

# The Great River Road – A Personal Journey Down the Mighty Mississippi

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Route of The Great River Road

## PREFACE

My first encounter with the *Great River Road* came as I was returning from a family reunion in Illinois a few years ago. On my way to the St Louis airport, I took a wrong turn on the approach to the bridge crossing the Mississippi River and ended up going north on Illinois State Highway 100 along the eastern shore of the river below sheer 300-foot bluffs of the “Mississippi River Palisades”. The beauty of the route persuaded me to continue driving north to “Pere Marquette State Park”, and along the way I began seeing a series of signs identifying Highway 100 as part of the “Great River Road”. As soon as I returned home to California I did a search online and discovered that I had driven only a very small portion of the route that extended the entire length of the mighty river, some 2700 miles! It was then that I began to make plans to one day drive the route from northern Minnesota all the way to southern Louisiana.

Three years later, in July and August of 2010, I boarded the Coast Starlight train in Los Angeles for the two-day trip to Seattle where I connected with the Empire Builder train that took me to Minneapolis, a journey of three days. There I rented a car, drove north to Lake Itasca State Park and began my journey down the *Great River Road*. Over the next twelve days I followed the familiar green signs marking the route, through large towns and small villages, past historic sites, beautiful natural wonders, and encounters with fascinating people, all the while the river was my constant companion.

This blog is not meant to be a travel guide for the Great River Road – there are several excellent ones that I’ve listed at the end. Rather it is a personal journey down the mighty river, and I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1938, during the Franklin Roosevelt administration, the concept of a parkway along the Mississippi River was first conceived by governors of the ten states bordering the river. At first it was envisioned as a continuous byway, but economic realities at the time dictated a different story. There was no funding available to develop a new single extended roadway, so as an alternative, a series of existing roads, some of which were unpaved, were mapped and designated to form a network that would become today's Great River Road! Roads were selected on both sides of the river that would most closely follow the twisting course of the river. Today this network of federal, state, and local county roads winds its way through quaint river towns, dense woodlands, majestic bluffs, big cities, rich farmlands and the vast Mississippi delta. A journey down the Great River Road offers a unique taste of culture and history, natural beauty, musical tradition, local cuisine and hospitality.

The Ojibway Indians of northern Minnesota called it "Messipi", meaning "Big River", and it was also known to early European explorers as the "Father of Waters". Native Americans of many different tribes living along its shores used the river in many ways, including transportation, hunting, and fishing, making it the center of their livelihood and culture. The mighty Mississippi is over 2,350 miles long, and the heart of the world's second largest watershed, covering over 1.2 million square miles including tributaries from 33 states and 2 Canadian provinces. On average more than 500 million tons of freight are shipped annually through a series of 29 locks and dams operated by the Corps of Engineers, enabling huge barges to ascend and descend over 800 feet of elevation between New Orleans and Minneapolis.

Some of the most significant historical sites along the Great River Road include the following: Charles Lindbergh House and History Center (Little Falls, MN), Chief Blackhawk Memorial (La Crosse, WI), Effigy Mounds National Monument (Marquette, IA), National Mississippi River Museum (Dubuque, IA), Ulysses S. Grant's Home (Galena, IL), Mormon Settlement and Joseph Smith's gravesite (Nauvoo, IL), Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum (Hannibal, MO), Jefferson National Expansion Memorial / Gateway Arch (St Louis, MO), Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site (Collinsville, IL), Graceland (Memphis, TN), Delta Cultural Center (Helena, AR), Delta Blues Museum (Clarksdale, MS), Vicksburg National Military Park (Vicksburg, MS), Natchez Trace Parkway (Natchez, MS), Louisiana State Capitol (Baton Rouge, LA), Jackson Square/Bourbon Street (New Orleans, LA), and Old Fort Jackson (Venice, LA)

Travelling the Great River Road is not only one of the most unique travel experiences one can find anywhere in the world, but it also promises to be a "personal" journey for everyone – enjoy it!

### **DAY 1 – Itasca Lake, Minnesota**

Early in the morning I arrived in Minneapolis / St Paul under clear sunny skies, and where I bid farewell to Amtrak and hello to Hertz as I took possession of my rental car which would be my mode of transportation for the next 12 days. My plan was to start my journey down the Mississippi River at its source, Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, but before doing so I wanted to make a stop in the small mill town of Blackduck to see if I could find "Camp Rabideaux", an old CCC Camp where I spent a summer in 1965 doing forestry field work in the Chippewa National Forest. The Ranger Station in Blackduck had a map and a historical brochure about the camp which was in the process of being restored as a National Historic Site. As I walked around the old camp, many fond memories came back to me, like the nighttime "Snipe Hunt" in the swamp that we organized for a guy from downtown Chicago. He sat in the middle of the swamp until well past midnight before he finally figured out it was

a big joke! Most of the old buildings were still standing, including the barracks that was our home for 3 months and the mess hall where we not only had our meals, but which also doubled as our classroom when we weren't out doing fieldwork in the woods.



Camp Rabideaux – University of Illinois Forestry Summer Camp (1964)

Later in the day I drove to Bemidji and then south to Lake Itasca State Park where I saw lots of young kids skipping across the headwaters of the Mississippi River at its source, Lake Itasca. Here the river was less than 10 feet wide and only a few inches deep, a stark contrast to what I would see many days later in southern Louisiana.



Lake Itasca State Park – Minnesota



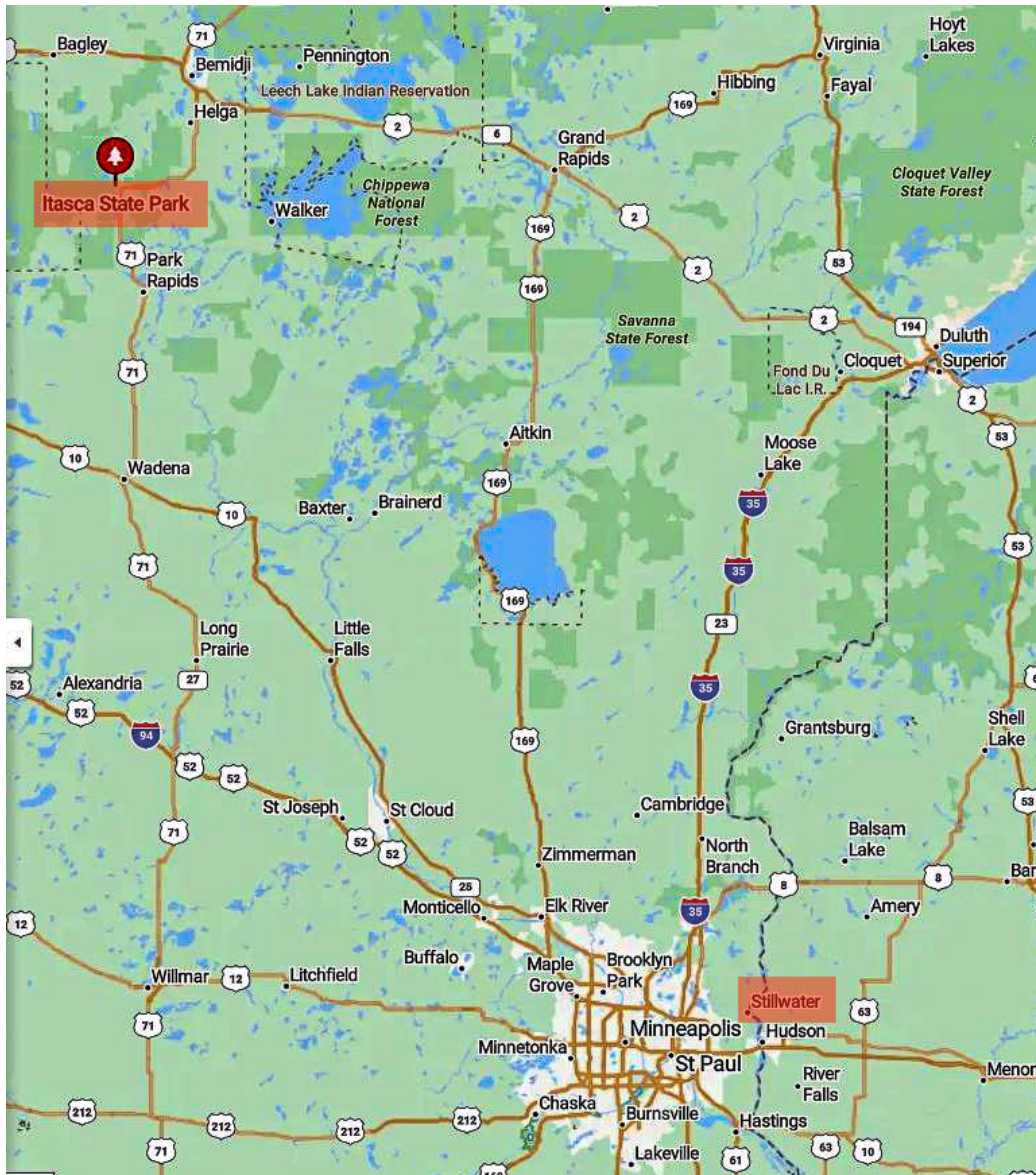
The Mississippi River

The State Park boundary was the official start of my long journey down the Great River Road which follows the river for its entire length, some 2,350 miles. The route is a collection of many state highways and county roads that closely parallel the river, many times on both sides through 10 states. It is well marked everywhere, and I had very little trouble staying on the route. That evening I discovered “Lobo’s Cabins, Bar, & Grill” on the northern edge of Lake Itasca and spent the night in a beautiful cabin in the woods, very secluded and quiet. For dinner that night Lobo’s served a delicious deep fried Walleye sandwich with a huge plate of onion rings, along with a cold pint of the local Summit Extra Pale Ale. Back at the cabin under a moonlit sky, the only sound I heard was the gentle whisper of the wind in the trees – very peaceful. That was until about 3:00am when I was suddenly awakened by a brilliant flash of lightning, immediately followed by the crash of thunder and the pounding of heavy rain on the roof. In the morning, I awoke to a gentle rain falling softly on the forest and it would follow me for the next couple of days as I travelled along the Great River Road.



"Lobo's Cabins" – Lake Itasca, Minnesota

## Day 2 – Itasca Lake, Minnesota to Stillwater, Minnesota



As the river slowly snaked its way south it gradually began to get deeper and wider each time the road crossed it. South of Cass Lake, home to the Ojibway tribe, I came upon “Charles Lindbergh State Park” which has preserved the famous aviator’s boyhood farm along the banks of the river, now several hundred feet wide at this point.



