

# Making the Invisible Visible

Memory and Historical Markers

# W.C. Handy

W.C. Handy is famous for committing Blues music from an oral tradition to paper. While waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi, he was the first to note other musicians using the ‘slide’ as a musical accompaniment to a new sound which became the blues, calling it “unforgettable.”. Though a statue and park in Memphis remember Handy as the “Father of the Blues” (and he certainly became famous after a 1906 composition of what became known as the “Memphis Blues”), a historical marker in Cleveland, Mississippi recalls a night in 1905 when Handy heard a local called Prince McCoy whose music inspired him as the original blues performers in the Mississippi Delta.





## DELTA BLUES INSPIRES W.C. HANDY

While leading his orchestra at a dance on this site c. 1905, Handy was unable to perform requested blues numbers. A local band stepped in and stole the show. "My enlightenment came in Cleveland. That night an American composer was born," he wrote. Handy later penned such blues classics as Memphis Blues and St. Louis Blues.

Though Handy gave McCoy and his local trio credit in his first drafts of the book *Father of the Blues*, any references to McCoy as an inspiration were removed, despite Handy's statement that "My enlightenment came in Cleveland. That night an American composer was born." in his 1941 book. McCoy never got recognition as a "founder" of the Blues.



## THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF W.C. HANDY

In W.C. Handy's famous account of his "enlightenment" in Cleveland, a ragged local trio was showered with coins after Handy's orchestra of trained musicians had been unable to similarly excite the crowd. In early manuscripts of his book *Father of the Blues* Handy identified the leader of the trio as Prince McCoy, but when the book went to press in 1941 McCoy's name had been removed. McCoy (c. 1882-1968) later led a popular orchestra in Greenville but never received public recognition for his role in inspiring Handy.

What influencers or originators have been  
lost to time?



# TASK ONE: RESEARCH!

Step One: Decide on the field you wish to research to find an “unsung hero”. It might be music, art, culture, history, science...your choice.

Step Two: Gather information and some images if possible related to your chosen individual. The individual might be famous but forgotten, an important influence upon another famous individual, or perhaps a local “footsoldier” who was part of a movement. Be prepared to write a summary of their contribution and the reason for their importance both in length and in brief. Use the questions on the next slide to guide your research.



## Questions to find Information:

1. Name of Individual:
2. Key dates:
3. Key quotes from them or others about them:
4. Their “story”:
5. What area have they most contributed to?
6. What might be a “trail” that this marker might be a part of?
7. What symbol might mark this trail?
8. What address or location would you place a historical marker for this person? Why there?
9. Key images:

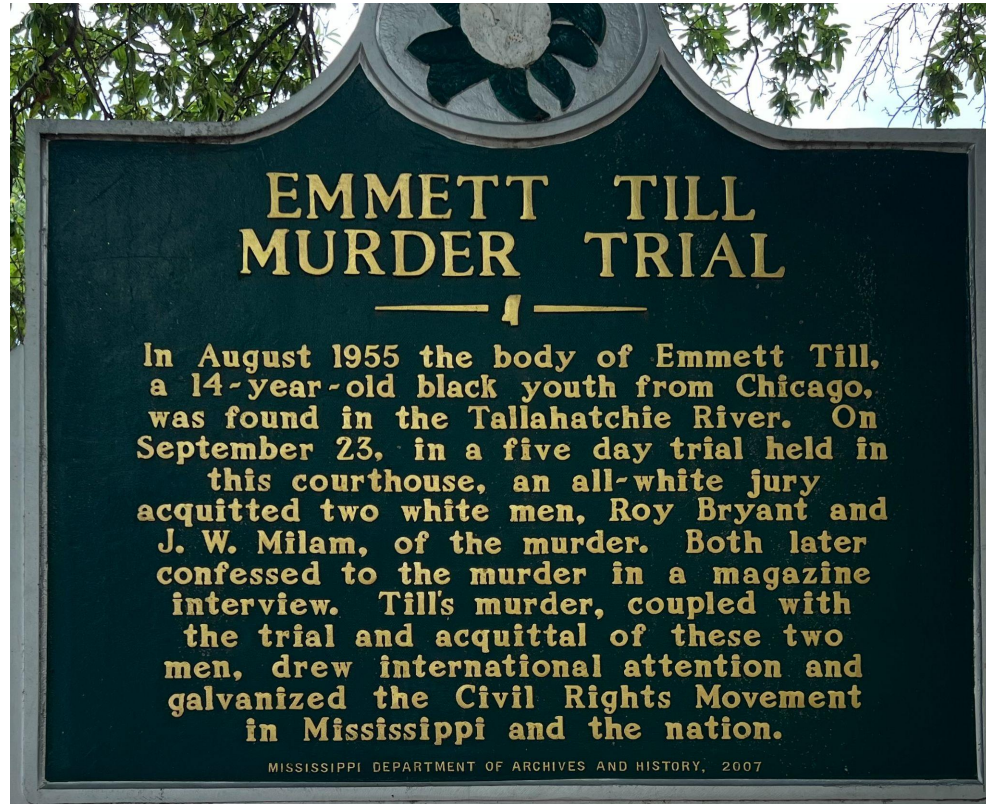
# TASK TWO: DESIGN A HISTORICAL MARKER!

