



THE MOST
SOUTHERN
PLACE ON
EARTH

10th ANNIVERSARY

JULY 2019

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Director's Note

Dr. Rolando Herts



Rolando Herts, Ph.D.

Director, The Delta Center for Culture and Learning; Executive Director, Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area

“Through Education, Partnerships, and Community Engagement”: Commemorating the Most Southern Workshops and Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area’s Tenth Anniversary

The Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University is honored to have presented for a tenth year The Most Southern Place on Earth workshops for K-12 educators through generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

This year also is the tenth anniversary of the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, a cultural heritage development partnership with the National Park Service designated by Congress in 2009. The MDNHA is managed by The Delta Center and has been a Most Southern program partner for several years. The Delta Center’s mission is to promote greater understanding of the Mississippi Delta’s culture and history and its significance to the world through education, partnerships, and community engagement. The Most Southern program is The Delta Center’s mission in action.

For the past ten years, over 700 K-12 educators from throughout the country and the world have traveled to the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area to learn about the music, history, and culture of this distinctive region that the National Trust for

Historic Preservation recognizes as a “National Treasure” and that the National Park Service calls “the cradle of American culture.”

Through regional partnerships with museums, cultural organizations, and statewide entities like the Mississippi Humanities Council, over the past decade, the Most Southern workshops have created spaces where our visiting K-12 educators engage with community-based residents and landmarks that tell authentic Mississippi Delta stories. The stories align with Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area themes including rivers, agriculture, cotton, blues music, religious expression, and food, as well as African Americans’ struggle for freedom and civil rights and immigrant groups that also shaped the region’s culture including Chinese, Italians, Lebanese, and Jews.

Immersion in primary source material regarding the paradoxical, contrasting nature of Mississippi Delta culture and history figures prominently in the Most Southern workshops. In the April 2019 article “How the Delta Center for Culture & Learning Showcases Its Impact,” the National Humanities Alliance, which is a coalition of organizations dedicated to advocating for the humanities, summarizes Most Southern thusly:

“Over the course of six days, teachers examine the Delta’s past and present, experientially and intellectually, focusing especially on the region’s place in the civil rights movement and the development of blues music. They listen to local musicians, walk the landscape, and eat regional cuisine at local restaurants; they attend scholarly lectures and panels led by civil rights activists and FBI agents. When they return to their classrooms around the country, the teachers bring not only a new appreciation for the Mississippi Delta’s role in our national history and culture, but also new methods—focused on food, music, and landscapes—by which to teach regional history to their students.”

The Most Southern program has implemented an expanded emphasis on direct engagement with Mississippi Delta residents whose lives have been touched and shaped by significant historical events and social movements. In 2018, in partnership with the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, the Mississippi Humanities Council, and other organizations, there were two staged readings held at GRAMMY Museum Mississippi of the locally researched and authored play “Beautiful Agitators” about voting rights activist Vera Mae Pigeo, a hidden figure of the Civil Rights Movement in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Participants also interacted with local residents at the rededication of the historic marker at the Tallahatchie River where Emmett Till’s body was recovered after his brutal murder in 1955.

In June and July 2019, Most Southern engaged teacher participants with community members through two public events co-sponsored by the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area. The first was a Delta Italians community gathering at Delta State University that featured the film “I Sopravvissuti (The Survivors)” created by Cleveland resident and Delta State alumnus Matteo Zengaro and a Q&A panel discussion with Delta Italians sharing their cultural heritage stories. The second event was the opening of the Delta Health Center museum in the historic black town of Mound Bayou held in collaboration with their 132nd Founders Day celebration.

Arguably, these all are key ingredients in the mystical formula that leaves participants transformed and even transfixed to such a degree that they find themselves returning to the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area repeatedly.

In 2018, the National Humanities Alliance collaborated with The Delta Center to decipher the Most Southern success formula through survey research. The survey generated feedback from 137 Most Southern alumni, which represented over 20 percent of our alumni network at the time. Among the findings:

- 100 percent said the workshops helped them grow as an educator, with 43 percent specifying “transformative growth” and 51 percent selecting “significant growth.”
- 100 percent rated Most Southern superior to other professional development opportunities, 62 percent of whom called it “vastly superior.”
- 92 percent were “extremely satisfied” with the return on their invested time and energy. The remaining 8 percent were “satisfied.”
- 72 percent said the workshops inspired them to pursue additional education or professional development opportunities.

The National Humanities Alliance is working with The Delta Center to continue this program impact research. Our summer 2019 participants completed pre- and post-workshop surveys, the results of which we anticipate will illuminate how the Most Southern experience fosters intellectual and personal transformation for teacher participants and their students.

Many thanks to our gifted and highly dedicated team members – Most Southern co-director Lee Aylward; budget manager Shelia Winters; and media team members at Obsidian Productions who mentored our brilliant Robertson Scholars Carsten Pran and Kamryn Washington from Duke University – for making this a great Most Southern tenth anniversary summer! Also, many thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, the National Humanities Alliance, and the people of the Mississippi Delta whose contributions and collaboration over the past decade have made the Most Southern program a premiere embodiment of The Delta Center’s mission.



