

David W Fletcher, April 2002, edited slightly August 2013

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A VISIT TO OLD HICKORY'S HERMITAGE

The Hermitage, homestead and plantation of the nation's seventh president—Andrew Jackson, is located about eight miles northeast of downtown Nashville, Tennessee near the present day towns of Donelson and Hermitage in Davidson County. Situated in what is known as the Central Basin of the state, the property covers approximately eleven hundred acres of rolling farmland, pastures, and woodlands. Today, the former estate of the President and Mrs. Jackson at 4580 Rachel's Lane boasts a modern welcome center with cafeteria and gift shop, an auditorium (to present the story of the Hermitage in a sixteen-minute film), a museum (that displays period artifacts, personal possessions and the family history of Andrew and Rachel, milestones in Jackson's military and political careers, and his life at the Hermitage after his presidency), the one-acre garden (with tombs of the President and Mrs. Jackson and a family cemetery), the mansion with "almost all original furnishings" (restored and expanded in 1836 after a fire two years earlier destroyed the upper story and damaged most ground floor rooms), the Tulip Grove mansion (built in 1836 for Andrew Jackson Donelson, Jackson's nephew), the story of life on the plantation and its operations (with emphasis on the neglected role of slavery), and the church (constructed as a special favor to Rachel and completed in 1824). The Hermitage is registered as a National Historic Landmark and is managed by the Ladies Hermitage Association as a nonprofit enterprise that receives no public funding from either state or federal sources.

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The Hermitage is easily accessed from Old Hickory Boulevard just north of Interstate 40 and Highway 70, but unless the visitor knows this, he or she will certainly get lost or at least take a little bit longer to find the entrance. This new entrance to the Hermitage seems artificial (especially in relation to the mansion that faces southward), since it takes the visitor away from the site's historic route and point of ingress which is the old Lebanon Pike or Highway 70. This change apparently expedites better a large number of tourists and routes them to the new welcome center on the west side of the property where the tour of the Hermitage now begins. This change is beneficial in another respect, since it avoids what appears to be a war zone. In early 1998, powerful tornados uprooted over 1,500 trees (some nearly two hundred years old) and virtually destroyed the old historic entrance to the Hermitage—its cedar lined carriage drive.

The short film about the Hermitage explains succinctly the life of Andrew Jackson and his residency there for the last eight years of his life. An accurate portrayal of Jackson's life is given but with a decidedly preferential interpretation of key and controversial aspects such as his "war" with the Bank of the United States, his Indian removal policy, and his acceptance and profitable use of slave labor. To counter what is often a negative depiction of Jackson's public conduct, the film's editors give special emphasis to Jackson's more intimate side or what might be called the humanitarian or caring side of Andrew Jackson—the man. He is deeply devoted to his wife Rachel, he adopts a young orphaned Creek boy, he willingly endures the same hardships that he expects his soldiers to accept, he regularly attends divine service as befits a devout Presbyterian, and even in his public policy he seeks to champion the interests of the common

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man over the interests of an elite aristocracy. Punctuated with biblical quotes and, for Jackson's remarks, the sound of a soft-spoken, genteel voice of a true southern gentleman, the film certainly discounts his tendency toward violence, his lack of military experience, and his stubborn opinionatedness. For example, the film says that Jackson fought only one duel during his entire lifetime, that the battle of New Orleans was "a great decisive battle of American history," and that his harsh and obdurate attitude toward the French over the issue of reparations was appropriate in that it produced the right results!

Jackson no doubt overcame the handicaps of a difficult childhood in Revolutionary Era Carolina to achieve success in his public career—attorney general for the State of Tennessee at age twenty-three, United States Congressman at age twenty-nine, and United States Senator at age thirty. As a general officer in Tennessee's state militia, Jackson subjugated and then negotiated propitious treaties with the Creek Indians that accelerated the expansion of the nation into the old Southwest. Most importantly, as Chief Executive of the country, he relied on his inner circle or "kitchen cabinet" to preserve the union against threats of nullification and to effect enduring changes in both the presidency and the management of the federal government. While some might argue whether Jackson "made the White House a place of honor" for those who followed, none would quibble about the fact that Jackson was hated by his enemies but loved by his friends, and that he lived, to a large extent, a contradictory life. In this assessment, the film is on target, since his achievements depended on his strength of character—his courage and directness—rather than any formal advantage like extensive education or experience.

