

Melrose Estate Interpretation

Scott Jenkins

One of the most interesting and beautiful southern towns I have ever visited is Natchez, Mississippi. Sitting high on a bluff above the Mississippi River, there is an abundance of elaborate pre-Civil War mansions and homes. Settled at the southern end of the historic Natchez Trace Road, Natchez had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the United States before the Civil War. This enormous wealth, reflected in the remaining architecture today, was the result of the cultivation of cotton using slave labor. Natchez was a town built by wealthy European planters and tradesmen who needed a place to conduct business and socialize away from the rural plantations. Today, the biggest attraction to Natchez is several antebellum house museums and private bed and breakfast inns. A pilgrimage in spring and fall of each year brings visitors to tour these old homes, and the rest of the year the town feels a bit deserted. One of these historic house museums is Melrose Estate. Constructed in 1847 by architect and builder Jacob Byers, Melrose is a National Historic landmark that is owned and operated by The National Park Service. On the National Park Service website, Melrose is worthy as a national landmark because it is one of the best examples of an intact mid nineteenth century estates in the deep south. Today Melrose is located on eighty acres of well-manicured land located right in Natchez. Upon entering the main gate at Melrose, visitors drive up a beautiful drive lined with Spanish Moss draped Crepe Myrtle and Live oak trees. Located on the left side of the driveway, the well-maintained outbuildings are visible and consist of a barn, stable, carriage house, and 2 slave houses. Around the next bend in the driveway the visual climax of the visit occurs. Located about 500 yards directly ahead sits a beautiful Greek Revival antebellum mansion. While this driveway is not the original, it is obvious that it was strategically placed to be centered with the mansion to grasp the attention of visitors. The mansion house and plantation at Melrose were built by an attorney from New York named John T. McMurrin. Melrose was only one of six cotton plantations that John McMurrin and his wife Louisa would come to own by 1865. The mansion is flanked on both rear sides by identical garçonnières that housed a kitchen and laundry downstairs, and slave housing upstairs. Today one of these structures serves as the Melrose ticket and souvenir shop. After parking, signs direct visitors to the ticket office first. On the way an

interpretive panel describes a brief history of the complex and includes several pictures of the mansion at different time periods. The month is August, and As I am walking to the ticket office, I cannot help but to think of the sweltering heat and humidity that day which instantly makes me feel a connection to the people who lived and labored here. As I continued to read literature in the ticket office about Melrose history it became clear to me that the focus today was the life of the McMurrin's and their house. I also recognized that from the interpretive panels to the brochures, the word slavery was strategically and repeatedly used in the description of the complex. After purchasing my ticket, I proceed to the front porch of the mansion where my guided tour would begin, and I was excited to see how my tour guide would interpret the story of Melrose.

I was greeted on the mansion porch by a national park ranger named Caroline and she greeted us before giving us a brief history of the complex and its exchange of ownership over the past two centuries. I did notice that all the visitors at Melrose that day were white. She began by saying that the land at Melrose was originally inhabited by the Natchez Indians and that they were driven out by early French settlers in the early 18th century. As we entered the mansion, she described the design of the house and why it was important in the deep south at the time. Due to the hot climate of the deep south, the house was designed with a main hall for ventilation during the extremely hot summer months. Our guide Caroline was very articulate and precise with her interpretation; however, I got the feeling she did not willingly want to glorify the aesthetics of the mansion's architecture or furnishings inside. As we moved into the dining room, she described dates of events that had taken place in the house like the wedding of the McMurrin's daughter Elizabeth which brought near a thousand attendants. Caroline also described the layout of foods in the dining room that day and the fact that no expense was spared. As we moved back into the main hall our guide stopped and pointed to a small portrait of a former slave at Melrose named Annie. Annie had been a slave owned by the Davis's who were the second owners of Melrose beginning in 1865 after the end of the Civil War. Like many of the wealthy planters in Natchez, the McMurrin's fled back to the north during the Civil War. Caroline describes how the ownership transition left Melrose vacant in 1865 and the Davis's sent Annie to live and protect the house and property from carpetbaggers who were coming into the south seeking opportunities of abandonment, especially property. One job Annie managed was keeping a fire going in the house that winter which told passerby's that the house was occupied. We continued

into the parlors and were told about the history of the painted portraits on the walls as well as the history of the furniture which is original to the house. A lot of detail was given about the quality of the furnishings and decorations which did feel like a celebration of wealth in many ways. Once again, I did not feel like Caroline was enthusiastic about this part of the tour. The remainder of our tour was spent discussing the Callan's, who acquired the property in the 1970's and are responsible for the restoration in the 1980's. The Callan's also turned the property over to the National Park Service which allowed it to be open to the public. The tour came to an end at the rear door of the hallway. Our guide asked if anyone had any questions, but it was also apparent that she was late meeting the next waiting tour group on the porch, so no one did. She then encouraged us to walk the grounds and visit the outbuildings but explained that portion was self-guided. Out of the 10 visitors in our group, only 3 of us headed to the part of the complex where the slave cabins and other outbuildings were located. It was a hot August day, and I am sure the 5-minute walk was too much for some of the visitors. The outbuildings area was well cared for, and buildings were furnished with appropriate antiques. The slave cabins had interpretive panels out front that discussed briefly what life was like for slaves and sharecroppers at Melrose. My visit that day to Melrose lasted about 2 hours. I found the experience informative and interesting, but the focus was clearly on the white plantation owners and their wealth. Clearly, the perspective that the history was given about Melrose was also predominately from a white viewpoint. I could understand why all the visitors that day were white even though sixty percent of Natchez population are African American. Don't get me wrong, slavery was mentioned repeatedly on all the interpretive panels as well as by our guide, but there were so many affective interpretation opportunities that are missing from Melrose. I recognize that The National Park Service has made great progress over the past decade by beginning to confront injustices and exclusion of marginalized American communities at many American historic sites. I also realize that the process of these changes can take time and I would like to propose some affective interpretation ideas for the Melrose sight that may help it be more welcoming and inclusive to all Americans. Using Melrose as a teaching tool for Americans may also guarantee a future of existence for it as a national park.

