

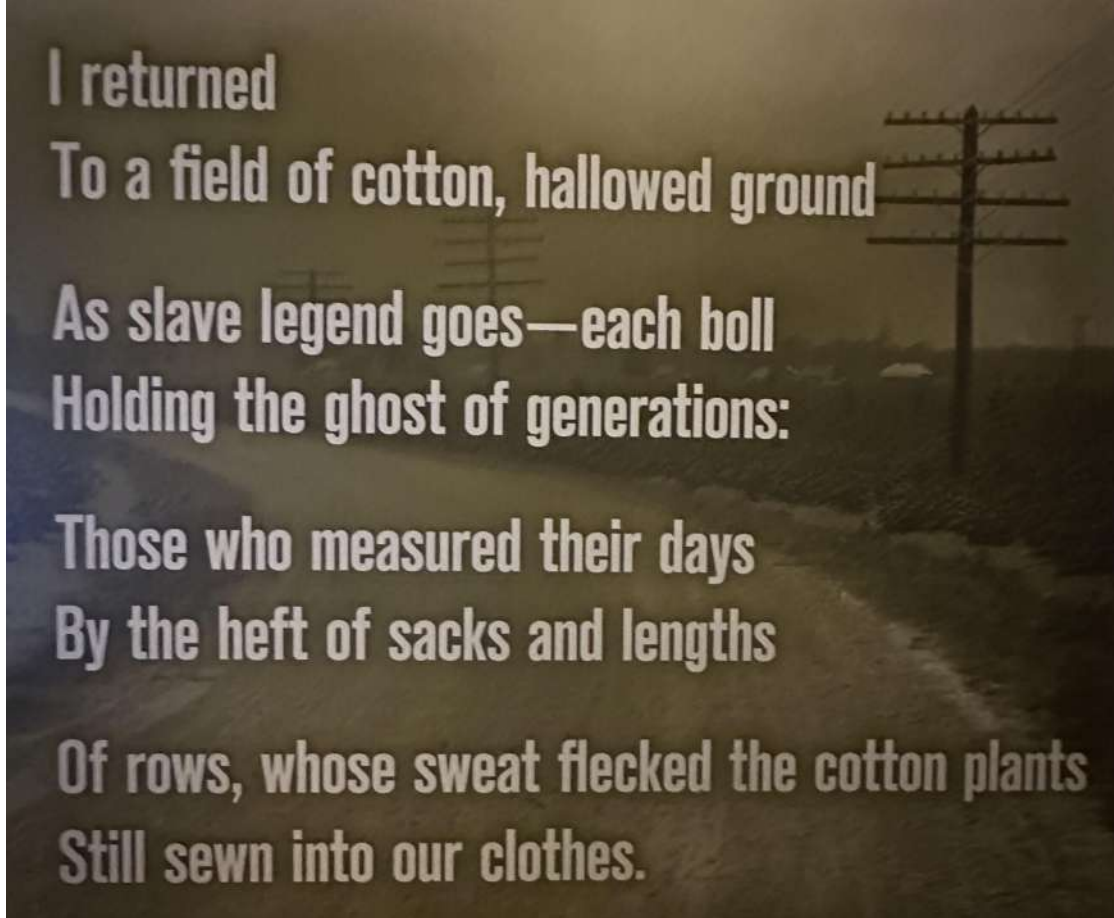
The Mississippi Delta

The Most Southern Place on Earth: Music, Culture, & History of the Mississippi Delta

