

Travel

Tivoli, Italy, is a retreat from Rome's bustle. **K4**

HISTORY



All roads lead to Mark Twain in Hannibal, Missouri. Above, memorabilia from the Mark Twain Museum and Gallery.

Below, Main Street is lined with establishments paying homage to the city's most famous former resident.

Photos by John Petkovic, The Plain Dealer

Exploring Hannibal

Mark Twain's boyhood home draws tens of thousands of visitors a year

Laura DeMarco ldemarco@plaind.com

HANNIBAL, MO. — Even the Days Inn has a picture of Mark Twain in Hannibal, Missouri.

There he was looking out over the lobby, young and virile, with red bushy hair and full mustache.

Hannibal's most famous son — and one of America's — is all over his hometown on the great Mississippi, 100 miles northwest of St. Louis. There are Mark Twain riverboat rides, Mark Twain impersonators, Mark Twain gift shops, Becky Thatcher's Diner, Tom Sawyer and Becky impersonators, a Mark Twain Dinetto, a Mark Twain brewery — there's even a Mark Twain waterpark.

And these are just the contemporary locations dedicated to the author who made Hannibal one of the most famous small towns in America.

The real reason this Missouri town of 17,000 draws thousands of tourists from around the world annually are the real places and artifacts from Mark Twain's — aka Samuel Clemens — life. The "boyhood home," Tom Blankenship's (Huckleberry Finn's) shack. The cave from Tom Sawyer. Cardiff Hill. John Marshall Clemens' law office. The home of Laura Hawkins, inspiration for Becky Thatcher. And the chance to see the mighty Mississippi, source of inspiration for so many of his greatest works.

It was in this antebellum river town of 2,000 that Samuel Clemens developed the distinctly American voice that defined the writings of Mark Twain. It was here that the writer found the inspiration for Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, Jim, Becky Thatcher and so many more characters and stories. It was here that Clemens led what has come to be seen as the quintessential early American childhood.

My family recently took a road trip to Hannibal after a day in St. Louis. It was more than just a vacation. I was doing

SEE HANNIBAL, K2



Chris Boehke, Advance Local



Celebrating a bicentennial

Hannibal turns 200 this year and there is a full program of events planned for the summer and fall, including a parade, the 64th annual Tom Sawyer Days, the 43rd annual Samuel L. Clemens Arts & Crafts Festival, the Big River Steamport Festival Labor Day weekend and more.

For information: www.visit Hannibal.com and www.hannibal2019.com/

CRUISING THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

New ships, insightful port excursions update a nostalgic float

David G. Molyneux and Fran Golden *Special to The Plain Dealer*

NATCHEZ, MISS. — To many Americans, the rural south of Mississippi and nearby states remains a mystery. Travelers seldom talk with people who live here, whether visiting or not. Even guided tours of towns, monuments and hallowed grounds tend to focus on the Civil War and a way of plantation life that ended, more or less, 150 years ago.

Through this countryside flows America's greatest river, the Mississippi, which hasn't changed much for centuries and remains relatively untamed, as recent floods attest. Hard-picked cotton and Mark Twain floated this way, and so did the old paddle-wheelers no longer in service.

New vessels have modernized the accommodations and experiences of floating on Old Man River, so you may watch the South roll by, framed from a swath of natural beauty and peace (after the flooding dissipates). You may visit an occasional antebellum mansion for antiques-viewing and cultural explanations and walk the battlefield of Vicksburg National Military Park to contemplate the "how-could-we-have-done-that."

Today's cruises on the Mississippi River also offer new excursions, designed for curious travelers to rummage about the river towns, and opportunities to get deeper onto the soil

SEE CRUISE, K3



Inside

Choosing a Mississippi River cruise **K3**

American Duchess, a 166-passenger modern paddle-wheeler of the American Queen Steamboat Co., at a port stop near Helena, Arkansas. David Molyneux, Special to The Plain Dealer

Hannibal, boyhood home of Mark Twain, is celebrating 200 years

FROM KI

research for a new book, "Mark Twain's America Then and Now" that will be published later this year and wanted to get a real sense of the town that formed the man who reshaped American literature.

