“BIRTHPLACE OF THE BLUES?”:
DOCKERY FARMS, MYTHIC SOUTH, AND THE ERASURE OF THE AFRICAN
AMERICAN LIVED EXPERIENCE IN MISSISSIPPI BLUES TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

PHILLIP MACDONALD: “BIRTHPLACE OF THE BLUES?”: DOCKERY FARMS, MYTHIC SOUTH, AND THE ERASURE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVED EXPERIENCE IN MISSISSIPPI BLUES TOURISM  
(Under the direction of William R. Ferris)

From humble grassroots beginnings, blues tourism has expanded to a multimillion-dollar industry for Mississippi. This thesis utilizes Dockery Farms historic site as a case study to discuss the representation of African Americans within blues tourism. Dockery is particularly important because it is deemed the “Birthplace of the Blues” and presents two common narratives found in blues tourism- William Dockery’s “Great White Man” narrative along with Charley Patton’s “periphery black musician” narrative. Utilizing personal letters, photographs, historic sites, and theoretical concepts including the “Old” and “New” South, this thesis offers a critical analysis of the history presented at cultural tourist sites in Mississippi. Both myth and memory inform constructions of the past through cultural tourism and this thesis argues that blues cultural tourist sites and publications consistently underrepresent the African American lived experience. This work aims to lead to the reassessment of tourist sites and the addition of an inclusive history.
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Introduction

A nervous sensation coursed through my body as I approached the Mississippi Delta. In June of 2014, I descended on the “Birthplace of the Blues” to visit Dockery Farms, a site located in a landscape I began studying three years ago. I was in a massive thunderstorm, blinded by the hard falling rain. I could barely see five feet in front of me. Because the Delta is flat, even though lighting struck the ground approximately three to four miles away, I could still see where the

1 Defining the blues is no easy task. Moreover, a definition changes depending on context. In Stomping Out the Blues, Albert Murray dissects definitions of the Blues within dictionaries. The problem Murray finds in the definitions of the blues is that they all speak to sadness as a defining characteristic. Murray remarks on other definitions of the Blues, which speak to the form and structure. Defining the blues has been difficult task. When speaking with advisors, I seem to always get a push back. When defining a genre, there is a balance of specificity and broadness that is hard to capture. However, for the sake of my project, the blues are a music performed in the spaces for African Americans’ leisure between the mid-1910s and the 1940s. The music was usually performed by a few musicians with individuals in the community participating by dancing. Though the songs performed may have been solemn in nature, they also included waltzes, ragtime, reels, slow drag, and other forms of dance tunes. These musicians and their songs were also recorded, which allowed the blues to spread through gramophones and jukeboxes. Albert Murray, Stomping the Blues (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 57, 75.
lightning met the ground as it pierced through the rain-blurred windshield of my rental car. I left Starkville, MS, early on that June morning, and as I drove, approaching the thunderstorm, I had time to take notice of my surroundings. The state highways in Mississippi function as a web, connecting townships across the flat, rural landscape. Large homesteads dotted my surroundings. The continuous pattern of farm after farm and field after field made an unremarkable impression that blurred together in the pouring rain. I finally turned on to Mississippi State Highway 8 as the weather cleared. After approximately ten minutes on Mississippi State Highway 8, I arrived at Dockery Farms.

Long before it became a historic site, Dockery was a 28,000-acre cotton plantation that dominated the landscape of the Mississippi Delta. The site now only covers a few acres, with the Dockery Family retaining the remainder of the land. On the site sits a former gas station, the stone porch of a burned commissary, a large covered porch, and a handful of empty cotton storehouses in various stages of decay. The Dockery site is free and open to the public. Visitors of Dockery are invited to walk the property, view the buildings, read the Mississippi Blues Trail Marker, sign a guest book, and press a button to hear Charley Patton’s music play throughout the

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Figure 2- Dockery Farms Historic Site

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2 William Lester, interview by Amy C. Evans, Cleveland, MS, August 12, 2012; William Lester, phone interview by author, Cleveland, MS, October 29, 2014.
site. Like other landscapes in the rural South, Dockery Farms and other blues sites in the Mississippi Delta are striving to use land in a post-agrarian society. The Dockery family rents out most of their land to farmers who grow crops on it, and the historic site serves as a way to promote cultural tourism in the Delta region.  

Dockery Farms plays an important role in the cultural tourism industry in Mississippi. Dockery functions as one of the anchor sites for the industry because it presents itself as the birthplace of the blues. The Mississippi Blues Trail marker on Dockery reads “Birthplace of the Blues?” Even with the question mark, the marker lends credence to the importance of Dockery. The marker serves as the State of Mississippi’s authoritative text on blues history and it informs the site’s audience. The Mississippi Blues trail marker reads:

Birthplace of the Blues? The precise origins of the blues are lost to time, but one of the primal centers for the music in Mississippi was Dockery Farms. For nearly three decades the plantation was intermittently the home of Charley Patton (circa 1891 to 1934), the most important early Delta blues musician. Patton himself learned from fellow Dockery resident Henry Sloan and influenced many other musicians who came here, including Howlin’ Wolf, Willie Brown, Tommy Johnson, and Roebuck “Pops” Staples.  

The marker’s narrative connects Charley Patton and Dockery Farms. The mention of Charley Patton, whom many consider the “father of the Delta blues,” lends credence to the site’s

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3 Lester, interview, October 29, 2014.

4 Mississippi Blues Commission, “Birthplace of the Blues?”
importance.

Blues fanatics and tourists do not travel to Dockery Farms because of the information on a marker. Individuals interested in the blues are primarily informed by the vast amounts of literature surrounding the blues. Many blues writers speak of Charley Patton as a father of the delta blues and locate the genre’s birth at Dockery Farms. The myth surrounding the figure and the place helps validate their own importance and the importance of Mississippi Blues Trail.

“Is this the place where blues was born?” I thought, when I arrived. My initial impression of the space was not strong. I felt a little short-changed because this was supposed to be the place. Because the blues is incredibly important to American identity, one would imagine, that this, the place that could have birthed the blues, must be beyond reality and larger than life. The images I imagined before arriving at Dockery were of fields with abandoned labor quarters rusting and decaying into the landscape. I had not imagined a space housing only a few buildings and markers. I spent years reading about and researching the landscape and its inhabitants, and now it amounted to a tourist stop off a two-lane highway. However, the importance I imbued onto the landscape still resonated in my imagination. The narrative of historic sites like Dockery Farms inform and construct Southern public history and memory.