June 17-24, 2023

Elaine Duckworth

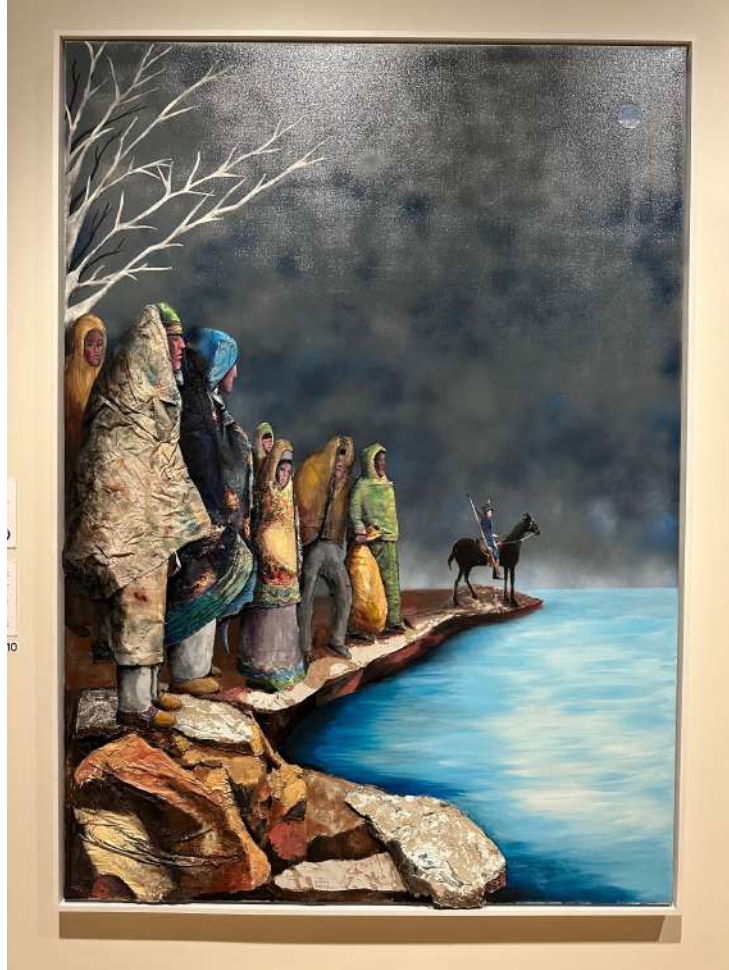
Richmond, Virginia



I returned
To a field of cotton, hallowed ground
As slave legend goes—each boll
Holding the ghost of generations:
Those who measured their days
By the heft of sacks and lengths
Of rows, whose sweat flecked the cotton plants
Still sewn into our clothes.



From “South,” by Pulitzer Prize-winning Mississippi poet
Natasha Tretheway



Benny Andrews (1930-2006), Mississippi River Bank, from the Trail of Tears series, 2005 mixed media on canvas [Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art]



Titus Kaphar (born 1976) *Darker Than Cotton*, 2017 [Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art] How can art challenge us to discover forgotten histories?



“Southern History”

Before the war, they were happy, he said, quoting our textbook. (This was senior-year history class.) *The slaves were clothed, fed, and better off under a master’s care.*

I watched the words blur on the page. No one raised a hand, disagreed. Not even me.

It was late; we still had Reconstruction to cover before the test, and—luckily—three hours of watching *Gone with the Wind. History*, the teacher said, of the old South—*a true account of how things were back then.* On screen a slave stood big as life: big mouth, bucked eyes, our textbook’s grinning proof—a lie my teacher guarded. Silent, so did I.

—Natasha Trethewey

This portrait of a woman named Delia is a rare example of pre-Emancipation portraiture in the South. James Reid Lambdin, a prominent portrait painter based in Pennsylvania, spent many summers in his brother Samuel’s home in Natchez. Family lore tells that Delia was revered in the household and that perhaps it was in honor of her that her portrait was painted, yet her headwrap nevertheless denotes her status as an enslaved woman. Think about Trethewey’s poem in relation to this portrait. What does Delia’s facial expression reveal to you?

