



## A Cotton Kingdom Estate



### The first Melrose family

The fortunes of Pennsylvania-born John McMurrin began rising soon after his arrival in Natchez in the mid-1820s. Mr. McMurrin established a profitable law practice, won election to the state legislature, married into a respected local family, and acquired the first of five plantations. In 1841, John McMurrin purchased 133 acres of land just outside of Natchez. Over the next eight years, a combination of free and slave labor constructed the estate's mansion and outbuildings. Finally, before New Year's Day 1849, the McMurrins and their two children moved into their new house.

### The Greek Revival mansion

Melrose was considered by many to be the finest home in all of the Natchez region. The Greek Revival style main house featured a full-height front entry porch with four massive Doric columns. A two-story colonnaded porch spanned the entire length of the rear elevation. Atop the building's hipped roof rested a raised decorative roof deck.

The McMurrins furnished their home with "all that fine taste and a full purse" could provide. Carved Ionic columns flanked oak-grained pocket doors connecting two parlors and a personal library housing many

volumes. Ornate Rococo style chairs and marble-topped tables, wall-to-wall carpets, silk-trimmed wooden Venetian blinds and fine silk drapes filled the main house. Over the dining room table hung a magnificent mahogany "punkah" that when operated by a slave shoed flies away from the food. Most rooms were connected to bells hanging on the back of the house by rope pulls or small cranks. These bells summoned the slaves quartered in the upper floors of the two brick dependency buildings just behind the main house. A hidden hallway in the rear of the first floor provided for discrete movement of house slaves.

### Behind the big house

The grounds behind the main house presented quite a different picture. Here the McMurrins constructed the buildings which housed a kitchen, livestock, carriages, tools and the estate's slaves. The Melrose slaves tended vegetable gardens and fruit trees planted behind each of the large brick dependency buildings. Trees were planted near the rear slave quarters to shade them. The back yards were little more than open spaces broken only by fences, dog and poultry pens, and dirt roads or paths.

In the years following the Civil War, the white owners of Melrose leased fields to African American families to plant cotton. Reuben and Alice Sims and their children, were among the sharecroppers who returned the land at Melrose to commercial agricultural use.

### The Melrose slaves

Slaves were in the fullest sense part of day-to-day life at Melrose. Between 1841 and 1861 the estate's enslaved labor force rose from eight to twenty-five. Rachel cooked the McMurrin family's meals which were served by Marcellus the table waiter. William drove the cart to town to pick up supplies or a visiting relative's luggage. Others tended gardens and yards, cared for livestock, drove the carriage that took master and mistress to town or to visit neighbors, and generally kept the estate's buildings and grounds in good order.

The ideal southern household was one in which the slaves were rarely seen but always ready to serve. Training began early. Children as young as six were often tasked

with watching the infants and toddlers of other slaves while parents worked. By the age of eight children spent their day working with their parents and others to learn the skills required to serve their master.

Only in the quarters during the still of the night could the slaves "lower the mask" a good servant must always wear. Here they could sit in a doorway with their pipes glowing dully in the darkness. Children could play marbles or hide-the-switch. Perhaps young and old alike chuckled over a folktale spun with both humor and wisdom.

## The Melrose landscape

When John and Mary Louisa McMurran purchased the Melrose tract in 1841 it consisted of little more than gently rolling hills covered with former cotton fields. The property was bounded on three sides by deep bayous.

The McMurrans built their new home on the highest point of land near the center of the property. This site not only signified the importance of the main house, it also allowed the cool breezes to flow from the west-facing entrance through open corridors to the rear galleries.

The Melrose landscape evolved as a mixture of ornamental grounds, natural settings, and work areas

defined by fences and native cherry laurel hedges. A long, winding drive lined with trees stretched from the cypress pond at the main gate up to the stately mansion. The lawn seemed to go on forever looking like a vast green carpet. Each spring this vast expanse became covered with wildflowers. On both sides of the main house cultivated roses, cypress vines, tulips, hyacinths, and hedges intermingled with nooks of wildflowers, native azaleas, and other wild trees and shrubs to give the estate the look of an English park. Just south of the main house, past the orchard, stands the preserved remains of a brick “parterre”- once a carefully laid out formal garden.

## The history of the estate

Following the death of their daughter and two grandchildren, John and Mary Louisa McMurran decided to sell Melrose and move in with Mrs. McMurran’s widowed mother in a similar estate called Woodlands, which was located just across the bayou along the west boundary of Melrose. Elizabeth and George Malin Davis purchased Melrose from the McMurrans in 1865. Melrose remained with the Davis family descendents, the G. M. D. Kelly family, until 1976 when it was sold to Natchez residents John and Betty Callon.

Melrose was first open for public tours in 1932 with the first Natchez Spring Pilgrimage. The resident families of Melrose continued this tradition until the property was acquired by the National Park Service in 1990. Melrose is one of two units of the Natchez National Historical Park open to the public. It represents one of the most completely preserved antebellum estates in Natchez with many original furnishings and outbuildings.

## Your visit to Melrose

The Melrose estate is easily accessed from U.S. highways 84, 98, and 61. Daily tours are available on the hour between 9:00 a.m and 4:00 p.m. There is a limit of 20 visitors per tour. Large groups are recommended to make reservations in advance. Some buildings are wheelchair accessible. Interpretive programs for visitors include tactile exhibits and assisted listening devices. Special tours for buses or educational groups are available by appointment.

Hours: Gates open daily 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.  
Closed Christmas and Thanksgiving days.

Tour fees: Adults 18-61	\$8.00
Groups of 13 or more	\$7.00
Children 6-17	\$4.00
U.S. Citizens 62 or over	\$4.00
Children Under 6	FREE

TOUR PRICES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE.

Natchez National Historical Park

Melrose Unit

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