We visited in winter, when there was plenty to do, but not nearly as much as is going on this summer. Hannibal, incorporated in 1819, is celebrating its bicentennial this year, and there is a full program of events throughout the summer and fall. The biggest include a bicentennial parade this weekend; the 64th annual Tom Sawyer Days, July 3-6; the 43rd annual Samuel L. Clemens Arts & Crafts Festival, July 4-6; and the Big River Steampunk Festival Labor Day weekend. There is also an academic conference for Twain scholars, July 25-27.

Twain's journey in Hannibal began at age 4 when his father, John Marshall Clemens, moved his family 30 miles north from Florida, Missouri, where Samuel Clemens was born in a one-room cabin Nov. 30, 1835. Today, this is the Mark Twain Birthplace State Historic Site, definitely worth a side trip from Hannibal.

Modern Hannibal predates its most famous resident's arrival by just 20 years. It became part of the United States in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and was surveyed in 1819. Prior to that, it had been home to Native American tribes, including the Chickasaw, Illini and Iowa.

By the time Marshall Clemens relocated to Hannibal with his family, it was Missouri's third largest city. Today Hannibal is a wonderfully preserved example of small-town America, with a charming main street, riverfront vistas and bucolic parks.

It was in 1844 that the most significant event of 9-year-old Samuel Clemens' life took place. The Clemens moved into the now famous "boyhood home," a two-story white, wood-frame house near the general store, at 206 Hill Street. It was here that Clemens found the inspiration for his stories of young boys in small town America — including that famous white-washed fence.

This was our first stop in Hannibal, the first stop of most visitors. The house is part of the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum complex, which also includes Marshall Clemens' office, Tom Blankenship's house, a museum and interpretive history center, A National Historic Landmark. It was opened in 1912, and continues to expand and add exhibits each year.

We spent the good part of a day at the nine-property complex (415 N. Main St., 573-221-9010). The tour begins at the interpretive center on Main Street. It's a thorough interactive immersion into Clemens' family history as well as Missouri's past. A timeline traces the Clemens family before and after Hannibal, and features artifacts from the era, such as a printing press and clothing. Historic photos round out the exhibit. A particularly interesting area discusses the real-life inspirations for many of Mark Twain's most famous characters, including Huckleberry Finn (Tom Blankenship) and Becky Thatcher (Laura Hawkins).

Next up was the main draw: the "boyhood home." The two-story house gives a real sense of life at the time for a middle-class family (who eventually lost that home due to Marshall Clemens' lifelong financial struggles). Outside, guests will find the most famous white-picket fence in American literature. We made sure to play Tom Sawyer for a photo-op — just like everyone else.

In contrast, the ramshackle (recreated) shack of the Blankenship family up the hill gave a glimpse of life for the rural poor in the mid-1800s. The tiny house was home to Woodson Blankenship, a laborer from South Carolina, Tom and his sisters. Considered bad seeds by the respectable families of Hannibal, most children were urged to keep away from the Blankenships. But Tom's outlaw qualities attracted Samuel Clemens.

Across the street, the Clemens family home serves mostly as an exhibit on childhood in the 1800s, while Marshall Clemens' tiny Justice of the Peace office provides more background on the world that formed his inquisitive son. A plaque tells of one night that inspired Twain: "Afraid to return home one late night, he snuck into his father's office to sleep... only to literally stumble upon a dead body awaiting investigation by the judge."

Located a block down the charming Main Street, the Museum Gallery was a fantastic, interactive experience. The large lower level consists of exhibits dedicated to Twain's most famous literary works: take a raft ride on the Mississippi à la Huck and Jim; "rough it" on a stagecoach; or pretend you're an "Innocent Abroad" or "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court."

On the next level, a replica steamboat pilot's cabin gives visitors the chance to experience the view Samuel Clemens had when he worked the river from 1857 to 1861. Exhibits explain the importance of steamboats in Twain's fiction and life.

The top floor is dedicated to artifacts from Twain's life, including the famous Oxford gown he acquired in 1907 and one of his white suit jackets. There is also a gallery of 15 Norman Rockwell illustrations the artist completed for versions of "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer."

All that history can make anyone hungry. Ice cream at Becky Thatcher's was tempting, but we decided to take a Twain break at Ole Planters Restaurant, 316 North Main Street, a mainstay since 1976, famous for its meatloaf and pies. Other options included the Mark Twain Dinerette, the Mark Twain Brewing Co. and a plethora of coffee shops.