Charles Lindbergh State Park



Mississippi River near Cass Lake, Minnesota

Nearby, in the town of Little Falls was the Weyerhaeuser Museum, dedicated to the family that began as “lumber barons” harvesting vast expanses of virgin White and Red Pine in the north woods of Minnesota and Wisconsin before establishing their timber empire in the Pacific Northwest. From here the Great River Road turned southeast through Sauk Rapids and St Cloud before passing through the cities of Minneapolis and St Paul. Luckily, I was able to avoid most of the rush hour traffic in the Twin Cities and reached the Wisconsin border about 7:00pm where I spotted a sign for the “Water Street Inn” located in the small town of Stillwater on the banks of the St Croix River. It’s a beautiful and historic little town below the rocky bluffs above the river, with many old buildings that have been faithfully restored. The Water Street Inn was an old red brick building and rather plain looking on the outside, but once I entered the lobby I was back in the late 1800’s when lumber was king, and the finest furnishings were imported from New York and Philadelphia. I was able to get a beautiful 3 room suite with period furnishings overlooking the St Croix River. As I settled in, I noticed a strange “closet” in one corner of the bedroom. It had heavy Iron hinges, but no door, and the inside was lined with heavy metal plating.



Stillwater, Minnesota



“Water Street Inn” lobby



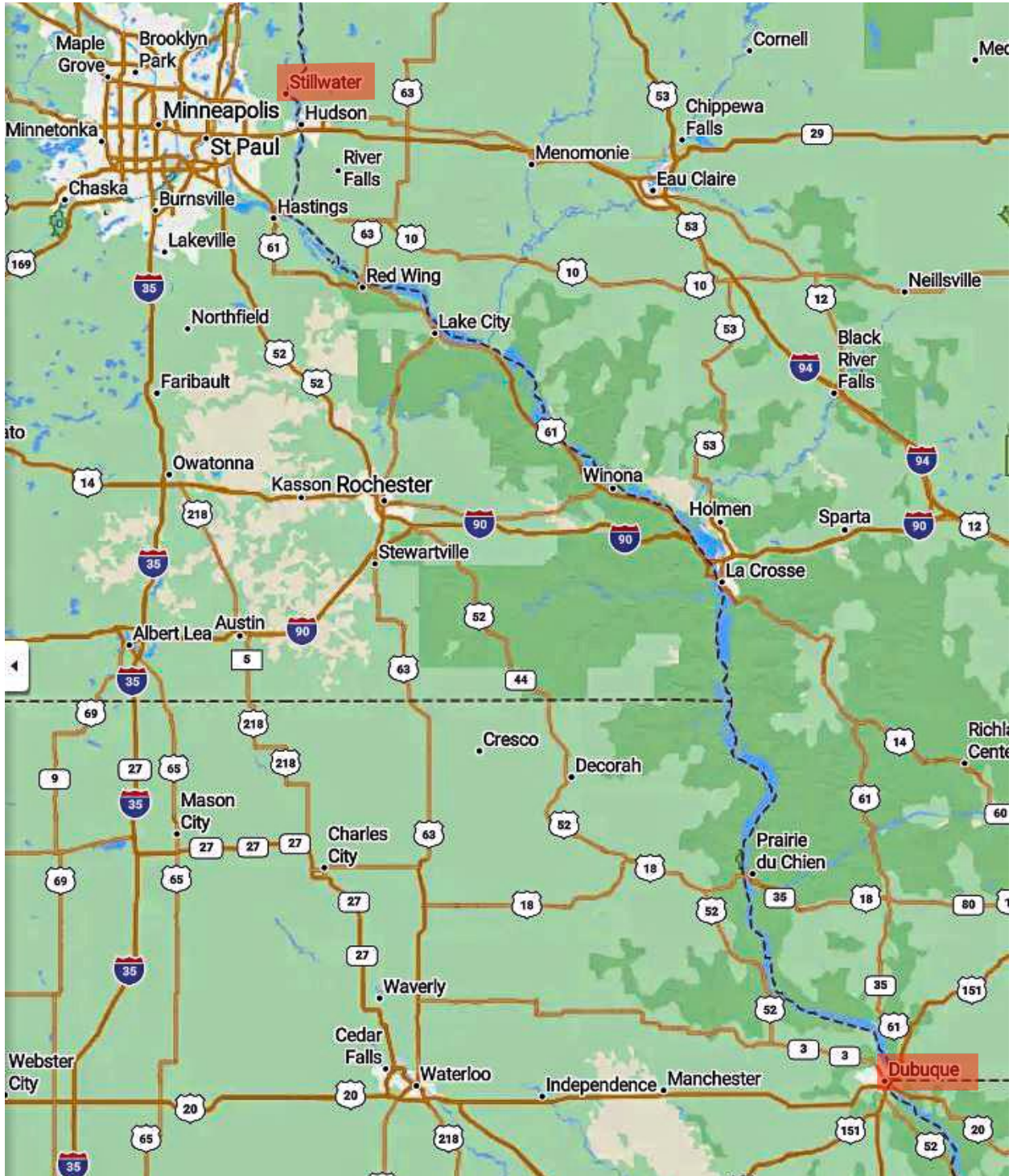
My room

Later I found out that it was not a closet at all, but rather a steel vault that was used by one of the lumber barons for safekeeping of his money whenever he came to town. Downstairs was “Charlie’s Irish Pub”, the hotel’s original bar and restaurant, and here is where I savored a plate of fresh Walleye and chips, along with a pint of Guinness. It wasn’t long before the storm front that had passed over Lake Itasca last night hit Stillwater with a vengeance, sending people scurrying for cover from the thunder, lightning and torrential downpours that raged for more than 3 hours.



“Packet” Steamboats on the St Croix River – Stillwater, Minnesota

Day 3 – Stillwater, Minnesota to Dubuque, Iowa

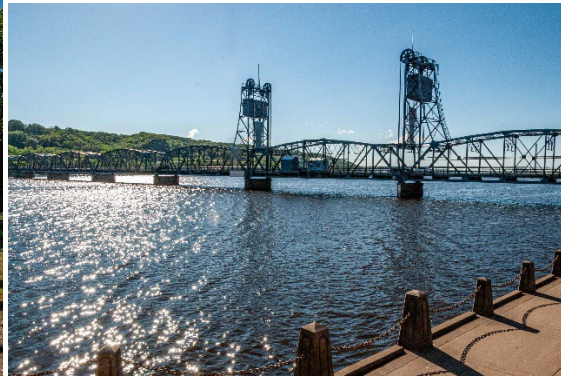




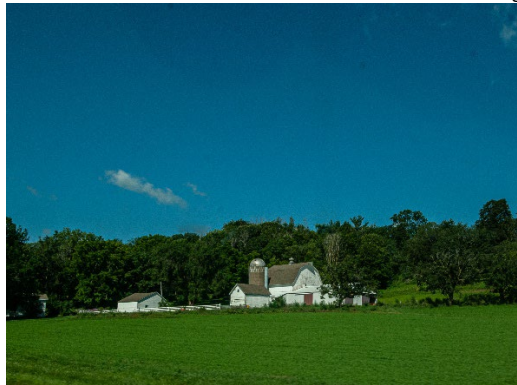
The next morning, I awoke to beautiful blue skies and very pleasant temperatures in the low 70's, which was perfect for strolling around the town taking photos of the many beautiful historic buildings, as well as the old "lift bridge" built in the mid-19th century and still in operation today. The trains no longer run through the town, but the old Railway Depot has been turned into a fine restaurant, along with a beautifully restored train called the "Minnesota Zephyr", complete with vintage dome cars and classic old diesel locomotives, parked on the tracks beside the depot. From Stillwater I crossed the historic lift bridge to the Wisconsin side of the St Croix River and followed a beautiful old two-lane highway south that sometimes hugged the banks of the river while at other times it climbed to the top of the bluffs above the river revealing vast farmlands of corn and clover. This is the very essence of Wisconsin dairy farms with their crisp white barns and tall silos among the rolling fields – a picture postcard at every turn in the road, and the Great River Road had many turns!



Minnesota Zephyr – Stillwater



Historic Lift Bridge across the St Croix River



Wisconsin farm

Several miles south I came to a scenic overlook above Lake Pepin, the only "natural" lake along the entire Mississippi River that was formed when the Chippewa River deposited a vast amount of glacial silt thousands of years ago, essentially creating an earthen dam much like the Corps of Engineers have done in the 20th century.



Lake Pepin - Wisconsin

Nearby were several historical markers detailing the events of the “Blackhawk War” of 1832 when 300 Sauk Indians lead by Chief Blackhawk were driven into the river and massacred by the US Army. Those not killed by the soldiers, including women and children, either drowned or were slaughtered by the Dakota Sioux on the other side – a very sad chapter in American history of which so few of us know.

Further south on the edge of Prairie-du-Chien stands a large estate called “Villa Louis” with a huge mansion built of native limestone and yellow brick that dominated the shoreline of the river. The gardens surrounding the mansion were magnificent and beautiful under the sunny skies and I could have spent the entire afternoon walking around the grounds. Here also stood two forts that played a part in the War of 1812, as well as a large 4 story yellow brick building of an old military style but without any information as to its origin or history. However, it was in the process of being restored.



“Villa Louis” – Prairie-du-Chien, Wisconsin

Late in the afternoon I crossed over the river on a very historic old “swing bridge” and entered the town of Dubuque, Iowa where I found very nice accommodations at the new Grand Harbor Resort downtown on the riverfront. I walked along the top of the levee to the historic “Star Brewery” building, which had been converted into a lovely restaurant and small museum. Adjacent to the old brewery was a 120-foot-high old brick tower standing all alone beside the railroad tracks.



Star Brewery – Dubuque, Iowa



Civil War era “shot tower”

Later I learned it was a “shot tower” built before the Civil War to manufacture lead ball for rifles and muskets by dropping hot lead from the top of the tower into a large pot of cold water at the bottom. I walked back to the hotel and had a large plate of St Louis BBQ ribs, grilled Gulf Shrimp, fresh corn on the cob, mac and cheese with applewood smoked bacon, and a cold pint of local “Old Potosi Lager”, while I sat outside on the veranda overlooking the river as the sun was setting. A perfect ending to a wonderful day.



tons) you begin to realize just how much cargo moves up and down the river, albeit very slowly! There were also a number of fascinating exhibits and displays about the history of the river, both the natural world as well as the cultural history, going back to prehistoric times.



William H Black steam powered dredge



Burlington Northern Railroad station – Dubuque, Iowa

From Dubuque I crossed back over the old swing bridge to visit the historic town of Galena, Illinois, the birthplace and home of General Ulysses S. Grant. The old town was perfectly preserved as if very little had changed from its founding in the early 1800's, with many beautiful stately mansions and Victorian homes overlooking the Galena River. The Visitor Center was located in the historic old "Illinois Central Railroad Depot" downtown with displays of the town's history. Next door was the "Railway Café", a tiny restaurant in a lovely old red brick building just a few feet from the railroad tracks. A sign on the door asked patrons of the restaurant to support the effort to get the popular Food Network TV show "Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives" to pay a visit.



