

Road Trip # 11

Selma: Civil War History in the Re-Making

The 1820s town of **Selma** [<http://www.selmaalabama.com>], situated on the banks of the Alabama River in west-central Alabama, is a place where the past reaches out to you like the branches of the town's moss-draped trees. And part of that past is Selma's role in the War Between the States (1861-1865).

During the war, Selma produced a variety of munitions and weapons for the Confederate armed forces as well as warships that included the CSS Tennessee and the CSS Tuscaloosa. The town also boasted a large workforce and was connected to other key points in the Confederacy by rail, which enhanced Selma's importance.

This road trip will take you into the heart of Alabama's Black Belt, where you can learn more about Selma's role in the Civil War and relive history during the Battle of Selma Reenactment each April. You can also experience a Civil War military ball, stroll through a burial ground where some notable Civil War soldiers are buried, and see the remnants of the mighty CSS Tennessee.

Background to the Battle

Selma's location on the navigable Alabama River, far inland from the coast, and its close proximity to furnaces in central Alabama put it in a strategic position for serving the Southern effort through much of the war. This also made the town a prime target for Union raids during the latter part of the war.

On March 30, 1865, Union Gen. James H. Wilson sent Brig. Gen. John T. Croxton's brigade to destroy all Confederate property at Tuscaloosa, approximately an hour and a half from Selma. After capturing a Confederate courier, whose messages from defender Nathan Bedford Forrest described the strength and disposition of his forces, Wilson sent another brigade to destroy the bridge across the Cahaba River at Centreville. This hindered Forrest from obtaining reinforcement, and ultimately began a running fight that did not end until after the fall of Selma on April 2, 1865. On that fateful day, the Union rounded up hundreds of prisoners, including Gen. Forrest. However, Confederate and Union soldiers continued to fight in every direction, all the way down to the Alabama River near the mouth of Valley Creek (where the present day Battle of Selma Reenactment is held).

In the dark of night, Union soldiers looted the city while many businesses and private residences were burned. After spending the next week destroying the arsenal and naval foundry, they left Selma and headed to Montgomery and on to Columbus and Macon, Ga., and ultimately to the end of the war.

By the time Selma's Civil War saga had ended, Wilson had captured 2,700 Confederate prisoners and the city of Selma, with only 46 of his men killed and 300 wounded. Although Forrest and a few of his comrades escaped, the most feared Southern commander and "the man that had never lost a battle" at last had been beaten.

Don't Miss: The Battle of Selma Re-enactment

Held in late April, the annual Battle of Selma Re-enactment weekend features living history tours for school groups, food and beverages, period clothing and souvenirs, a camp dance with a period band, sutlers with period wares, a Civil War Writer's Forum, and re-enactments on both Saturday and Sunday, where you can once again hear the war guns and battle cry of that spring event.

A highlight of the Battle of Selma weekend is the **Grand Military Ball** at beautiful **Sturdivant Hall** [<http://www.sturdivanthall.com>] (713 Mabry St.; 334-872-5626). During this event, the ladies turn out in their prettiest period ball gowns escorted by handsome white-gloved military men. Ceremonial guards are posted at the entrances, and flags hang from the balconies as bands play period music in the main courtyard. Everyone attending the ball must have a ticket and be dressed in period clothing.

Sturdivant Hall was built in 1852 by Col. Edward T. Watts as a town home for entertaining. It features a detached kitchen, gift shop and a formal garden. Period furnishings, art, clothing and other artifacts are on display. Tours of the house museum are available Tuesday through Saturday, from 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Group tours are by appointment.

Discover Other Sites in Historic Selma

To learn more about the history of Selma and all there is to see and do in the area, stop at the **Selma Welcome Center**

[http://www.selmaalabama.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=59] (132 Broad St.; 334-874-4764). You can pick up brochures on each of Selma's museums and select from five self-guided tours. The Selma Welcome Center is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m., and on Saturday, 11 a.m.–3 p.m.

Visit the Old Depot Museum

[http://www.selmaalabama.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=79] (4 Martin Luther King Jr. St.; 334-874-2197). This interpretive history museum, located in the old L & N Railroad Depot at the foot of historic Water Avenue, features a fine collection of artifacts and memorabilia depicting life in Selma and Dallas County from 1820 to the present. You can see how farmers and their families used oxen to plow their fields. View shells, cannonballs and other remnants of the South's largest industrial

complex during the Civil War, and hear stories of pioneers of America's Civil Rights Movement – another defining moment in the town's storied past. The museum is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m. and Saturday by appointment.