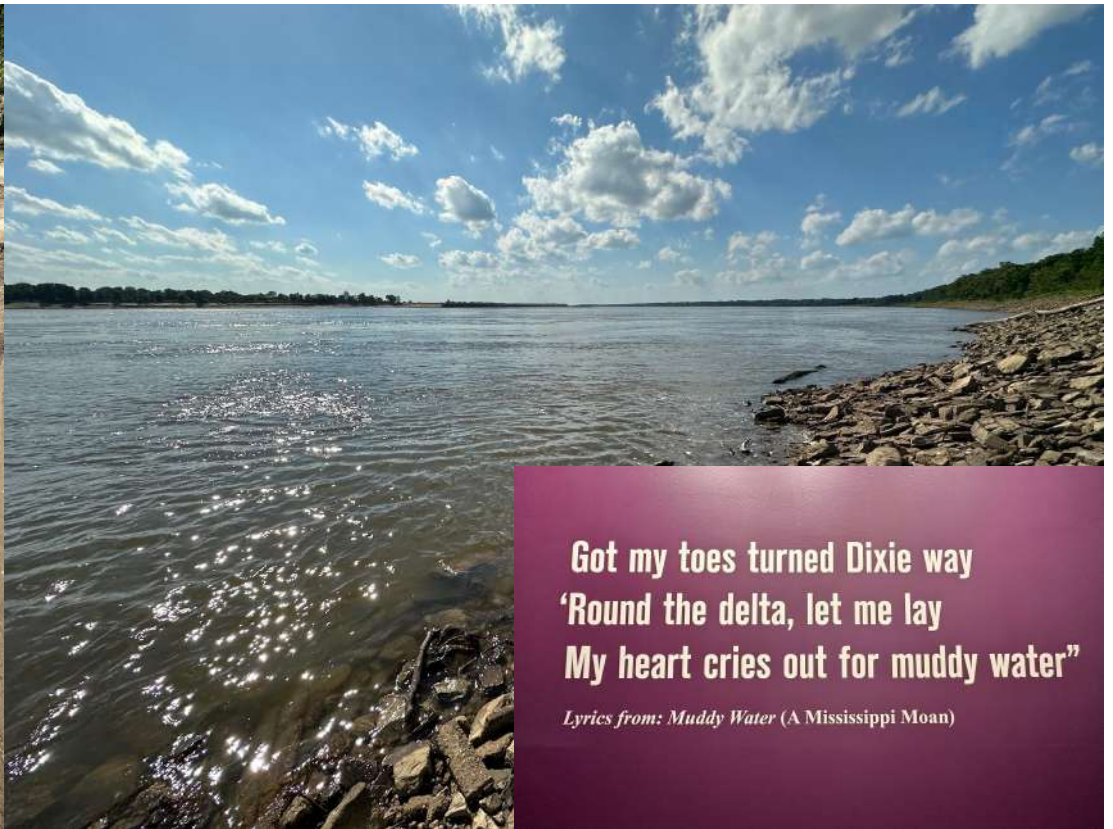
James Reid Lambdin (1807-1889) Portrait of Delia, 1840-1849
[Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art]



“The ability to shape your own narrative, rather than having others shape it for you, is ultimately what matters most. The power of the story lies in the hands of the storyteller. Almost any experience can be reshaped, any destiny re-imagined, if those who have lived it tell their own stories.”

—AMINATTA FORNA

Unidentified Artist, Unidentified Woman from Smedes, Sharkey County, Mississippi, ca. 1865-1910 [Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art]



**Got my toes turned Dixie way
'Round the delta, let me lay
My heart cries out for muddy water"**

Lyrics from: Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)

For more than 4,000 years, sediments deposited in the soil of the Mississippi Delta make it rich in nutrients for farming. The Great Flood of 1927 was the most destructive flood in American history until Hurricane Katrina. At least 500 people died and more than a half million Black families lost their homes in the flood. Systemic abuses, racism, and violence perpetrated against African Americans resulted in many families leaving the delta region in what is called The Great Migration. As evidenced in this song lyric, the Mississippi River has been a compelling theme in music and literature.



“The land was perfectly flat and level but it shimmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it.”
[From “Delta Wedding,” by Pulitzer-Prize winning Mississippi native Eudora Welty]



Built ca. 1930, the Ruleville Depot served as an Illinois Central Gulf RR depot until 1978. The railroad, built in 1897 by Major C.H. Pond and originally called the Yazoo Delta RR, first ran from Moorhead to Ruleville. With both passenger and freight service the railroad contributed to the early growth of Ruleville. “Greasy Street” was the center of commercial activity for African Americans in the Ruleville area. On Saturday nights Greasy Street was packed with people dressed in their finest clothes who visited establishments including Mack’s Colored Cafe. Blues musicians who played in Ruleville included Charley Patton, David “Honeyboy” Edwards, and Howlin’ Wolf. After Fannie Lou Hamer registered to vote, the bus she was riding in was pulled over in Ruleville and the driver jailed.



Diverse groups settled in the Mississippi Delta including Chinese, Italians, and Jews. Cathy's family opened stores and David's family came as indentures to work the land.