Historic town of Galena, Illinois



Illinois Central Railroad station – Galena, Illinois



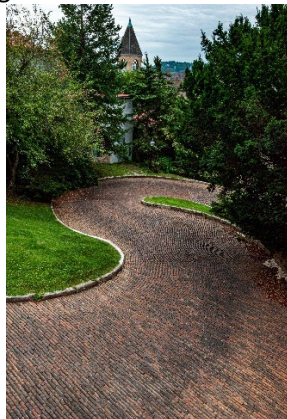
President Ulysses S. Grant's home – Galena, Illinois

I picked up a map of the Galena Historic District and walked along some of the tree-lined streets taking photos of many beautiful houses and historic buildings, including Grant’s home on the bluffs overlooking the river. From Galena I drove south to the small town of Savannah on Illinois State Highway 84, which tended to follow along the top of the bluffs through vast expanses of corn fields, and then suddenly drop two or three hundred feet down the shore of the river where a small town had sprung up at some point in history, only to climb back up to the top of the bluff again. Meanwhile, the railroad always followed closely along the shoreline of the river. The contrast between the rugged shoreline and bluffs along the river and the gently rolling farmlands above was dramatic – two totally different worlds.



Along Illinois State Highway 84

I stayed on Highway 84 through the “Quad Cities” of Rock Island, Moline, Davenport, and Bettendorf before ending up back on the Iowa side north of Muscatine where much of the low-lying farmland was flooded from recent heavy rains. Further south I discovered the “Toolesboro Mounds National Historic Landmark” which has preserved several burial mounds of the ancient Hopewell people dating back to 400 BC. Throughout my journey down the Great River Road, I would come upon many sites detailing the prehistoric settlement of the region. Late in the afternoon I arrived in Burlington, Iowa, the headquarters for the BNSF Railroad. Despite a historic old downtown area, there was no hotel accommodation any longer, all of them having been closed many years ago or moved several miles up to the top of the bluffs above the town to a large complex of shopping malls. But here I found a very nice room with a view of the vast Iowa cornfields at the Comfort Suites Inn and Conference Center where I also had a fantastic Filet Mignon for dinner, as one would expect to find in Iowa. The following morning, I drove back down into the old part of the town and discovered a very unique feature, a street called “Snake Alley” which lays claim to be the “World’s Most Crooked Street”! It is beautifully constructed of old red brick laid down in a pattern resembling that of a snakeskin, and together with its many sharp curves, obviously gave it the name it has today. There were many lovely old houses in town, and a gorgeous view of the river from a point on the bluffs above the city known as “Mosquito Park”.

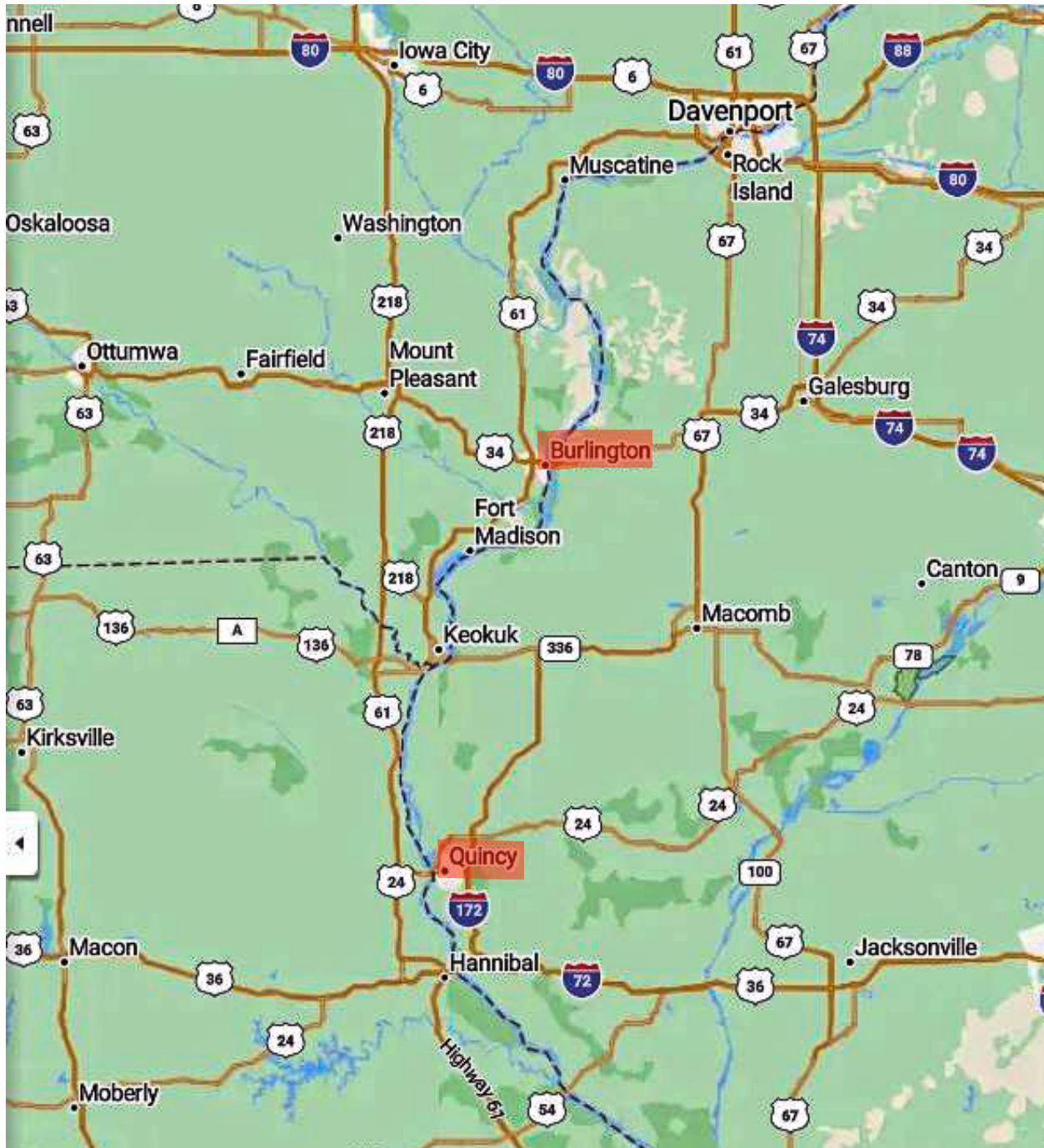


“Snake Alley”



View from “Mosquito Park” – Burlington, Iowa

## Day 5 – Burlington, Iowa to Quincy, Illinois



Leaving Burlington the following day, I drove south to Fort Madison where I found a reconstruction of the old fort in Riverview Park that was at one time the first US Army installation west of the Mississippi River, established to help secure the new Louisiana Purchase. However, much of the park was surrounded by a large pool of water remaining from the heavy rains that had ravaged Iowa a few days before. Also in the park was an old Burlington Railroad 4-6-4 steam locomotive sitting beside the main BNSF railroad tracks, not far from the original CB&Q Railroad Depot, now home to the local Historical Society. In their small museum was an old Edison Phonograph machine that still sounded

remarkably good and had a “volume control” consisting of a large “fur muffler” that could be moved in and out of the megaphone to adjust the volume – simple but very effective.



Fort Madison, Iowa



Burlington Steam Locomotive

As I was preparing to leave the town, Amtrak’s eastbound “California Zephyr” train roared by the old station and across the historic two-level swing bridge on its way to Chicago. My next stop was the historic old town of Nauvoo, Illinois which for several years in the mid 1800’s was home to Joseph Smith and the Mormon Church. As I entered the town, I became aware of a celebration taking place called “The Pageant” that celebrated the founding of the town. There are many old buildings dating from the 1840’s that have been wonderfully restored, especially the old Hotel Nauvoo which is still in operation today.



Hotel Nauvoo



New Mormon Temple – Nauvoo, Illinois

Historically this was the last place the Mormons settled before being forced to head west to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. But recently, a beautiful new white granite Temple had been constructed in the town and has become something of a place of “pilgrimage” for Mormons. There were a lot of couples being married at the Temple that day, and as I walked around the old town, I saw far more Utah license plates than Illinois plates, so the Mormons have returned!



Joseph Smith's home



Historic Nauvoo, Illinois

Just beyond the center of town was the “Joseph Smith Historical Site” where many of the original buildings are still maintained and open to the public for tours. I spent a couple of hours just wandering around the site, visiting the places where Brigham Young lived and worked before the death of Joseph Smith thrust him into the leadership of the Mormons as they trekked west to Utah. The graves of Joseph Smith and his brother who were murdered by a mob as they sat confined in a jail, are located on the bluff overlooking the river and have become almost a “holy” site for Mormons visiting Nauvoo.

By the time I was leaving Nauvoo the dark clouds of an approaching storm were on the western horizon, but as I drove south on Highway 96, I saw an old sign for the “Warsaw Brewery” and made a quick decision to take the turnoff. Located on the edge of the river was an old brick and stone building, part of it in a state of disrepair, but still open for business, none the less. Once inside the old building I found a place of fascinating history and old-world charm, although to my disappointment I found out they no longer brewed beer here, but they did have a nice selection of microbrews from around the Midwest. I ordered one of them and sat outside on the deck, in reality it was an old railroad flatcar, which made it even more enjoyable as I gazed upon the river. Just as I was finishing my beer, a small droplet of rain hit me, and it was only a minute later the clouds let loose with a torrent of rain along with strong lightning and thunder.



“Warsaw Brewery” – Warsaw, Illinois

From the brewery I continued driving on the old highway into the small town of Warsaw, past a collection of beautiful old brick and stone buildings dating from the late 1800’s but long since abandoned, making for a rather depressing scene. I’m sure if they could talk, they would have a lot of history to share. Light rain continued to fall as I drove south to Quincy, another historic town on the river. Here I discovered “Villa Kathrine”, perched atop a high bluff overlooking the river, a perfect reproduction of a small Mediterranean villa in the “Moorish Style”. The “villa” was built in 1900 by a wealthy Quincy businessman named George Metz who had traveled the world and modeled the structure after the centuries old “Villa Ben Ahben” in Algiers.

