

The Cabin Re-Interprets the Big House

The advent of the Black historical counter-narrative in Natchez, the heart of the Lost Cause South

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For twenty-one years Ser Boxley has been irritating the tourism industry, historical societies, and the National Park Service. “They don’t like me,” he says. Since he moved back to his hometown of Natchez in 1995 after a career teaching and fighting for social justice in Northern California, he has taken up the cause of the past. His plan was to leave the U.S. behind and enjoy his retirement in Africa, but the ghosts that seem to inhabit Mississippi’s ruins took hold of him. While in Natchez, on his way to Africa, he couldn’t look past the glorification of antebellum mansions and *Gone with the Wind* imagery that permeated his hometown during its annual Pilgrimage festivals. He had been on the frontlines of the civil rights movement in San Francisco. He carried with him a belief in the power of Black self-determination that made ignorance impossible. As tourists lined up for mansion tours to view the architecture of genteel plantation elites, he explained poetically, “Ancestor spirits asked me, ‘Who’s telling our story?’ That got me going.” He speaks about history in religious tones. “There are two spirits: a dark energy of enslavers and the ancestor spirits who want their truth out.”¹

Boxley’s ghosts fight for memory at a battleground, wedged between vast alluvial plains and lush, hilly forests, above a bluff overlooking the brown water of the Mississippi. Natchez’s history stretches back far beyond that of other southern cities: three centuries. It began as a tenuous French outpost, but after the American Revolutionary War, became a center of Spanish power on the Mississippi. Along with eventual and inevitable American emigration and development in the area, came the power of infamous King Cotton and modern, industrialized slavery.²

The slave market at Natchez was known for its volume, offering up to five hundred slaves at a time. Over one million hands from the declining eastern tobacco plantations were forced west in a massive, decades-long migration only recently being studied by historians. In the 1830’s, in order to feed high demand in the Delta cotton fields, slave trader Isaac Franklin set up a slave “coffle,” a sort of slave pipeline. He bought slaves from a partner in Virginia, marched



Civil rights and African American history advocate, Mayor Phillip West, takes a look back at Dunleith mansion.

them in chain gangs to pens in Nashville and then across the young state of Mississippi along the Natchez Trace. He finally gathered them in pens just outside the Natchez limits at a place known as “Forks of the Road.” Here planters from the Miss-Lou region casually and regularly gathered to trade for slaves as they pleased, a striking contrast to the auction-style that persisted across the rest of the South. Isaac Franklin had managed to modernize the domestic slave trade on the model of the nation-wide commercial revolution that marked the early 19th century.³

The Pilgrimage, a bi-annual month-long touristic extravaganza hosted by the city’s elites, dominated not only the tourism industry in the region, but also historical memory the railroad decimated Natchez’s place on top of the cotton industry. For most, the Pilgrimage was the only reason people came to the out-of-the-way city. History was a product in Natchez, to be bought and sold, but some episodes of Natchez African American history were considered too unpalatable as an offering for consumers. Travel literature maintained that tourists were coming to experience the romance of Margaret Mitchell’s world: its hospitality and architecture. No one was coming to be reminded of sins and blood. But such romantic imagery proved dissonant for Black travelers who happened to make their way to Natchez. They were

¹ Ser Boxley (aka Ser Sheshs Ab Heter C.M. Boxley), interview by author, March 28, 2016.

² Suzanne Dolensky, “Natchez in 1920: On the Threshold of Modernity,” *Journal of Mississippi History* (Summer, 2011), 96.

³ Historians studying this migration notably include Edward Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (NY: Basic, 2014.); Jim Barnett and H. Clark Burkett, “The Forks of the Road Slave Market at Natchez,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 63, no. 3 (Fall, 2001), 169-187.



The 1937 Pilgrimage Confederate Ball court, evoking images from popular “Agrarian” literature: women donning hoop skirts and acting the part of Southern belles while the men dress in Confederate uniforms. (from Dolensky, 135.)

less enamored with the genteel families that owned the fine homes, and more interested in their own American heritage.⁴

While African Americans leaders in Natchez had been insisting that they tell their own story for decades before Ser Boxley came back to town in 1995, no one had been so assertive and confrontational in their opinion as Boxley, who was unafraid to hold up taboo subjects like slavery and civil rights. “The way it was being presented made it look like white folks did everything,” he said. But Boxley insists that the history of the 1860’s and even the tumult of the 1960s sits like an untapped resource for the local tourism industry. The city brought in consultant Cheryl Hargrove, who agreed with Boxley, explaining that, “Among the largest untapped tourism locations in Natchez are the numerous sites where pivotal moments in African-American history have taken place.” The first Black mayor of Natchez since Reconstruction, Phillip West, explained to reporters in 2004 that “there has been a resentment over the mansions and the kind of either half stories or not truly accurate stories.” The mayor predicted that the dissonance would subside, “All of us recognize that we must embrace the real truth about who we are in order to be able to move forward for the future.”⁵

The Natchez Pilgrimage and the Southern Agrarians’ Order of Things

The idea of the Pilgrimage came from the imagination of Katherine Grafton Miller, the self-proclaimed romantic who was a vivacious leader among the stodgy women of the Natchez Ladies’ Garden Club. On the occasion of the 1932 convention of state garden clubs, members of the Natchez Club who owned numerous extant antebellum mansions that lined the streets of Natchez were encouraged to open their doors to tours. They took the occasion to showcase their gardens and exercise Southern hospitality. The women dressed in fanciful hoop skirts and made a fuss as their men and boys were recruited to play the part of antebellum gentlemen. A “Confederate pageant,” in the tradition of the tableaux championed by the Daughters of the Confederacy a generation prior, was held in the evenings. Here attendees were treated to dancing and story-telling, amounting to a spectacular and powerful retelling of history. The success of the Pilgrimage assured that it would become an annual event in the struggling city. It seemed the ladies had found a way to save the ailing cotton city from its deathbed by transforming it into a heritage tourist destination. After a generation its impact was no argument. Historian and tourism booster Thomas Clark noted in 1961 that “a well-loaded station wagon coming down the road from Pennsylvania headed for a Mardi Gras-garden tour in New Orleans and Natchez... translated in economic terms comparable to a small crop of cotton.”⁶

Romantic depictions of history became Natchez’s biggest industry as the ladies learned to cater to the expectations carried in by tourists who were reading the romantic Lost Cause literature of the “Southern Agrarians,” a literary school which had been gaining momentum since the 1920s. These Southern Agrarians defended the validity of the institutions of the Old South which they felt were under attack by urbane Northerners. Chief among their critics stood H.L. Mencken, who, especially after the 1925 Scopes Trial, complained openly of the South as a cultural black hole, the home of “yokels” under the influence of “snake-charmer” pastors. A

⁴ Ronald L.F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880* (Washington: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993); Steven Hoelscher, “Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 3 (2003), 664. For more on the impact of railroads see Dolensky, 105-7.; Boxley, 2016.

⁵ Boxley, 2016; Rod Guajardo, “Experts say Natchez filled with heritage tourism opportunities,” *Natchez Democrat* (Feb. 9, 2014).; Mike Bruner, “Race, politics, and the evolving South,” MSNBC, August 17, 2004, http://www.today.com/id/5676325/ns/today-today_news/t/race-politics-evolving-south (accessed March 2, 2016).

⁶ “I was always a dreamer,” Miller once said, “even as a little girl my head was in the clouds most of the time.” Bette Barber Hammer, *Natchez’s First Ladies, Katherine Grafton Miller and the Pilgrimage* (NY: L. Kitner, 1955), 2.; Ivan Dmitri, “So Red the Rose,” *Saturday Evening Post* (March 4, 1939), 61, and Alma Kellogg, interview by Elliott Trimble (Aug. 14, 1982), MDAH PGC AU745; Catherine W. Bishir, “A Strong Force of Ladies: Women, Politics, and the Confederate Memorial Associations of 19th Century Raleigh,” from Mills and Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscape of Southern Memory* (Knoxville: U of TN Press, 2003), 3-26.; Thomas D. Clark, *The Emerging South, 2nd ed.* (NY: Oxford, 1968), 140.

leading voice among the Agrarians, who contended that the South's traditional religion and hierarchy was a source of rich cultural heritage, was Mississippian Stark Young, whose 1934 best-seller *So Red the Rose* took place in antebellum Natchez. The popularity of the novel, a melodrama revolving around the lives of the elite mansion-dwellers, further added to the popularity of the Pilgrimage. In 1939, the *Saturday Evening Post* gave the Pilgrimage a three page spread, featuring a colored photo essay, under the headline "So Red the Rose." Later that year the film *Gone with the Wind* took the nation by storm, further adding to demand. In a state recovering from the devastating flood of 1927, a severe drought in 1930, hunger so bad the Red Cross was called in, a declining tax base, and crippling debt; Katherine Miller's Pilgrimage was a surprising lifesaver. Natchezians held onto it, whatever the philosophy behind it.⁷

