



The Mississippi Monitor

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Dixie National Rodeo announces concert lineup

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The 2025 Dixie National Livestock Show and Rodeo will run from January 3 to February 16, 2025. In addition to the Rodeo, the six-week event features multiple equine and livestock shows, the Sale of Junior Champions, the Rodeo Expo, the Dixie National Steakhouse and the Dixie National Parade.

The 60th Annual Dixie National Rodeo takes place Friday, February 7, through Sunday, February 9, and Wednesday, February 12, through Saturday, February 15, in the Mississippi Coliseum.

Award-winning and nationally-recognized artists scheduled to perform at the 2025 Dixie National Rodeo include:

- Friday, February 7, following the 7 p.m. rodeo – **Sam Barber**
- Saturday, February 8, following the 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. rodeos – **George Birge**
- Sunday, February 9, following the 2 p.m. rodeo – **Lorrie Morgan**
- Wednesday, February 12, following the 7 p.m. rodeo – **Clay Walker**
- Thursday, February 13, following the 7 p.m. rodeo – **Zach Top**

- Friday, February 14, following the 7 p.m. rodeo – **Ella Langley**
- Saturday, February 15, following the 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. rodeos – **Gretchen Wilson**

Fans of the Rodeo can sign up at www.DixieNational.org to become a member of the Dixie National Fan Club.



The Dixie National Rodeo, produced by Harper and Morgan Rodeo, is the largest professional rodeo east of the Mississippi River. This Rodeo is one of the top sixty largest professional rodeos in the world, with nine hundred of the best contestants traveling from across the globe to compete in Jackson. Tickets to the Rodeo can be purchased at the Coliseum Box Office or online at www.ticketmaster.com. Ticket prices range from \$20 to \$45 without fees. Children under eighteen months of age receive free admission. Those who wish to attend are encouraged to purchase tickets in advance for the best prices. Tickets may also be available for purchase at the Coliseum Ticket Office.

For the latest updates, visit the Rodeo's website and www.DixieNational.org, or follow the Dixie National Livestock Show and Rodeo on Facebook, Instagram and X.



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Broadwater Marina beginning major infrastructure improvements



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The Mississippi Secretary of State's Office has commenced a restoration project on the Mississippi Gulf Coast aimed at revitalizing the infrastructure of the thirty-acre state-owned area known locally as the Broadwater Marina (south of Highway 90).



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Funded through a combination of RESTORE Act, GOMESA and Tidelands resources, the project will ensure the marina's long-term viability, creating a safe, sustainable space for public use and allow for future economic development.

"The Broadwater Marina Restoration Project exemplifies Mississippi's commitment to environmental stewardship, public safety and economic development," said Secretary of State Michael Watson. "With the support of federal and state funding, this initiative will restore a vital community resource while preparing it for safe and sustainable future use."

The project will repair infrastructure severely damaged by storms, including Hurricanes Katrina and Zeta, while enhancing water quality systems and stormwater management. The upgrades will stabilize the property's outer structures, improve public safety and support recreational activities.

The most critical part of the project is repairing the failing perimeter and marina bulkheads. These repairs, funded largely by GOMESA, will secure the site's perimeter and protect the infrastructure from future storm events. Additionally, on-site earthwork and breakwater repairs will address damage caused by wave action and erosion during previous storms.

The estimated timeline for completion is fifteen months. The project began in mid-November 2024. For public safety, the marina will remain closed throughout construction.



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Pictured (l to r) are: Executive Director of MDEQ Chris Wells; Co-Managing Partner in Broadwater Development, LLP Roy Anderson III, Secretary of State Michael Watson; Executive Director of MDMR General Joe Spraggins, President of Brown, Mitchell & Alexander, Inc. Dax Alexander, and Bob Hodges of J.E. Borries, Inc.

Public university students offered free tele-mental health services



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The department of psychiatry and human behavior at the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC), in collaboration with the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, recently launched a new telehealth clinic to offer public university students free mental health services.

UMMC committed to the creation of the clinic as part of three overarching goals to help address the elevated rate of mental health concerns reported by students across Mississippi public universities. The Medical Center will also provide therapy support for students and create a statewide medication management service via tele-mental health.

The UNITE Clinic, short for the Universities Network for Integrated Telemental Expansion, provides therapy support and medication management services to students eighteen and older who are enrolled full-time at the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, Delta State University, Jackson State University, University of Southern Mississippi, Alcorn State University, Mississippi Valley State University, Mississippi University for Women and, most recently, the University of Mississippi Medical Center.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Dr. Nicholas McAfee

"We've done everything we can to operate the same way as the university counseling centers that students are already accustomed to, so they don't have to re-adjust," said Conner E. Ball, programming and policy director for the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior. "UNITE cuts out the waiting period by making it easy for students to self-refer and self-schedule. They don't have to go through a scheduler, and they can make same-day appointments."

In 2021, following the U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on protecting youth mental health, a needs assessment, supported by the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, was conducted by Dr. Nicholas McAfee, affiliate faculty in the UMMC department of psychiatry and human behavior and director of the William Magee Center for AOD and Wellness Education at the University of Mississippi, and Dr. Julie Schumacher, associate director of the Office of Wellbeing at UMMC.

Results of the survey, which sampled students at all eight public universities, revealed that psychiatric symptoms worthy of diagnostic follow-up and mental health treatment were more common than not during the pandemic. Students in the study, on average, experienced clinically significant elevations in at least five of the thirteen domains of a common screening tool used by mental health providers that assesses for symptoms of psychiatric diagnoses.

In response to the report, Mississippi developed the UNITE Clinic through a \$750,000 congressionally-directed grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The clinic supports students dealing with emotional, behavioral and neurodevelopmental difficulties such as performance anxiety, feelings of isolation or sadness, sleep problems, relational issues, adjustment issues and other concerns. Licensed professional counselors provide time-limited therapy support, and a psychiatric nurse practitioner, supported by a psychiatrist collaborator, provides medication management.