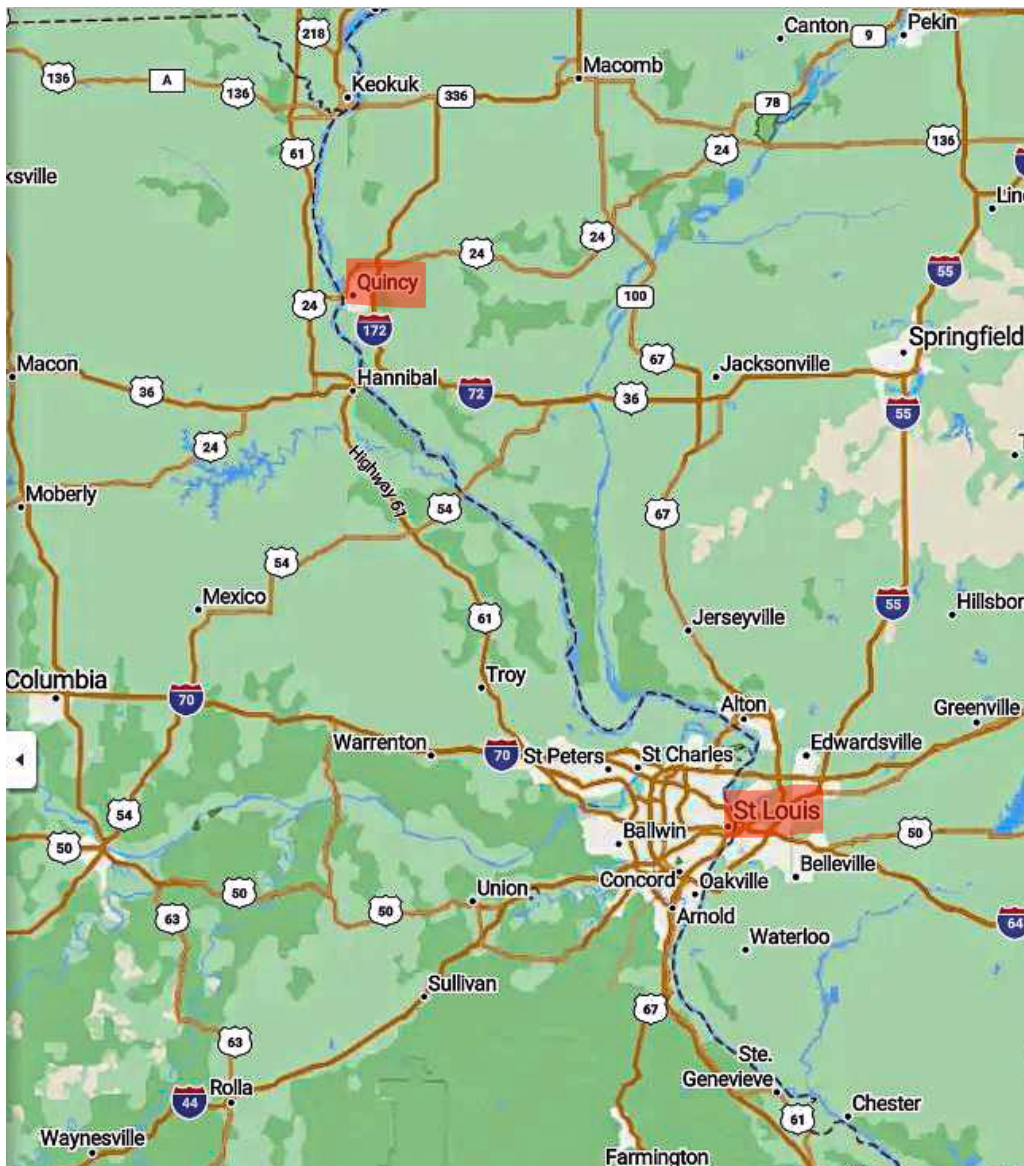


“Villa Katherine” – Quincy, Illinois



He filled the villa with all manner of exotic furnishings that he had collected during his travels, and once inside I found it decorated with many touches of the Middle East and Asia, not the Italian influence I had assumed. Being that it was approaching early evening I decided to spend the night in Quincy and the front desk clerk at the Hampton Inn recommended that I have dinner at the “Patio Restaurant” next door in the old Elkton Hotel, which made it a logical choice given the light rain falling outside. As I entered the restaurant it was like walking out to an Italian patio decorated with beautiful statues, colorful tile, and many flowering plants, but surprise, surprise - the restaurant was in the “basement” of the hotel! The owners had done a beautiful job of creating a wonderful outdoor atmosphere in a most unusual setting. On top of that, the food was outstanding as I ordered the shrimp cocktail, followed by a parmesan crusted pork tenderloin and Caesar salad. As I left the restaurant the skies were beginning to clear, so I walked down to the riverfront and sat with a cold beer on the deck of “Kutter’s Bar & Grill” while I watched a lovely sunset beyond the massive bridges spanning the river to Missouri.

### Day 6 – Quincy, Illinois to St. Louis, Missouri



The following morning, I walked around Washington Park in downtown Quincy past several classic old buildings from the late 19th century as a Farmer’s market and Jaycee’s pancake breakfast were in full swing in the park. Then I drove through the “East End” of Quincy, an old neighborhood of beautiful, shaded streets and magnificent old mansions built in the mid 1800’s, before heading south on highway 57 towards Hannibal, Missouri.



Historic mansions – Quincy Illinois

I came into Hannibal as the sun was breaking through the heavy clouds, and soon discovered the town was celebrating the 150th birthday of Mark Twain as well as the 100th anniversary of the publishing of his most famous literary work, “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”. Needless to say, the town was alive with tourists from all over the country and around the world. I visited Mark Twain’s boyhood home, now a museum where I learned a great deal about the man and the history of the town. Twain travelled extensively once he left Hannibal as a young journalist in search of interesting stories and adventuresome experiences, which often formed the basis for his writings. He was truly an amazing character and not absorbed by any pretensions, a man who could mingle easily with both the well-educated and those who were not.



Tom Sawyer’s home



Mark Twain & “friends”

Following a light lunch at the “Abby Rose Tea and Lunchroom”, a recently opened establishment in a former clothing store on Main Street, with a beautiful original stamped tin ceiling, I walked up to an old lighthouse high on the bluffs for a spectacular view of the river and the old town. Just south of Hannibal on Highway 79 I came upon the old, abandoned town of ILASCO where a monument stands commemorating the thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe who worked in the huge Atlas Cement Plant nearby. The name of the old town is an acronym for the ingredients that are used to make cement. (Iron, Lime, Alumina, Silica, Calcium, Oxygen)

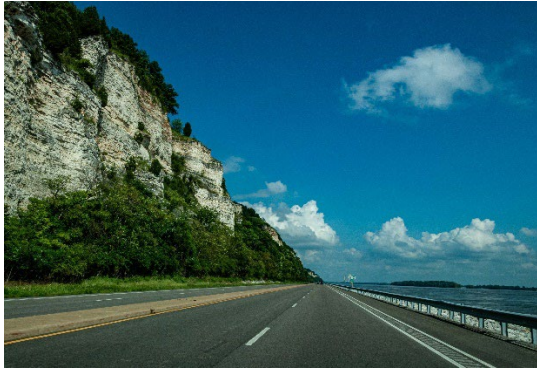


View of Hannibal from bluffs above the river



Monument to Immigrants – Illasco, Missouri

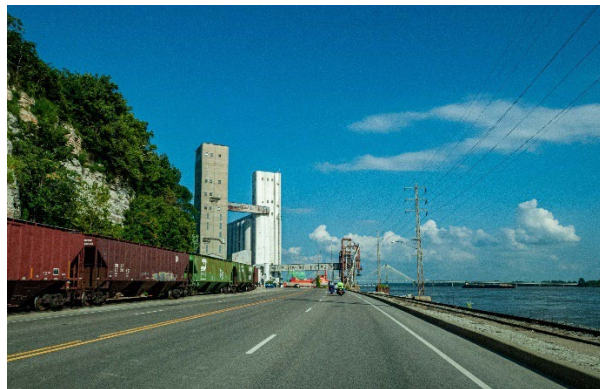
Near the small town of Louisiana, Missouri, I crossed over the river to the Illinois side and followed an old road through a beautiful landscape of woodland and farmland until I came to Pere Marquette State Park. Here is where the Illinois River meets the Mississippi and there was a lot of flooding still evident from the recent rains to the north. A couple of years ago I had stayed here in the old stone lodge and sat on the pier watching the towboats and barges slowly passing by. The pier was now under 8ft of water! Along this stretch of the Great River Road are spectacular views of the sheer limestone bluffs known as the “Mississippi River Palisades”, rising more than 250 feet above the river. Here also is a lovely little village called Elsah with its beautiful old Victorian houses built below the steep bluffs along a small tributary flowing into the mighty river. Above the village on the top of the bluffs sits “Principia College”, a Christian Science institution founded in 1906, with a gorgeous campus of old red brick and white limestone buildings. Among its most notable graduates is the famous actor, Robert Duvall, class of 1953. I toured the small campus and found a spectacular view of the “Meeting of the Rivers”, the place where the Missouri meets the Mississippi, with the skyline of St Louis in the distance.



“Mississippi River Palisades”



Elsah, Illinois



Alton, Illinois – approaching St Louis, Missouri

This is certainly a place of which only a few people are aware. Continuing south along Illinois State Highway 100 I came to a huge complex of grain elevators, railroad depot, and barge terminal on the eastern bank of the river near the city of Alton. Several large towboats were slowly making their way upriver against a strong current that was the result of recent floodwater flowing from the north. I crossed the river again and arrived in St Louis where I was scheduled to turn in this rental car and pick up another one for the rest of the journey, since splitting the rental was much less expensive than renting one car for the entire trip, strange but true.

#### Day 7 – St. Louis, Missouri to Sikeston, Missouri



After spending the night at the airport Marriott Hotel, I drove downtown to the riverfront and the old part of St Louis, which is also the location of the spectacular “Jefferson National Expansion Memorial”, better known as the “Gateway Arch”. The huge metal structure is a simple, but elegant design that is absolutely exquisite shining in the morning sun! Standing under the arch gives one a very unique perspective and conveys its enormous size best. Just to the north of the arch was a small pond located in such a way as to give a beautiful reflection of the arch, and apparently no one else among the large crowd had discovered it. Just below the arch the Mississippi River was flowing at a very fast pace, flooding the lower street and walkways. From the arch I walked among the many lovely old red brick

buildings and cobble stone streets of old town St Louis.



Old town St Louis



Gateway Arch



St Louis riverfront

Leaving old town St Louis I headed back across the river to visit the “Cahokia Mounds National Historic Site” near Collinsville, Illinois. The new Interpretive Center was very well designed with many fascinating displays to illustrate the history and culture of the prehistoric people who once inhabited the region. There was also an excellent film about how the Hopewell Mississippian culture built the large mounds as part of a huge city where thousands of people once lived and cultivated corn as their main staple crop for hundreds of years. The largest mound, known as “Monk’s Mound”, is over 100 feet high and the largest earthen pyramid north of Mexico. I climbed to the top of the huge mound in the sultry heat of midday and was rewarded with a fantastic view of more than 60 mounds that formed the ancient city back in the 1400’s.



