

Heritage Tourism Case Study: Tupelo, Mississippi

Scott Jenkins

Introduction

Tupelo Mississippi is located in north Mississippi and was incorporated in 1866. Geographically it consists of prairie and the northern end of the fertile black belt. Today, the biggest association for most people is that Tupelo is the birthplace of Elvis Presley. His childhood home is memorialized as a museum and interpretive center and one of Tupelos biggest annual events is the Elvis festival. You can still visit the hardware store where he purchased his first guitar too! Other interesting attractions in Tupelo include the Natchez Trace Parkway, antique automobile enthusiasts who came to visit the recently closed automobile museum and several car shows each year, and many restaurants and shops for shoppers from outlying places to come for a weekend. Tupelo is considered a rather progressive small town for Mississippi and is promoted as the town that has, “something for everyone”, but does it? Perhaps when considering entertainment and services, there is something for everyone, but the story of Tupelo and the area is so unique and interesting that it should be visible to visitors. It is a past that includes many cultures like the Chickasaw, the Spanish, British, French, African and African Americans, Latino, and Asians. Events such as the Battle of Ackia between the French and Chickasaw in 1736, Hernando De Sotos expedition in 1540, the hundreds of thousands of African and African American slaves that were forced to march down the Natchez Trace in coffles to supply labor for area plantations, the battle of Harrisburg during the Civil War, and one of the deadliest tornadoes in American history which leveled Tupelo in 1936. I think that when it comes to the shared history of the area, there really is something for everyone. If presented and

interpreted professionally, I think the history of Tupelo could be its biggest attraction. There are many ways that this history could be presented and available to visitors. Most importantly, both physically and virtually, this interpretive experience should be created by the diverse cultural communities that played a role in the story of Tupelo. In the following pages I will go deeper into the history of Tupelo and some of the bigger issues that have prevented different cultures and perspectives from being part of the telling of our complete history. I will also present ideas about projects and community involvement that could help incorporate the history into a visitor's experience. While Tupelo was named and incorporated in 1866, this fascinating story begins several centuries before.

Case Study 1

History

The earliest evidence of human inhabitation in north Mississippi is found in the numerous Native American mounds scattered throughout Tupelo and the surrounding area. One of these well-known mounds is the Bynum mounds. According to an excavation and radiocarbon study, performed by archaeologist Richard Walling in 1979, the mounds were constructed during the middle woodland period, between 100BC and 300AD. The area of Tupelo is much more associated with the Chickasaw tribe of Native Americans who migrated to this area of Mississippi around 1300AD. According to the Chickasaw nation website, they had no relationship to the mound builders. The Chickasaws legend of migration is that around 1300AD they migrated east. After crossing the Mississippi river, the tribe was divided on traveling north or south. Two brothers, Chacta and Chicasa, established themselves as leaders of each band. Chacta led his band south and established the Choctaw tribe of south Mississippi, and Chicasa

led his band north establishing the Chickasaw tribe. While this is considered oral legend, there is certainly some truth as the two tribes share a similar language and traditions. By the year 1500 the Chickasaw were very well established, and their territory and population had spread into parts of Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee. What makes the Tupelo area important is that this was the Chickasaw capital of their thriving culture. From 1500 until removal in 1836, the Chickasaw were repeatedly infringed upon by many non-native cultures. In 1540 the Spanish expedition of Hernando Desoto overwintered in this area anticipating the exploitation of the Chickasaws, only to be overpowered and driven out by them according to The Mississippi Desoto Trail Mapping Project by David Morgan. The next European contact and threat came from the French and ended with the battle of Ackia in 1736 that took place near Tupelo. The Chickasaw were victorious and drove the French out but had also allied with the British in order to repel the French. By the mid eighteenth century, the British began to arrive in Chickasaw territory on their independent expeditions in search of wealth. Many British traders and explorers married Chickasaw women and had children. These progeny of the two cultures had a very important status and had the ability to delegate on all subjects between the Chickasaw and the British explorers. One of these British traders from Scotland was James Colbert who married a Chickasaw woman and had children with her and several other Chickasaw women. Two of these sons were George and Levi, who both went on to be Chickasaw leaders. Under their leadership the Chickasaw allied with the British during the Revolutionary war, but relations were mended after independence. George Colbert went on to operate a tavern in what became west Tupelo. Levi operated Buzzards Roost stage inn in Alabama. It was also under their leadership that the Pontotoc Creek Treaty was signed and ceded Chickasaw lands to the United States in 1832. Removal of the Chickasaw to reservations in Oklahoma took place from 1836 to 1838. Today the