Co-directors Dr. Herts and Lee Aylward take a picture with the Dr. Edgar Smith and the participants of the July “Most Southern Place on Earth” workshop.

Originally from Little Rock and Eudora, Arkansas, Dr. Rolando Herts has years of experience working in the Delta region. After completing undergraduate and graduate programs at Morehouse College and the University of Chicago, he returned to the area to teach second grade in Indianola with Teach For America.

OPENING RECEPTION

Welcoming participants to the Mississippi Delta



Thirty-six educators selected from a nationwide application pool gathered at Cleveland's Martin and Sue King Railroad Museum to begin "The Most Southern Place on Earth" NEH Workshop. Throughout the evening, these teachers met Delta Center staff members and got to know other workshop participants from across the country.



Many participants got their first taste of the Delta at the reception, trying regional delicacies like pickled okra and marinated brussels sprouts. Other snacks and refreshments were also served as participants admired the museum's model trains.



DAY ONE

Creator and Destroyer of the Delta

The activities of the first full day of the workshop allowed participants to get to know the Mississippi Delta in preparation for the coming week of exploration. Much of the history of the Delta is palpable in the region today. Participants learned of the lasting effects of the South's cotton empire on education disparity and poverty in the Delta through the screening of the film "LaLee's Kin" and the subsequent presentation by Reggie Barnes. Participants also stood in the powerful presence of the Mississippi River- many of them for the first time - and were able to connect their knowledge of its historical impact to the actual body of water.

Workshop Introduction

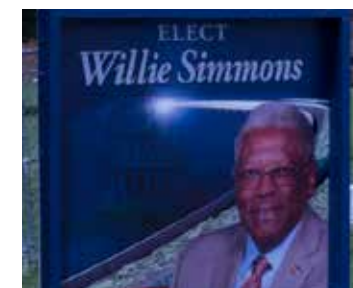


Day one of the workshop began with an orientation from co-directors Dr. Herts and Lee Aylward. In addition to walking the participants through the week's busy schedule, Dr. Herts shared videos about the Mississippi Delta and topics such as intersectionality to prepare the group for the impactful workshop ahead. Lee further familiarized participants with the Mississippi Delta, imparting upon them the importance of the Mississippi River to the evolution of the region and the

importance of The Delta to the history and identity of the country. She tells the participants: "You know things about the Delta, but what you know about the Delta you didn't know was about the Delta."

Senator's Place

For lunch, participants dined at The Senator's Place, where long-standing Mississippi Senator Willie Simmons serves world-class, love-filled Southern soul food. Senator Willie Simmons has long been a valued Cleveland community member. In the upcoming elections, Senator Simmons will be running for Transportation Commissioner of Mississippi's Central District. Senator Simmons' daughter, Sarita Simmons, will be running for Senator of District 13, the office that her father has held since 1993.



Since opening The Senator's Place in 2003, Senator Simmons has forged an even deeper connection with the people he loves and serves.



Most Southern Place on Earth NEH Workshop

7am	9am	11am	1pm	3pm	5pm	7pm	9pm
	Introduction	Lunch	Movie: LaLee's Kin	Discussion with Reggie Barnes	Visit to the River	Catfish supper	

Lalee's Kin Showing

After lunch, the group returned to Delta State to watch the Academy Award-nominated film "LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton." The film follows the life and family of woman named LaLee Wallace, who lives in Tallahatchie County, one of the poorest counties in the nation. The family embodies the cycle of poverty and poor education that has been left in the wake of the eras of slavery and sharecropping.

Reggie Barnes



Also featured in the film is Reggie Barnes, the West Tallahatchie School Superintendent from 1994 to 2001, who was tasked with getting the school district off of probation by increasing standardized test scores. He spoke passionately about his experience as Superintendent and the understanding it afforded him of the systemic social, economic, and educational ills faced by residents of places like Tallahatchie County. Mr. Barnes and the participants exchanged insights regarding what is needed to uplift a school district and a community like those of West Tallahatchie County.



The River

Participants then boarded the mobile classroom to view the Mississippi River—the Nile of the New World. Typically, participants visit the river at the site of the Levee Break of the Flood of 1927, the subject of their required pre-workshop reading, "Rising Tide." However, due to high water levels in that area, the group overlooked the river from Terrene Landing instead.

Participants marveled at the river, the bearer of a great deal of economic, cultural, and musical Delta heritage. Some bent down to touch its waters while others tried their hand at skipping rocks. Tides lapped gently against the river banks, the calm flow reminiscent of The Mississippi's historical sustenance of the Delta region. Nonetheless, the waters' vast expanse served as a chilling reminder of the river's capacity to devastate.



Airport Grocery

The first day of came to a close with a trip to Airport Grocery, where the group enjoyed a delectable Delta dinner of fried catfish, hush-puppies, and assorted sides. The dinner was accompanied by a live blues performance by Keith Johnson, the great nephew of renowned blues musician Muddy Waters.



Awash with mouthwatering smells, authentic ambiance, and friendly conversation, Airport Grocery provided the perfect close to a busy day.



