



# **ALABAMA/MISSISSIPPI 2020**

## **A travel blog**

Nicole J. Burton

# Montgomery, Alabama: The Legacy

February 19, 2020

Nicole J. Burton



Researching a new play about a women's civil rights project in Mississippi during Freedom Summer 1964, I thought I'd first visit the new Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. I'm blown away. I recommend everyone visit, especially white and whitish people. The story's bad, worse than we know, but the straight line narrative of American enslavement through the criminal justice system is told creatively, clearly, and compassionately, and it was an honor to visit the marker of a friend's grandfather, lynched in 1915, shortly after the release of the film, "Birth of a Nation." I'll have to squeeze the Rosa Parks and Freedom Riders Museums and Selma in tomorrow as by evening I'll be in Meridian, Mississippi.

# Montgomery to Selma

February 22, 2020



Heavy rain dampened my enthusiasm to walk about Montgomery but before leaving I visited the Freedom Rides Museum in the old Greyhound Bus Station. That's where the Freedom Riders were attacked by a mob while police looked on in May 1961. It's a beautiful museum saved from the wrecking ball by the Alabama Historical Commission. As it poured, I drove west forty miles to Selma and over the Edmund Pettus Bridge where the March to Montgomery began. What a feeling.

At the Selma Interpretative Center, I watched videos of marchers reflecting on their experiences then went upstairs for the rest of the exhibit and lo and behold, there was Linda Lowery, the woman in the video, answering a young visitor's questions. Linda had turned 15 the second day of the four-day march and she said one of the happiest days of her life was when she voted for the first time at age 21. As I'd done in Montgomery, I donated Joy Jones' terrific book for teenagers, *Fearless Public Speaking*, and some of my books, to the permanent collection of the city library. I thought Jim Landry would be happy to know that *Memory Music* had made it to Selma.

# The Riddle of Meridian

February 23, 2020



Mamie and Don of the Century B&B made me a wonderful breakfast and learning about my research, Don offered to drive me to James Chaney's gravesite on the outskirts of town. Truthfully, he wanted to drive my Jeep. (I'd asked the rental company for a small subcompact hoping to slide quietly across Mississippi but God has a sense of humor and I ended up with a huge turquoise Jeep with Minnesota tags.) It was a pleasure to be driven awhile and Mamie pointed out sights from the backseat, the high schools and the synagogue bombed in 1968 by the KKK, the national headquarters of which is in Philadelphia, thirty miles north. I saw a map showing black and white populations by county and realized that Neshoba County where Meridian is the county seat is a white county surrounded by mixed and majority black counties. The reason we know the name "Meridian" is because it's where activists Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were kidnapped and murdered while investigating a church bombing.

Leaving the Jeep at the B&B, I explored Meridian on foot. Before arriving, I'd imagined it as a dusty cowtown when in fact its downtown has many tall brick buildings, two Art Deco skyscrapers (one being renovated by Marriott), and historically had a large Jewish community. As far as I can tell, its prosperity derived from lumber shipping and the crossroads of north-south and east-west railroads.



I followed the civil rights trail map and with difficulty found markers for the Meridian COFO/SNCC Office and Freedom School (both gone), St. Paul United Methodist and New Hope Baptist Churches, the Wechsler School (the state's first brick educational building for black students named for Rabbi Wechsler), the shuttered Head Start building, and the old black business area. At Weidmann's, "Since 1870," the oldest continuously operating restaurant in Mississippi, I feasted in style on mac n' cheese, turnip greens, fried green tomatoes, and corn bread.

The photo is taken from the site of the COFO office, which was above a drugstore. The E. F. Young Hotel hosted Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he came to town. The complex developed into a hotel, two restaurants, a movie theater, beauty shop, two barber shops, a shoe shine parlor, and hair product manufacturing shop. I hope someone has plans to restore it.

# "Lift Every Voice and Sing"

February 24, 2020



I was warmly welcomed at Mount Helm Baptist Church in Jackson. The congregation was wearing red for "Heart Sunday" and the sermon was about the dual challenge of barring our hearts against evil and opening our hearts to love. I enjoyed the beautiful, nuanced music and the opportunity to sing my favorite anthem. My seat mate, an 85-year-old former English professor, ably assisted me with the unfamiliar prayer books. Mount Helm is the oldest black Baptist church in Jackson founded in 1835 in the basement of the white First Baptist Church and later built on donated land after the Civil War. As a guest, I was asked to introduce myself and several members kindly gave me information for my project after the service. I wrote and rested in the afternoon.

On my way to a meeting and dinner in the 1950s googie-style Fondran neighborhood, I scoped out some locations where the story I'm telling took place. Many of the buildings are gone, of course. I'd read in the news that the iconic Sun-n-Sand Motor Hotel in downtown Jackson where some of the white women stayed had been torn down last year. Imagine my delight when I turned the corner and there it was in all its decrepit glory. Because there was nowhere safe for black and white women to meet in Jackson in 1964, the white women would sneak out of the back of the motel, hightail four blocks to the Farish neighborhood, and meet at the black YWCA next to Collins Funeral Home. I also found Magnolia Towers, a white high-rise apartment building, now affordable senior housing, that housed the headquarters and staff of the women's project. Good hunting tonight.

