The Mississippi Monitor

4th Quarter, 2026 • Monitoring the news of the state • Volume 4, Number 4



Gulfport native serves aboard one of the world's largest warships

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"Serving in the Navy gives me a chance to improve myself and become a better version of myself every day for me and my family"

Petty Officer 1st Class Andre Sampson

U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Mike Shen



Gulfport native serves aboard one of the world's largest warships

(2022) Andre Sampson, from Gulfport, Mississippi, signals on the flight deck of USS Harry S. Truman *U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Jack Hoppe*

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Petty Officer 1st Class Andre Sampson, a native of Gulfport, Mississippi, serves the U.S. Navy assigned to USS Harry S. Truman, a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier operating out of Norfolk, Virginia.

Sampson graduated from Harrison Central High School in 2013.

The skills and values needed to succeed in the Navy are similar to those found in Gulfport.

"Growing up in my hometown, I met a lot of different people, which made it easy for me to work well with others when I came into the Navy," Sampson said. "Everyone comes from different backgrounds. Knowing that, I'm able to understand each of their struggles."

Sampson joined the Navy 12 years ago. Today, Sampson serves as an aviation boatswain's mate (equipment).

"My father served in the Navy," Sampson said. "I joined the Navy to follow in his footsteps while making my own path."

Aircraft carriers are the centerpiece of America's naval forces. For more than 100 years, they have projected power, sustained sea control, bolstered deterrence, provided humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and maintained enduring commitments worldwide.

Among the largest warships in the world, Harry S. Truman is longer than three football fields at 1,092 feet. The ship is 252 feet wide and weighs more than 100,000 tons. More than 5,000 sailors serve aboard these self-contained mobile airports.

According to Navy officials, aircraft carriers are versatile and have unique mission capabilities that make them a more strategic asset for the Navy than fixed-site bases. They are often the first response in a global crisis because of their ability to operate freely in international waters anywhere on the world's oceans. In addition, no other weapon system can deploy and operate forward with a full-sized aircraft carrier's speed, endurance, agility and combat capability of its air wing.

Sampson has many opportunities to achieve accomplishments during military service.

"I'm most proud of being the bow catapult leading petty officer aboard USS Harry S. Truman," Sampson said. "I was trusted to lead sailors and help them deal with their personal problems, helping them overcome and watching them grow and succeed in their naval careers. I love to help others. I love to see them succeed."

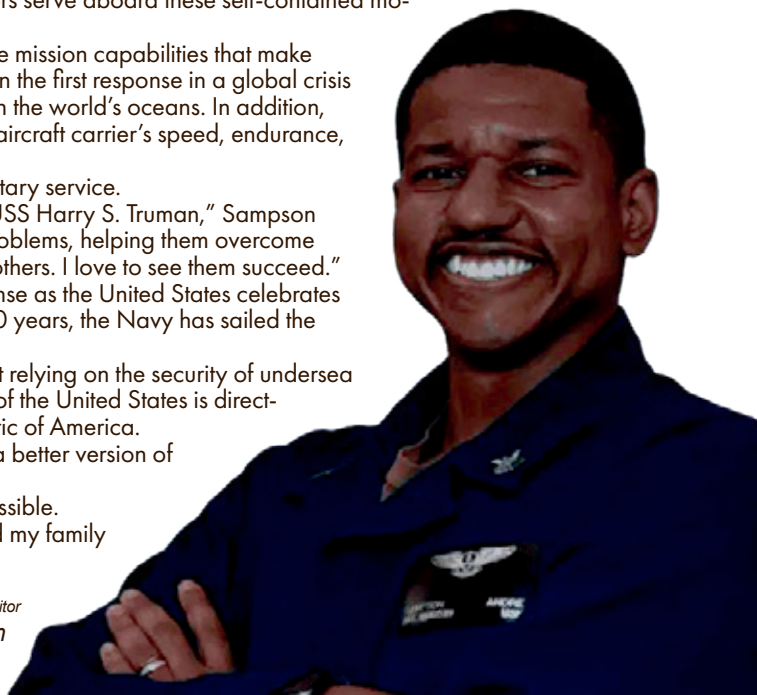
This year, the Navy is commemorating its contribution to the nation's defense as the United States celebrates 250 years of independence. According to Navy officials, for more than 250 years, the Navy has sailed the globe defending freedom and protecting prosperity.

With 90% of global commerce traveling by sea and access to the internet relying on the security of undersea fiber-optic cables, Navy officials continue to emphasize that the prosperity of the United States is directly linked to recruiting and retaining talented people from across the rich fabric of America.

"Serving in the Navy gives me a chance to improve myself and become a better version of myself every day for me and my family," Sampson said.

Sampson says he is grateful to others for helping make a Navy career possible.

"I want to thank my leadership, my junior sailors here aboard Truman and my family for their undying support and trust," Sampson said.



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State Farm begins issuing $70.5M cash back to Mississippi drivers

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company (State Farm Mutual) has begun issuing payments to qualifying auto customers as part of its one-time $5 billion cash-back dividend. The rebates were first announced in February 2026. Mississippi policyholders who had an active policy as of December 31, 2025, will receive a share of more than $70.5 million, averaging about $124 per vehicle.

"Keep an eye out for information about your dividend payment," said Mississippi Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney. "If you already have an email address registered with State Farm, you'll receive instructions on how to log into the dividend payment portal and choose how you'd like to receive your payment. If you don't have an email address on file, State Farm will automatically mail you a check. Because the distribution covers more than 49 million auto vehicles, the payment process will take several months to be completed nationwide."

State Farm customers are reminded to carefully review a sender's email address and any website address before opening a link.

The State Farm dividend payment selection email will come from donotreply@e.sfdividend.com.

The State Farm Dividend Payment Portal powered by Verita can be accessed at sfdividend.com.

The Dividend Customer Contact Center can be reached at 1-888-808-9532.

State Farm will not ask customers to pay a fee to receive a dividend payment. Customers are reminded to not pay a fee, payment or send money.

State Farm will not ask customers for a personal email password, banking password, digital-wallet password or any other personal password. Customers should not provide personal passwords.

"This is exactly the kind of outcome we want to see for Mississippi consumers. An average refund of about $124 per vehicle is meaningful for families, especially at a time when the cost of insurance and everyday expenses continues to put pressure on household budgets," said Deputy Commissioner David Browning.

Dividend payments are retrospective and do not affect future auto rates, which are based on expected future costs and monitoring trends to appropriately match price to risk.

Find more info from State Farm at newsroom.statefarm.com/state-farm-mutual-begins-issuing-dividend-payments/.

Qualified customers with an email address on file with State Farm:

- **These customers will receive a State Farm dividend payment selection email from donotreply@e.sfdividend.com.**
- **Customers should use the unique ID/PIN information provided in the email to select preferred payment option (digital or check) using the State Farm Dividend Payment Portal at sfdividend.com.**

Qualified customers who do not have an email on file with State Farm:

- **These customers will automatically receive a check in the mail.**
- **Customers should cash within the timeframe outlined in the check letter.**

Dividend Payment Portal

Sfdividend.com

Dividend Customer Contact Center

1-888-808-9532.

State Farm WILL NOT ask customers:

- **To pay a fee to receive a dividend payment.**
- **For payment or to send money to receive a dividend payment.**
- **For a personal email password, banking password, digital-wallet password or any other personal password.**



Know Before You Go

Bush's Kountry Cafe is open Sundays, except for the last Sunday of the month, with limited lunch hours on select Thursdays and Fridays. It's best to check ahead before making the trip.

117 E 3rd St, Leland, MS
Phone: (662) 771-5030

WHAT WE KEEP

Food, memory, & the Delta table

By Lora Delhom

Some places introduce themselves.
The Delta does not.
Here, you are expected to sit long enough to understand.
I have been thinking about what it means to keep something.
Not preserve—not behind glass or written down—but kept in the way a recipe is kept. A table is kept. A way of doing things continues without needing to explain itself.
Because in the Delta, things are always shifting.
And yet—some things hold.
You find them if you know where to look.
In a Sunday plate that arrives without commentary.
In a café that has never needed to reinvent itself.
In a kitchen where the same dishes are made the same way, again and again, until no one thinks to name it as anything special.
Food here is not performance.
It is carried.
Between hands. Between generations. Between people who may never write it down—but know exactly when it's right.
This series is a record of that.
Of the places that don't ask to be explained.
Of the people still doing the work of keeping things going.
Because not everything in the Delta needs to be reimagined.
Some things just need to be kept.