What made the Pilgrimage successful wasn't so much the gardens and hospitality, but the same thing that made *Gone with the Wind* successful. The Pilgrimage represented more than the Lost Cause to visitors who were attracted to the mansion tours and Confederate ball, it represented predictable order in an increasingly pluralistic country, a country reshaped by the New Deal. The Agrarian literary figures, in their anonymously published manifesto *I'll Take my Stand*, turned Mencken's arguments about the emptiness of Southern culture on the industrial North, a place where individualism was sacrificed to the collective and where workers became desensitized slaves to the "Cult of Science." They lamented that "younger Southerners" were "being converted frequently to the industrial gospel," and urged their fellows to reject the so-called New South and "come back to the support of the Southern tradition" lest they become "an undistinguished replica of the of the usual industrial community." Former Garden Club President Mary Louise Goodrich echoed their concern, "We don't want to look like a little town in the Midwest, like every other town. We wanted to look like Natchez used to look."⁸

The Pilgrimage's 25th Anniversary pamphlet echoed the anti-modernist sentiment of the Twelve Southerners, "Check your modernisms, your hurry

and everyday bustle and come with me to lovely Natchez," it began. The writers of romantic Lost Cause literature reflected the opinions of many of their readers: the Depression proved that industrialism and urbanization had failed. The individual was lost in hurry and became less a human and more a cog in some faceless machine. A yearning existed to "return" to agrarianism and perceived traditional Jeffersonian values.⁹

As the Great Migration pulled away African American labor and boll weevil infestations devastated Natchez's cotton fields, it was harder and harder to hold onto agrarian Jeffersonian values. Throughout the 1920s, Natchez's Chamber of Commerce, made up of businessmen dismissed by the Garden Club ladies as coming from families "lacking the original culture and refinement of Natchez," attempted furiously to reinvent the city as an urban, industrial model for the New South. They pushed hard to plug Natchez into the nascent oil industry developing downriver in Louisiana and tried to build a bridge and rails to reconnect commerce to the city, which had become a backwater in the industrialized automobile and railroad eras. Boosters of the New South were unable to accomplish their goals since the Agrarian-minded legislature (reflecting the will of poor whites in the less affluent Hill country) passed several state laws dating back to the 1890s, stymying industry. The writers of *I'll Take My Stand* compared chambers of commerce to "Sovietists," and wondered provocatively if the South should abandon the Democratic Party for a new party.¹⁰ The only success of the Chamber was the opening of the Armstrong Tire and Rubber Plant in 1939, which was Natchez's largest employer and the only reliable economic engine in the city besides the tourism brought in by the Pilgrimage. The Garden Club ladies lamented their neighbors' push for the "modern," and hoped they would "come around" to seeing their point of view. In the end, heritage tourism proved the boon to Natchez and brought the money that ended up building the bridge that the Chamber of Commerce dreamed about.¹¹

⁷ Edward S. Shapiro, "The Southern Agrarians, H.L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity," *American Studies* 13, no. 2 (Fall, 1972), 76.; Ivan Dmitri, "So Red the Rose," *Saturday Evening Post* (March 4, 1939), 61-64.; Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the 20th Century* (NY: Hill & Wang, 1986), 109-110.

⁸ Twelve Southerners, "Introduction: A Statement of Principles," *I'll Take my Stand*, (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1930), *xlii-xliii*.; Mary Louise Goodrich, interview by Graham Hicks (Jan. 27, 1982), 11. MDAH PGC AU738 OH1982.06.02

⁹ Hammer, 1.

¹⁰ Notably, many of the Garden Club ladies did just that and were very early Southern Republicans. Katherine Miller regularly attended Republican National Conventions and campaigned for Eisenhower in 1952, long before the rest of the Democratic "Solid South" shifted its allegiances.

¹¹ Dmitri, 63.; Dolensky, 109-111, 113-114; Twelve Southerners., *xlv* and *li*.; Hammer, 8.; Goodrich, 13.

African Americans in the Southern Agrarian Order

Where did Natchez's 7,159 African Americans fit into that Jeffersonian "old way of life" championed by "romantics" like the Twelve Southerners and the Natchez Garden Club? According to Eric Foner, "Blacks formed no part in the imagined community of Jefferson's republic." The proper ladies of the Garden Club did not say it so curtly, preferring what Boxley called a message referred to lately as "Natchez Positive." They annually performed a version of the South which avoided "unpleasantness," expressed concern for and paternal devotion to the Blacks of Natchez, while resting implicitly on an assumption of white supremacy. Historian Jack Davis, who spent years researching race relations in Natchez, argued that a major purpose of the Pilgrimage was to push a white supremacist message to participants and visitors. Racial hierarchy and expectations that blacks would fall into line was as much a part of the Agrarian vision as anything else and the Pilgrimage presented it as the natural order of things. In fact, Natchezians wrote that "the negro of today should thank God his ancestors were brought to this country as slaves." Everybody had a part to play. Reflecting the writings of seminal Progressive historian U.B. Phillips, whites would play the role of the benevolent paternalist while blacks would assume the role of their faithful charges. Pilgrimage founder Katherine Miller told reporters one of her "pet hobbies was to encourage Negroes living in and about Natchez in the beautification of their surroundings." When invited to speak before a black church on the subject, Miller gave a sermon, entitled "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Whites did not see this as demeaning to blacks. It was the order of things, and, from their perspective, only modernists and socialists like Mencken failed to understand this salutary relationship.¹²

Blacks in Natchez, hampered by the color line in unions found themselves to be the "first fired" as the few firms that existed in Natchez, like Armstrong Tire, trimmed their staff during the Depression. Blacks, trying to earn what paltry benefit they could from the financial boon of the Pilgrimage, worked as hotel workers, wait staff, and chauffeurs. They tended



Images of African Americans being used as set pieces during Pilgrimage. Top: Mrs. Ferriday Byrnes, the mother of the Natchez Trace Nat'l Pkwy, rides along the Trace. Bottom: A youth operates a "punkah" to fan Pilgrimage participants, reminiscent of the racial hierarchy of slavery days. [National Geographic (Feb., 1949), 183 and 192.]

to accommodate the imaginations of their white neighbors who found profit in revisionist versions of the "Old South." While they pled for white paternalists to have "sympathy" on them, most Black leaders urged cooperation with whites and dismissal of the "theories" of newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* which made migrating north seem like a good option. Some black newspapers made the claim

¹² In 1930, African Americans were 53% of Natchez's population. "Table 25: Mississippi, Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990," from Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race* (Washington: U.S. Census Bureau, Feb., 2005.); Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (NY: Hill & Wang, 2002), p. 154.; Boxley, 2016. The word "positive" has become a buzzword during the Tri-centennial celebrations of Natchez to be held throughout 2016. Teree Carruthers, "Natchez, MS, celebrates Tri-centennial," *Livability* (Aug. 7, 2015), <http://www.livability.com/ms/natchez/attractions/natchez-ms-commemorates-300-year-history-while-preparing-even-brighter-future/>; Jack E. Davis, *Race against Time: Culture and Separation in Natchez since 1930* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2001).; Ullrich Phillips believed whites provided slaves with civilization in exchange for their labor. U.B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (NY: Little, Brown, & Co., 1929).; Mrs. Hugh Rodman, letter to Albert Jones, State Sovereignty Commission (Dec. 15, 1960). MDAH 2-63-32; Hammer, 2.

that Jim Crow wasn't so bad in Natchez. One black traveler told newspapermen, "Conditions here in Mississippi are infinitely different from what I had been told I would find." She concluded that Natchez, in particular, left her with the thought, "It is too bad northerners hear only of the darker side of Southern existence."¹³

The few black celebrities, like *Porgy & Bess* star Etta Moten, who made their way to the Pilgrimage, were surprised that the ladies treated them with "no condescension." If the ladies were promoting white supremacy, they were doing so unconsciously and made no pointed effort to force the issue in any direct or confrontational manner. Despite this, there was an unarguably singular version of history being presented. Ser Boxley, decades later, called it "white-washed." Steven Hoelscher has made the claim that the Confederate Tableaux and Pilgrimage made the selective memory of Agrarian Romantics concrete, lending it an air of reality, if at least in the past. This served to give Jim Crow social legitimacy, even if the ladies were not overtly political or aggressive about their message. It should be noted, however, that these river elites were not the group pushing Jim Crow in Mississippi, after all they considered themselves, "a breed apart." Jim Crow was authored by the "Hill Country" people of the eastern part of the state who found their champion in Governor, then Senator, Theodore Bilbo. Bilbo, a KKK member, responded to and fed anti-black and anti-planter class populism that, in turn, drove Jim Crow. Bilbo was despised by the elites and Chamber of Commerce types in Natchez, as was his virulent and confrontational version of white supremacy. Etta Moten, who attended the Pilgrimage and lavished praise on her elite planter-class hosts, in the same interview with the black press, complained that traveling in separate train cars was "abhorrent." But she also noted that her coach was at least "equal in every respect to the white coach, and kept spotlessly clean." The "Bourbons," as E. Franklin Frazier called the river elites, were "willing to leave the voteless and landless Negroes in peace," but allowed Jim Crow as a concession to the up-swelling of resentment from poor whites.¹⁴

