

Scenes from Northport: The artsy village that's more than Tuscaloosa's little sister



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Sure, Northport welcomes people to town with a huge "Roll Tide" painted beneath a railroad bridge but this town of about 24,000 people offers more than overflow housing for students at nearby University of Alabama.

The artsy little village located north of the Black Warrior River and the larger city of Tuscaloosa is home to Kentuck Art Center in its picturesque downtown historic district. Randomly placed metal sculptures, quaint shops and homey eateries give the area a quirky and fun personality.

Northport's beginnings

Located in Tuscaloosa County, Northport was first settled in 1813 as Kentuck, or Canetuck. [According to the Encyclopedia of Alabama](#), numerous warehouses were built along the shores of the Black Warrior River to transport cotton to market and soon residents were calling the town North Port. It would be incorporated in 1871 as Northport.

During the 1830s, the river town had a boom, with establishment of a post office, a ferry, schools and businesses. Prominent resident James Shirley, whose home still stands downtown as a historic house museum, built the first bridge spanning the Black Warrior.

The Mobile and Ohio Railroad began construction of a train trestle in 1898 to span the river. Designed by Benjamin Hardaway, an engineer from Tuscaloosa, the trestle was, at the time, the longest in the nation spanning a river at 135-feet long. Rail service began in 1901.

Asylum history

At the time, neighboring Tuscaloosa was known for two things: its state university, much of which was burned during the Civil War, and the Alabama Hospital for the Insane, later known as Bryce Hospital. In the 1920s, Bryce expanded with an annex in Northport that was specifically built for the treatment of black patients, who had been treated in separate units at Bryce until 1902, when the Mount Vernon Hospital for the Colored Insane, later renamed Searcy Hospital, opened near Mobile. The Northport annex was called Jemison Center because it was located on the former property of Mims Jemison, who died in the Civil War, the Encyclopedia of Alabama said.

Today, the three original hospital sites are closed and Bryce operates as a smaller facility in

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Tuscaloosa. The architecturally significant old Bryce building is being restored by the University of Alabama for use as a welcome center, museum and school for the performing arts. Searcy's 34-building campus is abandoned, as is Jemison.



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Alabama's deadliest tornado outbreak

Northport was a bustling town when it was struck by an F4 tornado during the **Deep South Outbreak** on March 21, 1932, killing 37 people in the town. Before the end of March 22, 37 tornadoes had devastated eight states, killing 334 people, including 268 Alabamians, making it the deadliest tornado outbreak in Alabama's history.

Kentuck Arts Center and Festival

Kentuck, which takes its name from Northport's early moniker, is "a community funded art center perpetuating the arts by connecting community to artists," according to its website. It does this with a big and bright presence in downtown Northport, where visitors can see artists working on metal sculptures or pottery and tour The Courtyard of Wonders, a sculpture garden that includes a giant metal fire ant, Rusty the Big Red Dog, who overlooks the town from the top of an arts center building. The complex also includes galleries where visitors can buy art and offers exhibitions and classes.

Each October, the center hosts an [arts festival](#) in the downtown area. This year, the festival is from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Oct. 15-16.

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