Jackson’s Island

Virtual Tour by David Wang, age 14

Jackson’s Island, located in the Mississippi River near Hannibal, Missouri, is an island of many names. It was called Pete’s Island by a band of pirates. It has been known as Glascock’s Island as well as Pearl Island. However, it was Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn that did much to make it the most famous river island in the world. The hero and his friend Jim used this real landmark as a hideout in their common goal of escaping to freedom.

Jackson’s Island today is no longer the three-and-a-half-mile piece of land it was. Floods and rain have worn it down into a series of three shorter islands. The land mass on the Mississippi right beyond the well known landmark, Lover’s Leap, is one section of the existing segments of Jackson’s Island. When the river floods, parts of the island disappear temporarily.

“Three miles below St. Petersburg, at a point where the Mississippi River was a trifle over a mile wide, there was a long, narrow, wooded island, with a shallow bar at the head of it, and this offered well as a rendezvous. It was not inhabited; it lay far over toward the further shore, abreast a dense and almost wholly unpeopled forest. So Jackson’s Island was chosen.”

This section of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer illustrates the ecological description of the island. It suggests that the vast network of forest and wild shrub made an ideal playground for the characters in the book, as well as possibly the young Sam Clemens and his comrades. Its remoteness also made ideal cover for Huckleberry Finn and Jim on their escape to freedom.

Jackson’s Island takes its name from Mark Twain who also named Hannibal’s Cardiff Hill, another landmark, in this fashion. In real life, Bence Blankenship, a brother of Tom Blankenship, smuggled food to a runaway slave on the island. Although Huck was mostly based on Tom, Bence’s activities on Jackson’s Island clearly found their way into Twain’s writings. There, Huckleberry Finn first identifies himself with Jim when he said, “They’re after us!” The word “us” is the most important word, coming from a white boy at the time. This island was the site of the forming of an important friendship in American literature - one of the most positive and equal black and white relationships at a time when such friendships were not normal.

In The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Tom, Huck, and Joe Harper, feeling unappreciated, ran away and hid on Jackson’s Island wishing to be pirates. When they learned that their families believed them to be dead and were planning funerals, the boys returned to the fictional town of St. Petersburg, which Twain based on his childhood home of Hannibal.

Special points of interest:

- From the island visitors can see great views of Lover’s Leap, Cardiff Hill, and the town of Hannibal
- Watch for the wildlife that inhabits the island…
- Turtles
- Muskrats
- Snakes
- Otters
- Beavers
- Hawks
- Eagles

Jackson’s Island still invites those seeking adventure
Modern-day Toms and Hucks still explore the island

Jackson’s Island is still uninhabited as it was during Clemens’ boyhood, although it is home to muskrats, turtles, snakes, otters, beavers, and countless mosquitoes. Modern-day visitors continue to visit the island by boat for picnics and other recreation, although the lush vegetation also includes poison ivy. A myriad of bird species also roost on Jackson’s island, as confirmed by the Audubon Society. It is likely for a visitor to see an eagle or hawk soar overhead when visiting the island.

Mark Twain was known to use real-life events, people, and locations in his novels. Jackson’s Island played a critical part in his two most famous adventures. In a way, it was one of the first places where a white person first saw a black man as an equal. It also played a sentimental role in Twain’s life, because his childhood revolved around the island and the Mighty Mississippi which surrounded it.

~D.W.

Visitors still explore Jackson’s Island, which is virtually unchanged since the days of Sam Clemens’ boyhood.