The Black Natchezian seemed to be trapped eternally by Jim Crow accommodationism, especially from the perspective of those who left during the

Great Migration. Richard Wright, the famous author who was among the first voices of black consciousness, was born just outside Natchez in Roxie. He didn't know Natchez intimately, having moved North as a very young boy, and raised in more empowered black communities. He wrote in his autobiography *Black Boy* about the disappointment in meeting his father on a plantation in Mississippi, "clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands." Wright concluded, "We were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly different planes of reality." His father was merely a "black peasant," whose reality was dictated by "white landowners above him."¹⁵

From the very earliest days of the Pilgrimage-era, these so-called "New Negroes" of the Great Migration looked at the revision of history by Wright's "white landowners" and were not comfortable with the story being told. In a review of a 1934 photography book by Doris Ullmann, which attempted to document the lives of Mississippi blacks, editors of the NAACP journal *The Crisis* took the opportunity to attack the white revisionism that permeated the book, which they said assumed "that it is the manifest destiny of the Negro to be cheerfully quaintly servile, poor, ignorant, pious, and superstitious for the edification of the Big House."

Ullman asserted that "since Negroes are destined to be servants, they have a right to be servants of worthy people," a reflection of the white supremacy of river elites. The reviewer objected at the authors' explanation that



Visit
the
Deep
South

PILGRIMS TO THE DEEP SOUTH will discover an unique and interesting section of their native land. Romance and color of the Old South blended with the progress of the New South, a profusion of natural beauty and charming hospitality will make their visit one of the most eventful adventures of a lifetime.

A Pilgrimage advertisement distributed nationally ca. 1940, describing the era of chattel slavery as one of "romance and color." (From MDAH via Hoelscher)

¹³ Lizbeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal* (NY: Cambridge UP, 1990), 242.; J.H. Attaway of the Mississippi YMCA, quoted by Dolensky, 124; "Etta Moten Given Big Ovation in Mississippi," *Kansas City Plain-Dealer* (Nov. 6, 1936), 8.

¹⁴ "Etta Moten Given Big Ovation in Mississippi," *Kansas City Plain-Dealer* (Nov. 6, 1936), 8.; Boxley, 2016.; Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race," 661.; Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Dixon, interview by Graham Hicks (Feb. 13, 1982), 8. MDAH AU737 OH1982.06.01; Daniel, 31, also E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 142.; Dolensky calls this the "poor white vs. nabob" rift, footnotes 111.; Frazier, 142.

¹⁵ Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. (NY: Harper & Bros., 1937), 30-1.

white elites in the South were “infected” by their black neighbors “with a wish to live with a minimum of labor” since black servants were so cheap and plentiful in Southern mansions.¹⁶

Advertisements, distributed nation-wide and through major media outlets, echoed the sentiments of paternalistic white supremacy that *The Crisis* found so objectionable. Pilgrimage ads depicted Blacks as smiling and servile set pieces, among the mansions and trees. They were part of the mystique, often demeaning themselves for pay by acting as slaves in the yards surrounding the mansions. Black children were recruited to fan white tourists who dined in the mansions. Heavy-set black women dressed in calico as “mammies” to serve dinners in the mansions. Black choirs were paid to sing “throaty Negro spirituals,” the sound which helped take tourists “back to yesteryear, to the Golden days of the South.” A 1941 ad compared the songs of black workers in the field to the sound of “the liquid notes of mockingbirds.” It went on to say, “The fields still whiten and darkies still sing in this land of laughter, love, and song.”¹⁷

Blacks were expected to be content with their subservient role and were depicted, as *The Crisis* complained as “almost incurably cheerful.” Visitors who heard spirituals sung by Natchez’s black choirs rest assured “a cherished testimonial to masters and slaves is that the spirituals, though born in slavery, carry no note of bitterness.” Tableaux visitors wrote about being delighted by “plantation scenes featuring songs and dances by Negro youngsters, which gave us the joy of the Negro quarters before the war.” ‘Joy’ is hardly the first word that comes to mind when describing slavery as it *actually* was practiced in antebellum Natchez. Not only were slaves marched across the country in Franklin’s coffles, but brutality in Natchez was not unknown. In one of many examples, a free black barber William Johnson wrote in his diary of an enslaver who “had beat his man Arthur very Severely on Friday night with a Picket he pulled off the fence and that the Picket had a nail in it which Stuck in the Poor fellow’s head [sic].” Historian Pete Daniel noted that the river elites of Mississippi “never understood the price their black laborers paid for their lords’ wealth and position.”¹⁸



Mammy's Cupboard Restaurant, as photographed by the author in Natchez in 2016.

African Americans were present, out of economic necessity usually, at the sites of the Pilgrimage, many of which had been the places of enslavement for their recent ancestors. What was lacking was not black participation, but their function as humans with a history. To the white elite, blacks were a part of the setting. Nothing made this clearer than the restaurant and gas station designed by Pilgrimage architect Annie Davis-Bost and built in 1939 on the outskirts of Natchez along Highway 61 to serve the needs of motoring tourists. Known as “Mammy’s Cupboard,” the restaurant building stands under the skirt of a 28 foot tall black woman holding a serving tray. Its owner told *Roadside America*, “She needs to be kept up, she’s a historical item.” To tourists and those catering to their expectations, blacks were *history* in Natchez. Mammy was a “symbol of nurturing,” referencing black history from the enslaver’s point of view. It should be noted that whites erected monuments to “faithful slaves” across

¹⁶ “The Big House Interprets the Cabin,” *The Crisis* (Feb., 1934), p. 37.

¹⁷ Joan Gandy, “Coy prepare for 75th Pilgrimage program,” *Natchez Democrat* (Jan. 28, 2007.); Nicholas, William H. “History Repeats in Old Natchez,” *National Geographic*. Feb., 1949, pp. 181-208.; Hammer writes, “One of the most attractive features is the graceful ‘punkah’ which swings over the dining room table, reminiscent of the days when some small negro was assigned to pull it back and forth to combat the summer heat.” (p. 23.); Davis, Jack E. “A Struggle for Public History: Black and White Claims to Natchez’s Past”. *The Public Historian* 22, no. 1 (2000), 55.; Hammer, 8; 1941 ad quoted by Hoelscher, “Making Place, Making Race,” 658-9.

¹⁸ *The Crisis*, “The Big House...”, 38.; Mary P. McVeigh, 1952, quoted in Jack Davis, “A Struggle for Public History,” 55.; Hammer, 22; William Johnson, diary entry from Aug. 18, 1844, from William Johnson, *William Johnson’s Natchez: The Diary of a Free Negro, Vol. 2*, William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis, eds. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1951), 500.; Daniel, 31.

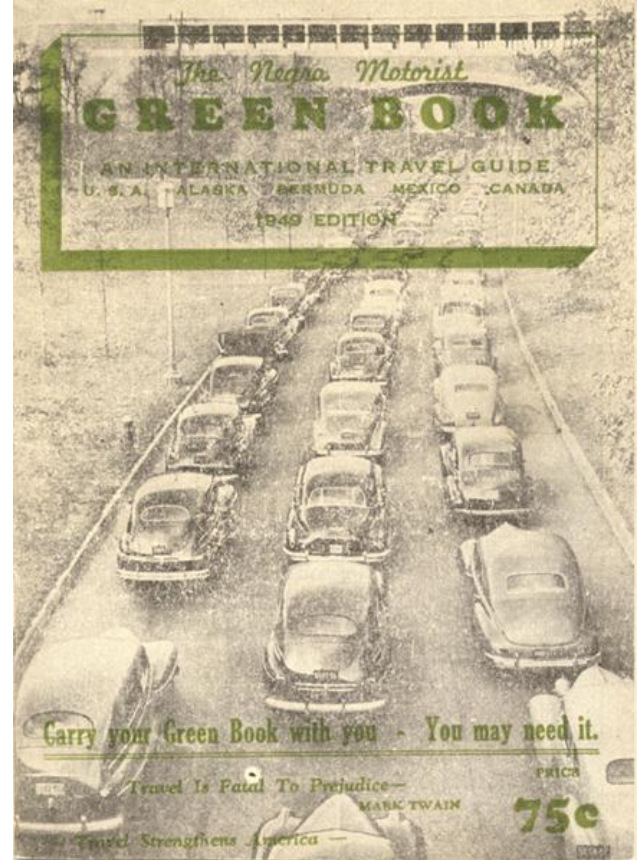
the South. There was even a failed attempt made to erect one near the National Mall.¹⁹