"Establishing the UNITE clinic is a big step in the right direction to address the ever-increasing demand of mental health services among college students," said McAfee. "Based on the findings of our study, increasing access to care will likely help more Mississippians graduate with a college degree."

MC to change name, halts football



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After significant review and in preparation for the institution's 2026 bicentennial, last month, the Mississippi College Board of Trustees today approved an institutional name change from Mississippi College to Mississippi Christian University.

University representatives say the decision underscores MC's status as a comprehensive university and allows the institution to retain its MC logo and identity.

Representatives say the institutional name change is a strategic decision that reiterates the university leadership's commitment to fulfilling the private university's vision statement – to be known as a university recognized for academic excellence and commitment to the cause of Christ. Planning for a name change and associated branding efforts will begin immediately, and the new name will take effect in 2026, to coincide with the bicentennial.

At their meeting, the Mississippi College Board of Trustees also approved a preliminary plan for academic reorganization and a strategic realignment of the athletic department.

"These transformational and necessary changes are extremely important to the future of this institution. As we look ahead to the institution's bicentennial in 2026, we want to ensure that MC will be a university recognized for academic excellence and commitment to the cause of Christ for another 200 years," said Mississippi College President Blake Thompson.

The preliminary plan for academic reorganization elevates the Department of Christian Studies to an interdisciplinary unit that underscores the institution's commitment to Christian education. A new structure will be implemented that consolidates the School of Christian Studies and the Arts with the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the School of Education will be renamed to the School of Education and Human Science. The Provost has been charged with evaluating the potential consolidation of a limited number of academic departments on campus. This plan aims to ensure academic programs are relevant to the marketplace while also making the university more efficient and innovative.

"By refining our academic offerings and investing in key academic initiatives, we seek to provide a learning environment where students and faculty can excel, pursue meaningful scholarship and engage in impactful service," said MC Provost and Executive Vice President Mike Highfield.

"This academic transformation will deepen our dedication to holistic education and prepare our graduates to thrive as leaders who embody Christian values in their professional and personal lives," Highfield said.

The strategic realignment of athletics includes the discontinuation of the intercollegiate football program, which will allow the institution to further its commitment to excellence in intercollegiate Division II play across its remaining seventeen sports and pursue needed facility upgrades.

"Discontinuing our football program is a difficult decision," said MC Athletic Director Kenny Bizot. "We acknowledge the program's legacy and the deep connection to the many student-athletes, alumni and supporters of the football program. I want to emphasize that we will always consider them as part of our MC Family."

"We will support our current student-athletes as they seek to continue their education at MC, as well as those who wish to transfer," added Bizot.

All three changes – the institutional name change, academic reorganization plan and athletic department realignment – emphasize prioritizing the academic enterprise and supporting the university's core functions.

"A name change to Mississippi Christian University allows us to clearly articulate who we are as an institution," said Thompson. "We are firmly planted in Mississippi, uphold a commitment to our Christian mission and educational environment and focus on academic excellence."

The three changes were based on recommendations from a task force of university trustees, which were developed in consultation with university leadership and approved by the Board of Trustees, with the primary goal of providing long-term sustainability for the institution through strategic mission alignment, organizational efficiencies and a structurally balanced budget.

"We will still be MC. One of the great things about the transition to Mississippi Christian University is that it allows our students and alumni to continue to call their beloved school MC," said Thompson.

Mississippi College is a private, co-educational, Christian university that serves nearly 5,000 students from across the world. Founded in 1826, Mississippi College is the oldest institution of higher learning, public or private, in the state of Mississippi. MC is affiliated with the Mississippi Baptist Convention, and the institution's vision is to be known as a university recognized for academic excellence and commitment to the cause of Christ. For more information about the university or their recent changes, visit MC.edu.



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Mississippi welcomes record 43.7M visitors in 2023

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Late last year, at the Governor's Conference on Tourism in Hattiesburg, Governor Tate Reeves announced the release of Visit Mississippi's annual Tourism Economic Contribution Report, revealing that the state welcomed a record 43.7 million visitors in 2023. This visitor volume has resulted in a record-breaking \$17.5 billion contribution to Mississippi's economy.

The new study, conducted by Tourism Economics, provides an in-depth analysis of tourism's economic impact in Mississippi for the calendar year 2023. This marks a pivotal transition from previous fiscal year reporting, allowing for improved alignment with national trends.

"These record-breaking numbers highlight just how much momentum Mississippi's tourism industry has," said Reeves. "Today's announcement is another historic win for our state. Mississippi has a lot to offer, so it's no surprise that people from all over want to visit and spend their hard-earned money here. I'm proud of what Mississippi's tourism industry is accomplishing."

Key Highlights from the 2023 Economic Impact Report:

- **Visitor Volume:** Mississippi welcomed 43.7 million domestic and international visitors in 2023.
- **Visitor Spending:** \$11.5 billion in visitor spending generated a total economic impact of \$17.5 billion in Mississippi in 2023.
- **Job Creation:** The total economic impact sustained 133,880 jobs, contributing \$4.5 billion in labor income.
- **State and Local Taxes:** Tourism generated \$1.1 billion in total state and local tax revenues in 2023, alleviating the tax burden on Mississippi households.
- **Daily Spending:** On average, visitors spent approximately \$31.6 million per day.
- **Key Spending:** Top categories included food and beverage, lodging, recreation and retail, and transportation.

The report reveals that approximately \$31.6 million was spent daily by visitors in Mississippi, underscoring the importance of the tourism industry to local economies and communities across the state.

"Every dollar spent by visitors supports jobs and generates vital tax revenue that benefits local communities," said Rochelle Hicks, director of Visit Mississippi. "Our tourism industry supported approximately 133,880 jobs in 2023, contributing \$4.5 billion in wages. Without the impact of tourism, Mississippi households would need to pay an additional \$922 in taxes each year."

As Mississippi looks to the future, both the Governor and Hicks express confidence that tourism will remain a key driver of economic growth.

"By working together to promote Mississippi, we can continue to attract visitors and stimulate economic activity," Hicks added. "Our collective efforts will ensure

that Mississippi remains a sought-after destination for years to come."

