

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Historic Homes of Natchez

Each spring the beautiful homes and gardens of Natchez are thrown open to the public. The leisurely charm of the Old South has lingered here long after it was supplanted elsewhere by the efficiency of the modern life.

Nowhere else are there more of the old plantation homes still maintained as they were in ante-bellum days. Many of these houses are still owned by descendants of the original builders, who have also kept the elegant furnishings which are within for the visitors to see and enjoy.

We were told that there are 75 or more of the ante-bellum homes but only 30 are open during the month of March each year. The two garden clubs — the Pilgrimage Club and the Natchez Garden Club are the hosts for this annual event which brings thousands of visitors to Natchez each year.

For the information of our readers who do not know the history of this Deep South city, we have found that the name "Natchez" comes from the Natchez Indian tribe. These Indians were of Aztec origin and were in possession of the Natchez country when the French came in 1700. They were sun-worshiping Indians, and their great chief proclaimed himself "brother of the sun." The people of Natchez have erected a bronze plaque of a handsome Indian chief in a granite wall overlooking the great "Father of Waters," in memory of the Indians who gave the city their name.

Among the houses we were able to enter during our brief visit in Natchez were: D'Evereaux, Cherokee, Elms, Ellicott Hill, Gloucester, Hawthorne, Longwood, Monmouth, Montaigne, and Oakland. We were welcomed as overnight guests at "Elms," a home built in 1782, during the Spanish era.

The cost of the tour is \$4 per person for five houses, or \$8 for the day's tour of 10 houses. It is not a conducted tour; each group or person must provide transportation. The routes are clearly marked with placards of white, blue, green, purple, red and yellow, showing hoop-skirted young women in the various colors. Our tour was white for the morning and blue in the afternoon, our book of tickets printed in the same colors.

At the door of the gracious homes our ticket was received by one of the colored servants of the household, and we were welcomed with genuine Southern hospitality. At most of the garden entrances there were other colored people selling "pralines" the sugar and nut confection for which the South is famous and were they good!

The second home we visited was Hawthorne, a typical home of a Southern planter, on the Natchez Trace Highway. It is said that architects interested in the unusual, find charm in the hand-hewn stairway which rises from the broad back hall to the rooms above. It is believed that this house was built in 1825 by the Tichenor family. This was about the same year that many of our Monterey adobe houses were built, this fact making the tour in Natchez that much more interesting to us.

No other house on the Pilgrimage brought to mind the sadness and the results of the War Between the States as did Longwood, for it had not been completed when the war came and to this day only the ground floor is live-able. It was begun in the late 50's; is of brick, burned by slaves on the place. It was to have contained a great many rooms and to have been furnished with imported furnishings, all of which were cancelled. The upper floors bear evidence of the hurried departure of the workmen, for their tools and lumber are still in place just as they were left in 1861.

Monmouth was our next stop. Historically this house is noted as the home of Gen. John A. Quitman, who raised the first American flag in Mexico. He purchased the mansion in 1826.

Montaigne was built in 1855 as the home of Gen. William T. Martin of the Confederacy, whose features are carved on Stone Mountain as a representative of the State of Mississippi. This house is Georgian in appearance, a solid, two-story structure, built of sturdy timbers and has withstood the ravages of time and the desecration of opposing forces during the War Between the States.

Gloucester is half hidden in giant, moss-draped oaks surrounded by 250 acres of farmland and virgin timber. It was built about 1800 we were told and is of solid brick construction. Huge Corinthian columns support spacious galleries across the broad front. This was the home of Gov. Winthrop Sargent, who was the first governor of Mississippi Territory. Here we saw a library

of rare first editions and valuable old books, as well as many paintings by old masters and beautiful colonial furniture.

Cherokee was attractive but is probably the most modern in point of restoration and furnishing of any of the other 10 houses we visited. It was built in 1794 by Jessie Greenfield on land acquired under a Spanish grant. It was recently acquired by new owners and has been restored.

Oakland of course reminded us of California. It is still owned and occupied by lineal descendants of the original owners. It was built in 1838 for Catherine Chotard Eustis, the granddaughter of Maj. Stephen Minor, the last governor of the Natchez District under Spanish rule.

Connley's Tavern or Ellicott Hill is owned by the Natchez Garden Club, the members of which have restored it and now call it home. The tavern was built about 1795 and is the spot whereon Col. Andrew Ellicott raised the first United States flag in February 1797 over the District of Natchez. Since that episode the spot has been known as "Ellicott Hill."

Built in 1840 for William St. John Ellicott and his wife, "D'Evereaux" was one of the most spacious homes we entered. It was once judged the most perfect home, in style and setting, in the entire Southland. For this reason, it is shown in the motion picture, "The Heart of Maryland."

We wish we might have words or the ability to describe the exquisite silver, dishes, furnishings and paintings which we have seen in these old houses but that is impossible. Although the early residents of Monterey did not have all the grandeur that these wealthy Southern plantation owners enjoyed, we too have lovely homes many of which date back almost as far, if not farther in many instances. Let's preserve them to the best of our ability and bring the world to see them as the Garden Clubs of Natchez have done so beautifully.