# COFO Headquarters

February 25, 2020



To sit in the headquarters where Robert Moses and company coordinated the Summer in Mississippi project known as Freedom Summer 1964 is inspiring. Robby Lockett, civil rights historian and professor at Jackson State University (JSU) runs the COFO Education Center, a museum to past activism and a meeting area for current social action. The brainchild of Moses to reduce intra-organizational strife, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was established in 1961 as an umbrella organization to unify and meet the needs of an increasing presence of civil rights organizations in Mississippi, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and a host of local organizations.

In 1963, COFO made 1017 John R. Lynch Street its home and the property is now owned by JSU. A sign taped on the wall above desks with old telephones reads the safety rule: "In Constant Touch." Activists in the field were cautioned to call in every 30 minutes. After talking to Robby, I stayed for his presentation to a tour group and had the pleasure of also hearing Hezekiah Watkins, activist and youngest Freedom Rider (age 13) talk about his experience. On my way down to the Delta, I stopped at Medgar Evers' home, which is now a National Historic Landmark. Evers was the first NAACP Field Secretary and was assassinated in his driveway in June 1963. My heart and head are full. This hard story is our history.

# Delta Blessings & Curses

February 26, 2020



Fannie Lou Hamer is one of my heroes. I went with pleasure to her memorial park and gravesite in Ruleville, Sunflower County. Around the corner from where she lived, the park includes this beautiful statue with engraved pictures and quotes, her gravesite and that of her husband, and tribute markers. I did Soaring Crane Qi Gong in the pavilion to leave and receive blessings. Over forty years gone, she has much to teach us about courage and commitment. I enjoyed a brief visit with the Ruleville librarian to drop off books, lucky to see her because she splits her days between the Drew and Ruleville libraries.

I didn't want to continue my Delta itinerary; I didn't want to go to Money, but the historian at Jackson State said the ruins of Bryant's Grocery Store where Emmett Till bought candy and whistled at the cashier was a sacred spot. So down Sunny Side Road I went, winding along the muddy Tallahatchie River, blacktop to gravel to blacktop again. Someone had recently left yellow flowers on the ruins across from the railroad tracks and down from the old Money Cotton Gin. Though outwardly peaceful, I hated the neighborhood.

I didn't like my next stop either, Sumner, the courthouse where the sham trial of Till's murderers took place. I visited the good Emmett Till Interpretative Center, where a recent acquisition is the bullet-ridden sign from the spot on the riverbank where Till's body was believed to have been removed. A new bulletproof sign--



and a camera--have been installed. Finally, my last --short--stop was the visitor parking lot of Parchman Penitentiary, where hundreds of Freedom Riders were imprisoned. A nasty place, an 18,000-acre forced labor prison to this day. Nine people were murdered there recently.

Back at my hotel in Cleveland, I thought of staying in or finding a meeting but this last night in the Delta--and Mardi Gras--was my one opportunity to find some Delta blues so I drove up to Clarksdale and sure enough, at the Hambone Art and Music Venue, Mississippi Marshall and friends were playing soulful, sustaining blues. The red beans and rice were good too.

# King of the Blues

February 28, 2020

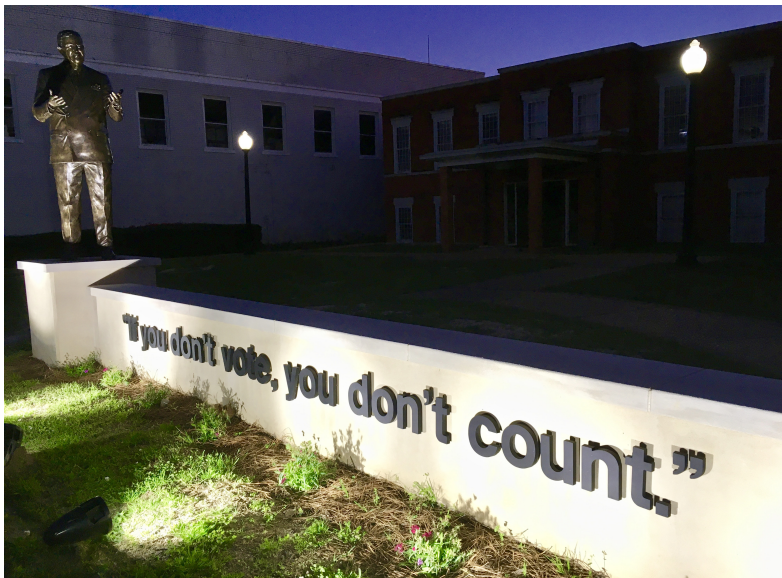


I thought I'd spend an hour at the B.B. King Museum in Indianola but two and half hours later, I told the cashier in the gift shop, "You didn't say you were going to take me hostage!" Of course, B.B., who is buried outside the museum, lived to age 90 and had a full, varied life beginning with working the Delta fields and eventually traveling the world as King of the Blues. This fabulous museum is expanding and by fall will include inside B.B.'s tour bus and Rolls Royce, and an outdoor meditation garden with lyrics and quotes. There's a community room where a video was playing for Black History Month and the Gentry High School had hung a terrific art show. The painting in the photo is entitled "The Lady Flag" by Tykeria Stovall.

