At the Crossroads

Activists help revise the history of Natchez, Miss., and its place in slavery's legacy.

by Matt Alderton

Sers Seshs Ab Heter-C.M. Boxley had had enough of America.

After 30 years as a civil rights activist in California, he was tired of the fight. So he headed to Mississippi to store his collection of artifacts at the family home. From there he planned on heading to a new life in Africa.

But when he arrived home in Natchez, Miss., Boxley couldn't believe what he saw.

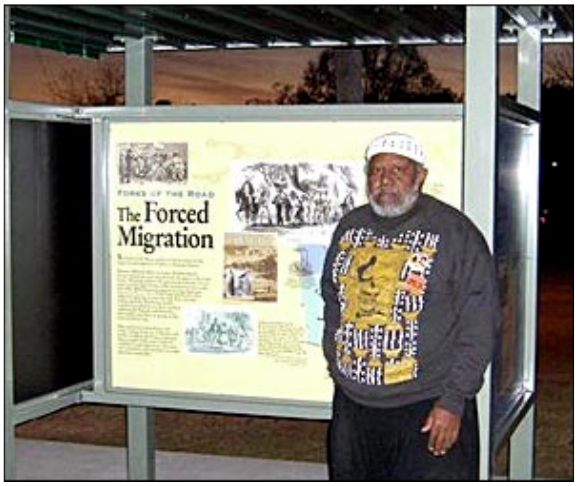
"I saw the one-sided history that was going on here," Boxley recalls. " Natchez is a town full of monuments—homes, the names of streets—that commemorate and tell the story of King Cotton enslavement. However, the story that had been commercialized here in tourism, and the history that has been preserved and is being presented to the public, is that of [the slave owner]; it omits the human and slave ancestors who made this possible."

For more than 50 years, since at least the 1930s, tourists descended on Natchez. Beckoned by the romantic imagery in Stark Young's "So Red the Rose" and Margaret Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind," they flocked to Natchez to see its stately plantation homes, drink mint juleps, wear hoop skirts and slow dance with Southern belles.

But Boxley says they were only getting half of the story. Inspired to unveil the missing elements of his hometown's legacy, Boxley canceled his trip to Africa and settled back into Natchez, determined as ever.

The First Wall Street

The Forks of the Road is a crude piece of land about one mile east of downtown Natchez, at the intersection of D'Evereux Drive, St. Catherine Street and Liberty Road. A mottled site of dead grass and concrete, little suggests that it once was home to the South's largest slave market, second only to New Orleans. All that stands there is a small marker and modest exhibit—four panels under an open roof—installed in December to detail the history of the slave trafficking that took place here through much of the 19th century.



Sers Seshs Ab Heter-C. M. Boxley

"It was the first Wall Street," Boxley says of the site, "a human Wall Street."

Boxley, 65, has spent the last 10 years lobbying for the construction of a historical monument at the Forks of the Road. Last year, his work paid off when the city purchased a small piece of land on the site of the former slave market, courtesy of a $130,000 grant from the Mississippi State Department of Archives and History.

"I chose the Forks of the Road as a project to equalize the imbalance of

history that's being told and sold in Natchez," Boxley says, "because it speaks to the mass commonality of enslaved African people's contributions, culture and humanity to the development of this area."

The history of the slave owner is told each year during the city's Fall and Spring Pilgrimages, which include tours of historic homes from the Old South, hosted by predominantly white homeowners who dress up in period costumes for the occasion.

Natchez, in fact, is home to the largest collection of white-columned mansions in the United States, says Mimi Miller, director of preservation and education for the Historic Natchez Foundation, an independent nonprofit that has been working since 1979 to instill racial accuracy and balance into the city's tourism trade.

SLAVES! SLAVES!! SLAVES!!!
FORKS OF THE ROAD, NATCHEZ.

THE SUBSCRIBERS have just arrived in Natchez, and are now stopping at Mr. Blam's house, Forks of the Road, with a choice selection of slaves, consisting of

MECHANICS,
FIELD HANDS,
COOKS,
WASHERS AND IRONERS, and
GENERAL HOUSE SERVANTS.

They will be constantly receiving additions to their present supply during the season, and will be sold at as reasonable rates as can be afforded in this market.

☞ To those purchasers desiring it, the Louisiana guarantee will be given.

Planters and others desirous of purchasing, are requested to call and see the Slaves before purchasing elsewhere. nov27—d:wtf GRIFFIN & FULLUM.

Mules! Mules! Mules!

JUST ARRIVED, and in excellent order, a large lot of MULES, raised in Missouri, and recommended for their size and condition.

