

A ROAD FROM THEN TO NOW

By Joqita Burka



It's an 11-mile stretch of road that once required a full day's journey. No doubt, the families of the Draytons, Middletons and Bulls often covered this route on horseback or by carriage as they celebrated holidays, discussed politics or offered assistance to a neighbor.

Ashley River Road, travelled since 1691, was the link to the homes of some of Charleston's most prominent families. On this road, large farms—or plantations—produced cotton, rice, indigo and the lore that has fed much of the world's views of the antebellum South.

Here were the homes of the men who shaped the country's course. Here battles—both Revolutionary and Civil—tore apart fortunes and families. This is a path that reveals our past.

Today this stretch of Highway 61, overarched by Spanish-moss-entwined oaks (preserved by law since 1721), is a National Scenic Byway stretching from Church Creek to SC Highway 165. From its eastern end, the road takes travelers from Springfield Baptist Church past Drayton Hall, Magnolia Plantation and Middleton Place and through some of the state's most cherished historic sites.

Drayton Hall (c. 1738) is America's oldest preserved plantation house open to the public. Built by European and African-American craftsmen, the Georgian-Palladian structure is the only home along Ashley River Road to survive the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Seven generations of Draytons kept this home in much of its original condition with no running water, electricity or heating. In 1974, The National Trust for Historic Preservation acquired Drayton Hall and made the bold decision to preserve the site rather than restore it in the style of one particular period. Professionally guided tours of the home and self-guided tours of the historic landscape and natural habitats transport guests to days spent with the Drayton family. Of special interest is *Connections: From Africa to America*, an interactive program tracing African Americans from slavery to emancipation.



Just northwest is Magnolia Plantation and Gardens. The plantation itself is over 300 years old and replete with camellias, azaleas, dogwoods, oleander and quince making it a flowering beauty. A boat tour follows the old flooded rice field, and boardwalks traverse the Audubon Swamp Garden.

At Middleton Place, only the gentlemen's guest house remains of the original structures, but it is the gardens that will take your breath away. Middleton is the oldest landscaped garden in the nation, dating to 1741 and home to the Who's Who of American history, including Henry Middleton,

president of the First Continental Congress, and Arthur Middleton, signer of the Declaration of Independence. The gardens stretch down to the Cooper River and are modeled on those of Versailles.

At the end of your journey, the Middleton Place Restaurant offers a taste of authentic Southern cuisine and a perfect place to sit back for a moment and think. Time to reflect on the people who once walked these lands, mapped our country's direction and travelled this historic road through the South Carolina Lowcountry.

Find Out More in PLACES...

Ashley River Road National Scenic Byway, page 123; Historic Charleston Gardens & Plantations, page 90

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED

WHAT AN AUTHENTIC SOUTHERN PLANTATION WAS LIKE ?

Built circa 1738, DRAYTON HALL is the oldest preserved plantation house in America that is open to the public.

Virtually unchanged through the centuries, Drayton Hall is a survivor. A walk through its rooms and across its historic grounds is a walk through America's heritage and deep into the past of the Carolina Lowcountry. Drayton Hall's professional interpreters share their individual passions – from architecture and African-American history to material culture and military life – shaping each guided tour for a richer, more varied experience. With ongoing archaeology and archival research, plus the many programs and special events that change throughout the year, no two visits to Drayton Hall are ever the same.



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