



Tallahatchie Flats near Money, MS

By Josephine Matyas

**T**his January marked the unveiling of the new U.S. Civil Rights Trail, a collaborative project of 14 states to highlight more than 100 landmarks that played a pivotal role in advancing civil rights and social justice in the 1950s and 1960s. These landmarks include churches, courthouses, schools, museums and historic sites, and they vary from the scene of the first student lunch counter sit-in to the balcony at the Lorraine Motel, where civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated 50 years ago in April 1968.

Travelling the southern states has been a regular destination for our RV travels. Admittedly, it's a part of the nation where there has been much conflict in the past; but from those dark, tempestuous times has come a richness of musical traditions, a wealth of historical sites and a deep-rooted culture. Those are like magnets for us.

We have a Roadtrek 210 – a Class B camper van – and have found the smaller size makes it easy to cover a lot of territory in reasonable time and in a cost-efficient way. As with all RVs, we are travelling with “our home on our back” – it's so much more convenient and comforting to sleep in our own bed, cook our own meals and set our own schedule. Campgrounds are found all across the southern states, although we do prefer state and national parks in natural settings or those operated by the U.S. Corps of Engineers. They have provided the perfect base to explore some of the highlights of this new Civil Rights Trail.

Many of these landmarks have displays covering the arc of the long struggle – through the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Jim Crow laws of the south, the battleground actions in school, church and courts – and each is tied to a specific seminal event of the Civil Rights movement. Those specific events are what make each destination a unique part of history.





F.W. Woolworth's building, Greensboro, NC



Lorraine Motel, Memphis, TN

## GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

The International Civil Rights Center & Museum ([www.sitinmovement.org](http://www.sitinmovement.org)) opened in February 2010, to mark the 50th anniversary of the original student lunch counter sit-in, an event that inspired sit-in protests across the country.

The museum is located in the historic, downtown F.W. Woolworth's building, where the original lunch counter has been preserved, right down to the blue and pink chrome-backed swivel stools, the long laminate counter and the signs selling a glass of Pepsi for five cents and a slice of apple pie for 15 cents. Tour guides, signage, video and photographs tell the story of the four African-American college freshmen who challenged the Jim Crow laws separating the races by requesting service at the "whites-only" lunch counter. Their action launched protests, which moved to the forefront of national attention; by the end of 1960 more than 75,000 students had participated in similar sit-in actions that Dr. King said gave the Civil Rights movement a much-needed shot in the arm.

**RV tips:** We chose to boondock in Greensboro so we'd be close to the opening time at the museum. Even though the area was experiencing an unusual cold spell (-9 C at night) we were able stay warm by using Reflectix inserts to insulate our window surfaces, dive under our thick down duvet and use our propane furnace judiciously to warm the interior in the morning. We've managed to boost battery endurance by switching most of our interior lights to energy-efficient LEDs.

## MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

In the turbulent 1950s and 60s, the Tennessee city of Memphis (like many others in the South) was struggling with issues of class and segregation. That's what compelled civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. to visit the city to campaign for the labour rights of the city's striking sanitation workers.

Dr. King was standing on the balcony, in front of room 306, of the Lorraine Motel when he was gunned down by an assassin's bullet on April 4, 1968. The Lorraine Motel – now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum ([www.civilrightsmuseum.org](http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org)) – is a poignant and expansive look at the lessons of the Civil Rights struggle against injustice and the events before and after the assassination of Dr. King. There is an impressive collection of artifacts, films, historical video and interactive media and visitors can see the infamous room and balcony.

**RV tips:** Because of the lure of music and history, Memphis is a destination we've visited several times. We loved T.O. Fuller State Park about 15 minutes south of the city, the first state park opened to African-Americans east of the Mississippi River. It's a serene, wooded setting that was just the ticket after a busy day in the downtown. The park has 45 RV accessible sites with electrical and water hook-ups. There's a centralized bathhouse, laundry and dump station. In town, we've also stayed at the Graceland RV Park, walking distance from Elvis Presley's home. The spacious, full hook-up sites have 30/50-amp service, bathhouse and laundry facilities, swimming pool and free WiFi service.

## BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

The pulse of Civil Rights history beats strongly in Birmingham. The city's rejuvenated six-block Civil Rights District is a showcase of contemporary history, saturated with the remembrances of a human rights movement that awakened the conscience of America. During the civil rights protests of the early 1960s, the TV images of peaceful demonstrations turned violent in Birmingham shocked the world and were instrumental in a grassroots uprising that overturned legal segregation in the nation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the city of Birmingham was considered one of the most segregated cities in the South and the modern-day city doesn't try to hide its turbulent history. The establishment of the Civil Rights District – the city's dedication to progress and unity – is a way to reconcile the past with a vision for the future.

The centrepiece is the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute ([www.bcri.org](http://www.bcri.org)), a world-class living institution dedicated to portraying the era of racial segregation and to displaying the long, painful journey toward equal rights throughout the South. Something special happens when you take the walk through the historic galleries and multimedia displays tracing the passage through time from the 1920s to the present. It's an emotional journey: a shiny, clean drinking fountain labelled "white" standing next to a grimy, rusty one labelled "black"; video footage of the Freedom Riders with a full-size replica of their bus that was firebombed when it crossed the state line into Alabama; a replica of the cell where Dr. King wrote "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (the bars were taken from the actual cell in which he was held).

Immediately across the street is historic Kelly Ingram Park, the 1960s organizing point for protest marches, as well as the site of some of the worst images of the civil rights struggle. The images from 1963 that shocked the world and galvanized its outrage are captured in bronze sculptures placed strategically along the park's walkways: marchers attacked by snarling police dogs; the blast of high-pressure fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators; children as young as six jailed for their part in protests.

Across the street is the site we toured a site of one of the most horrific events of the Civil Rights Movement, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where in September 1963 a Ku Klux Klan bomb tore apart the side of the church, killing four little girls who were preparing for Sunday services. More than any other



Guide Sylvester Hoover outside the Bryant Grocery store, Money, MI

event, this bombing brought world condemnation of racial violence and demands for an end to the deeply rooted and legal segregation. The surge of emotional momentum across the country, helped to ensure the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

## MONEY, MISSISSIPPI

Just north of Greenwood, we stood outside the remnants of the infamous Bryant Grocery store, forever linked to the 1955 horrific murder of Emmett Till, a young boy who was accused of the crime of flirting with a white woman (her claims were recently recanted). This event was a spark of the Civil Rights movement. Today, Emmett's memory is preserved with historical markers at the site in Money associated with his murder.

**RV tips:** We got a dose of authentic Mississippi while boondocking at nearby Tallahatchie Flats. We were just there for one night so had no need for services or hook-ups. Visitors who want a break from their RV can rent historic, renovated sharecropper cabins, updated with comfy beds, indoor plumbing, kitchen, heat and air conditioning and furnished in 1940s rural America-style. 🍁

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210 Popular. Learn more at [www.travelswithrigby.com](http://www.travelswithrigby.com).

### For more information

United States Civil Rights Trail,  
[www.civilrightstrail.com](http://www.civilrightstrail.com)

[www.visittheusa.ca](http://www.visittheusa.ca) for a USA trip planner.