DAY TWO

Cultural, Racial, and Religious Diversity

HERITAGE

7am 9am 11am 1pm 3pm 5pm 7pm 9pm

Chinese Graveyard Live Oak Cemetery Delta Jews Greenville Museums Lunch Charles Wilson: The Religious South Dinner

After gaining a broad context of the Delta during the first day of the workshop, participants spent their second day exploring the cultural, religious, and racial diversity of the people who inhabit this region. Though the demographic composition of the American South is primarily discussed in terms of a black and white dynamic, several less recognized populations have called the Delta home, including Chinese and Jewish people. Participants traveled to the neighboring town of Greenville to learn about these communities and hear accounts of their struggles and triumphs through first-hand accounts.

Delta Chinese

The workshop's first stop of the day was the Chinese cemetery. Here, participants learned about the history of the Chinese population in the Delta area, tracing their struggles and triumphs from their community's establishment to the present day.



Raymond Wong, a Chinese Delta native, gave a tour of the cemetery. He spoke of the origins of the Chinese presence in the region, discussed some of the conditions the population has faced since its establishment, and divulged his own experiences growing up as someone with geographically Southern and ethnically Chinese roots. Though, according to Wong, many of the Chinese people he grew up with have left Mississippi, the legacy of the Chinese Deltans is preserved by active community members like himself.



Greenville's Live Oak Cemetery

From the Chinese cemetery, the workshop walked to the neighboring Live Oak cemetery. This cemetery, which has historically been the place where Greenville's black population laid their dead to rest, stands across the road from the Chinese cemetery and is marked by a plaque explaining the story of Holt Collier, who was interred there in 1936.



Collier was a well-known African American hunter who, in 1902, took President Theodore Roosevelt on a bear hunting expedition. Workshop co-director Lee Aylward explained that when Collier roped a bear for Roosevelt to kill, Roosevelt refused, inspiring a political cartoon that birthed the 'Teddy Bear'.



Jewish Synagogue

From the cemeteries, the participants traveled to Greenville's Jewish synagogue. Part-museum and part-temple, the Hebrew Union Temple boasts opulent stained glass windows, a magnificent organ, and walls of Jewish and Jewish Deltan memorabilia dating back to the temple's foundation in the 1880s. Participants were treated to a tour of the museum, whose photos and artifacts retain the history of the Greenville's Jewish heritage.



At the Jewish Temple, Benjy Nelken spoke to workshop participants about the history of the temple's efforts to preserve Jewish culture and community in Greenville. Before they arrived at the temple, participants watched the documentary "Delta Jews", which portrays how Jewish people in places like Greenville have grappled with reconciling their religion and heritage with Southern customs and contexts.

Flood of 1927 Museum



Before arriving in Cleveland for the workshop, participants read the book "Rising Tide", which tells the story of the catastrophic Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927. After coming face to face with the sheer size and force of the Mississippi River the day prior, participants could imagine the terror that Delta residents felt when the river flooded its banks and overpowered human attempts to control its deluge.



Much of the book is set in Greenville because it stood directly in the path of the flood as it tore through the levee upriver. The Flood of 1927 Museum in Greenville further immersed participants in the momentous event, allowing them to see artifacts from the flood, interact with maps of the disaster, and explore in greater depth the massive social, political, and economic changes that followed it.

Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson: The Religious South



The workshop continued back at the Delta State campus with a fascinating lecture by Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson, a renowned professor of Southern history and religion at the University of Mississippi. While much of Dr. Wilson's lecture focused on religion's central role in the social development of the Mississippi Delta, it also connected to the day's earlier exploration of racial diversity in the region. In addition to answering participants' questions of how religion has shaped the politics and social makeup of the South, Dr. Wilson played clips of Southern church music, which he emphasized as the roots of many genres of American music. This lecture's integration of music transitioned into the final activity of the day: a performance by a Blues musician and scholar.

Dr. Wilson's lecture gave academic nuance to the discussions of the Delta's diverse character that occurred in Greenville earlier that morning. Participants began to synthesize the knowledge they had gained visiting Greenville in the traveling classroom, watching documentaries and speaking with Delta natives. Many teachers discussed how the day's activities challenged their understanding of the South and shared about the diverse communities in which they teach as well.



Bill Abel: History of the Blues

The second day of the workshop concluded with a brilliant performance and presentation by Delta Blues musician Bill Abel. Abel is self-taught and he makes his own instruments out of materials like driftwood and cigar boxes. He played several samples of Blues rhythms for the group and spoke insightfully about the genre's evolution. Each sample that Abel played sounded subtly different from the last and often employed different instruments. Between songs, Abel explained how the Blues style had shifted, introduced notable figures in the genre's evolution and spoke about what historical events had catalyzed the change. This activity introduced the cultural significance of the Delta's music that the participants studied on the workshop's third day.