For more detailed insights and to access the full economic impact study, visit www.VisitMississippi.org/travel-industry-partners/.

About Visit Mississippi



A division of the Mississippi Development Authority, Visit Mississippi is the official destination marketing organization for the state. Dedicated to showcasing Mississippi's diverse attractions and experiences, Visit Mississippi promotes the state as a premier travel destination for leisure, business and cultural exploration. Through strategic marketing initiatives and partnerships, Visit Mississippi aims to enhance visitor experiences, drive economic growth and highlight Mississippi's rich history, vibrant culture, scenic beauty and renowned hospitality.

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Four Mississippi schools named 2024 National Blue Ribbon Schools



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Magnolia Park Elementary School, Exemplary High Performing School, is part of the Ocean Springs School District.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mannsdales Upper Elementary, an Exemplary High Performing School, is part of the Madison County School District.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Recently, four schools in Mississippi were among 356 named 2024 National Blue Ribbon Schools by the U.S. Department of Education. This prestigious recognition highlights schools that excel in academic performance or make significant strides in closing achievement gaps among different student groups.

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes schools based on student performance data, including assessment results, student subgroup performance and graduation rates. Schools are recognized in both or either of two performance categories: Exemplary High Performing Schools or Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools. High performing schools are those who are among the top performers in their state as measured by state assessments or nationally normed tests. Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools are schools that excel in narrowing achievement gaps between different student groups and the overall student body.

Two of the four 2024 Mississippi Blue Ribbon Schools were named as Exemplary High Performing Schools, Magnolia Park Elementary School, in the Ocean Springs School District, and Mannsdales Upper Elementary, of the Madison County School District.

The other two were named as Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools. They are Ripley High School, of the South Tiptah School District, and Stone Elementary School, in the Stone County School District in Wiggins.

"Congratulations to the educators, students, families and communities of all four schools for earning this national recognition of achievement," said Dr. Lance Evans, state superintendent of education. "The Mississippi Department of Education applauds their hard work and intentional focus on best practices for academic and professional success to become a 2024 National Blue Ribbon School."

While national awardees reflect the full diversity of American education and represent a wide array of schools, they also share common traits. National Blue Ribbon Schools are led by leaders who articulate a clear vision of instructional excellence and uphold high standards. They showcase effective teaching methods and offer robust pro-



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Ripley High School, an Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing School, is part of the South Tiptah School District.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Stone Elementary School, an Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing School, is part of the Stone County School District in Wiggins.

fessional development for their staff. Data-driven instruction is a hallmark, and there is a concerted effort to ensure every student succeeds. Collaboration among families, communities and educators is a key component of their success.

"The National Blue Ribbon Schools Award is a testament to the exceptional achievements of students and educators at each of these schools," said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. "The 2024 National Blue Ribbon Schools are raising the bar for our nation's students, serving as models for effective teaching and intentional collaboration in their schools and communities. As we celebrate their achievements, let us look to these schools for inspiration as we champion education as the foundation of a brighter future for every child."

A National Blue Ribbon School award flag displayed in a school's entryway or on a flagpole is a widely recognized emblem of exceptional teaching and learning. These schools serve as models of effective and innovative practices for educators across the nation.

Each nominated school submits a comprehensive application detailing its school culture, curriculum, assessments, instructional practices, professional development, leadership, family and community involvement.

Up to four hundred twenty schools may be nominated each year. The U.S. Department of Education invites nominations for the National Blue Ribbon Schools award from the top education official in all states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and the Bureau of Indian Education. Private schools are nominated by the Council for American Private Education.

Photographs and brief descriptions of the 2024 National Blue Ribbon Schools are available at nationalblueribbon.schools.ed.gov/.

University system enrollment continues to grow

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

More students were enrolled at Mississippi's eight public universities and the University of Mississippi Medical Center for the fall 2024 term, according to enrollment figures finalized on November 1, 2024.

The total student enrollment stands at 79,817, compared to a total of 77,074 students for the fall 2023 term and 75,739 for the fall 2022 term.

Despite a national trend of modest enrollment gains of around 1.1%, three Mississippi universities exceeded that growth over 2023.

The University of Mississippi (exclusive of their medical center) welcomed 5,973 freshman students for the fall 2024 semester, the largest incoming class in state history.

"A college degree is a critical component for so many professional fields, and students at Mississippi's universities understand the value it will hold for them as they graduate and enter the workforce, hopefully in Mississippi," said Dr. Al Rankins Jr., commissioner of higher education.

"Our universities offer a strong foundation for students from across the state and beyond, and these numbers reinforce the confidence of students and parents alike in the quality education available throughout our system," Rankins said. "We are grateful to the Mississippi Legislature and Governor Reeves for partnering with us in keeping our universities affordable for Mississippi families."



Institution	Fall 2023	Fall 2024	Number Change	% Change
Alcorn State University	2,894	2,995	101	3.5%
Delta State University	2,716	2,654	-62	-2.3%
Jackson State University	6,564	6,326	-238	-3.6%
Mississippi State University	22,657	23,150	493	2.2%
Mississippi University for Women	2,227	2,193	-34	-1.5%
Mississippi Valley State University	2,196	2,205	9	0.4%
University of Mississippi	21,596	23,981	2,385	11.0%
University of Mississippi Medical Center	3,114	3,143	29	0.9%
University of Southern Mississippi	13,110	13,170	60	0.5%
System Total	77,074	79,817	2,743	3.6%

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Koch Foods investing \$145.5 million in expansion of Morton facility

By Frank Corder

The Mississippi Development Authority announced a major expansion by Koch Foods in Scott County on Thursday that will create 128 jobs over the next five years.

The project, a \$145.5 million investment, will include expanding the company's processing and distribution operations and rehabbing its facility in Morton.

"Koch Foods appreciates the support of the state of Mississippi, including not only the Mississippi Development Authority but all the local and state government agencies that make doing business in Mississippi efficient and business friendly," Koch Foods Chief Operating Officer Mark Kaminsky said in a statement.