Down the street at Betty's Place, I ate a plate of local fried catfish, okra, and broccoli. Mike Campbell, the proprietor (Betty was in the kitchen), showed me the signatures of well-wishers from around the world who'd signed the walls. He's hoping Mike Espy running for Senate will win in the fall. Espy expanded the international market for farmed catfish that benefitted the state greatly, though the industry's fallen off in past years. Several people had mentioned their support of Espy, who was Clinton's Secretary of Agriculture and a Congressman before that. Mike asked me who I supported for President and I said Warner though I'd vote for any Democrat. He said he supports Biden because, "He's been there, in the White House, he knows the drill."

# If You Don't Vote, You Don't Count

February 28, 2020



Before leaving Jackson, I walk down Capitol Street past the site of the 1963 Woolworth's lunch counter sit-ins by Tougaloo College students and professors. The Mayor of Jackson had refused to desegregate downtown businesses despite being court-ordered and a mob attacked the protesters while police looked on. More than 50 students were arrested and segregation protests and voter registration drives accelerated. People I've talked to are proud of the achievements of the Mississippi Movement. Black and white, they speak with refreshing candor about history, racism, and ongoing struggles.

I drove to my last destination, Hattiesburg, through the Pine Belt. Near the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi, I met African-American and gender studies professor and author of *Strategic Sisterhood*, Dr. Rebecca Tuuri. Over coffee at T-Bones Cafe, she unloaded a glorious treasure trove of book, online, and people resources to further my research. Hattiesburg was a civil rights hub, Rebecca told me, the biggest of the Freedom School sites, with over 3,000 local activists, 70 student volunteers, and 645 students enrolled in Freedom Schools in the summer of 1964.

At her suggestion, in the waning light I squeezed in drive-by's of the African American Military History Museum, formerly one of two black USO's; the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, known locally as "the Civil Rights Church," where Rev. Martin Luther King preached two weeks before his assassination; the Eureka School, one of the first brick schools for black students built in the South, and my favorite site, the new Vernon Dahmer statue that graces the front of the Forrest County Courthouse. Vernon Dahmer was a Hattiesburg farmer, businessman, and civil rights activist whose motto appears in the photo. Dahmer died when his house was fire-bombed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1966. This courthouse, named for a

Confederate Civil War general who was the first Grand Wizard of the Klan, was the site of hundreds of black people lining up to register to vote in the rain in January 1964.



# Visiting Alabama and Mississippi

March 1, 2020



As my visit to Alabama and Mississippi ends, I encourage those who've said they'd like to visit the Civil Rights Trail in these two states and get to know the people better. Lord knows, they can use the visitors. You can easily put together a trip itinerary as I did; it's America, same phones, same currency, Central time. Okay, maybe a different century but that's part of what's interesting.

Among other sources, I was inspired by Dana Milbank's *Washington Post* column about taking his kids on the Civil Rights Trail for spring break last year. While traveling in my singular turquoise rental Jeep (shown by popular request), I met several groups on organized tours of civil rights sites, including those by Road Scholar and Distant Horizons. After spending almost two weeks and nine hundred miles traveling and meeting people, I took the Amtrak Crescent train home, enjoying a cozy roomette sleeping car for 24 hours from Hattiesburg to Washington, D.C. It was the best way to transit back to the 21st century and begin absorbing all I'd experienced. Tomorrow, my final thoughts.

# Come Again

March 2, 2020



For all the upside of visiting Alabama and Mississippi, and there's much to recommend--The history of the black freedom struggle that inspires the world. Museums and sites. A good kind of pride and friendliness. Great food. Delta, rivers, pine forests, rolling hills--one cannot ignore the downside--Ground Zero for the enslavement of people of color. Racial terrorism. Mass incarceration. Deprivation.

Robby Luckett of Jackson State told me that the power structure in Mississippi remains largely unchanged from fifty years ago so the struggle continues. The urban poverty was worse than any I've seen. The downtowns of Montgomery, Selma, Meridian, Jackson, and Hattiesburg exhibited neglect as if fifty years ago it was decreed: No more maintenance. No more roads, sidewalks, bridges, paint for porches, shingles for roofs, economic development, or jobs. In a double whammy of White Flight and desegregation, the historic black business areas slumped and fell. But efforts are underway to revitalize and visitors are attracted to the bravery of the black freedom movement. It hasn't escaped the notice of the Mississippi Chamber of Commerce that in its first year alone, the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum attracted over 250,000 visitors. After all, the only color more important than white in America is green.

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