DAY THREE

The Blues Trail Emerges from the Freedom Trail

7am 9am 11am 1pm 3pm 5pm 7pm 9pm

Dockery Farms

Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden and B.B. King Museum

Lunch

David Evans: Origins of the Blues

Dinner

Dockery Farms: The Birthplace of the Blues

Wednesday picked up where Tuesday left off, immersing workshop participants in the wellspring of American music that is the Delta blues. Participants pay a visit to Dockery Farms, a critical site in the proliferation of blues music, and pay respects to the King of the Blues, B.B. King, at his namesake museum in Indianola, MS. Accompanying participants on their journey are Dr. Edgar Smith and Mrs. Inez Smith. By sharing about their activism with historical figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer and their intimate knowledge of the Delta's music and history, the Smiths bridge the essential gap between Blues music and the history of the Black Delta community, from slavery to civil rights.

Wednesday's first stop was Dockery Farms, widely held to be the birthplace of the blues. Upon the group's arrival, Bill Lester, the director of the Dockery Family Foundation and a former Delta state professor, informed the group about famous Delta blues musicians who picked cotton by day and played blues by night at Dockery. He also shared about his own experiences growing up in the Delta surrounded by Blues musicians and other figures who had witnessed and participated in the cultivation of Blues music in this region.



Bill Lester, a former Delta State professor and executive director of the Dockery Farms Foundation served as a guide, teaching the history of the Farms and how Blues emerged from the cotton fields. He also explained the detailed stories behind the hundreds of artifacts that lined the property.

Though the precise origin of the blues is still disputed, Dockery Farms was a crucial breeding ground for the music of the likes of Charley Patton, the father of the Delta blues. The influence of Charley Patton and other Dockery blues musicians like him was not only essential to the development of blues music throughout the south, but also has its reaches into jazz, rock and roll, country music, and American music as a whole.

The Crossroads

Legend has it that blues icon Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in exchange for marvelous guitar mastery. Though there are many guesses as to which exact crossroads it was, Co-director Lee Aylward brought the participants through rural countryside to this dirt road where many believe the mysterious deal took place.





Fannie Lou Hamer's Memorial Garden

The mobile classroom then left Dockery and carried participants east to the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden in Ruleville. A crucial figure in the realization of voting rights for Black Americans among a number of other civil rights ventures, Hamer is often overlooked in the story of the country's ongoing fight for equality.



Fannie Lou Hamer was unaware of her constitutional right to vote until she attended a meeting held by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1962. Spurred by this discovery, she became a SNCC organizer and led a group including herself and 17 others to register to vote at the Indianola County Courthouse. For this attempt, she was evicted and fired from the plantation where she lived and worked for 20 years. When Hamer brought her story to the national stage in 1964 at the Democratic national convention, President Lyndon B. Johnson held an emergency press conference to prevent her from getting air time.

The courage and determination that characterize Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy was felt profoundly by the workshop participants as they stood where she stood. Moved by the powerful experience visiting Hamer's resting place, many remarked on the importance of imparting stories like Hamer's to their students.

Though Hamer's vote and voice were faced with suppression, in her following years of activism, she made herself heard as a champion of civil rights and women's rights.

Dr. Edgar Smith and Mrs. Inez Smith

Accompanying the group on their morning bus ride were husband and wife of 64 years Dr. Edgar Smith and Mrs. Inez Smith. Dr. Smith, the chairman of the Mississippi Blues Commission's Blues Musicians Benevolent Fund and former B.B. King Museum Board Member, shared with participants his pride in the heritage of the Mississippi Delta. "When I hear stories of the Delta, it's like reliving my history," he told the group. He shared childhood memories of segregated schools and the importance of juke joints as expressive outlets for the hardworking blacks of the Delta. Dr. Smith made sure to emphasize that though Dockery Farms certainly allowed for the proliferation of Delta blues music, the cotton fields were the true birthplace of the blues.



Mrs. Inez Smith is also entrenched in the history of the Delta. A proponent of civil rights, Mrs. Smith sent books and other supplies to Fannie Lou Hamer in support of her activist endeavors. In the mobile classroom, the Smiths held back tears as they read aloud the thank you letter written to them by Hamer for the books. The original letter is framed in their home.



B.B. King Museum

The group's journey continued with a visit to the B.B. King Museum & Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola. B.B. King, prolific blues singer, guitarist, songwriter, and producer is known and admired as the King of the Blues because of the stylistic elements of blues electric guitar that he pioneered. A native of Itta Benna, Mississippi, B.B. King began his outstanding career in the juke joints of the Delta.



What makes the B.B. King Museum special according to Dr. Smith is that it is entwined in the community in which it rests. Not only do people come from far and wide to visit the museum, but the museum is also a source of pride for local residents, who hold meetings, weddings, classes, and other events there.



Dr. David Evans: Origins of the Blues



Having spent the day exploring the parallel evolution of the Blues genre and the Civil Rights movement in the Delta area, the participants returned to Cleveland to listen to a performance by renowned Blues ethnomusicologist Dr. David Evans.

Playing his guitar and his harmonica, Dr. Evans also gave numerous samples of different Blues styles, explaining the nuances behind the music as he went.



Exhibit at the Delta Health Center

The day's final activity was held at the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, notable as the first independent town founded by former slaves. In this trailblazing town, the Delta Health Center is itself a trailblazer as the first Federally Qualified Community Health Center in the United States. Until the mid-20th century, the Mound Bayou community suffered high infant mortality, malnutrition, and other health issues that arose from poverty at rates far higher than their white counterparts. Despite heavy pushback from the press and other sources, the Delta Health Center was given funding in 1965 by the Office of Economic Opportunity to address these ills and nourish holistic wellness amongst Mound Bayou residents.

