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## **The Multi-Vocal Trailscape of the Natchitoches Trace: A Trail of Tears, Trade and Transformation**

*Jade L. Robison (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)*

### **Abstract**

This paper demonstrates how individuals have inscribed the Natchitoches Trace trailscape with meaningful narratives via oral traditions, historical accounts and material evidence, and considers how descendent populations curate their heritage in such a landscape. Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri River near St. Louis, the Natchitoches Trace stretches southwest through the Ozark region in Missouri and Arkansas, and onto Natchitoches, Louisiana. Created by pre-Columbian groups for trading purposes, the trail was later utilised by early European pioneer families for westward expansion. The 1830 Indian Removal Act forced the repurposing of the trail as a route of exile for displaced Cherokee, an event commemorated as the Trail of Tears. An examination of the historical context of these shared memories reveals how the cultural landscape of the Natchitoches Trace was constructed and repeatedly built upon. In this way, descendent populations are able to curate their cultural heritage in the trailscape, which serves as a repository for these narratives. With a focus on the Ozark region of Missouri, I demonstrate the multi-vocality of the Natchitoches Trace trailscape as it was continually shaped and remade by groups of people with different cultural identities and motivations.

### **Introduction**

Through their use, trails become inscribed on the landscape and in the memories of their users, in turn inviting continued use. Such a *trailscape* transcends both space and time as multiple groups of people use it for different purposes throughout diverse points in time, or over continuous periods. The Natchitoches Trace is one such trailscape with a life history of both continuity in utilisation and change in purpose. Its path was worn by pre-Columbian groups trading goods between St. Louis, Missouri and Natchitoches, Louisiana (mid-continental USA), until its use by early European settlers colonising the frontier (see

figure 1). Later it became part of one route taken by the Cherokee during their forced removal, an event commemorated as the Trail of Tears (in Cherokee the *nunna daul tsuny*, “The Trail Where They Cried”). In this paper, I synthesise literature on the Natchitoches Trace to develop a fuller understanding of this trailscape, its evolution through time and how its inscription reinforces social memory.

The Natchitoches Trace begins at the mouth of the Missouri River near the present-day major city of St. Louis, Missouri, continuing south through the Ozark region of Missouri, through Arkansas, diverting to Natchitoches, Louisiana, and the Red River Valley of Texas. Thus, the Trace runs a north-south course almost parallel to and just west of the Mississippi River, the major river draining the North American continent. In Texas, the Trace meets another trail, El Camino Real de los Tejas, which terminates at the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, now modern-day Mexico City. As a result of the long-term usage of the trail by multiple groups, it has also been referred to as the Southwest Trail and the Old Military Road. Here, I focus specifically on the portion of the trail in the eastern Ozark escarpment of Missouri. Following a theoretical discussion of trail as landscape, I further define the geographic scope of the present study and discuss three major uses of the trail. Finally, I synthesise this information to argue for a larger, emergent understanding of the Natchitoches Trace trailscape as a repository for cultural narratives, enabling descendent communities to curate memories of past lived experience.

### **Trailscape**

I introduce the term *trailscape* here to highlight the notion that a trail inscribed on a landscape becomes itself a special kind of landscape, with a physicality that attracts subsequent use, inviting it to become a place of social inscription and memory. While a landscape is an area confined by spatial boundaries, it can also be conceptualised more abstractly. Kantner’s definition of region is interchangeable with landscape, such that they are “spaces for which meaningful relationships can be defined between past human behaviour, the material signatures people left behind, and/or the varied and dynamic physical and social contexts in which human activity occurred” (41). A landscape also has

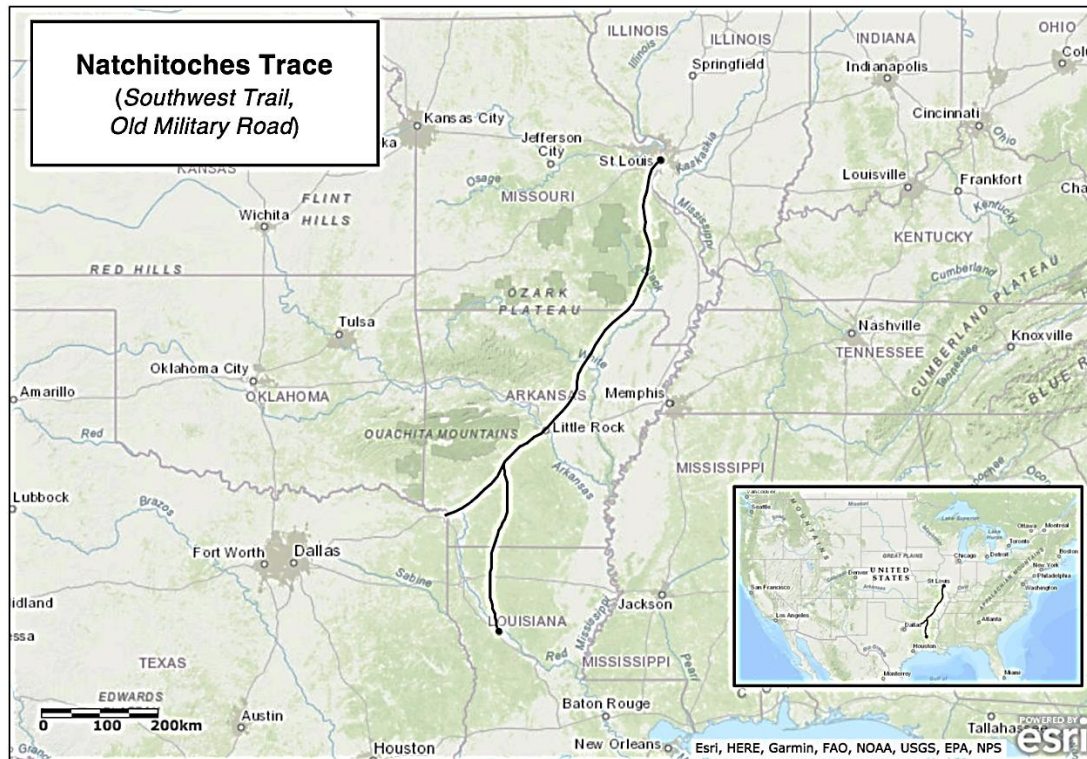


Figure 1. Map of the Natchitoches Trace showing its extent from St. Louis, Missouri to Natchitoches, Louisiana, and a possible alternative route into Texas.

intangible boundaries, ones that are not defined by space but by meaning. Meinig distinguishes between ten kinds of landscapes, including landscape as nature, habitat, artefact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, place and aesthetic (1-9). These landscapes have tangible values, such as eroded hills and flooding rivers, and values that are the product of the human mind, like social or economic systems and ‘scenery.’ As agents operating within a particular landscape, humans carefully construct that landscape and make decisions to utilise it in a purposeful way.