Cahokia Mounds National Historic Site – Collinsville, Illinois



View of St Louis from “Monk’s Mound”

Beyond the mounds was a beautiful view of the St Louis skyline and the Gateway Arch, more than 30 miles away. Back on highway 3 in the small town of Prairie du Rocher I came upon a large group of bikers with their Harleys all parked very neatly in a long row on the side of Main Street, opposite two local bars.

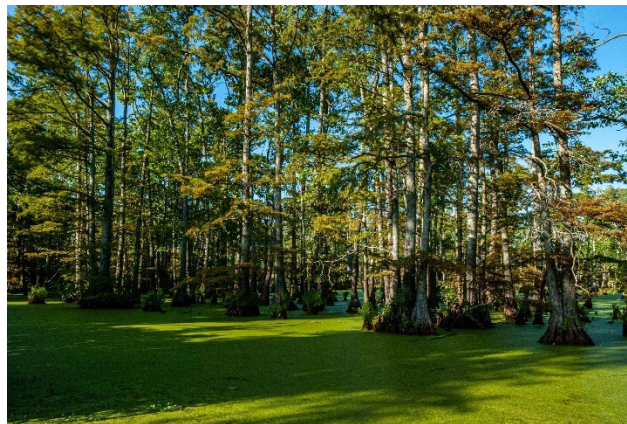
Continuing south through the fertile bottomlands with immense fields of corn and soybeans was the site of old Fort Kaskaskia, the first capitol of the state of Illinois. But in the early 1800’s the river had carved a new channel and cutoff the town from the rest of the state. Now it’s only accessible from the Missouri side of the river. (the state capitol moved to Vandalia, and later to Springfield) Further south was the elegant home of Pierre Menard, a wealthy landowner, very active in state and national politics, and a father to 14 children by two wives. I had the good fortune of arriving just as the State Park Ranger was about to start a tour of the house which was built in 1804 and furnished with the most elegant décor of the time. It is an unusually fine

example of French Creole style architecture, especially with the “galerie” (porch) that wraps around three sides of the house.



Pierre Menard House – Ellis Grove, Illinois

Not far from the Menard house is the Menard State Prison, a complex of beautiful yellow sandstone buildings, unfortunately surrounded by high chain link fences and razor-sharp concertina wire! From here the narrow winding road provided a lovely scenic drive through old stands of southern hardwoods in the Shawnee National Forest of southern Illinois, passing only a few small towns, most of them with a population less than 300 people. There were also a lot of historical markers commemorating the journey of the Lewis and Clark Expedition as they made their way from the Ohio River up to St Louis to begin their journey up the Missouri River. Just south of the small town of Thebes was the Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area with a beautiful Bald Cypress Swamp around the edge of the lake and inhabited by all kinds of birdlife. Although I grew up in Illinois, I never knew there was a Cypress Swamp in the state – a real surprise.



Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area – Shawnee National Forest

Soon I arrived in the historic old town of Cairo (pronounced “kayro” by the locals) at the very southernmost point in Illinois, where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi. At one time in the past, the town was bustling with riverboat traffic and known as the “Gateway to the South”, however, in recent times it has fallen on hard luck. With the exception of the beautifully restored yellow sandstone “Customs House”, driving through the old downtown with its many abandoned buildings in various states of disrepair was depressing. The only other exception was the lovely old neighborhood called the “Historic Cairo Park District” along Washington Street where I discovered several elegant mansions dating back to the mid 1800’s, the largest of which was “Magnolia Mansion”. Washington Street still has the original red brick paving that was manufactured by the local “Egyptian Brick Company”.



Cairo, Illinois



Egyptian Brick Company



Abandoned buildings – Cairo, Illinois



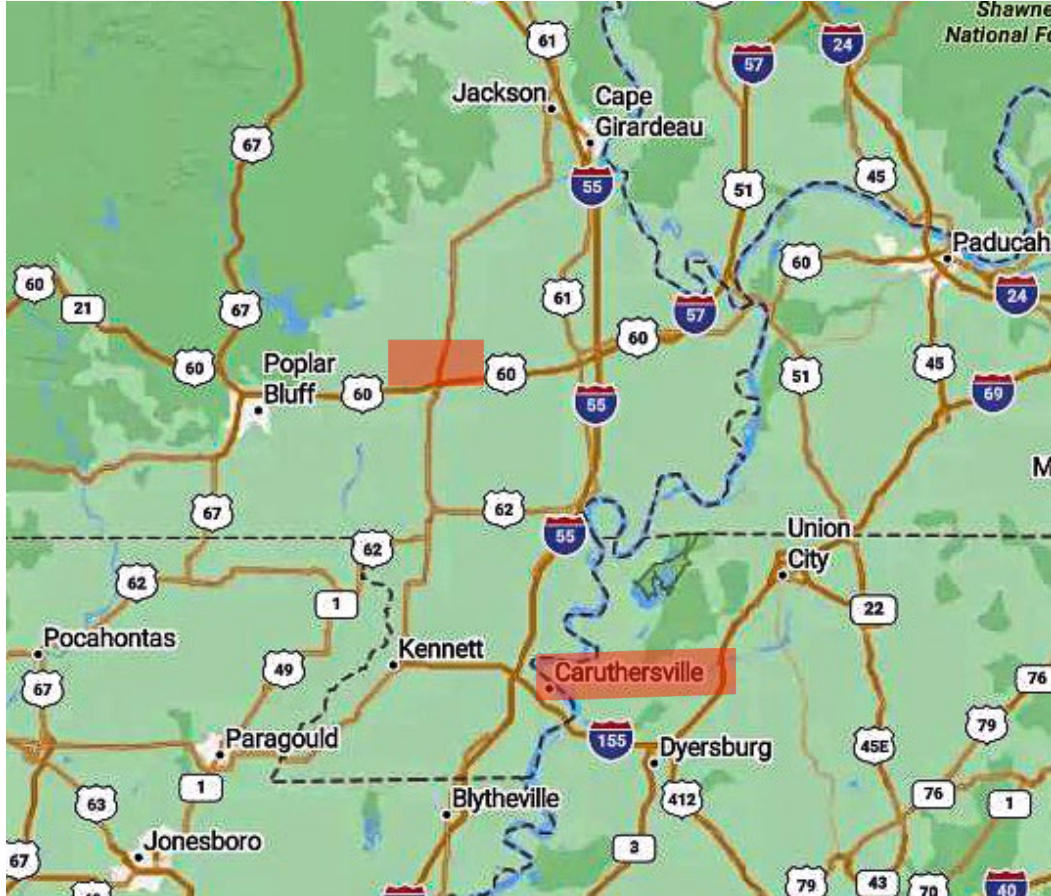
“Magnolia Mansion” – Historic Cairo Park District



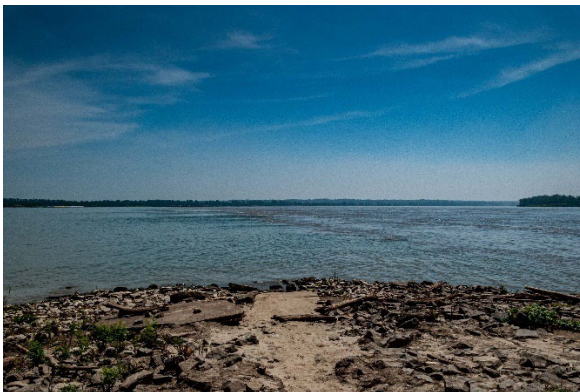
Historic Customs House – Cairo, Illinois

Seeing no decent places to stay for the night, I drove across the river to Sikeston, Missouri, and even then, the only hotel available was a Days Inn, so that’s where I ended up for the night. Luckily, there was an Appleby’s Restaurant next door for a delicious dinner of “Fiesta Lime Chicken” and a cold Sam Adams beer.

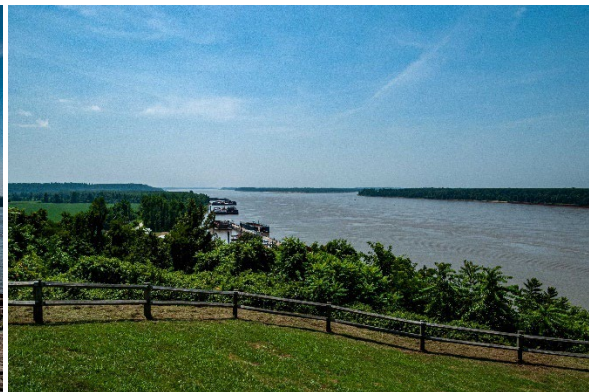
## Day 8 – Sikeston, Missouri to Caruthersville, Missouri



The next morning, I headed back to Cairo, and at the very southern tip of land where the Ohio and Mississippi rivers meet stands “Fort Defiance State Park” which has a commanding view in three directions with Missouri to the right and Kentucky to the left. Here was the encampment of General Grant’s Union Army during the early years of the Civil War. From Cairo I crossed the Ohio River to Kentucky and paid a visit to Columbus-Belmont Historic Site where General Polk and the Union gunboats drove the Confederate artillery off the bluffs overlooking the river, thus securing the Upper Mississippi River for the Union, and it remained so for the rest of the Civil War.



Fort Defiance State Park – southern tip of Illinois



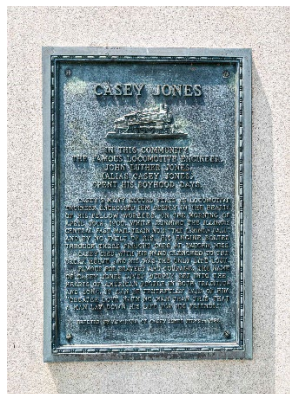
Columbus-Belmont Historic Site – Kentucky



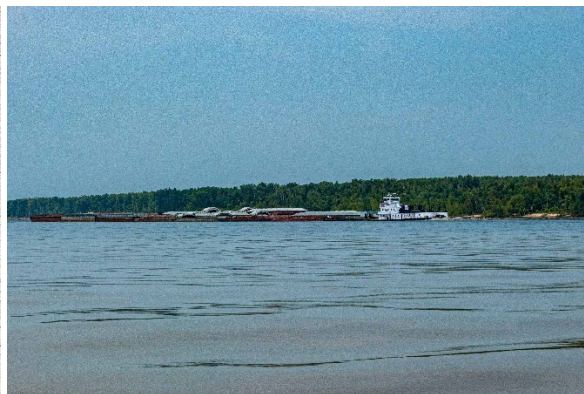


Columbus-Belmont Historic Site - Kentucky

On display in the park was a section of the massive iron chain and anchor that the Confederates had strung across the river in a failed attempt to stop the approach of the Union gunboats. On down the road was the little town of Cayce, Kentucky where I found a memorial in the town square to the legendary locomotive engineer John Luther Jones, better known as *Casey Jones*! He is credited with saving many lives though losing his own while remaining at the throttle of his Illinois Central Railroad locomotive as it crashed in 1900.