If blacks had a history in Natchez, it was and would remain a mystery to whites if African Americans themselves did not take action to tell their own stories. “There is a Negro South, but it is mysterious and incomprehensible to most white men,” explained segregationist James J. Kilpatrick in 1962. There were many Natchez histories, but only *one* was being told. When blacks did tell their story, they were accused of telling lies. Richard Wright, whose book *Black Boy* humanized the black experience in America, was *not* celebrated as a hero in his native city. Senator Bilbo took to the floor of the Senate in 1945 to give his review, calling the story “a damnable lie from beginning to end.” Bilbo admitted Wright knew enough about Southern “culture, education, and life,” but only used his experience as a base to build lies which meant to “plant the seeds of hate in every Negro in America against the white men of the South.”²⁰

Black Political Awakening in the Age of the Consumer

The early Pilgrimages attracted mostly the wealthy, but postwar Pilgrimages saw great growth as an increasingly middle class clientele arriving in the historic city. Automobility had become a symbol of American freedom, one in which anyone with a car could participate. While Highway 61 brought *white* tourists to the Pilgrimages for visions of magnolia and moonbeams and, according to Thomas Clark in 1961, to “‘imagine for a fleeting moment’ that they too had owned slaves and run plantations,” *black* tourism was difficult in the Deep South. Jim Crow made travel an embarrassing and potentially dangerous proposition. Editor Ernest Dunbar explained to a wide audience in the pages of *Look Magazine* in 1968, “*Really* seeing America could get us arrested or even killed.” Blacks were not part of the exuberant postwar proclamation of freedom of the open American roads, but they wanted to be and the high speeds of the new Interstate highways offered anonymity on the road.²¹

Jim Crow made travel such a burden for African Americans that Victor Green’s list of hotels and restaurants that served Black travelers became a nation-wide best-seller and was published for three decades beginning in 1936. The Harlem-based *Negro Motorist Green Book* sold for 75 cents and warned consumers to “Carry your Green Book with you- you may need it.” But in 1949, it added a quote from Mark Twain, “Travel is fatal to prejudice.” Green, who took the opportunity to write an introduction to each edition, hoped that African Americans could use their role as travel consumers to chip away at Jim Crow. He may have been responding to his critics who saw his guidebook as accommodationism. Green addressed



The 1949 edition of the *Negro Motorist Green Book* included the Mark Twain quote: “Travel is fatal to prejudice.” (From University of Michigan “Automobile in American Life & Society Project”)

¹⁹ Davis-Bost and her husband designed many cottages in a revival style of the Queen Anne and Colonial for the elites of Natchez. Her family has been involved in the Tableaux for decades.; *Roadside America* field review, “Mammy’s Cupboard,” *RoadsideAmerica.com* (Accessed March 4, 2016) <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/3344>; Micki McElya, *Monumental Citizenship: Reading the National Mammy Memorial Controversy of the Early 20th Century* (Ph.D. Diss. New York University., 2003), 13, 152.; Kathleen Clark, 71.

²⁰ James J. Kilpatrick, *The Southern Case for School Segregation* (NY: Crowell-Collier, 1962), 20-1.; Theodore Bilbo, “Remarks delivered by U.S. Sen. Theodore G. Bilbo in the Senate, June 27, 1945.” *Congressional Record, 79th Congress, 1st Session, 128* (June 27, 1945), 91. Bilbo added, “It is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen in print... But it comes from a Negro, and you cannot expect any better from a person of his type.”

²¹ Jack E. Davis. “A Struggle for Public History: Black and White Claims to Natchez’s Past”. *The Public Historian* 22, no. 1 (2000), 52.; Thomas Clark, 1968, quoted by Matthew Reonos, “Served up on a Silver Platter: Ross Barnett, the Tourism Industry, and Mississippi’s Civil War Centennial,” *Journal of Mississippi History* (Summer, 2010), 131.; Dunbar is quoted in Tammy Gordon, “‘Take the Amtrak to Black Tourism’: Marketing Heritage Tourism to African Americans in the 1970s,” *Journal of Tourism History* 7 (2015), 56.; Cotton Seiler, “‘So That We as a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By’: African American Automobility and Cold-War Liberalism,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (Dec., 2006), 1092 & 1111.

these concerns, “It will be a great day for us when we can suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment.” In the 1963 edition, Green praised the work of civil rights activists who led sit-ins and other consumer-based protests against segregation.²²

It was in the fight for equal access to public accommodations, particularly those involving travel, which had been the launch pad for the civil rights movement from the challenge of Homer Plessy in 1896 to that of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in 1955, and the Freedom Rides of the 1960s. On busses and trains, arguments over a color line, which constantly shifted depending on who was on board, were daily occurrences, even before the classic civil rights movement began in the 1950s. Color lines were blurry and hard to enforce on the road and at roadside diners where the clientele were strangers and these were sites of pressure for Southerners to change the segregationist norms that governed their businesses. Those who put their *Green Books* down to participate in sit-ins at segregated diners, according to Spelman’s SNCC advisor Howard Zinn staged “a multi-pronged assault on the mystique of race.” Lizbeth Cohen, who sees the consumer marketplace as the center ring for the civil rights movement noted, “Southern whites might not have liked it, but they were getting a clear message that the consumer marketplace could not be easily preserved as segregated space.” She quoted a Southern business owner who said, “The first thing that happened to whites like us was that we lost our businesses.” Pressure on white providers of services such as hotels and restaurants along the roads was central to the disintegration of Jim Crow and eventually to the self-empowerment of Southern African Americans.²³

It was on this field of battle, through a boycott led by brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, that eventually brought the capital of the Old South, Natchez, to its knees in 1966. Natchez whites, who had been reassured by their Pilgrimage history that blacks were destined for a life of servitude and needed white patronage in order to accomplish anything, were shocked by the audacity of their black

neighbors and were quick to blame outside influences. Freedom movement activist Stephen Bingham said he often received complaints in Natchez from whites who said, “We never had any problems until you Northerners came down here and started stirring up our good niggers.”²⁴

Contrary to this common opinion, agitation in Natchez came from *within* the community and not from outside. The black businessmen of the city had formed the Natchez Civic and Business League, made up of men who, in their own words, were “born and reared here in Adams County and we expect to continue to make Natchez our home” and “desire to work out our problems on a local level.” In 1955, the Civic League distributed a NAACP petition calling for the desegregation of schools in Natchez, within months of the *Brown v. Board* ruling. A letter addressed to the President of the Natchez Board of Education, accompanying the petition, explained, “In the past school plans have been made for us, rather than with us.” After the petition, along with the names and addresses of the signers were published in the *Natchez Democrat*, the President of the newly formed Natchez Chapter of the NAACP resigned his post and left it vacant. Within weeks, almost every signer of the petition wrote their own letters to the Board of Education, asking for their names to be removed from the petition. Most of their letters read the same, claiming misunderstanding or that they were lied to by the Civic League. One reads: “I was tole the wrong thing. an sence I lern better. I made a turble mistake. [sic]” Another read, “I want no part of this NAACP.” Perhaps, indicating the way opposition formed, another withdrawal letter uses the rhetoric of McCarthyism, “I am not, and never have been, a member of the NAACP.” It was a popular opinion among Natchez’s whites that the NAACP was a tool of outsider Communist forces intent on throwing the U.S. into anarchy. The talk of “reds” created a “racial situation” that was “very quiet in Natchez,” explained reports of the State Sovereignty Commission, created by the legislature to investigate racial strife and to guard against federal encroachments on Mississippi. It didn’t seem like it, but Jim Crow won its final victory in Natchez.²⁵

²² *Negro Motorist Green Book* (1949), cover, 1; *Traveler’s Green Book* (1963-4), 2.

²³ Robin D.G. Kelly, “We are not what we seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South, *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (Jun., 1993), 103-4.; It should be noted that racial segregation in Mississippi, aside from schools, was practiced without legal prescription. It was more a norm than the law and, while the term has proved insufficient to historians, was mostly *de facto* in nature. It rested on the shopkeeper’s right to refuse service.; Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (NY: Knopf, 1964), 107; and Michael Powell, “Howard Zinn, Historian, is dead at 87,” *New York Times* (Jan. 28, 2010).; Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic* (NY: Vintage, 2003), 186-7.

