



THE SUN CHRONICLE

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Sweet home Montgomery

BY LINDA FASTESON FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE

Deep in the heart of Dixie, in the land where cotton was once king, lies Montgomery, the state capital of Alabama, where culture and history now hold the throne. The paradoxical city of just over 200,000 people, which served as both the cradle of the Confederacy and the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement, continues to recreate itself by commemorating the historic struggles for freedom and equality, while celebrating creative self-expression.

Take a step outside, walk around Court Square, Dexter Avenue and through some of the most historic places in the United States, and hop on a trolley to see how Montgomery is truly a courageous, rebellious and visionary city.

Commerce Street

Commerce Street, alongside the stylish new Renaissance Montgomery Hotel and Spa at the Convention Center, was once the center of downtown manufacturing. The street's historic buildings have been restored, and one houses the Hank Williams Museum, at 118 Commerce St. With costumes, custom-made suits, musical instruments, and even the baby blue 1952 Cadillac in which he took his final ride, it is the most complete showcase of the country singer's life. It is owned and enthusiastically operated by Beth Petty, who is quick to note that "No other artist in the field of music has ever matched what Hank Williams did in that length of time." Nearby are Williams' favorite eateries - Chris's Hot Dogs (Elvis Presley also stopped in here), and The Elite Cafe, now called Nobles.



Montgomery's Murphy House is a Greek Revival structure, built in 1851, that served as the home of a cotton broker and was a headquarters for a Union Army provost in 1865. (Photo by Roger Fasteson)

Across from the hotel is the formerly bustling Union Station, which now houses the Montgomery Area Visitor Center. Behind it, antebellum cotton wagons unloaded their cargo on the Alabama River by the dock where the riverboat Harriot II now takes passengers on scenic cruises. The new Riverwalk, part of the city's Riverfront entertainment district, leads to an amphitheater with splash pad and the Montgomery Biscuits stadium, home to the AA affiliate of Major League Baseball's Tampa Bay Rays.

The Alley, a trendy New Orleans French Quarter-style restaurant, is just one of the restaurants in the area. You can also sample barbeque at Dreamland, Italian food at SaZa, and join the evening crowd for live music at AlleyBar's ice bar.

Court Square

Court Square, which is not square and no longer has a courthouse, is dominated by the landmark fountain that stands at what was the site of Civil War-era slave auctions. The telegram that led to first shots of the Civil War was sent from a hidden telegraph office on second floor of the square's Winter Building.

Rosa Parks waited at a nearby bus stop for the historic ride in 1955 that led to her arrest for refusing to give up her seat. The Rosa Parks Library and Museum, part of Troy University, is just down Montgomery Street, at the site of the old Empire Theater and this pivotal event. The museum includes many historic artifacts and an emotional reenactment of the incident that triggered the Montgomery bus boycott and led to a Supreme Court decision banning bus segregation.

Dexter Avenue

Dexter Avenue - one of most historic short streets in United States - runs uphill from Court Square to the State Capitol where, in 1861, Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as president of the Confederate States of America. A little over a century later in 1965, the Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights for all citizens ended here, highlighted by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "How Long, Not Long" speech. Midway up the hill, King preached from his first and only pulpit at the Dexter Avenue Memorial Baptist Church, which also served as headquarters of the bus boycott.

Hop on the trolley

A century or so ago, Montgomery had a busy new railroad station and was the first city in the western hemisphere with an electric streetcar system, the Lightning Route. A quarter or a dime, if you're a senior citizen, gets you a ride on the today's Lightning Route Trolley. It is a great way to get out of the midday Alabama sun and to the attractions that are uphill or a little farther out. It starts at the historic Union Station, just outside the visitor center, or you catch it at any stop. On weekdays, two alternating narrated routes stop at landmarks and historical sites along the way, making for a bargain-priced city tour.

A few other stops along the trolley route that shouldn't be missed:

State Capitol - Be sure to see the interior of the historic capitol building. Of note are the spiral staircase and rotunda murals depicting Alabama history and the historic house, senate, and supreme court rooms.

First White House of the Confederacy - Across the street, The First White House of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis' Civil War home while Montgomery was capital of the Confederate States of America, has been preserved with period furnishings, war memorabilia and some of his personal items. It was relocated from the the Renaissance Hotel area to this spot across from the Capitol and adjacent to the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Alabama Department of Archives and History - The story of Alabama's people is revealed through the Native American, pioneer, military and political documents and artifacts at Alabama's official state history museum. It's the oldest state-funded archive in the nation and a genealogical research facility, all housed in an impressive marble building completed in 1940.

The Dexter Parsonage Museum - This building on Centennial Hill is where King, dynamic leader of the nonviolent approach, calmed the angry crowd after the porch of his home was firebombed. It was in this kitchen he had the epiphany that gave him the strength to continue to stand up for justice and righteousness.

Civil Right Memorial - Water flows gently over the names of the key players of the modern Civil Rights movement carved into this monument dedicated to their work and courage. You can enter your name in the Wall of Tolerance, a permanent interactive display in the Civil Rights Memorial Center, part of the continuing movement for social justice

Old Alabama Town - These blocks of restored authentic structures showcase Alabama life in 19th and early 20th centuries. Take a step back in time into a one-room schoolhouse, log cabins and a cotton gin. The dogtrot house, designed with an open passageway running between two log cabins connected by common

roof, is unique in having a second story.

Montgomery Performing Arts Center - Check the schedule and catch a Broadway-style show, music concert, other cultural activity at the 1,800-seat Montgomery Performing Arts Center. Performers have included BB King, Loretta Lynn and Smoky Robinson.

Outside the city

The Wright Brothers opened the nation's first civilian flying school on the outskirts of Montgomery in 1910. Today, it is home to Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base and Air University, which provides military and civilian personnel with classes in aviation and leadership.

Hyundai's first assembly and manufacturing plant in North America is also located here. The free hour-long tram tour reveals the latest in automotive technology. Over 200 robots and their Alabamian associates are busy at work stamping, painting and assembling in the 2-million-square-foot facility, where it takes 16 1/2 hours from rolling out to rolling off. Up to 300,000 cars are produced here each year.

If Shakespeare is in town, head outside the city for the Blount Cultural Park - 350 acres of English-style countryside. It is home to the Carolyn Blount Theater, one of the largest Shakespeare festivals in the world, attracting over 300,000 visitors. Fourteen productions are staged each year, including three by the Bard. Even if you can't catch a performance, head out to enjoy the grounds. The Shakespeare Garden features flowers and plants from the plays.

The park is also home to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, with a permanent collection of 19th and 20th century American paintings and sculptures. It also houses ARTWORKS, Alabama's first interactive fine arts gallery for children.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was stationed here in WWI when he met Zelda, daughter of a prominent judge. Literary fans will want to visit the home they shared from 1931-1932 in the Cloverdale section of the city, which is preserved as a museum.

For family friendly entertainment, travel from South American jungles to Asian hilltops at the Montgomery Zoo. You'll see over 600 animals in their natural habitats and can learn more about wildlife conservation at the Mann Museum.

For the athletic types, Golf Magazine and the Zagat Survey named the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail one of top public courses in America, and it's just 10 minutes from downtown Montgomery.

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