Landscapes of movement, as described by Snead, Erickson and Darling (1), are materialised in a number of ways, taking the form of a trace, path, trail, road, track, causeway or other similar phenomena. All of these terms describe a route, or a specific way taken for travel, and provide physical indication of passage. Although similar in form and function, it is useful to consider how they differ. A road, unlike a trail, is characterised by a more formalised construction and planning (Hyslop 29). Roads are created by the

deliberate addition of pavements, retention walls and the like. Trails, on the other hand, are created through the visible wearing of the surface due to high volume of animal and/or human traffic. Therefore, a road is purely a human feature of the landscape, whereas a trail can have a non-human creator. The concept of intentionality is important here as well. A road is constructed only by intention; its construction requires careful planning and an organised workforce (Earle 257-258). A trail may or may not be intentionally created and the intentional construction and maintenance of a trail can change through time. A large animal might clear a path to a stream, happening to trample on forest floor vegetation as it weaves between trees. This initial treading makes the passageway clear and easily traversed, permitting other animals or humans to intentionally utilise the path to access the stream. Therefore, trails follow “informal, expedient and irregular routes” (Manson 385). Trace as a synonym of trail implies evidence of some former passing across a landscape, a physical wearing on the surface that provides a direct connection to the past. It is a certain kind of trail, intended to invoke the historic character of a specific route. The Natchez Trace, spanning a portion of the southeast United States, is similar to the Natchitoches Trace in its Pre-Columbian origin and subsequent reuse by early European settlers. The modern label of ‘trace’ in both cases may be intended to reflect the ancient character of the trail.

Manson identifies factors favourable to trail continuity, all of which relate to landscape condition (386). Routes of paths will avoid obstacles when possible, preferring alternatives to traversing rough terrain, rapid streams, dense underbrush and swampy areas. A route might also be preferred that offers optimal plant and animal resources to provide sustenance for a long journey. Streams can be followed because they make for a reliable water source and offer a directional reference. In the more arid regions of the American Southwest and Great Plains, streams tend to be followed more closely, especially in drier seasons (Manson 386). A trail connecting many communities will likely maintain a higher degree of continuity than one that is more isolated. New settlements are supported by the presence of a trail, as it facilitates trade and communication with other groups. As demonstrated by Earle, communication is one main purpose of a trail system, although

routes may also exist to support seasonal movements or ceremonial functions, dependent upon the needs of the trail users (256). Although paths, trails and roads can be arbitrarily classified, this system is never fixed, but is always in the process of becoming. Change occurs in a trail's route, end points and purpose throughout its landscape history, lending a trailscape a great deal of fluidity.

A trail is inscribed on the landscape through its continued use and becomes embedded within the cultural memory of those who have utilised it for whatever purpose. A label such as "persistent place," defined by Schlanger as "a place that is used repeatedly during the long-term occupation of a region," is useful in this regard (92). The trailscape becomes a place that draws continued use and is refashioned to suit the needs of those who encounter it. People in the past leave evidence of their usage of a trail in material, historical or oral records, resulting either in a deliberate or unintended inscription of a particular memory or collection of memories on the trailscape. Descendant populations, who act as observers of these memories, may choose to reify the trailscape as referent for heritage. As defined by Lydon, heritage "produces meanings from objects and locales by constituting them as a focus of social memory and shared narratives" (655). This is relevant to an understanding of trailscape, since meaning is acquired through the continued use of the trail over time and by various groups of people for different purposes, a process that is enabled through a shared social memory. Thus, a trail is a mnemonic device for descendent populations to curate various social memories about a lived experience that become part of that group's cultural heritage.

Finally, trails integrate the histories of their users by becoming a repository of conflated and contested social memories. A trailscape acts as a repository for the curation of memory and reveals itself to observers as an entanglement of shared narratives. Since a trail in an archaeological sense exists as a feature on the landscape, it is a place where shared narratives coexist. Thus, a trailscape is inherently contested as a result of its jointly owned past. People perceive and experience it in different ways, just as with any landscape that is inscribed with value and memory. In a phenomenological sense, the meaning of a trailscape as a place is dependent on the social, political and individual circumstances of

the human experience, reuse and recharacterisation of a trail. A trail can at once be remembered as a conduit for local travel, path of migration to new territories or a woeful path of exile. As a result, it is essential to acknowledge differences of perspectives and cultural values in any study of a trailscape.

### *Investigating a Trailscape: Natchitoches Trace as a Place*

The present examination of the Natchitoches Trace trailscape flows from a Braudelian paradigm augmented by other important approaches to the landscape of meaning and memory. A landscape's "social, sacred or ceremonial *longue duree*" drives the reinscription of past meaning onto the present, permitting its continued use in somewhat similar ways (Knapp and Ashmore 14). To a large extent this study relies on the landscape as one embedded with social and cultural memory. Memory promotes the continuity of a trail, permitting its reuse and recharacterisation. Van Dyke and Alcock categorise the materiality of memory into five themes: narratives, representations, objects, ritual behaviours and places (4-5). These aspects of memory are evident in the Natchitoches Trace trailscape in varying forms, permitting an understanding of the trail's landscape history. The trail itself transformed space to place, with this trailscape now manifesting shared narratives of activities and experiences in the form of archaeologically identifiable artefacts or features. As memory is constructed in a particular landscape, material traces are left behind, permitting its interpretation. Places, and in this case, trails, "may be repeatedly inhabited, modified and imbued with changing meanings" (Van Dyke 279).

If tangible heritage includes something that possesses aesthetic or archaeological value, the memory of a particular trailscape may also be preserved intangibly through oral histories, knowledge, skills and performance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 52-53). Intangible forms of heritage are inseparable from the material and social worlds of a culture, and as described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, are living entities that accord value to the transmitters and actors involved in the passing of this heritage (53). As a form of intangible heritage, oral history draws upon a native understanding of place and expresses the value of particular landscapes through language. In his ethnographic work with the Western

Apache of east-central Arizona, Keith Basso evaluates the ways in which memory is employed to reconstruct, or reimagine, the past. This is accomplished through place-making, imagining place-worlds where the past is reproduced through memories. As Rowlands and de Jong importantly point out in their conversation of memory in postcolonial Africa, the origin of heritage and memory are often found within conflict and loss (13). In this regard, Western Apache draw upon language in the referencing of particular tragic or humbling events with place-names. Through descriptive place-names such as “Widows Pause for Breath,” “They Are Grateful For Water” and “They Piled On Top Of Each Other,” past events that once occurred on the landscape are commemorated and occupy an important part of Apache heritage (Basso 28-29). The value found in place-naming becomes important in considering how people experience a trailscape, since the events that take place along a trail determine what is remembered about it.