Historic sites like Dockery Farms inform public understanding of American History, there should be a standard by which all historic sites serve as a resource for a complicated past that includes the experiences of all groups of Americans. However, like most of the historic sites I visited in Mississippi, I found problematic aspects concerning the representation and presentation of African Americans within their narrative. Indeed, in this regard, Dockery Farms could serve as an example of the difficulty and problems that accompany the creation of cultural tourist sites.
This thesis begins with a history of cultural tourism within Mississippi. Following a history of this form of tourism in the state, I assess the problems specifically embedded within blues tourism. This thesis then focuses on Dockery Farms. The Dockery Farms Foundation’s Executive Director, William Lester presented me with a spoken narrative on Dockery Farms for this thesis. This thesis also discusses the life of Charley Patton as part of Dockery’s “birthplace of the blues narrative.” After reflecting on Charley Patton’s past, I assess Dockery Farms currently and connect cultural tourism with the site. I examine cultural tourism’s connection with the mythic South and public memory. Together, the mythic South and public memory inform cultural tourist sites, and these sites shape how the general public remembers southern history.\footnote{For the purposes of the thesis, the general public is defined by individuals who visit cultural tourist sites.}

This thesis will also explore Dockery’s absent history, a complicated history of the African American experience. Investigating the lived experiences—especially violent—of laborers on the farms helps to lift the veil and look at life not only at Dockery, but throughout Mississippi at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. Although much of blues tourism in Mississippi lacks a full presentation of the black lived experience, the Mississippi Blues Trail Teaching Guide, produced by the Mississippi Arts Commission, serves as an example of progress toward depicting a fuller expression of black life in Mississippi in the early twentieth century.

This thesis offers a critical analysis of cultural tourism in Mississippi that assesses the history that is presented at the state’s tourist sites. Identifying the short-comings of tourist sites may lead to their reassessment and the addition of an inclusive history. This thesis shows how myth and memory inform constructions of the past through cultural tourism. Using Dockery
Farms as a case study, I argue that blues cultural tourist sites and publications consistently underrepresent the African American lived experience.

**Beginnings: Blues Tourism in Mississippi**

The most transparent goal for cultural tourism within Mississippi is to gain economic benefits. Since 2000, Mississippi consistently ranks highest in unemployment in the United States. The Delta region in Mississippi has functioned as a flagship for the state’s economic woes. Beginning around 2008 the national economic downturn forced unemployment rates in the Delta to skyrocket. The Delta continues to be one of the poorest regions in one of the most impoverished states in the country. In an attempt to address the Delta poverty, Wanda Clark, project coordinator of the Mississippi Blues Trail, stated that one hope for the trail is to encourage tourists to spend money within small communities throughout the Delta. Tourist dollars could inject money into stagnant and depressed local economies. The Mississippi Development Authority report on tourism’s influence on Mississippi’s modern-day economic development discusses both the injection of billions of dollars into the economy, and the

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8 When looking at the Delta counties of Bolivar, Leflore, Sunflower, Washington, and Yazoo, and at Mississippi as a whole the unemployment rates begin to skyrocket around the middle of 2008. Some of the counties listed above have a chronic problem with unemployment in general. Mississippi Department of Employment Security, “Summary of Unemployment Rates for the Years 1970 forward.”

importance of tourism as a source of employment within the state.\textsuperscript{10} Blues tourism brings money into Mississippi, and its economic value attests to its importance for the state.

The relatively new appreciation of blues tourism in Mississippi is rooted in a grassroots movement that began in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{11} With the creation of the first recognized blues festival, The Mississippi Delta Blues Festival, in 1978, and the opening of the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, MS in 1979, modern-day Mississippi blues tourism was born.\textsuperscript{12} Lacking adequate funds for promotion and effective marketing, early festivals were visited by few out-of-state tourists. Instead, local communities enjoyed festivals early on. Like the festivals’ struggle to gain national recognition, the Delta Blues Museum also faced hardships at the beginning. Low attendance and no city, state, and federal funding meant the museum fought to remain financially solvent.\textsuperscript{13} Over time, blues tourism garnered more and more support. In 1981, the then-governor of Mississippi, William F. Winter, created Delta Blues Festival Day. The emerging political support of the blues as part of the state’s cultural heritage helped spark a new blues awakening within Mississippi. Throughout the 1980s, more blues festivals emerged. Even with the growth of festivals and active blues promotion, blues tourism still relied primarily on grassroots organizations of blues enthusiasts.\textsuperscript{14}

The blues tourism industry gained strength with the Colombia Records release of Robert

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\textsuperscript{10} Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division, “Fiscal Year 2009 Economic Contribution of Travel and Tourism in Mississippi, February 2010.”

\textsuperscript{11} King, \textit{I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now}, 56.

\textsuperscript{12} The Mississippi Delta Blues Festival’s name was later changed to the Mississippi Delta Blues Festival and Heritage Festival. King, \textit{I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now}, 56, 58.

\textsuperscript{13} King, \textit{I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now}, 57.

\textsuperscript{14} King, \textit{I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now}, 66.
Johnson’s *Complete Recordings* in 1990. The two-CD boxed set went platinum, ushered in newfound appreciation for the blues by the American public, and motivated tourists interested in the blues to visit the Delta.\(^5\) This renewed interest in the blues inspired many Delta communities to begin institutional efforts to promote Mississippi blues’ historic sites: ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon refers to this movement as “New Blues Tourism.”

The “New Blues Tourism” movement consisted of tourists participating in an organized and mediated experience of blues heritage.\(^6\) In 2001, the Mississippi Division of Tourism and the Mississippi Art Commission released the first major study of blues tourism in Mississippi from a hired tourism-marketing group.\(^7\) The marketing group’s findings complimented local blues tourism efforts, but it also pointed out logistical problems that ranged from the lack of signage to inadequate upscale lodging for tourists.\(^8\) The report reflected the state’s newfound serious focus on their cultural heritage of blues and its importance for tourism.

As a result of the report, Mississippi centralized oversight of the state’s blues tourism industry under one agency. The Mississippi Delta Tourism Association (MDTA), created in 1994, received badly needed financial support from the state. Bill Seratt, president of MDTA, announced that the state was willing to support the organization because it offered immediate branding. Seratt stated, “no matter where you are, if you say, ‘The Mississippi Delta’ or ‘Delta’

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\(^{17}\) King, *I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now*, 68-69.

\(^{18}\) King, *I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now*, 69.
it conjures up some kind of image for just about anyone.”19 Seratt’s testimony spoke to the importance and intensity of the Delta’s imagined visuals for tourists from around the world.

In order to help tourists navigate the blues heritage sites throughout Mississippi, the state established a blues commission in 2003.20 The Mississippi Blues Commission’s main goal was to develop Mississippi Blues Trail highway markers. The commission worked in tandem with blues historians to create criteria for what the markers said and where the markers were they placed.21 The popularity of the blues markers grew exponentially as organizations and enthusiasts contacted the commission requesting information in hope of cross-promoting their local products with blues heritage. Communities once ambivalent about their local blues heritage realized the economic potential of tourism.

**Father and Son: Dockery Farms and Charley Patton**

Dockery Farms as a case study helps to illuminate the problems within blues cultural tourism. The following is the Dockery Farms narrative presented to me by the Executive Director of the Dockery Farms Foundation, William Lester. In the narrative it is evident that the African American experience is underrepresented and overshadowed by the “great white man,” William

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21 King, *I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now*, 74.
Dockery.

