



# NATCHEZ TRACE PARKWAY

*Mississippi  
Alabama  
Tennessee*

# ONCE AN INDIAN PATH, THEN A WILDERNESS ROAD BETWEEN NASHVILLE AND NATCHEZ, AND FROM 1800 TO 1830 A HIGHWAY BINDING THE OLD SOUTHWEST TO THE UNION



**W**E HOPE you will enjoy your visit along the Natchez Trace Parkway and remember your experience with pleasure and satisfaction. The parkway offers you a leisurely drive of 280 miles (450 when completed) through a protected zone of forest, meadow, and field. As you drive along the sometimes gently rolling, sometimes precipitous hills, the lush vegetation, stately trees, vines, shrubs, and other flowering plants provide a variegated background of beauty.

The parkway follows roughly—crossing, recrossing, and at times paralleling—the route of the Old Natchez Trace. A frontier road in the early days of the American Republic, the Trace subsequently linked the Old Southwest with the settled East.

Today, markers, exhibits, and trails explain why this frontier road has been remembered and help you understand its history. During your visit you can see a segment of the American landscape that is rapidly regaining its frontier characteristics. You can walk or ride over typical sections of the old road, visit historic buildings, and observe sites and scenes associated with a stirring and adventurous era of the American past.

## TRACK OF THE INDIANS

When Europeans first came into the Natchez Trace country, they found it sparsely occupied by Indians—mainly Natchez, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. All were relative latecomers who, according to their own traditions, had come into the region from the West centuries earlier.

Evidences of the aboriginal inhabitants—mounds, shell heaps, fortifications, cemeteries, and village sites—abound along the Trace. Archeologists have studied these sites, both on and near the parkway, and have recovered an immense number of manmade objects, learning much about these Indians' culture. These objects vary from simple stoneware, hammers, projectile points, primitive tools, and utensils to elaborately designed pottery, artistic ornaments, and lifelike sculpture.

Many of the artifacts taken from the Indian sites were made from materials not of local origin, such as copper that may have come from as far away as Lake Superior. Some have designs and motifs that probably originated in Central America, suggesting the existence of a considerable volume of trade goods, some of which must have been carried overland. These artifacts further suggest that the dim wilderness trails, predecessors of the Natchez Trace, probably were used by prehistoric Indians.

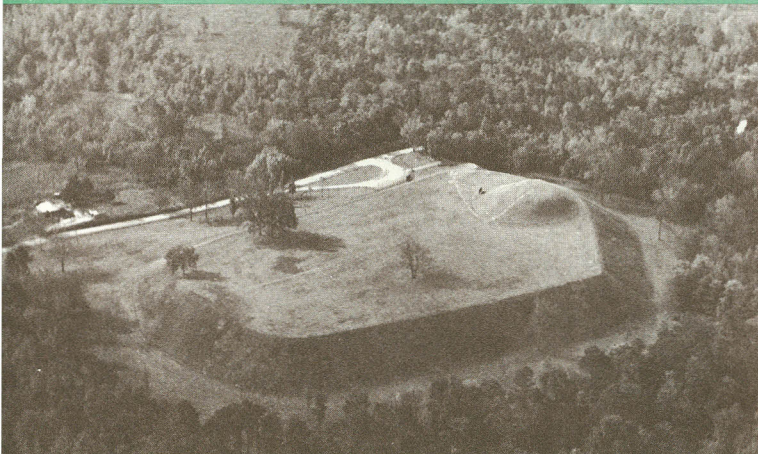
## BEGINNINGS OF THE TRACE

When Europeans began to explore the southern part of what is now the United States, they found a network of beaten paths, perhaps first made by deer, buffalo, or other wild animals in quest of salt licks or food. Indians added others, and they turned many of the older ones to their own use as warpaths, hunting trails, or paths linking village with village and tribe with tribe. Since the region is rich in remains of prehistoric Indian occupation,



Near Nashville the Old Natchez Trace looks today much as it did 150 years ago. *Courtesy Paul A. Moore, Tennessee Conservation Dept.*

Emerald Mound, one of the largest temple mounds in the United States, is less than a mile off the parkway.