A Plate That Doesn't Ask to Be Explained: Bush's Kountry Cafe



Bush's Kountry Cafe in Leland doesn't introduce itself.

It doesn't need to.

You walk in and understand immediately what kind of place it is. Red-and-white checkered tablecloths stretch across the room—not styled, not nostalgic on purpose, just there, doing their job. The walls carry a mix of black-and-white and color photographs, layered without hierarchy, like walking through family memory itself.

You begin to realize the room isn't decorated.

It's inherited.

There's music playing low from a boombox—the kind you remember from a family barbecue, before anyone curated a playlist, when someone just pressed play and let the afternoon take over.

And in the corner, a red fan hums. Not vintage in the way people collect things now, but actually old—like 1980s plastic, still working, still necessary. It doesn't feel out of place here. It feels like part of the system.

Bush's serves a traditional meat-and-three—but not in the way most people expect.

You sit down. You're handed a menu. And then, in your own time, you make choices that feel both immediate and inherited. Fried chicken or meatloaf. Greens or cabbage. Mac and cheese or lima beans. Yams or dressing. Cornbread or a roll.

It's not a line.

It's a table.

And that shift changes everything.

There's no performance in it. No attempt to reinterpret or elevate. The food arrives the way it has always arrived—hot, steady, and without explanation.

My plate came heavy in the way a proper Sunday plate should—fried chicken, greens, yams, dressing, and cornbread, with a quiet addition of cranberry sauce that felt less like an extra and more like someone making sure you had enough.

The fried chicken—three large wings—carried the kind of memory you don't realize you've been holding onto until you taste it again. A thin, crisp coating. No show of spice. Just flavor, clean and familiar.

The greens were the kind you measure other places against. Deep, layered, unmistakably slow. Smoked turkey, likely ham, a brightness of vinegar, and something just beneath it—maybe molasses, maybe Steen's—that rounded everything out. The kind of dish you return for before anything else.

Across the table, the meatloaf came with mac and cheese, greens, and lima beans.

The lima beans stood out—soft without turning grainy, lighter than the butter beans we're used to in New Orleans cooking, but carrying the same lineage. The kind of difference you notice when a dish belongs to a place—deeply rooted in Delta cooking, and in what many would recognize as soul food traditions.

There's a rhythm behind the wait staff—efficient, but never rushed. People move between tables, helping one another without ceremony, a quiet choreography that doesn't draw attention to itself.

Orders are taken in a cadence that suggests familiarity, even if it's your first visit.

You're not being served so much as folded in.

The food comes quickly—but not hurriedly. Quick enough that two families with small children finished their meals with everyone still in good spirits. No one was rushed out. No one needed to be.

Even the iced tea lands exactly where it should—sweet enough to satisfy a Delta table, steady enough that you could bring your discerning kids and not think twice about it.

Dessert, for me, was a slice of caramel cake to go.

It wasn't the version I carry in my head—the one tied to a specific place, a specific memory—and that's its own kind of reminder. Some recipes stay local. Some flavors belong to where you first learned them.

And sometimes, that just means you go home and try to make your own.

In a region that is constantly being asked to reinvent itself—economically, culturally, visually—places like Bush's operate on a different timeline.

Nothing here is optimized for an outside audience. Nothing has been redesigned for presentation.

And that may be exactly the point.

Because what Bush's offers isn't novelty.

It's continuity.

Not everything in the Delta needs to be reimagined.

Some things are already doing the work of being remembered.





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2026 College and Career Savings Art Contest winners honored



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The 2026 Mississippi College and Career Savings Art Contest winners were recently honored with a reception at the Mississippi Museum of Art. Twelve students and one teacher took home $8,000 worth of scholarships during the event.

"Every year, I'm amazed by what these students produce," said Mississippi Treasurer David McRae. “If students can dream it, they can be it. Their futures should be limitless. Hopefully, these Mississippi Affordable College Savings (MACS) account scholarships will push students towards their dreams. Congratulations to all of this year’s winners, and thank you to all who participated.”

The Mississippi College and Career Savings Art Contest is an annual event held by the State Treasurer's Office. This year, students competed for MACS scholarships. MACS was recently ranked by Forbes as the top sixth program in the country. First place winners received a $1,000 scholarship in the form of a Mississippi Affordable College Savings (MACS) account. Second place received a $500 scholarship, and third place received a $250 scholarship.

Additionally, Allyson Worsham from Grenada Elementary School took home the Art Contest Teacher of the Year award and was awarded the $1,000 Educator Scholarship! She had 81 students submit art pieces this year. With the Educator Scholarship, she will be able to purchase art supplies for her classroom and cover other educational expenses, so she can continue to inspire young minds through art.

MACS is a nationally ranked Mississippi 529 College and Career Savings plan offered through the Office of the State Treasurer. With MACS, families can open a tax-advantaged savings account for educational expenses. The money in these accounts can be used for college tuition and expenses. The funds can also be applied to secondary and elementary private tuition, apprenticeship programs, student loans and more. For detailed information about the program, visit Treasury.MS.gov/MACS.

2026 ART CONTEST WINNERS
Early Elementary (PreK-Grade 2)

1st Place: Miller McDaniel from Quarles Elementary School

2nd Place: Stella Shin from Starkville Christian School

3rd Place: Micah Nolen from Senatobia Elementary School

Elementary (Grades 3-5)

1st Place: Henry Moore from Vardaman Attendance Center

2nd Place: Khushvi Patel from East Jones Elementary School

3rd Place: Nikolus Sabaski from Grenada Elementary School

Middle School (Grades 6-8)

1st Place: DaSean Perkins from Ida B. Wells APAC

2nd Place: Declan Stewart from Ida B. Wells APAC

3rd Place: Julietta Lucia Prada-Acuna from Northwest Rankin

High School (Grades 9-12)

1st Place: Alexis Gypson from Ida B. Wells APAC

2nd Place: Hudson Presley from Ida B. Wells APAC

3rd Place: Kennedy Grantham from Biloxi High School

Teacher of the Year
Allyson Worsham from Grenada Elementary School

Mont Helena still stands

Love, loss and a Mississippi Delta landmark

By Meredith Biesinger



Photos from Mont Helena

Rising above the flat Delta fields, Mont Helena looks almost as if it belongs to another landscape. The stately white home sits high atop an ancient Native American ceremonial mound, its columns visible long before you reach it.

For years, visitors could step inside and hear the remarkable story of the woman whose name it bears. Today, Mont Helena is privately owned and closed while repairs are underway, with no certainty about whether public tours will return.

But Mont Helena is still there.

And after more than a century of fire, neglect, storms, and one of the most devastating tornadoes in Mississippi history, that feels significant.

The March 2023 tornado that devastated Rolling Fork spared Mont Helena. The house still stands over the Delta fields, holding a story that began long before its walls were built.

Historian Jane Witham knows that story well. For 10 years, she helped share the history of Mont Helena with visitors and participated in the annual play that brought its most famous love story to life.

"The house itself was built on top of a ceremonial Indian mound," Witham said, noting that there were originally three mounds at the site. The other two were eventually lost to agriculture. "Actually, the way I look at it is if the house had not been there, that mound might not have been preserved either."

The story of Mont Helena begins with Helen Scrymgeour Johnstone, born in 1839. Her father, John T. Johnstone, came to Mississippi from North Carolina and acquired land in Sharkey County that became known as "The Helen Place."

> *"Mont Helena has spent more than a century watching Mississippi change, and it is still standing tall today."*

Helen grew up primarily at Annandale near Madison, but Witham said she and her mother traveled to the Delta property when Helen was young, staying in the caretaker's house. Mont Helena did not yet exist.





Then came the love story that would follow Helen for the rest of her life.