Chickasaw still consider North Mississippi their homeland. In fact, the tribe is very active here and have discussed opening a cultural center on the Natchez Trace in Tupelo.

As European settlers came in contact with the Chickasaw, they influenced them towards assimilating into a Yeoman agricultural society. This included owning African and African American slaves which many of them took to Oklahoma during forced removal in 1836. The early nineteenth century European speculators quickly realized the importance of the Black Belts rich soil and its potential to grow cotton which led to the enforcement of earlier Indian Removal policies. The three decades following the Chickasaws removal gave way to a society of European planters establishing plantations in and around what was then Pontotoc County Mississippi. In fact, Tupelo was called Harrisburg before the Civil War. Harrisburg was surrounded by communities of plantations like Palmetto, Camargo, and Richmond. Most of these European settlers came from the Carolinas to seek their fortune in cotton cultivation. In E.T. Winstons book titled, "The Story of Pontotoc", he describes the countryside surrounding Tupelo as being well populated by, "venerable Carolina planters". According to the 1860 Pontotoc County census, most male white head of households are listed as farmers. Some own no slaves and the larger landowners own as many as 100. This plantation culture thrived on a smaller scale here in the Tupelo area until the Civil War in 1861. After Emancipation and the end of the Civil War, Agriculture remained the leading industry in the area. In the 1930's, Dairy became a large focus for Tupelo. Most small and large farms in the surrounding counties raised and milked small herds of cows. From the mid 1930's until the early 1970's, milk processing plants in Tupelo, like Borden and Pet, sent out delivery and pickup drivers into the rural countryside to pick up and deliver milk from door to door. Jersey milk cows were first imported to the Tupelo and north Mississippi area to help meet the demand for quality dairy products. The area was

nicknamed the Jersey capital of the United States as northern dairymen still used Holstein cows. Another nickname for Tupelo is “First TVA City”. In 1934, Tupelo became the first city to receive electricity from the Tennessee Valley Authority. It would be another ten years before rural residents outside of Tupelo’s city limits would receive electricity. In 1936, a tragic event happened at Tupelo when a tornado killed 216 people and leveled the downtown area. According to Walker Fortenberry in his article, “Tupelo Tornado of 1936”, it was the fourth deadliest tornado in United States history at that time. My great grandparent’s home was destroyed on the farm I live on today during that tornado. This event was especially devastating because the country was in the midst of the Great Depression.

Into the 1940’s and 50’s Tupelo became a manufacturing hub for furniture. The furniture industry in Tupelo thrived until the late 1990’s and operates today on a much-reduced scale. One of the most important and consistent features of Tupelo over time is The Natchez Trace. Today it is The Natchez Trace Parkway, but the actual trace road is thousands of years old. On the Natchez Trace Parkway Association’s website, they describe the Natchez Trace as starting as an animal path. Native Americans used it for trading with other tribes and traveling for hunting game. They also discuss the importance of the road as the first designated federal road. European traders called Kaintucks also used the Natchez Trace to transport goods to southern markets from as far away as Kentucky. Acquired and designated a National Parkway in the 1930’s, the trace was greatly improved and rerouted right through Tupelo. The actual Natchez Trace Road lies about five miles outside of Tupelo. Today it is well visited and kept in meticulous landscaped condition. Every few miles there are pull off interpretive exhibits and sites that mostly pertain to the indigenous cultures like the Chickasaw and mound builders. These exhibits were designed in the 1950’s and 60’s and offer a lot of room for improvement and modernization. The Natchez

