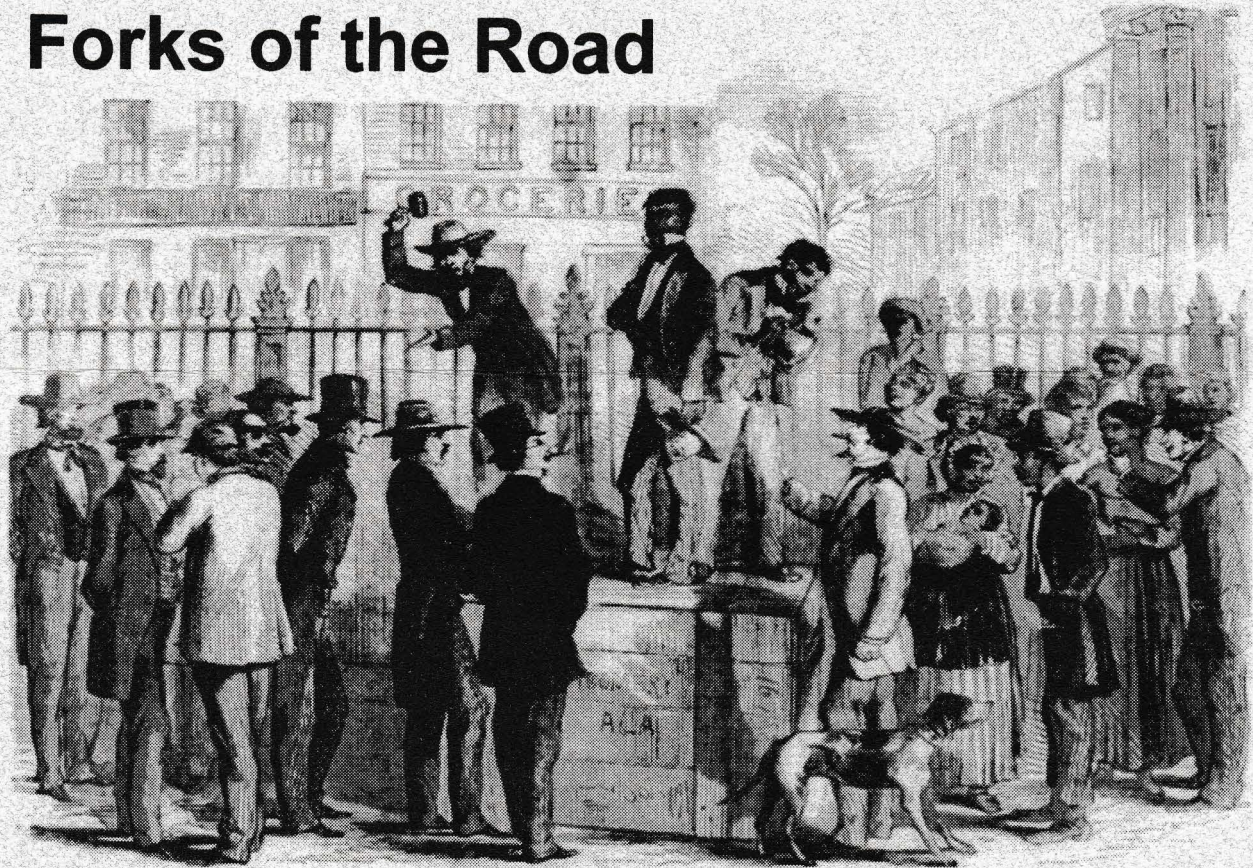


Forks of the Road



Sales of enslaved people on the streets of Natchez may have depicted a scene similar to this one.¹

people; those two words conjured up many images: people in chains; long journeys; harsh conditions; moments of uncertainty, fear, worry, or anxiety; being separated from family and friends; an uncertain destiny. For slave traders, those two words meant profit, but often at great risk.