Helen met Henry Gray Vick after his carriage broke down near Ingleside, the home of Helen's older sister. The two were quickly taken with one another, and Henry eventually proposed. Helen's mother insisted they wait until Helen turned 20 to marry.

Their wedding was planned for May 20, 1859—Helen's 20th birthday.

It never happened.

Shortly before the wedding, an argument between Henry and James Stith eventually resulted in a challenge to a duel. According to the history Witham and others researched, Henry fired his pistol into the air. Stith did not.

Henry was killed.

His body was returned to Madison, where he was buried on what should have been his wedding day. Helen attended in her wedding dress, wearing a black veil.

The tragedy earned Helen the name that still follows her through Mississippi history: the Bride of Annandale.

Life, however, continued.

Helen later met Episcopal priest George Carroll Harris. Witham said Helen initially resisted marriage because she believed she would always love Henry, but Harris assured her he could accept that. They married, raised a family, and spent years following his ministry.

Harris later served in Memphis during the devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1878. Witham said the church where he served was converted into a hospital. Harris contracted yellow fever himself but survived, and letters between George and Helen from that period remain part of the family's historical record.

Eventually, Helen and George returned to the land her father had acquired for her decades earlier.

Mont Helena was intended to be their retirement home.

The first house burned before they could move into it. They started over, building again on the mound, and the house that emerged around the turn of the 20th century became the Mont Helena recognized today.

Decades later, however, the house nearly disappeared.

By the 1990s, Mont Helena had fallen into severe disrepair. Witham recalled that the deterioration was so extensive that "you could stand in the basement and see through" the house. During restoration, enough of the original flooring was salvaged to recreate the ground floor, while missing architectural details, including fireplaces, were reproduced from old photographs.

That restoration eventually allowed Mont Helena to become something more than a historic house. For 10 years, history quite literally came alive there through Mont Helena: A Dream Revisited.

Witham was part of it from the beginning.

"We did the play for 10 years," she said. "I wish you could have seen it. It was fabulous."

Performances were intimate, limited to just 40 guests. During intermission, visitors were served a recreation of the wedding reception Helen and Henry never had, complete with period-inspired foods and a wedding cake display. The play ran on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights during portions of the spring.

And the tickets? They were not easy to get.

"It was sold out every night within a few minutes of when we put the tickets on sale," Witham recalled.

Witham eventually became one of Mont Helena's historians, sharing its story before performances, while the owner, Drick Rodgers, discussed the house and its architecture.

Rodgers maintains a family connection to the history surrounding Mont Helena. According to Witham, he is not a direct descendant of Helen, but is descended through the family of Helen's sister's husband. His grandmother, Annie Carpenter, was also a close companion of Helen later in Helen's life and served as executrix of her will. Letters preserved through that connection helped historians piece together details of Helen's life.

And then, of course, there are the alleged ghosts.

Witham never experienced anything paranormal herself.

"I personally have not," she said. "But I have trusted friends who have."

Some reported footsteps and voices upstairs when no one else was there. Another acquaintance told Witham he saw a woman in a white dress standing in a window. Paranormal investigators have spent nights inside the home, although Witham remains unconvinced they found definitive proof of anything supernatural.

Maybe that uncertainty is part of Mont Helena's allure.

For now, the doors are closed. The house is privately owned and undergoing repairs, and its future as a public attraction remains uncertain.



Photos from Mont Helena

But travelers along Old Highway 61 can still see it from the road and take photographs from public areas. Visitors should remember that Mont Helena remains private property: admire the house from an appropriate distance and do not approach or go onto the porch.

Even from the road, though, it is difficult not to stop and look.

There, above the Delta fields, is a house built on an ancient mound, connected to a bride who never became one, nearly lost to fire and neglect, restored by people determined to preserve its story, and spared when a tornado tore through the surrounding community.

Mont Helena has spent more than a century watching Mississippi change, and it is still standing tall today.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.



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“Walter Anderson Adventures” at MC brings Southern artist’s legacy to life

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

“Walter Anderson Adventures” centers on the life and art of the reclusive Gulf Coast artist, whose vibrant watercolors, monumental linoleum prints and intimate depictions of nature and the Mississippi shoreline have captivated generations. The walk-through exhibit, located in the main gallery of the Gore Galleries on the MC campus in Clinton, is currently open through December 2026.

At the helm of the ambitious endeavor is Southeast Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Anthony Thaxton, a 1994 MC alumnus, artist, cofounder of the Institute for Southern Storytelling at MC, and newly-named director of the Gore Galleries.

The project is a culmination of his work, in conjunction with Anderson’s family, that encompasses the critically acclaimed 2021 documentary, *Walter Anderson: The Extraordinary Life and Art of the Islander*, a companion book and a second volume, *The Bicycle Logs of Walter Anderson*, and various campus exhibitions, panel discussions and student workshops.

“Walter Anderson is a bona fide genius, and his life and art have always spoken to me,” Thaxton said. “The more I learned about his life, the more excited I got. The film and the -books were well received – the documentary aired on over ninety-five PBS stations – and, as a result, people flocked to the Walter Anderson Museum of Art in Ocean Springs.

“I spent hours with the family and built such a rapport with each of them that they treat me like family now.”

Thaxton brings a lifetime of artistic passion to the project. The 2019 MC Distinguished Art Alumnus of the Year, he has built a multifaceted career as a television director, photographer, musician and educator. His Southeast Emmy Award-winning work on the documentary made him uniquely qualified to highlight Anderson, often called one of the South’s greatest and most elusive artists.

“We’re not just displaying Walter Anderson’s incredible art – we’re providing a proper context for it,” Thaxton said. “We’re presenting his life as much as we’re presenting his work. We’re telling his story.”

“Knowing about Walter Anderson the man enhances your appreciation of his amazing art.”

“Walter Anderson Adventures” draws on extensive archival research and interviews with Anderson’s family, including his children, notably youngest son John G. Anderson. Thaxton gained unprecedented access to journals, artwork and personal accounts of Anderson to develop the exhibit, an immersive, one-of-a-kind look into the artist behind the famous Horn Island watercolors and Shearwater Cottage murals, among thousands of others.

Visitors will embark on a journey through Anderson’s life while viewing original pieces, many newly discovered or never before exhibited. Among the highlights: as a teenager, Anderson loses his family’s sailboat in a storm and hangs onto a beacon for two days before rescue; he travels dozens of miles down the Mississippi River in a rotten canoe; the college trip he earns to France; his self-imposed exile to Horn Island off the Mississippi Gulf Coast; his impromptu trip to China; his solo bicycle rides to Florida and Texas, and much more.

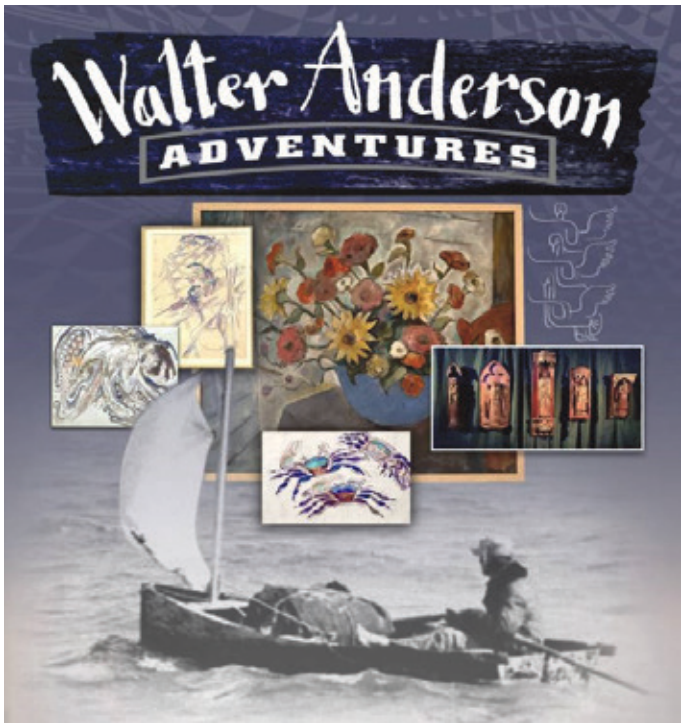
“Anderson was constantly exploring, but he was always creating, making beautiful things,” Thaxton said. “*Raiders of the Lost Ark* is my favorite movie, but Indiana Jones has nothing on Walter Anderson.”