Mount Locust a century and a half ago offered food and lodging to Trace travelers.



it seems likely that these old paths had been in use for hundreds of years. Pioneer settlers frequently called such a trail a *trace*—a word that in old French suggests its origin as a line of footprints or animal tracks.

These traces, or trails, showed a marked tendency to follow watershed divides in an effort to avoid stream crossings and swamps, even though the distances were greater. Several of these trails, though individually unimportant, when joined together led in a northeasterly direction, from present-day Natchez, Miss., to Nashville, Tenn. Thus the Natchez, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and probably the Cherokee tribes were linked together. This trail system became increasingly important after the coming of the Europeans, who used it for their military, political, and commercial activities while pushing into the region from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Seaboard.

### COMING OF THE EUROPEANS

Frenchmen, shortly after their arrival on the gulf coast in 1699, first explored the area through which the Natchez Trace ran. They settled in Natchez in 1716. During its early years the colony seemed promising, but, because of an unfortunate quarrel with the Indians, it was destroyed in 1729 when the Natchez tribe massacred the greater part of the population—nearly 300 people.

Gradually exploring the interior, the French by 1733 had enough information to draw a fairly accurate map of the region. It showed an Indian trail running from Natchez to Choctaw villages in eastern Mississippi and thence to the Chickasaw villages farther north. French traders, missionaries, and soldiers frequently traveled over the old trail, to which—in writing at least—they gave no name.

In 1763 France ceded the region to the English. During the years that followed, Great Britain established the Colony of West Florida, a narrow strip of land extending along the Gulf Coast from the Mississippi River to Georgia. Under British occupation, a considerable population of English-speaking people moved into the region around Natchez. The English settled themselves on farms in the vicinity of Natchez and thus began a permanent occupation. They, like the French, were interested in Indian trade and frequently journeyed over the trail which, on contemporary maps, they called the "Path to the Choctaw Nation."

During the American Revolution, Spain went to war against England, not because she sympathized with the Americans, but because she hoped to injure an old enemy and rival. As a result of the British defeat, the Spaniards claimed all the lands between the Mississippi and the Chattahoochee Rivers, and northward to and beyond Memphis. Spain continued to hold Natchez until 1798. But few Spaniards came to live in the Natchez country, and the population remained predominantly English. During the Revolution itself, many American Tories from the rebelling colonies settled in the Natchez District. ing colonies settled in the Natchez District.

In 1798, Spain, while retaining the lands west of the Mississippi and along the Gulf Coast, finally surrendered Natchez to the United States, along with all the lands above 31° north latitude. The Mississippi Territory was immediately organized, with its capital at Natchez. The new territory had a population of more than 8,000 people, mostly English-speaking, who had settled there during the period of British control, 1763–79.

So much for the beginnings of the southern end of the Trace. What about the northern end? At the same time the French were establishing themselves around Natchez, British traders from the seaboard colonies reached the Trace country about 1700, but made no permanent settlement until North Carolinians came into middle Tennessee and founded Nashville in 1780. They too found an old Indian trail running to the Chickasaw villages, near what is now Tupelo, Miss., and called it the "Chickasaw Trace."

### TRAMPING OF THE BOATMEN

Beginning about 1785, men from Kentucky and other regions of the western frontier floated their farm products downriver to Natchez and New Orleans; then, en route to their homes, they either walked or rode the Natchez Trace to Nashville. By 1800 a thousand were making the trip each year.

The volume of such traffic grew year by year until these colorful, hard-bitten "Kaintucks" had tramped the Trace into a crude wilderness road.

While few goods were carried over the Trace, it contributed immeasurably to the economic development of the West. For years pioneer economy was largely based upon the Spanish silver carried home in the pockets of thousands of "Kaintucks."

## LINK TO THE UNION

The new Mississippi Territory urgently needed better means of communication with the settled parts of the United States. Natchez was more than 1,200 miles from Washington, D.C.

