

Centuries of Charm

Rich in history, the tucked-away town of Natchez, Mississippi, has many stories to tell — with plenty still being written

FOR 300 YEARS, creative types have been drawn to the charming river town of Natchez, Mississippi: Mark Twain, who had a complicated relationship with the town, was a frequent visitor. Mick Jagger developed a taste for Natchez while producing the James Brown biopic *Get on Up*. Though it flies under the radar of the well-trod tourist trail, the town is not lacking in history. Natchez has more than 1,000 structures on the National Register of Historic Places, along with 13 National Historic Landmarks. Before the Civil War, it had the highest concentration of millionaires in the U.S. Thanks in part to its wealthy citizenry, the town avoided destruction during the conflict and now has the largest array of intact antebellum architecture in the country. This year, Natchez celebrates its tercentennial, providing yet another reason to visit the oldest settlement on the Mississippi.

1 A SOLEMN STROLL NATCHEZ NATIONAL CEMETERY

There's a reason this cemetery, established in 1866, is on the National Register of Historic Places: It offers a well-preserved peek into Natchez's unique social history. Members of the armed forces and their loved ones are buried here, including members of the African-American 24th U.S. Infantry regiment and personnel from the Union navy. There are plenty of legends and stories within the cemetery's sprawling, uneven grounds, and in true Natchez fashion, nobody will fault you for a wandering mind — but the truth is often stranger than fiction, so sign up for a tour. www.cem.va.gov/cems/nchp/natchez.asp

2 A HIKE THROUGH HISTORY NATCHEZ TRAILS AND MISSISSIPPI RIVER BLUFF PARK WALK

Turn any corner in Natchez and you'll spot something of historical note. If you want to know exactly what you're looking at, walk one of the signposted Natchez trails. These self-guided tours wind through downtown and along the river bluffs, detailing everything from the most prominent home of each generation to the topography of the cliffs. If admiring a Mississippi sunset from the highest point along the river turns your thoughts to literature (or libations), take a detour down the bluffs to Under the Hill Saloon, which Mark Twain frequented during his Natchez stays. [For-natchez.org/trails.html](http://for-natchez.org/trails.html)

3 SPIRITED SPIRITS KING'S TAVERN

Built circa 1789, the oldest building in town boasts two kinds of spirits: a resident ghost (the mistress of the bar's first owner, Richard King) and a menu of handcrafted cocktails. Celebrated chef Regina Charboneau serves innovative comfort food (like potpies with biscuit crusts) alongside healthy, upscale

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classics. King's Tavern has the only wood oven in town and is the only restaurant without a deep-fat fryer. Regina's husband, Doug, runs the family-owned rum distillery next door. The tavern's local feel extends to the decor: The bar is made from whiskey barrels and the ceiling wood comes from keelboats that once plied the Mississippi. M.mainstreethub.com/kingstavernnatchez