John G. Anderson told Thaxton that, with this thorough and deeply emotional look into his father’s life, “You are reinventing how exhibits are going to be made.”

Bob Blanton, pastor of the Episcopal Church of the Creator in Clinton, enjoyed an early tour of the exhibit and proclaimed it to be a triumph. His favorite part of the experience: a look inside the artist’s “Little Room” in Anderson’s Ocean Springs cottage at Shearwater Pottery, and the handwritten copy of the 104th Psalm the artist had left inside just before his death.

“Anderson’s work was a blending of heaven and of nature,” Blanton said. “That room clearly had something to do with his mystical experience, his experience of heaven. It’s clear that he had a personal relationship with God. He heard God’s voice in that psalm, and it echoed in him. It seems that everything that came into him came out artistically.”

Concurrent with the Anderson exhibit, the Gore Galleries are also hosting “Circular Visions II,” an exhibition by master



woodworker Bob Willis, through September 30, and “Treasures of the Gore Galleries,” featuring works from MC’s permanent collection. Gallery hours are from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesdays.

Thaxton said hosting “Walter Anderson Adventures” as the first major exhibition of his tenure as director of the Gore Galleries is special.

“I’m elated that I get to do this with a family that I love,” he said. “Their cooperation has been enormous in making this a success.”

Thaxton isn’t through exploring Anderson’s rich legacy. He’s working on a graphic novel about the artist’s life that will serve as a catalog of the exhibit, and his daughter, Sydney, is writing a screenplay for a streaming series about the relationship between a young Anderson and his wife, Sissy.

With more projects on the way, “Walter Anderson Adventures” is a first in many new exhibitions to come at the Gore Galleries at MC. For more information or to schedule group tours, email athaxton@mc.edu.

Gore Galleries is located at 109 Monroe Street in Clinton.

Mississippi's Groves named 2026 Veteran of the Year

By Dan Fazio



When Mississippian Ryan Groves learned he had been named the Military Friendly® Veteran of the Year, his first reaction was disbelief.

"There are a lot of Veterans doing incredible things across the country, so to have my name selected was pretty humbling," he says.

Then came a second thought: How did I get here?

The answer, Groves says, has little to do with him alone.

Throughout his life, mentors have seen potential in him before he saw it in himself. They challenged him, opened doors and trusted him with responsibilities he wasn't sure he was ready to handle. Now, as a retired U.S. Army chief warrant officer 3, combat-wounded Veteran and federal employee, Groves is trying to do the same for others.

"This recognition may have my name on it, but it really represents years of people investing in me," Groves says.

That philosophy is at the heart of how Groves approaches his second chapter, one in which the uniform is gone, but the mission of serving others remains.

THREE YEARS BECOMES 22

Groves joined the Army for what he thought would be a short stop on the way to something else: working as a park ranger.

He enlisted in the National Guard while in high school, then joined the active-duty Army after a state parks interviewer suggested he needed more experience before he could land the job he wanted. His plan was simple: serve for three years, gain experience and earn money for college.

Three years became more than two decades.

During his Army career, Groves served in artillery and operations, deployed, led soldiers and ultimately became a warrant officer. Along the way, he learned lessons that went far beyond military tactics.

"The Army taught me discipline and accountability, but the biggest lessons were about people," he says.

Many mentors helped shape that philosophy. Sgt. 1st Class Thurman Body pulled Groves off the gun line and made him his tactical driver, giving him a broader view of artillery operations. Chief Warrant Officer 2 Richard Emendorfer later encouraged him to apply to become a warrant officer– a career path Groves had never considered.

"When I came into the National Park Service, Carrie Mardorf did something very similar," he said. "She pushed me toward leadership opportunities that I thought were probably still years away. She trusted me with responsibilities before I was completely convinced I was ready for them."

Those experiences taught him the value of looking at problems from different perspectives and recognizing potential in others.

"I joined for three years and college money," Groves says. "I left more than two decades later with an education I could never have received in a classroom."

LEARNING TO BECOME SOMEONE NEW

Groves was wounded in combat and received the Purple Heart. The physical injuries, he says, were not the hardest part.

The greater challenge was the mental and moral injury that followed.

For years, Groves tried to get back to the person he had been before he was wounded. Eventually, he realized that recovery wasn't about returning to his old self.

"The rebuilding process really did not begin until I accepted that I had changed," he says.

That realization changed the way he viewed his future. Rather than asking how he could become the person he once was, he began asking what he could do with the person he had become.

That perspective now informs how he talks about transition with other Veterans.

THE UNIFORM COMES OFF

Groves' military retirement did not produce the free time he had promised his wife.

Instead, it opened the door to a collection of new missions.

He joined the National Park Service, where he has held leadership roles involving park operations, administration, budgeting, project management and workforce development. He has also worked with AmeriCorps, mentored transitioning service members through Hire Heroes USA, volunteered with Scouting and become deeply involved with the Warrior Bonfire Program, which serves combat-wounded Veterans.

"The uniform came off, but the desire to contribute didn't," Groves says.

At the National Park Service, he adapted a military leadership concept into his own philosophy: "One Team, One Park."

The idea grew from the military phrase "One Team, One Fight." Groves wanted to break down the silos between specialties and remind employees that visitors don't see separate divisions – they see one park. His leadership philosophy is straightforward: Everyone has something to contribute.

"Progress usually happens when people stop worrying about whose lane something belongs in and start asking what they can contribute to the solution," he says.

REACHING BACK

Groves' commitment to Veterans became especially personal through Warrior Bonfire.

The late Dan Fordice, the program's founder, helped Groves and his family during their transition from military life, providing a place to live and helping them build connections in a new community. Later, Fordice asked Groves to lead a bonfire trip.

He hasn't looked back.

The program gives combat-wounded Veterans an opportunity to reconnect in an informal environment where difficult conversations can happen naturally. For Groves, it became an important part of discovering his own next mission.

Now he leads trips himself, including one that brings Veterans together around shared experiences and new connections.

He also sees mentorship as one of the most important responsibilities Veterans have to one another.

Through Hire Heroes USA, Groves works with transitioning service members who often make one critical mistake: They underestimate themselves.

Veterans may dismiss years of leadership, logistics, budgeting or other responsibilities as merely "additional duties." They also may assume civilian employers understand military terminology.

"They need to find that outside person that they can hand that resume to and say, does this make sense to you?" Groves says.

His advice is simple: Don't minimize what you have done, and don't assume you have to figure out the next chapter alone.

"You do not get extra credit for doing it alone," he says.

MAKING THE PLATFORM BIGGER THAN HIMSELF

Groves now has a national platform, and he intends to use it.

He wants to spotlight organizations helping Veterans, recognize the people doing that work and encourage more Veterans to reach back to those following behind them.

That message reflects his own experience. His proudest moments, he says, include hearing from former soldiers who are now preparing for retirement or transition themselves – people he once led who still trust him enough to ask for advice.

"That is a pretty good measure of whether you did something right as a leader," he says.

That sense of responsibility extends beyond his professional life. As an assistant scoutmaster, Groves helps develop young leaders. He also started beekeeping with his children, turning a personal interest into an opportunity to teach them responsibility, entrepreneurship and community involvement.

For Groves, it all comes back to the same lesson his mentors taught him: Someone took the time to invest in him. Now it is his turn to invest in others.

"Veterans make America better because many of us continue serving long after the uniform comes off," he says.

His next mission is simply to make sure that service continues, and to help others discover theirs.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Groves, of Clinton, is currently pursuing a Master of Science degree in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at Clemson University, where he is finishing his second year of graduate studies. Article courtesy of G.I. Jobs Magazine, reprinted with permission.

Tasting creativity

Kyla Jacobs' Olive Oils and Vinegars

By Cara Pridemore

More than 1,000 miles apart, two locations of Olive Oils and Vinegars exist. Opened in December 2013, Kyla Jacobs manages the second location in Pass Christian. Inspired by the success of her family's original store in Northfield, Minnesota, Jacobs saw an opportunity to bring the unique concept to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

"There wasn't anything like that, at least on the Mississippi Gulf Coast," she said. "I thought, 'How cool would that be to bring something like this to our community, who enjoys cooking, enjoys entertaining, and enjoys drinks.'"