Founded in 1973, Koch Foods is a U.S.-based retail, wholesale and industrial foodservice provider that stands out as one of the nation's largest poultry processors. The company employs over 13,000 people with locations across Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio and Tennessee.

Governor Tate Reeves called the major investment another big win for Mississippi.

"Koch Foods' \$146 million investment speaks volumes about what's happening in our state," Reeves said in a statement from MDA. "We have a pro-business mindset, skilled workforce and prime location that offers efficient access to major domestic and international markets. There a lot of good things happening here and this is just the latest example!"

MDA noted that the agency is providing assistance through the Mississippi Flexible Tax Incentive, or MFLEX program.

"By leveraging the state's popular MFLEX program, Koch Foods is taking advantage of the flexibility and support that make Mississippi an ideal location to grow," said MDA Executive Director Bill Cork.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.

Get comfort food AND enjoy minimal cleanup time

Comfort food can come in many forms, but comfort food that can be made in less than an hour and with easy preparation can be a little harder to find. This recipe uses only a single skillet, which makes cleanup a breeze, especially if you serve it right from the stovetop! In addition, the spices can be modified to your liking and preference. The cream cheese provides a tasty shortcut to deliver a nice, smooth pasta sauce. If you like a meat-heavier dish, simply add more chicken cubes! If time allows, you can let the chicken sit in the spice mix for longer, to achieve a deeper flavor.

One Skillet Cajun Chicken Pasta



INGREDIENTS

2 tsp. smoked paprika
1 tsp. oregano
1 tsp. thyme
1/2 tsp. garlic powder
1/2 tsp. onion powder
1/4 tsp. cayenne pepper
1/4 tsp. black pepper
1/4 tsp. salt

1 Tbsp olive oil
1 Tbsp butter
1 lb. boneless, skinless chicken breast
1/2 lb. penne pasta (uncooked)
15 oz. fire roasted diced tomatoes
OR 1/4 cup diced fresh tomatoes
2 cups chicken broth
4+ oz. cream cheese
3 green onions, sliced

PREPARATION

1. Combine the first eight ingredients (spices) in a small bowl (or use your own preferred blend).
2. Cut the chicken into 1/2 to 3/4-inch cubes.
3. Place the cubed chicken in a bowl, pour the spice mix over the top, and stir to coat the chicken in spices.
4. Add the olive oil and butter to a large, deep skillet. Heat the oil and butter over medium-high until the skillet is very hot and the butter is melted and foamy.
5. Add the seasoned chicken to the skillet, and cook for a couple of minutes on each side, or until the outside gets some color. The chicken does not need to be cooked through at this point.
6. Add the pasta, tomatoes (with juices), and chicken broth to the skillet. Stir slightly, until everything is evenly combined.
7. Allow the broth to come to a boil at medium-high heat.
8. Reduce heat to medium-low, and cover skillet with a lid.
9. Let pasta simmer for 10-12 minutes, stirring frequently, until the pasta is tender and the liquid is thick and saucy.
10. Add the cream cheese to the skillet in chunks, then stir until it has melted into the sauce.
11. Top the pasta with sliced green onions and serve.

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Discover Mississippi: Mississippi Petrified Forest



By Guest Columnist Susan Marquez

FloraMS.org



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

While explorers and settlers have known about the Petrified Forest since the mid-1800s, it was developed for the public in the 1960s.

Now that the weather is a bit cooler, it is a great time to get outdoors and explore. If you'd like to take an unforgettable journey back in time, 36 million years to be exact, then this is the place for you. No, there are no dinosaurs roaming the countryside outside of Flora, but there is a magnificent place of beauty and fascination at the Mississippi Petrified Forest.

The Petrified Forest was formed by an ancient log jam deposited many millions of years ago by a river in a still-under-construction continent. Now a trail through a lush forest reveals a treasure trove of petrified trees that once stood tall in what is now central Mississippi. Today they lay prone, literally turned to stone.

While explorers and settlers have known about the Petrified Forest since the mid-1800s, it was developed for the public in the 1960s when



VisitMississippi.org

R.J. "Bob" and Shirl Schabilion acquired the property in 1962. Both were passionate about preserving our natural resources. They were conservationists before conservationists were cool.

Taking a tour through the Mississippi Petrified Forest is both relaxing and invigorating. The trails reveal hills with ravines hollowed out by nature during the past century. According to the Petrified Forest's website, the size of the petrified logs indicates that, as living trees, these stone giants were over one hundred feet tall, and perhaps a thousand or more years old.

Just recently, we've all seen what a roaring, thunderous, flood-swollen river can do. The images out of western North Carolina are mind-boggling. The water literally snatched everything in its path. That is exactly

what happened tens of millions of years ago in the Petrified Forest.

There was a series of weather events over millennia that worked to create this magic place. Flowing southward, a swollen river ripped down the once magnificent trees. As explained on their website, "With the abating of this earth-changing force, the battered remnants of the trees finally began to sink, settling deeper into the watery ooze. Each fresh flood from the North brought more sand and silt to cover them. This continued for countless ages of time, ever more deeply burying the old trees. They slowly began to decay. Now the petrification process, turning once living trees into stone logs, has begun."

The flood was followed by the age of the glaciers, which pushed forward and pulverized everything in their path. The water from the glaciers' gradual melting carried the finely ground glacial dust with it, which was eventually deposited on the flood plains. There was little vegetation to hold the soil as it dried, so the winds picked up the fine dust particles, forming gigantic dust clouds that became huge dust storms.

Tons of dust were carried by the winds to the area where the stone logs lay buried far underground. As the winds died down, the particles of glacial dust settled to the earth, leaving a layer of fine, tan-colored soil over the area. For thousands of years, the great stone logs rested securely, while far above them grasses, bushes, and trees began to rise and grow out of the fertile soil.

Over thousands of years, the fine Loess soil was nibbled away, eroded by wind and rain, forming small gullies that turned into larger gullies, which turned into ravines. A reddish sand began to appear, along with the old trees that had literally turned to stone, which is what visitors to The Mississippi Petrified Forest see today.