Ashmore suggests a way to interpret the use of a particular landscape through the concept of *life history of place*. She defines this as “examining evidence for human recognition, use and modification of a particular position, locality or area over the full time span of its existence” (1178). In what follows, I draw out meanings of the Natchitoches Trace through the thick recitation of the life history of one segment of the Trace, that portion found in the southeast Ozark region of Missouri. I examine trail use by multiple populations at different periods of time, which is possible through the coexistence of shared narratives on the trailscape. As demonstrated in the remaining discussion and analysis of common themes in trail use, the Natchitoches Trace is best characterised as a multi-vocal trailscape with an entangled social memory and history owing to its continual recharacterisation and changing meanings.

## **The Natchitoches Trace**

### *Geographic Scope*

The Natchitoches Trace is a route that extends from the St. Louis area of Missouri southwest to Louisiana and Texas (Price and Price 8). During pre-Columbian times, it may have served as a trade route linking Cahokia, a major population centre that organised the



North American mid-continent from A.D. 900-1450, with the Caddoan peoples, who populated areas in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Arkansas (Manson 392, Rafferty 109). Along its route, the Trace connected with other trails, including El Camino Real de los Tejas, also known as the Old San Antonio Road (Manson 396). By the late 18th century, the Natchitoches Trace was known as the Southwest Trail and, in this capacity, it carried early European settlers westward (392). The portion of the trail between St. Louis, Missouri and Little Rock, Arkansas was known as the Old Military Road due to improvements made to the trail to permit the transport of military supplies.

Passing through Missouri required a trek through the hilly Ozark region (see figure 2). The entire Ozark Plateau encompasses portions of Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Kansas, and rises to approximately 150-760 m (500-2,500 ft) above the plains. On the eastern escarpment of the Ozark Plateau in Missouri are the St. Francois Mountains and the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, an area protecting the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers. The most rugged and isolated region in southeast Missouri are the Courtois Hills, which are home to a network of caves and springs. The area is characterised by abundant resources such as chert, edible plants, fauna and valleys offering arable land, creating a landscape with the ability to support human populations (Zedeño and Basaldú 13, Stevens 27). Thus, the Natchitoches Trace trailscape here is that of rugged and hilly terrain with access to plentiful shelter and water resources. These attributes likely contributed to continuity in trail usage.

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to an investigation of Natchitoches Trace usage by three populations in Missouri spanning different time periods: 1. Pre-Columbian Native groups, 2. early 19th century European settlers, and 3. Removal Period displaced Native groups. I examine the extant literature on the socio-cultural and historical context of the relevant time periods and identify archaeological features of the trail and its surrounding landscape. I will conclude with a discussion of overarching themes in long-term trail use and reuse in the Ozark region of Missouri.

*Pre-Columbian Trade and Settlement: the Origin of the Trace*

The inhabitants of the central Mississippi River valley, bounded on the east by the Mississippi River and on the west by the Ozark escarpment, occupied the area since the Paleoindian period (ca. 10,000 B.C.). The population consisted of hunter-gatherer groups who camped seasonally between the eastern Ozark escarpment and the lowlands

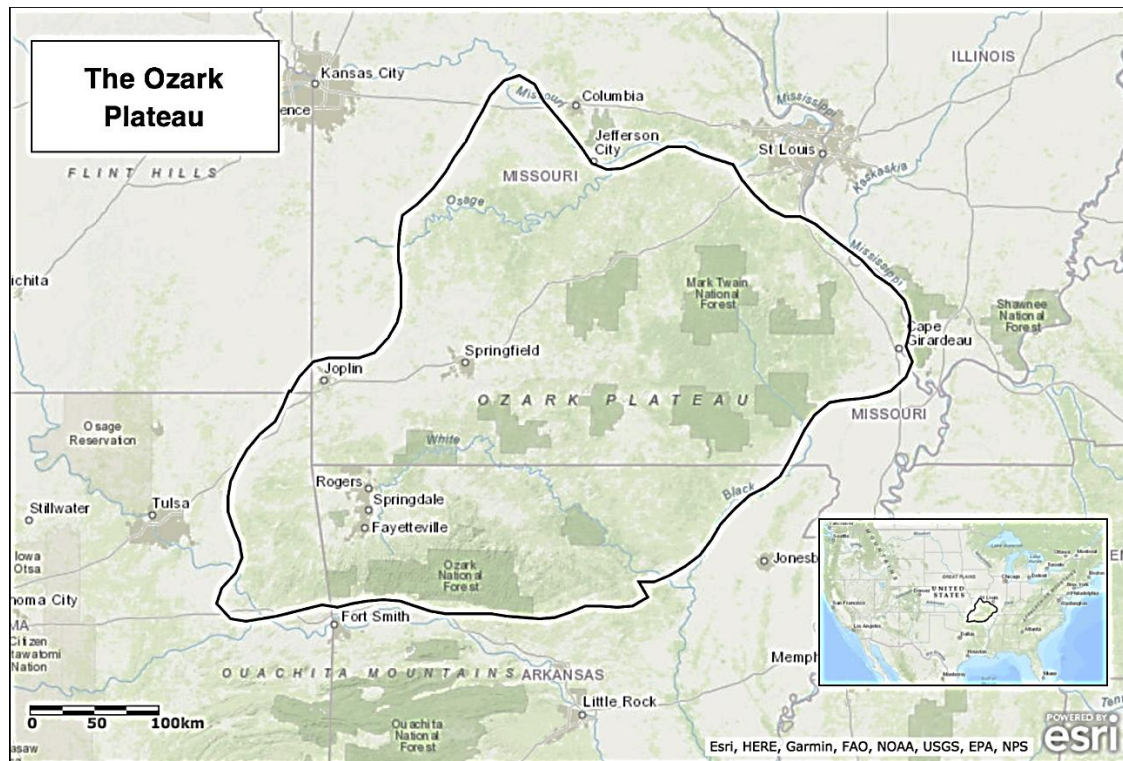


Figure 2. Map showing the approximate location of the Ozark Plateau in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas.

in southeast Missouri. The presence of distantly sourced chipped stone material indicates these early occupants commanded knowledge of and were adept at obtaining resources over considerable distances (see Morse and Morse 2009; Zedeño and Basaldú 2003). During the Middle Archaic period (7,000-4,000 B.C.), archaeologists report an increased emphasis on lower valley habitation with seasonal exploitation of upland resources.