The Dockery’s lived in Mississippi for about half a century before William Dockery started Dockery Farms. William Dockery’s father and mother—Major T. C. Dockery and Mary Atkins Dockery—migrated from Rockingham, NC to Hernando, MS in the mid-1850s. The Dockerys came from a powerful political North Carolinian family who were profitable slave and landowners. The end of the Civil War left the Mississippi Dockery’s destitute and left the Major partially armless. Instead of sending William Dockery back east for “proper education” the family barely paid his way through the University of Mississippi. William Dockery came to Cleveland, Mississippi in 1885 in hopes of starting a garment business fresh out of Ole Miss. He soon realized his line of work was not going to flourish, and in a moment of desperation he looked to the east. Presently, the Mississippi Delta brings images of miles and miles of flat landscape to mind. But in 1895 when William Dockery began his farms, there was nothing but dense alluvial forest. This dense, almost impenetrable landscape came at a low price, so Dockery began to buy up tracts of lands. By some accounts he even traded a Winchester rifle and a cow there in order acquire land. Some of the purchased tracts were not next to each other, causing Dockery Farms to be titled as plural. These parcels of land were of varying size.

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22 “William Dockery.”


24 William Lester, interview by author, Cleveland, MS, June 7, 2014.


26 Lester, interview, MS, October 29, 2014.
Dockery changed the environment from dense brush to farmable land. Transforming the landscape took time. Dockery’s African American hired help went through the brush and stripped the trees of their bark, “deadening” them, so they would not have any leaves. Without leaves sunlight could hit the ground. Sunlight hitting the ground allowed Dockery to plant cotton. After a year of cotton cultivation in a dense thicket, limbs began to fall off the trees in mass. Workers stacked the fallen limbs against the trees and lit the dead trees on fire in the winter. After two or three years of tree burning, the landscape contained rows of cotton between tall burnt tree stumps. The following winter, armed with axes, chains, and mules, workers began to remove the wood. While the mules pulled on the stumps with chains, about a dozen or so workers hacked at the stump with their axes. Once pulled out, workers lit the stumps on fire. Armed with a hoe and mule, workers pushed soil back into the hole where the stump once resided. For years African American men and women worked six days a week from sun up to sun down in order to transform the landscape from dense thicket to farmable land with rich soil. These workers helped turn the Delta from dense brush into flat fertile farmland. The removal of dense brush allowed for the fertile soil to be used to cultivate cotton, allowing the Delta to become cotton country. In fact, the cultivation of cotton ruled the economy of the Mississippi Delta. The massive development caused cotton to cover the landscape.

27 Dockery Farms was part of a larger structure of irregular and unsystematic parcel landownership common throughout the Southeastern United States. John Fraser Hart, *The Rural Landscape* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 145.

28 Lester, interview, October 29, 2014.

William Dockery’s property was so vast that he could not oversee all of it by himself. Instead, he implemented what he called “kingdoms.” With a yearly payment, a family or individual could completely oversee a large tract of land by his or herself. The overseers of the kingdom hired workers and handled all aspects of cultivation on the land. Like other large farms in the Delta, large tracts of farmland were worked by many African American laborers from other parts of Mississippi and the South. The Jim Crow South gave very little in regard to employment options for African Americans. Farms outside of the Mississippi Delta were often small, so white owners did not need much help and generally had poor soil. However large farms in the Delta similar to Dockery needed countless amounts of laborers. Dockery Farms’ massive size required the farms to have many laborers, over 4,000 African Americans worked at Dockery throughout its history. One of the laborers, Bill Patton, brought his family with him when he arrived at Dockery. Patton’s son, Charley, performed on Dockery and is now synonymous with the farms.

When the general public thinks about blues musicians, many conjure up images of elderly, impoverished, and uneducated African American men sitting on a wooden front porch playing a guitar. However, these images do not reflect reality when examining blues performers at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. Blues was youth music. Young men and women enjoyed listening to and performing the blues and the genre emerged from young individuals traveling and playing music. Many musicians were able to make a living by performing for audiences

30 Lester, interview, June 7, 2014.


32 Lester, interview, June 7, 2014.
and therefore could stay away from manual labor. Unlike jobs requiring physical labor, the money musicians earned by performing could be substantial, so the assumption all blues performers lived in poverty does not accurately depict the financial possibilities and realities for various performers. Additionally, some performers had the opportunity to receive an education. Assumptions about blues musicians can easily be exposed as inaccurate when examining the life and work of Charley Patton.

Charley Patton moved to Dockery Farms with his family in 1897 because his father, Bill Patton, received work on the farms. Bill Patton was thought of as a hard worker and a bible thumper; he even preached sermons in backcountry churches. Patton was considered his own “boss man” at Dockery. He rented his own kingdom of land, which meant Patton purchased all his own furnishings, tools, and brought in his own laborers on the land. In turn, Dockery took a smaller share of the profit. The level of income this deal yielded, allowed the Pattons to be considered a rung above day

33 Palmer, Deep Blues, 50.
34 Palmer, Deep Blues, 49.
laborers.

Charley Patton’s childhood dealt mostly with his musical and educational development. When the Pattons arrived at Dockery, Charley immersed himself in the musical scene, collaborating with the Chatmon family and Henry Sloan.\textsuperscript{36} Playing social functions with the Chatmon family and learning from Henry Sloan, Patton developed into a professional musician.\textsuperscript{37} While garnering his skills with the guitar, Patton also received an education—Patton is believed to have reached the 9\textsuperscript{th} grade. As a young man Patton developed into a professional musician and traveled throughout the Delta and beyond. Patton’s early connection to Dockery Farms meant he used the farms and the Delta as a home base throughout his life.

Before recording his songs in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Patton traveled around Dockery Farms and continued to develop musically. Patton primarily played for African American audiences at the “quarters on Dockery’s farm, homes of enterprising sharecroppers, and perhaps in a few small town cafés or specially constructed juke joints in the country.”\textsuperscript{38} The revenue ascertained through professional playing allowed Patton the privilege of not living as a laborer. He always had money. As a professional musician Patton made between $50 and $100 per week.\textsuperscript{39} He had his own car and wore “white man’s clothes.”\textsuperscript{40} Life as a professional musician afforded Patton a life of leisure and the ability to focus on his musicianship.

\textsuperscript{36} Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, 51.

\textsuperscript{37} Evans, “Charley Patton: Conscience of the Delta,” 141.

\textsuperscript{38} Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, 67.

\textsuperscript{39} Evans, “Charley Patton: Conscience of the Delta,” 149.

\textsuperscript{40} William Lester, interview by author, Cleveland, MS, June 9, 2014.
Audiences around the Delta viewed Patton as an entertainer— he was likened to the Elvis or James Brown of the Delta. Some of his contemporaries, like Son House, believed Patton did not take his musicianship seriously, saying, “Patton indulged in too much clowning on the guitar—throwing it in the air and catching it, banging on it, playing on his back or between his legs… he would make a song out of anything.” Patton’s performances were often influenced by the people in the room. When he played live, his songs were influenced by the audiences’ expectations and during his recordings he had only himself in mind. His recorded songs have a clear and concise choice of music and lyrics. During Son House’s rediscovery in the 1960s he was taken aback by the “excellence” of the Charley Patton Recordings. Both in live performances and recordings Patton played a myriad of tunes and not just country blues— he also performed rag-time, old time, gospel, and others. To function as a professional musician, Patton needed to be able to play many different songs to be able to entertain a variety of audiences.