Monument to Casey Jones

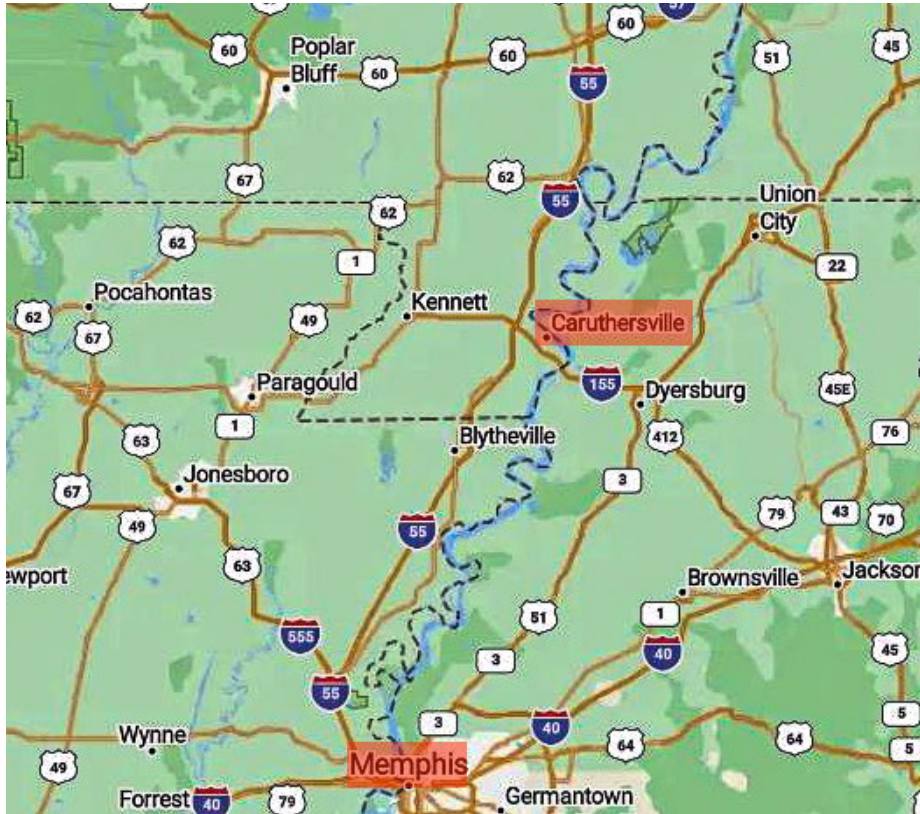


On board the ferry from Hickman to Dorena

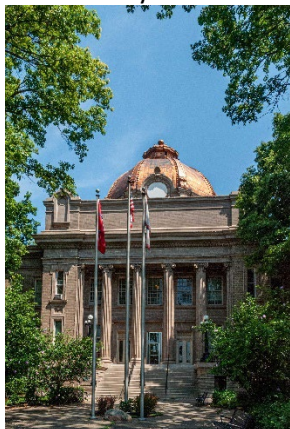
Down the road from Cayce was the little town of Hickman where I boarded a small car ferry for the trip across the Mississippi River to Dorena, Missouri and on to the historic town of New Madrid. The town was initially established as a Spanish settlement to secure the land west of the Mississippi River for Spain, but it's most famous as the epicenter of a massive earthquake in December of 1811, one of the most powerful on record. The earthquake, with over 2000 aftershocks, caused massive changes to the river and surrounding topography, even resulting in the river flowing backwards for some time. The small museum in town gave a fascinating bit of information about how earthquakes in the Midwest, though not as common, are more devastating than those on the West Coast because of the deep sediments that underlie the Mississippi Valley.



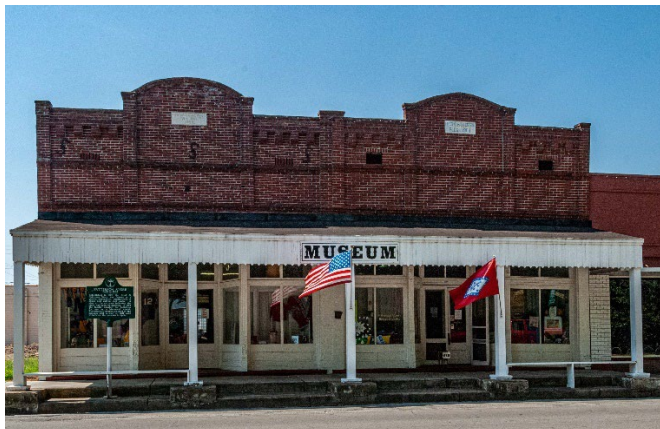
Day 9 – Caruthersville, Missouri – Memphis, Tennessee



After spending the night in Caruthersville, Missouri I headed south on US Highway 61 through the “boot heel” of Missouri and into Arkansas, passing huge fields of cotton and rice, typical of the Mississippi Delta that now extends all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. In the little town of Osceola, Arkansas across from the beautiful old stone courthouse stood 6 historic markers honoring famous Blues musicians who were born in the town, which saw the beginning of the “Blues Highway” that would lead me all the way to Louisiana.



Courthouse – Osceola, Arkansas



Patterson Store – beginning of the “Blues Highway”

Soon I was approaching the metropolis of Memphis, but instead of going directly downtown, I turned north toward “Fort Pillow National Historic Site”, a former Confederate Army post on the high bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River at a very strategic point which formed a key part of their defense of the South. In 1862 there were over 100 Confederate cannons and mortars in place when Union

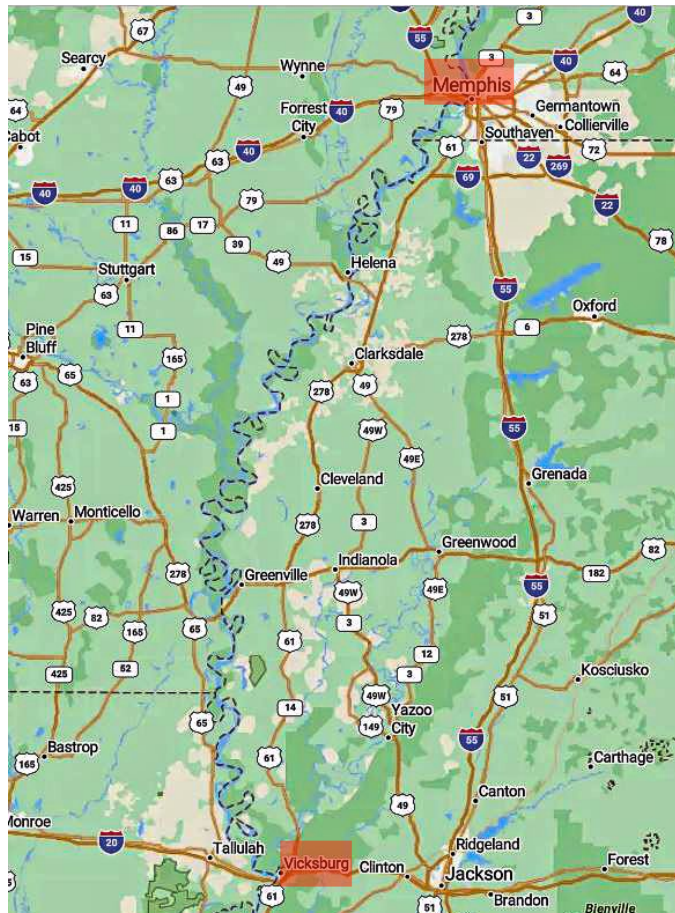
gunboats approached from the north, and after a long and bloody battle the Union Army prevailed, opening the way for taking Memphis. Despite the excessive heat and humidity (104 degrees and 95%) I walked along one of the trails through the forest, following the top of the old Confederate Army breastworks and trenches. The horseflies were still pesky, and finally the heat got to me, so I jumped into the car and set off again to join the Great River Road.



Old Confederate trenches

As I approached Memphis a large thunderstorm quickly sprung up over the city with heavy rain, but at least it did lower the temperature from 104 to 89 degrees in less than five minutes, to my great relief.

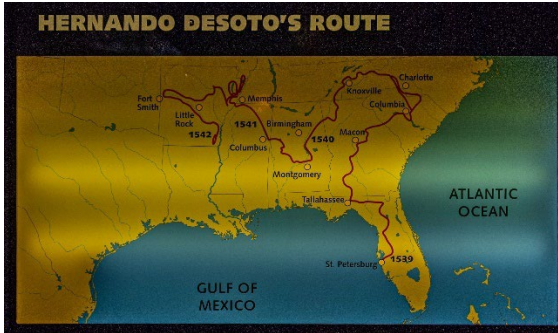
### Day 10 – Memphis, Tennessee to Vicksburg, Mississippi



The next morning, I explored the old riverfront area of the city before heading south again into the state of Mississippi to visit the “Riverpark Museum” near Tunica. Here I found a great display of many aspects of life along the river, from prehistoric native cultures to the early European explorers, the Spanish explorer DeSoto being the first to arrive in 1520, on through the Civil War and into the present day. The museum also had some fascinating displays on the natural history of the region, as well as a small aquarium with a monstrous Alligator Snapping Turtle and a huge Blue Catfish.



Riverfront Park – Memphis, Tennessee



“Riverpark Museum” – Tunica, Mississippi

At the junction with US Highway 49 I crossed over the river again to the historic town of Helena, Arkansas where I found a fascinating little museum located in the old Missouri Pacific Railroad Depot called the “Delta Cultural Center”. On the second floor were some very informative displays about the battle early in the Civil War when Union forces routed the Confederates with only a few casualties but ended up losing 4 times that number from disease during their occupation of the area. Union troops renamed the town “Hell-in-Arkansas” because of all the mosquito ridden swamps surrounding the town. The first floor was dedicated to a fascinating exhibit of life in the Mississippi Delta, from the early inhabitants to the days of slavery.



Old Missouri Pacific Railroad Station



Downtown Helena, Arkansas



Mural of famous Blues artists – Helena, Arkansas

An interesting fact I discovered in the museum was that the Delta has anywhere from 20 to 40 feet of topsoil, making it the richest agricultural area in the world, akin to the great Nile River delta in Egypt. Helena used to be a thriving river town that Mark Twain once called the loveliest city on the river, but now it struggles to survive as it has been bypassed by time. As I pulled out of town, I stopped to get some iced tea to help cope with the 102-degree heat, and as I paying for the drink, an old man asked the clerk “where’s the ice?” to which the clerk replied sarcastically “that would be in the ice box, now wouldn’t it!” Back on the Mississippi side of the river state highway 1 rolled through field after field of cotton, as far as the eye could see across the flat landscape, a classic picture of the Mississippi Delta. In Greenville there was a superb reconstruction of an old river steamboat sitting in a small pond and serving as the local Visitor Center.