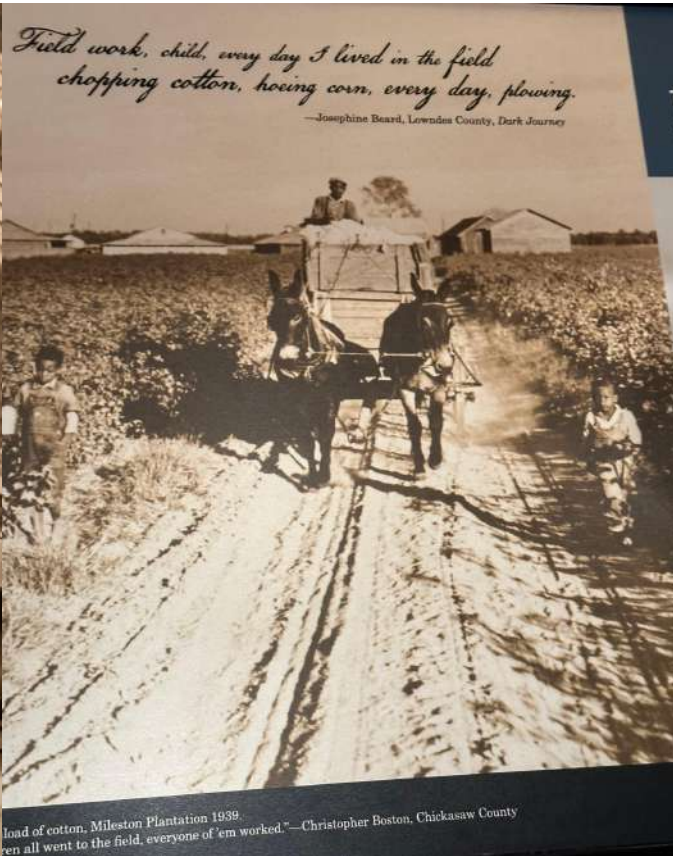
Birney Imes (born 1951) Oaklimb Baptism, ca. 1980

[Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art] Southern religions are fundamentalist and based on the literal teachings of the church fathers and congregants are instructed to behave according to doctrine. Fundamentalist services became a political movement in the 1920s with the Scopes' Trial and again in the 1980s. Faith in the Mississippi Delta is part of the broader southern religious culture. There is a strong sense of moralism in which individual morality is not concerned with justice in the society but focused instead on an individual's salvation and morality. Southern religious culture goes beyond the church doors. It's a conduit for the way in which people testify to their faith. The southern oral traditions and storytelling are also pervasive parts of southern culture.



*we ask questions we are cussed,
and if we raise up we are shot,
and that ends it.*

—unknown Delta sharecropper



*load of cotton, Mileston Plantation 1939.
When all went to the field, everyone of 'em worked.* —Christopher Boston, Chickasaw County

*Field work, child, every day I lived in the field
chopping cotton, hoeing corn, every day, plowing.*
—Josephine Beard, Lowndes County, Dark Journey



Can to Can't

*“When the sun be...breaking, you're going to the field.
When the sun go down, then you come out of the field.”*

Oscar Butler, Indianola resident



The Blue Front Cafe opened in 1948. Despite a 10 PM town curfew, the cafe might stay open 24 hours a day to serve the round-the-clock shifts of workers at the height of cotton gathering and ginning season. [-from Blues Trail Marker]



Owner of the Blue Front Cafe, Jimmy “Duck” Holmes (18 June 2023) of Bentonina Mississippi, plays blues he learned from Jack Owens and Henry “Son” Stuckey. The day before he played for thousands of fans at the 46th Bentonina Blues Festival.



Only known photograph of Patton, ca. 1930

Charley Patton

Although born in Hinds County, Mississippi around 1895, Charley Patton spent most of his life in the Mississippi Delta.

He was arguably the single most important musician in America.

In 1910 his family moved to Dockery Plantation and from that point, Patton's life became not about manual labor but rather music. He learned from Henry Sloan of Dockery and Carl Harris of Cleveland. In turn, Patton influenced countless other musicians including Robert Johnson, Son Thomas, Howlin' Wolf, and John Lee Hooker. Charley Patton moved in and around the Delta, never settling for too long in one place and managed to record both gospel and blues tracks. Patton died at Heathman Plantation near Indianola in 1934.