Trace Parkway headquarters are also located in Tupelo and offer a small interpretive center and museum to travelers. It too is very outdated and has a lot of potential to interpret the history of the area. While the Natchez Trace Parkway is known to people from everywhere, it still does not compete with the number one thing people from all over the world associate Tupelo with which is Elvis Presley. Elvis was born in Tupelo in 1935 and became the King of Rock and Roll. Much of Elvis success can be attributed to the African American residents that he learned from in Tupelo. Elvis died in 1977 and today there is an interpretive center in his honor in Tupelo. It consists of his childhood home, a museum, and a church he attended. The website states that it receives 100,000 visitors each year. It also receives a lot of involvement by locals who were growing up during Elvis rise to fame. For many locals, the constant Elvis promotion has created some fatigue so to speak. Today, Tupelos population is about 53% white, 37% black, with the remainder a mix of Latino and Asian. Like many other towns in the deep south, there is a lot of division between races in Tupelo. I suppose it is not as bad as it has been historically but still divided. Despite this, Tupelo still has a lot of visitors who come to shop and dine for weekend trips. It is unfortunate that Tupelo does not have some type of interpretive center that would be another attraction for visitors. It could provide an important platform to address our interesting, and at times, difficult past.

Case Study 2

Missing Narratives

When I think about the missing narratives in the Tupelo Mississippi area I immediately think about African Americans and the Chickasaw. As I discussed in the previous section, both cultures are active in the community today. Over the last two decades, the Chickasaw nation has

become a respected voice in the city through their INKANA foundation. This foundation was established in order to allow Chickasaw to interpret their own story in their homeland. The Chickasaws presence in Tupelo, until recently, was limited to the names of creeks, communities, and roadways which made it clear that a thriving culture called this area home before Europeans immigrated here. Names like, Pontotoc, Tishomingo, Oktibbeha, and Chiwapa. A short fifteen-mile drive from Tupelo, is the sight of the Monroe Mission. According to the Natchez Trace travel website and historic marker at the site, the Monroe Mission was established by Presbyterian Reverend Stewart in 1821 in an effort to Christianize Chickasaw children and teach them skills of Yeoman society. The mission was a part of the effort to assimilate native people into white society. It is a fascinating and almost forgotten story of the area and may provide an entryway into a deeper contemplation about the current cultural climate in the community around Tupelo. Another important story following the Monroe Mission is the forced removal of the Chickasaw in the 1830's. In the Tupelo area, it began with the signing of the Pontotoc Creek treaty in 1832 which led to the actual removal to Oklahoma in 1837. While this story is well documented, by whites, in many history books, it is a story that is not visible within the community of Tupelo. Once again, the Natchez Trace Parkway does offer a very outdated and basic interpretation, but the interior of the community of Tupelo does not offer any opportunities to learn this story. I think the importance of these stories is that they allow visitors to understand how resilient the Chickasaw culture is, and that after almost two centuries, this land is so important to them that they wish to return. Their love for this area can help instill understanding and pride in all of the residents and visitors today. I see their association with Tupelo as an asset for heritage tourism, but I also see the ability for a community to grow and become more united through its differences. There are many other important stories about the Chickasaw in the

Tupelo area, but the Monroe Mission and the Chickasaw removal are necessary to understand the complete story of this city and community. Another missing narrative in Tupelo is the African American story of the area. While the story begins in slavery, there are many other unheard and little-known stories that helped build and shape the Tupelo we live in today. One of these stories is that of the Shake Rag community in east Tupelo. In an essay written by Michael T. Bertrand, and published by Kare L. Cox in, "Destination Dixie", Shake Rag is described as the poor black community on the east side of Tupelo where Elvis learned much of his musical and dance styles. While being the poor part of Tupelo, Shake Rag had the richest culture in the area. In another article written by Sarah Warnock for the Clarion Ledger in 2017, Shake Rag is described as a community that was underserved but culturally thriving especially with music. It was a place where Pentecostal gospel and the blues resided together and are so easily seen in most of Elvis work. While Elvis did not live in Shake Rag, he did live in walking distance and spent much time observing African American musicians there. In the 1950's, under eminent domain, Shake Rag was leveled to make room for development of the downtown area. The story of Shake Rag today seems to still be evolving. Could there be some living residents of Shake Rag today who carry valuable oral histories and memories? I see the Shake Rag story as a possible way to unite predominantly white Elvis fans with the African American community in Tupelo. There are many possibilities for advancing heritage tourism through the Shake Rag story. One other event that has never included the African American community in its story is the devastating tornado of 1936. It has been reported as the fourth deadliest tornado at the time with 216 deaths. What is interesting is that in 1936, African American deaths were not even counted in the death toll. My grandfather, W.C. Jenkins, was born in 1912 and was an adult living in Tupelo when the Tornado occurred. I remember him describing that many more African Americans perished than

