



MarkHitsTheRoad

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Eastern United States Road Trip (E22A-1)

Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia

When I lived in Ohio, I took four month-long western road trips. It was on the first of these in 1991 that I made my first visits to Seattle, Las Vegas and the desert Southwest. I'd eventually move to Seattle in 2002 and then to Las Vegas in the desert Southwest in 2016. But while living out west, I never made any comparable road trips out east.

Sometimes I tacked some vacation days or weekend sightseeing to business trips out east, and I did a couple fly-and-drive vacations in 2014 and 2019. But this trip was my first eastern U.S. road trip, and my longest road trip in more than 20 years.

My primary targeted destinations were units added to the National Park System that I hadn't been to. On this trip, I visited 8 newer units, bringing my total units visited to 388 of the 423 official units in the National Park System. My secondary targets were prehistoric Native American earthworks and other archaeological sites along the way. I then filled in gaps on the route with numerous historical sites and other chosen for any of a number of reasons.

Like my old western road trips, this trip began with a lot of driving. I didn't plan on any sightseeing stops until I got to the Texas panhandle, and I pretty much stuck with I-40 and a few nearby sites on my drive east until I got to Arkansas.



My first sightseeing stop was more than 800 miles into the trip, when I made a quick photo stop at the midpoint of Route 66 in Adrian, Texas.



The world-famous Cadillac Ranch, Amarillo, Texas



A “Muffler Man” repurposed as the “2nd Amendment Cowboy”, Amarillo, Texas



Before WWII, the former Amarillo Helium Plant produced 95% of the world's helium supply. There reportedly is still a lot of helium in the atmosphere around the plant, but I didn't notice any ill effects from breathing it.



The decidedly un-famous VW Slug Bug Ranch, Conway, Texas. Not as impressive as Cadillac Ranch, but still worth a quick stop if you've seen its more famous counterpart.



The Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ Ministries a.k.a. the Groom Cross in Groom, Texas. It is similar in appearance to giant crosses in Edmund, Oklahoma and Richmond, Indiana. At 190 feet tall, it was the tallest cross in the country when it was built in 1955, but it is now only the 5th tallest. There are several other Christian-themed sites on the grounds around the cross, as well as a chapel and gift shop.



The National Route 66 Museum in Elk City, Oklahoma is actually a complex of small museums focused on Route 66, the town of Elk City, farm implements, etc. It also boasts “the world’s biggest Route 66 sign”. As you can see, their Route 66 sign is really big. So big, in fact, that most other countries don’t even try to compete with their own Route 66 signs.



The TWISTEX Memorial near El Reno, Oklahoma pays tribute to three Oklahoma storm chasers who were killed by the El Reno Tornado on May 31, 2013. The storm began with several smaller sub-vortices, but after it crossed U.S. 81 to this spot, it grew to 2.6 miles across in just 30 seconds, the widest tornado ever recorded, catching storm chasers off guard. Maximum wind speed was determined to be about 296 miles per hour, the second highest ever measured worldwide.



Sequoyah's Cabin Museum near Sallisaw, Oklahoma preserves the cabin that was home to Sequoyah, the Cherokee Indian who created the Cherokee alphabet and writing system, making the Cherokee one of the first North American tribes to have a written language. Although he was not formally educated, he recognized the importance of having a culturally unifying written language.

Sequoyah was born in Tennessee in about 1778. He moved from Tennessee to Alabama and then to Arkansas, where he was then pressured to exchange that land for land in Indian Territory (today's Oklahoma). His Indian Territory log cabin is preserved at the museum.



Spiro Mounds Archaeological Center, an Oklahoma State Park. I have had information on this site for some years, but it is in far eastern Oklahoma, out of the way for when I pass through Oklahoma on Texas or Midwestern trips. So, I thought I'd see it on this trip. Alas, heavy rains had been passing through the region including last night, and the site was closed due to flooding. I got this photo of a couple of its mounds from the road. The mounds here are associated with Caddoan Mississippian culture. The site was occupied in four phases dating from 900 AD to 1450 AD.



