



National Park Service - U.S. Department of the Interior

Marks Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign Interpretive Trail



Quitman County Board of Supervisors

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Project Description: Marks Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr's Poor People's Campaign Interpretive Trail

A. PROJECT RESULTS

National Park Service's (NPS) African American Civil Rights grant funding of \$50,000.00 provided the opportunity for the Quitman County/Marks communities to come together through a series of town hall meetings to develop the idea for a Mule Train trail. This cultural trail is a tribute honoring Dr. King's heroic effort, the members of SCLC and all those who participated in launching and the implementation of this campaign. During the three-year planning/implementation period, community members mapped out the trail's route based on the key locations in Marks, Mississippi, that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited, and the places where the Mule Train activities were planned and organized, and assisted with the overall design.



Mississippi State University's Carl Small Town Center (CSTC) was approved as the consultant for this project. CSTC staff served as active advisors, related to concept designs that provided physical improvement, and assisted with [site mapping](#). During the town hall meetings, CSTC staff conducted workshops that led to the design outcome of [eleven locations](#) selected through a voting process and feedback from those who participated in the meetings. [See website for projects highlights.](#)

Thirteen wagons, each pulled by two mules, kicked-off the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. It was important to the committee working on this project, to ensure the intent of Dr. King's goal of selecting Marks/Quitman County as the starting point for the Poor People's Campaign was a portrayal of the actual history. It was the wheels that propelled the caravan of wagons movement; thus, the committee agreed to make the wheel the symbolic image for the Mule Train Markers to mark the Interpretive Trail. The wheel is a symbol of continuous motion that revolves on an axle, which is used to thrust wagons, locomotives, vehicles, and other modes of transportation forward. Without the wheel, it's difficult to produce movement. The wagon wheels gave movement to this campaign, and the symbol of the wheel portrayed on each of the eleven markers will help to continue to propel the history of the 1968 Marks Mule Train & MLK, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign, where visitors and tourists will be able to step into this history.

This project successfully achieved the goals as outlined in the Quitman County's grant application, which were to complete the [cultural interpretive trail](#) for the 1968 civil rights history, and in doing so, defined the roles for the City of Marks, community organizers, and civil rights activists who played in recreating this history. The trail was the fourth phase of the comprehensive plan of *Marking the Marks Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign*.





The first phase of this comprehensive plan was completed in 2015 with the installation of the [Mule Train Marker](#). The funding for this phase was a part of the 2011 [Mississippi Freedom Trail](#) project. Matching funds were secured from the Quitman County Board of Supervisors and the City of Marks Board of Aldermen to complete the installation of the Mule Train marker. Also, in 2015 the inaugural [Mules & Blues Fest](#) was kicked-off. This festival is based on the 1968 civil rights history of the Mule Train and iconic music/blues legends born in Quitman County.

Phase-two of the comprehensive plan was the installation of a trailhead sign in October 2016. The National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program provided funding to design and install a permanent sign that doubles as a “Welcome to Marks” entry sign located in Marks public park at the intersection of highways 3 & 6. The grant was done in partnership with the Mississippi State University’s Carl Small Town Center.



The completion of each phase of *Marking the Marks Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign* has given a boost to Marks’s downtown revitalization. Currently eighty- percent of the storefronts on Main Street are filled with retail merchants, diners, office space, as compared to 2016, when Main Street was abandoned.



The revitalization efforts to downtown Marks is contributed in part to the 2018 opening of Northwest Mississippi Regional Amtrak stop, which hosts daily route travelers from Chicago to New Orleans.

B. DIFFERENCES: SCOPE OF WORK AND DELIVERABLES

There were no changes in the scope of work for this project as outlined in the grant application, other than delays caused by the 2019 government shut-down and COVID-19 crisis. Besides an extension granted due to the virus, the project’s timeline stayed on course to completion.

Some added deliverables included: funding from Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension *Aim for Change* program, which was used to design and create the first phase of a bike/walking path along the Mule Train cultural trail. The path is 1/2 mile and connects the cultural trail to the downtown Amtrak staop, Main Street and the county’s historic courthouse. *Aim for Change’s* primary goal is to promote a healthier lifestyle through physical activity. The route allows residents and tourists the opportunity to experience nature and view the markers located on the cultural trail, all the while exercising to improve health benefits. Additionally, funds from the MSU provided seven pathway signs which were installed at key locations along the Mule Train Interpretive Trail as directional signage for residents and tourists.



C. PROJECT IMPACT

Marking the Marks Mule Train & MLK, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign consists of a comprehensive plan with five phases. With the trail now complete, the fourth phase is gaining the ability to market the project on regional and state levels. (*Refer to article in Tri-Lake Magazine*). The unveiling of the markers has already attracted an increase tourism to Marks to visit and explore the trail, evident on social media posts on the county's [Facebook page](#).

The project impact on this community's economic revitalization is outstanding with the number of storefronts on Main Street now occupied. Additionally, the trail added an element of beautification, giving downtown a sense of place and created opportunity for more business development.

The unveiling of the eleven markers was the main event of the program commemorating the [53rd Anniversary of the 1968 Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign](#), which was held on May 13, 2021. On that same date fifty-three years ago, the Mule Train left Marks headed to Atlanta, and eventually onward to Washington, D.C.

During the trail's unveiling, a trolley tour was offered to visitors and residents where they were able to journey along the Mule Train Interpretive Trail and listen to tour guides and local leaders providing first-hand accounts of what took place at each wagon wheel marker. The first leg of the tour began at Silent Grove Baptist Church, where Dr. King stopped to rally support for the Poor People's Campaign. Other sites included Valley Queen Baptist Church, where he preached the funeral of Armistead Phipps, who died of a heart attack during James Meredith's *March Against Fear*, and the infamous Cotton Street neighborhood, where Dr. King wept and was inspired to take up the fight against poverty and economic justice. Click to view the [53rd Anniversary video and article highlights](#) of the unveiling.

