

**Original Research Article****INTERPRETING PARCHMAN FARM: A SCHEMATIC PROPOSAL**Torrey Tracy¹

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Abstract

Parchman Farm, more formally known as Mississippi State Penitentiary, is located in unincorporated Sunflower County in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. As the state's only maximum-security prison, as well as the oldest penal institution in the state, it was constructed largely by the very same prisoners who would become the first to experience life within its confines. As a working prison farm, inmates, to this day, serve their sentence by working in state-owned agricultural fields, or in the onsite manufacturing workshops-ultimately generating revenue for the state. Since its creation at the turn of the 20th century, Parchman Farm has been a unique character in the narrative of the Magnolia State. The prison has been home to several notable blues musicians, including Bukka White and Son House. Its distinctive form of labor-intensive rehabilitation inspired many numbers of blues songs to be written about the facility, ultimately becoming an informal incubator of sorts for pre-war delta blues. In 1939, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded White and multiple others at the farm for the Library of Congress. In addition to its rich delta blues history, the facility also served as an integral component to the civil rights movement after becoming a brief home to the 1963 "freedom riders" upon their arrest. In 2005 Tim Climer, the (at the time) executive director of the Sunflower County Economic Development District, stated that he wanted to develop Parchman Farm as a tourist attraction by establishing an interpretive center. I take this as an invitation, as well as an obligation, to participate and contribute-implementing my past work along with future research, student participation, site visits, interviews, and an unprecedented level of appreciation of all thing's delta blues, towards the thoughtful schematic design of a compelling interpretive center.

Key words: Parchman Farm, Sunflower County, Interpretive Center

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In 2011, I had no prior contact or connection with the state of Mississippi before I agreed to go on a 250-mile bike ride along the Natchez Trace. Like any historical enthusiast venturing into unfamiliar hot and humid territory, on a bicycle mind you, in August of all months, I performed the necessary due diligence by researching the state and its many attractions.

From its early documented history involving Native cultures, 18th century explorations and settlements, the American Civil War, the agricultural boom of the early 1900s, up to its role in the modern civil rights movement, I was amazed at the state's diverse and rich history. My anticipation grew wildly.

After my aching muscles returned to their relaxed state, I reflected upon my bicycle ride along the Natchez Trace as very transformative to say the least—not only a successful test of my physical endurance but more importantly, a sincere relationship with a new environment. I knew soon afterward that my budding love affair with the Magnolia State would only flourish.

Academically I would find myself being driven deeper into more of the state's civil rights history as well as becoming more versed and appreciative of pre-war delta blues music and musicians. I would also come to enjoy how these entities became intermingled and part of a shared narrative.

Author Ted Gioia in his work *Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized Music* profoundly notes the state's influence on our modern culture when he wrote “no U.S. president has hailed from the [Mississippi] Delta region, or indeed anywhere from Mississippi. Nor has a vice-president. No Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was born here. No Secretary of State. The region's contributions to the fields of Chemistry and Physics are practically nil. The same can be said for economics, psychology, sociology, and a college course catalog full of other academic disciplines. None of the Dow Jones Industrial companies have their headquarters here. In fact, not a single member of the fortune 500 calls Mississippi their home. Yet music the world over was transformed by the songs made here. The influence the [Mississippi] Delta has on the sound of our musical lives is so pervasive today that it is almost impossible to take full measure of its impact¹.

Countless trips to the state since my first over a decade ago would allow me to collect more and more first-hand stories and experiences—experiential souvenirs (as I like to call them). My visits would also introduce me to other characters who helped shape the state's history—one of the most influential undoubtedly being Parchman Farm, more formally known as Mississippi State Penitentiary.

Parchman Farm is situated in unincorporated Sunflower County in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. The county, founded in 1844 is the longest in the state and is home to some of the best agricultural conditions in the country. For years following the American Civil War, African Americans migrated to the area in hopes of finding work. From 1870 until 1900, the African American population in Sunflower County grew from approx. 3000 to 12,000 and during the first couple decades of the 20th century, the population almost tripled making up 75% of the area's population.

For much of the 19th century after the American Civil War, many of the southern states, including Mississippi implemented a convict lease system for its prisoners; lessees paid fees to the state and were responsible for caring for their hired help-- feeding, clothing and housing prisoners who worked for them as laborers. Although it proved to be very lucrative for both the state and lessees, the system was inherently flawed and led to entrapment and a high rate of convictions for minor offenses for black males, whose population as prisoners increased rapidly in the decades after the war. This system grossly stereotyped black males who often struggled for years to get out from it.

Due to consequences faced by abuses and corruption, the state of Mississippi ended its convict lease program in late 1894, but, as Douglas Blackmon explores in his book, *Slavery by Another Name*,

a study of the convict lease system, the South kept a system of convict labor in place until World War II. Generations of black men were trapped by the system. Pivoting from the program meant the state had to build prisons to house convicted persons².