Fort Smith National Historic Site, Arkansas (at the Oklahoma border) was a U.S. Army frontier fort and law enforcement post. The Cherokee's Trail of Tears passed here – the fort played a key western role in the forced migration of Cherokee from the Southeast to Indian Territory. It also was the home of regional law enforcement, and eventually included a prison/jail and gallows.



A view from underneath the trap door of Fort Smith's still-working gallows.



The original boundary between Arkansas and Indian Territory was within a couple hundred yards of the main Fort Smith building. Today, the Arkansas River – just a bit further to the west – marks the boundary between the states of Arkansas and Oklahoma in this area.

Petit Jean State Park sits atop Petit Jean Mountain along the Arkansas River, northwest of Little Rock, Arkansas.



The park's Palisades Overlook provides a view of the canyon carved by Cedar Creek. In the hazy distant left is Mount Magazine, the tallest point in Arkansas.



The park's Stouts Point Overlook features views of the Arkansas River. The Cherokee's Trail of Tears water route followed the Tennessee, Mississippi and then Arkansas Rivers west to Indian Territory, passing below by this point.

Toltec Mounds Archaeological State Park southeast of Little Rock is the site of a Late Woodlands period 18-mound complex of the Plum Bayou culture, and includes the tallest surviving prehistoric mounds in Arkansas. It was occupied from about 600 AD to 1050 AD. Unfortunately, like many prehistoric mounds, many of the mounds here were plowed into oblivion by settlers who saw the land rather than the history.



I hiked the Knapp Trail through the mound site which ends with this view of the three most prominent mounds at the park today. A marker (red arrow) some distance from Mound A (the middle mound) was the site of Mound H. The view from Mound H to Mound C (left) lines up with the Winter Solstice; the view from Mound H to Mound B (right) lines up with the Summer Solstice. It is not unusual to find relationships between mound locations and astronomical observations at mound complexes.

Excavations at the site has turned up a lot of tools and other artifacts, ceremonial burial paraphernalia and even a variety of food.

But no nuts. Almond Joys have nuts. Mounds don't.



The Caney Bayou Mound near Bonita, Louisiana is only 5 ½ feet tall and 130 by 165 feet, substantially reduced in height and size by decades of plowing before preservation started. But artifacts from the site date back to the Archaic period, and evidence suggests that the mound was constructed around 3000 BC. (In comparison, the first Egyptian pyramids were constructed at about 2800 BC.)



Southeast of Monroe, Louisiana, there really is nothing to see here from the road, but in those trees just to the right of the road is the Watson Brake mound complex, the oldest known mound complex in North America, dating back to about 3500 BC. It suggests that even hunter-gatherer tribes could plan and organize the large workforce needed to create a large mound complex. Located on private property, there is no trespassing. Seven of eight land owners have agreed to sell, which could eventually make the site public, but the lone holdout may be doing the site a favor because tourists are often destructive.



It is believed that the petrified trees in the Mississippi Petrified Forest, near Flora, Mississippi, washed down to this location about 36 million years ago. They were eventually buried in sediment, and petrified, but were discovered as a gorge began eroding into this area, exposing the trees. The site is one of only two known petrified forests in the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. The other one, in upstate New York, has trees that date back about 380 million years, preserving fossils of one of the Earth's oldest forests.



Mound A at Pocahontas Mounds, near Flora, Mississippi. The two mounds at the Pocahontas Mounds complex are from the Plaquemine Mississippian culture, dating to 800 AD to 1300 AD.



The Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument was established as an official National Park System unit in 2017, and includes about half of Birmingham’s Civil Rights District. This was my first time here since this was designated a NPS unit, although I have been here twice before; I explored the district extensively when I vacationed in Alabama in 2014.