Charley Patton’s time performing at Dockery Farms allows him to be called on again and again as taking part in the creation of the Delta blues. At his grave in Holly Ridge, Mississippi his Blues Trail Marker reads:

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42 Palmer, Deep Blues, 66.

43 Palmer, Deep Blues, 66.

The most important figure in the pioneering era of Delta blues, Charley Patton (1891 to 1934), helped define not only the musical genre but also the image and lifestyle of the rambling Mississippi bluesman. He roamed the Delta using Dockery as his most frequent base, and lived his final year in Holly Ridge. Patton and blues singers Willie James Foster (1921-2000) and Asie Payton (1937-1997) are buried in this cemetery.

The marker displays why Patton is important to the state’s blues heritage, but more importantly gives credence why blues fans from all over the world need to come and visit this place. Since the trail marker functions as the authoritative text for tourists, Patton’s historical importance becomes solidified. Patton, with the mention of Dockery, rests in the public’s memory as the “father of the Delta blues.”

Within Mississippi blues narratives Charley Patton always overshadows the importance of Dockery Farms- including William Dockery. Blues writings usually discuss Patton and Farms at the same time. Dockery Farms rests, usually, at the beginning of the narrative of blues in the Delta, but then Charley Patton shows and takes over the show. The historic site of Dockery Farms and its narrative presented by Lester functions to push back on the importance of Charley Patton. William Dockery is presented as this father like figure that carves out a space for blues to born. The “great white man” narrative that surrounds Dockery Farms reaffirms the sites importance to the blues tourism and scholarship.

45 This same pattern is also presented in this thesis.
Dockery Farms and Cultural Tourism

William Lester, who lives on the site, serves executive director of the Dockery Farms Foundation and serves as the spokesman for the historic site of Dockery Farms. Lester came to Cleveland, MS to teach art at Delta State University in 1973. Lester asked to build a house on Dockery’s property so he could live closer to the university’s campus instead of his family home 35-40 minutes south. This is where his relationship with the Dockerys began. After six or seven years Lester finished his house. The Dockery family asked for his help to preserve the site—and so the family started the foundation in 1986. Lester’s main efforts go into preserving, cleaning, and restoring the site. During my time in Mississippi, I was able to talk and interview him twice. Lester is an extremely warm and open voice for the foundation. After listening to his presentations online, reading interviews, and conducting my own interviews, it is evident Lester has an expansive knowledge of Dockery Farms. He often conducts interviews in the Dockery gas station and if any traveling visitor happens to be there at the same time as he is, Lester is more than happy to let them into the station to have a look around. The openness of both the site and Lester makes for a well-groomed cultural spot.

46 Lester, interview, June 9, 2014; Lester, Evans interview, October 29, 2014.
While speaking about Dockery Farms B.B. King famously said, “You might say [the blues] all started right here.” This quote by King is emblematic of how blues promoters and tourism organizers want the public to view Dockery in order to affirm the myth of Dockery Farms as the birthplace of the blues. I use the term “myth” because any evidence of Dockery being the very place of the inception of the blues is lost to time. Moreover, the entire notion of a birthplace of a vernacular music, like the blues, is a flawed concept. Cultural phenomena don’t usually have a single origin, but instead emerge out of a culture. However, according to the authoritative voice of the Mississippi Blues Commission, Dockery Farms functions as a single location that speaks to the origins of the blues.

In March of 2010, Dockery was recognized by the National Park Service of the U.S Department of the Interior as having historic significance. On the site’s nomination record Dockery Farms, “represents a significant example of American agricultural, economic, racial and social heritage.” Moreover, the record cites blues literature, like Palmer’s *Deep Blues* and Oliver’s *The Story of the Blues*, to mention Charley Patton and bring credence to

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48 National Register of Historic Places, Dockery Farms Historic District, Sunflower County, Mississippi, National Register #06000250.
the importance of the site. The National Park Service funded a matching donation for Dockery of $177,000 through the Save America’s Treasures Grant. With these funds Lester restored the gas station as well as cleaned up the grounds. Today, the gas station houses workshops and fundraisers to enable the continual restoration process and up-keep of the historic site.

Locations like Dockery Farms on the Mississippi Blues Trail help construct a past for visitors. Dockery Farms as a site is used by Mississippi’s tourism groups to promote both the blues and a collective imagined past. In a southern landscape, Dockery Farms’ historic site presents a narrative of a musical and agrarian past.

When reflecting on William Dockery’s beginnings, William Lester stated, “Mr. Will, once he arrived here, I believe thought to himself that this was the land of opportunity. Not just for him, but for all these people that he needed to make his dream come true.” In this quote, Dockery is presented as pioneer and the focal point of the narrative. Focusing on Dockery removes agency and importance from the numerous African American laborers who enabled Dockery to create his cotton empire.

49 National Register of Historic Places, Dockery Farms Historic District.


51 Lester, interview, October 29, 2014.

52 In fact, tourism organizations in many states help to construct a past in order to garner visitors and, more importantly, revenue. King, *I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now*, 140, Lester, interview, June 7, 2014.

In Lester’s narrative of Dockery Farms, William Dockery is presented as a great white man, who carved out his own piece of the American Dream. In the site’s narrative about Dockery as a landowner, William Dockery and his son Joe are presented as fair landowners.\textsuperscript{54} Although, William Dockery’s son, Joe Rice Dockery, eventually conceded that, “the system [sharecropping] was wrong. Daddy knew that, and I knew it. Everybody knew it.”\textsuperscript{55}

Archival evidence, including William Dockery’s personal correspondences present a counter narrative to the narrative presented to the public. In almost all the letters written by William Dockery it is apparent that his farm sits in the forefront of his thoughts. He talked about the laborers, the price of crops, profits, the transforming of the landscape, and more. African Americans are constantly brought up in his letters because they were so integral to the success of Dockery Farms. Even with African American labor being so important to his empire his contempt Dockery harbored for them was evident within his letters. He referenced them as “niggers;” in terms of ownership; he even documents an incident when he threatened them with violence.\textsuperscript{56} In one of his letters, Dockery wrote, “I have a do[g] negro at work in the woods cutting down trees and cutting caue [sic]. I go with them as company.”\textsuperscript{57} His writing suggests he views his laborers similarly to chattel slaves with no agency. Additionally, he remarked on his proximity to his laborers and their work- he is around them, but only as company. In other words, when together Dockery wanted to place a distinction between himself and the labor.

During one of my interviews with Lester he stated, “Dockery demanded the best from his

\textsuperscript{54} King, \textit{I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now}, 148.

\textsuperscript{55} Palmer, “Deep Blues,” 56.

\textsuperscript{56} William Dockery, letter to Hughla McKay Rice, March 23, 1892.

\textsuperscript{57} William Dockery, letter to Hughla McKay Rice, September 11, 1888.
workers,” but the writings and actions of Dockery tell a different story, he did not view his laborers as much more than objects whose race and labor separated themselves from him. The letters from Dockery help craft a counter narrative to the image of the great white man presented throughout cultural tourism.