Visitor Center – Greenville, Mississippi

The route from Greenville south to Vicksburg was marked by several monuments designating it as the “Mississippi Blues Trail”. First there was Gospel music that originated from the field songs sung by slaves to help pass the time, which most often was from sunrise to sunset, known among the slaves as “from can see to can’t see”. The Blues were derivatives of the field songs that were usually sung on Saturday night at small bars and clubs, whereas Gospel was sung in church on Sunday.

In the beginning, Blues was considered a much lower form of music, but later it would come to be the first original American music. All of a sudden, the narrow two-lane road became a one lane dirt road that ran for 11 miles along the top of the levee, passing many old oxbow lakes that have become havens for large numbers of birds, especially Great White Herons. Curiously enough, every half mile or so there was a cattle guard across the road, but there were no cattle to be seen, nor were there any fences! Once I arrived in Vicksburg, I began to look for a place to stay the night and noticed a small sign along the riverfront for the “Cedar Grove Mansion Inn”.



Cedar Grove Mansion Inn – Vicksburg, Mississippi

Here I found a beautiful estate and lovely mansion built in 1840 overlooking the river. As I checked in with the owner, she recommended that I choose General Sherman's Room for the night, and later I found out that General Sherman had indeed stayed in the room during the time that the mansion was used as the Union Army headquarters following the fall of Vicksburg in July of 1863. The entire mansion was filled with original furnishings of the period and was remarkably well preserved considering the destruction of the town during the siege by Union forces. Dinner that evening was served in one of the mansion's elegant ballrooms and as I sat at my table I noticed the carpet had been cut open to reveal a large hole in the floor, the result of a cannonball from the Union bombardment. Then my eye caught sight of a small cannonball lodged in the door frame about five feet above the floor, which brought the history of the Civil War to a stark reality as I savored the lobster ravioli and blackened seafood pasta.



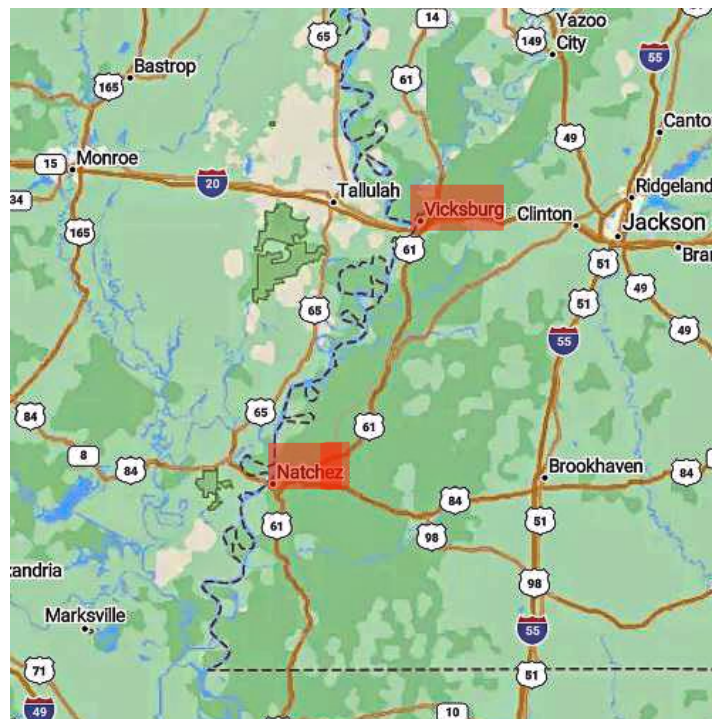
General Sherman's room



Dining Room

After dinner I sat on the veranda outside my room and watched the sun setting as occasional lightning flashed in the distance. The evening was still hot and muggy with nary a hint of any breeze, making me wonder how people 150 years ago coped with the oppressive heat and humidity while dressed in the heavy woolen garments of the times.

### Day 11- Vicksburg, Mississippi to Natchez, Mississippi



The next morning, I walked down to the Vicksburg riverfront and discovered a magnificent series of beautiful murals painted on the side of the flood wall, detailing the history of the town and the region. Three blocks up from the river was the “Biedenharn Museum of Coca-Cola History” located in an old drugstore and candy factory where Coca-Cola was first bottled in 1894. Until that time, the beverage was only served from a “fountain”, many of which were beautiful and expensive ones made from marble by the Siberian Arctic Ice Company. The old drugstore and soda fountain had the original bottling apparatus on display, as well as every imaginable logo, promo item, and gadget that ever carried the Coca-Cola name.



Murals of Vicksburg history

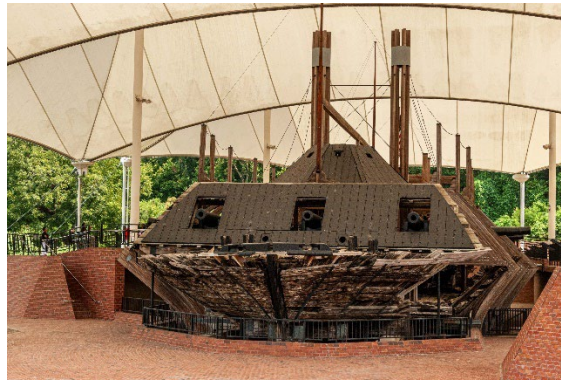


“Biedenharn Museum of Coca-Cola History” – Vicksburg, Mississippi

My next stop was the “Vicksburg National Military Park” and a very interesting film about the battle and siege of the city that really prepared me for a tour of the battlefield. The road through the park followed the Union lines on the east side and then the Confederate lines on the west side, sometimes coming within just 30 yards of each other. As I drove slowly along the old battle lines, I passed many monuments that had been erected to honor the soldiers on both sides. It was a sobering scene when one imagines the horror of the battle that took over 20,000 lives. After 47 days without a re-supply of food and ammunition, the Confederates were forced to surrender the city as the South’s last remaining defense on the Mississippi River. One of the highlights in the park was the restored remains of the Union gunboat “Cairo” which was sunk in the river in 1863 by a Confederate torpedo, now known as a “mine” that was detonated manually from the shore as the gunboat passed. The National Park Service has done a remarkable job of restoring and interpreting the remains since it was discovered buried in the mud a few years ago.



Union Army lines – Vicksburg National Military Park



Union Gunboat "Cairo"

Leaving Vicksburg I drove south on US Highway 61, the "Mississippi Blues Trail", toward Natchez. About 15 miles down the road I spotted a sign for the "Grand Gulf National Military Site" and decided to investigate. Seven miles down a narrow winding road I came to the old site of Fort Wade and Fort Coburn where Confederate artillery batteries had fended off a strong attack by Union gunboats in 1863. The site had several old buildings and a nice display of old carriages, including two black hearses from New Orleans and the only surviving hospital wagon from the Civil War. Just as I finished taking a photo of a 14-inch mortar at Fort Wade, I barely had time to run to my car to escape a torrential downpour from one of the strongest thunderstorms I've seen in ages.



14 inch Confederate mortar – Grand Gulf National Military Site



Civil War Ambulance wagon

I was forced to sit in my car for over an hour as wave after wave of heavy rain continued to dump from the thick black clouds, small limbs fell from the trees, hail pummeled the roof, and lightning was so close that the thunder literally shook the car. Finally, I was able to drive slowly



down the road but barely able to see through the driving rain that had water rushing across the road and large tree limbs strewn in the middle, I wondered if there might be a tornado around the area.

Back on Highway 61 and out of the rain I came upon the “Natchez Trace”, a lovely parkway through the heavily forested Delta bottomlands that followed an old route used by Native Americans for hundreds of years between present-day Nashville and Natchez, connecting the Cumberland, Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers. When the Trace was a major trading route in the early 1800’s there were many inns constructed along the way to serve travelers, one of them being the “Locust Inn” that was actually part of a large plantation. It was restored by the National Park Service in its original condition, looking much as it did when it provided room and board for weary travelers.



Historic “Natchez Trace” Parkway

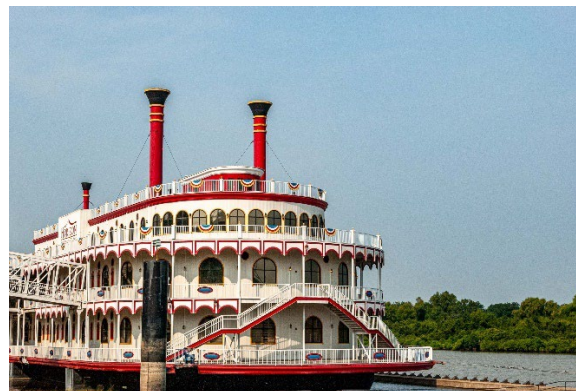


“Locust Inn” on the Natchez Trace

As for myself, I found a nice place to stay at the “Comfort Suites Riverview Inn” on the river in Natchez with a great view of the city and the river where I could watch the barge traffic. That evening, I had a fantastic grilled fresh Catfish for dinner in the hotel’s restaurant, along with the usual hush puppies and creamed corn, as recommended by my waitress.