The 1840s building housing the **Vaughan-Smitherman Museum** [http://www.selma-al.gov/buildings/vaughan_smitherman.html] (109 Union St.; 334-874-2174) allows visitors to view a wonderful collection of Civil War memorabilia and antiques. Over the years, the building has served as a school, a Confederate hospital, the Freedman's Bureau Hospital (Selma's first African-American hospital), the Dallas County Courthouse, a military school and the Vaughan Memorial Hospital. Now as a museum, it depicts Selma's history from its founding until the 1960s. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday, 9 a.m.–4 p.m.

"There is glory in graves" reads the inscription on the Confederate Monument that stands in the center of Selma's National Historic Register Old Live Oak Cemetery. Strolling beneath its ancient oaks and magnolias draped in Spanish moss, visitors will also find humor and pathos in the lives of the people whose stories are told here.

Old Live Oak Cemetery

[http://www.selmaalabama.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81] serves as the resting place for more than 8,000 people, including two of the most famous Confederates of the Civil War: William J. Hardee, and Capt. Catesby Ap Roger Jones. Hardee was corp commander of the Army of Tennessee, former commandant of West Point and author of *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*. His funeral was reported to be the largest ever held in Selma. Jones commanded the CSS Virginia (the Merrimack) in its battle with the USS Monitor at Hampton Roads, Va., the world's first modern naval battle. Jones also commanded the Confederate naval ordnance works that built the Brooke rifle for the CSS Tennessee.

Among other notables buried at Old Live Oak are Elodie Todd Dawson, staunch Confederate supporter and sister-in-law to Abraham Lincoln; Frances John Hobbs, well-known suffragist who sewed the most valuable treasures from her jeweler husband's shop into her petticoats, saving them from Union Army looters; Selma's founder, William Rufus King, who was elected vice president of the United States; and Edmund Winston Pettus, a Confederate general for whom Selma's historic bridge is named. The grave markings and monuments are varied and provide a fascinating look into Selma's past.

Stay at the Historic St. James Hotel

Make your reservations for the weekend at the historic **St. James Hotel** [<http://www.historicstjameshotel.com>] (1200 Water Ave.; 334-872-3234). Built in 1837 and known originally as the Brantley Hotel, this classic structure has overlooked the scenic Alabama River in Selma for more than 150 years.

During the Civil War, the hotel was occupied by Union troops, but while the occupying army burned much of the city, the St. James and other structures on Water Avenue were spared. Following the war, Benjamin Sterling Turner, the first African-American ever elected to the United States Congress, operated the hotel. He is reputed to have hosted the legendary outlaw brothers Frank and Jesse James in 1881.

In 1892, the St. James fell upon hard times and ceased operations. During its period of vacancy, ghosts, including those of Jesse James and his girlfriend Lucinda, are said to have taken up residence here. In later years, the community galvanized to save its beloved landmark, prompting the restoration of the antebellum gem in 1997. Today, the St. James showcases a blend of classic and contemporary sophistication, offering 42 Victorian rooms. Traditional Southern cuisine is provided in the elegance of **The Troup House Restaurant**.

See the Remnant of Selma's Famed Ironclad Warship

During the Battle of Mobile Bay, the CSS Tennessee waged the greatest fight against the longest odds of any Confederate warship during the Civil War.

Before departing the area, be sure to stop by the Selma City Hall. On the lawn, you'll see one of the nation's unique military artifacts – the stern pivot gun of the famed CSS Tennessee. Manufactured in Selma and weighing 15,300 pounds and with a range of 4.5 miles, the Tennessee gained undying fame in the South when it tackled an entire Union fleet during the **Battle of Mobile Bay** [<http://www.battleofmobilebay.com>] on August 5, 1864, and waged the greatest fight against the longest odds of any Confederate warship during the Civil War.

Located in west-central Alabama high on the banks of the Alabama River, the 1820s town of Selma is the seat of government for Dallas County. Considered the "Queen City" of Alabama's Black Belt, Selma is best known for its role in the Civil War of the 1800s and the struggle for voting rights that occurred here a century later. Boasting more than 1,200 architecturally significant houses, churches and other buildings, Selma is also home to the largest contiguous historic district in Alabama.

Selma is located one hour and 50 minutes from Birmingham (approximately 97 miles) and is an hour's drive (approximately 50 miles) from Alabama's capital city, in Montgomery. To get to Selma from Montgomery, merge onto I-65 S. toward Mobile. Merge onto U.S. Hwy. 80 W. via Exit 167 toward Airport/Selma and continue to Selma.

To share questions or comments about this road trip, please email marilyn.stamps@tourism.alabama.gov [marilyn.stamps@tourism.alabama.gov].