4 MUSICAL MEMORIES RHYTHM NIGHT CLUB MEMORIAL MUSEUM

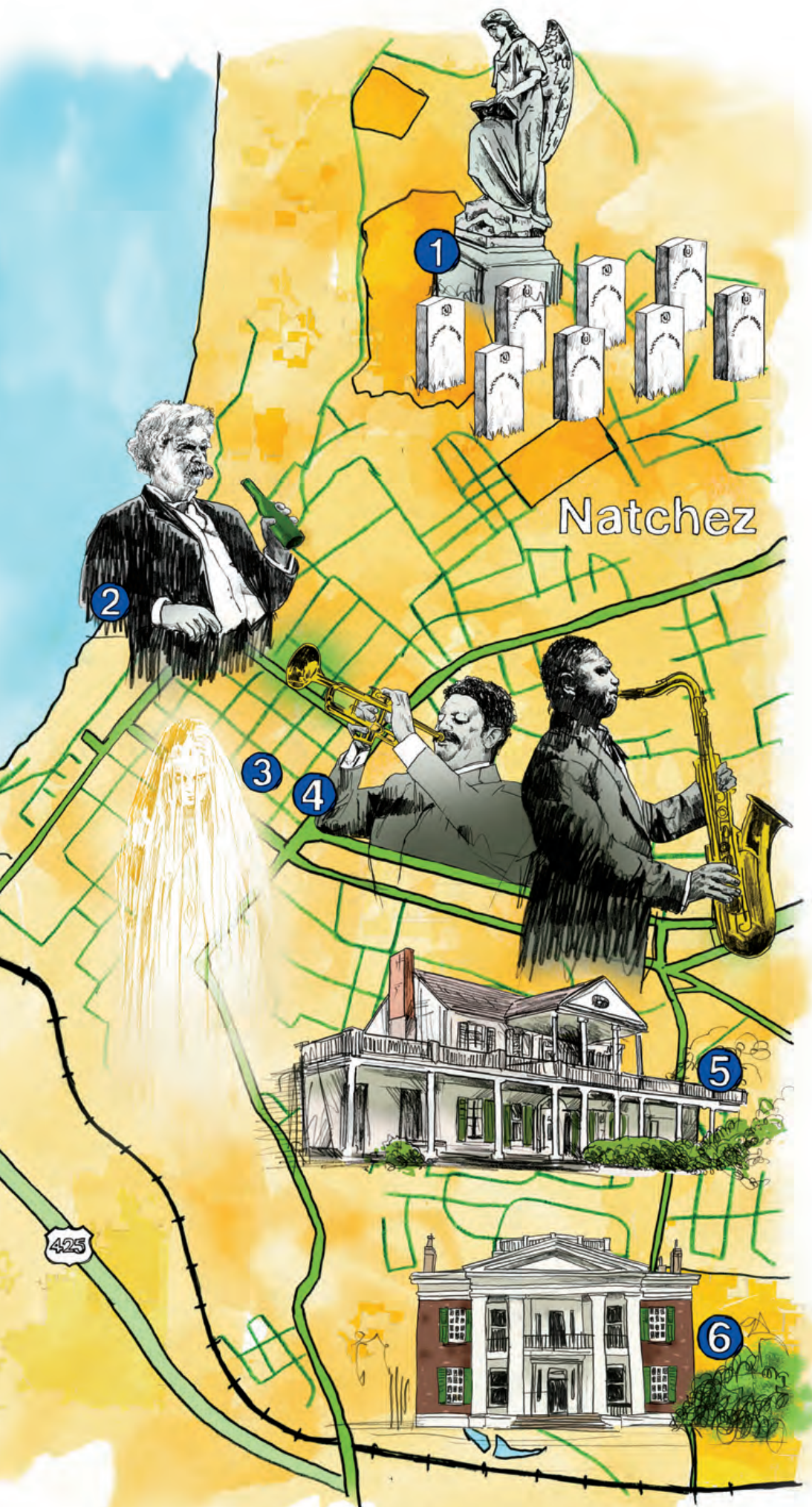
Natchez has long held a place in music history thanks to the Rhythm Night Club, which was one of the most popular blues venues in the South until 1940, when it was the scene of one of the country's deadliest fires during a show with Chicago bandleader Walter Barnes. The disaster has since been immortalized in films, poems and music. In 2010, Natchez residents Monroe and Betty Sago built a museum on the grounds of the former nightclub, which offers fascinating insights into the town's cultural history. Rnconsitemm.org

5 HOLLYWOOD HOUSING LINDEN

The exterior of Linden will be familiar to *Gone With the Wind* fans — the Tara plantation was based on the building's facade. Linden is one of Natchez's oldest manors, dating back to 1790 and serving as home for six generations of the Conner family. A tour with heiress Jeanette Feltus is a special treat — and not just because of her famous alcoholic milk punch. The eccentric and candid guide whirls elegantly from room to room, telling the stories of each artifact and addressing portraits of her family members with an irreverent gusto you'll never forget. Lindenbandb.com

6 MELROSE PLACE MELROSE IN NATCHEZ NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Many of Natchez's storied homes are intriguing, but at the Melrose house, park ranger Barney Schoby Jr., brings the customs of the past to life. He knows every inch of the 15,000-square-foot mansion and all of the secrets of the three families who lived there. Schoby can even recite passages from the family's journals by heart, recounting everything from celebrations to financial woes with an engaging flair. Melrose, which was originally built for the McMurrin family in 1848, was sold furnished, which has resulted in its being one of the most intact antebellum estates in the country. Nps.gov/natc —HILLARY RICHARD



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