

By: *Tiffany Green*

Recognizing Black History

Since 1976, February has been officially designated as Black History Month, an annual celebration to highlight the accomplishments and achievements of African Americans who have contributed to American History. In addition, Black History Month is also a time to remember the journey of how African Americans evolved to where we are today. If it were not for the strife, pains, and perseverance of those who came before us, we would be living in a different America.



Location of Natchez in Adams County

In reflecting on Black History Month, I wanted to bring awareness to the history of a place that is close to my heart: Natchez, Mississippi, a small, rural town that is a big part of my history because I grew up there and I call it home.

Natchez, Mississippi, founded in 1716, is the oldest city on the Mississippi River. It is located about 90 miles south of Jackson, Mississippi and about 85 miles northwest of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Today, Natchez is widely known for its tourism and antebellum architecture.



Stanton Hall, Greek Revival 19th Century antebellum mansion house. Natchez, MS

Historically, however, Natchez was an important part of slave trading during the mid-19th century. In fact, it was the most prevalent slave trading city in Mississippi and second in the United States only to New Orleans. Because of the lucrative trading of cotton, sugarcane, and slaves, many wealthy southern planters were drawn to the area and took up residency there. These wealthy inhabitants built mansions and oversaw plantations during that time.

In 1863, after the Battle of Vicksburg, many former slaves who were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation began moving into Natchez and the surrounding areas. At that time, the Union army officers were understaffed, under resourced, and were unable to accommodate the growing population. In order to manage the tens of thousands of freed Black slaves, the Union Army created a concentration camp in Natchez in a natural pit known as the “Devil’s Punchbowl,” named after the natural way the region was shaped. The camp was positioned at the bottom of a pit with trees located on the bluffs above. Black men were recaptured by the Union troops and forced back into hard labor. Black women and children were locked behind the concrete walls of the camp and left to die from starvation and smallpox. In total, over 20,000 freed slaves were killed in one year, inside of this American concentration camp. No one was allowed to remove the bodies and the slaves were buried wherever they fell.



The Devils' Punchbowl (Mississippi)

I have a personal connection to this area. Growing up, my father would hunt at a place that he called “the Punchbowl.” I only knew the Punchbowl as the bayou across the street from my grandparents’ house over looking the Mississippi River. Neither my father nor my grandparents ever told me the story of the Devil’s Punchbowl. It was not until I started reading about the history of Natchez as an adult that I learned its origin. I never knew the place that was so familiar as a child had such a morbid past.

I still love to visit my grandparents’ house. But now, when I look across the street, I think about all the lives that were lost in the struggle to fight for change.

I encourage everyone to visit Natchez for the breathtaking sights, for watching the sunset on the bluff and for the remembrance of Black History. Within the present-day beauty lies a violent past that is a significant part of post-Reconstruction African American history. I see the beauty of Natchez and it’s history as a reminder of how far change has taken us.