*"I think I heard the think I heard the Peavine when it blowed
I think I heard the Pea Vine when it blowed
It blow just like my rider gettin' on board"*

From "Peavine Blues" 1929

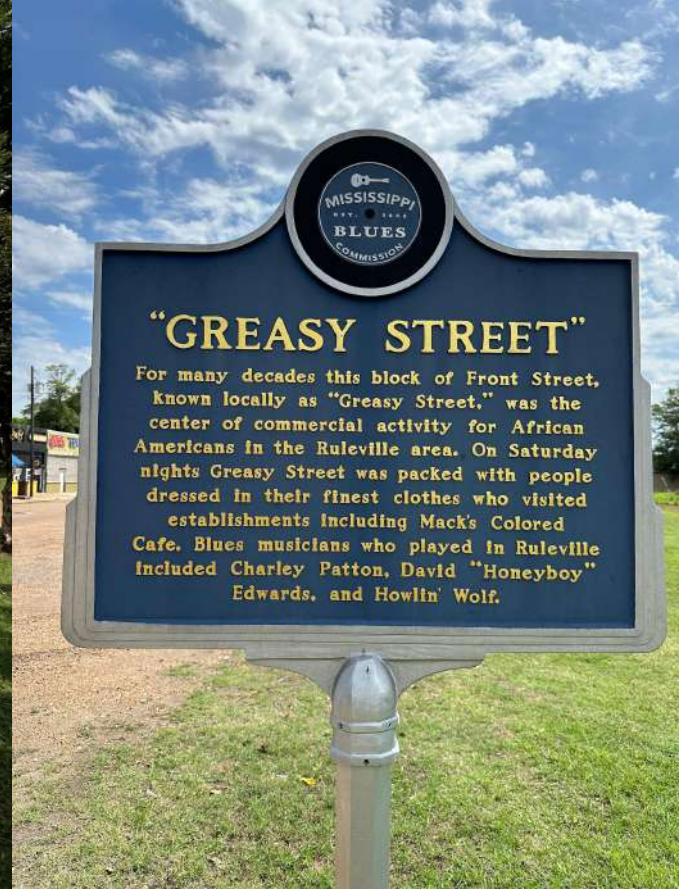
Charley Patton has been called the "Father of the Blues." He worked chopping cotton at Dockery Plantation where he birthed a musical style rooted in oppression and distinguished by polyrhythms and slide guitar introduced by Hawaiians.



Valley Store in Avalon, Mississippi, where the legendary Mississippi John Hurt spent many nights entertaining.



John Hurt was a crowd favorite at the Newport Folk Music Festival in Rhode Island, where he appeared annually from 1963-1965. His granddaughter, Mary Frances Hurt created the Mississippi John Hurt Blues Foundation. [Mississippi Blues Trail Marker]



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Southern water dippers [National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee] How is racism illustrated by these artifacts?



Fannie Lou Hamer sang spirituals such as “This Little Light of Mine” and “Go Tell It On the Mountain.” She was a powerful speaker and reminded everyone, “*Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.*”

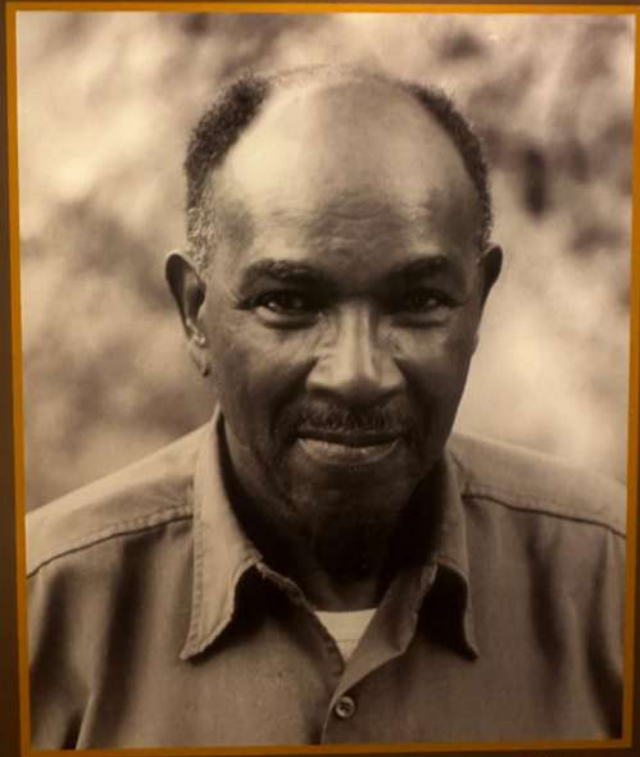


Matt Herron (1931-2020) Singing freedom songs, Freedom School, Mileston, Mississippi, 1964, 1967 [Mississippi Museum of Art] Songs of the movement include “Oh Freedom,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “Get On Board Children,” “We Shall Not Be Moved,” and “We Shall Overcome.”



