



## GONE

“GONE” commemorates the 150-year anniversary of the Civil War by documenting the abandonment of Southern culture through the neglect and deterioration of its architecture. The project also promotes historic preservation by depicting the beauty of antebellum ruins as they rise from the debris of destruction.

Although I have been taking pictures of the Mississippi Delta since 1972, I did not focus on antebellum architecture until 2004, when I photographed a brick ruin (circa 1843) deep in the woods in Fayette County, Tennessee. The house was both architecturally and historically significant and its decaying majesty provoked both sadness and intrigue. I pursued structures in similar states throughout the South.

I determined that this work was worthy of a project and decided to preserve what I could of the South's pre-Civil War culture. I went to my cousin, Shelby Foote, showed him my work in progress, and asked him where I should look to find antebellum architecture. He proceeded to tell me the history of the Civil War campaigns in Mississippi. However, more importantly, he gave me the name of my first local historian contact and sent me on my way to Washington County, Mississippi, the place where he was born and the location of the fictional Jordan County in his novels. One of my first photographic shoots was of Mount Holly, the house (empty and neglected) built by his ancestors before the Civil War. I brought him back one of the original bricks made there by the slaves on the plantation. We could still see the thumbprint impression in the hand-formed red clay. Shelby continued to mentor me until his death in 2005.

I photograph structures that tend to be isolated in the woods or on remote farms within the Mississippi river valley in Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Missouri. I concentrate the work in this geographic region because the people who built these pre-1861 houses and supporting buildings made cotton “king.”

Cotton was king because of the Mississippi River. The Mighty Mississippi, with all of her tributaries, extends throughout over forty percent of the continental United States. Only the Amazon, and perhaps barely the Congo, exceeds the breath and complexity of this vast water system. The Mississippi deposits more alluvial soil than any other global river formation and concentrates it mostly in the area extending from the boot hill of Missouri, all the way to her mouth, south of New Orleans. This rich soil is perfect for cotton cultivation and Southerners have benefited from the new white gold since the early 1800's when dedicated people hacked out farms from the infested swamps and woods of the River. Soon railroads came through connecting farm to town and brought cotton as a commodity all over the United States.

Although the “Southern mansion” is a well-documented cliché, it is not the focus of this project. Most farms were small because labor was scarce. Those landowners, who could afford it, escaped to the sanctuary of higher ground to avoid Yellow fever. These wealthy people felt obliged to build monuments to their prosperity in towns like Natchez, Mississippi (far away from the grime of the Mississippi mud) and throughout Louisiana.

Meanwhile, the farm overseers and managers stayed in the lowlands to tend the crops. Some poorer farmers tried growing cotton inappropriately far from the Mississippi River in the hill country, such as in Marshall County, Mississippi, and in west Tennessee. After several years of crop failures, the owners abandoned these buildings. I photographed some of these ruins, as well.