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SLAVE TO HISTORY

LOUISIANA PLANTATION IS NOT AFRAID TO REVEAL THE DARK PAST OF THE DEEP SOUTH

WORDS AND PHOTOS: JOHN BISHOP



Baton Rouge, the state capital of Louisiana in the deep south of the US, is a drawcard for viewing alligators in the swamp, catching crawfish and its rich history of architecture and a “colourful” way of life. But among the highlights are the low-lights of Louisiana: its history of slavery.

There are about 140 plantations you can visit along the Mississippi River running from Natchez south to New Orleans. These are the original homes of the rich, white slave-owning folk who grew sugar and prospered until the American Civil War ended slavery.

Many of the plantations’ houses and gardens are physically impressive and well preserved – often now they are luxury retreats and conference and wedding venues. But there is one aspect I find profoundly disturbing.

Only the stories of the white folk who lived in the “big house” are being told. The slaves, who worked the land and made the white folk wealthy, hardly get mentioned.

There is only one place that tells the story of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved people, and that’s the Whitney Plantation, which opened in December 2014 amid much controversy about its depiction of slave history.

Visitors are presented with a lanyard on admission. Each one has a picture of a slave. I had Catherine Cornelius: “Ah was a slave born an raised on de Smithfield Plantation... Ah worked in de field cutting cane,” was her

comment across the years.

The centrepiece of the Whitney Plantation is the marbled walls recording the names of more than 100,000 slaves documented as having lived in Louisiana up until the end of the American Civil War, when Union troops enforced President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

The walls copy the Holocaust Memorial; there are 107,000 names and quotations from the slaves, who came mostly from the Senegal/Gambia area of West Africa. One named Anna was transported with her mother and two brothers.

Her mother died on board and she was separated from her brothers. Sold on the auction block at age five, she recalls crying at the time. She was purchased as a playmate for a child of a wealthy white family, a common practice at the time.

Another woman, Julie Goodrich, tells of the breeding dormitories, where she had 15 children all by different fathers; all the children were sold.

In another case a pregnant woman was caught stealing. The plantation owner had a shallow pit dug in the shape of her pregnant belly to protect the baby while she was tied down and flogged.

The quotations come from a remarkable piece of historical research undertaken in the Depression.

More than 6000 volunteers documented the experiences of ordinary Americans, including former slaves, as part of President

Roosevelt’s Federal Writers’ Project.

Whitney was started by a German family called Hydell in 1752, who owned it until 1867. It then passed through various hands before being bought by an elderly, wealthy, white trial lawyer from New Orleans called John Cummings, an Irish Catholic real estate magnate who then spent 15 years and \$8 million on the project to tell the story of slavery. It is still the only museum in the US to do this.

The enigmatic Mr Cummings told *The New York Times*, when the facility opened in November 2014, “Don’t you think the story of slavery is important? Well, I checked into it, and I heard you weren’t telling it, so I figured I might as well get started”.

On other plantation tours the story of slavery is airbrushed away. Its existence is not

denied, it’s just not talked about.

The guides refer to the pathways for slaves to become free, but no numbers are given. Also, to the blacks who owned slaves themselves – and it’s true, a few did.

Reference is also made to the Code Noir, the French legal code that supposedly regulated how slaves were to be treated.

Ashley Rogers, the Director of Museum Operations at the Whitney Plantation, debunks claims about its impact as a form of protection against physical harm to slaves.

“It was promulgated in Louisiana in 1724 and remained in effect until 1763. In 1763 the Spanish took over, passing their own slave codes. In 1803, Louisiana became a territory of the US with the Louisiana Purchase. That ended its relevance,” she said.

“Make no mistake: the Code Noir



DIVE INTO CRAWFISH

Baton Rouge is the land of crawfish, a very small crustacean – lobster shaped but shrimp sized. It’s farmed and eaten by the bucketful in etouffee, gumbo and other fish-stew type dishes served with or on rice.