“One day we will not have to hang our heads in shame or hold our breath when the name Mississippi is mentioned, fearing the worst. But, instead, we will be anticipating the best.”

—MEDGAR EVERS



Charles Sawyer Collection

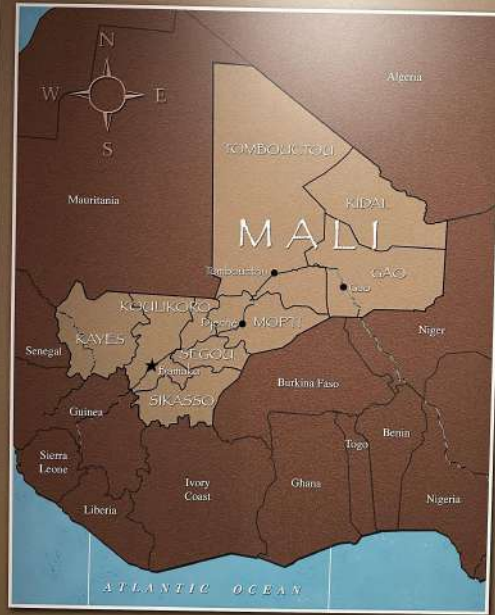


BB King's mother died when he was 9 years old. He said, *"I would give nearly any amount of money today to have a picture of my mom."* From her deathbed his mother told him, *"Be kind. It will always bring you good things."* His teacher, Luther Henson, taught Riley lessons in life and self-respect and worked with him to overcome his tendency to stutter. Though her was passionate about educating African American children, *"the pay was so small he decided that he would just stop teaching and just turn to farming,"* said niece Sara Betty Lou Henson. [BB King Museum, Indianola, Mississippi]



REPUBLIC OF MALI

Date of Independence:
September 22, 1960



*"If you don't know the blues... there's no point
in picking up the guitar and playing rock
and roll or any other form of popular music."*

Keith Richards

Mississippi Blues and Islamic Roots

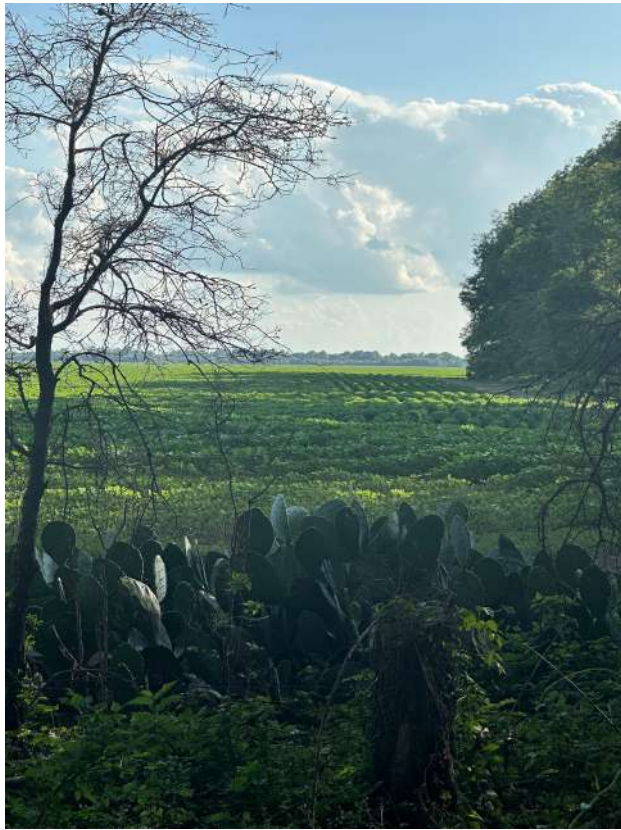
America's most original music—the blues—born and brought to life in Mississippi, has deep roots in Africa. New study by historians is now documenting this. Dr. Sylviane Diouf has shown the similarities in the *athaan*, the Muslim call to prayer heard five times daily around the world, with an early type of blues song. She compares the *athaan* to "*Levee Camp Holler*," sung by former enslaved people as they worked. [International Museum of Muslim Culture, Jackson, Mississippi]