In 2012, Jacobs' father and stepmother opened the first Olive Oils and Vinegars location while Jacobs was enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi. After graduating with a degree in interdisciplinary studies and an emphasis in nonprofit, she decided that opening a second location in Pass Christian, a city she'd lived in when she was younger, was the next best step in growing the business. Thirteen years later, she says she still enjoys the sales aspect just as much as the culinary side of her work.

Working in retail during college taught Jacobs the importance of customer service and satisfaction. While designing Pass Christian Olive Oils and Vinegars, she wanted customers to walk directly into a tasting room, where they can sample a variety of oils and vinegars before making a purchase.

"It's more of an experience, rather than just coming in and purchasing a bottle off a shelf," Jacobs said.

For Jacobs, developing relationships with customers is crucial in helping them find their ideal bottle of olive oil, vinegar, or pairing, which is a mix of the two in the form of a vinaigrette.

Inside the store, more than seventy different olive oils and vinegars are stored in stainless steel "fusties," or tanks, before being transferred into one of four bottle sizes. Throughout the process, customers can sample products and create combinations that fit their preferences.

"Instead of just hoping that it will taste good, you'll know if it tastes good," Jacobs said.

She extends this personalized approach throughout the business. From her recycled bottle program to the recipes available online, Jacobs seeks to create an experience that goes beyond a simple transaction.

Strictly regulating sourcing ensures the premium quality of her oils and vinegars, as Jacobs moves between the Southern and the Northern hemispheres, depending on seasons and harvests. In addition, all her products come from small, family-owned farms and businesses.



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Among the four different categories of oils and vinegars – infused oils, fused oils, extra virgin olive oils, and balsamic vinegar – customer favorites have emerged. Garlic, butter, and Tuscan herb remain some of the most popular infused oils.

"Tuscan herb is definitely a classic bread dipper, but you can do so much with it between vinaigrettes, marinades, roasting vegetables, using it in rice dishes, pasta dishes," Jacobs said. "It is very versatile."



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For fused oils, the flavors change according to the seasons, although lemon olive oil remains a popular choice. When choosing an extra virgin olive oil, customers typically select mild, medium or robust varieties, depending on how they plan to use them. Traditional eighteen-year-aged red balsamic is the most popular vinegar, while fruit flavors are common during the summer and richer maple flavors in the winter.

"It's all based on season and what's available as far as fruits and vegetables," Jacobs said. "It changes constantly."

This variety in products reflects the variety of Jacobs' customers. Throughout the year, the store welcomes local residents, snowbirds, summer visitors and attendees of community events. She enjoys connecting with each new crowd and forming a following within various events.

"We have created a clientele within the 'Cruisin' the Coast' community," Jacobs said. "It's really a beautiful thing; we get really excited to see them. They come in, they stock up, and we've developed a relationship with them."

Looking ahead, Jacobs hopes to continue expanding both the products and experiences her store offers. She plans to add more kitchenware, as well as in-store experiences, such as private tastings and cooking classes.

"We're always trying to think of new ways to keep it interesting, always researching product knowledge – and when you talk to customers, you hear about new things," Jacobs said. "My biggest thing is always growing, always learning."

Throughout the history of her business, Jacobs has taken ideas and transformed them into something tangible. She brought her family's business model from Minnesota to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, evolved to meet customers' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, provides shipping to anywhere in the U.S., and continues to adapt to seasonal produce changes. She says she hopes her customers leave with that same sense of creativity and the confidence to take an idea, make it their own and share it with others.

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Officials break ground on Lakeland Drive pedestrian bridge in Jackson



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Groundbreaking for the project was held in late August

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Community leaders, project partners and elected officials gathered in late August to celebrate the groundbreaking of the Lakeland Drive pedestrian bridge, a transformative infrastructure project that will safely connect the award-winning LeFleur Museum District (LMD) while expanding opportunities for walking, biking, recreation and tourism in the heart of Jackson.

Made possible through state appropriations by the Mississippi State Legislature and federal funding secured with the support of Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, the new pedestrian and biking bridge will cross Lakeland Drive next to the parking lot of North Jackson Youth Baseball on the south side and into the center of Jamie Fowler Boyll Park on the north side. This will create a safe and accessible connection between the museums, parks and outdoor attractions that make up one of Mississippi's premier cultural destinations.

The project represents a significant investment in both quality of life and regional connectivity, encouraging active transportation while strengthening access to educational, recreational and tourism assets that serve hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

"This pedestrian bridge is going to really make a difference. It gives families and visitors a safe way to get across a busy Lakeland Drive to safely enjoy the museums, parks and other attractions that make the LeFleur Museum District such a special place," said Mississippi Transportation Commission Chairman Willie Simmons. "We're proud to be part of this project and grateful to everyone that helped make it happen. This is a great investment in Jackson and Mississippi."



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Cindy Hyde-Smith

The bridge was designed through a collaborative effort with Neel-Schaffer and WBA Architecture, whose work reflects both functionality and the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape. Construction of the bridge will be led by the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT).

Once complete, the bridge will provide a safe, ADA-accessible route for pedestrians and cyclists traveling throughout the district, eliminating a longstanding barrier

created by Lakeland Drive and making it easier for visitors and residents to explore the museums, trails and green spaces that define the area.

"It's exciting to see how a shared vision can be transformed into meaningful action, with federal, state and local leaders working together to make it happen. By connecting key state assets and expanding the trail system, the project will strengthen area connectivity, support economic growth and enhance quality of life for Mississippians," said Taylor Nicholas, Executive Director of Great City Mississippi Foundation.

Expected to be completed in 2027, the Lakeland Pedestrian Bridge is designed to serve as both a functional crossing and a welcoming gateway to the LeFleur Museum District. The bridge will prominently feature the LMD's logo as its centerpiece, enhancing wayfinding while creating a recognizable landmark that reflects the district's identity.

The Lakeland Pedestrian Bridge also serves as an important early investment supporting the long-term vision for LeFleur's Bluff. While the bridge is made possible through federal funding, it is complemented by state investment and generous private philanthropic support for the broader LeFleur's Bluff Master Plan, helping create a connected destination for one of Mississippi's most significant public spaces.



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Mississippi Transportation Commission Chairman Willie Simmons



Rendering of what the completed Lakeland Drive pedestrian bridge is expected to look like

While public funding provides a critical foundation, private philanthropy and community support will be essential to fully realize the LeFleur's Bluff Conservancy's vision. Gifts from individuals, families and corporate partners will directly support the expansion of amenities, programming and public access improvements that elevate LeFleur's Bluff into a premier urban park. Community investment will ensure the space reaches its full potential as a lasting resource for generations to come.

The establishment of the LeFleur's Bluff Conservancy now serves as a key driver for the next phase of funding and development. Those wishing to support this work can visit LeFleursBluffMS.org to learn more.

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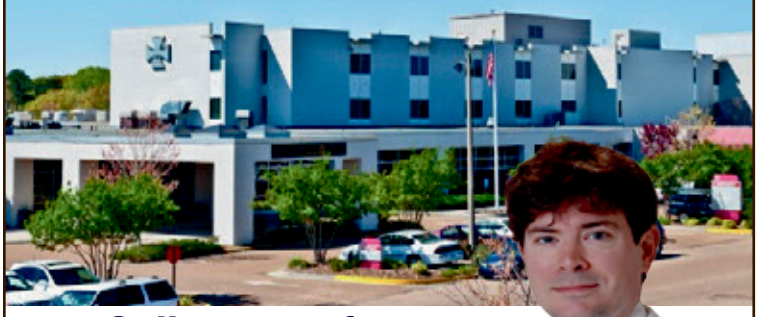

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Mississippi Quitline offers free resources to help residents quit tobacco

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The Mississippi Quitline provides free, confidential, evidence-based services designed to help Mississippi residents quit tobacco and nicotine products.

Tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable disease and death in Mississippi and continues to contribute to heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic lung disease and other serious health conditions.