**Mythic South and Public Memory: How We Got Here**

William Dockery’s letters contradict the narrative of the “great white man.” This archetype derives from the mythic south. Anthropologist Raphael Patai wrote, “as I see it, myth not only validates or authorizes custom, rites, institutions, beliefs, and so forth, but frequently is directly responsible for creating them.” Myths function to inform social life’s present and future by “fus[ing] concept and emotion into an image.” Myths are empowered by their influence on human action, and the American South partly exists through its own mythos.

Like myth, the imagined resides in the memory of the public, and the American South is defined both by its geographic characteristics, as well as its imagined region. The construction of the Old South myth came out of the “New South.” The Old South myth according to a “Lost Cause” narrative, conjures up romantic images of plantations, great white men, and happy slaves.

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58 William Lester, interview, June 7, 2014.


According to that myth, life in the Old South was informed by the virtues of honor, hospitality, grace, and noblesse oblige.\textsuperscript{62}

Defining the New South is a little bit more complicated. Southern historian Paul M. Gaston’s \textit{The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Myth Making} grapples with the economic changes in the postbellum South. The New South creed addresses the region’s attempt to industrialize. With northern capitalists’ help, Southerners tried to bring the South out of its economic destitution after the war. During this time of economic reform the South’s hoped to reinstate a form of de jure slavery. Through economic—sharecropping—and political—Jim Crow Laws—disadvantages African Americans still lived at the bottom rungs of Southern Society.\textsuperscript{63} The “exquisite culture” of the Old South came to be appreciated during the New South.\textsuperscript{64} During this time, Southern Writers, such as Joel Chandler Harris, offered up continuous depictions of African Americans as being lazy, servile, and overall happier living in slavery.\textsuperscript{65} The New South curated the notion of the Old South, which promoted a caricature of African Americans existing as less than human.


\textsuperscript{63} Both Sharecropping and Jim Crow laws will be further discussed in the African American lived experienced of this thesis.


\textsuperscript{65} Cobb, \textit{Away Down South}, 79-80.
By the end of the nineteenth century, little economic progress was made, which left the South defeated—again. The New South saw social and political disorder, and Jim Crow segregation became synonymous with its name. Gaston speaks to myths’ major effect on society when he wrote:

Myths are something more than advertising slogans and propaganda ploys rationally connected to a specific purpose. They have a subtle way of permeating the thought and conditioning the actions even of those who may be rationally opposed to their consequences. They arise out of complex circumstances to create mental sets which do not ordinarily yield to intellectual attack.

Like Raphael Patai, Gaston remarks on the importance and heavy consequences of the myth—especially in the South. The mythic American South is made real through actions—like African American caricaturization. The understanding of blacks as being lazy, backward, and dumb informed the public’s understanding of blues musicians. The images of dumb black musicians performing were fixed in the American psyche. In a similar fashion, when myths are added to the narratives of cultural tourist sites, those myths are made real.

Mythology is essential to blues tourism. The promotion of blues recordings, performances, and historical sites relies heavily on myths. Two major Mississippi blues myths, which come up time and time again, deal with Mississippi as the birthplace of the blues and the Devil at the Crossroads narrative. The Mississippi Blues Commission did not invent these

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69 One of the main myths in Mississippi blues tourism deals with Dockery Farms being the birthplace of the blues. There is no way to prove such a singular place as the birthplace of the
myths, but it does use them to attract tourists to the state.\textsuperscript{70} The myths function within the consciousness of blues tourists and fans alike, and they make the Mississippi Delta a holy site for the blues—a Mecca, if you will.

Myth and public memory are embedded in the thoughts and actions of the southerners.\textsuperscript{71} The American South’s memory is informed by myths, and through public memory—southern myths are made real. The South’s defeat in the Civil War forced southerners to remember and reimagine life before the war.\textsuperscript{72} This reimagining was influenced by Old South myths, which in turn informed the post-Civil War Southern identity.

In “Toward a Geography of Memory,” geographers Kenneth E. Foote and Maoz Azary Ahu explore how public memory informs the construction of historic and commemoration sites. Public memory is completely subjective and constructs an \textit{imagined} past.\textsuperscript{73} I emphasize blues because there is no actual documentation to corroborate Dockery as the birthplace all credence to the myth has to be hearsay. Another main myth is the idea of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil to play guitar. Interestingly, Robert Johnson came up in one of my interviews with Will Lester. He stated the crossroads was actually on Dockery’s property. No he did not sell his soul to the devil, but instead took the train back to Hazlehurst, MS and raised the level of his musicianship under the tutelage of an east coast minstrel player named Ike Zimmerman. William Lester, interview by author, Cleveland, MS, June 9, 2014.

\textsuperscript{70} The creation of myths surrounding the blues or blues musicians can be traced back to the promotion of race records during the beginnings of the record industry. Even Paramount Records first promoted Charley Patton as the “Masked Marvel” as gimmick to allure listeners. Gioia, \textit{Delta Blues}, 68.

\textsuperscript{71} For this thesis, public memory is defined as “the interface where the past is represented in the present by means of shared cultural productions and reproductions.” Kenneth E. Foote and Maoz Azary Ahu, “Toward a Geography of Memory: Geographical Dimensions of Public Memory and Commemoration” \textit{Journal of Political and Military Sociology} 35 (Summer 2007): 126.

\textsuperscript{72} W. Scott Poole, “Memory,” in \textit{The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Myth, Manners, and Memory} ed. by Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 104.

\textsuperscript{73} Foote and Azary Ahu, “Toward a Geography of Memory”: 126.
imagined because historical or commemoration sites rely not only on fact, but also on a socially constructed past. “Public memory,” in the words of historian John Bodnar, “emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expression.” 74 These sites function as cultural products that replicate common perceptions of history. 75 For many, historical sites function as a cultural product that speaks to the complete history of a space, thus enforcing the public memory of a landscape.

Dockery Farms plays a major role in southern myths and in the public memory of the blues. The major myth Dockery Farms perpetuates is that it is the birthplace of the blues. The historical site is not alone in spreading the “birthplace” myth. There is another marker in the trail, which also lays claim to being a birthplace of the blues. In Tutwiler, MS, a marker entitled, “W.C. Handy Encounters the Blues” describes when the bandleader W.C. Handy waits at a train station in Tutwiler and hears a man singing and playing the slide guitar. Handy, like Patton, is also referenced as a father of the blues because of his popular orchestration based on the “sounds he heard in the Delta.” 76 But even this origin story is tied to Dockery Farms. Many believe the musician Handy heard at Tutwiler was Henry Sloan—a Dockery based musician who is thought to have taught Charlie Patton. 77 By implementing birthplace myth(s) within the Mississippi Delta blues narrative, promoters and tourist organizations help to spread these ideas. 78 But why


75 Foote and Azaryahu, “Toward a Geography of Memory,” 127.

76 “W.C. Handy Encounters the Blues,” Mississippi Blues Trail Marker, Tutwiler, MS.