Public history has evolved as a much-needed practice over the last thirty years. The methods and techniques created by public historians have been a big part of the profession's success. We know now that historical interpretation is more than just what we see and hear. It is

also about the way it makes us feel. Interpretation with its influence on emotion is known as affective interpretation and can be used in many ways at historical sites. I think many of these affective techniques should be incorporated at Melrose and would benefit the experience of visitors and the community of Natchez in many ways.

My proposal redirects the focus at Melrose. While the McMurrin's and the mansion are important parts of Melrose, I would put equal attention into the African American and the indigenous Natchez Native Americans who also made the Melrose property home. To do this, I would add new affective exhibits throughout the property and recreate a map of visitors flow at the Melrose complex. All of these additions would be guided by affective techniques that will help reach visitors in a deeper and more empathetical way. This provocation of emotion in visitors allows for a site like Melrose to be a place of healing for Americans and hopefully visitors take this experience back to their communities to be shared. Here are some details about an improved experience at Melrose.

Proposal

The first change at Melrose that I would incorporate would be the location of the ticket office and gift shop. I realize funding is very important at sites like Melrose, but I will address that in a separate proposal. Instead of beginning the visit at the mansion, I see value in a new ticket and information building being constructed centrally in the complex between the mansion and the outbuilding area. I also think an adjoining interpretive center would allow visitors to learn the history of the property before touring. This interpretive center would focus on the history and importance of the Mississippi river as it relates to the different cultures who called Melrose home. I also think that the guided tour should consist of the slave cabin and outbuildings as the first stop. Currently, there is no guided tour of that part of the complex. I also think it is important for visitors to see and learn about slavery at Melrose to understand why and how it is possible to see a Greek revival mansion lavishly decorated on the opposite side of the complex. While visitors visit the slave cabins, I think a recording of WPA slave narratives should play through speakers while the sincerity of them could be questioned through interpretive panels. As we read in Siobh an McHugh's article, "The Affective Power of Sound", she discusses the capabilities of incorporating aural and oral elements to help visitors relate. I can even imagine playing these slave narratives through speakers at every building at Melrose as a reminder as to

who constructed and supported the existence of Melrose. As the tour leaves the slave cabin and outbuilding side of the complex, there are several empty acres that could be used to demonstrate the importance of agriculture at Melrose. From gardens and livestock that fed the inhabitants to the cultivation of cotton, which was the cash crop, I think small plots for demonstration would be interesting to a broad audience. Tiya Miles and Rachel Miller discussed the importance of landscape in their article titled, "Critical Place-Based Storytelling, A Mode of Creative Interaction at Historic Sites." I think a cotton field or garden in the Mississippi heat provides a great opportunity for a storyteller or tour guide to relate what it was really like to be forced to work as a slave. Its one thing to read about picking cotton, but to stand in one-hundred-degree heat and envision what it was like can provoke another level of understanding and emotion. I realize costumed interpreters have been out of fashion for the past decade, but I feel they can be excellent ways to enhance the interpretive landscape at places like Melrose. Another important site close to Melrose is Forks of the Road slave market. In Ariella Gross's book, "The Law and the Culture of Slavery: Natchez Mississippi," Gross describes The Forks of the Road slave market as being the largest slave market in the south. Although I did not find any mention of Forks of the Road in my research of Melrose, it undoubtedly had a close connection and would be a great exhibit installation. Just this year in 2021 the National Park Service acquired possession of The Forks of the Road and should be an excellent opportunity to combine some elements from the two sites. Another important exhibit I feel is needed at Melrose is a Civil War exhibit. Currently, the war is discussed by tour guides and interpretive panels, but I did not see or hear a thought-provoking discussion about the causes of the war. Even more interesting would be a discussion about why so many wealthy Natchez planter residents came from northern states only to flee back to the north as the war began. As I mentioned earlier, the story of Annie the former slave protecting Melrose at the end of the Civil War, is another opportunity for deep discussion or thought with visitors. If slavery was outlawed before the war ended, then why was Annie willing to protect Melrose? Or perhaps it shows how many other forms of control former slave owners had over former slaves. Are some of these methods of control still relevant today? Lots of knowledge about systemic injustice and oppression could be learned from an exhibit that allowed closer examination. I also think a community outreach program at Melrose that tried to locate any slave or African American descendants would be valuable and may provoke some involvement from African Americans in Natchez. Involvement from local artists, especially

African American artist, could be a great benefit to Melrose exhibits while also engaging and involving the community. I realize that a National Park site has a lot of guidelines and procedures to follow when it come to changes, but as expressed by Jennifer Ladino in “Memorials Matter,” these interpretive changes may be a lifeline that keeps historic sites in existence and available as a resource to the American people.