whites because of the poorly built houses that were concentrated in areas like Gum Pond. He also said that many of the African American bodies had to be retrieved from Gum Pond because the tornado had blown them in. In my researching about the 1936 tornado in Tupelo, I do not find any African American accounts of the event. I am sure that many African American descendants of survivors live in Tupelo today, maybe even an actual survivor of the event. It is no surprise that white residents today, like me, do not even know of these facts about the tornado, rather, it just indicates how divided the two cultures are today. It seems like a prime subject for a community project and could potentially bring the city and communities closer. In researching African American history in Tupelo, I was also surprised to learn that there is a Civil Rights Heritage Trail in Tupelo that mark seven important locations in the African American community. This is not openly promoted by the city in the way the Elvis complex or the car museum have been which is why many Tupelo residents do not even know they exist. When thinking about ways to promote heritage tourism in Tupelo, there is no shortage of stories and facts. What there is a shortage of, is perspectives that these stories are told from. Tourist today are looking for authentic and accurate stories about cultures and events. Americans are moving towards wanting to confront difficult eras and events in our history. Learning our history from only one perspective has done a disservice to Americans. It has allowed tensions and resentment to grow in the communities that have had no voice. As a city of different cultures, we need build off of the things we have in common, like our history. Our story can be changed from one of oppression, division, and greed, to one of resilience and inclusiveness. The real story of Tupelo will attract visitors and set an example for other towns in Mississippi to follow.

Final Case Study

Recommendations for a Heritage Tourism Strategy in Tupelo Mississippi

There is no question that Tupelo Mississippi has a wealth of cultural and heritage assets that make it a great candidate for this heritage tourism strategic plan. Like a puzzle, all of the pieces are scattered throughout the community in and around Tupelo. Coming up with this strategic makeover for the tourism industry in Tupelo has consisted of figuring out how we get all of the pieces together in a similar space to create a positive and progressive image of our history and heritage. This proposal centers around the formation of a cultural heritage interpretation center which will be located in the 15-acre fairground field in historic downtown Tupelo. This complex will act as a starting point for tourist while also bringing diverse cultures and communities together as they build and lead the interpretation of the local heritage and history. This center will offer educational, artistic, and entertainment experiences that allow tourist an authentic experience in Tupelo. The complex will have a museum, historical archives, a research space, an art gallery for local and regional artists, an indoor auditorium, and an outdoor amphitheater. The center will also provide bus tours to different locations and programs throughout the area. The location at Fair Park is conveniently located right on main street in the historic downtown area while also only a quarter mile from highway 45. Many important factors and elements of Tupelo have been considered when creating this plan and with the collaboration of organizations and groups in and around Tupelo, we think this is an achievable and sustainable plan.