After lunch, it was time to do a little more exploring. The Mark Twain Cave, the very one featured in "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" as McDougal's Cave, offers daily 60-minute tours, just a short drive out of town. It became a tourist destination in 1886,



Mark Twain's "boyhood home" at 206 Hill St., now a museum, is ground zero in Hannibal for all visitors. Photos by John Petkovic, The Plain Dealer

just a decade after the book made the town and hills around it famous.

Another short drive away, Hannibal visitors can pose for a photo with Tom and Huck at the foot of Cardiff Hill. In Mark Twain's boyhood, this was known as Holliday's Hill because of its closeness to the house of Richard Holliday and his wife. Twain renamed the hill in his fiction. Eventually, Hannibal renamed it too.

Located northwest of the city, the hill along the Mississippi was the site of many adventures of young Samuel Clemens, Tom Blankenship and friends. In 1876, it became the site of even more dramatic exploits in "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer."

It didn't take long for Cardiff Hill to become a tourist destination after "Tom Sawyer" was published. Following Clemens' death in 1910 it became even more popular as readers sought to recapture the blissful days of American boyhood. It became so popular that in 1935 on the 100th anniversary of Samuel Clemens' birth, President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the Mark Twain Memorial Lighthouse on the hill. This was preceded in 1926 by the bronze statue of Tom and Huck walking along the Mississippi.

Mark Twain wasn't the only famous resident to call Hannibal home. Remember the unsinkable Molly Brown? She, too, was from this Missouri town, born in 1867. The Molly Brown Birthplace & Museum, 6600 Butler St., 573-221-2477 takes visitors back in time to learn the rags-to-riches tale of Margaret Tobin Brown, Titanic survivor and heroine, American patriot, socialite and philanthropist.

Another museum in this city worth a visit is the Hannibal History Museum, 200 North Main St., 573-248-1819. The grand Victorian Rockcliffe Mansion (1000 Bird St., 573-221-4440), built by lumber baron John J. Cruikshank Jr. in 1900, also gives a sense of the past wealth of Hannibal.

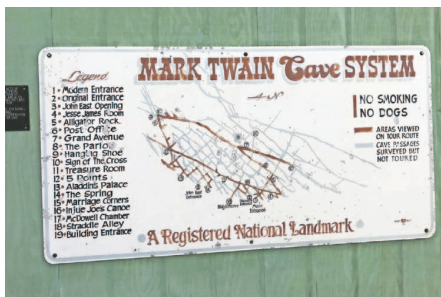
The Rockcliffe also functions as a B&B, one of a few in town. Given the unusually large number of visitors, many international, who come to this small mid-American city, we were surprised by the dearth of locally owned hotels and B&Bs. For the most part, lodging in Hannibal is dominated by mid-level chains located a few miles outside the city on the interstate. At least the Days Inn we chose had that Mark Twain picture in the lobby, as I imagine every hotel here does. (For a guide to B&Bs, including the Rockcliffe Mansion, see: visithannibal.com/stay-awhile/bed-and-breakfasts/)

We preceded our visit to Hannibal with a day in St. Louis, which I would recommend to most travelers making the 640-mile trek from Cleveland. You could spend many days in this gateway city, but if you have only one day, here are the musts on our list: see the Gateway Arch; check out the Chuck Berry duck walk statue, and shops and eateries on Delmar Boulevard; visit Blueberry Hill, the diner and music club; Crown Candy, one of the city's oldest soda fountains, from 1918; the quaint Laclede's Landing area near the waterfront (a spot visited many times by Mark Twain, too.)

On our way home, we made one more stop, at another home of a great American: the Abraham Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield, Illinois. The lovely Greek Revival house was Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln's home for 17 years, beginning in 1844. Today, the restored home and four blocks around it are an impressive reminder of one of America's greatest leaders.

From Illinois, we headed home via Chicago to Cleveland, one of many possible routes that could make this journey a larger road trip. On the way there, we veered south through Nashville and Memphis, then followed the Mississippi to St. Louis and Hannibal, for a taste of the South. Both routes made for an entertaining, all-American road trip.

For more on Hannibal and bicentennial events: visithannibal.com and www.hannibal2019.com/



The Mark Twain Cave, just outside town, lets visitors have their own Tom Sawyer adventure.



A replica of Mark Twain looks out over his old home on Hill Street.



No stop in St. Louis is complete without a visit to Delmar Boulevard, including the nationally famous Vintage Vinyl record store.