The Dr. L.C. Dorsey Museum at the Delta Health Center, funded by a grant from the MDNHA, exhibited relics of the genesis of the Health Center such as newspaper articles in its opposition. The event facilitated a discourse between workshop participants and Delta Health Center staff surrounding the health disparities that the Health Center is working to combat.



DAY FOUR

Emmett Till and Journeys Toward Justice

7am	9am	11am	1pm	3pm	5pm	7pm
	Mound Bayou Tour	Lunch	Bus to Sumner	Emmett Till Panel Discussion	Money Store	Robert Johnson Gravesite

For many participants, the fourth day of the workshop was the most profound and emotionally-taxing. They relived an incredibly difficult moment in Delta history, tracing the abominable kidnapping and lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. Participants stopped at the site where Emmett allegedly wolf-whistled at a white woman, preceding his vicious murder by two white men. They also sat inside the courthouse where Till's murder trial was held and hear a first-hand account of the atrocity from Emmett's first cousin, Reverend Wheeler Parker.

Tour of Mound Bayou

On Thursday, the workshop resumed with an early-morning trip to a nearby town called Mound Bayou. This town was founded in 1887 by two former slaves and is considered the first town in the United States to be established by African Americans. The success that Mound Bayou has seen since its founding has led Mound Bayou to become a symbol of resilience and self-sufficiency for the black community in the Delta.



Taborian Hospital

The first stop in Mound Bayou was the Taborian Hospital, opened in 1942 by the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor. Equipped with operating rooms, an x-ray machine, among a host of other advanced facilities, the Hospital was a testament to Mound Bayou's self-sufficiency. Having closed in 1967 because of financial pressure, it was refurbished and reopened in 2011.



T. R. M. Howard

Across the street, participants read about T.R.M Howard and took a group photo in front of the Mississippi Freedom Trail marker that is dedicated to him. As the Chief Surgeon of the Taborian Hospital for a time, T.R.M Howard was a prominent figure in his hometown of Mound Bayou. Howard organized the first civil rights advocacy group in Mound Bayou, which resulted in successful boycotts and rallies.



Po' Monkey's Juke Joint

Until his passing in 2016, Po' Monkey's juke joint was a buzzing and storied hall for Blues musicians and fans looking for a good time. Now vacant, the building retains its mystery and its energy. Today, it is adorned with bottles, beads and plush animals, paying homage to the man who breathed life into the joint and turned it into the monument it is. After touring Mound Bayou during the morning, the participants had the chance to walk around the building, take pictures and imagine how the juke joint may have looked when it was still in operation.



Lecture by Charles McLaurin

Upon returning to campus from the morning activities in Mound Bayou, participants continued deepened their knowledge of Fannie Lou Hamer with a lecture delivered by Charles McLaurin. McLaurin knew Hamer well. In fact, he was her chauffeur, her confidante, and even her campaign manager when she ran for Congress. McLaurin shared unique insights into Fannie Lou Hamer's life and legacy through personal anecdotes. He shared A native of Jackson, Mississippi, McLaurin was a part of SNCC's very first voter registration organizing efforts and was the one who took civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer to register to vote.



Many of the teachers shared that they had not learned extensively about Fannie Lou Hamer's significance to the Civil Rights movement before attending the workshop. During their time in the Delta, the participants now had the chance to enrich their knowledge about her by hearing first-hand accounts from people like Charles McLaurin, who knew her personally, as well as Dr. Edgar and Inez Smith who had volunteered to help Hamer's campaign and who had corresponded with her in writing. In addition, the workshop's emphasis on place-based learning allowed the educators to visit Fannie Lou Hamer's gravesite and memorial garden, which McLaurin had helped establish when Hamer passed away in 1977.





Emmett Till Panel

The day's main event was the group's trip to Tallahatchie Courthouse in Sumner, MS, where an all-white jury acquitted Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam for the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955. Bryant and Milam mutilated and drowned Till in the early morning after he allegedly whistled at Bryant's wife, Carolyn Bryant, in her family's grocery store in the town of Money, MS, where Till was visiting from Chicago. The courthouse today is semblant of its 1955 self; it still exhibits at its front a monument to the Confederacy, echoing the sentiments that engendered the 1955 acquittal.



Though it has been modernized since the trial, the courtroom retains an eerily similar appearance to how it looked in the 1950's. On one side of the original railing sat the audience, consisting of workshop participants, community members and interested travelers from around the country; the panel sat on the other side. Rev. Parker Wheeler took the middle seat, while author Devery Anderson and Rev. Willie Williams sat on his left and his right, respectively.

Reverend Williams heads the Emmett Till Memorial Commission, which promotes keeping the poignant history of Emmett Till's murder alive while also promoting reconciliation and racial peace, especially in the Mississippi Delta. Devery Anderson is the author of the comprehensive historical biography, "Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement".