The 16th Street Baptist Church is included in the park and was very active in the Civil Rights movement, often hosting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other movement leaders. In 1963, the Ku Klux Klan set off 19 sticks of dynamite just outside the basement of the church. The explosion killed four girls and injured 22 others.

The picture is the view of the church from Kelly Ingram Park, also now part of the national monument. The statue in the foreground pays tribute to the four girls killed in the explosion – Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Denise McNair.



Freedom Riders National Monument in Anniston, Alabama, also established in 2017, was another of my first-time NPS unit visits. Freedom Riders were civil rights activists who rode interstate buses into the segregated South to challenge the lack of enforcement of the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings that segregated public buses were unconstitutional. The rides often provoked violent attacks against the activists, and yet it was the riders who were often arrested by southern law enforcement. The Anniston Greyhound Bus Station was the site of one such attack. That bus was attacked again about six miles outside of town and burned. The old bus station and the site of the bus burning are included in this national monument.



Etowah Indian Mounds State Historic Site, Cartersville, Georgia, is a South Appalachian Mississippian culture mound complex. It is regarded as the most intact Mississippian culture site in the Southeast. The site was occupied from about 1000 AD to 1550 AD. These painted marble effigies of a woman and a man were found among burial artifacts in Mound C. These are possibly the largest and most skillfully carved statues from the Mississippian Period. Keep in mind that the Native Americans who carved these only had stone tools to work with.



Cherokee territory traditionally covered northern Georgia and nearby parts of Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina, although by the early 1800s their reservation only included a significant portion of northwest Georgia. But the Cherokee adopted a constitution, a republican form of government, a bilingual newspaper, and other Western ideas. They also established a capital city at New Echota, now a Georgia State Historic Site. A self-guided walk leads through the New Echota site, and includes this early 1800s middle class Cherokee farm. The Georgia government wanted to assert greater control over the reservation, especially after gold was discovered in nearby Dahlonega. They found a sympathetic president in Andrew Jackson, and after a new treaty was pushed onto the Cherokee, the Cherokee were expelled from the Southeast, forced to move to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). The Trail of Tears consists of a handful of land-based and water-based routes between the Georgia reservation and Indian Territory. 16,000 Cherokee were forcibly expelled from their Georgia homes; almost a quarter of them died en route to Indian Territory.



Dahlonega Gold Museum State Historic Site in the historic Lumpkin County Courthouse, Dahlonega, Georgia. Dahlonega was the site of the first American gold rush, and a branch of the U.S. Mint was established here from 1838 to 1861.



Rock Eagle Effigy Mound near Eatonton, Georgia. Rock Eagle wasn't made of piled dirt (like most effigy mounds) and then covered with rocks. Rather, it is a pile of rocks positioned to take the shape of an unknown type of bird. It is difficult to date, as rocks don't have the same type of organic material that earthen mounds do, and few artifacts have been found at the site. It is believed to be between 1000 and 3000 years old. Nearby is the Rock Hawk Effigy Mound, although not as well preserved as Rock Eagle. Researchers are determining whether a third rock pile found in the county was an effigy mound.



Uncle Remus Museum, Eatonton, Georgia. Joel Chandler Harris, creator of the Uncle Remus character and writer of Uncle Remus stories, was from Eatonton.

Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, like Etowah, above, is a South Appalachian Mississippian culture mound site. The major mounds here were constructed before 1000 AD, and the site was occupied by this culture for about 200 years. However, there is evidence of 17,000 years of human occupation at the site.



The Earth Lodge Mound at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, Macon, Georgia



Original floor in the Earth Lodge Mound



Great Temple Mound and Lesser Temple Mound at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park

Before leaving Macon, I stopped at one of the local grocery stores. Over the years, a lot of people have told me good things about Macon Bacon, so I figured I'd try it. Alas, I wasn't able to get any.

At this point, I headed to the coast and then turned north, heading up the East Coast. The summary continues in Part 2.