²⁴ Stephen Bingham, “Mississippi Letter” (Feb. 15, 1965) http://www.crmvet.org/lets/65_bingham_mslet.pdf

²⁵ Jack J. Van Landingham, Memo to Director of State Sovereignty Commission (Mar. 18, 1959), SSC-AC 2-63-7.; Natchez Business & Civic League, letter to W.A. Geisenberger (Jul. 29, 1960), SSC-AC 2-63-20.; David Bacon, Natchez Chapter NAACP, letter to Brent Forman, President of the Natchez School Board of Ed. (July 25, 1955), SSC-AC

The NAACP was the main target of white hostility, and most of that hostility came from poor whites would have been at the bottom rung of the social caste had it not been for the presence of blacks. Blacks were expected to demure to whites, but the growing movement to “regain civil rights won during Reconstruction,” as Ser Boxley put it, were seen by Bilbo’s former constituency of Hill Country whites as a direct threat to the privilege they tenuously held only because of Jim Crow. Many from the Chamber of Commerce crowd in Natchez were members of the Citizens’ Councils and spoke out against the violent activities of their poor neighbors who had formed KKK-associated clubs like the Cottonmouth Moccasin Gang. According to civil rights worker Stephen Bingham, “Such persons worry not so much because of any concern for the people being brutalized, but because it detracts from the mythical image of racial harmony that was built up in their minds.” This “mythical image” was fed them by the Pilgrimage for decades.²⁶

Attempts made by Civic League members to reach out to the Chamber of Commerce were thwarted by the State of Sovereignty Commission. The director of the SSC Albert Jones explained to a Natchez Chamber member that the result of cooperation between black and white leaders would lead to sit-ins and would “subject you to constant and endless requests for encroachments upon the pleasure and good life of the fine people of your nationally recognized and respected city.” Jones indirectly, but powerfully alluded to the history that Garden Club challenged Natchezians with protecting, “Your fine citizens are the molders and protectors of your heritage.”²⁷

Sentiment tied to historic memory did not fall on deaf ears in Natchez and neither did the infamous 1962 words of Governor Ross Barnett, the son of a Confederate veteran, who had planned to jumpstart Mississippi’s tourism by promoting Mississippian bravery in the Civil War during the war’s centennial. He based his plans on the success of the Pilgrimage and hoped that northern tourists would be so enamored with Southern hospitality and that he “could

validate Mississippi’s racial order” and dispel bad press the state was getting. Charged with state pride and full of historic memory, the day before James Meredith would become the first black student at Ole Miss under protection from a force of U.S. marshals, Barnett proclaimed, “I love Mississippi! I love her people! Our customs. I love and I respect our heritage!” A crowd of thousands waved Confederate flags as the band played “Dixie” to a roar. That night, white Mississippians wore symbols of a memory shaped in Natchez as they re-enacted the Civil War on the skulls of federal marshals.²⁸

Leading a small group to Oxford from Natchez and famously photographed brandishing a bat before the riot was Natchez’s Sheriff Billy Ferrell. Ferrell had spent the previous year as an informant for SSC investigations into the personal backgrounds of Civic League members who had applied to become notary publics so they could register new black voters. Ferrell was quick to report back that Archie Curtis, one of the Civic League’s applicants, “during the episode of the Freedom Riders in Jackson was seen loitering about the bus depot in Natchez.” The director of the SSC forwarded the sheriff’s information directly to Governor Barnett and added that Curtis was a “smart aleck Negro.” The sheriff weeks later detained young people arriving by bus in the tourist town, in the fear that they might be outside agitators



Adams County sheriff Billy Ferrell (center) at the scene of the 1962 Ole Miss Riot. Deputies of the city police and sheriff’s office were investigated by the FBI after a series of bombings. (*Life Magazine*, 1962)

2-63-9.; David Bacon, letter to Audrey M. Mackel, Chairman of the NAACP Educational Committee (Aug. 5, 1955), SSC-AC 2-63-11.; Elijah Hudson and Martha Straughter, letter to Brent Forman, School Board Chairman (Aug. 16, 1955), SSC-AC 2-63-11.; Lizzie Bacon, letter to Editor of the *Natchez Democrat* (Aug. 12, 1955), SSC-AC 2-63-11.; Isom Cameron, letter to President of the School Board (Aug. 11, 1955), SSC-AC 2-63-11.; Mrs. Hugh Rodman, Jr., letter to MS SSC (Sep. 8, 1960), SSC-AC 2-63-23.; Jack Van Landingham, memo to State Sov. Com. (Dec. 14, 1959), SSC-AC 2-63-14.

²⁶ Jack Van Landingham, memo to State Sov. Com. (Dec. 14, 1959), SSC-AC 2-63-14.; Natchez’s black community gave the U.S. its first African American Senator, Hiram R. Revels. The mayor of Natchez during Reconstruction and many of its civic leaders were also black. See Ronald L.F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez* and Richard Tristano, “Holy Family Parish: the Genesis of an African-American Catholic Community in Natchez, Mississippi,” *Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 4 (Autumn, 1998), 258-283.; Boxley, 2016; Stephen Bingham, “Mississippi Letter.”

²⁷ Albert Jones, Director of the SSC, letter to L.C. Gwin (Aug. 4, 1960), SSC-AC 2-63-22.

²⁸ Renoas, 129, 124; Wright Thompson, *Ghosts of Ole Miss*, documentary film directed by Fritz Mitchell, Wilmington, NC: Mount Philo Films, 2012.

and Freedom Riders. The entire government apparatus had its hair up from Jackson to Natchez, worried violence might spring up and when it did, it was the governor and sheriff who instigated it at Ole Miss.²⁹

The Ole Miss riot sparked poor Natchezian lumberman E.L. McDaniel to join the Ku Klux Klan. “The way they [federal marshals at Ole Miss] did it, it showed me something had to be done,” he explained. “Everywhere you’d go people would be cussing the federal government and the blacks and everything else.” His success at arming gangs of KKK-affiliated groups launched him into the top position in the United Klans of America. His hooded gangs found Archie Curtis and whipped him and beat him, then called his wife to inform her that they murdered her husband. The same day another black man, an employee of Armstrong Tire, was forced to strip and then beat with a gun and whip. All in all, sixteen black men were kidnapped and battered by masked men and three were killed, their bodies found anchored to the bottom of the Mississippi River. Instead of cowering, George Metcalfe, an employee at Armstrong Tire, reorganized the defunct NAACP Chapter in Natchez. He faced constant death threats from Klansmen, many of whom were his co-workers at Armstrong, as he protested his employer’s refusal to integrate facilities at the factory.³⁰

As the FBI moved in and took over the investigation, reporters rushed to the city, much to the chagrin of McDaniel and his followers. An article entitled “Anti-Antebellum Natchez,” in the *Chicago Daily News*, challenged Natchez’s reputation, “Somebody has taken the charm out of the once genteel Natchez.” Once the race question had been laid bare in Natchez, history had to be retold and black Natchezians were finally confident enough to state their side of the story. The article continued, “Negroes, who say they never found much charm here anyway, found even less when they tried to hold the first civil rights meeting in recent years.” The police

chief had taken to banning photographs of the mansions in an effort to keep Northern press out of the area and away from the Pilgrimage reputation of the city. The mayor John Nosser apologized to the reporter for the actions of his police. His apology was rewarded by a bomb in his front yard. A bomb also exploded under the hood of George Metcalfe’s car in retaliation for comments he made to reporters about the police. When Metcalfe’s car exploded just outside the Armstrong factory, workers inside cheered.³¹

Metcalfe’s co-worker James Young felt that “one of the greatest mistakes made was when they bombed George Metcalfe’s car.” Threats of race war, a run on ammunition, church burnings, and assassination though, did not discourage Natchez’s enraged black population. Charles Evers, whose brother had been famously murdered a year previous while registering black voters, rushed to Natchez to calm the angry mob in the streets chanting, “We will kill for freedom!” Rocks were thrown at police cars as armed protestors called for a race war. A reporter for the *New York Times* reported that “this city has probably been more heavily armed, man for man, than almost any other city.” Evers called out to the crowds in the street, “We can’t win with violence!” Six hundred National Guardsmen were called in and the crowds dispersed.³²

But a subsequent march against a public gathering of the KKK turned out to be peaceful. Only once was Evers told to turn around by the police. He responded, “We cannot back down now. I don’t believe we can stop it now.” The march was considered a turning point. Black Natchezians who had been too nervous to sign a petition a few years prior were now marching in the streets. An awakening had occurred and, as Evers said, it was not going to be stopped. The event was marked by black Natchezians by a 50 year reunion held in 2015 as the birth of black self-determination.³³

²⁹ Marc Weingarten, “Racism’s photographic trace: Eyeing hate, Mississippi Style,” *Observer* (Mar. 24, 2003).; For examples, see Albert Jones, Director of SSC, letter to Sheriff Billy Ferrell (May 19, 1961), SSC-AC 2-63-65 and Albert Jones, Director of SSC, letter to Sheriff Billy Ferrell (Jun. 13, 1961), SSC-AC 2-63-71.; Sheriff Billy Ferrell, letter to Hon. Albert Jones (Jul. 3, 1961), SSC-AC 2-63-78.; Albert Jones, letter to Gov. Ross Barnett (Jul. 7, 1961), SSC-AC 2-63-79.; A.L. Hopkins, “SSC Investigation of Archie C. Curtis c/m Natchez,” July 17, 1961, SSC-AC 2-63-53A.