The Late Archaic (4,000-600 B.C.), known as the Poverty Point period, is characterised by the first massive modifications to the landscape, with the construction of

burial mounds. The occurrence of intricately made bannerstones, effigy objects and tubular pipes announce significant technological advances and the wider use of natural resources in the manufacture of tools and ornaments. The presence of lithic material from exotic or extra-valley sources serves as evidence of early interregional exchange and communication, as seen in the Little Black River and Current River drainage areas (Zedeño and Basaldú 22). This exchange was likely confined to the central Mississippi River valley within the Ozark region in the southeast. Participation in long-distance exchange did not occur until the Woodland period (600 B.C.-A.D. 700).

At this time, diagnostic sand-tempered pottery, termed 'Tchula,' replaces a coarse grit-tempered variety, suggesting technological similarities to assemblages from the Tchefuncte culture in Louisiana (see Price 1986; Zedeño and Basaldú 2003). Exotic artefacts indicating participation in the Hopewell interaction sphere—with obsidian and grizzly bear teeth, crocodile teeth from the Gulf of Mexico, copper from the northern Great Lakes region, and mica from the Appalachian Mountains all being exchanged throughout North America (see Hill et al. 2017; Stoltman 2015; Wright 2014)—appear albeit sparsely in the Ozarks in the form of Hopewellian ceramics and projectile points (O'Brien and Wood 198). These patterns suggest a general movement of people and goods along a line of exchange stretching towards the northeast and the southwest, the same general route the Natchitoches Trace follows.

The wider regional shifts experienced at the onset and development of the Mississippian Emergent period (A.D. 700-1000) include a dependence on corn production, participation in extensive trade networks and the development of large civic-ceremonial centres (Zedeño and Basaldú 25). Archaeological assemblages of the larger regional Ozark population centres during this time indicate the presence of diverse cultural traditions. That is, the western Ozarks of southwest Missouri include materials related to the Caddoan tradition from further west, while the eastern region suggests a close relation with Western Lowland Mississippian groups further to the east. It appears Cahokia actively controlled the northern extent of the Ozarks. This distinction is complemented by an analysis of ceramic wares by Lynott et al. (2000) that suggests a trading relationship between the

northern upland and southern lowland Ozark groups with the movement of ceramic vessels to the uplands.

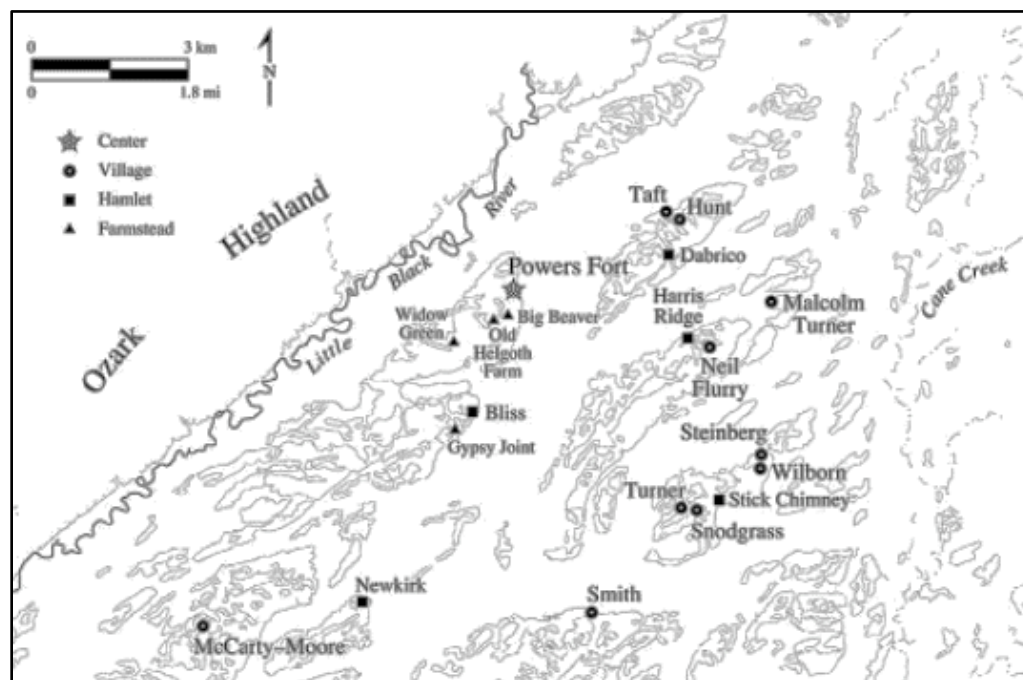


Figure 3. A portion of the Little Black River watershed showing Powers Phase villages, hamlets, and farmsteads (from O'Brien, Michael. *Mississippian Community Organization*, 2008, p. 158)

A significant amount of archaeological evidence exists for the Mississippian time period known as the Powers Phase, lasting from A.D. 1250-1400. During this time, large ceremonial centres and smaller villages occur within the Little Black River watershed lowland region of southeast Missouri (see figure 3). The Natchitoches Trace passes in the vicinity of the Little Black River watershed. This region is dominated by larger settlements, such as Powers Fort, and smaller surrounding villages, which are located 3-9 km (1.8-5.5 mi) from Powers Fort (Price 48). Powers Fort features a large temple mound as well as three smaller mounds, a central courtyard and houses, all enclosed by fortifications (Lynott 40). The smaller villages surrounding Powers Fort also contained houses, plazas and

fortifications, although they appear to have served as cemeteries for the larger population at Powers Fort and other villages.

Given the nearby location of the Natchitoches Trace with its connection to Cahokia, one might expect to find a collection of exotic goods at Powers Phase sites. Archaeological surface collections from multiple Powers Phase sites, including Powers Fort, Snodgrass and Turner, show evidence for trade of lithics, especially Mill Creek chert (Price 224). This chert variety is sourced to southern Illinois (near Cahokia) and was used primarily in hoe and knife manufacture at Powers Phase sites (Price and Griffin 18-19). In Structure 8 at Turner (23BU21A), one of the largest house structures at the site, 24 Mill Creek chert hoe flakes were found (Price 13). Of 1085 flakes at both Turner and Snodgrass, 973 are of Mill Creek chert material (O'Brien 256). Cahokia is known to be one of the dominant consumers and exporters of Mill Creek chert, where it is also found in large quantities. Large bifaces made of the lithic material are frequently found unused in mound contexts in the Mississippi valley region (Koldehoff and Brennan 149). This concentration of Mill Creek material suggests control by elites in its use and dispersal, a pattern that could potentially be expected across Powers Phase sites.