Desserts, such as bananas foster, sauteed in butter with lots of liquor, are typically sugar-laden.

Much food is fried, even peanuts still in their shells, and alcohol is freely consumed, even with breakfast. The craft beer scene is active and oysters are plentiful, as is pork, chicken and beef.

I enjoyed oysters at Indigo Pearl, freshly shucked, a dozen for US\$14. And for

barbecue, the locals pointed me to TJ’s Ribs, a legendary place. I chowed down on pork and beef ribs, chicken, brisket, sausage and chips with rice and beans and coleslaw.

Try a traditional Po’Boy sandwich at Poor Boy Lloyds. It’s a soft bread roll (like a bap) filled with whatever you want. The vibe is casual: square tables with plastic tablecloths, gingham curtains, and waitresses who call out your order. The locals eat substantially at lunch.

Almost every type of music can be found here: jazz, blues, swamp pop, rockabilly and zydeco, a local mixture of blues, R&B and indigenous sounds.

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sanctioned a great deal of bodily violence inflicted upon enslaved people.” One plantation still displays a bill of sale. It lists a “buck nigger 25, in good health” bought for \$1000, about \$10,000 in today’s money. Various “females trained as domestic servants” were bought at \$250 each. I ask Cheryl, my tour guide at Whitney, if telling the story of slavery so often upset her. “It does get me down,” she replied. “But I tell myself the story is so important that I have to keep going, and I do.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN IMAGE: The Heydel Estate now the Whitney Plantation Museum. A sculpture to remember the children who lost their lives during slavery. Marbled walls recording the names of more than 103,000 slaves known to have lived in Louisiana; and the State Capitol Building in Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana.

SALUTE TO CHAMPION

MEMORIAL TO THE DEFENDER OF THE PEOPLE A MUST-SEE

Downtown Baton Rouge is dominated by the memorial to the state’s favourite son, Huey Long, a manipulative populist who stood up for ordinary folks against big business, particularly the oil industry, and built a huge personal following across the state.

State Governor and then senator, Long was becoming a rival to president Franklin Roosevelt, by advocating an ambitious program of redistribution in the Depression era called Share Our Wealth. It was a far more wide-reaching plan than Roosevelt’s New Deal.

The State Capitol Building, a 27-storey art deco building housing the state legislature and the governor’s office, is Long’s building. He championed its construction during the Depression, and as Governor borrowed money to make it happen.

On the night of September 10, 1935, Senator Long stepped into the corridor from the governor’s office where he was met by a doctor called Carl Weiss, who pulled a pistol and shot and killed Long.

Long’s bodyguards cut Weiss down in a hail of bullets. No motive has ever been established for the doctor’s actions. A bullet hole can still be seen and felt in a marble pillar where the shootout took place, making the location a major tourist attraction.

By state law no building can be built taller than the State Capitol, and in the gardens where he is buried, Long’s statue is the only one on display.



A BOAT RIDE WITH BITE ON SWAMPS

Going out into the swamps to look at the alligators is a popular tourist attraction in Louisiana.

Tourists go out on airboats; flat-bottomed vessels with large motorcar engines driving a fan, which enables the boat to skim across the water needing only a few centimetres of draught.

Tucker, my guide from Basin Landing Airboat Tours, takes us into the Henderson Swamp, and finds a mumma alligator with about a dozen babies. Don’t put any part of your body in the water and definitely don’t approach the babies, he warns.

“Fall in the water and you’ll be doing the Cajun Twostep,” says Tucker. That’s when

you do an imitation of walking on water as you leap back into the boat quickly.

Alligators were once an endangered species in the US, and it became distinctly unfashionable to have alligator skin clothing or accessories.

Through a combination of protection and farming, alligators are now plentiful again, and alligator is on the menu of local restaurants (and yes, it tastes like chicken).

There are about 2.8 million alligators on 65 alligator farms in Louisiana and they generally grow to about four metres, have two sets of teeth and a strong bite.

About 13,000 are released into the wild each year.