In 1901, the State of Mississippi began buying up parcels of land in Sunflower County to establish a prison. Eventually, the state would accumulate nearly 16000 acres—over half of which had been owned by the Parchman family. In 1905, enough infrastructure was in place to begin to formally house inmates on-site. As the state's only maximum-security prison, as well as the oldest penal institution in the state, it was constructed largely by the very same prisoners who would become the first to experience life within its confines. For decades, the prison operated essentially as a for-profit cotton plantation; prisoners grew their own food, made their own clothing, raised livestock, and even served as armed guards or "trustee shooters." For much of its history, Parchman was designed without boundaries or fences because of its vast size and remote location². As Mississippi law mandated the prison be self-sustaining, it proved to be very financially successful for the state—in 1905, for example, the state was taking in nearly \$200,000 every two years from its harvest (the equivalent of nearly \$5 million in today's value). The extremely harsh and relentless working and living conditions made "Parchman Farm" notorious, but the state was later able to improve Parchman's image by implementing prison reforms. As a working prison farm, inmates, to this day, serve their sentence by working in state-owned agricultural fields, or in the onsite manufacturing workshops-ultimately generating revenue for the state.

While it can be said, quite definitively, that Mississippi is the birthplace of the American blues, Parchman Farm should be considered its cradle. With little access to radio or records and, to help pace their labors and pass the day, prisoners often joined in work songs that had survived from earlier decades. This rich repository of older music traditions would become studied extensively by folklorists Alan Lomax, his father John Lomax, Herbert Halpert, and William Ferris. Alan Lomax observed that such songs "revived flagging spirits, restored energy to failing bodies, [and] brought laughter to silent misery." The Lomaxes first visited Parchman in 1933 and returned numerous times to record blues and work songs, spirituals, and personal interviews with inmates. The unaccompanied vocals by female inmates recorded in the prison's sewing room in 1936 and 1939 have been cited by blues scholar Samuel Charters as an invaluable document of the way blues must have sounded in its earliest stages³.

Many Mississippi blues artists found inspiration from their time spent working the fields at Parchman. While countless inmates contributed to this original amalgam of musical genres, some would later become more celebrated for their authority. Booker (Bukka) White, born in 1906 in Aberdeen, MS was a cousin of the legendary BB King. Bukka was one of the most influential Mississippi Blues artists who, at one time, called Parchman their home. After being found guilty of assault with a weapon, Bukka spent three years at the prison. He first recorded for the Lomax's during his incarceration in 1939⁴.

White also recorded several memorable songs about his imprisonment, including "When Can I Change My Clothes" and "Parchman Farm Blues" in 1940, shortly after his release. Other notable blues artists who served sentences at Parchman include Sun House (a formative influence to Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters to name a few), R. L. Burnside, John "Big Bad Smitty" Smith, Terry "Big T" Williams, and, reportedly, Aleck "Rice" Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson No. 2), while songs with Parchman themes were recorded by Charley Patton, Wade Walton, and others. Mose Allison, who grew up in nearby Tippecanoe, first recorded his "Parchman Farm" in 1957, and many artists including John Mayall and Johnny Winter later recorded it. Former rockabilly singer Wendell Cannon organized a prison band program here in 1960 and took groups consisting of trustee inmates to perform across the state for several decades. Blues artists who participated in the band program included David (Malone) Kimbrough, Jr., and Mark "Muleman" Massey.

While its influence on blues music began to fade in the early 1960s, Parchman Farm would become directly embroiled in the civil rights movement. During the Freedom Ride movement,

twenty-seven riders rode from Montgomery, Alabama to Jackson, MS on May 24, 1961—challenging segregation on public buses. As they got off the bus in Jackson, they were immediately arrested. After they were sentenced to jail, more and more Freedom Rides took place, often ending in Jackson where participants were subsequently arrested. During the entirety of the Freedom Ride protest more than 300 riders, including Congressman John Lewis, were arrested, and many of them were sent to Parchman. Freedom Riders were kept in poor conditions—given clothes that did not fit, not allowed to exercise, or leave their cells, often served inedible food—and ridiculed by prison officials. When the prisoners refused to stop singing freedom songs, their mattresses were taken away. Governor Ross Barnett, of Mississippi, ordered the guards to “break their spirit, not their bones”. However, the jail served another purpose. According to Raymond Arsenault in *Freedom Riders*, “In effect, the Freedom Riders turned a prison into an unruly but ultimately enlightening laboratory where competing theories of nonviolent struggle could be discussed and tested. In the darkest corners of Parchman, where prison authorities had hoped to break the Riders’ spirit, a remarkable mix of personal and political education became the basis of individual and collective survival”⁵.