Moreover, a larger quantity and diversity of ceramic forms and surface treatments occurs at Powers Fort than at any other villages of the Powers Phase, indicating certain traded ceramics never reached the other lower-order settlements (Price 222). An elite presence at Powers Phase settlements likely had some control on the exchange of goods and their diffusion. Price and Griffin (1979) examined the distribution of different categories of artefacts at both Turner and Snodgrass. They found arrow points, pottery trowels, pottery discs, arrow-shaft abraders and decorative vessels occurred most frequently in the larger house structures that were separated from smaller structures outside of a white-clay wall (O'Brien 172). This indicates an elite presence at these villages had considerable control over artefact distribution. Galena and ochre at Gypsy Joint, a smaller Powers Phase site, attest to participation in foreign trade, indicating exotic material and trade goods sometimes reached lower-order settlements in the Little Black River watershed region (Morse and Morse 262).

Nearly all Powers Phase sites appear to have been abandoned and burned c. A.D. 1320-1350 (Lynott 41; Price et al. 57). The interpretation of this pattern has been vigorously debated: some insist the region was completely abandoned, and others suggest a small population remained, creating simply a “vacant quarter” (O’Brien and Wood 331). Nevertheless, there appears to be some sort of shift or reorganisation of Mississippian communities in the southeast region of Missouri that resulted in its vacancy by the majority of the population.

### *Early European Settlers on the Trail*

Upon the arrival of Europeans to North America, the Mississippi Valley remained under French control for most of the late 18th century, when it was plied by trappers and traders. The American government acquired the region that is now Missouri via the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In 1812, the Territory of Missouri was formed, and in 1821 it was admitted to the Union as a state. It was during these changes in ownership that European settlers frequented the region more intensively. For a brief period, the region of Missouri was under Spanish control, during which time large tracts of land were being sold for a very small fee, attracting settlers to the area. Besides cheap lead, multiple other attributes attracted European settlers to the area, including ease of communication and facilitation of trade, suitable geographic features and lack of former settlement by Europeans (Price 25).

The existence of a pre-worn path greatly aided early European settlers in their spread westward. Some of the earliest references to the trail appear in an 1845 map of Missouri and Featherstonhaugh’s 1844 account of his travels across the country. Early settlements (1815-1850) in the Ozark region of Missouri sprang up along the Natchitoches Trace, consisting mostly of Americans with Scottish-Irish ancestry (Rafferty 1980). As Houck wrote in 1908, “the Natchitoches path became the military and wagon road of the immigrants moving into Arkansas” (227). Along the trail “huge covered wagons, pulled by teams of oxen” travelled over “the rutted, rocky road carrying families and all of their household possessions” (Hahn and Reilly 40). Men had to carry axes to clear the trail of any fallen trees, and sheep and cattle herds trailed behind.



*Figure 4. Section of the Natchitoches Trace with the wagon ruts still visible (from Price, James E. "The Widow Harris Site: A Place in the Ozarks," 1988, p. 7)*

The use of the Natchitoches Trace for migration by settlers permitted their participation in a pre-existing trade network. Houck provides an impression of the trade, likely one that occurred between Native groups and European settlers:

In 1816 Shawnees and Delawares lived on Castor river and near Bloomfield, in what is now Stoddard county. They travelled this trail twice a year, in the spring and fall. In the spring, they sold their furs and bear and winter deer skins, and in the fall, their summer skins, honey and bear's oil, which they cased in deer hides tied together with rawhide tugs. They carried these products of their country on ponies and always travelled in single file. (231)

This passage indicates reliance by some Native groups on seasonal trade of specific goods. Trade and travel on the trail become so frequent that, by 1820, the path "had been sufficiently opened...to admit the passing of wagons" (Wood 73, qtd. in Manson 392; see figure 4).

Abundance of resources and participation in trade networks encouraged some families to build and settle in cabins along the trail or to establish larger communities nearby. The earliest towns were strategically located along the Natchitoches Trace, and sometimes at crossings of the trail and a stream, in order to increase the accessibility to river and overland trade (Price and Price 21). The Widow Harris cabin (named for the homestead's first occupants; official designation 23RI-H19), located in the Harris Creek Valley in south-central Missouri, provides a glimpse of frontier life along the trail. The

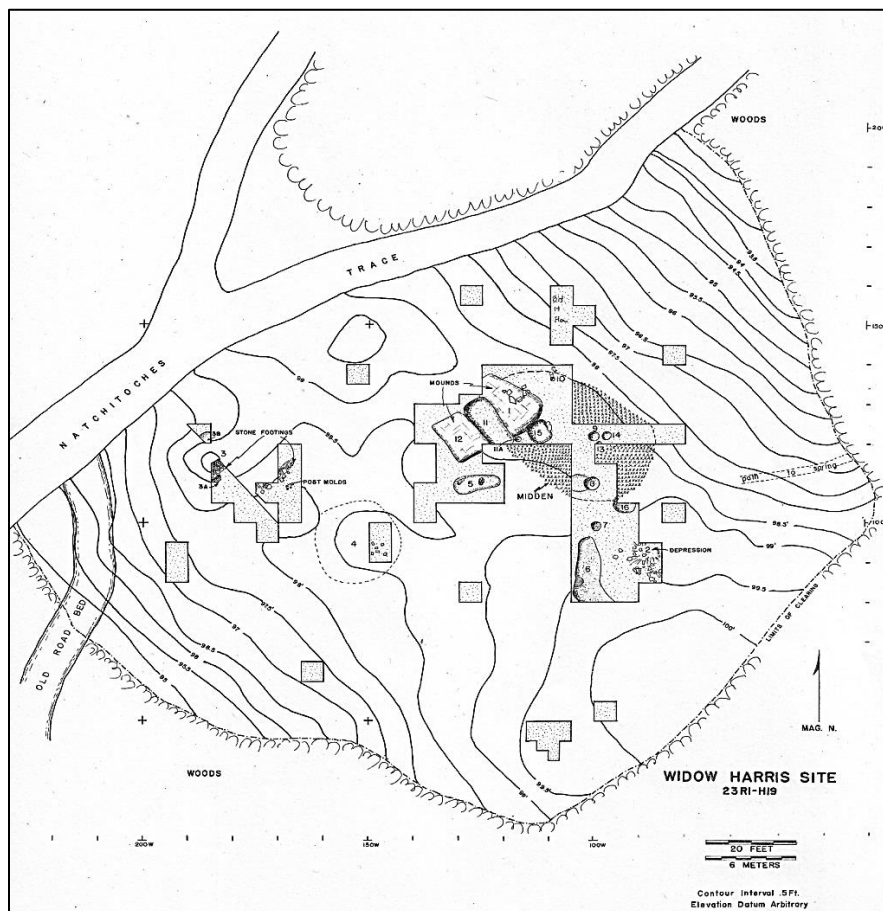


Figure 5. Map of Widow Harris site showing areas excavated (drafted by Price, James, 4 Oct., 1978)

cabin was built a mere 23 m (75 ft) from the Natchitoches Trace by Micajah and Sally Harris, one family amongst others who were fleeing the disastrous New Madrid earthquakes of



