

Delta Sources and Resources

The Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture

301 Main Street

Natchez, MS 39120

by Bobby Dennis

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Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture

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Visit Natchez

The Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture is the first museum to tell

the full story of African Americans in Natchez, Mississippi, a city on the Mississippi River that is located in the southwest part of the state. Since its founding in 1990 by the Natchez Association for the Preservation of African American Culture, the Museum has become an essential resource for the study of local history.

“It was created to research, collect, exhibit, interpret, and preserve the cultural and historical contributions of African Americans in the growth of Natchez and the nation,” according to Bobby Dennis, the museum’s executive director. “Here, at the Museum, the rich cultural history of the people of Natchez is seen through artifacts, photographs, books, programs, video, and digital



Front of Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture with hours of operation.

Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III

productions, all of which are used to help provide an immersive experience for the visitors.”

The Museum is located at 301 Main Street, only two blocks east of the river. Its home, a restored post office building from 1909, is a one-story brick structure that was built in the Beaux-Arts style.

The Museum’s slogan is simple and direct: “We exist to tell our story.” That message is illustrated by the museum’s history and the array of exhibits, tours, programs, and partnerships it has in the community. Natchez, which is located in Adams County, has a population of just over 14,000, according to the 2022 US Census. Known for its historic homes, Natchez is one of the oldest continuous settlements on the Mississippi River. Its famous garden clubs, site of the Forks of the Road slave market, and its civil rights history are just a few of its popular attractions.

Museum History

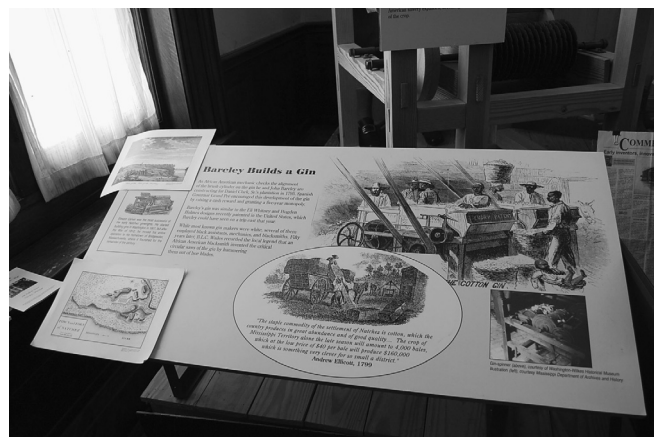
The idea for the Museum originated in 1979, after Mary Lee Davis Toles saw the 1977 television series, “Roots,” and began developing the concept of preserving Natchez Afro-American history and culture. On Sunday, February 17, 1990, after many years of groundwork, Toles joined Patricia Washington, Josie Anderson, Flora Terrell, and Mary White—all black professional women—in forming the Natchez Association for the Preservation of African American Culture which created the Museum. The group applied for a charter and saw it approved in March 1990. The founders met for a second time in February 1991. At that time Patricia Powers-Reynolds, now deceased, and Juanita Jones joined the group and agreed to support the project. The surviving founders are still active supporters of the Museum.

The founders viewed the Museum as a timely vehicle for sharing informed material on the cultural legacy of Natchez. They also saw the institution as a catalyst for sharing truth and

critical light on local history. Their aim was to bring to life the African American experience through photography, lectures, and exhibits of art and artifacts. Although emphasis has been placed on local and state African Americans, national African American experiences are also being preserved and presented, especially as they relate to Natchez narrative.

Museum Exhibits

The Museum is known for its rare and colorful exhibits that include The Portraits of Black Natchez (1880-1920). This exhibit is part of The Norman Collection, which is owned by Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Gandy of Natchez. Other exhibits include the Rhythm Night Club Fire (1940), The Barland Family Collection (1782-1920), Pinta De Castas Painting (1775), and “Natchez Beginnings of America’s Cotton Kingdom” (1795-1920). Another collection focuses on the Natchez US Colored Troops. More than 3,000 of them were stationed at Fort McPherson in Natchez during the Civil War. The community is working to create a monument that will honor the troops. In addition to a period uniform, the collection includes a flag and photographs of the Colored Troops.



Text panel on the cotton industry in southwest Mississippi. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.



Richard Wright, author of *Native Son*, was born near Natchez in 1908 and spent time with his grandparents in the city.
Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

One area of note presents the story of the famous author, Richard Wright. A section dedicated to him is now recognized as a National Literary Landmark. The display includes photographs and artifacts related to Wright's travels in Africa. The son of sharecroppers, Richard Wright was born near Natchez in 1908 and spent time with his grandparents in town. His autobiography, *Black Boy*, tells the story of accidentally setting fire to the curtains in this house.

"Once you begin the tour of exhibits in the colonization period, you notice the impact African Americans have had on building the city of Natchez," noted Dennis. He explained: "It was the French that first recognized that African Americans were imbedded with the Indians when they arrived. The African American and Natchez story begins through a journey of freedom, slavery, disenfranchisement, and the strength of a people making their mark on the great city of Natchez."

In December 2021, the Museum's exhibit on opera singer Daisy Newman found a national audience when it was featured in a story by the Associated Press. The story also appeared in the February 2022 issue of *Today in Mississippi*

magazine. Newman was born and raised in Natchez. Her exhibit, "Black Butterfly," opened in February. The exhibit includes a portrait donated by her sister, a panel featuring her biography, newspaper clips, photographs, and videos of her performances.