Prior to the 53rd Anniversary, the history of the Marks Mule Train & MLK, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign received national media attention based on events surrounding media exposure, in particular the [50th Anniversary](#) in 2018, when Martin Luther King III, made his pilgrimage to Marks and was an integral part of the commemoration activities. King III walked the path and viewed the temporary markers at that time, stepping into the history his father had created. For those in attendance of the events, the occasion appeared reverent, seeing King III honor the fortitude and the depth of the work that his father did in 1968 in Marks.

After three years of planning and hard work, the anticipated *1968 Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr. Poor People's Interpretive Trail* is now a reality, showcasing eleven markers, displaying the history and activities which took place fifty-three years ago, and earned Marks the duly distinction of the "*Home of the Mule Train.*" Residents, visitors and tourists will be guided by seven directional pathway signs pointing the way, as they walk, bike or drive the [Mule Train Cultural trail](#).



Perhaps, the biggest impact of this project is that Marks and Quitman County is now becoming a nascent civil rights destination, with the potential to bring economic stimulus, tourism growth and the capacity to attract private investors and businesses for downtown and regional development. The potential has been fueled with the addition of the Amtrak station. As with the unveiling of trail to showcase the 1968 civil rights history, the stakeholders and the grassroots committee will continue to seek state, federal and regional funding as well as collaborative partnerships to find means to reveal this history internationally. In retrospect, Dr. King's presence in Marks is now opening doors to not only help this rural underserved community, but other rural towns in the Mississippi Delta to set a path forward to a greater economic prosperity.

D. PHASE 5 OF COMPREHENSIVE PLAN:

SEEK FUNDING FOR MULE TRAIN INTERPRETIVE WELCOME CENTER

Due to this preservation grant, this community now has the Mule Train interpretive trail. Funding is now needed to assist with remodeling a historic county-owned building located downtown diagonally from the Amtrak station. The county purchased this 90-year-old building in 2018, with the intent to remodel and preserve the structure, and use it for a multi-purpose building serving as the Interpretive Welcome Center and housing the county's tourism office. Achieving this goal would complete the final phase of the comprehensive plan of *Marks Mule Train & MLK, Jr's Poor People's Campaign*.

One of the 11 markers on the Mule Train Interpretive Trail is located at *Eudora AME Church*, founded in 1919. Dr. King spoke at this church in spring of 1968 and during the 1960s it was a safe haven for the Freedom Riders, providing meals, shelter and meeting space. Due to the deteriorating physical structure in 2019, the church was condemned and is no longer in use. An application was recently submitted for this project for the 2021 NPS African American Perseveration grant. We are waiting for the outcome of this application in hope of preserving this historic church as well.

E. LONG-TERM MAINTENANCE PLAN

The City of Marks and the Board of Aldermen, along with the Quitman County Board of Supervisors will assist in managing this project and will be responsible for the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of the markers located on city and county property. The regular landscaping and maintenance of the markers will be tasks performed by the City's maintenance department. In addition, the Marks Garden Club and the University Extension office will assist with seasonal landscaping and beautification projects centered around the markers. The markers located on church's property, businesses and the school grounds will be maintained by their maintenance crews, which are outlined in a consent agreement.



To make this maintenance plan sustainable and long-term, the following steps will be taken:

1. Based on best practice; establish a maintenance plan to include policies, procedures to develop a quarterly assessment form. This form will be shared with the businesses, churches and property owners where markers are located.
2. City of Marks' maintenance department will develop an annual budget through routine monthly inspection; to assess the condition of needed repair and anticipated cost.
3. Providing training as feasible and needed to maintenance crew to monitor and administer the marker interpretation, as well the marker physical condition.
4. Submit quarterly marker interpretation tour/program report to Quitman County Board of Supervisors and the City of Marks to include a maintenance report citing marker condition and recommended repairs as needed; report any damage and emergency repairs needed immediately to City of Marks Police and the Quitman County Sheriff's Department.
5. Annual review of the marker maintenance plan; alter as needed; seek consensus and approval from all plan partners.
6. Future Public Outreach Activities
 - a. The quarterly magazine *Tri-Lakes* has a readership of 3,000, and will have an article featuring the Mule Train cultural trail. This issue will be published in August 2021.
See draft copy of article
 - b. The Mule Train cultural trail will be featured in the newest county's tourism brochure, available in spring of 2022. The county will seek funds from Mississippi Development Authority and Visit Mississippi to design, print and distribute 5,000 brochures. This brochure will be a part of the regional marketing package to help promote and increase tourism. Copies will be distributed to regional and state tourism offices and welcome and visitor centers.
 - c. We will continue our efforts to promote our civil rights history with the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, Mississippi, where there is currently a display of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign. The director of the museum was a part of the unveiling tour and in attendance for the 53rd anniversary program.



- d. We will also continue our efforts to work with the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. With featured tour packages, we will link with the Memphis's Museum, where there is also a display of the history of the Poor People's Campaign which featured images of Marks.
- e. Currently, efforts are underway to pull together regional and state tour packages that will include ticket fares for Amtrak travelers. Marks will be a part of this package promoting its cultural assets.
- f. Tours of the Mule Train cultural trail will become a part of the annual Mules & Blues festival held during the month of October.
- g. This project has been placed on the [Quitman County](#) and the Mules-Blues festival websites and Facebook pages.
- h. Pictures of the Mule Train cultural trail are posted on the [Mississippi State University's Carl Small Town Center's website](#).
- i. Future videos of unveiling tours will be featured on the county's website and Facebook pages.