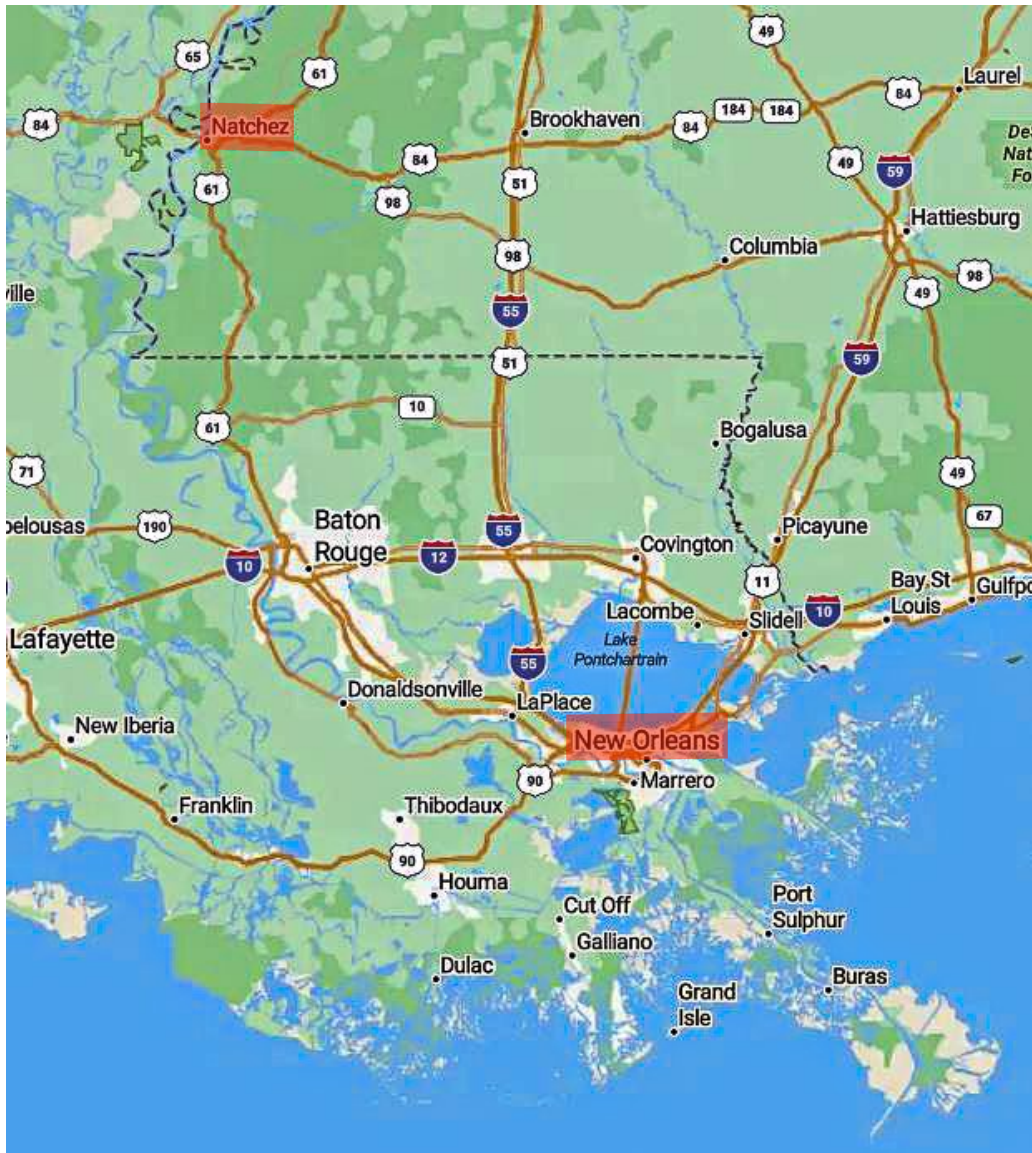


View of the river from the “Comfort Suites Riverview Inn” – Natchez, Mississippi



Restored Riverboat – Natchez, Mississippi

## Day 12- Natchez, Mississippi to New Orleans, Louisiana



The next morning, I went to the “Welcome Center” to pick up some literature on historic southern plantations to visit on the way to New Orleans. As I was leaving, a group of prison inmates dressed in classic black and white striped uniforms were being assembled outside for a work detail, and the memory of the famous Paul Newman film “Cool Hand Luke” about chain gangs came to mind.

My first stop was an old plantation on the edge of the city named “Melrose”, part of the “Natchez National Historic Park”. The plantation was situated among beautiful old Live Oak and Cypress trees whose limbs were covered with Spanish Moss that made a picture-perfect scene of the Old South. Although the main house was closed, being in the middle of restoration, I visited some very interesting exhibits in the outbuildings, including the laundry and the dairy where there was a fascinating display about the “Punda”, a Hindi word for a large fan, normally a palm leaf in India but now a cloth covered board in this country. It was usually operated by a young slave boy who pulled a rope to swing the fan back and forth to provide a circulation of air above the dining table for the purpose of keeping flies off the food and plates and it soon became known as the “Shoo Fly”.



Melrose Plantation Historic Site – Natchez, Mississippi



“Shoo Fly” – Melrose Plantation

Another very informative exhibit was a detailed look at the institution of slavery, which was defended by the southern states as “just and right under both God and the law”. Owners and masters had total control of their slaves and could decide their life or death, and it’s a chapter in our country’s history that is difficult to reconcile with today’s standards.

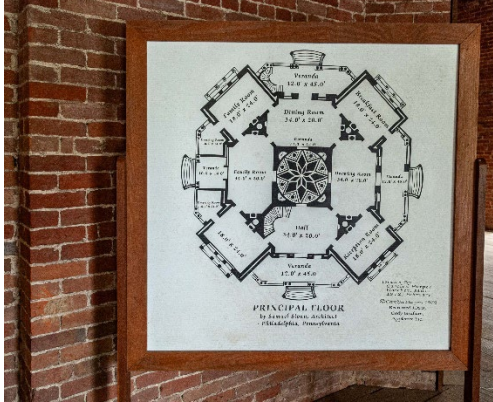
Not far from Melrose was another historic antebellum mansion called “Longwood” with the unique distinction of being the largest octagonal structure in the country. It was designed in 1859 for Dr. Haller Nutt, a wealthy cotton planter, and construction began early in 1861 shortly before the “war between the states” broke out. Construction of the mansion was halted in 1862 with only nine rooms on the ground floor completed out of the 32 rooms that were planned.



“Longwood Mansion” – Natchez, Mississippi

Dr. Nutt died just as the war ended and the mansion was never finished, remaining so until this day.

The floor plan was quite unique with all rooms having access outside to either a veranda or balcony, and the interior space of the structure is entirely open with a huge atrium topped by a Byzantine onion-shaped dome that allowed a lot of air and light to fill the rooms from inside. Over one million bricks were used in its construction, some of which were of a unique 5-sided design to allow for the shape of the octagonal corners throughout the building.



Floor plan of Longwood Mansion



Unfinished 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

The first floor was ornately furnished in the period and currently maintained by the “Pilgrimage Garden Society of Natchez” which organizes tours of the mansion. Also, of notable mention on the grounds of the plantation is a rare brick outhouse that has separate accommodations for men and women, state of the art for the day.

Soon it was time to hit the road again and head south on Louisiana Highway 1 as it followed the river for the next 45 miles, sometimes on top of the levee and at other times below it. I passed many fields of cotton, rice, and sugar cane as well as three large Corps of Engineers flood control works, before coming into the state capitol, Baton Rouge. In contrast to the fields of cotton and rice, I suddenly found myself in the middle of a giant complex of oil refineries and chemical plants, the largest being a huge Exxon Mobil refinery that stretched for at least a couple of miles along the highway. The city was dominated by the impressive State Capitol Building, the tallest structure in the city and surrounded by a lovely park and beautiful gardens. Nearby was the gravesite of Huey Long and a monument commemorating his many years as governor when he virtually controlled everything within the state. East of the capitol building was “Spanish Town”, oldest neighborhood in the city and so named because it was a land grant from Spain in the days when Spain had established nearby Fort Rosa. The neighborhood was a lovely collection of classic old houses in the architectural style of the bayou country, with long rooms and doors at each end to facilitate the movement of air to cool the house – an architectural style known as a “shotgun house”.



State Capitol and Huey Long Memorial – Baton Rouge, Louisiana



“Spanish Town” neighborhood – Baton Rouge

I got back on Louisiana Highway 1 headed toward the old town of Plaquemine in Iberville Parish, as the road snaked its way following the river. I made a short side trip to the historic district of

Donaldsonville where there were some classic old buildings with beautiful wrought iron balconies and old storefronts restored to their original condition.



Donaldsonville, Louisiana

The old road along the river wound its way through vast fields of sugar cane before abruptly connecting with the busy US Highway 90 on the south side of New Orleans, where it quickly became a 4-lane mess of rush hour traffic. Luckily, I spotted a Holiday Inn just off the highway before the last exit to the huge toll bridge downtown. I checked into a nice room on the 9th floor with a view of the downtown New Orleans skyline across the river as some heavy thunderstorms began to roll in. For dinner that evening I went down to the “Round House Bar and Grill” in the hotel for a superb Black & Blue Burger with Applewood Smoked Bacon, along with a couple of ice cold local “Arbita Jackhoma IPA” beers. Later in the evening I watched the thunderstorms sweep over the city with lots of lightning, thunder and heavy rain before calling it a night.



View of downtown New Orleans from Holiday Inn

### **End of the road and the return to Chicago**

In the morning the sun was out as I rejoined the Great River Road on the way to its conclusion 75 miles south of New Orleans in the small fishing town of Venice. Much of the route was actually at a level below the height of the river so it made for some interesting photos of the large ocean-going ships steaming up the river 6 – 8 feet above me! Much of the surrounding landscape was either natural cypress swamp or cultivated fields of rice and sugar cane, but there were also a few huge oil refineries and chemical plants along the banks of the river. At the end of the road in the small town of Venice was a large harbor, home to the shrimp fleet, all of whom were confined in port due to the massive BP oil spill that had closed their fishing grounds. Nearby were the headquarters of the “Oil Spill Emergency Response Center”.



Cargo ship on the Mississippi River 6 feet above the highway



Shrimp fishing fleet in Venice, Louisiana

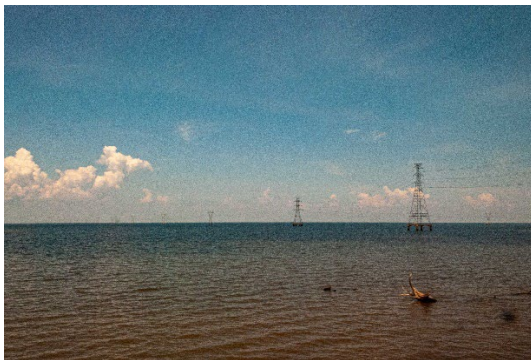
At this point I looked back over the past 12 days and 2700 miles and began to realize what an amazing experience it had been. I drove back north again to New Orleans to turn in the rental car and board the legendary train to Chicago, the “City of New Orleans” which departed Union Station in the early afternoon. Once on board the famous train, I went to the observation lounge car for a glass of wine as the train rolled past the Superdome and crossed the huge expanse of Lake Pontchartrain on the 30-mile-long causeway.



Boarding the “City of New Orleans”



Passing the Superdome – New Orleans, Louisiana



Crossing Lake Pontchartrain



Bayou country – southern Mississippi

Then the train made its way into the bayou country and immense cotton fields of southern Mississippi, headed north to Jackson. Later that evening, as we approached Memphis, I had a delicious dinner of Maryland crab cakes in the dining car with the view of a beautiful sunset on the western horizon. Then I returned to the observation lounge car for another glass of wine before retiring to my roomette for the night. Early the next morning we arrived in Chicago, and I had about 6 hours before the departure of the Southwest Chief train to Los Angeles. So, I decided to see a bit of the city from the “Skydeck” on top of the Sears Tower (now the Willis

Tower). The express elevator was extremely fast, taking less than 60 seconds to reach the top – 2 floors every second! The view was incredible, even under the cloudy skies, and a recent addition to the Skydeck were two small glass rooms that extended 6 feet out from the side of the building with thick glass floors where people could stand and look more than 1100 feet straight down to the street below! It was a very popular attraction for kids, but not so much for their parents.



Approaching Chicago



View from the "Skydeck" on top of the Sears Tower



Standing on the glass floor over 1100 feet above the city

Before leaving the Sears Tower, I toured a wonderful display of Chicago history in the lobby and then walked back to Union Station. Soon it was time to board the Southwest Chief for the two and half day return trip to Los Angeles and the conclusion of my two-week journey down the great river!

## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

### Footnotes:

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