Participants had the chance to speak to the panel members after their discussion and ask questions about the case and inquire about how society might learn from its troubled history. As Reverend Wheeler emphasized, "If we do not know our history, we are doomed to repeat it."



Rev. Wheeler Parker



Rev. Willie Williams



In the workshop evaluations, many teachers indicated that the Emmett Till panel was the most moving experience they had during their time in the Delta.



Devery S. Anderson

Koolickles at Bryant's Grocery

After an emotional and powerful panel at the courthouse, participants traveled to the nearby 'Money Store' where teenage Emmett Till allegedly wolf-whistled at a white woman. Though the actual building is closed and overgrown with vines, one could easily imagine the open storefront with trucks parked beside it. To facilitate this immersion, participants were served "Koolickles" (pickles marinated in Kool-aid) in order to mimic the type of snack that Emmett and his cousins might have bought and eaten while at the store. Here, participants had the chance to speak one-on-one with Rev. Wheeler Parker.



Robert Johnson's Gravesite



After the bus crept past Money Store and into rural fields, it pulled off onto a dirt road where the Little Zion Church house stands, surrounded by beautiful, large trees. In the shade of these trees, tombstones pop from the soil in a small cluster. Near the base of the grandest tree, there is a wide tombstone etched with the name 'Robert Johnson'. To this day, Blues fans honor Johnson's memory by leaving flowers and liquor bottles at his tombstone.

Blues legend has it that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for musical prowess at a crossroads in the Mississippi Delta. After leaving a legacy on the Blues genre with his music, Johnson was poisoned and buried in his early twenties. However, where his body actually lies is a disputed fact. Though Robert Johnson did not attend the church, the Little Zion Church is widely recognized as the place where the Blues legend lies.



Broad Street Historical Park



To bring the day to a close, the group visited Broad Street Historical Park in Greenwood, MS, where a Mississippi Freedom Trail Marker commemorates Stokely Carmichael's 1966 "Black Power" speech.



Stokely Carmichael was a Trinidadian-American who developed the Black Power movement and lead the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The prolific speech that Carmichael gave at Broad Street Park in Greenwood introduced the phrase "Black Power" into the lexicon of the struggle for civil rights. Many continue to use the phrase as the struggle for racial equality continues to this day.



DAY FIVE

Cotton, Culture, and Civil Rights

MEMPHIS

7am 9am 11am 1pm 3pm 5pm 7pm 9pm

7am - 9am	9am - 11am	11am - 1pm	1pm - 3pm	3pm - 5pm	5pm - 7pm	7pm - 9pm
Bus to Memphis	Cotton Museum	Lunch	National Civil Rights Museum	Peabody Hotel		

The essence of Friday was a visit to Memphis, Tennessee, where the Mississippi Delta is said to begin. In Memphis, participants took in the economic legacy of Memphis with a visit to the Cotton Museum and the cultural legacy of Memphis with a visit to the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. The highlight of the trip was group's exploration of the National Civil Rights Museum, originally the Lorraine Motel and the site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. The Museum underscores the profound significance of civil rights to the history and future of Memphis, the Mississippi Delta, and the nation as a whole.

Cotton Museum

The first stop in Memphis was the Cotton Museum in downtown Memphis. Here, participants appreciated the economic and cultural centrality of 'King Cotton' to the evolution of Memphis and to the Delta. They witnessed the sheer size and density of a 500-pound bale of cotton, and learned of the varied array of cotton products, which ranges from the predictable cotton balls and blue jeans to such surprising products as soap, insecticides, and LCD screens.



A key aspect of the Cotton Museum is that it highlights the role of cotton in the development of American music, namely the blues. Blues music has its roots in the cotton fields, where it evolved from African American work songs and spirituals, and has gone on to influence many genres of American music.



Most Southern Place on Earth NEH Workshop

Stax Museum

The next stop was Soulsville, USA, where participants visited the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, formerly Stax Records. Stax—a fusion of the last names of founders Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton—began in 1957 as Satellite records and throughout the 60s reached unanticipated heights, producing for such prominent artists as Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, and Booker T. and the MGs, and thus pioneering soul music. Though Stax was forced into bankruptcy in 1976, the record label can hardly be said to be short-lived.



Many workshop participants entered Stax with a personal connection to soul music—some by generation and some by geography—and found in Stax a beautiful amalgamation of the music of their youth. Others, newer to soul music, were magnetized by the genre's vivid sounds and colors. All were captivated by Stax's remarkable story and lasting cultural influence.

National Civil Rights Museum

Perhaps the most poignant stop of the day was the National Civil Rights Museum, originally the Lorraine Motel, the assassination site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In addition to paying special homage to this defining figure of the Civil Rights Movement, the museum chronicles the civil rights journey of the United States, beginning with the Middle Passage from West Africa to the Americas and ends by looking onward to the future of the civil rights.

Often conveyed in the traditional narrative of blacks in the United States are the numerous and severe injustices they've historically faced. Participants took notice of the dimension that the museum adds to this narrative; it highlights the resistance and resilience of blacks in the face of these injustices from the era of slavery, through Jim Crow and segregation, to today. The museum features eminent figures of this resistance as well as the stories of everyday people who lived this history.