David Fankhauser, a freedom rider and inmate at Parchman Farm, recalled “In our cells, we were given a Bible, an aluminum cup and a toothbrush. The cell measured 6 × 8 feet with a toilet and sink on the back wall, and a bunk bed. We were permitted one shower per week, and no mail was allowed. The policy in the maximum-security block was to keep lights on 24 hours a day⁶.” The experiences and hardships endured by the Freedom riders gave the group immense credibility in the civil rights movement.

Being so intimately connected to many facets of Mississippi culture and history, I imagined that there existed some formal interpretive or visitors center at Parchman Farm that one could learn more from. To my surprise, I was unable to find such a facility; however, a few years back I stumbled upon a 2005 quote from Tim Climer, the (at the time) executive director of the Sunflower County Economic Development District. He stated that he wanted to develop Parchman Farm as a tourist attraction by establishing an interpretive center⁷. As a novice historian, who draws inspiration from history and how it can shape the built environment, I took this as an invitation, as well as an obligation, to participate and contribute--implementing my past work along with future research, student participation, site visits, interviews, and an unprecedented level of appreciation of all thing’s delta blues, towards the thoughtful schematic design of a compelling interpretive center.

Intrigued by Mr. Climer’s interest in the development of a center, as well as by his role in this story, I felt it necessary to reach out and get to know him a bit better. I also wanted to express my extracurricular interest of taking him up on the challenge he proposed. During our phone conversation, he explained to me that nothing substantial came from his notion proposed 15 years prior, and he was enthusiastic that we shared a common interest in highlighting this integral part of Mississippi’s past. Initially, he felt an interpretive center would be in line and supported by the emerging Mississippi Blues Trail initiative spearheaded by the Mississippi Blues Commission. The Blues Trail was established in 2006 to place interpretive markers at the most notable historical sites related to the birth, growth, and influence of the blues throughout (and in some cases beyond) the state of Mississippi. Currently, there are over 200 markers in the program⁸. Per Tim Climer, not only would a formal interpretive center help usher in tourism revenue to the area, but culturally connect to other Delta blues museums in Clarksdale and the surrounding areas⁹.

Having the support and enthusiasm of Tim, I was eager to begin researching a schematic proposal and design of an interpretive center, even if it were only to be shared between him and me. The first, and most important element in my opinion, was the overall approach, or angle, the interpretive center was going to take. Would it seek to educate on the inner workings of the prison? Would it serve as a commentary on social justice? I asked myself if there existed any interpretive centers for currently functioning prisons. Alcatraz came to mind first, but the prison itself was decommissioned in 1963. After becoming more familiar with the story of Parchman, as well as Tim Climer’s interests, it was clear to me that the center should highlight and support awareness of Parchman Farm’s influence on delta blues music and its musicians and the contemporary civil rights

movement—particularly the role the farm played in the Freedom Rides. Parchman Farm was a very unique character in these stories, and an interpretive center at the location need not go beyond such.

Strategically, it would be ideal to site an interpretive center near the Farm’s main entrance—at the corner of US Route 49 and Mississippi Highway 32—a very desolate flat stretch of earth in the heart of the Delta. At this entry, there is an iconic, and yet almost dreadful, “Mississippi State Penitentiary” canopy and sign that welcomes all those who have business at the facility. Currently there exists a clear spot of land directly across from the entrance—a fantastic piece of earth that would create a powerful visual connection and relationship to the prison.

As an architectural form, the proposed interpretive center would consist of a collection of simple volumes—rather humble and efficient in size and material, as well as in scale with the surrounding existing built environment. The deliberately small size of the interpretive center would help to avoid creating any extraneous disturbances near the working prison. The larger of the two volumes would serve to educate visitors on both Parchman Farm’s connection to Delta blues music as well as its key involvement in the civil rights movement. While familiarizing themselves with the many artists who contributed to this genre, visitors would be able to listen to samples of work through an interactive component via their smart phone. The smaller volume would serve as the administrative and amenities element.

Situated between the rectilinear volumes, and beneath an elevated screening element, would be a small courtyard that is anchored by what is to be intended as a memorial to those incarcerated. The 6’ x 8’ weathered steel mass would poetically situate visitors in a confined space—one reminiscent of the space a few of the Freedom Riders were placed in during their time at the Farm. Within the steel mass would be concealed speakers emitting faint sounds identifiable with life inside of Parchman Farm.

As an architectural designer who aims to raise awareness and highlight history through design, I was immediately captivated by idea of the development of an interpretive center for Parchman Farm. The facility, albeit an active home for incarcerated individuals, is very much steeped in Mississippi history—particularly history surrounding one of Mississippi’s cash crops: blues music. I look forward to an official home for the public to visit to better understand this rich and colorful narrative.

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