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The film fittingly illustrates the nexus between the Tennessee statesman and war hero and his acquisition of Hermitage's 425 acres in 1804 (which expanded to over one thousand acres by the time of his death in 1845). Specially noted are the agricultural uses of the land for cotton and corn and as pastureland for livestock and horses, the architectural evolution of the mansion from about 1820 to 1836, the cultural setting of the antebellum South with its dependence on slavery, and the familial uses of the homestead as a place of refuge for the extended family and a place of burial for Rachel who died suddenly at the Hermitage just before Christmas 1828. The Hermitage definitely bears the imprint of the lordly Jackson, but more revealing is its antithesis to his imperious temperament—its calm, tranquil peacefulness (a suitable reflection, instead, of Rachel's benign demeanor).

The museum likewise beckons the visitor to its artificial (i.e., out of its natural setting), but nonetheless artifactual, world of early nineteenth-century patrician Tennessee. Here, the modern explorer encounters a typical means of transportation (the marvelously restored Brewster Carriage manufactured in 1831 by Brewster Carriage Works of New Haven, Connecticut at a cost of \$1,000 and acquired by Jackson in 1837), evidences of cross-cultural interchange with an emphasis on the ongoing archaeological work at the field quarters of the slaves (discoveries of artifacts from West Africa, a medallion with a mysterious Arabic inscription—"hail to the great Machmud"—linked in some way to the Islamic world, and cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean or the coast of West Africa), samples of household goods and personal effects (mostly bought in the early 1800s and brought to Nashville from Philadelphia or New Orleans), and information about

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Jackson's extended family and his White House family. In the center of the museum stand mannequins of Andrew and Rachel dressed in their finest ball regalia. The skinny Jackson (6' 1" tall and weighing only 140 pounds) towers over his plump Rachel (5' 2" tall), but this true-to-life representation clues the visitor to a lesser known detail about Jackson—that he was plagued with chronic respiratory and gastric intestinal illnesses, and this left him gaunt and emaciated.

A wall chart in the museum, *The Times of Andrew Jackson*, puts the events of his life in chronological order among major happenings of the post-Revolutionary and early antebellum eras. The chart includes pivotal developments in the expansion and industrialization of the nation such as the steam engine (1769), the cotton gin (1793), the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804), the Erie Canal (1825), the first railroad (1830), and the telegraph (1844). Personal items, like Jackson's eyeglasses, his cane, and his trademark white beaver hat (with its broad black band that he wore as a symbol of mourning for his beloved Rachel), help the visitor feel a bit closer to Jackson as a real person. In the corridors leading to the museum, displays about Jackson as "an eyewitness to the U.S. Capitol's evolution" and "the attempted assassination of Jackson at the U.S. Capitol" balance his role at the local level with his involvement as a national leader. These exhibits show the President's human side, his intimate personality, and add realistic knowledge about Jackson—the man, a recurrent theme at the Hermitage.

This realism, particularly of southern aristocratic lavishness, greets the guest on his or her visit to the mansion and its garden, grounds, and fertile fields. The mansion's floor plans of 1821, 1831, and 1836 are displayed clearly on a sign outside, so that the visitor is made to

