

Gateway to the Delta

Port Gibson

The traveler heading north on Highway 61 from Natchez gets an inkling of what lies ahead in the Mississippi Delta when entering Port Gibson, a cotton town located directly across the Mississippi River from Louisiana's plantation country. Founded in 1788 by beekeeper and planter Samuel Gibson, this hamlet on the river's bluffs offers all the faded beauty, flamboyant quirkiness, and antebellum splendor that the Delta tourist expects. The haunting ruins of Windsor, the eccentric hand atop the steeple of the First Presbyterian Church, and the grandeur of Oak Square—a house that cotton built—are among the treasures of Port Gibson that let the sojourner know that there's something magical just up the road in Mississippi's Delta.

St. Joseph's Catholic Church (Church & Coffee Streets) was built in 1863 by Elvie Bowie Moore, the niece of the frontiersman Jim Bowie, in large part to provide for the spiritual needs of parishioners' slaves.



Windsor

Near Port Gibson off Highway 552

Twenty-two of the original twenty-nine, thirty-foot-high, fluted, stucco-over-brick columns, with iron Corinthian capitals are all that remain of the glory that was once Windsor. Built with slave labor by Smith Coffee Daniel, II, at a cost of \$175,000, the sixty-five-square-foot raised Greek Revival mansion with twenty-three rooms was once mistaken for a college by riverboat pilot Mark Twain.

Confederates used Windsor as an observation post during the Civil War, sending lamp signals from its cupola across the Mississippi River to Louisiana. Daniel's wife, Catherine, saved it from destruction by federal troops by allowing them to use it as a Union hospital in 1863, only to have it razed on February 17, 1890 by an accidental fire started by a discarded cigarette.



Eight surviving columns of Windsor, southwest elevation. The ruins are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (1971).

First Presbyterian Church

Corner of Walnut and Church Streets (Highway 61)

Architect James Jones built the Gothic Revival-style First Presbyterian Church in 1859 for Rev. Zebulon Butler, only to have Butler's funeral serve as the church's first official service a few months later. Butler had zealously opposed slavery in the 1850s and had succeeded in sending 300 slaves back to their African homelands. So popular was Butler with his congregation that they erected a wooden hand atop the church's spire in memory of his finger-raising sermons.

The wooden landmark was so well attended by woodpeckers that the five-foot-long finger fell off in 1905 and was replaced with the present twelve-foot-long metal hand. The church still has its original slave gallery and a chandelier from the famous steamboat, "Robert E. Lee."

First Presbyterian Church, west elevation, with its clenched hand and finger pointing heavenward, so inspired Gen. U.S. Grant during his 1863 occupation of Port Gibson, he declared the town to be "too pretty to burn."



“The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg.”
—David L. Cohn

Vicksburg

Some question the accuracy of associating Vicksburg with the nearby Delta flatlands, aware as they are that in 1790 the Spanish treasured it for its easily-defended hills, a topography that ultimately led to its early American name, Walnut Hills, and its enduring nickname, the Bluff City. But flatness by itself does not make the Mississippi Delta. The Delta is also state of mind, and a mind whose foremost consideration has always been cotton.

Not long after Methodist minister Newitt Vick arrived from Virginia in 1814 and founded Vicksburg, cotton became the primary agricultural staple. In the 1830s, Vicksburg became the chief export point for the Delta’s expanding cotton empire. Oxen-drawn wagons, pole-driven flatboats and Yazoo River steamboats brought interminable payloads of white gold to Vicksburg, whose people grew wealthy from the trade.

Wealthy enough, history relates, to subdue rioting riverside gamblers in 1835, survive devastating tornados and floods on a near-annual basis, endure the worst wartime siege on American soil in 1863, and engineer their way around the Mississippi River’s 1876 attempt to bankrupt them by abruptly changing its course and leaving Vicksburgers without a river at the base of their bluffs for twenty-five lean years.

The Mississippi River Bridge at Vicksburg was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.



Annabelle

501 Speed Street

John A. Klein built this house in 1868 for his son, Madison Conrad Klein. The arched front windows, including the three-sided bay window with two-over-two double-hung sash, and the asphalt gable roof with a cross gable over a two story projection, reveal Annabelle's Victorian-Italianate style. The one-story front porch is covered with cast-iron columns and features an ornate, dentiled cornice supported by paired brackets.

A 1953 tornado carried away the original roof, but George and Carolyn Mayer restored Annabelle in 1992, adding bathrooms and electricity and furnishing their residence with European art and antiques handed down through four generations of the Mayer family.

Annabelle, south elevation. Adjoining the main structure is a Queen Anne guesthouse complex built in 1881.





Annabelle's dining room, furnished with a ten-piece centennial Chippendale table and chairs made of ribbon mahogany. The china cabinet and buffet are original pieces. The clock is of 1804 French Empire vintage.



Annabelle's front parlor is lit by an Italianate, three-bay window. A rare Victorian piano desk, with secret hiding places, is on the right.



A 1780 William and Mary cock-fighting chair was fashioned of oak and walnut.

Early 1700s Boulle ladies writing desk, or bonheur du jour, is of ebony veneer and inlaid with tortoise shell and brass.