“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

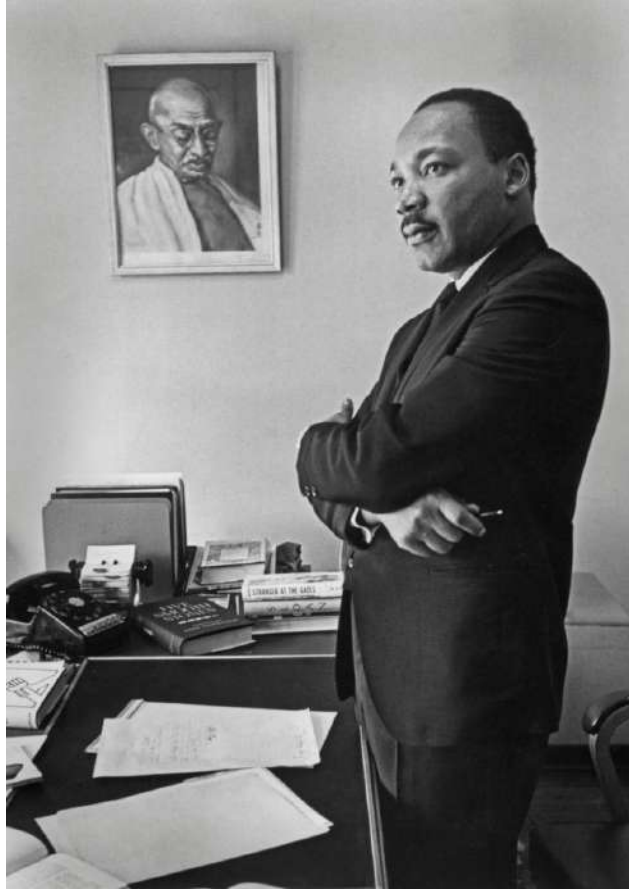
[Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till, ca. 1953-1955 (*Library of Congress*) and art displayed at the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center (E.P.I.C. Museum) in Glendora, Mississippi, which is housed in the cotton gin once owned by J.W. Milam (one of the men who abducted and killed Emmett Till).



Robert Johnson's recordings in 1936 and 1937 such as "Cross Roads Blues," "Kind Hearted Woman Blues," "Sweet Home Chicago," "Terraplane Blues," and "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" left an enduring influence on American music that cannot be overstated. The photo at left was taken near his gravesite.



In the heart of the Mississippi Delta, Isaiah Montgomery and Benjamin Green created a townsite from a swamp in 1887 that Theodore Roosevelt called the “Jewel of the Delta. Mound Bayou is the oldest, all African American community in the United States. Mamie Till and Black journalists stayed in Mound Bayou during the trial. The Taborian Hospital, where Fannie Lou Hamer died, is closed at this time. The challenges facing Mound Bayou today are a lack of economic growth and opportunities for children and youth.



“An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.” Mohandas Gandhi

In 1959, after the success of the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. King and his wife, Coretta, made a pilgrimage to Gandhi’s homeland in India. King returned more convinced than ever that nonviolence was *“the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”* [National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee]



Marion Post Walcott / Library of Congress

You Do the Math

Black Schools ≠ White Schools

Difference in Teacher Salaries, c. 1916

	Georgia	S. Carolina	Louisiana
White	319	333	529
Black	<u>-119</u>	<u>-111</u>	<u>-160</u>
	\$200	\$222	\$369

