

A bountiful harvest of sites along this route

ATKINSON'S MILL, BOYETTE SLAVE HOUSE, FARM LIFE MUSEUM, UPTOWN SELMA HIGHLIGHT THIS HERITAGE DRIVING TOUR

Here's a half-day driving tour that showcases Johnston County's rural heritage during what's arguably our prettiest season of the year. It takes you to an historic grist mill that's still in operation, to an antebellum slave house uncommon in this state, to our region's premier farm-heritage museum, and back to a unique assemblage of shops specializing in country antiques and collectibles.

We'll start our tour at the home of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau, located in the Victorian-era Lee House beside the Carolina Outlet Center between I-95 exits 95 and 97. The welcome center is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays, but you can still pick up brochures and such from a gazebo on the grounds after business hours.

To begin your drive, follow the road in front of the Lee House (Industrial Park Drive) northward alongside I-95 toward Selma. Turn left at the first stoplight, which puts you on U.S. 70 West. After the railroad overpass, turn right on U.S. 301 through the heart of Selma. You'll be tempted to stop at the antique shops there, but we recommend you wait till our tour brings you back. Leaving Selma, look for N.C. 39 veering off to the left at Selma Middle School.

Highway 39 will take you immediately into classic Johnston County countryside, characterized by small farms growing all sorts of crops. About seven miles north of Selma you'll pass the old white-frame Corbett-Hatcher School house on the right — preserved for present-day use as a community center. Two more miles up 39 brings you to N.C. 42. Turn left and go just a quarter of a mile to the driveway leading to historic Atkinson's Mill on the right.

This is Johnston County's oldest business still in operation. Atkinson Milling Co. cranked up in 1757.

And while the present-day mill house isn't the original, the work being done there hasn't appreciably changed over the past 245 years. Huge rotating stones (powered by electricity these days) grind corn into flour, which is sold under a variety of brand names like Cattail Corn Meal and Sweet Betsy Hush Puppy Mix. Ray Wheeler and his family are today's operators, and they're gracious enough to stop what they're doing to give visitors a tour of their operation.

Leaving Atkinson's Mill, turn left on N.C. 42 and proceed eastward about three miles to N.C. 222 at a crossroads community known as Moore's Schoolhouse. Turn right on 222, go about three miles, then right on Glendale Road (State Road 2110). About a quarter of a mile from 222 you'll find yourself at the old Boyette family plantation. The

private residence is on the right, and across the road on the left is the Boyette Slave and School House — a one-room wooden structure featuring a chimney made of heart-pine sticks and daubed with clay-based mortar (it's one of just six such structures surviving across North Carolina). Even though it's located on private property and no one's there to give you a guided tour, visitors are welcome to pull off the road into a grassy parking lot and look around.

Returning to N.C. 222 via Glendale Road, turn right on 222, which takes you toward the town of Kenly — about five miles away. This stretch of roadway is flat and straight for the most part, and was originally used for a narrow-gauge tram railroad that hauled timber to a sawmill in Kenly.

In Kenly, turn left on U.S. 301

and proceed northward about half a mile till you reach the entrance to the Tobacco Farm Life Museum on the left. This is a professionally run museum built to showcase the life and work of the region's tobacco farmers who thrived during the first half of the 20th Century. Besides the modern museum building is a restored Depression-era farmstead complete with authentic farmhouse, tobacco barn, and pack house. The Tobacco Farm Life Museum is open seven days a week.

Leaving the museum, turn right on U.S. 301 back through Kenly. It's about 10 miles back to Selma. Along the way you'll pass through Micro, a town named years ago for its size rather than anything to do with science or technology.

Back in Selma, follow 301 into the heart of town, and turn left onto Anderson Street. A block to the east — at Raiford Street — you'll find yourself in the heart of Uptown Selma — a new name for Selma's central

business district, which has recently been converted into an antique mecca with all sorts of shops selling everything from antique furnishings and collectibles to hand-made soaps and quilts. Even if you're not in a shopping mood, you'll enjoy the charm of Uptown Selma's early 20th Century commercial buildings. The shopkeepers are glad to have you come in and simply look around.

From Selma you may go your own way — or return to the Visitors Bureau for a refill of suggested things to see and do.

From the start of our tour at the Johnston County Visitors Bureau to its conclusion in Uptown Selma, the total driving distance is 36 miles. That gives you plenty of time to stop and explore the sites and sounds and smells along the way.

—Wingate Lassiter