77 Gioia, Delta Blues, 112.

78 King, I’m Feeling the Blues Right Now, 85-86.
is this myth so important? Locating the birthplace of the blues on a specific spot brings more authority to the cultural and historical importance of the Mississippi Delta. Moreover, this idea is lodged in the minds of blues enthusiasts. It encourages them to visit the Delta and bring their money with them, which has an economic benefit for the state.

Even as Dockery Farms developed as a tourist spot, it continues to follow the “great white man” narrative. Similar to William Faulkner’s character Thomas Sutpen in Absalom! Absalom!, William Dockery looms over the narrative of Dockery Farms as a larger than life patriarch who “designs” his own piece of land. Like William Dockery, Faulkner’s legacy left a major imprint on the face of Mississippi. One can even visit various places throughout his personal life. Faulkner is not the only literary figure who belongs in a discussion of representation in Mississippi-Richard Wright serves as a foil to Faulkner. Almost none of physical living space of Wright’s early life in Mississippi still exists- notably his family home in Jackson. In the same dichotomy presents itself in the relationship between Charley Patton and William Dockery. Very little remains of Charley

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Patton, but William Dockery left a collection of his family papers and the site of historic Dockery Farms as his legacy. The remnants of Faulkner and Wright or Dockery and Patton’s life serve as a reminder of whose material legacy is usually preserved.

**More Than Entertainment: Black Experience in the Delta**

The presentation of African American laborers’ lived experience on Dockery Farms contains no complexity. From sun up to sun down laborers on Dockery worked. Their work included picking cotton, to tending cattle, to fixing fences, and other tasks.\(^82\) On Saturday night, many of the African American laborers crossed a little bridge to get to the “frolic house” on Dockery. At the frolic house, individuals danced and sang to the tunes of traveling musicians.\(^83\) The normative narratives of laborers on Dockery are presented as either working or playing. The complexities and nuances of their lives are absent in the blues tourism narrative. That narrative also excludes a key component of the everyday life experience of black Americans, their daily encounter with violence.

Violence is a fundamental aspect of everyone’s life at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century in the Mississippi Delta. Even for whites, violence was a daily experience. The reality of violence is exquisitely demonstrated in William Dockery’s letters. In one letter sandwiched between talking about going to church and a friend’s wedding, Dockery gives an account of a murder on his farm. Dockery wrote, “this community is all excited about this new county. Don’t know if whether they will get th[sic] or not. There was a fearful murder committed here last night. 4 negroes returning from Renovo Mills at 11 oclock and were fired on by someone and 2 negroes

\(^{82}\) William Lester, interview by author, Cleveland, MS, June 7, 2014.

\(^{83}\) William Lester, interview by author, Cleveland, MS, June 9, 2014.
hit… no claim to cause or one who did it. Well, Mr. Somers got married on 20\textsuperscript{th} to Mrs. Stimoch.”\textsuperscript{84} Almost in the same breath of the shooting does Dockery move onto the wedding on the 20\textsuperscript{th}. His unemotional tone indicates the everydayness of violence. In another letter, Dockery gives an account of an African American being “whipped on Saturday.”\textsuperscript{85}

Dockery even presented the threat of violence in his writings. In another letter, Dockery states, “I had my niggers meted, they will be tried Friday am afraid I cant hang them.”\textsuperscript{86} Dockery’s poor handwriting makes deciphering what the laborers did to warrant arrest is not defined, but what it clear is Dockery thought about doling out his own form of punishment. This remark on justice is not only one in his letters. In an earlier letter Dockery states, “I think a dog has a right to a trial before being hung for stealing sheep [sic].”\textsuperscript{87} In this sentence Dockery demeans his laborers by referencing one of them as a dog and believes even with a trial a laborer caught stealing must end up hanging. From reading Dockery’s letters, it is evident that even he was surrounded by violence, although he was not on the receiving end.

After the Civil War, white Mississippians asserted that they had a “negro problem,” and utilized violence as a way to solve that problem, and Governor Benjamin G. Humphreys and the Mississippi state house found a solution. Humphreys believed that newfound freedom did not translate into African Americans having political and social rights. Consequently, to maintain a rigid social class structure, the legislature enacted a series of laws that came to be known as the black codes. These codes were borrowed from other state legislatures in the South and were

\textsuperscript{84} William Dockery, letter to Hughla Dockery Rice, July 14, 1892.

\textsuperscript{85} William Dockery, letter to Hughla Dockery Rice, August 23, 1901.

\textsuperscript{86} William Dockery, letter to Hughla McKay Rice, March 23, 1892.

\textsuperscript{87} William Dockery, letter to Hughla McKay Rice, September 11, 1888
designed “to drive ex-slaves back to their home plantations.” The black codes were repealed only during the short-lived Reconstruction. However the codes reemerged through the creation of Jim Crow laws. When African Americans made gains towards freedom and equality, the white society reacted to the challenge of their social order with violence. Lynching greatly increased at the turn-of-the-century and was used as a tool by white society to maintain the social caste system. Moreover, white supremacist terrorist organizations began to target African American farmers who experienced a moderate amount of success. With time came the demise of the Reconstruction era and the intensification of the white-dominated social order.

In the post-emancipation era, the lives of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers were not that dissimilar from those of slaves. Large landowning farmers, like William Dockery,

90 Lynchings are defined by historian Eric Foner as a practice “particularly wide-spread in the South between 1890 and 1940, in which person (usually black) accused of a crime were murdered by mobs before standing trail. Lynchings often took place before large crowds, with law enforcement authorities not intervening” Eric Foner, Give Me Liberty: An American History, Vol. 2, 4th ed. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), A-55.
92 Oshinsky, “Worse Than Slavery,” 100.
93 William Dockery’s system of “kingdoms” differed by not supplying the operating capital and tools. Many musicians lived around and within the sharecropping system. In David “Honeyboy” Edwards autobiography he discusses growing up with his father going from farm to farm to try and make a profit. David “Honeyboy” Edwards, Janis Martinson, and Michael Robert Frank, The World Don’t Owe Me Nothing (Chicago, Il: Chicago Review Press, 1997), 7-8.
considered their tenants as “their niggers.” Laborers were furnished with feed, seed, fertilizer, food, housing, and clothing, and Dockery and his sharecroppers shared “equal” profits made from the crop. Each item provided to the sharecropper was charged against his account. At the end of each growing season, the sharecropper remained in debt. This system of reoccurring debt, also known as cyclical debt or debt peonage, left many African American farms tied to the land and in poverty. It is impossible to be precise about how many landowners miscalculated tenants’ debts and earnings; but one economist believes that it was as high as 75%. The sharecropping system and its unfair practices were “the rule rather than the exception.”

Operating within the system of sharecropping, Dockery Farms maintained a unique infrastructure for its laborers. Unlike other farms, Dockery housed a church, post office, small school, doctor’s office, and train line. These amenities reflect an advanced farming system that Dockery created, a system that attracted many laborers. But even with these amenities, the lives of African American laborers were shaped by a constant threat of violence.

To strengthen their control over their sharecroppers, landowners resorted to physical violence. In an 1899 letter, William Dockery wrote, “I am disgusted at nigger renters. They

94 Neil R. McMillen, Dark Journey, 126.


96 Neil R. McMillen, Dark Journey, 131.


99 “A Tour of Dockery Farms with B.B. King.”
have a great deal more business than I do at my store or elsewhere.”