1811-12 (Price 6). The earliest account of the cabin comes from tax records dated to 1815 (Morse and Morse 329). In the 1970s, James and Cynthia Price carried out extensive survey and excavations of the cabin and the surrounding area, which involved an 8.9 km (5.5 mi) section of the Harris Creek Valley and a 12.9 km (8.0 mi) transect of the Natchitoches Trace. Excavations revealed a two-room cabin as well as a second, later cabin (Morse and Morse 329; see figure 5). Survey and excavation recovered assemblages of both faunal and floral remains as well as uncovering a large amount of ceramics, cast iron cooking vessels, buttons, beads, utensils, clocks, tools and glassware, all of which significantly add to our understanding of subsistence and trade in the Ozarks in the early 19th century (Price and Price 20). These materials include kaolin pipes, British and French gunflints and a pepperbox pistol barrel. The ceramics assemblage recovered from the cabin includes primarily decorated wares, especially blue transfer-print pearlware (Morse and Morse 329). The presence of these latter artefacts indicates even this frontier location was well integrated into the market economy of the American Southeast.

Price and Price (1978) identify three settlement-subsistence strategies that operated in the early 19th century Missouri frontier. The first is the semi-egalitarian mobile hunter-squatter type, operating on minimal agricultural production and a focus on trading, trapping and hunting. The establishment of nuclear family farmsteads issues in the subsistence farmer type, which involved a mixed farming-herding strategy and some reliance on trade and agriculture. The third category is the planter, who participated heavily in the market economy through cash crop production. The subsistence practices of the Harris family and other settlers in the Missouri Ozarks in the early 19th century relied heavily on the subsistence farmer strategy. Subsistence at the cabin was largely centred on wild and domestic resources, including corn, beans, watermelon, peaches and nuts, among others, as well as on pig and with minimal consumption of wild animals (16-17).

The Widow Harris cabin served as a place of refuge for travellers along the trail, particularly George Featherstonhaugh, who recounts in 1844 his time spent there while travelling across the country. He describes the cabin as “a double one” with two rooms and notes “they were an amiable and good family of people, and not without the means of living

comfortably if they only knew how to set about it” (85). The artefact assemblage recovered from the cabin indicates the Harris family was particularly well-off—although Featherstonhaugh’s account attests to the contrary—likely aided by the frequency of travellers with goods to trade. Nevertheless, not all occupants along the trail were living comfortably or could be called good-natured settlers. According to Featherstonhaugh some settlers “under the pretence of entertaining travellers, they got them into their cabins, and often murdered them if they had anything to be plundered of” (87). People did not just happen to settle along the trail, but rather intentionally built cabins alongside it to obtain items through trade or by plundering the belongings of weary travellers.

Trade was an important economic resource for those living and travelling along the trail. Isaac Kelley, one of the first settlers to arrive in the southeast Missouri region between 1798 and 1803, operated a trading post on the Current River along the Natchitoches Trace (Price 27). His decision to settle in the area appears to reflect strategic considerations regarding trade and indicates an increased frequency of trail use. Hume mentions Kelley’s establishment and notes men carried pelts along the trail on horseback (612). Ferry crossings were important establishments as well, used to transport settlers and their belongings across rivers. In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shortly after the Kelley and Harris families settled in the area, people settled southeast Missouri more frequently. This is reflected in the establishment of railroads, churches, schools, cemeteries, villages and lumber industries, occurring largely in the 1850s. People were increasingly drawn to the area due to the availability of land and resources.

### *The Indian Removal and the Trail of Tears*

An additional reason for the movement of settlers to the west was the increase in population of the American Southeast by Europeans. A lack of land for European settlement drove the U.S. government to forcefully remove Native groups from their traditional lands in the Southeast. The “Five Civilised Tribes” of the southeast region of the U.S., including the Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Seminole groups, were forced to migrate from their native lands to a designated Indian Territory in Oklahoma.

Following the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, Natives were forcefully led in numerous detachments along trails to their new designated land. This tragic event is known in popular culture as the Trail of Tears, although to the Cherokee it is the *nunna daul tsuny*, “The Trail Where They Cried.”



Figure 6. Map showing the three Trail of Tears routes taken through Missouri. The Benge Route travels along a large portion of the Natchitoches Trace. (National Park Service)

Thirteen detachments of the Cherokee were led through Missouri along three separate routes between the years of 1837 and 1839 (Patterson E1; see figure 6). These routes include the Northern Route, the Hildebrand Route and the Benge Route. The Natchitoches Trace served as the principle trail taken by John Benge, who led nearly 1100 Cherokee and 144 of their enslaved Africans from the Wills Valley in Alabama to Indian Territory. Departing in October 1838, they reached southeast Missouri by December 1838. Scattered settlements of Shawnee, Delaware and Cherokee groups existed in southeast Missouri prior to the 1838 forced removal. These groups were seeking new territory in the mid-18th century as a result of increased appropriation of their more easterly lands by European settlers. A treaty in 1817 granted these groups rights to the land in the southeast Missouri region, although this treaty was shortly thereafter rescinded once the Indian Removal Act

was established and the Natchitoches Trace was designated an official removal route by President Andrew Jackson.

Oral histories, correspondence, road surveys, historic maps and later historic accounts attest to the trail's extensive use by the Benge Trail of Tears detachment as a route taken by displaced Cherokee. The route from Cape Girardeau to Greenville and south through the Little Black River watershed into Arkansas was given official state recognition by the General Assembly of Missouri in 1835 and was subsequently surveyed in 1838 by Aaron Snider. The trail had been used primarily as a postal route since c. 1820 despite the lack of towns other than groups of farmsteads and essential businesses centred on ferry crossings, trading posts and mills (Patterson E9).

Although considered an official state road, the Trace was much less a road and more a rough trail. Even upon state recognition as a primary transportation route, money was not granted for the trail's clearing or maintenance. These duties were expected from volunteer citizens (Patterson E12). Considering the lack of large settlements in much of southeast Missouri, besides dispersed groups of cabins and farmsteads, the Natchitoches Trace must have been especially difficult to traverse in areas where few people were residing. Additionally, since the trail was used by John Benge and the Cherokee during the month of December, weather must have also been a factor determining trail visibility and accessibility. Historical documents note ice on the rivers caused delays and despite blazes present on the trees, the path was still not well marked (E13).