Examine the images on the next slides for the design of a two-sided Historical Marker one might find throughout a state which celebrates important people and their contributions. Using the blank templates provided and your research, create your own two-sided historical marker.

Side One: In four sentences summarize the importance of the individual and their contributions to your chosen field. You should also have the image of the “trail” you chose in TASK ONE.

Side Two: In four paragraphs, tell the story of your individual in more detail and depth along with their significance and perhaps the significance of the location. Include important images, quotes, and subtitles on the right hand side of your sign.

# Samples of Side 1:



# Sample of Side 2:

**ROMEO**  
NEW ELECTROGRAPHIC PROCESS  
MADE IN U.S.A. - PAT. 1,917,111  
(N.A. 3029) - 10" FULL BROADCAST  
Vocal: Blues with Guitar Acc.

CROSS ROAD BLUES  
-Robert Johnson-  
ROBERT JOHNSON  
7-05-81

### Robert Johnson

One of the most famous and legendary Delta blues musicians is Robert Johnson (1911-1938). Although he recorded only twenty-nine songs at two recording sessions in 1936 and 1937, his work has been included in the repertoires of countless blues and rock musicians since. Johnson's songs "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," "Cross Road Blues," "Love in Vain Blues," "Traveling Riverside Blues," and "Sweet Home Chicago" became well known via the recordings of Elmore James, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and many others.

Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, but by 1920 he was living near Robinsonville, just south of Memphis. In the late 1920s, he took up the guitar and was learning to play from Willie Brown, Charley Patton, and Son House. By 1931, Johnson had returned to the Hazlehurst area and begun studying with local bluesman Ike Zimmerman, an important influence on Johnson and his modern, revolutionary style.

From 1933 on, Johnson traveled around the Delta and to other parts of the country including Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and even Canada. Johnson went from one jook to another, never settling in one place, although he did have a home in Helena, Arkansas, for a time. Late in 1938, impresario John Hammond planned to present Johnson as part of the "From Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall, an appearance that would have undoubtedly made him an international star. Unfortunately, Johnson died before that event. He was allegedly poisoned at the jook behind the Three Forks Store near the intersection of U. S. Highways 82 and 49E, by the angry husband of a woman he was seeing. Confusing accounts of different death and burial sites have arisen, but local sources have related that he died on Star of the West Plantation just south of this site on August 16 and was buried here the next day.

Some believe the legend that Johnson sold his soul in exchange for remarkable guitar-playing skills that would make him famous, and the story of his fateful meeting with the devil at a rural crossroads is an enduring blues theme. However, early blues songs are full of references to African American folk magic and the devil. Johnson's lyrics no exception. His songs "Hell Hound on My Trail" and "Me and the Devil Blues" helped to perpetuate the legend.

Robert Plant, of the iconic English rock band Led Zeppelin, visited the gravesite here on November 25, 2009, and left a note on the headstone that said: "Traveling Riverside" and "The Lemon Song" -1965. Thanks, Robert! R.A. Plant, England.

*This project was funded in part by a grant from*

*This is number No. 11 on the Mississippi Blues Trail, dedicated May 26, 2007, revised January 2021.*

Photo credit: Robert Johnson Studio Photos © 1981 Delta Hall Corporation

*Person of Note in the Negro Community of Hazlehurst, Mississippi*  
Carrie M. Thompson, is inscribed on his headstone: "John of Nazareth King of Jerusalem. I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He will call me from the Grave." The headstone is located in the southwestern corner of this cemetery.

*This note, handwritten by Robert Johnson according to his sister, Carrie M. Thompson, is inscribed on his headstone: "John of Nazareth King of Jerusalem. I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He will call me from the Grave." The headstone is located in the southwestern corner of this cemetery.*

Welcome to one of the many sites on the  
**MISSISSIPPI BLUES TRAIL**

[www.MSBluesTrail.org](http://www.MSBluesTrail.org)

# Sample of Side 2:



## MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM TRAIL

**Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market** On August 21, 1955, Emmett Till and his cousin, Wheeler Parker, arrived in Money from Chicago for a visit with relatives, including their great-uncle Moses "Mose" Wright. Three days later, on August 24, Till and his cousins came to this site, which was Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market, to purchase candy. Till, who had turned fourteen only the month before, had been warned not to test the South's Jim Crow code. But as he and his cousins were leaving the store, Till was reported to have whistled at Carolyn Bryant, the young white wife of the store owner. She recounted in court testimony that Till also grabbed her around the waist, something she much later admitted was not true.