Dockery clearly resents African American laborers, who rent land and who try to conduct business outside of his control. Dockery believes his laborers are connected to him and his land.

In another letter Dockery writes, “the negroes got half of the import and had a regular maunero [sic] meeting. I tell them it was a mistake altogether. For if they don’t pay me soon they will find me about the finest man they have seen lately.”

Though it is not clear what type of meeting the African American laborers are going to, what is clear is that Dockery does not agree with what they are doing. Moreover, Dockery continues to use the threat of violence. If “his” workers meet and cannot pay him, they might see his rage. With the threat of violence at every turn, few spoke out against the inequality of sharecropping. In William Dockery’s hometown of Hernando, Mississippi, white landowners formed a lynch mob and shot and killed an African American reverend named T.A Allen after hearing he was trying to start a sharecroppers union.

The threat of violence was real for African Americans in and around Dockery Farms.

One aspect of the African American experience that Mississippi cultural tourism does focus on is the blues. The blues were created and performed in leisure spaces—like a frolic house at Dockery Farms—throughout the Mississippi Delta. In “We Are Not What We Seem” by historian Robin D.G. Kelley depicts spaces for leisure as of paramount importance for an

100 William Dockery, letter to Hughla Dockery Rice, March 21, 1899.

101 William Dockery, letter to Hughla Dockery Rice, August 27, 1890.

African American communities. These leisure spaces allow for humanity to be expressed and for the production and molding of culture. On Dockery Farms, the frolic house was such a leisure space. The communal nature of dancing and playing music allowed the frolic house to contain the performances of African American expressive culture. In such houses, the audience and performer created a performance based on mutual understandings. Utilizing songs and tunes, the performer and audience crafted a musical conversation about the struggles of everyday life. The Dockery Farms site does a fine job of presenting the music by projecting music throughout the site. The music presented, of course, is of Charley Patton.

Although blues musicians are clearly part of the narrative at Dockery, because there are gaps within the historical narrative surrounding African American life, to fully understand the lives of musicians, one must understand how social injustice and violence shaped their lives. The lyrics of blues musicians are essential to understanding the close proximity in which African American men lived with violence.

Eddie “Son” House, who performed at Dockery Farms, sang about the injustices within African American lives in his song, “Grinnin’ In Your Face.” The song addresses how people will “cut you down” and steal from you, while continuing to grin in your face. In Bukka White’s “Fixin’ to Die Blues,” the audience gets a glimpse into the impact of lynching. In the song White describes the pain and anguish African American families experience because of

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104 “A Tour of Dockery Farms with B.B. King.”

105 Son House, Grinnin’ In Your Face, Edsel Records, pub. 1965.
violence. These two songs allow blues musicians to create a space for their own testimony. Their songs unveil African American experiences near and around Dockery. African American lives were not protected by any government agency, and the fear of death was a constant. The rules of racial repression inflicted on African American labors also applied to musicians who traveled from place to place.

**Blues Education: A Change in Tide**

Although much of blues markers in Mississippi lack a complete narrative of the black lived experience, the *Mississippi Blues Trail Teaching Guide*, presented by the Mississippi Arts Commission, serves as an example of progress toward depicting a fuller expression of black life in Mississippi in the early twentieth century. In addition to the trail markers, the Mississippi Blues Commission oversaw the publication of a teaching guide, aimed to enrich the state’s fourth grade history curriculum, which expounded upon the information presented on the blues markers and sites. The teaching guide serves as an example of how blues tourism reaches beyond the trail markers and shows signs of improvement in its narrative of southern history, which permeates into the state’s K-12 curriculum.

Like many historic site narratives in Mississippi, the guide does have its shortcomings, avoiding difficult topics such as violence in the black experience. However, the guide’s shortcomings do not overshadow the progress toward incorporating a more inclusive history. The

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107 The Mississippi Arts Commission, *The Mississippi Blues Trail and Beyond: Teacher’s Guide*. The guide itself is meant for fourth grade history because that is the grade where state history is taught, but in the introduction the authors state, “teachers can easily modify lessons to be taught through the 12th grade.”
The teaching guide contains six units on music, the meaning of the blues, cotton, transportation, civil rights, and media. The opening unit of the guide entitled, “Music” functions to introduce students into the world of blues music. First the students learn about structure patterns in the blues-like “AAB” or “AAAB.” The guide moves past structure by speaking about the genre’s emotive qualities, “If you ask blues musicians to define of the blues, they almost invariably describe a state of mind- ‘the blues as feeling’”\textsuperscript{108} Moreover, these feelings are reflective of blues musicians’ emotions and experiences. After trying to define the blues, the last lesson of the unit deals with the genre’s roots. The beginning of the roots section discusses the Trans Atlantic slave trade. This movement allowed for African music to function as one of the main roots for the blues. Furthermore, this latter section defines the terms- calls and response, field holler, work song, spiritual, and blues ballads. The “Music” unit exposes students’ ears to the blues as well as contextualizes the music within history.

The second unit simply called “Meaning” begins to speak to the lived experiences of African Americans in Mississippi at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century—through the introduction of the terms sharecropping and Jim Crow laws. The unit performs adequately in defining both terms. Sharecropping is presented as a solution for African American labor post emancipation and also a nefarious institution, which leaves African Americans in debt. Jim Crow is presented as a way for limiting the rights of African Americans through segregation. Interestingly, the guide asks students to empathize with individuals living under institutionalized oppression by

\textsuperscript{108} The Mississippi Arts Commission, \textit{The Mississippi Blues Trail and Beyond: Teacher’s Guide.}, unit 1-2, p. 3.
thinking about “how would you react?”\textsuperscript{109} The unit also presents the blues as a means for the musicians to purge themselves of their emotions - a catharsis. The last section of the unit tackles gender and the blues. Students learn of the early major success of female blues musicians, who “presented alternative models of attitude and behavior for black women during the 1920s.”\textsuperscript{110} The second unit on meaning functions to expose the students to the lived experience of African American men and women, but the section is not without problems.

When the guide attempts to present the positive changes of post-emancipation, the mobility and ability of African Americans to leave their jobs is overestimated. Chattel slavery had ended and African Americans were no longer forcibly held in place through law, but the institution of sharecropping did force laborers to stay. Through the cycle of yearly debt, landowners forced many sharecroppers to stay on the land.\textsuperscript{111} The second unit’s presentation of the African American lived experience does omit the similarities between slavery and sharecropping. The guide wishes to present sharecropping as a significant gain beyond slavery.

Although the guide does not depict the severity of sharecropping, it does attempt to explain the system and present some of the problems that correspond with it. The Blues Trail Markers do not even attempt to explain the system of sharecropping. The term sharecropper comes up time and time again on numerous markers as a part of biographical information of musicians, but there is no effort to explain. Visitors of the markers are given no tools to try and

\textsuperscript{109} The Mississippi Arts Commission, \textit{The Mississippi Blues Trail and Beyond: Teacher’s Guide.}, unit 2-1, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{110} The Mississippi Arts Commission, \textit{The Mississippi Blues Trail and Beyond: Teacher’s Guide.}, unit 2-3, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{111} Oshinsky, “Worse Than Slavery,” 120.
more fully understand the life of a sharecropper. In contrast to the markers, the guide does try and present certain aspects of African American experiences.