School Funding in the South

■ White ■ Black

Public Funding for
College Construction
1937-38



7.76 %
\$7,059,445

92.24 %
\$83,884,687



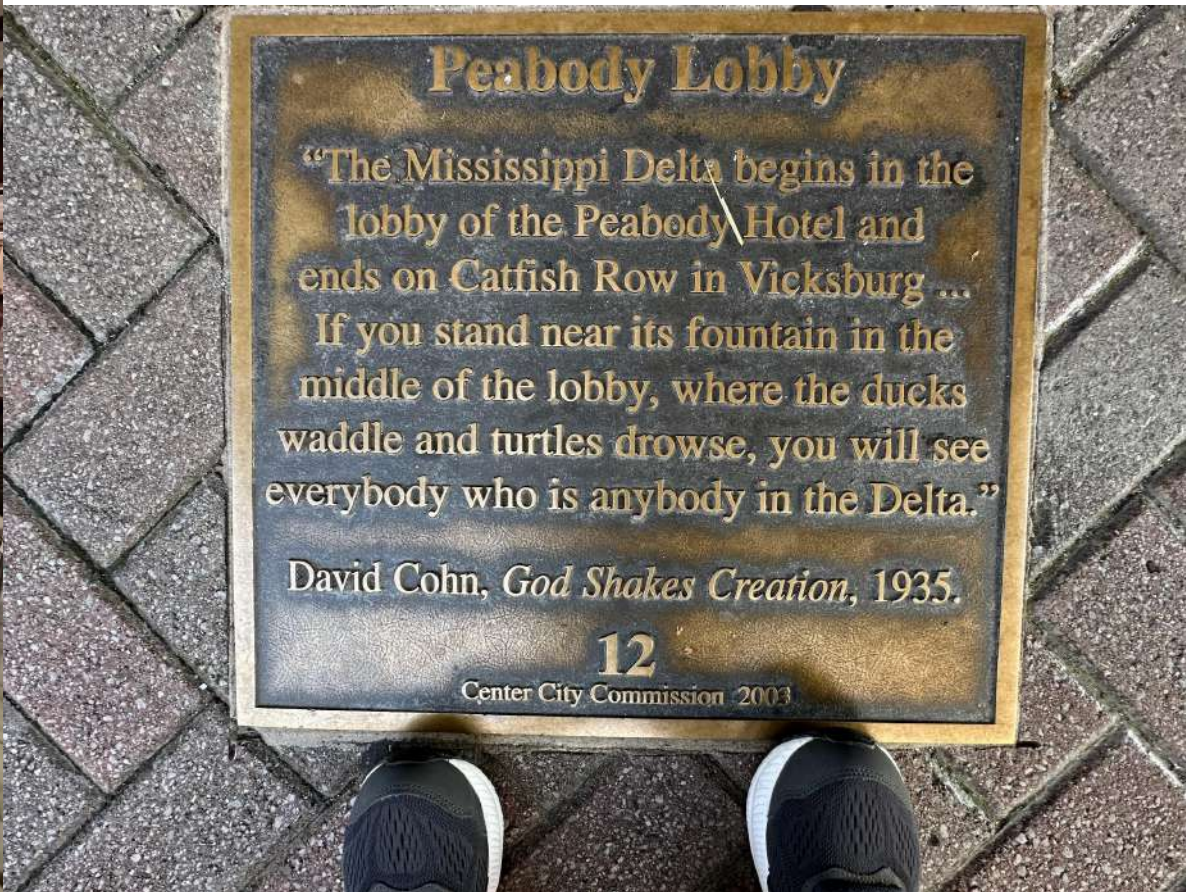
Value of School Property
(including buildings
and equipment)
per Pupil, 1946



Expenditure on Instruction
per Pupil, 1935



Ruby Bridges, born September 8, 1954, in Tylertown, Mississippi, integrated an all-white elementary school in New Orleans on November 14, 1960 when she was 6 years old. [National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee]



Five ducks live in the marble fountain at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. As they've done for nearly a century, the ducks enter the lobby at 11 AM and march back to the elevator at 5 PM to return to their Royal Duck Palace on the rooftop.



“If you think of culture always as a return to roots—R-O-O-T-S—you’re missing the point. I think of culture as routes—R-O-U-T-E-S—the various routes by which people travel, culture travels, culture moves, culture develops, culture changes, cultures migrate, etc.”

—STUART HALL

*“I was leaving the South
to fling myself into the unknown . . .
I was taking a part of the South
to transplant in alien soil,
to see if it could grow differently,
if it could drink of new and cool rains,
bend in strange winds,
respond to the warmth of other suns
and, perhaps, to bloom.”*

—RICHARD WRIGHT



Carroll Cloar (1913-1993) *Kudzu*, 1976 [Mississippi Museum of Art]



In an empty field in Cleveland, Mississippi, at the corner of S Chrisman and Collins Streets where an African American neighborhood once thrived, wild Rain Lilies bloom.



Eudora Welty (1909-2001) Houseboat family, Pearl River, ca. 1936 [Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art]. I am coming full circle at the Pearl River near Jackson, Mississippi, at the end of my learning experience on June 24th, grateful and blessed.



LET YOUR
LIGHT
SHINE