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understand the evolution of the plantation manor from a plain brick structure in the Federal style to its current and fashionable Greek Revival look. The interior reveals an affection for the splendors of classical Greece with its Parisian wallpaper depicting the legend of Telemachus on the Isle of Calypso, Ionic columns, colorful urns, and furniture laced with Hellenic motifs. The high ceilings, wide passageways, triple doors, comfortable rooms, lush canopy beds, and ornate decorations all befit a dwelling that belonged to “King Andrew” the President. This realism is accentuated by the beautiful garden and its ornate tomb covered by an attractive bronze cupola on Doric columns; the buildings on the grounds (kitchen, smokehouse, and icehouse nearby and carriage and spring houses more distant); and the field quarters’ excavations with the sources of water—the spring and a well (now filled with rubble that needs to be cleared). The display of the dwelling of a prominent slave—Alfred’s cabin (that was moved from its original location in the 1850s to its current site just north of the mansion garden)—represents the imposition of a later tradition, but gives a good example of the mediocre lodgings of slaves. The garden privy or necessary remains a mystery to Hermitage curators, but it probably served as the outdoor equivalent of the mansion’s chamber pots, and as such it highlights the lack of indoor plumbing and sanitary facilities in nineteenth century homes even the homes of “the rich and the famous.”

How authentic a picture of Andrew Jackson and his Tennessee residence can the visitor get from today’s Hermitage? The site accurately depicts the basic facts of Jackson’s life, and it does so in an unbiased way. The curators do labor, though, to show the positive side of Jackson, not necessarily by any intentional omission but rather by the accentuation of the story they do

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tell. But the mansion and grounds undeniably present a static rather than an actual working replica of an antebellum plantation.

What do the curators emphasize? They wish the visiting public to see Jackson as a dedicated and influential southern gentleman, who served his country faithfully, adored Rachel and his children with undying affection, extended goodwill to his servants and hospitality to guests at the Hermitage, and throughout his public career worked for the common good and in the best interests of all. To do this, they highlight laudatory qualities of Jackson's personality and his family life, and they minimize or exclude political controversies that show his combative nature. The curators additionally have obliged the mainstream of political correctness, as well as legitimate interests in the nature of antebellum slave culture, with inclusion of artifacts and information from the site's active archaeological dig. Missing from this portrayal, though, is the identity and role of any overseers of the slaves at Jackson's Hermitage.

Why do the curators depict this side of Jackson? The directors of the Ladies Hermitage Association evidently—and this is only guesswork—wish to preserve and accentuate the type of culture that mirrors their own world and its quintessential conceptualization—that of the refined, affable, and complaisant southern gentleman and genteel lady with the blemishes veiled and the benefits exaggerated. But to the credit of the Ladies Hermitage Association, this is the culture of the Old South, Andrew and Rachel Jackson, and the Hermitage plantation. In historic preservation, the adaptation of social conventions of that time should not be neglected nor subverted.

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How does the Hermitage's picture of Jackson compare with other portrayals, i.e., with "virtual" historic sites such as that of the Cherokee Nation and the White House? Such a comparison is difficult, since these sites give only limited information about Jackson. The Cherokee Nation website, in articles about the Trail of Tears and Cherokee removal, say little about President Jackson except that he acted in an "unbelievable" way (since 500 Cherokee braves saved his keister at the Battle of Moccasin Bend). The site also criticizes the President, amazingly neither harshly nor derogatorily, for his "unlawful" disregard of John Marshall's Supreme Court decision in favor of Cherokee property rights. The White House website similarly gives just a brief outline of official episodes of national importance from the life of the seventh President. The White House site concentrates on politics and controversies of national interest and summarizes the sectional conflict over nullification and Jackson's battles with rivals Henry Clay and John Calhoun. But links are provided to a short biography of Rachel Jackson and a copy of the Hermitage in the Presidential Home Replicas collection. The picture of Jackson in these electronic sites is limited in scope and less favorable than what is portrayed at the Hermitage.¹

Today's Hermitage, in certain respects, may be judged a modern and even commercial portrayal of Andrew and Rachel Jackson's estate. But the Hermitage retains the endearing and enduring heritage of the President and Mrs. Jackson. To walk in the garden, to hear the sound of

¹The authenticity of any historic site obviously is lessened by electronic representation. Electronic media preclude three-dimensional visualization, touch and feel, the vitality of sound, odor and smell—empirical phenomena that facilitate learning.

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the babbling brook, to enter a doorway or touch a handrail in the mansion is to encounter at the Hermitage, in a real and personal way, the pathways walked by the seventh President who led the nation during an amazing period of change and development.

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