The way to Natchez was fairly easy: simply cross the mountains, thence down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. But, return the same way? To sail or row upstream was too laborious, and certainly too slow for pioneer Americans. They could go downstream to the gulf, and thence by sea to the East Coast. But that too was unsatisfactory because Spain controlled the lower Mississippi—and sailings were few.

The only alternative was to go overland. But how? Follow an old Indian trail to Nashville, the nearest settlement, then via Knoxville to Washington. To facilitate communication with the new territory, Congress in 1800 extended mail service from Nashville to Natchez.

The Postmaster General complained that the overland trail could be used only "at a great expense to the public on account of the badness of the road which is said to be no other than an Indian footpath very devious and narrow." He then suggested to the Secretary of War that United States troops stationed in the Southwest be used "in clearing out a wagon road and bridging the creeks and causewaying the swamps between Nashville and Natchez."

President Thomas Jefferson in 1801 ordered the U.S. Army to do the job. When the work was completed, a French traveler estimated that the improvement reduced by 100 miles the distance between Natchez and Nashville. Growing importance of the road led to further improvements. Congress appropriated funds in 1806, and the work was done under the supervision of the Postmaster General. Thus, within a short time, the old Indian trail became an important frontier road.

## YEARS OF TURBULENCE

From 1800 to 1820, the Trace was the most heavily traveled road in the Old Southwest. For more than a generation, a colorful procession of frontier characters passed over it. In a single day in late spring, an innkeeper might observe a group of returning boatmen, "dirty as Hottentots"; a company of United States soldiers; a mounted postman; a Methodist missionary; and an Indian hunting party.

As a post road it was immeasurably useful. It also was of vital importance to the United States during the long "cold war" that ended only in 1819 when Spain abandoned her claims to Florida. The military importance of the road became evident in 1803; it then appeared that France might refuse to honor her bargain to surrender Louisiana. Ordered by the President, Tennessee Militia marched to Natchez, giving the Trace its first large-scale military usage.

When war did come in 1812, Andrew Jackson led the Tennessee Militia to Natchez. Although ordered to disband his troops in 1813, he refused and led them home. Sharing the hardships of his men as they marched over the Trace, he earned the affectionate nickname, "Old Hickory." Two years later the "victors of New Orleans" followed the Trace northward to their homes. Because of Jackson's victory march, his name has been associated with the Trace more than that of any other man.

## DECLINE OF AN ANCIENT TRAIL

The importance of the old road began to decline after the War of 1812, partly because it was no longer needed for frontier defense. The newly developed steamboat robbed it of its traffic, as did newer and more direct roads. When the Indians moved West and as Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee became more populous, the Trace lost its wilderness character. Some sections were abandoned. Others became part of the local road system. The creak of the farm wagon supplanted the Indian war cry and the rattle of saber and spur.

## THE CHANGING SCENE

What is the best season to pay a visit? That depends on your taste and interest. If you prefer budding green forest foliage as a background for brilliant redbud, crimson maple, or milk-white dogwood, then by all means come in March or April. If you like waving fields of yellow, come in September; later you can see variegated, sometimes strikingly beautiful, displays of autumnal foliage. Under the brilliant sun of a winter day, the smooth, bright trunks of sycamore and beech stand out boldly, and leafless branches and twigs on roadside and meadow weave stark patterns against the sky.

