

# Devil's Racetrack leads to a very rural place

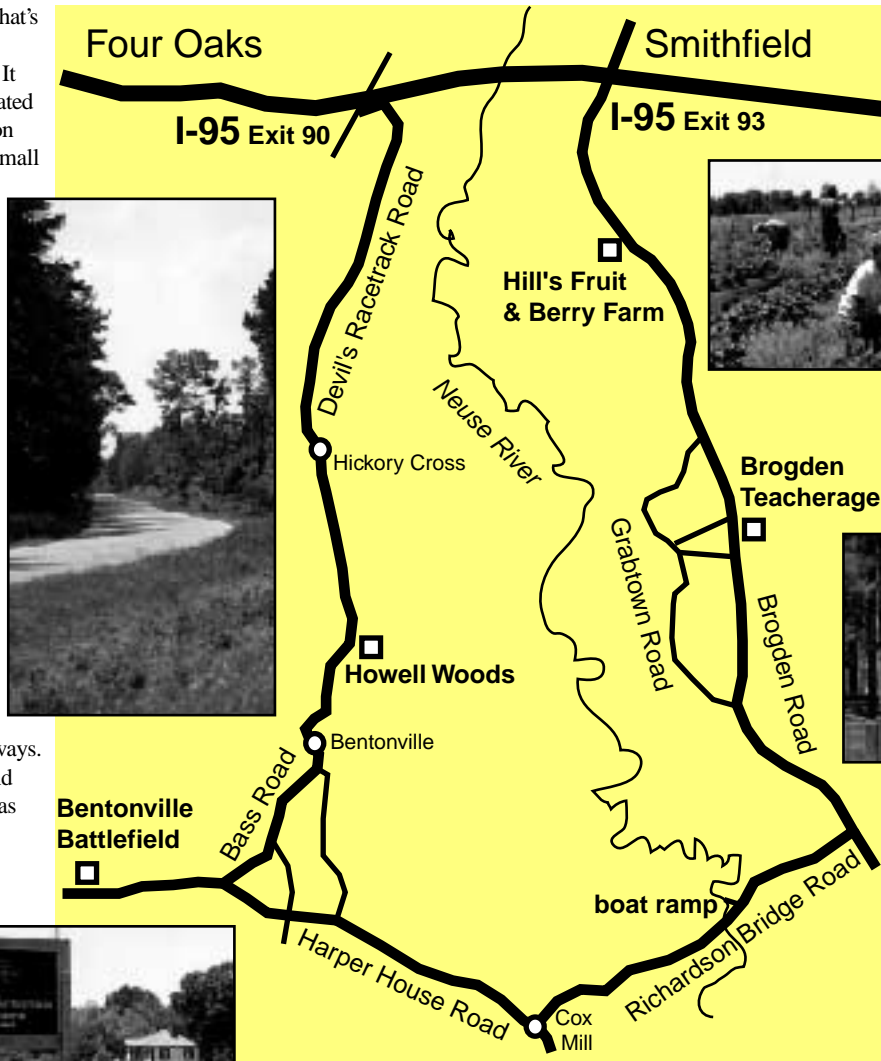
HOWELL WOODS, BENTONVILLE BATTLEGROUND, AVA GARDNER COUNTRY ARE HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS HERITAGE DRIVING TOUR

Here's a half-day driving tour that's guaranteed to give you a taste of Johnston County's rural heritage. It takes you through sparsely populated woodlands that constitute Johnston County's last wilderness, past small family farms in operation for several generations, to a Civil War battlefield that hasn't changed dramatically since 1865. The tour also takes you through Grabtown, the farming community where movie-star Ava Gardner grew up.

You may start your tour at either end. We'll lead you through it counterclockwise, starting at I-95 Exit 90 between Four Oaks and Smithfield. Just south of the U.S. 701 overpass, turn left onto Devil's Racetrack Road (which also doubles as the approach to the I-95 North access ramp). We'll start measuring our trip at the Begin Scenic Byway sign. This is one of numerous state-designated byways. This particular byway runs beyond Johnston County. We'll follow it as far as Bentonville.