In the third unit entitled “cotton,” the students are introduced to Charley Patton and Dockery Farms. The guide uses cotton to discuss the development of townships and plantations in the Delta after the Civil War. Both the “cotton” unit and the fourth unit, “transportation,” function to help students understand the geography of the state. Students learn about townships, farms, rivers, trains, and highways in order to better understand the spacial makeup of the state. Dockery Farms is introduced and almost in the same breath (the same paragraph) Charley Patton is mentioned. The guide presents Patton as the “founder of the Delta blues” and he lived on Dockery with his family. Moreover, Dockery again is stated as the birthplace of the blues. Through the discussion of cotton in the Delta, Charley Patton and Dockery Farms are now supplanted in the minds of students as being the original sources of the Delta Blues.

Major problems in the presentation of the African American lived experience arrive in the fifth unit entitled “Civil Rights.” The unit uses the term “general complaints” to describe the way blues musicians discuss the racial structures of their lived experience. Jim Crow again is referenced in this section in connection with prison farms. Both of these terms speak only to a part of the lived experience of African Americans; the threat of violence also needs to be addressed. The lack of a relevant discussion on violent racial structures throughout the guide means there is not an effectively constructed experiential history of Mississippi Blues musicians. When searching through the entire guide the word violence, or violent, comes only up three times. Violence, especially on the scale within the Deep South, is never an easy subject to discuss with children, but a difficult subject matter should not hinder the teaching of history.

Ignoring the violence only makes for an incomplete history.

The last unit of the guide entitled “Media” discusses the commodification and the distribution of the blues. Starting with WC Handy and sheet music this unit travels through a history of the blues by touching on traveling tent shows, jukeboxes, field recordings, and the radio. Each lesson tackles an aspect of how the blues garnered a larger and larger audience. The guide does an expose students to the myriad ways in which the media help propel the blues into the national spotlight.

The issues within the Teacher’s Guide are the same issues within Mississippi cultural tourism. The Mississippi Blues Commission’s blues markers avoid the pain and trauma suffered by African Americans in Mississippi through violence. Unlike the markers, the guide does speak to aspects of the lived experiences of African American in the Mississippi Delta by discussing sharecropping and Jim Crow laws. The guide helps to fill in unanswered questions, which the markers leave—like what is sharecropping? What are Jim Crow laws? Apart from the absence of a discussion on the threat of violence, the guide does try and speak to aspects of African American lives.

**Conclusion: Where is the Violence?**

The hope of this thesis was to begin critical discussion of blues cultural tourism, especially in the state of Mississippi. The tourism industry in Mississippi has much to celebrate and this critique is not meant to overshadow the industry. I am not trying to throw the baby out with the bath water. To paraphrase my advisor, Bill Ferris, in the 1970s we fought so hard to gain any recognition from any official office to promote the blues. And I do not take this sentiment lightly; just the sheer volume of African American culture appreciation and
presentation within the state is impressive. Additionally, this work does not mean to undermine
the vast amount of research conducted by the Mississippi Blues Trail writing and research team,
Jim O’Neal and Scott Barretta, whose works and contributions to the field of blues scholarship is
http://www.msbluestrail.org/commission. Additionally, Scott Barretta also worked as writer and
historian for the Mississippi Blues Trail teaching guide.} Both the markers and the guides go to a great extent to discuss the how mobility
and religion were part of the day-to-day lives of African Americans in Mississippi. Even with
the positives I want use this space to critically analyze blues cultural tourism.

This thesis hopes to serve as part critical analysis and part journey for the reader. Our
journey of begins with an introduction of the blues tourism industry within the state of
Mississippi. In the same vein of the words of my advisor, these early grassroots efforts that
promoted blues history of Mississippi functioned to ignite the tourism industry. The 1980s and
1990s brought a change in tide in the relationship between the state government and the industry-
culminating with the establishment of the Mississippi Blues Trail in the mid-2000s. From there
we look into the narrative of Dockery Farms and Charley Patton. Both entities help anchor the
importance of Mississippi within blues- Patton as the “founder” and Dockery Farms as a space to
reestablish the importance of William Dockery in the Mississippi blues narrative. Shifting to
Dockery Farms as a main focus, the thesis discusses the relationship between the blues tourism
industry and Dockery Farms. Here we also gain more insight into the historical character of
William Dockery through his correspondents. The first sections of this thesis present and begin
to contextualize the work of the Mississippi Blues tourism industry.

In the latter sections of the thesis’ journey, I begin to critically discuss possible reasons
why the industry’s presentation of history are the way they are. Through the discussion of the
mythic South I found the constructions of the old south ideals helped caricaturize African American musicians. Moreover, the remnants of this construction continue to be played out within the Mississippi blues tourism industry. One of problems with the industry’s presentation of blues history stems from the absence of a discussion of violence as part of the lived experience of blues musicians, and more to the point African Americans, living at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century in Mississippi. Through history I fill in the gaps left this presentation.

Lastly, I look to the teaching guide, written by Scott Barretta, sponsored by the Mississippi Blues Commission begins the conversation of a more well rounded presentation of African American lived experience throughout Mississippi at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. Even with its shortcomings, the guide does begin an avenue for students to think about the lived experience of Mississippi blues musicians.

Even with the guide’s presentation, more can be done to help tourists and blues enthusiasts begin to understand the lived experience of blues musicians in the Mississippi Delta. The project “Without Sanctuary” unveils graphic images of lynching throughout the United States. Such images presented both online and through print, will help fill in historical gaps left by cultural tourism. Graphic lynching pictures will help assure that this violent history will never be forgotten. The twisted, deranged photographs and postcards of lynchings are a sepia-toned nightmare that leaps out of the American past. Lynchings were a part of the American

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South’s landscape for generations, and they took place around, if not on, Dockery Farms. Violence must be part of cultural tourism’s conversation about the past.

Organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative are working to help bring this violent history to the public. They petition to erect memorials where documented lynchings took place. By erecting memorials to those who were lynched, communities and tourists are forced to face the violent past of the South. Buy remarking on the contested memory of the South these markers create a fuller understanding of the lives of African American blues musicians.

Instead of presenting a more complex of African American experience on Dockery Farm we are given a button. When pressing this button at Dockery Farms the visitor is presented with the music of Charley Patton- the most important “son” of Dockery Farms. Here the push back from the violent history of Dockery takes place through play. When the music pumps out of the strategically placed speakers and courses through the listeners, we are brought into a lighter presentation of the past. Our imaginations are directed to think of Patton performing on the porch of the now burnt down commissary. We are not to think about the lynching and murders that took place on Dockery; or the laborers who remain in debt; or William Dockery the man how spoke of the laborers as property or in animalistic terms; no we are to think about a place of play. The problem of representation Dockery Farms, and Mississippi blues tourism in general, lies in its focus on depiction of play and not the complexities of violence.


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