## Landmarks Along the Trace

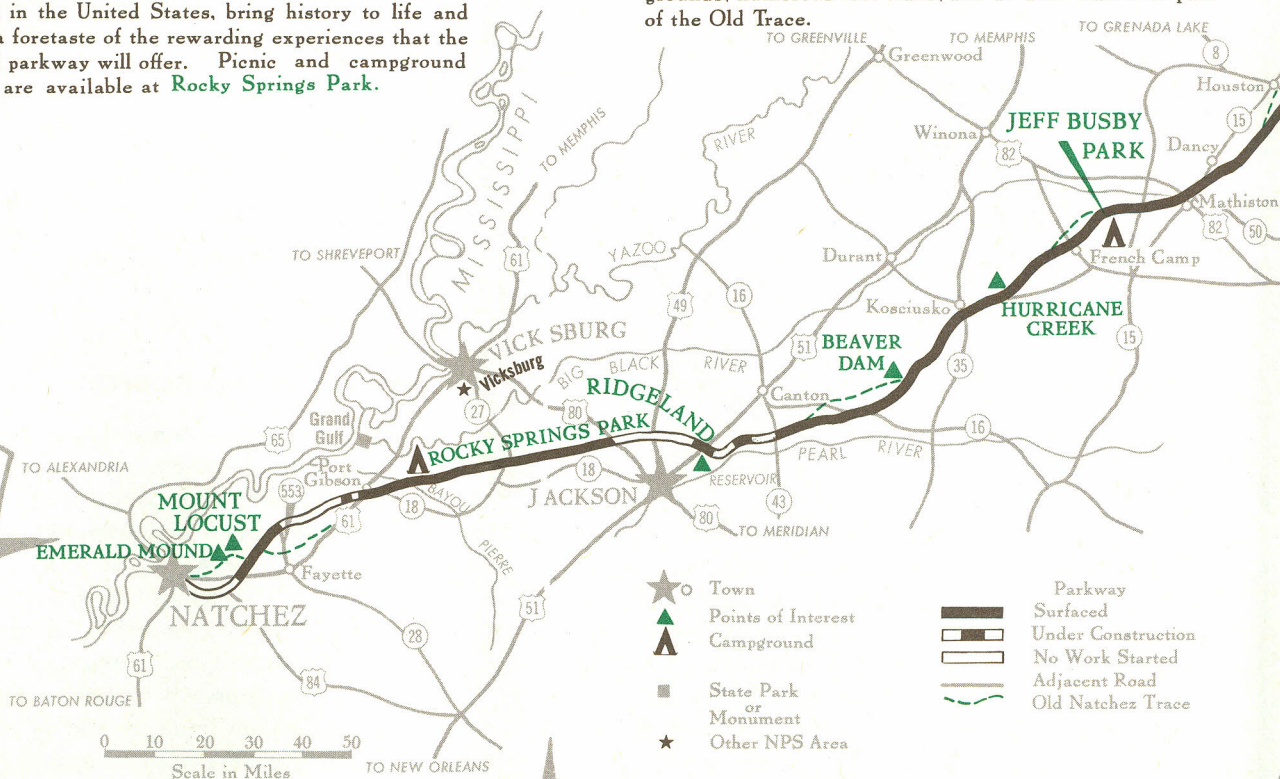
The parkway offers a rich opportunity for those who like to delve into the past. You can walk or drive on representative sections of the **Old Trace** and see for yourself what a frontier road looked like. At short intervals you will find other landmarks: a building, an abandoned mine, or a stream crossing, all associated with the people who lived on or traveled over this historic thoroughfare.