Peabody Hotel



The Mississippi Delta is said to begin in the Lobby of the Peabody Hotel and end on Catfish Row in Vicksburg; the beginning of the Delta was the last stop on the group's trek through Memphis. The group arrived in time to observe the 5 o'clock walk of the Peabody ducks, a tradition that's been in place at the hotel for almost 90 years.





DAY SIX

Making Mojo and Memories

7am	9am	11am	1pm	3pm	5pm	7pm	9pm
	Dr. John Strait: Delta in Diaspora		Lunch	Make your own Mojo	Wrap Up		

The workshop culminated with a lecture that integrated knowledge from many different themes that the participants explored throughout the week. These themes, often intersecting and converging, gave the educators plenty of material to reflect on, sparking ideas of how to involve their workshop experience in their curriculum. After a week jam-packed with learning, exploring, inquiring, and networking, the participants synthesized their knowledge about the rich history of the Mississippi Delta.

Lecture by Dr. John Strait

Dr. John B. Strait, Associate Professor of Geography at Sam Houston State University, gave a fascinating lecture about the 'Delta Diaspora,' covering topics from the evolution of the Blues genre to the Great Migration of blacks from Mississippi to northern cities like Chicago and Detroit.

During this session, the different strands of knowledge that experts had spun throughout the week wove an intricate, colorful tapestry that encompassed the Most Southern Place on Earth.



Workshop Reflections

Later on, the participants were given some time to sit down and reflect on their experiences over the past week. After writing their reflections, participants were welcomed to share their impressions from the workshop with the group. Participants spoke on the intellectual, emotional, and cultural impact of their experiences in the Delta and articulated the importance of bringing these experiences back to the classroom. Taking this rich knowledge back to their schools across the nation, each participant was equipped with a nuanced perspective about the Delta region and now had the opportunity to spread this knowledge to their students.



Mojo Making

The final activity of the workshop was the making of Mojo bags, inspired by Voodoo tradition. These Mojo bags could be filled with a variety of items, each of which represented an aspect of the Delta explored through the workshop. Among these items were cotton seeds, brick from Dockery Plantation, water from the Mississippi River, and Gravel from Highway 61. Each participant was invited to place into their mojo bag the items representing the experiences that resonated most with them throughout the workshop. When their mojo bags were filled, participants tied them closed, not to open them again, so as not to let out the magic. Attached to the ties were labels of the contents of their mojo bags so that they may always treasure their time in the Delta. The most crucial ingredient in everyone's mojo bag was Double Strength "Come-Back Oil." With the oil in their bags, participants will be compelled to return to the Delta and revisit all its wonders. and now had the opportunity to spread this knowledge to their students.