Devil's Racetrack is a name derived from Johnston County legend. As you drive along the first portion of this straight-and-level roadway, you can imagine why it was once a favorite place for Sunday afternoon horse-racing. The story goes that spirits were running free one Sunday, with much gambling going on. The championship race of the day had just begun when a stranger riding a black horse broke out of the crowd and joined the race. The stranger and his horse easily caught the leaders, passed them halfway through the race, and rode out of sight never to be seen again. That put an end to the Sunday afternoon horse-racing, as folks feared a return of the devilish mystery rider.

Eight miles from the start of our tour is the entrance (on the left) to Howell Woods, Johnston Community College's Environmental Learning Center located in the heart of Johnston County's wilderness. While this 2,800-acre tract of Neuse River bottomland is used primarily as an outdoor classroom, visitors are welcome at any time to



explore more than 25 miles of unpaved roads and paths through the woods (preferably on foot or bike, not in your motor vehicle). An assembly hall near the entrance to Howell Woods has exhibits featuring live snakes and birds of prey that inhabit the region. There's also a bird-watching station beside the building that attracts hummingbirds and other colorful varieties. A wildflower garden is another site to see. While no hours are posted for visitors, a member of the staff is usually on duty and will take time to give you a brief orientation.

Leaving Howell Woods, our tour takes us across Hannah Creek and Mill Creek, then up a hill past the Bentonville Community Center. This once was the heart of this sprawling rural community, but the Post Office is long gone and there are no commercial establishments within sight. Still, it's

the doorway to the sandy plain where the Battle of Bentonville — one of the last major military events of the Civil War — was fought in March 1865. About a mile past the Community Center, Devil's Racetrack Road makes a sharp left turn. For our tour, continue straight at this point onto Bass Road for another mile until you reach Harper House Road, which takes you (to the right) to the Bentonville Battleground State Historic Site's visitor center. There you can pick up directions to other nearby points of interest related to the battle.

Resuming our tour, retrace your course on Harper House Road, this time continuing past the Bass Road and Devil's Racetrack Road intersections (the authentic C.W. Flowers country store is worth a stop at the latter) all the way to a place called Cox Mill, where you'll turn left onto Richardson Bridge Road. That'll take you back across picturesque Mill Creek (notice the

cypress trees growing in the water) and then across the Neuse River. Just beyond the river bridge on the left is the entrance to a state-maintained boat ramp providing unrestricted access to the river.

Continue eastward on Richardson Bridge Road till you reach Brogden Road. Turn left and begin the drive back toward Smithfield that'll take you past some of Johnston County's fine farmland. Immediately on the left you'll spot fields of tobacco (harvesting begins in July). Other

popular crops in this region are corn and soybeans.

About four miles up Brogden Road you'll see Grabtown Road veering off to the left. Grabtown is an old folk name given to this rural community more formally known as Brogden. Stay on Brogden Road for two more miles and you'll come to the center of this community. The

old brick schoolhouse is gone, but still standing next door is the school's teachorage where Ava Gardner lived as a child (her mother was in charge of the place where Brogden School's teachers were housed). The Teachorage is now a private residence, so don't expect to find it open for a tour. (Back in Smithfield you can learn more about it with a visit to the Ava Gardner Museum.)

Continuing along Brogden Road you'll pass Hill's Berry and Fruit Farm. From mid-April to early June you can stop and pick your own strawberries. If you're lucky, you might find peaches for sale in mid-summer. Even if you don't stop, you can still see the neatly manicured strawberry patches and peach orchards close by the roadside.

Brogden Road takes you to I-95 Exit 93 and on into Smithfield. From the start of our tour at Exit 90 to its conclusion at Exit 93, the total driving distance is just under 38 miles.