During the most recent operational year, fifty-one percent of Quitline participants reported living with one or more chronic health conditions, underscoring the role tobacco cessation plays in improving health outcomes and reducing the burden of chronic disease. During that period, 5,819 Mississippians contacted the Quitline, and 3,084 enrolled in evidence-based tobacco cessation treatment services. Among those who enrolled, seventy-three point eight percent used nicotine replacement therapy as part of their efforts to quit tobacco.

The Mississippi Quitline offers a variety of services at no cost, including personalized coaching from trained tobacco treatment specialists, free nicotine replacement therapy for eligible participants, customized quit plans, digital tools and online resources, and specialized services for priority populations.

Specialized programs are available for pregnant and postpartum individuals, veterans, and people living with behavioral or mental health conditions.

State health officials encourage tobacco users who want to quit to take advantage of the free services offered through the Quitline as part of broader efforts to improve the health of Mississippi residents.

Residents interested in enrolling may call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669) or visit quitnow.net/MS.



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Pictured (l to r) are MSU Student Association President Keegan Figueroa; MSU President Mark E. Keenum; Vice President for Access, Opportunity and Success Ra'Sheda Forbes; and I'terrious Hunter, an MSU Promise Scholar and fraternity brother of Holmes.

Mississippi State University dedicates plaza for first black student to attend the institution

By Jeremy Pittari

Holmes Plaza on the MSU campus now recognizes the contributions and life of Dr. Richard E. Holmes.

To recognize the contributions and life of Mississippi State University's first black student, the ribbon was cut on a monument erected in the plaza on the Starkville campus that now bears his name.

Dr. Richard E. Holmes became the first black student to attend MSU back in the 1960s. He went on to provide healthcare in two states.

In recognition of those milestones, the former YMCA Plaza on the university campus was officially renamed the Holmes Plaza late this summer. A monument also now stands on the site in his honor.

"Holmes Plaza and the monument we are dedicating today ensures that Dr. Holmes' story is always remembered on our campus. And what an incredible story it is," MSU President Mark Keenum said. "He was a true pioneer and courageous trailblazer when he became Mississippi State's first African American student on July 19, 1965."



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Dr. Richard E. Holmes pictured at MSU in 2016.

Holmes was a member of MSU's Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. After graduating from the university, he went on to become a physician who provided health care in Mississippi and Alabama. He also worked in the MSU Longest Health Center for 30 years, according to the school.

Holmes Plaza now serves as "a place where everyone can find opportunity and belonging," Keenum said.

During the ribbon cutting ceremony, I'terrious Hunter, a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, said he was honored to participate in the recognition of a fraternity brother. Hunter is also a MSU Promise Scholar.

Other participants of the event included Vice President of Access, Opportunity and Success Ra'Sheda Forbes and MSU Student Association President Keegan Figueroa.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.







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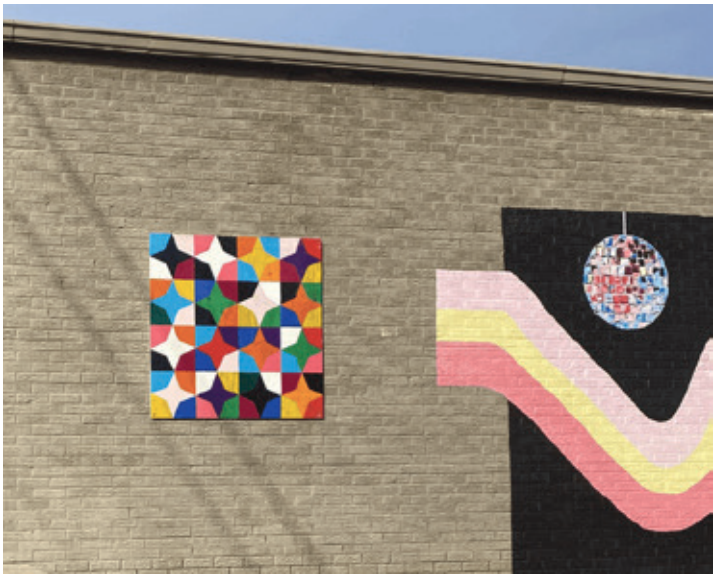
Ripley's public art movement:

Where Mississippi's stories come to life







All photos from Visit Ripley

By Meredith Biesinger

What makes Ripley's public art movement so memorable isn't simply the number of murals. It's that every piece feels connected to the surrounding community.

Not every art gallery has a front door.

In Ripley, some of the state's most meaningful works of art are waiting along sidewalks, tucked into alleyways, stretched across brick buildings, and painted where people pass them every day. What started as an effort to bring more people downtown has grown into something much bigger—a community-wide canvas celebrating the people, places, and stories that make Ripley unique.

Today, visitors can spend an afternoon wandering through downtown, discovering between 25 and 30 public art installations. Some celebrate the area's Chickasaw heritage. Others honor legendary musicians, literary icons, local history, and Ripley's creativity. Together, they tell the story of a town that believes history belongs where everyone can experience it.

"I love public art," said Elizabeth Behm, executive director of Ripley Main Street. "It brings so much to a town."

That belief has transformed downtown in ways Behm couldn't have imagined.

"We wanted downtown to become a place where people would visit and linger, not just pass by," she said. "Now we have high school students coming downtown to take their prom pictures. One of them looked around and said, 'I didn't even know we had a downtown like this.'"

It's the kind of story that says more than statistics ever could. The murals didn't simply brighten blank walls. They changed the way people experience their own hometown.

As visitors make their way through downtown, one mural often sparks a double take.

A Tale of Two Fa(u)lkners, painted by Mississippi artist Anna Frances Ballard, celebrates two remarkable writers connected by both family and history. Most people immediately recognize Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner. Still, the second figure is his grandfather, Colonel William Clark Falkner, a Ripley native, Civil War veteran, railroad builder, and accomplished author whose own literary success inspired his grandson's dream of becoming a writer.

"People don't always realize there were two writers," Behm said. "William even lived here for a short time as a child. We thought it would be fun to honor both of them."

Even the title tells part of the story. The elder Falkner spelled the family name without the "u," while William Faulkner later adopted the spelling now recognized around the world.

Just a short walk away, another chapter of Ripley's story unfolds in Blues Alley.

String lights stretch overhead while colorful murals celebrate the musicians who helped define North Mississippi's Hill Country Blues. While Delta Blues may be Mississippi's best-known musical export, Hill Country Blues developed in the rolling red clay hills surrounding Ripley, blending deep African musical traditions with generations of local influences into a sound all its own.

The musicians featured throughout Blues Alley represent that rich musical heritage, honoring artists whose influence continues to reach far beyond North Mississippi.

The alley itself carries its own history. During Prohibition, it was believed to have been home to a popular speakeasy, while nearby Gus Brown's Café served as an important gathering place for Ripley's African American community. Today, visitors stroll the same alley, pausing to admire artwork that preserves both the music and the stories that shaped this place.

Many of the murals were painted by Jackson artist Sam Ryan Ingram while he was still a college student.

"Sam Ryan painted several of these murals while he was in college," she said. "Now his work hangs in the White House. We could never afford him now," she shared with a laugh.

It's a reminder that Ripley didn't simply invest in public art. It recognized extraordinary talent before much of the rest of the country did.

Creativity continues around nearly every corner of downtown.







The Historic African American Quilt Trail features quilt-inspired murals created by Ripley High School art students and displayed throughout the community, honoring African American history while allowing young artists to leave their own mark on the town they call home.

Other murals celebrate Chickasaw heritage, brighten the Ripley Public Library, showcase Mississippi's native beauty, and transform unexpected places—including an old car wash—into colorful landmarks that invite people to stop, explore, and stay awhile.

What makes Ripley's public art movement so memorable isn't simply the number of murals. It's that every piece feels connected to the surrounding community.

Some tell stories that span centuries. Others celebrate local legends or the next generation of artists. Together, they have created something much larger than an outdoor gallery.

They've created a downtown where history lives in plain sight, where art is part of everyday life, and where visitors—and even longtime residents—find themselves slowing down long enough to see Ripley a little differently.