While it is fun to see the ancient logs while walking the trails at the Petrified Forest, there is more to see. In the spring and summer, there are wildflowers and honeysuckle vines. The forest is ever-changing with the seasons, yet the pungent scent of pine and cedar permeates the air year 'round, while native birds join in chorus as if to entertain hikers.

Admission into the Petrified Forest is \$6 for children in grades one through twelve and for senior adults. Regular admission is \$7, and \$5 each for groups of fifteen or more. Admission includes hiking the forest nature trails, as well as use of the picnic area; access to the museum, which features a blacklight display of fluorescent minerals; a native wildlife display; and the gift shop. For another \$4, visitors can participate in the gem flume.

The park and pavilion at The Mississippi Petrified Forest is often used for group events, including weddings, reunions, company picnics and other special events.

A wooded campsite with full hookups, including electric service, water, and sewer is available, as well as primitive campsites.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.



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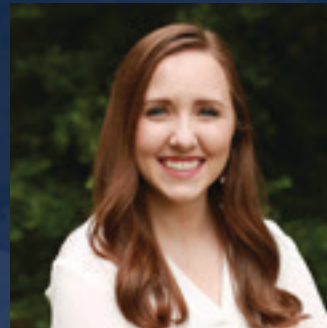
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Mississippi's best Bed & Breakfast:

Ross Mansion hits milestone achievement in less than a year



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Ross Mansion in Hattiesburg has been named Best Bed and Breakfast by Mississippi Magazine.

By Lynne Jeter

When Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) offered Afternoon Tea at the Ross Mansion, I jumped at the chance to see the place that had become Mississippi's Best Bed & Breakfast in less than a year of new ownership, and the first time in its 123-year history it opened commercially.

Oh, and to enjoy the refined tradition of afternoon tea on fine china in an exquisite setting.

When I stepped inside the grand foyer, my only regret was not dressing the part! No hat, for shame!

Every detail of the mansion exuded the early 1900s, when the mansion was in its heyday.

Dr. T.E. Ross, who founded the first hospital in South Mississippi, known for his gentle, thorough, Christian medical care, had the Colonial Revival built in downtown Hattiesburg's historic Bay Street area in 1903. It would house three generations of the Ross family. The mansion had a telephone, electricity and indoor plumbing, among majestic furnishings, nine fireplaces, a grand staircase, and a fantastic piazza. The house was also built with an elevator that went to all three floors. These were rarities for its day in South Mississippi.

Ross was often spotted doodling around in his electric car en route to his practice and to the nearby hospital he helped establish. He was also instrumental in the founding of USM and William Carey University.

Back to the Afternoon Tea. The owners, Gerry and Jenny Mallory, entertained us and kept us fed. Their daughters, Megan and Ivy, served us multiple courses Disney-style. That included tri-tiered trays piled high with cheesecakes of different sizes, finger sandwiches of several sorts, fresh blueberry scones, double star jam butter cookies, and pumpkin mousse with exquisite piping.

"My goodness, I feel like a princess!" squealed Sarah Holloway, an OLLI hostess and my tea-mate, when the overflowing trays were placed on the table.

Guests oohed and aahed when given double-sided sheets of delectable tea choices.

It was quickly evident why Ross Mansion received such an honor.

"We were thrilled to be named the Best B&B in the state after less than a year of operation," said Gerry Mallory. "From our interactions with guests and by reading reviews they left of their stays, it seems they're most impressed by the authenticity of the mansion itself, the high level of personalized service they receive, the overall cleanliness and comfort they enjoy, and the close proximity it is to the revitalized downtown of Hattiesburg."

OLLI Director Paula Mathis said OLLI members "waxed eloquent" about their Ross Mansion experience, providing glowing feedback on the visit. One member reported, "Certainly a place and experience to repeat with friends and family. Top notch A-1."

Changing Course

The Mallorys were career schoolteachers in Florida. She taught elementary school; he was a history teacher. On the side, they were Christian ministry directors and musical entertainers.

"Our decision to acquire an historic home where we could operate a B&B and event experience was based on several factors," said Gerry Mallory. "First, we dearly love people, and operating a B&B allows us to form some pretty amazing bonds with many wonderful guests. Jenny possesses an incredible gift for creating imaginative, engaging environments, which she has put to good use at Ross Mansion. Both of us possess a deep love for our heritage; her interest being primarily in fashion and decor, and mine, as a history teacher, focused more on historical stories and artifacts. In addition, our (time) as pastoral ministry directors provided us with a wealth of event and hospitality experience. Lastly, we possessed the skills and experience to renovate and maintain this historic home after renovating and remodeling our 1936 home and a 1920s era church."

Their search for the perfect setting – the "right" house with historical authenticity located in a vibrant, growing community – took the Mallorys in various directions. At first, they considered Northern Virginia, near their middle daughter's home, but exorbitant costs and poor conditioned houses crossed that area off the list. They spent a great deal of time online looking around the South.

"When we found the house in Hattiesburg online, we fell in love with the pictures and drove up from Lakeland, Florida, the next day to view it," he said.

"It had everything we were looking for. The price was a bit high, but through negotiations and pointing out the remaining refurbishment work to be done, the house sold for \$485,000." (Zillow values it at roughly \$750,000.)

The Tough Part

The 7,200-square-foot mansion was nearly empty when the Mallorys moved in. Furnishing it was "a daunting task," Gerry Mallory admitted.

"We rarely paid retail prices for any of the historic and beautiful furnishings and decor in the mansion," he said, pointing to a 1910 Edison record player as an example. "Items came largely from estate sales in Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, California [where in-laws live], Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and other sundry places. We also acquired some items in thrift shops and antique shops. We were able to round out our furnishing needs by acquiring some amazing antique furnishings from the European Auction House in Seminary."

They also lucked out with Disney surplus sales. (All three daughters worked at Disney.) They acquired high-quality products – wallpaper for the Storybook Chamber, and curtain fabric for two rooms – left over from Disney resort hotels.

Between renovations, landscaping, furnishings and decorating, the Mallory family spent more than \$100,000. They also spent nine months of labor (12-hour days, seven days a week) with no income, living off their savings.