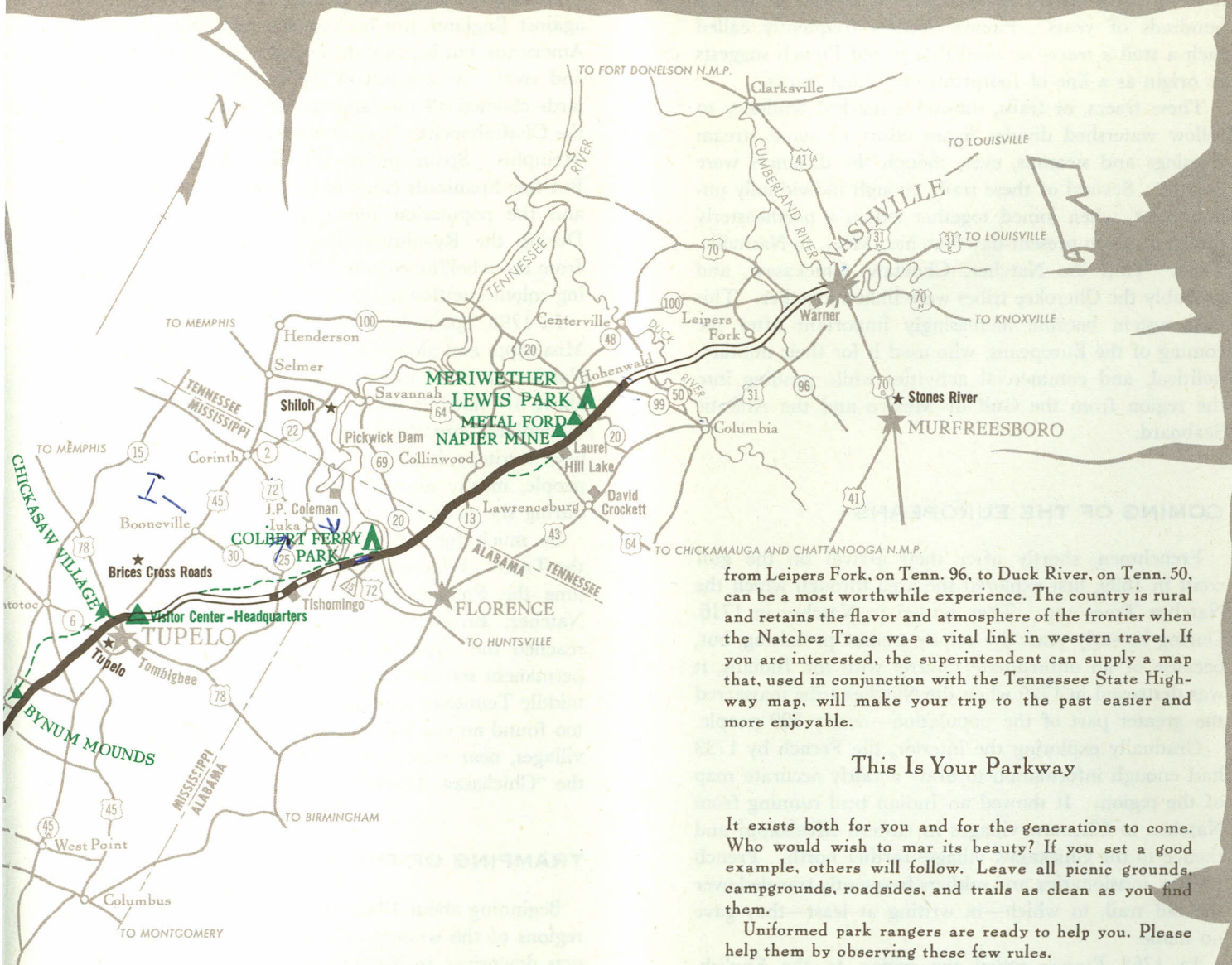
Near the motor road are installations designed to help you understand and enjoy what you see. These include visitor centers, waysides, markers, historic houses, hiking trails, campgrounds, and picnic areas. Following are descriptions of some of the more interesting stops, keyed to the map in green.

Along the roadside, the lush semi-tropical vegetation of the Deep South abounds. Restored **Mount Locust** with its frontier furniture and utensils, the earliest inn on the trace, and **Emerald Mound**, one of the largest Indian ceremonial structures in the United States, bring history to life and give you a foretaste of the rewarding experiences that the completed parkway will offer. Picnic and campground facilities are available at **Rocky Springs Park**.

Between Jackson and the **Tupelo Visitor Center** you can motor over the longest completed section of the parkway and enjoy its delights and benefits. At **Ridgeland** you will find an exhibit that will enrich your appreciation of the history of the Old Trace. Markers, trails, and exhibits, of which the **Chickasaw Village** site and **Bynum Mounds** are highlights, remind you that this was the land of Choctaw, Chickasaw, and prehistoric Indians. Also, the parkway parallels and sometimes preserves examples of the historic Natchez Trace. At **Jeff Busby Park** is a campground and a delightful overlook from the highest elevation on the parkway in Mississippi.

