchez’s African-American history to modern-day visitors.



Monmouth, Natchez, MS

The Natchez Museum of African American Culture, located in the city's old post office, is another important historical and cultural asset. It contains photographs and artifacts that chronicle and interpret the history of slaves and African-Americans in the region, with a current exhibit of art from West Africa from where large numbers of slaves came. Prior to the Museum's founding in 1990, some of the mainstream historical record projected the image of contented slaves and overlooked the cruelty of the slave trade and the museum helped set the record straight. The first Africans were brought to Natchez by early French settlers as labor for the growing settlement. That would eventually become the state of Mississippi. Just east of the downtown Natchez area is the site of Forks of the Road, the second largest slave market in the U.S. in the nineteenth century. The site became a refuge for freed slaves once the Union Army took the city in 1863.

Key Players

In spite of an early commitment to preserve and protect the historical and architectural assets of Natchez, the city lost its way in the 1960s and 1970s when the economy declined and industry began to move out. The downtown suffered from serious neglect, and many of the stunning architectural and historical gems deteriorated. If it hadn't been for the work of several key players, the city could have declined even further.

Local policymakers in Natchez have long understood the importance of historic preservation. In 1954, the city adopted the first preservation ordinance to maintain its historic/architectural assets. Thanks to this ordinance, the town now has five historic districts, most in the downtown area. Former city planners, the Historical Commission, and elected officials continue to generate and enforce historic preservation regulations.

Among the organizations and institutions committed to preserving Natchez's past, a few stand out as key players in preservation efforts. The Historic Natchez Foundation was founded in 1974 to preserve and enhance the buildings and neighborhoods, an important part of Natchez's history. As a time when the city was perhaps not as focused on protecting its historical assets, the Foundation mustered the will, leadership and resources to stop the decline. Through its efforts around National Historic Register designation, its support to home owners and building owners who need tax credits and incentives, its

development of the Natchez Historic Collection, and its tireless work to identify and catalogue current and endangered properties, the Foundation has been at the forefront. In many ways, the Foundation is the conscience of historic preservation in the area, as well as one of its saviors.

Since its founding in 1988, the Natchez National Historical Park has helped to preserve Natchez's historic significance. The Park has a multi-million dollar visitor's and interpretative center, as well as several architecturally and historically significant collections, houses and sites. The opening of the center marked one of the first attempts by preservationists to tell the full and accurate story about slavery in Natchez.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) has been critically important to the preservation of Natchez's historic and architectural assets, with projects such as the restoration of Jefferson College and the Grand Village of the Natchez Indians and its contributions to Natchez's efforts to get all of the historic properties and sites on the National Register of Historic Places. MDAH also provided grants to building owners for façade improvements, and it helped Natchez obtain Certified Local Government status, an important designation for historic preservation funds. Staff from MDAH also worked extensively with the Historic Natchez Foundation in its early efforts to reclaim some of the neglected historic buildings in the late 1960s and 1970s. As one interviewee noted, *"MDAH has been a lifeline to our preservation efforts. They've been there every time we've needed them."*

The Garden Clubs of the 1930s were another of the early advocates for historic preservation and the first to bring in outside visitors to Natchez. Some of the revenue generated by the tours over the years has gone directly to homeowners, and the income helped their efforts to renovate and maintain the structural and architectural integrity of their homes.

The Office of Tourism and Natchez Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) have been instrumental in making Natchez a national destination for visitors, conventions, and meetings. The CVB works with all the historic, cultural and events organizations to coordinate promotion and to enhance the quality of the visitor experience, and the revenue generated adds to the historic preservation income stream.

City and county leaders also have recently initiated a plan for restructuring and streamlining economic development in the region. This effort could enhance, among other things, the relationship between historic preservation and economic development.

Economic Impact of Historic Preservation

Natchez has arts, music, garden tours, conventions and great views that attract a lot of tourists, but as a local business owner said, “It’s the history, the culture and the architecture that is the core. Everything else would still go on, but without the historical assets, it wouldn’t be the same.”

The Natchez Mayor’s Office estimates that roughly 700,000 people visit the city each year, many coming for the Spring and Fall Pilgrimages, Garden Tours, Natchez Festival of Music, Balloon Fair, conventions and meetings—but also for the sheer pleasure of walking the streets of Natchez and taking in the view from the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. Again, the historical and cultural assets are what make this attraction of tourists possible.

The impact of that many visitors is substantial for Natchez and for Adams County. In 2008, about 2000 people were employed in tourism-related jobs in Adams County, 15 percent of total employment for the county, and tourism-related tax revenues from rooms and restaurants in Natchez alone was over \$1 million.

The Natchez Historical Park makes a significant contribution to the local Natchez economy. In 2008, the park saw 232,470 visitors who spent \$11,863,000, which contributed to creating 222 jobs and generating \$4,416,000 in wages and adding \$6,835,000 of value to the Natchez economy.

The renovation and repair of historic properties and homes also has an economic impact with 1,170 people in Adams County employed in construction and specialty trade-related work by 62 firms. A former city planner for Natchez estimates 200-300 applications a year for permits to renovate and/or repair historically significant homes, much of this done by a group of highly-skilled mill working firms and professionals. They, in turn, sub-contract to complete work on homes and historic buildings including to a small

but highly-skilled group of African-Americans. Several talented craftsmen from these families have passed those skills on to their children.

The economic benefit of the Historic Natchez Collection is also notable. The wealthy barons of the cotton industry furnished their homes with a distinct style of furniture and decorative arts that were quite elegant. The Historic Natchez Foundation secured the license for what became known as the Historic Natchez Collection. The Foundation sold the design rights to major furniture manufacturers in North Carolina and other companies throughout the country, which pay the Historic Natchez Foundation a royalty for using the design. Mimi Miller said that “at its peak, the licensing brought in \$400,000 a year to the Foundation, which helped support our preservation work.” In recent years, revenue from the Collection has declined but it still brings in roughly \$30,000 a year.

The Future

In addition to the work of all of the key organizations noted above, there are also several projects in the planning stages that will continue to strengthen the historical and cultural assets of Natchez. The Community Alliance, the city and others have been working on the Natchez Trails Project, a \$3 million project funded by the Federal Highway Administration, the Mississippi Department of Transportation, and private contributors. Once completed, the trails will become a virtual “Museum of the Streets.”

The National Park Service will also oversee a new project. NPS purchased seven acres of land near the Fort Rosalie site and plans to tear down deteriorated buildings, constructions, parking and walking areas, and develop a new set of interpretative exhibits on Natchez’s colonial history. Furthermore, several structures on Canal Street will be renovated and used for extended visitor information and contact sites.