"The plumbing and some electrical infrastructure needed updating," he said. "A great many repairs were needed, including water-damaged areas on the second floor. We gutted and remodeled some bathrooms, added three more, extensively remodeled the second floor, and landscaped the yard by adding fountains, statuary, foliage, a pergola, French drains to keep the basement dry and a 300-foot walking path graced with a variety of fairy gardens."

They completed most work themselves, using professional plumbers and electricians as needed, with the help of Jenny's father, a general contractor, who oversaw much of the work.

"We were surprised by a few things in our journey, some good, some not so good," he said. "First, it came as a welcome surprise when the garbage service picked up pretty much everything we took to the curb," he said. "Second, we



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The Mallory Family includes Ross Mansion owners Gerry and Jenny Mallory, and their daughters, Megan, Ivy and Chesney.

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found our neighbors to be a significant source of encouragement and support; some even went to planning meetings to speak on our behalf. Negatively, there were several surprises in the infrastructure, even though we had several contractors and inspectors examine the house beforehand. The roof, which is brand new, wasn't constructed correctly in several areas, and we had to get that fixed."

Building the Brand

When it came to designing the rooms, Jenny Mallory took over. She created a sanctuary of bed chambers, each meticulously curated – the Victorian Peacock Chamber, Library Chamber filled floor to ceiling with family heirlooms and Ross's medical books, the girly-girly Enchanted Chamber, the 1800s Storybook Chamber, the Garden Chamber and the Royal Chamber. Overnight guests have multi-course breakfasts to anticipate.

Gerry Mallory handled the business setup and operation, website development, marketing and advertising, and community outreach. Jenny Mallory employed her creative skills with social media content.

"We continue to make improvements on the mansion and the grounds almost daily, which requires continued investment," said Gerry Mallory. "Also, we spend quite a bit advertising, since we're a new business."

Ross Mansion opened in October 2023. Mississippi Magazine named it the state's best B&B in its May/June 2024 edition.

"Surprisingly, the summer season was quite slow for us, so, to date, we're still operating close to the line," he said. "However, business has picked up significantly, particularly for overnight stays. Now that we've been open for a year, we're benefiting from frequent returning guests for both overnight stays and for Ross Mansion-sponsored events, such as our Murder Mystery Dinner Games and our Afternoon Tea Experience."

Room rates range from \$195 to \$290 plus seven percent tax, higher during peak seasons, and special rates at times. Ross Mansion cannot accommodate children under the age of twelve for overnight stays.

Afternoon tea events are all-inclusive, typically \$49.95. Christmas Victorian afternoon candlelight teas are \$64.95. Murder mystery dinner games, which include a three-course meal plus hors d'oeuvres and an immersive gameplay

experience from the 1920s-30s cost \$99.

By next spring, it's their hope to average a gross monthly income between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

At the heart of their business is this scripture: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28).

Christian love was at the heart of Dr. T.E. Ross, who turned part of his mansion into apartment housing for high-ranking officers from Camp Shelby during World War I.

Lagniappe

With the help of longtime friend, Michael Garner, the Mallorys tracked down Kim Ross-Waldrop, the great granddaughter of Dr. T.E. Ross. She grew up in the Ross Mansion and lives in Jacksonville, Florida. At their invitation, she stayed overnight in the Library Chamber and provided the Mallorys with a wealth of information on the Ross family, including a family tree and detailed family historical notes, all handwritten. Gerry Mallory is working on a history of the Ross family, which will be posted to the website at RossMansion.com. Ross-Waldrop also gifted the Mallorys the original family sterling silver tea set from the early 1900s, family heirloom framed photos from the 1920s, Dr. T.E. Ross's books, and other family memorabilia now displayed throughout the mansion.

"Kim is a lovely, lovely lady," said Gerry Mallory.

Two of their three daughters – Megan and Ivy – have opened their own branch of the Ross Mansion experience with Carriage House Productions, an immersive theater experience with original music, dramatics and more.

"In five years, the girls' goal is to move into a much larger space to provide high quality, imaginative entertainment, and events for families in our region," he said.

Their third daughter, Chesney, is wrapping up her final year of law school at George Mason University's Scalia School of Law, while also working for the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington, D.C.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.

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Golden retriever joins Children's of Mississippi care team



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Children's of Mississippi patient Cayden Myers, 15, of Camden gets a visit from Hollywood and the facility dog's handler, child life manager Cara Williams.

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Bree Wood didn't enjoy physical and occupational therapy until she got a dose of encouragement from Children's of Mississippi's first facility dog.

The sixty-seven-pound golden retriever named Hollywood made quite an impression on the nine-year-old Children's of Mississippi patient from Brandon.

"I want to see Hollywood again," she wrote on a message board while recovering from surgery.

"She was dreading PT and OT, but she whipped through her exercises with Hollywood encouraging her," said Bree's mom, Penny Wood. "Hollywood is making a big difference."

Bree's father, Taylor, agreed.

"Having a dog like Hollywood lifts children's spirits and takes them away from the situation that's going on."

Born and educated at Canine Assistants in Milton, Georgia, Hollywood has been on the job at the state's only children's hospital since late September. The newest Children's of Mississippi team member can help stabilize blood pressure and reduce anxiety, pain and fear.

"Hollywood isn't just a dog – he's a vital part of our Child Life team," said Cara Williams of Clinton, child life manager and Hollywood's handler.

"He truly is the best dog. His demeanor is so calm, and the way he loves patients, families and staff is something that can't be replicated. He is so gentle and truly wants to be with people. He loves a good belly rub and will lean all the way in for a pet."

His bedside manner is good medicine for patients and their families, she said.

"Hollywood meets patients where they are. He doesn't expect anything from them and simply loves them. He allows them to be distracted from whatever is happening and gives them a sense of normalcy."

Hospital facility dogs like Hollywood are similar to therapy dogs but have the skills to react to the emotions of patients and their families and bring them comfort. These dogs work with handlers throughout the day and go home with them at night.

