

A Change of Pace: Research in Natchez

By Cai Ryan

Natchez, Mississippi is more than crawfish and mosquitoes; it is the beginning of a fundamental and perhaps lifelong “change of pace.” At least that is the opinion shared by a dozen history students after returning from ten days working in Natchez, Mississippi as part of Professor Ron Davis’s U. S. South Colloquium in spring 2006.

The group flew into Jackson, Mississippi on April 6, and we should have known that much was afoot because of the fantastic meal we shared at an old eatery in Jackson, with a rather unique outside-and-upstairs bathroom facility that is part of the Natchez legend. We then motored down the Natchez Trace to Natchez, with numerous eventful pauses along the way: ghostly river-towns now overgrown with kudzu and crawling with snakes; the historic black Alcorn University; a town (Port Gibson) once deemed by General Grant as “too beautiful to burn;” and the fantastic Indian mounds of the Natchez people—whose life and civilization was destroyed by the French in the 1720s, to name but a few. When we reached Natchez and the Mississippi River, we were saturated in the historic ambiance of the place and the state. After spending weeks and weeks reading what seemed like a never-ending stream of books and articles in preparation, we had finally arrived.

Once in Natchez, it was twelve-hour days of research in the local archives and courthouse, meetings with local personalities, field trips, and eye-opening experiences that brought the Old South to life for all of us. For many, the trip was the first taste of Natchez; for others, it was a return voyage for more work on their thesis projects. Combing through and digging up wills, deeds, court cases, correspondence,



The Natchez Gang at Alcorn College

diaries, and old newspapers kept us busy from early morning to late evenings. Some of us spent our days interviewing local descendants and still active participants in the district’s richly historic past; others of us got caught up in tramps through the back country looking for cemeteries and the physical environs where our subjects once lived out their lives as enslaved people, planters, free blacks, slave traders, soldiers, divorced women, criminals, and pioneer settlers.

All of us experienced Natchez in ways that can only be discovered through traveling with Dr. Davis—and we had the added benefit of Professor Joyce Broussard, who brought her own special expertise to the trip. Davis was with us for the first few days and then Broussard took over. Word is that she will be the new “master” (or mistress) of the “Natchez Experience” as Davis moves slowly into retirement from teaching.

After working and tilling the historic soil in Natchez, the group then traveled back to Jackson for research in the Mississippi Department of Archives and history under the tutelage of Professor Joyce Broussard. What a gold mine of archival material! Rich and profuse are the words that come to mind. And do we ever know our way around archival holdings after this sojourn to the Deep South! We can’t wait to get back, and we now well understand

the magic that seems to happen to those who step back in time for the “Natchez Experience.” We are among the elect.

Here is the “coffle” of student participants and their research topics:

Maria Bonilla: “Spanish Land Grants to Women in the Old Natchez District”

Charity Hayes: “Miscegenation and Family: The Hayes-Claiborne Connection in Natchez, Mississippi”

Brian Hamilton: “Masters of the Big House: The Familial and Economic Network of Five Plantation Families in Antebellum Natchez”

Anne Huddleston: “Civil Whites: White Female Supporters of Integration in Natchez during the 1950s”

Kim Lico: “The Female Criminals of Nineteenth-Century Natchez”

Laure Marest: “The French Connection: The Surget Planter Elites of Nineteenth-Century Natchez”

Cindy Parker: “Enslaved Monmouth: An Antebellum Estate House Viewed from the Perspectives of the Enslaved.”

Shane Peterson: “The Forgotten Soldiers: The Black Veterans of WWI Natchez”

Sylvia Plotkins: “The Jewish Community of Twentieth-Century Natchez”

Linda Quinn: “Divorce in Territorial Natchez”

Sharon Rosen: “The Dumas Family of Natchez: A Black Dynasty”

Cai Ryan: “Women of Agency: Female Entrepreneurs and the Law in Nineteenth Century Natchez”

Kimberly Schmidt: “Divorce in Post-bellum Natchez” □□□