Sometimes that's exactly what great public art does. It doesn't just decorate a place, it tells a story.



EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.

Hitachi Energy bringing its largest transformer manufacturing investment in U.S.A. to Mississippi



Special to The Mississippi Monitor



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Arthur "Pokey" Evans, Executive Director Copiah County Economic Development District

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Hitachi Energy will invest $528 million to expand its transformer manufacturing operations in Copiah County, marking the company's largest U.S. investment to date and bringing 654 new jobs to the region.

The expansion will take place at the company's existing transformer manufacturing operation in the Copiah County Industrial Park in Gallman. Hitachi Energy currently employs 475 people at the facility, which manufactures small power transformers.

"This is truly a massive win for Mississippi and the United States," Governor Tate Reeves said. "Hitachi Energy could've made its largest investment in America anywhere in the country – but the company chose Mississippi."

Expansion represents corporate investment of $528 million

The project will substantially increase the facility's production capacity and expand the variety of small power transformers manufactured domestically. The additional capacity is expected to help meet growing demand for electrical infrastructure across North America while strengthening the domestic supply chain for critical energy equipment.

The expansion includes the purchase of a 45-acre site at the Copiah County Industrial Park, construction of a new manufacturing facility, installation of new manufacturing equipment and infrastructure improvements.

"Reliable energy infrastructure has become one of the most important factors in economic growth, and that starts with the ability to manufacture the equipment that keeps the grid running," Mississippi Development Authority Executive Director Bill Cork said. "At $528 million, Hitachi Energy's expansion is a massive addition to the investment taking place in Mississippi and puts Copiah County at the center of an industry that is increasingly critical to economic development."

The Mississippi Development Authority is providing assistance through the Mississippi Flexible Tax Incentive, or MFLEX, program. MDA also is assisting with site development and infrastructure improvements. Copiah County is providing assistance for the project.

"Copiah County Economic Development District is grateful for the decision of Hitachi Energy to invest $528 million into expanding the domestic transformer production located in Copiah County," said Copiah County Economic Development District Executive Director Arthur L. Evans Jr. "We thank the Mississippi Development Authority for support of this project, which will strengthen Hitachi Energy's operation, create new jobs and assist with continued economic growth of our community."

Hitachi Energy manufactures transformers and other electrical equipment used to support the nation's power grid, including infrastructure serving homes, businesses and communities.

The company said the expansion reflects its long-term commitment to U.S. manufacturing as demand for electricity and grid infrastructure continues to increase.

"Demand for electricity is growing rapidly, and the grid must grow with it," said Andreas Schierenbeck, CEO of Hitachi Energy. "This investment in Mississippi, our largest ever in the U.S., reflects our long-term commitment to American manufacturing and building the grid infrastructure that will help power America's growth for decades to come."

Power infrastructure manufacturer creating 654 jobs

Construction is expected to begin later this year, with transformer production at the expanded operation scheduled to begin in 2029.

The project is expected to further establish Copiah County as a manufacturing center for equipment supporting the nation's energy infrastructure while adding hundreds of jobs to the local economy.

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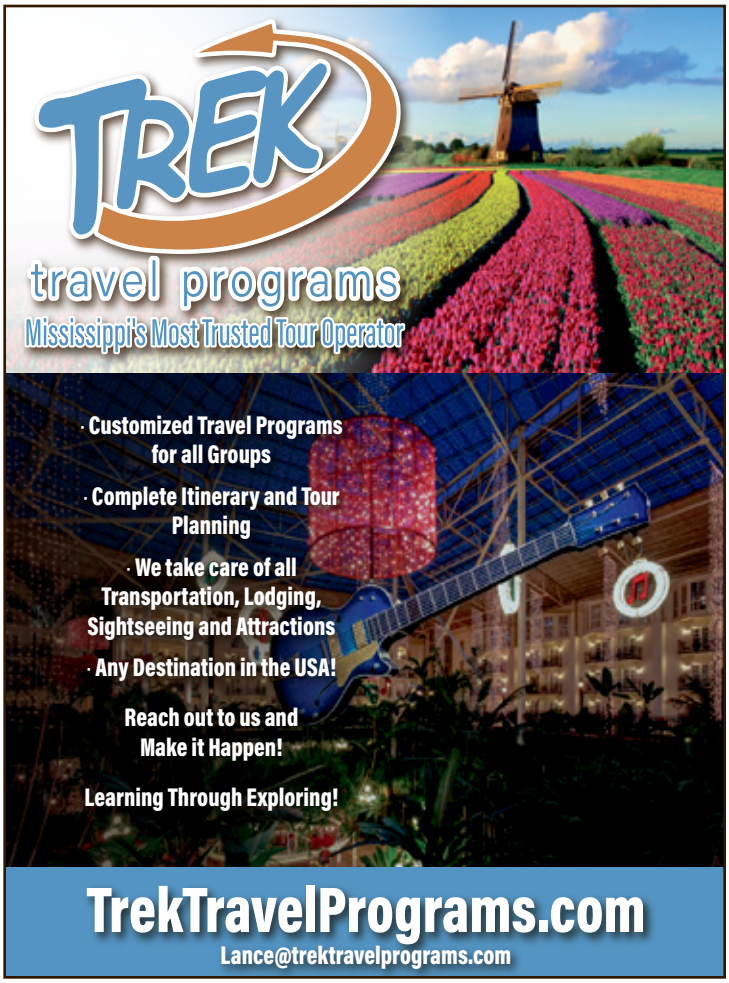

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Long Beach natives and sisters co-author book of love for USM

Special to The Mississippi Monitor



After two years in the making, countless revisions, late nights, and so much love, Jordan Cutchall (Taylor), Lakelyn Taylor and Gracyn Taylor are finally ready to share *My Southern Miss* with their communities.

What began as Cutchall's idea to create meaningful baby shower gifts for two of her best friends that she met at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) quickly grew into an inspiring project shared by all three sisters and Long Beach natives.

Created for Little Eagles, alumni and Southern Miss fans of all ages, *My Southern Miss* celebrates the traditions, landmarks and memories that make Southern Miss so special. Whether someone is introducing a little one to their alma mater, sharing their love for Southern Miss with the next generation, or simply reliving some of their own favorite Golden Eagle memories, the three sisters say they hope this book brings a little piece of Southern Miss into people's homes.

Cutchall earned both her bachelor's degree in elementary education and master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Southern Miss. Her USM story includes involvement in Alpha Delta Pi, Sigma Alpha Iota and the Pride of Mississippi Color Guard.

"Southern Miss brought so many blessings into my life," said Cutchall. "I walked away with lifelong friendships, cherished memories and a place that feels like home every time I step on campus. I'm so thrilled to share my love for USM through this project."

Lakelyn Taylor studied communication and Spanish at Southern Miss before earning both her master's degree and PhD in communication. During her time at USM, she was involved in Alpha Delta Pi, the Honors College, SGA, Speech and Debate, and the Speaking Center.

"*My Southern Miss* is a passion project two years in the making, but it encompasses generations of traditions, memories, and legacies," said Lakelyn. "I'm so proud to be a Golden Eagle and to have been able to contribute to this book. I hope it does justice to all Golden Eagles and that each person can find a little of themselves represented in it. It's a privilege to celebrate the University of Southern Mississippi in this way, and I can't wait for others to experience it, too."

Gracyn Taylor graduated from Southern Miss in 2018 with a degree in theatre performance. A lifelong artist, she brought the campus to life through winding brick paths, historic oak trees and the places she remembers most.

"This book is my love letter to the place that became so much more than a campus," said Gracyn. "Every path, building and oak tree holds a memory of the people and experiences that shaped me there."

"I hope our dear readers use this book as a moment to pause and reflect on the times we laughed, cried, stumbled and beat the odds across generations, all while calling this gorgeous school home," continued Gracyn. "The priceless friendships and memories we've quilted at Southern Miss echo in these pages and deserve their time in the spotlight. So, sit down, share stories, dream big, and, as always — Southern Miss To The Top!"

Copies of the book can be ordered at MySouthernMissBook.com.