"Dogs are proving every day that they are among the very best medicine modern science has to offer," the Canine Assistants website reads. "Our community



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Williams walks through Children's of Mississippi's Kathy and Joe Sanderson Tower with Hollywood, the children's hospital's facility dog.

service dogs' gentle nature and calm demeanor allow patients ... to experience animal-assisted therapy."

Hollywood gets his famous name from the Hollywood Bowl, since his litter's naming inspiration was iconic music venues. His litter mates are named Fillmore, Red, Radio, Sydney, Bluebird and Opry.

A typical day for Hollywood starts with a walk or a backyard game of fetch before breakfast. He then is brushed and squeezes in a nap before it's time to go to work.

"When he gets to the hospital, Hollywood loves greeting patients and staff as

To see a video of Hollywood and Cara Williams at work, visit:
youtu.be/TPOLEcQPNZ4

he makes his way up to his office space," Williams said. "I check the computer to prioritize consults and patients who Hollywood could help reach medical goals. He takes breaks often, either napping in the office or outside in the sunshine."

Ricardo Davis Jr., a Children's of Mississippi patient from Ridgeland, has been enjoying time with Hollywood during his hospital stay, too.

"I love him," he said.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Dezi'Riah Jackson talks with Children's of Mississippi child life manager Cara Williams and Hollywood in the Kathy and Joe Sanderson Tower.

Hollywood also brightened the day for Cayden Myers, a Children's Heart Center patient, said his mom, India Sims of Camden.

"Cayden loves dogs, so he was so excited when he saw Hollywood," she said. "The dog was very comforting to him during his stay. Cara and Hollywood are a great team."

Petting Hollywood is a favorite activity for Pailyn Williams, a Children's of Mississippi patient from Crystal Springs.

"Hollywood is sweet," said her mother, Patience Lewis. "She's an animal lover, so she was thrilled to see him come through her hospital room door."

Hollywood needs to look his best, so he's groomed weekly, eats a healthy diet (no treats or table scraps allowed) and gets regular veterinary care.

"Having Hollywood simply adds an extra layer of goodness," Williams said. "Everyone he meets or even just walks by smiles a little bigger. The reactions

are priceless and have only been positive. Animals can reach people in a way that sometimes staff can't. The experience here at Children's will continue to be brighter with Hollywood here."

Rosedale Distilling Company breaks ground on \$17M investment

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Rosedale Distilling Company celebrated the groundbreaking of Mississippi's largest distillery, marking a major milestone in the Delta's economic and cultural growth. Governor Tate Reeves, Commissioner Willie Simmons, and other political and community leaders joined the ceremony to commemorate the beginning of an unprecedented \$17 million investment in Bolivar County, with a projected total of \$23 million to be invested over the next eight years.

Founded by Jack and Elizabeth Coleman, Rosedale Distilling Company will produce premium and super-premium spirits, introducing high-quality Mississippi-crafted products to the national market. The project promises significant economic and community benefits, including the creation of fifty-seven new jobs in Rosedale and an anticipated draw of 40,000 annual visitors by 2025.

"Rosedale Distilling Company's investment is a remarkable milestone for Bolivar County," said Governor Tate Reeves. "This project not only creates jobs but also showcases our state's unique riverside culture. It's a fantastic economic and tourism boost for the Delta and an invitation for others to discover what Mississippi has to offer."

With renovations planned for approximately 130,000 square feet of historic architecture, the distillery site includes a 166,000-square-foot former factory from 1954, which will house the main distillery and barrel-aging facilities. Rosedale Distilling will also restore several downtown Rosedale buildings, creating spaces for a retail store, tasting rooms and museums that pay tribute to the Delta's heritage—including exhibits on Mississippi River explorers, Delta blues legend Robert Johnson and Senator Blanche K. Bruce.

Rosedale Distilling plans to carry on the "rich and colorful histo-



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Shown in October 2024 is the framing inside the future Mississippi River Explorers Club of the Rosedale Distilling Company, which is being built within the 1898 former Valley Bank. The Club will highlight the Spanish, French and British explorers competing for control of the Mississippi Valley. The developers say the space will be used to offer learning, food, music and fun all in one, and the facility has an expected opening of the spring of this year.

ry of fine whiskey making" in the Mississippi Delta near Rosedale.

According to Jack Coleman, "One product line will honor the legendary Perry Martin, a bootleg whiskey maker for more than forty years who made such great, aged whiskey that it could be found in many parts of the country. Mr. Martin buried his filled barrels to age in the sandbar of the Mississippi River to avoid discovery - barrels he bought from my grandad's hardware store. His whiskey, a prized possession in Mississippi, was considered so good, customers would ask for it by name in bars in Chicago, Detroit, New York and many other cities. We appreciate the cooperation of the Martin family in bringing this historic brand back alive."

Located along the Mississippi River, Rosedale Distilling is ideally positioned to benefit from convenient access via the Port of Rosedale and the upgraded Terrene Landing, which now allows docking for



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In a photo from 1945, soldiers coming home from WWII are pictured in Las Vegas, Nevada, with a bottle of "PM" Perry Martin Whiskey from Rosedale. The last batch of PM was completed in 1968, before Perry Martin died at age 92.



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Rosedale Distillery Company owners Jackson and Elizabeth Coleman speak at the groundbreaking ceremony for their new multimillion dollar distillery in Rosedale.

tourist riverboats. With support from the Mississippi Development Authority and Bolivar County, the development is expected to further enhance the Delta's tourism appeal, drawing both local and out-of-state visitors to experience the region's rich cultural and natural assets.²

Bill Cork, who serves as executive director of the Mississippi Development Authority, notes that the project has potential to attract new business.

"Rosedale Distilling Company is setting a new precedent in Mississippi's hospitality industry, creating meaningful jobs and showing companies that Mississippi is open for business," said Cork. "This distillery will attract visitors and foster growth for years to come."

Elizabeth Coleman expressed gratitude to the many partners who contributed to making this project a reality.