In the early morning hours of August 28, Carolyn's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother J.W. Milam kidnapped Till from his great-uncle's home three miles southeast of the store. According to an FBI transcript, the kidnapers brought Till back to the store to have him identified before driving him to a barn near Drew in Sunflower County, where he was beaten and shot. His murderers secured a gin fan to his neck with barbed wire and dropped his body in the Tallahatchie River near Glendora. Bryant and Milam were soon arrested on kidnapping charges, and three days after his abduction, Till's body was pulled from the river.

Mamie Till, Emmett's mother, insisted that her son's body be returned to Chicago for an open-casket funeral, an event that garnered national media exposure. Milam and Bryant were indicted on September 6 by a grand jury for the kidnapping and murder, and the trial began on September 19 in Sumner. On the stand Mose Wright identified Milam and Bryant as the kidnapers, and Mamie Till testified that the body was that of her son. On September 23, a jury of twelve white men voted to acquit both defendants after deliberating only sixty-seven minutes. They would have reached that verdict in less time, according to one jury member, if they had not stopped to drink sodas. In January 1956, *Look* magazine published an interview with Milam and Bryant in which both confessed to the murder of Emmett Till. The two could not be retried, however, due to constitutional law regarding double jeopardy.

News of the murder and the trial outraged black and sympathetic white Americans, and the case became a catalyst for the American Civil Rights Movement. In an interview for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Myrtle Evers, widow of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, stated, "The Emmett Till case shook the foundations of Mississippi, both black and white. It said even a child was not safe from racism and bigotry and death. I recall so well Medgar crying when he found that this had happened to Emmett Till."



Ed Clark. Time © Lyle Nagel, Getty Images

Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market as it looked in the mid-1950s when Roy and Carolyn Bryant lived with their two children in the space above the store.

The November 24th, 1955 edition of JET magazine featured a story on the Emmett Till murder and shocked the public with photos of the battered body of Till in his casket. These photos have been widely credited with rallying black support and white sympathy across the U.S. As a result, intense scrutiny was brought to bear on black civil rights in Mississippi.



Ed Clark. Time © Lyle Nagel, Getty Images

Emmett Till was abducted at gunpoint from the home (pictured left) of his great-uncle, Mose Wright.

At right, the all-white male jury is shown in the Tallahatchie County courtroom in Sumner.



Ed Clark. Time © Lyle Nagel, Getty Images

While black journalists sat at a table in the front, black spectators stood or sat in the back of the courthouse during the 1955 trial of J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant.

*"The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all."*

— Mamie Till



Della Hunt. University Archives © Thomson

A young Emmett Till proudly poses with his bicycle on the streets of his native Chicago.



Ed Clark. Time © Lyle Nagel, Getty Images

Till's great-uncle, Mose Wright, and mother, Mamie Till, during the trial in Sumner, Mississippi.

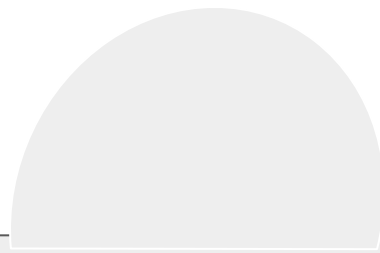


Franklin D. McMillan © CBS

A courtroom artist captured the act of extreme hostility on the part of Mose Wright. After having been threatened by J.W. Milam during the kidnapping to "not know anyone there," Wright pointed at him and said, "There he is."

This is marker No. 1 on the Mississippi Freedom Trail, dedicated May 18, 2011. It was replaced in July, 2017 due to vandalism, with updates made to text to reflect current findings.

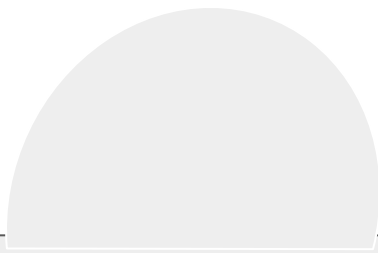
SIDE ONE TEMPLATE



**TITLE**

**FOUR SENTENCES HERE THAT SUMMARIZE  
THE KEY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL.**

SIDE TWO TEMPLATE:



TEXT HERE.

IMAGES, CAPTIONS, & QUOTES  
THIS SIDE.

Name of Student:





## Reflection Questions:

1. Why did you choose this individual? What does this say about what (or who?) you or society values?
2. Why have they been forgotten in your opinion?
3. What does it say about power or privilege who gets to be remembered or commemorated?
4. Where did you choose to put your marker? Why there? What other options might there have been? What should be the intention of the location-to be most visible or to mark a site?
5. What symbol did you pick for your trail? Why that symbol? What message are you trying to convey?

## Reflection Questions:

6. Whose voices get forgotten in our collective memory?
7. What types of people should we be remembering? How should we best remember them? Is it important to remember them? Why?
8. How does the work of famous individuals mask the contributions of many others? Are their contributions equally important?
9. Whose contributions are more significant in enacting important change, the famous leaders or the 'foot soldiers'? What makes you say that?
10. Are individual people the driving force behind history or are we just participants in larger historical events and forces?