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Long Beach natives and sisters Gracyn Taylor, Lakelyn Taylor and Jordan Taylor Cutchall

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New members appointed to Board of Health



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Connie Baird Thomas



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Lorie Till

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Governor Tate Reeves has appointed two new members to the State Board of Health. Connie Baird Thomas of Madison, and Lorie Till of Clarksdale will serve six-year terms on the eleven-member Board, which provides policy direction for the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH).

"We are excited to have these two accomplished public servants join the Board of Health," said Dr. Dan Edney, MSDH Executive Director and State Health Officer. "The work we do touches the lives of every Mississippian, and I am grateful for their willingness to serve public health for the people of our state."

Thomas has been a senior researcher at the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University since 2002. She currently serves as Associate Director of the Social Science Center for Policy Studies and Director of the Evaluation Research Group. Her primary interests include program evaluation, early childhood development and public health. As a program evaluator, she has led the evaluation of a statewide effort to reduce health disparities in under-resourced communities and served as Lead Investigator for the assessment of other health-related initiatives including the Mississippi Delta Health Collaborative and the AIM for Change High Obesity Project. Thomas holds a B.A. from Tougaloo College and a Ph.D. from Mississippi State University, both in Sociology, and has completed graduate work in Criminology and Sociology at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo.

Till has served as CEO of Northwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center since 2023. Her leadership experience spans rural, community, and academic healthcare settings, including roles as Chief Nursing Officer and COO of hospitals, and positions with academic medical centers directing care coordination and population health initiatives. Till's expertise includes healthcare operations, value-based care, utilization management, regulatory compliance and revenue cycle. She is president of the Delta Health Transformation Council and member of the Mississippi Christian University Nursing Advisory Council and the Mississippi Rural Health Association Board of Directors. She earned a B.S. in Nursing from Mississippi College, M.S. in Nursing and Healthcare Administration from Loyola University and an Executive Master of Population Health Management from the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Thomas and Till, who were introduced at Wednesday's Board of Health meeting, will fill vacancies left by Elayne Hayes-Anthony, who died in March, and Bobby Moody, who retired in June 2025.

Also, during the meeting, Dr. James Chaney assumed the role of board chairman, and Dr. John Davis, vice-chairman. Both have served on the BOH since 2021. Previous Chairman Dr. Lucius Lampton, who has served on the Board since 2006, remains as a member.

Daniel Elliott elected chairman of Mississippi Council on Economic Education Board

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Daniel Elliott, market president for Huntington Bank in Jackson, has been elected chairman of the board of directors for the Mississippi Council on Economic Education for fiscal year 2027.

Elliott brings more than twenty-eight years of banking, business leadership and community service experience to the position. As market president for Huntington Bank, he provides leadership and strategic oversight for branch and lending teams serving Rankin, Hinds, Scott, Simpson and Warren counties.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Daniel Elliott

"Daniel understands firsthand the critical role that financial and economic education plays in building stronger families, communities and a more competitive Mississippi," said Selena Swartzfager, president of the Mississippi Council on Economic Education. "His leadership, banking expertise and deep commitment to our state make him an exceptional choice to lead our board."

Swartzfager said Elliott's leadership will help the organization expand its reach as demand for economic and financial education continues to grow across the state.

Elliott has held a variety of leadership and commercial banking positions throughout his career. He earned a Master of Business Administration degree from Mississippi College and a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Belhaven University. He also is a graduate of the Graduate School of Banking at Louisiana State University and the American Bankers Association National Commercial Lending School.

A longtime community volunteer, Elliott has served on the Mississippi Council on Economic Education Board of Directors and previously served as president-elect. He also serves on the boards of Operation Shoestring, Merit Health Rankin and Friends of Mississippi State Hospital.

His previous community leadership includes service with the Rankin County Chamber of Commerce, Shannon's House of Hope and The Little Light House of Central Mississippi. Elliott is a member of the Leadership Mississippi Class of 2022, a graduate of Leadership Rankin and a past recipient of the Mississippi Business Journal's Top Forty Under Forty recognition.

"I am honored to serve as chairman of the Mississippi Council on Economic Education," Elliott said. "Financial and economic education gives young people the tools to make better decisions throughout their lives. MSCEE has a tremendous record of equipping Mississippi educators with the resources and training they need to bring these essential concepts into the classroom."

Elliott assumes the chairmanship as Mississippi schools prepare for expanded financial literacy requirements scheduled to take effect in 2027 under legislation approved by the Mississippi Legislature. The Mississippi Council on Economic Education continues to provide educators with professional development opportunities, classroom resources and student programs focused on financial capability, economic understanding, entrepreneurship and career readiness.

For nearly twenty-five years, the Mississippi Council on Economic Education has worked to provide Mississippi teachers and students with access to economic and financial education through partnerships with educators, businesses, universities, foundations and community organizations.

Elliott and his wife, Katie, live in Rankin County and have two children.

Medical cannabis hotline launches to support safe use across Mississippi

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

As Mississippi's medical cannabis program continues to grow, so does the need for reliable, real-time guidance when questions or concerns arise.

To meet that need, the Mississippi Poison Control Center has launched a dedicated Medical Cannabis Hotline. The free, confidential resource is designed to support both patients and providers navigating cannabis use safely.

Available daily from seven a.m. to ten p.m., the hotline connects callers with specially trained poison specialists who can help assess symptoms, answer questions and guide next steps.



Mississippi Poison Control Center
Medical Cannabis Hotline - 601-984-1170
7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

"With the legalization of medical cannabis and the implementation of the Mississippi Medical Cannabis Act, the Mississippi Poison Control Center recognized the importance of providing a trusted, accessible resource for information and guidance," said Mallory Pullman, managing director of the MPCC.

"Before creating the hotline, we were already seeing an increase in calls related to non-medical cannabis exposures. As questions grew and the program expanded, it was obvious that Mississippians needed a reliable source of guidance. A dedicated hotline allows us to support public safety efforts across the state."

Medical cannabis can be an effective option for some patients, but, like any medication, it comes with risks, especially when dosing, formulations or interactions are not fully understood.

The hotline is equipped to handle a wide range of concerns, including accidental overuse, incorrect dosing, unexpected side effects, drug interactions and questions about different products or formulations. Specialists also can assist in situations involving accidental exposure, including when children or pets may have ingested cannabis products.

"We want people to know they can call us for anything," Pullman said. "Not only are our specialists available to reassure callers after a dosing error or unexpected side effects, but they are also able to answer general questions and provide information to support safe use."

For patients, the service offers reassurance in uncertain moments. For providers, it serves as an additional layer of clinical support as research and guidance around medical cannabis continue to evolve.

"While information about medical cannabis is widely available online, knowing the right questions to ask or how to articulate a concern is not always easy," said Dr. Michael Marlin, medical director of the MPCC. "Our free hotline helps to bridge the gap when someone's provider is unavailable or simply uncomfortable answering."

That accessibility is especially important when symptoms may feel concerning but are not clearly urgent. A quick call can help determine whether a situation can be managed at home, adjustments are needed or whether further medical care should be sought.

As part of the Mississippi Medical Cannabis Program under the Mississippi State Department of Health, the hotline also plays a broader role in public health.

Specialists not only respond to calls, but also collect and analyze data on accidental exposures, dosing errors and adverse effects. That information helps identify trends and potential risks across the state.

"We designed our medical cannabis hotline to support a data registry that will help identify risk factors when unexpected adverse effects occur or when medical evaluation is necessary and separate these risks from hemp-based cannabis products available on the 'gray' market," Marlin said.

Those insights can inform education efforts, packaging recommendations and safety messaging aimed at reducing preventable incidents and improving patient outcomes.

Medical cannabis is still a developing area of medicine, and many providers are continuing to build their knowledge as new research emerges.

The hotline offers a reliable source of up-to-date information, helping clinicians navigate questions related to pharmacology, dosing and drug interactions.

Due to regulatory barriers and its scheduled status, cannabis pharmacology has historically received little coverage in formal medical training. The medical cannabis hotline is designed to help fill that gap, giving providers a straightforward resource for patient-specific, drug-specific and disease-specific questions.

For questions or concerns about medical cannabis use, call the Mississippi Poison Control Center's Medical Cannabis Hotline at 601-984-1170.



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