One of the more interesting artifacts is a wooden doll and wagon that were handcrafted by a slave. Dennis said the two items were donated by Rick Chamberlain of Mount Locust, which is located on the Natchez Trace Parkway. The Museum's collection also includes an original floor beam from the Magnolia Hill Plantation, which was cut out from a Cypress tree by slaves in the 1830s. Afrocentric art that includes drawings, paintings, and wooden sculptures are also on display.

Museum Tours

As executive director, Dennis handles the operations of the Museum. He also serves as tour guide and community liaison. He is assisted by members of his board. For Dennis, giving tours is akin to walking visitors through the lives of people and sharing their experiences and struggles, while educating visitors of the complexities of rules that governed the establishment of a new



The life of the late Daisy Newman, a once famous opera singer, is featured in the "Black Butterfly" exhibit.
Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

community. Emphasis is given to how rules have changed and the effect those changes have had on African Americans through French, English, and Spanish occupation.

The goal, explained Dennis, is to provide visitors with a look at the transition from colonization into settlement in the state of Mississippi. From that period, the tour moves to the Forks of the Roads, the second largest slave trading market in the South. The tour includes a presentation on the impact of this market. It shows, among other things, that ninety percent of all those sold in the Natchez area in this period was born a slave of America.

Additionally, the tour show explains the preservation of Natchez through the Civil War by highlighting the bravery and heroism of the Natchez US Colored Troops, whose job was to protect the farms, plantations, and river of the Natchez District. A presentation is also given on the contributions of the black politicians who shaped the confidence of the African American community after the Civil War and set the stage for the continuation of the path to equality of modern-day Africans.

The tour ends with a fifteen-minute video presentation that provides an overview of Natchez's history. At the conclusion of the video, Dennis answers questions and shares additional information on African American history.

For Dennis, it is important for visitors not only to be informed, but to be inspired through a tangible, immersive experience. Ideally, he said, the visitors will become so moved, they will return and bring others with them.

The Museum attracts people from all walks of life who come from many parts of the United States and other countries. Many visitors come by way of the river boats, which include the *American Queen*, the *American Duchess*, and the *American Countess*. Up to 500 people a month now visit the museum via the river.



Wooden doll and cradle held by Bobby Dennis, executive director of Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

Museum Programs

Each year, the Museum hosts events and special programs designed to engage the public. In February 2021, in celebration of Black History Month, it hosted “Isabella and the Prince: ‘Overcoming Struggles Through Courage & Faith’” by Jeremy Houston, a local author and historian. The program presented a reenactment of the life of Prince Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, a West African prince who became enslaved on a Mississippi plantation in Adams County. The event drew more than ninety people on a cold winter night.

In April 2022, the Museum was set to host the premiere showing of *Africans on the Mississippi—Cuttin’ Cane*, a docuseries written and produced by Spencer Howard of LearningTree Productions in association with the River Road African American Museum. The film looks at African influences on Mississippi River communities

Some of the Museum programs include lectures at Alcorn State University in Lorman, Mississippi. In November 2021, Teresa A. Busby, executive director of Southwest Mississippi Center for Culture and Learning, invited Dennis to give a talk on “The African American and

Natchez: First 100 Years.” At this writing, he was scheduled for a return visit on April 19, to give a presentation titled, “Music and Myths of Natchez: Examining How They Started.”

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the museum hosted the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Luncheon each year on King’s birthday. It was not unusual to see up to 1,200 people in attendance. The event typically drew people from local churches, students, business groups, and elected officials, among others. At one time, the Museum hosted a reception for the annual Natchez Literary Festival.

A current project is the posting of twenty-eight historical markers at sites related to African American history in Natchez. The markers are 14 x 14 in size and mounted on a black pole. In addition to having the name of the historical sites, they will include dates and QR codes. The QR codes will take readers to the Museum’s website where they can learn more about the related history. This project is supported by the city of Natchez, Historic Natchez Foundation, Visit Natchez, The Natchez Democrat, and the Natchez Monument Company.

Museum Support

As a non-profit, the museum relies on the generous support of the public, which makes it possible for it to “preserve and showcase the courage, struggles, achievements, and aspirations of Blacks, both in the past and in the present,” according to Dennis. Support for the Museum comes from individuals, businesses, government, and non-profit organizations.

Ever one to improve on what the Museum has to offer, Dennis actively pursues grants to support the Museum and to use technology that aids in the interpretive experience. In 2021, Mississippi Humanities Council awarded the museum \$12,200 through the ARP Humanities Recovery Grant program. Dennis said the funding provided critical help following a year of

COVID-19 restrictions. Among other things, it allowed him to purchase advertisement and acquire speakers for various programs. He also received financial support through the Marketing Assistance Funding Program provided by Visit Natchez. With that assistance, he was able to make upgrades to the Museum’s SMART board and its website.



Display on the cotton gin and its workers in southwest Mississippi.

Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

For More Information:

Tours at the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture are free to the public. Donations are accepted. The museum is located at 301 Main Street, Natchez, Mississippi 39120. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Other hours are available by appointment. Parking and wheelchair accessible ramp are located behind the building. For more information, call Executive Director Bobby Dennis at 601-445-0728 or by email at visitnapac@gmail.com. Additional resources are available at: visitnapac.net or visitnapac.com ▲▼▲