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## **MISSISSIPPI BLUES TRAIL CELEBRATES ROBERT JOHNSON'S BOYHOOD HOME**

Jackson, Mississippi (May 22, 2009) - Governor Haley Barbour today announced the placement of the 75th Mississippi Blues Trail Marker honoring the Abbay and Leatherman Plantation, the epicenter of the blues where Blues legend Robert Johnson spent his boyhood years. The ceremony will be at 10:30 a.m. Thursday, May 28, in Tunica.

The Mississippi Development Authority Tourism Division Heritage Trails Program, the Mississippi Blues Commission and the Tunica Convention and Visitors Bureau will dedicate the marker at Casino Strip Boulevard West of Highway 61.

"This marker holds special meaning because it recognizes the actual birthplace of the blues," Governor Haley Barbour said. "Robert Johnson spent his formative teen years at the Abbay and Leatherman Plantation and found inspiration for his unique brand of the blues."

Mississippi is well known as a destination for music lovers. Gov. Haley Barbour created the Mississippi Blues Trail to recognize the talents of the state's countless musicians in the Birthplace of America's Music. When completed more than 150 sites will offer an unforgettable journey into Blues history.

Abbay & Leatherman, one of the oldest and largest cotton plantations in the Delta, is known to music enthusiasts worldwide as the boyhood home of blues icon Robert Johnson (c. 1912-1938). Johnson lived here with his family in a tenant shack by the levee during the 1920s. The powerful and impassioned recordings he made in 1936-37 are often cited as the foundation of rock 'n' roll, and the facts, fantasies, and mysteries of his life and death are a continuing source of intrigue.

Johnson would become known as the "King of the Delta Blues," heralded not only as a dramatic and emotional vocalist but also as an innovative and influential master of the guitar and a blues poet who could chill listeners with the dark depths of his lyrical vision. But he was recalled only as a good harmonica player who had limited skills as a guitarist during his adolescent years here on the Abbay & Leatherman plantation. Johnson left the Delta around 1930, but when he reappeared about two years later he possessed such formidable guitar technique that Robinsonville blues luminary Son House later remarked that Johnson must have "sold his soul to more

the devil.” The 1986 Hollywood movie, *Crossroads*, was based on the legend of Johnson’s alleged deal with the devil, as were several subsequent documentaries and books. Johnson was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, the illegitimate son of Julia Dodds and Noah Johnson. May 8, 1911, is often cited as his birth date, although some sources, including a census listing and his death certificate, point to 1912. His mother once sent him to Memphis to live with his father, Charles Dodds (aka Charles Spencer) but took him back after she married Willie “Dusty” Willis at Abbay & Leatherman in 1916. Johnson, then known as Robert Spencer, reportedly lived here for a decade or more beginning in about 1918. Records from the nearby Indian Creek School verify his enrollment there. However, the 1920 census shows Will and Julia Willis and Robert Spencer in Lucas, Arkansas, in the same county where Abbay & Leatherman owner Samuel Richard Leatherman once acquired additional cotton farming property.

Johnson married Virginia Travis at the Tunica County courthouse in 1929, but his wife died in childbirth on April 10, 1930. Back in Hazlehurst, Johnson found himself a new wife, Callie Craft, as well as a musical mentor, guitarist Ike Zinnerman. He soon left married life behind to pursue a career as an itinerant musician, now able to play alongside the best bluesmen in the Delta, including Son House and Willie Brown, and to entertain crowds wherever he went with a reputation for being able to play any song after hearing it just once. He began recording in 1936, and though his recordings proved highly influential in the course of blues and rock ‘n’ roll history, few of them sold well during his lifetime. His death near Greenwood on August 16, 1938, has often been attributed to poisoning, although the case remains a mystery. Johnson was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in its first year, 1980, and into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame also in its initial year, 1986.

While markers are scattered statewide, the Mississippi Blues Trail is concentrated in the heart of the Delta. The Mississippi River carved the flatlands of northwest Mississippi through generations of floods. That left fertile ground for farming and the Blues. The trail starts at the first official marker in Holly Ridge, the resting place of the blues guitarist Charley Patton. The trail then winds its way to sites honoring B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Son House and more. For more information, visit the Mississippi Blues Trail on the web at [msbluestrail.org](http://msbluestrail.org) or the official MDA Tourism site [visitmississippi.org](http://visitmississippi.org). To contact the Mississippi Blues Trail office in Jackson, contact Alex Thomas (601-359-3297, [athomas@mississippi.org](mailto:athomas@mississippi.org)) or Leigh Portwood (601-359-3061, [lportwood@mississippi.org](mailto:lportwood@mississippi.org)).

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