The Fair Park location in downtown Tupelo is a historic landmark itself. For over a century it served as a gathering space for county and city residents for fairs and other events. This would be the location for the interpretive center complex. This would be the headquarters

for our areas cultural heritage resources and focus equally on Chickasaw, African American, and European history of the area. It would also act as a welcome center for visitors and offer a museum, history programs, bus tours to historic locations, and art exhibits. For students, the center would offer an archive of regional history as well as a space to conduct research. Being centered closely between two universities, the center may also be a great resource for undergraduate and graduate students. It would accommodate grade school groups and offer educational programs and tours. In Cheryl Hargrove's book, "Cultural Heritage Tourism", Hargrove discusses the importance of meeting visitor's needs. (pg. 51) These needs are diverse, and this cultural heritage interpretive center will be able to attract interest from all age groups and cultural backgrounds. One of the biggest changes within this plan is that heritage tourism in Tupelo is inclusive of all the residents who make up the collective history. In the past, only white heritage has been promoted through interests like Elvis and antique cars. In an essay written by Michael Bertrand, and published in "Destination Dixie", by Karen Cox, Bertrand discusses the inaccuracies and staged history that takes place at the Elvis birthplace. (pg. 88) Bertrand also describes important lost narratives from minimized perspectives like African Americans and the Chickasaw. The new strategic heritage tourism plan not only brings these unheard perspectives to the visitors but also involves the very communities in the telling and interpretation. All of the programs, activities, and museum collections will be organized by communities in and around Tupelo. Visitors will have the option to take scheduled bus tours to important sites around Tupelo and along the Natchez Trace. Visitors may also use a map provided and take a self-guided tour of the downtown area which includes sites like the historic African American Carver School, or the historic Dixie Bell theatre. A few other ideas were found in an article titled, "Point Pleasant, West Virginia Making a Tourism Landscape", by Robert Kruze. The first one involves

an artist installation of Murals. Kruse calls this a “commemorative landscape”, that represents a timeline of important historical events. (pg. 320) Our mural could begin with prehistoric Native American panels and transition into Chickasaw, agriculture, slavery, the tornado of 1936, the Shake Rag community, and even an Elvis panel. Once more, the design and installation of these painted panels would be done by the communities associated with them. Other art exhibits could be installed in other outdoor spaces at the interpretive center and along sidewalks throughout downtown.

The other idea Kruse presents is taking advantage of fictional associations in communities. While Tupelo is still a fairly conservative town, there are numerous paranormal and haunting stories in and around the town. Legends and hauntings along the Natchez Trace parkway, haunted locations like the historic Lyric theatre, and even our original courthouse. North Mississippi even has a paranormal group who would possibly find an interest in promoting events or tours through the interpretive center. Seasonally, the interpretive center can offer small concerts or presentations outdoors at the amphitheater. Tupelo is also considered to be in the Mississippi hill country blues area and while most Americans associate Tupelo with Elvis, we know he learned from African American gospel and blues musicians in the community of Shake Rag. Even though Shake Rag was destroyed for development, there is an opportunity to revive the spirit of Shake Rag in Tupelo. This would be another opportunity for the African American community to shape and lead a blues and gospel revival in our city. Richard Gatchet wrote an article called, ““I've Got Some Antique in Me": The Discourse of Authenticity and Identity in the African American Blues Community in Austin, Texas, where he discusses authenticity in blues music. (pg. 209) He describes blues as being authentically black but that other cultures can play the blues too and still be respected by each other. Despite notions of authenticity, music has the

power to bring people together and a festival with a Shake Rag theme in Tupelo could benefit the economy as well as unite visitors and residents. While all of these ideas will work well in Tupelo, we also have to get the right stakeholders involved in our plan. Groups such as the Chickasaw INKANA foundation, The Chickasaw nation, the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area, the Black Business Alliance, local historical societies, Tupelo Arts Council and elected officials. Cheryl Hargrove dedicates a chapter in her book to these strategies and there are many ways to promote engagement from stakeholders.

Tupelo has been nicknamed an “All American City” for many decades. While that title has applied well in the past, it has not represented all of our residents. Tupelo has a wealth of cultural resources and many of them have never been promoted. We have a culturally diverse population and each one of them brings unique assets to our city. Traditions, cuisine, music, and art are just a few of the diverse assets we hope to attract visitors to experience in Tupelo. Tupelo Mississippi has had a past associated with a darker period in American history. The time has come for a revision of our towns narrative and through the proper leadership, careful organization, collaboration, and suggestions from professionals, we can make Tupelo a desirable destination.

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