There is a general lack of information regarding camp sites along the trail, although historical accounts have identified one location for certain, the Widow Harris cabin mentioned above. In the 1880s, Mrs. Washington Harris, the daughter-in-law of the widow Sally Harris, told Dr. John Hume her account of the passing of the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears. She notes they camped in an area just across the road from the cabin and "filled the field plumb full" (qtd. in Patterson E5). Additionally, she recalls a Cherokee woman and baby had died and were buried in the Harris family's cemetery. In a publication discussing settlement-subsistence practices of settlers in the Ozark frontier, the Prices note the existence of a cemetery a few miles southeast of the Harris cabin on a map, likely the one

referenced by Sally Harris (27). At this point in the journey, the Benge detachment was about 9.5 km (6 mi) north of the Missouri-Arkansas border, where they would cross the Current River and continue the journey to Oklahoma. In total, the Benge detachment travelled nearly 1287 km (800 mi), with 257 of them in Missouri, crossing through 6 states and territories (E5).

Reconstructing the Trail of Tears trailscape through written accounts of European travellers and the archaeological record alone insufficiently conveys the true experience of the journey, and it offers a perspective limited only to outside observers. Oral history can reinforce a group's identity and shared belief system, and brings a more personalised and immediate sense of place to a reconstruction of a lived experience. An early attempt to document the oral history of Cherokee migration to Indian Territory in Oklahoma began in 1936 when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided a grant to the University of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Historical Society to conduct interviews of Native and "white" settlers. This collection consists of 80,000 entries and has been made digitally accessible by the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma. In an interview recorded by Nannie Lee Burns in 1937, Kate Rackleff, a Cherokee woman born in Oklahoma, recalls the memories told to her by her mother who migrated on the Trail of Tears:

In those days there were no roads and few trails and very few bridges. Progress of travellers was slow and often times they would have to wait many days for the streams to run down before they could cross. Each family did its own cooking on the road. People then had no matches, and they started a fire by rubbing two flint rocks together and catching the spark on a piece of dry spunk held directly underneath the rocks. Sometimes, they would have to rake away the snow and clear a place to build the fire. Travellers carried dry wood in the wagons to build their fires. The wagons were so heavily loaded and had traveled so many days that, when they came to a hill, the persons in the wagons would have to get out and walk up the hill. They did not ride much of the time but walked a good deal, not only to rest themselves but to save their teams...

Many died from exposure on the trip and mother said that she thought that a third of those who started died on the way, although all of her family lived to reach the new country. Those who came over the Trail of Tears would not stop for sickness and would stop only long enough to dig a rude grave when anyone died and then the bereaved family was forced to move right along. (*Western History Collections*, interview no. 7382)

The experience of the migration as narrated above conveys a deep sense of physical and emotional suffering that resonates within the narratives of the subsequent generation. In another account, Josephine Pennington, born in 1888, 50 years following the forced removal, describes the collective suffering of the migrants at a particularly treacherous moment:

In due time parties were started west, under the charge of soldiers. These parties were driven through like cattle. The sick and weak walked until they fell exhausted and then were loaded in wagons or left behind to die. When streams were to be crossed, if not too deep, all were compelled to wade. The water often times was to the chins of the men and women, and the little children were carried high over their heads. If the water was over their heads they would build rafts and cross on them. (L. W. Wilson, *Western History Collections*, interview no. 7783)

Jake Simmons, a Cherokee descendent, discusses a similar experience, although highlights how expectant mothers endured a heightened struggle due to their weakened and more fragile physical state:

My grandparents have told me that children were born on this move but that did not halt the move in the least, as the woman was placed in the wagon without delay, possibly only a day before the birth of the child, while prior to then she walked and marched the best she could, often wading streams up to

her neck, and when the streams were deeper than this, the women, together with the rest of them, were put across the rivers in little boats, made sometimes of hollow logs if all of the Army boats and little skiffs were in use. (L.W. Wilson, *Western History Collections*, interview no. 5142)

These descendants of Trail of Tears survivors, all of whom were born following initial settlement in Indian Territory, convey a very immediate and emotional experience of the migration in their narratives. The forced removal was thus not an individual experience, but rather a collective suffering that resonates within these narratives.

Accounts such as these offer a valuable perspective of the experience of forced migration. Such memories bare the fluidity of the trailscape, as daily experience is shaped by certain factors including the condition of the environment, the health of the individual and the material items that accompany an individual. As portrayed in these specific narratives of Trail of Tears migration, the trail is not described in such a way as to designate particular places *on* the trail, but rather the trail *is* a single place. In this way, oral tradition preserves the memory of a particular place, the Natchitoches Trace trailscape. Remembrance of the trailscape is a result of the value we find in preserving heritage, whether it be our own or someone else's. The physical route of the Trail of Tears is commemorated today as a National Historic Trail by the National Park Service, a United States federal agency devoted to preserving national heritage. Stories of collective suffering and accounts of racial injustice referenced in trauma literature offer a contemporary literary perspective of the Native experience. Works of Native literary criticism such as Daniel Heath Justice's *Our Fire Survives the Storm* portrays Cherokee literature as its own entity worthy of reflection and discussion, and as a step in the process of cultural regeneration, continuity and recovery (150). Justice notes the importance of words, stories and language to tribal communities, as they are "vital to the processes of peoplehood" and "give shape to the social, political, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of tribal life" (207). Through trauma literature, song, poetry, dance, material culture and oral history, descendants of Trail of Tears survivors actively remember the experience of the trailscape and curate their heritage within it.

## **Interwoven Trailscapes**

The coexistence and interweaving of shared narratives lends insight into how people contrive meaning from their use of the trail, permitting its continual reuse and recharacterisation. Through the act of remembering, the trailscape becomes a place curated as a form of heritage. A number of common themes emerge from the discussion of the landscape history of the Natchitoches Trace, although here I highlight only three: the Natchitoches Trace trailscape as a homeland and a hinterland, a landscape of refuge, and one of social memory.

### *1. A Homeland and a Hinterland*

The Natchitoches Trace as it exists in the southeast Missouri Ozarks is simultaneously a homeland to those who settled in the region and a marginal hinterland when compared to the wider settlement patterns in the respective time periods. Each population that inhabited the area consisted of groups of migrants not native to the region. The pre-Columbian Powers Phase of the Mississippian period is marked by a sudden appearance of settlements just south of the Ozark escarpment and the Natchitoches Trace. These villages were occupied from approximately A.D. 1250-1400 and were suddenly abandoned and burned. Although arising as a conglomeration of civic-ceremonial centres, the Powers Phase villages were one of many settlement groups operating to support trade for the major core at Cahokia, whether consciously or indirectly. It ultimately arose and declined as a Mississippian hinterland.