They can be seen at the mule yards of Mr. Joseph E. Kirk, and will be sold on favorable terms. A finer lot of Mules is rarely offered to the public.

nov27—a;wtf W. H. RIGHTER.

Advertisement for a slave auction at the Forks of the Road.

"What Natchez had that people wanted to see were those monumental houses, unlike anything they had ever seen," Miller says. "People weren't particularly curious about why these houses were here; they were looking at them as pieces of art." The public, however, has matured, and Natchez, she says, is ready to tell the whole story.

King Cotton's Capital

Natchez sits on a high bluff above the Mississippi River. As the oldest settlement on the lower Mississippi River and Mississippi 's first state capital, it once was the wealthiest city in the country, with more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the nation.

"Natchez was the symbolic capital of the Deep South Cotton Empire," Miller says. "But the backdrop of all this growing wealth was slavery."

Traders who visited the slave market at the Forks of the Road described it as casual and convenient. Unlike the slave auctions of the day, the market near Natchez was run on a first-come, first-serve approach that shunned public spectacle to allow for "bargain hunting."

"[Slaves at the Forks of the Road] are not sold at auction, or all at once, but singly, or in parties, as purchasers may be inclined to buy," wrote writer Joseph Holt Ingraham, who visited the Forks of the Road in 1834.

Winter was slave-selling season. Slaves from throughout the South were caravanned on land by coffle—a configuration that owners used to chain slaves together in a line—or at sea by steamboat to slave pens in Natchez. On its busiest days, up to 500 slaves were for sale at the Forks of the Road.

From Slave Market to National Park

Today, the land surrounding the Forks of the Road is home to a church and a muffler shop. The only remnant of its history, the small exhibit that Boxley worked so hard to make reality, sits on less than a quarter-acre of land, the site of a former bar and its rundown parking lot.

"The site has been significantly altered," says Keith Whisenant, superintendent of Natchez National Historic Park, the local arm of the National Park Service. "It used to be a hill, now you can park at street level all the way across. That probably removed most of the artifacts, any remnants of the site. There is nothing visible that suggests it was ever a slave mart."

Before the 108th Congress adjourned in December, it earmarked $140,000 for Forks of the Road. The Natchez National Historic Park administrators will use the money to assess the possibility of expanding the site under the National Park Service. A feasibility study will determine the historical value of the site and whether enough land exists to build a national park there.

If Congress approves the transfer of the land from the city of Natchez to the Natchez National Historic Park, it could be home to a slew of potential projects, including a memorial recognizing the names of slaves that passed through the market there or a museum dedicated to its history. At the very least, Whisenant says, it would garner the site greater attention, with the possibility of growth in the tourism industry.

"I hope to be able to get the full-blown story of the site developed and preserved in such a way that it will be here for time to come," Boxley says. "Because you can't tell the story of [slavery] in Cincinnati unless you know the story here; you can't tell the story in Lexington, Ky., unless you know the story here. You can't tell the story of Alexandria, Va., unless you know the story here."

How You Can Help

From the Pen to the Auction Block

One of Forks of the Road's most successful slave traders called the Ohio River Valley home. Capt. John W. Anderson, a slave trader and farmer in Maysville, Ky., traveled annually to Natchez, Miss., to auction off slaves.

Anderson w ould scour Ohio Valley farms several times a year to buy men and women between age 12 to their early 20s. While waiting favorable market conditions, the slaves were stored on his farm in a slave pen for up to several months, depending on the timing of the market.

The slave pen was a two-story, hewn-log building with eight small windows and a 10-foot fireplace. Men were chained to the floor on the second story where they could only sit or lie down. They were latched two-by-two to a central chain affixed to a large metal loop that descended from the pen's ceiling. Women, who cared for the men and did all the cooking, could move around the pen freely.

Outbreaks of cholera were frequent, as human waste and garbage fell into the kitchen through cracks in the upper floor. The fireplace provided little heat in the winter.

By the time Anderson gathered up to 30 slaves, he walked them eight miles to his uncle Stokes Anderson's home. The forced march was meant to toughen up slaves before auction. At the end of their march, slaves were put on flatboats to make the 1,150-mile trip to Natchez. His sales in Natchez from 1832 to 1834 garnered Anderson $50,000—nearly $1 million in today's dollars.

Anderson 's slave pen can be viewed at the Freedom Center. Click **here** to plan your visit.

History is everywhere. Learn about how you can contribute to the historical preservation movement by consulting the Freedom Center 's Community Research Training Program. Call Dr. Delores Walters at 513-333-7565 for more information.

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