Participant Yearbook

Katrina Donoho
Benton, AR

John Abbott
Brookline, MA

Brigitta McTigue
Boynton Beach, FL

Jennifer Cipriano
Everett, WA

Jackie Schmoltdt
West Bend, WI

Larry Fata
Bronx, NY

Daniel Matz
Philadelphia, PA

Marcia McNeese
Jackson, MS

David Grosskopf
Seattle, WA

Sarah Thayer
Cambridge, MA

Lizandaa Alberg
Somerset, NJ

Lea Daley
New York, NY

Dan Holden
St. Louis, MO

Brianna Murphy
Northborough, MA

April Donahoo
Riverside, CA

Shirley Edmondson
Los Alamos, NM

Andrew Levin
Kenosha, WI

Amy Kirchner
West St. Paul, MN

Rebecca Park
Brooklyn, NY

Robert Bundy
Oregon, OH

Sophia Renda
Philadelphia, PA

George Ovitt
Albuquerque, NM

Aaron White
Greenville, MS

Jody Dixon
Newton, NC

Deborah Bellemore
Salem, OR

Pamela Williams
Holt, MI

Rhonda Koppelman
Cuba, MO

Kevin Koppelman
Cuba, MO

Caroline Blanchard
Morris Plains, NJ

Elizabeth Anderton
Fairhope, AL

Mary Jackson
Clarkston, WA

Ian Weissman
New York, NY

Baily Koppelman
Poplar Bluff, MO

Jamie Calvert
Louisville, MS

Angela Breland
Philadelphia, MS

Workshop Evaluations From Participants

ACTIVITY	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Reception at the Railroad Museum	0	1	7	9	15	4.14
Introduction	0	0	4	13	19	4.42
Discussion session	0	0	2	10	21	4.42
<i>LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton</i>	0	1	5	10	22	4.47
Discussion led by Reggie Barnes	0	0	8	7	19	4.43
Levee Break site/Delta and Pine Land	0	1	4	10	17	4.28
Airport Grocery (Catfish supper)	0	0	2	5	27	4.74
Discussion of the Delta Chinese	0	0	5	11	18	4.32
Discussion of the Delta Jews	0	0	7	10	18	4.38
Greenville's Black graveyard	0	0	2	15	17	4.31
Guest Scholar: Dr. Charles Wilson	0	0	7	6	19	4.39
Bill Abel, History of the Blues	0	1	4	3	24	4.63
Dockery Farms and the Crossroads	0	0	0	9	25	4.65
Fannie Lou Hamer's Gravesite	0	0	0	4	30	4.96
B.B. King Museum	0	0	1	8	25	4.73
Guest Scholar: Dr. David Evans	0	2	9	8	17	4.28
Exhibit at the Delta Health Center	0	0	8	15	10	4.45
Tour of Mound Bayou	0	0	3	9	22	4.43
Charles McLaurin	0	0	0	3	30	4.91
Panel discussion of Till case	0	0	0	1	33	4.98
Bryant Grocery	0	0	5	12	14	4.5
Robert Johnson Gravesite	0	1	4	15	10	4.18
Bus Ride to Memphis	0	2	4	9	17	4.12
Stax Museum	0	0	2	4	29	4.76
Cotton Exchange Museum	0	3	3	11	17	4.29
Lunch at Central Barbeque	1	0	5	14	13	4.51
National Civil Rights Museum	0	0	0	2	31	4.96
Lobby of the Peabody	5	9	10	6	6	3.31
Bus Ride home (Stax movie)	1	4	4	7	16	4.08
Guest Scholar: Dr. John B. Strait	0	4	3	8	17	4.46
Mojo making	1	0	4	4	25	4.84

"I would likely have never come to MS., but now I want to come back. It really helped to take many questions I had and completed then and tied together many parts of history I had questions about."

"The panel with Wheeler Parker was an irreplaceable experience"

"The most valuable resource and change agent in the Delta is its people!"

"Each day was filled with rich information and discussion. Experiencing the 'spaces' of the Delta from the Sumner County courthouse to the fields in which people worked, facilitate for my further understanding of the Delta."

"Being immersed into the Delta was invaluable. Hearing directly from the people and hearing their experiences coupled with standing in the very spot that these experiences occurred had an enormous impact on my learning"

"Hearing from members of the Chinese and Jewish communities helped me get a more well-rounded idea of who has contributed to the culture of the Delta."

"The design of place-based experiential learning allowed us to truly encounter the environment and context in which so much emerged and evolved."

"The variety of experiences available to us is the strength of this program. I believe it is an immersion program."

"All of the experiential learning was amazing. Also invaluable to hear from people who lived through civil rights. Primary sources are the best!"

"This program was amazing and is an invaluable and essential resource to teachers. I have already recommended this program to colleagues because it is transformative."

"There were several excellent learning experiences. It gave it a historical context that helped me more deeply understand the blues musician culture."

Our Team



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Director of The Delta Center for Culture and Learning



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Program Associate for Education and Community Outreach



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Workshop Documentarian
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Kamryn Washington
Workshop Documentarian
Robertson Scholar, Duke University

Special Thanks

Guest Speakers:

Bill Abel
Devery Anderson
Reggie Barnes
Dr. David Evans
Keith Johnson
Bill Lester
Charles McLaurin
Benjy Nelken
Dr. Edgar Smith

Reverend Wheeler Parker
Willie Simmons
Inez Smith
Dr. John Strait
Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson
Reverend Willie Williams
Cathy Wong
Raymond Wong

and to:

Obsidian Productions

Sponsors



About the Delta Center

The mission of The Delta Center for Culture and Learning is to promote greater understanding of the Mississippi Delta's culture and history and its significance to the world through education, partnerships, and community engagement.



The Delta Center for Culture and Learning is a “Center of Excellence” at Delta State University. Delta State University is one of the eight universities in Mississippi governed by the Institutions of Higher Learning. The Delta Center is an interdisciplinary program that focuses on the humanities and social sciences as they relate to the Delta. The Delta Center had its beginning in the year 2000. Dr. David Potter, the President of Delta State University at that time, and Dr. John Thornell, former Provost of the university, invited Dr. Luther Brown to become the founding Director of The Delta Center for Culture and Learning.

The Delta Center advances Delta State University's participation in promoting and celebrating the unique heritage of the Delta while also addressing the longstanding social, economic, and cultural challenges that inhibit regional advancement. The Delta Center has fulfilled this role since its inception and continues to do so by:

- Serving as management entity for the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, a cultural heritage and economic development partnership between the people of the Mississippi Delta and the National Park Service;
- Housing the International Delta Blues Project, which comprises the International Conference on the Blues, a Blues Studies program, and a Blues Leadership Incubator promoting economic development and entrepreneurship related to Blues tourism and the creative economy;
- Hosting “The Most Southern Place on Earth: Music, Culture and History of the Mississippi Delta,” a Landmarks of American History and Culture workshop funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities which brings K-12 educators to the Delta for a week-long educational and cultural immersion experience; and
- Working throughout the Delta region and nationally with cultural, educational and tourism organizations, local, state and federal agencies, and visiting college classes and groups from around the country and the world, providing information, expertise, and experiential learning and partnership development opportunities.

To see more photos, videos and summaries from the “Most Southern Place on Earth” workshop and the Delta Center, check out and like our Facebook page: <https://facebook.com/TheDeltaCenter/>.

For more information, please visit the Most Southern Place on Earth website: <http://deltacenterdsu.com/mostsouthern/>

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed on this website do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities



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