"Jack and I, along with our equity investors, are thrilled to bring this transformative project to the Delta," she said. "We are grateful to partners like U.S. Bancorp Impact Finance, Southern Bancorp Bank and the Mississippi Heritage Trust. The City of Rosedale, Bolivar County and the Mississippi Development Authority have been instrumental, and it's taken strong collaboration to bring this dream to life."

At press time, the company planned to start installing distilling equipment at the end of last year, with an opening date of this spring.



The art of crafting AI legislation for the Magnolia State

By Lynne Jeter

Since Mississippi is at ground zero with artificial intelligence (AI) legislation, along with nineteen other states, **what do lawmakers do first?**

“Our first responsibility is public safety, and we need to make sure we’re putting on guardrails, especially for minors, though we don’t want to be too restrictive as this technology develops,” said Sen. Bart Williams (R-Starkville), chair of the Senate Technology Committee. “We definitely need to look at deepfakes.”

Williams recently coordinated two days of technology hearings, loaded with eight AI experts representing private and public stakeholders, to better educate the eighteen members of the Senate and House Technology Committees.

There was encouragement for legislative bodies to establish governance structures, incentivize AI development, and allocate funding, with an emphasis on partnerships with private industry and workforce training. There was discussion on the need for legislative guidance on data quality requirements and plans, and on the challenges of legislating AI, particularly the fear of unintended consequences that could outlaw beneficial practices. An emphasis was placed on agile and flexible legislation.

“For the most part, we really aren’t sure how to approach AI legislation yet,” said Williams, agreeing that Mississippi needs to have an AI governance model in place. “I’ve probably been four or five different places out of state, and I’ve got three or four more to go before we head back into session.”

Data privacy and intellectual property protection, like Tennessee has done with AI legislation protecting artists, are also important points, said Williams, who is already having conversations with state leadership about an AI task force.

“We did the Cyber Board of Directors,” he said. “We codified it this last session, and Chair Ford and I have been intimately involved in working with that board to make sure they understand the legislative intent; and I think they knocked it out of the park.”

For 2025, creating frameworks that ensure AI is developed and used responsibly will be a top priority, said Rep. Jill Ford (R-Madison), chair of the House Technology Committee.

“This could involve legislation around privacy protections, particularly in areas like law enforcement and education, to make sure that AI is not being misused,” she said. “We’re also looking into job retraining programs to help workers adapt to the changes AI will bring to many industries.”

Will AI legislation be tackled in one comprehensive bill? Or in different bills addressing various issues?

“If it were up to me, understanding this would be a group effort, and we need to have a healthy discussion. I’d have separate bills,” said Williams. “Sometimes, in an omnibus bill, if you’ve got ten topics in there, you may want to go over two or three of them that are worthy of more discussion and research.”

Ford is considering a mix of comprehensive and smaller, targeted bills.

“A comprehensive bill could establish broad regulations for the responsible use of AI, while smaller bills could address specific sectors like healthcare, law enforcement, or education,” Ford explained. “Starting with foundational legislation that can grow as technology develops seems like a prudent path.”

How will Mississippi fund AI initiatives/legislative mandates?

“Funding is always a challenge, but we’re exploring federal grants and partnerships with the private sector,” said Ford. “By

partnering with universities, tech companies, and even neighboring states, we can find innovative ways to fund and implement AI measures without putting too much strain on Mississippi’s budget.”

There’s another way to tackle AI legislation: Let ChatGPT do it by plugging into it drafting a bill that will do x, y and z, or uploading a bill, having it do market research for an opinion on how it will be received, comparing the bill to other bills and laws in other states, providing pros and cons of the bill, and spit out a summary. It can all be done within thirty seconds.

Dr. Kollin Napier, director of the Mississippi Artificial Network (MAIN), explained his take on the ideal AI legislation, or legislative game plan, for Mississippi:

“The ideal AI legislation for Mississippi should thoughtfully balance the advancement of technological innovation with the protection of individual rights and societal interests,” Napier said. “Central to this legislative approach is an emphasis on awareness, education, and training in AI. By understanding what AI can and cannot do—its capabilities, limitations, and accuracy—Mississippi can harness its benefits while effectively

addressing potential risks and concerns.”

“MAIN plays a pivotal role in this endeavor and serves as the primary driver of these solutions,” continues Napier. “As the nation’s first statewide AI initiative, MAIN has established strategic partnerships with all fifteen community colleges, public and private universities, state agencies, local governments, business and industry, K-12 institutions, and more. Supported by global industry leaders like Dell Technologies and Intel Corporation, MAIN positions Mississippi as a leader in AI education, training, and awareness.”

“AccelerateMS funds MAIN, and several state agencies are partnered on the initiative: Mississippi Association of Community Colleges (MACC), Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB), and Mississippi Manufacturing Association (MMA). MAIN provides legislators with valuable resources, enabling them to craft legislation that empowers the workforce without hindering research and innovation while mitigating risks,” he said.

“Building on MAIN’s momentum, the state should integrate these efforts into a comprehensive legislative framework that includes establishing clear definitions and regulations for AI,” Napier advises. “This framework would set boundaries for ethical and responsible use in critical sectors like healthcare, education, and law enforcement. Promoting innovation and economic growth through incentives such as tax credits or grants would encourage investment in AI research and development, making Mississippi a hub for AI innovation while attracting talent and investment.”

“Ensuring data privacy and security with robust laws governing the collection, storage, and processing of personal data in AI systems is essential. This approach balances individual privacy rights with the beneficial use of data. Implementing ethical standards and accountability mechanisms to prevent biases, discrimination, and other harmful outcomes in AI applications is also crucial. Establishing clear accountability measures would hold entities responsible for their AI systems’ consequences, promoting trust and reliability in AI technologies. Mandating transparency and explainability in AI systems, especially those used in critical decision-making, fosters trust and informed consent among the public.”

“We want to be out in front of trying to attract businesses that come as a result of AWS,” said Williams, adding that “shortly after the session happens, maybe in the middle of January, we’ll have another day or half day of AI hearings. A lot will happen between now and then.”

“AI is here to stay, and we need to understand how to embrace it, how to create policy around it, how to protect our people against it.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.



State Senator
Bart Williams



State Representative
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