For an overall impression of the parkway, you should visit the **Tupelo Visitor Center**, where you can see the film "Path of Empire" and view exhibits. Sixty-five miles of parkway run northward from Cherokee, Ala. through hilly terrain typical of middle Tennessee. Here are picnic grounds, numerous foot trails, and an auto trail over part of the Old Trace.





from Leipers Fork, on Tenn. 96, to Duck River, on Tenn. 50, can be a most worthwhile experience. The country is rural and retains the flavor and atmosphere of the frontier when the Natchez Trace was a vital link in western travel. If you are interested, the superintendent can supply a map that, used in conjunction with the Tennessee State Highway map, will make your trip to the past easier and more enjoyable.

### This Is Your Parkway

It exists both for you and for the generations to come. Who would wish to mar its beauty? If you set a good example, others will follow. Leave all picnic grounds, campgrounds, roadsides, and trails as clean as you find them.

Uniformed park rangers are ready to help you. Please help them by observing these few rules.

Heed posted speed limits. Maximum speed is 50 m. p. h. Commercial traffic is prohibited.

Build fires only in fireplaces.

Picnic only at authorized grounds.

Do not hunt or use firearms.

Leave undisturbed all natural, historical, and archeological objects.

Carefully extinguish all lighted cigarettes, cigars, and matches; never throw them or other debris from moving cars.

At **Metal Ford** and **Napier Mine** you can get a fine "closeup" of frontier iron mining and smelting. At the grave of **Meriwether Lewis** you can pay your respects to the memory of the Great Explorer and find, at the nearby museum, a brief account of his life and achievements.

From **Meriwether Lewis Park** to Nashville, the parkway will cross deep valleys and run atop sharp ridges through a region of great natural beauty and historical interest. Much of the Old Trace, either unimproved or graveled country road, is passable in dry weather.

If you are venturesome and curious, willing to risk getting stuck or lost, a 24 mile drive on the old Natchez Trace

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The parkway is still in the process of construction and development, as you can see on the map. This may require some detours, so it is advisable to make local inquiries for accurate travel information.

*Accommodations.* There are no overnight facilities along the parkway; hotels, motor lodges, and restaurants offer a variety of services in nearby towns and cities. The only service station on the parkway is at Jeff Busby Park. Campgrounds are located at Rocky Springs, Jeff Busby, Colbert Ferry, and Meriwether Lewis Parks. Campsites cannot be reserved, and the length of stay is limited to 15 days.

*Visitor Services.* For the story of the old Natchez Trace be sure to see the film "Path of Empire," shown at the Tupelo Visitor Center. Travel information and assistance can also be obtained here or from any uniformed park ranger along the parkway. Self-guiding interpretive markers, nature trails, wayside exhibits, and museums are located at various points of interest. As new sections of the parkway are completed, additional exhibits, picnic areas, and camping facilities will be available.

*Publications.* If you wish more information about the parkway and points of special interest, we recommend Dawson Phelps, *The Natchez Trace: Indian Trail to Parkway* and the handbook *Mount Locust*, both on sale at the Tupelo Visitor Center. Folders describing the Tupelo-Baldcypress Swamp, the Bynum Mounds, Emerald Mound, and other places are available without charge. Post cards of Natchez Trace subjects can be secured at Tupelo, Ridgeland, Mount Locust, and Meriwether Lewis. Free self-guiding leaflets are available at some of the nature trails.

## ADMINISTRATION

NATCHEZ TRACE PARKWAY is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, with offices in the Tupelo Visitor Center, is in immediate charge. Address all inquiries to him at Box 948, Tupelo, Miss. 38801, or telephone (601) 842-1572.

The National Park System, of which this parkway is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of the people.

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THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—bears a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute their full measure to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

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Water tupelo and baldcypress  
stand knee deep in still waters  
20 miles north of Ridgeland.



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