³⁰ E.L. McDaniel, interview by Orley B. Caudill (Aug. 12, 1977) University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History; A.L. Hopkins, “SSC Investigation of whippings and armed robberies of Negro men in Adams County by hooded or masked white men,” Feb. 20, 1964, SSC-AC 2-63-68.; “Natchez, Sheriff’s Department Case Report on subject James Winston,” Feb. 16, 1964, SSC-AC 2-63-63.; “Natchez, MS – Freedom Movement vs. KKK,” *Civil Rights Movement Veterans*. Accessed March 17, 2016. <http://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim65b.htm#1965natchez>

³¹ McDaniel, 1977; Nicolas von Hoffman, *Chicago Daily News*, undated from SSC-AC 2-63-74; A.L. Hopkins, “SSC Investigation of the racial situation,” Oct. 22, 1964, SSC-AC 2-63-74.; “Natchez, MS – Freedom Movement vs. KKK,”

³² James Young is quoted by Lance Hill, *Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (UNC Press, 2004), 190-192.; Virgil Downing, “SSC Investigation of excessive sales of ammunition and firearms,” Aug. 13, 1964, SSC-AC 2-63-71.; A.L. Hopkins, “SSC Investigation of the racial situation,” Oct. 22, 1964, SSC-AC 2-63-74.; Erle Johnson, memo to SSC file (Sep. 3, 1965), SSC-AC 2-63-72.; Hill, 192.; *New York Times* (Aug. 29, 1965); Roy Reed, “Troops sent into Natchez...”, *NY Times* (Sep. 3, 1965), 1.

³³ “Negroes march over dark Natchez streets,” *Miss-Lou (Natchez) Observer* (Sep. 22, 1965), 1.

Evers and the revived NAACP further announced a boycott of white-owned businesses to urge the Chamber to move on twelve demands that they be given equal access as consumers to stores, schools, and jobs. Mayor Nosser, who was a successful grocer, tried to manage the peace, but got no help from the SSC which urged him to make a list of demands that black leaders control black youth and seek legitimate marriage licenses. Nosser ignored the insulting advice of the state, which addressed him as “Johnny” in correspondences. Here was tested Lizbeth Cohen’s thesis that attacks on the racial status quo was best achieved “at its weakest link: white economic dependence on black consumers.”³⁴

The Deacons of Defense, armed and traveling in Ser Boxley’s donated car, which they called “The Jeep,” moved into Natchez to enforce the boycott and protect protestors. When some blacks attempted to cross the boycott line, the SSC reported that the Deacons would “follow people that go uptown and buy and then take their merchandise away from them and tear it up.” According to Boxley, the story of the Deacons is not considered “acceptable history” since they used force to attain their goals. “The Deacons are unacceptable as historic subjects.” Among the many signs being considered as part of the Natchez Civil Rights walk, there is no marker commemorating the efforts of armed black activists.³⁵

The Natchez section of the *Green Book* usually included no more than two places, but, notably, the first businesses to capitulate to the boycott were Natchez hotels and restaurants, which



An emotional Mayor Nosser (standing) attends a memorial service for local NAACP treasurer Wharlest Jackson in 1967. (Source: *The Crisis* (April, 1967))

lifted their ban on black travelers. Some businessmen decided the best way to retaliate would be to lay off all black workers, but the national organ of the NAACP promised a nation-wide response if such an action was taken. Despite a judge’s injunction to cease marching and picketing outside the boycotted businesses, 700 black Natchezians followed Evers into the street and all were sent to Parchman Prison where they were tortured. According to Boxley, these arrest records have only recently been found by historians and there have been attempts to contact the exiled activists, the youngest of which was 7 years old. After three long months, six major businesses failed and Mayor Nosser’s own store was forced to lay off half its staff because of the boycott. On December 3rd, with Christmas approaching, Nosser announced that he would comply with the demands of the Evers and his followers, a major victory for the NAACP. There would be equality in hiring, access to public accommodations, and city employees were reminded not to use paternalistic words like “uncle,” “boy,” and “auntie” to refer to black clients.³⁶

Celebration of the victory was short lived due to the fatal car bombing of another Armstrong employee and NAACP officer Wharlest Jackson in 1967, who got a promotion that traditionally went only to white employees. Evers led a huge march that contained 3,000 blacks and some sympathetic whites, including Mayor Nosser who joined in singing “We Shall Overcome.” Evers spoke, “We gather here today to protest the social inertia of our white brothers who piously condemn violence after it occurs and refuse to work for democracy in the absence of violence.” No one was charged with the murders, but black Natchezians remember the history that took place in the streets and the awakening it left them. But memory is hard.³⁷

The Fight over Historical Memory: The Black Counter-Narrative

White visitors to the Pageant in the 1960s, though, were powerfully inspired by the Old South they saw on display. A visitor to the tableaux from Miami, thanked one of the ladies for her hospitality and concluded, “At the conclusion of the Pageant, I

³⁴ “Aid Mississippi murder attempt victim,” *The Crisis* (Nov., 1965), 586-7.; Erle Johnson, SSC Director, letter to Mayor John Nosser (Oct. 14, 1965), SSC-AC 2-63-78.; Cohen, *Consumer’s Republic*, 187.

³⁵ Boxley, 2016.; Erle Johnson, “Memo on Natchez Boycott” (Dec. 3, 1965), SSC-AC 2-63-81.

³⁶ “Another First in Mississippi,” *The Crisis* (Jan., 1965), 48.; “Association warns Natchez businessmen,” *The Crisis* (Dec., 1965), 653.; Children marched for integration and were shot with rubber bullets by the police. Men were stripped naked and put out in 40 degree temps while women were fed laxatives, per John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: U of IL Press, 1995), 358, 360.; Lindsey Shelton, “Shining the Light: Locals Remember the Parchman Roundup Fifty Years Later,” *Natchez Democrat* (Oct. 4, 2015); Phillip West, interview by R. Wayne Pyle (Sep. 18, 1980) University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History, 7.; “The Natchez Agreement,” *The Crisis* (Jan., 1966), 24-26.

³⁷ Scott, Stanley S., “Natchez Bomber Strikes Again,” *The Crisis* (April, 1967), 133-5.

asked “Him” to give us the wisdom, courage, and determination to resist all efforts to make us a mongrel nation.” The Pilgrimage ladies continued to plan their events, nearly oblivious to the tumult in their city. They felt they were above these things. They held meetings to discuss flowers and tableaux plans and named their courts while their husbands fought the rabble of the KKK and NAACP from their seats in the Citizen’s Council.³⁸

In 1964, emergency meetings were called to discuss “problems brought about by the Civil Rights bill.” The ladies debated cancelling the Pilgrimage for fear it might be integrated by law, but they decided to let their lawyers decide the issue. One lawyer explained that cancelling the Pilgrimage meant “surrendering to them,” but others took the argument that the ladies’ homes were private homes and *not* public buildings and so were not subject to public accommodation laws. They unanimously approved a measure to keep guards at the door to ward off visitors “of Negroid blood.” Picketers were arrested during the 1965 Pilgrimage and the awakened black community refused to participate, at least in any direct way, as performers in the tableaux or at homes.³⁹

Blacks were not interested in the stories being told by the Pilgrimage and they never were. As Boxley put it, the mansions “were just a place to work.” Black newspapers reflected the opinions of blacks in Natchez when they described the city as “a relic of the antebellum South, this city has clung desperately to the racial patterns of the dead past.” Garden Club members were confused why blacks continued to ignore the Pilgrimage when they voted to integrate tours in 1967. They were also disappointed at the sudden lack of black participation. Soon whites dressed up in blackface to create slave scenes at the tableaux, further enraging the local black population. Tableaux organizers as late as 1986 continued to refer to a scene in their presentation as a “darkie ball.” When blacks protested, they claimed it was a historically accurate term. The Garden Club blamed outsiders from the NAACP for turning blacks against them, but the Garden Club’s one-sided interpretation of history and inability to critically examine their

version of history is what actually caused the rift. The Agrarian revisionists began calling out blacks for being revisionist. Certainly no friend of the Garden Club, the former Klan leader E.L. McDaniel fumed in 1977 about the black counter-narrative history that painted whites as oppressors. “It doesn’t justify saying all whites discriminated against blacks because that’s not a true picture of it.” He said, “We’re still fighting the Civil War.” The war over public memory was a kind of civil war, a struggle over power. As David Blight explained, “Those who create the dominant historical narrative, those that can own the public memory, will achieve political and cultural power.” There was much at stake.⁴⁰

Some took a confrontational approach, such as Ser Boxley, who has on occasion stood on the sidewalks outside the stately mansions wearing the uniform of a Union soldier. Attempts by black leaders to integrate the Pilgrimage by including homes owned by antebellum blacks were rejected by the Pilgrimage Association in the 1980s. The Pilgrimage would continue to be a controlled event, meeting expectations of those seeking *Gone with the Wind*, and showing only the “white-pillared” past, as Richard Schein calls it. Black leaders like Mayor Phillip West chose to simply shrug off a dying generation in the Garden Clubs. “There will always be those of us who don’t want to move forward, and they’ll always be some of us who want to move back,” he said. “But I don’t believe a majority of our citizens want to move back.” He was part of the panel that organized a tour of sites of importance to Natchez’s black history in 1990.⁴¹

Public history was always segregated in Natchez, but after the tumult of the mid-1960’s, a *black* story was being told and there was a consumer base ready to hear that story. With the demise of Jim Crow, which Natchez’s African Americans helped make possible with their boycott and blood, interstate travel was now an option for blacks. The 1963-4 *Green Book* featured little cartoons entitled “*Green Book’s* History Makers,” which included vignettes about historic African American heroes like mountain man Jim Beckwourth and San Francisco businessman

³⁸ George A. Coffin, letter to Mr. and Mrs. W.T. Mallory (May 3, 1960) PGC-MDAH Z/1818.000/M/Roll 36353.