Imagine being born enslaved on a tobacco or rice planta-

tion. Over several generations of planting and harvesting, the soil becomes overused and crops can no longer grow. You aren't needed anymore to work the land in the Atlantic States. Cotton plantations in the Deep South are doing well, but more labor is needed. What will become of you? As a slave on tobacco and rice plantations, your biggest fear might be being sold to the Deep South.

Long Hard Journey

Picture saying goodbye to your family and friends. Between 1810 and 1860, more than 200,000 enslaved people were transported to Mississippi from the Atlantic States. Most traveled by land routes, since traveling by ocean or river meant great cost to the slave trader and risk of disease or death for the slaves.

The enslaved walked in chains or coffles for several months on old Indian trails, like the Natchez Trace, or on stage roads to



Coffle Song²

*The way is long before me,
love,
and all my love's behind me;
You'll seek me down by the
old gum tree
But none of you will find me*

the markets of Natchez. Along the way, the trader may have the option buying or selling slaves if it was to his financial advantage. For the enslaved, it was a long hard journey of poor housing, illness, and emotional distress.

Arriving in Natchez, slaves were prepared to be sold to a new master, while the trader swapped, sold, and bargained for slaves at up to four different types of markets. Here, slave traders were also able to sell their wagons, mules, and horses for profit.

Buy, Sell and Trade

“Acclimated, gentlemen! A first-rate carriage driver—Six hundred dollars bid. Examine him, gentlemen—a strong and athletic fellow—but twenty seven years of age.” He is knocked off at seven hundred dollars,... springs from his elevation to follow his new owner; while his place is supplied by another subject.³

Up to 32 dealers conducted store, courthouse, and river land-ing sales, or bargained with traders at Forks of the Road market. Groups of enslaved people would camp outside of Natchez for several days where they would bathe, be issued new clothes, and be lectured on how to conduct themselves in the market place.

Forks of the Road was located

east of Natchez at a road juncture among the elite man-sions of Monmouth, Melrose, and Linden. Here, the market was not a conspicuous part of town, but was still easy to police, and conve-niently located close to the Mississippi river and land travel routes. For slave buy-ers, the Forks was a brief car-riage ride from town or es-tate.

Being auctioned was a dehuman-izing experience. Enslaved peo-ple were publicly inspected for signs of ill health or whip marks, which might indicate poor tem-perament. As slaves were sold to new masters, they parted from those with whom they had formed friendships during the long journey.

What became of them as their destinies were altered?

A Challenge of Preservation

The Forks of the Road mar-ket was last used for slave trade in 1863. Union troops then used the market build-

In 1998, a group of Natchez African Americans approached the National Park Service and the Mississippi Department of

ings as a refugee camp for newly freed slaves and as housing while occupying Natchez. By 1864, both of the market buildings were torn down.

Archives and History in an effort to have the site set aside as a National Historic Landmark (NHL). This grass-roots movement by local citizens shows the impact people wanting to preserve their history can have. Efforts to recognize the site are continuing.

When You Visit

The Forks of the Road market was located one mile east of downtown Natchez at the junction of Liberty Road, St. Catherine Street, and D'evereux Drive. A Mississippi Department of Archives and History historical marker purchased by the Natchez Juneteenth Committee commemorates the site.

Take a minute to reflect on the lives of thousands of enslaved people who were traded, bought, and sold at the Forks of the Road. People who began their lives on tobacco and rice farms in the Atlantic States, journeyed under adverse conditions to the Natchez area, and had their destinies altered as they were traded in slave markets to cotton plantations and estates in the Deep South.

¹New York Illustrated News, January 26, 1861, p. 177, illustration "Annual Sale and Hiring of Slaves at Montgomery Alabama". Courtesy of the Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden and Foundations.

²From the testimony of Sella Martin, written in 1867, as reproduced in Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, p. 705.

³Ingraham, *The South West*, II, p. 29-30.