Similarly, the region was once a territory in the frontier, having been “discovered” by early European explorers and settlers. The Natchitoches Trace served to transport people and all of their belongings in the search for inhabitable land in the 19th century. Early southeast Missouri settlers, such as the Harris family, did not intend to find permanent residence in the Little Black River watershed upon setting out onto the trail. Rather, they found a new home within the American hinterland that appeared to enable



participation in trade and communication, and ensure both access to an appropriate amount of agricultural potential and suitable resource acquisition.

## 2. *Landscape of Refuge*

In the conception of the Natchitoches Trace trailscape as both a homeland and a hinterland, the region also became a landscape of refuge. The Harris family, being amongst the earliest settlers to inhabit the area, sought a land of new opportunities within the solitude of the Ozarks, fleeing from the disastrous effects of the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-12. Despite their considerable distance from the longer established settlements in the eastern U.S., they still were part of an extended system of exchange and communication, as evidenced by the material assemblage found at the remains of the cabin and references to the family homestead in numerous historic travel accounts. The land they occupied was therefore a retreat from the crowded colonised regions in the east, as well as a refuge for weary travellers who were invited to rest at the cabin before continuing their journey.

The Cherokee, too, sought refuge from the ongoing appropriation of their traditional lands. Prior to the Indian Removal Act, groups of displaced Cherokee, as well as Shawnee and Delaware, had voluntarily migrated to the southeast Missouri Ozarks. It was not until John Benge's route on the Natchitoches Trace that these groups as well as those coming from Alabama were forced to seek a new place of refuge in Oklahoma's Indian Territory. Despite the tears shed and the sorrow felt in leaving behind their sacred lands, the Native people on the trail perhaps felt some sense of hope that Indian Territory would remove them from further government interference, if only for the immediate future. The Widow Harris cabin served as one specific place of refuge along the trail as they rested to draw up strength for the remaining portion of the journey. Documenting oral histories passed on through the descendants of those who made this forced migration provides memories and meanings of the trailscape that written accounts by European travellers simply cannot convey. Additionally, it designates the trailscape as a single place that is experienced by people in the past and remembered in the present.

### 3. *Trailscape of Memory*

The memory of a landscape can involve the direct remembrance of an ancestral past or it can consist of links to a vague history of landscape use. The Natchitoches Trace relates to both of these forms of social memory through its landscape history. The pre-Columbian populations who formed the trail and continued to frequent it maintained a more intense connection to the trailscape as a relic of their ancestral past. This is seen archaeologically in Powers Phase sites such as Turner and Snodgrass, where a concentration of Mill Creek chert occurs in specific structures, limited in its distribution. This suggests objects made from this material were controlled by an elite group that was obtaining it through trade, since this chert variety is sourced from southern Illinois. The importance of Mill Creek chert at Cahokia and other Mississippian settlements make it possible Powers Phase populations were obtaining the material via the Natchitoches Trace, although it is possible too that it came from across the Mississippi. The difficulty of access to certain raw material invokes the power of a particular place and demonstrates the value of such items as symbolically charged (Spielmann 199). In this case, elites are referencing a powerful place, Cahokia, via material that was likely obtained through interaction within the trailscape. The role these objects play in elite contexts suggests a deliberate memorialisation and citation to the importance of this system of exchange as aided through the presence of the trail. Monuments and assemblages are therefore conscious statements about what should be remembered.

For reasons unknown, Powers Phase groups abandoned the area, which was to be claimed by European explorers and settlers. While these foreigners were unaware of the origins and importance of the Natchitoches Trace to pre-Columbian Native groups, they nevertheless recognised the existence of the trail as one that was part of the landscape for quite some time. Portions of the Trace along with other trail segments have been federally memorialised as the Trail of Tears, referencing trailscape, memory and sorrow. The Cherokee commemorate the tragedy as the *nunna daul tsuny*, “The Trail Where They Cried,” much in the same way the place-names of the Western Apache reference tragic

events. Memory of the experience of the trailscape is thus preserved in the name itself, and the trailscape becomes an important place-world in the heritage of descendant populations. Since “memory is made through repeated, engaged social practices,” the trail’s existence continued despite its changing functions and meanings (Van Dyke 279). As stated by Knapp and Ashmore, a landscape might have been thought of in similar ways despite its shifting meanings and uses (14). The Natchitoches Trace, throughout its life history, was ultimately used to convey people, ideas and material goods.

### **Conclusion**

A trail often conforms to the physical landscape and its idiosyncrasies; its route is determined by something as small as the avoidance of a hornet’s nest to the preference of avoiding a region entirely due to potential for conflict between neighbouring populations. Nevertheless, a trail plays a tremendous role in shaping the landscape. Through use, it becomes inscribed, thereby physically transforming the environment. As a physical remnant of human interaction, it serves to link communities together and finds importance as an “artefact of the way people organise space to accommodate social, political, economic and ceremonial needs and values” (Manson 397). Pre-Columbian populations may have established the trail in order to facilitate trade and maintain strong connections with larger settlements in local or distant regions. European travellers sought access to agriculturally viable land via the trail, whether or not they were aware of the trail’s Pre-Columbian origins. Displaced Cherokee suffered along the trail in moments when the journey was nearly too much to bear. Descendants of Trail of Tears survivors commemorate the trail as an important part of their heritage, retelling the collective suffering in various ways as an act of remembering. Thus, the actors on the trail are differentially aware of each other’s passing; and we, the interested observers, find it valuable to use the trailscape as a place of heritage to curate these disparate memories.

Until recently, the Natchitoches Trace was not physically maintained through deliberation. Yet, through its physicality, it was maintained by a form of social memory that permitted its continual reuse. In recognising the trailscape as a specific place where

memories are curated, we can actively maintain it as a form of heritage in vastly different ways, whether through oral history accounts, commemorative plaques, public outreach, trail preservation or federal recognition. Social memory has permitted the continuance of the trail despite its reinterpretation and recharacterisation by different groups of people. The relationship between people and the Natchitoches Trace trailscape fosters a collective memory of its life history of place and becomes one that differentially remembers. Thus, a trailscape is a very special kind of landscape that reinforces cultural memory and acts as a place for heritage to be curated. In discussing buildings and architectural features, Ashmore notes they “acquire histories as they are built, occupied, maintained, modified, partly or wholly dismantled or allowed to fall to ruin” (1178). This is directly relevant to the Natchitoches Trace and permits its investigation as a trailscape that experienced both continuity and change simultaneously.

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