³⁹ Pilgrimage Garden Club, meeting minutes, Aug. 5, 1964, PGC-MDAH Z/1818.000/M/Roll 36350; Pilgrimage Garden Club, meeting minutes, Aug. 21, 1964, PGC-MDAH Z/1818.000/M/Roll 36350; Hoelscher, “Making Place, Making Race,” 676-7.

⁴⁰ Boxley, 2016; “Racial tension relieved,” *Memphis World* 34, no. 23 (Dec. 11, 1965); Patricia Leigh Brown, “New Signpost at Slavery’s Crossroads,” *NY Times* (Dec. 16, 2004), F1.; McDaniel, 25-6.; Davis, “A Struggle for Public History,” 58.; David Blight, “Southerners don’t lie: They just remember big,” from W.F. Brundage, ed., *Where these Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000), 349.

⁴¹ Boxley, 2016, and Patricia Leigh Brown, “New Signpost at Slavery’s Crossroads,” *NY Times* (Dec. 16, 2004), F1.; Steven Hoelscher, “The White-Pillared Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South,” from Richard Schein, ed., *Landscape and Race in the United States* (NY: Routledge, 2006), 52.; “West recalls segregation days at program,” *Natchez Democrat* Feb. 17, 2005.; “Natchez to host first annual Mississippi Heritage Festival,” *Tomorrow’s South, Today’s Mississippi* (June 1, 1990), 14.

William Leidesdorff. There was a real attempt by some in the civil rights movement to build a black history, meant to empower blacks and invest them in America. The marketplace, being such an important battleground of the civil rights movement, would continue to be a battleground for black history.⁴²

When black tourists began showing up in Natchez, they did not see the mansions as places of romance. When black observers saw the small boy recruited to fan diners with the “punkah,” they saw a scene of torture. As one observer said, “I’m thinking about a small black doing that and if he didn’t do it right, he’d get a whipping.” Studies proved black tourists were interested in touring plantations, but were less enamored with gardens and architecture as their white counterparts were. Ser Boxley said, “For black Americans it is completely different. The important thing to know is *who made the bricks*, who did the work that made it all possible.” Honest interpretations that rely less on the story of elite families and their feudal residence in a particular place, but on the story of the masses of people who built the mansions appealed to the black consumer of mansion tours. “Place and objects of memory are very important because they evoke sensations and perceptions and a sense of feeling and environment that one simply cannot gather by reading on a page,” James Early of the Smithsonian said. “That’s why people come to these sites — to commemorate.”⁴³

This wasn’t new in Natchez, where history is king. A home-grown history was long a part of the black experience in the city. Even in the 1940s, activists like Natchez dentist and NAACP pioneer Audrey Mackal explained that “Caucasians have distorted facts in history by omission or commission until history as we receive it is more or less propaganda.” Gleaned from interviews with former teachers who worked in segregated schools, historian Jack Davis persuasively argues that blacks had *always* tried to tell their story in Natchez. He found that black teachers literally shelved their state-assigned segregationist textbooks and taught about Natchez’s notable black heroes like Hiram Revels and Richard Wright. While blacks told blacks the stories of local history, there had always been a gulf between the

racism, especially in integrated schools. Phillip West explained that during his formative years in Natchez, “Then it was simply a separate society in terms of black and white. . . . In the history books there may have been mention of two or three blacks, but we didn’t realize there was so much more black history that none of us would even be exposed to except in adult life.” In fact, West explained that one of his teachers in the mid-1960s was reprimanded for catering to the needs of his black students. Boxley concurred with West, “You had to go outside of Natchez to get black history.”⁴⁴

Besides schools, black history was commemorated usually through the means of public ceremonies to celebrate anniversaries of historic events, a long-standing tradition of blacks across the South. Usually unable to control public landscape in a permanent way, as whites did with historic markers and the Pilgrimage mansions, blacks resorted to these temporary gatherings in places of historic memory. These events attracted black visitors from all over the country, evidence that demand for black history existed. The Natchez Club of Chicago, its membership being mostly emigrants from Natchez, held annual pilgrimages to sites of black history in Natchez during the 1940s and 1950s. Their ceremonies included speakers like Dr. Mackal. In 1990, a Mississippi Heritage Festival was organized in Natchez by black leaders who formed a foundation to promote black history and culture. It was hoped the event, which included tours of historic sites of importance to blacks in Natchez, would become an annual event that might rival the Pilgrimage. This tradition of public gathering continues in Natchez and has been utilized by Boxley’s Black and Blue re-enactment group, churches, and others. Boxley admits that there is rarely a white visitor at his Civil War re-enactments. “Whites don’t come to black events with a few exceptions,” he said. “When they do come, they leave before long.”⁴⁵

Whites in Natchez looked at these black gatherings, which came and went, with curiosity and tolerated them as something which appealed to niche consumers. But when blacks in Natchez took action to create permanent reminders of black history in the

⁴² *Traveler’s Green Book (1963-4)*, 1, 99.

⁴³ Theresa Lewis is quoted by Jack Davis, “A Struggle for Public History,” 57; Butler, et. al, 300.; Hoelscher, “White-Pillared Past,” 59; Butler, et. al., “Imagining Plantations: Slavery, Dominant Narratives, and the Foreign Born,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 3 (2008), 288-302.; Molly Vorwerck, “Tourists flock to black history monuments,” *USA Today* (Aug. 22, 2013).

⁴⁴ Davis, “A Struggle for Public History,” 56-7. West, 4-5.; Boxley, 2016.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Clark, “Women’s Hand and Heart and Deathless Love: White Women and the Commemorative Impulse in the New South,” from Mills and Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscape of Southern Memory*. (Knoxville: U of TN Press, 2003), 71.; “Natchez Club maps plans for outing,” *Chicago Defender* (Aug. 16, 1941), 13.; “Natchez to host first annual Mississippi Heritage Festival,” *Tomorrow’s South, Today’s Mississippi* (June 1, 1990), 14.; Boxley.

city, to construct historical landscape, particularly those harkening back to the civil rights era, they met resistance from ensconced whites. As Hoelscher argues, the control over space gave the elites a chance to shape memory and race, a power they jealously guarded. After a successful Martin Luther King Day parade in 1986, black leaders led by former homegrown NAACP Chapter head Phillip West, sought to rename a street lined with antebellum mansions in Dr. King's honor. This was viewed by whites, many of whom had aligned themselves against their black neighbors a couple decades prior, as a provocative and confrontational move. A compromise was struck after months of hand-wringing. The part of the street that passed the mansions would retain its historic name, while the part that passed through the predominantly African American neighborhood would become King Road.⁴⁶

Ser Boxley, who returned to Natchez in 1995, stepped into a city confronting questions about the institutionalization of historical memory. Inspired by a Juneteenth celebration in Natchez and his own research into the slave trade, he looked for a permanent place in the landscape to honor "the ancestors." He found that "nowhere in this chattel-slavery museum of a town could I find, ready and visibly, stories that reflected the African American presence." He expected whites, particularly from the Chamber and Pilgrimage Club to oppose his efforts, but he also found that many blacks did not want to upset the status quo. He dismissively calls them "master's people." After years of lobbying, he was able to persuade the city to buy a small corner at the site of Franklin's old slave pens at the Forks of the Road and was able to get recognition for the site's historic importance from the UN. He is now working with a multi-racial group of Natchezians to build markers for an integrated historic walking trail which will include the scenes of the civil rights movement, the places where the historic Evers march and the explosion of violence at the news of the Metcalfe bombing and the boycott picketing took place. "We aren't going to spend \$3 million on a trail that shows white folks have done everything here," Boxley contends. The civil rights movement proved that African Americans, too, were authors of progress in the city and Boxley hoped that would be celebrated.⁴⁷

Another institutional marker of black history is the long-fought-for but humble museum of the



Ser Boxley and James Meredith at a Mississippi event.

Natchez Association for the Preservation of Afro-American Culture (NAPAC). The organization's history reflects that of the Garden Club in some ways. Judge Mary Toles was inspired by the TV series *Roots* to open a museum to house artifacts of importance to black Natchezians. She held meetings of like-minded concerned women and in 1990 they founded NAPAC. It took nine years of lobbying and grant writing to get the city to fund the museum. NAPAC has become a moderate advocate for the promotion of black history in Natchez and has lent its organization to developing interpretive sites around the city. David Dreyer, who volunteers at the NAPAC museum saw the museum as a way to confront the Pilgrimage class. "There are so many stories that haven't been told here, but people might not get that with just the Pilgrimage," he explained to the press. "We need to find a way to tell new stories." Boxley explained that the museum is now part of the official bus tour for cruisers riding the *Queen of the Mississippi* riverboat. "One or two black folks from the boat asked the bus driver to stop at the museum, which raised a bit of a reaction by their white tour guide," he explained, "but now it's a stop."⁴⁸

Visitors interested in learning about Natchez's important role in the civil rights movement have been attracted to the museum, even if most of the Pilgrimage crowd passes it by. But remembering the civil rights tumult is no easy process and it may seem strange for some to think of sites of recent violence as potential tourist attractions, especially for those who lived through them. "The memories are still raw and frightening and people are not so willing to step back into them," explained the Smithsonian's James Early.

⁴⁶ Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race," 659.; Davis, "A Struggle for Public History," 59.

⁴⁷ Edward Ball, "Slavery's Trail of Tears," *Smithsonian Magazine* 46, no. 7 (Nov., 2015), 76.; Boxley, 2016.; Parker, *Al Jazeera*

⁴⁸ "Acknowledging African-American history in Natchez an ongoing process," *Natchez Democrat* (Jul. 27, 2002).; Parker, *Al Jazeera*.; Boxley

But city leaders and local historians are urging the city that memorializes the riches brought about by slavery should also memorialize the grassroots and visceral fight for civil rights that took place in Natchez. In fact, they argue there is greater interest in the civil rights story than in antebellum homes.⁴⁹

As interest in the Pilgrimage continued to slip, city leaders looked to take the Pilgrimage model and apply it more broadly in an attempt what some local historians call “equal history.” This opened the door for more stories to be told, and Natchez had no shortage of history to share. The Natchez Historic Foundation acted as a sort of referee over public memory in the city. It negotiated between the Pilgrimage Association, African American groups, and the National Park Service (NPS), which moved into the area to develop Natchez National Historic Park in 1988. The Garden Club members knew the value of rebuilding and modernizing the Natchez Trace National Parkway, a five decades-long NPS project begun in the 1940s. The club’s vice president, was a booster and effective lobbyist for the project which built a touristic highway between Nashville and Natchez. When the road was completed in 1988, Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation, which owns and restores many of the antebellum buildings in the city, lobbied for the national park designation in the city. The project was sold in Natchez as a way to revive the flailing tourism trade in the city, as the Pilgrimage found itself becoming more and more of a politically incorrect relic.⁵⁰

Fearing black exclusion from the important attempt to create an institutionalized historic landscape by the federal government, Phillip West went to Washington in support of the bill on the condition that it would include a directive that the park would interpret history in a way that included the African Americans who make half the city’s population. Miller and other NHF members appeared happy to include West and his concerns in her appeal to Congress. One NHF member explained, “It sounds a bit course to say it, but they [Pilgrimage tourists] were seeing white Natchez, Natchez from the perspective of a slave owner.” Blacks in Natchez had demanded their history be placed on the landscape and tourists were asking to hear the whole story of Natchez. “There is a financial incentive for a more

balanced tourism product,” tourism director Walter Tipton conceded. In 1976, Miller’s HNF purchased a home from the Garden Club that belonged to William Johnson, an antebellum free black barber and slave-owner, whose diary when rediscovered in the 1930s opened the first page in black public memory in Natchez. The home was transferred to the NPS and became the visitor center for the NPS park. Ozelle Fisher from NAPAC was unimpressed with the inclusion of the Johnson house in the NPS deal. “William Johnson is not high on our agenda, because of the fact he owned slaves.” Boxley points out that, despite the fact West got his wish and the law requires the NPS to include African American history from the days of slavery to the present; the NPS staff is almost entirely white. He worries blacks would be reluctant to advocate for African American history in such a white-dominated organization. “The staff at the NPS and NHF and the tourism people are just protecting the heritage of their own families and the history of whites,” Boxley said, expressing the distrust many black leaders feel about projects that involve cooperation between races.⁵¹

Positivity is the buzz word in Natchez among

Fig. 8. Singers perform “The Southern Road to Freedom” at Holy Family Church during the 2014 Pilgrimage. (Natchez

the circles who organize its tourism message for the city’s 2016 Tri-Centennial. “The whole focus and fundamental goal,” says the Tri-centennial Director Jennifer Ogden Combs, “is to create a positive path for the future by bringing the community together using our 300th anniversary as a catalyst for positive change going forward.” But it seems to the Pilgrimage crowd that black history is anything but positive, a force antithetical to their more palatable, non-confrontational and romantic vision. A tour guide at the Rosalie Mansion, during the Pilgrimage, worried about the presence of black history and the negativity tourists might associate with it. She told a *New York Times* reporter, under the promise of anonymity, “There are people from all walks of life who would get upset and take it personally. I would not want it to distract from our city.” It is true that people looking primarily for escape don’t “seek out the messy and uncomfortable history of slavery and the enslaved while on vacation.” Critics of the Pilgrimage like Ser

⁴⁹ Parker, *Al Jazeera*; Molly Vorwerck, “Tourists flock to black history monuments,” *USA Today* (Aug. 22, 2013).

⁵⁰ Ronald Smothers, “A city longs for the end of the road,” *NY Times* (May 19, 1988), A20.

⁵¹ Brown, F1; Smothers, A20; “West recalls segregation days at program,” *Natchez Democrat* (Feb. 17, 2005.); Ralph Jennings, quoted by Patricia Leigh Brown, “New Signpost at Slavery’s Crossroads,” *NY Times* (Dec. 16, 2004), F1.; Brown, F1; “Mississippi seeks to save freed slaves’ home,” *NY Times* (Mar. 5, 1989), 37.; Smothers, A20; Public Law 100-479 100th Congress Oct. 7, 1988 “An Act to create a National Park at Natchez, MS”; Boxley, 2016.

Boxley, counter that the stories of struggle through black history in Natchez are not really a litany of pain and agony, but of overcoming and victory, and achieving the promises of America. “Natchez says, ‘Promote the positive- Natchez positive,’” Boxley complains. “There wouldn’t be positive in Natchez if it wasn’t for black struggle to turn negative *into* positive.”⁵²



Fig. 8. Singers perform “The Southern Road to Freedom” at Holy Family Church during the 2014 Pilgrimage. (Natchez Democrat)

For positive, a tourist could venture to Holy Family Church. The sounds of African American choirs singing traditional spirituals had long been a popular staple of the Pilgrimage season. These concerts long attracted black *and* white visitors to the city in a way the mansion tours and tableaux with their Southern Agrarian view of history did not. Since 1990’s public memory revolution, the tradition of black-directed choirs singing for the tourists has been resurrected at Natchez’s historic black Holy Family Church as a direct challenge to the history told in the Pilgrimage mansions. The setting itself recalls its many black parishioners who organized colored regiments during the Civil War and who took civic leadership roles in Reconstruction. The message of the “Road to Freedom” concert is hopeful and positive, even if the sounds tourists hear are groans meant to mimic the sounds of slaves forced into back-breaking labor. The narrator breaks in to explain, “These songs are testament to the ability of blacks in Natchez to create their own culture, survive oppression.” Choir members dressed in Afro-centric garb, sing stories of history from slavery, through the gains of Reconstruction, the Rhythm Night Club Fire, and the civil rights era chaos. The director explained that it was important for young people to be part of the show. Not only would they be telling their story to

tourists, but they also would be empowered by researching and recounting their own local black history. “We need the young people,” he said, “so the history will continue to be told.”⁵³

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⁵² Quoted by Carruthers.; Brown, F3.; David Butler, et. al., 299.; Boxley, 2016.

⁵³ Roy Reed, “Racial tensions in ‘Old South,’” *NY Times* (Sep. 5, 1965), E3.; “Set Pilgrimage to Dixie City,” *Chicago Defender* (Mar. 3, 1951), 3.; Hoelscher, “White-Pillared Past,” 56.; Richard Tristano, “Holy Family Parish: the Genesis of an African-American Catholic Community in Natchez, Mississippi,” *Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 4 (Autumn, 1998), 258-283.; Hoelscher, “White-Pillared Past,” 56.; Vershal Hogan, “Choir sings stories on Southern Road to Freedom,” *Natchez Democrat* (Mar. 26, 2014).

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