



# HISTORIC *Landmarks*

## Old Courthouse Museum

A WORLD-RENOWNED COURTHOUSE IN A SMALL ALABAMA TOWN HONORS TWO OF MONROEVILLE'S NOTABLE LITERATI AND PULLS GUESTS INTO THE PAGES OF A BELOVED NOVEL ENTWINED WITH LOCAL LORE.

BY Ashley Shaw | PHOTOGRAPHY BY John O'Hagan





Visitors well versed in the stories of Harper Lee and Truman Capote will recognize the stately dome and tolling clock of the Old Courthouse Museum, which make appearances in the literary work of both homegrown legends. (Opposite) After touring the courtroom made famous by Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, browse The Bird's Nest museum shop for regional art, books, and food items as well as eclectic gifts, décor, and specialty souvenirs available only in Monroeville, Alabama.



Year after year, fans of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—whether the book, the movie, or the annual live production—make a pilgrimage to author Harper Lee's hometown for a tangible connection to its fictional counterpart, Maycomb. The first stop on their journey places them squarely in the shoes of Atticus Finch, young Scout, and immortalized trial-goers.

"It's what we consider the world's most famous courtroom," says Wanda Green, executive director of the Monroe County Museum, which oversees the Old Courthouse Museum and other preserved venues. "So many people tell us that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is their favorite book. They love to come here to make a connection."

Off the beaten path in rural southwest Alabama, Monroeville entices literary enthusiasts en route to the Gulf Coast and international travelers with Southern-bound itineraries. "One of my favorite things when I go to the museum is to look at the map they have with pushpins where visitors live. It's incredible to see how many people from all over the world have come to Monroeville to see the courthouse," says Penelope Hines, Chamber of Commerce executive director.







Immerse yourself in Lee's revered novel and the film version as you move from the jury box and judge's bench on the first floor to the upstairs balcony. "We turn visitors loose," says Wanda Green, executive director of the museum. "The panels on the walls make it easy to enjoy a self-guided experience."

Visitors to the Old Courthouse Museum can imagine themselves among the cast of characters who lined the courtroom as protagonist Scout Finch's father, Atticus, defended an unjustly accused Black man during the Jim Crow era. Make your way to the balcony for a bird's-eye view of the place that inspired Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning tale.

"Believe it or not, there are still people out there who haven't read the book, but they've seen the movie," says Wanda, who often dispels a misconceived belief that the motion picture's climactic courtroom scene was shot on-site. "They just came to town and copied it," she explains. Hollywood production designer Henry Bumstead and actor Gregory Peck, who played the integral role of attorney Atticus Finch, visited Monroeville in preparation for the cinematic adaptation that won three Academy Awards.

In the immediate wake of both the book and movie releases in the early 1960s, Monroe County offices moved to a new location on the north end of downtown Monroeville. The community set out to transform the empty building into a museum, as the 1904 Romanesque structure and chiming clock tower had garnered fast fame.

The most noticeable difference between the silver-screen and real-life versions, as any local will tell you, is

the construction of the balcony. "Ours is actually closed right in the middle. You go through two doors to get to either side of the balcony, and in the movie, it's open all the way around," says Wanda, who started as a museum volunteer more than a decade ago. Informative panels lining the walls reveal the architectural discrepancies. They also illuminate the courthouse's past and its bookish connections.

The main floor houses two permanent exhibits. One is dedicated to Lee, and the second showcases memorabilia related to her childhood friend Truman Capote, another literary giant who grew up in Monroeville. "The Capote exhibit is actually larger than the Harper Lee exhibit. [His] family, the Faulk family, was extremely generous with family artifacts and letters and photos," says Anne Marie Bryan, executive director of Monroeville Main Street, a nonprofit that supports preservation-based economic development.

"Everything we do, we do to support the health of downtown, and everything we do for the health of downtown supports the museum," says Anne Marie, a native and self-proclaimed cheerleader of Monroeville. The organization helped secure national funding for vital structural repairs on the courthouse in 2019 and has







been key in citywide art installments, including the Literary Capital Bronze Sculpture Trail.

A collaboration with the University of Alabama, each of 14 statues honors 10 writers who have contributed to Monroe County's literary legacy—from the museum's honorees to Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Cynthia Tucker, *Crazy in Alabama* novelist Mark Childress, and educator Marva Collins. "We wanted to be able to relate our literary history to students through art. When somebody asks why Monroeville is the literary capital [of Alabama], we wanted children to grow up knowing there's more than one person who can inspire you," Anne Marie says.

Maps are available to experience the sculpture trail and historic district on your own, but in April, the Chamber of Commerce leads free guided outings every Saturday that conclude on the museum steps. "It's a history tour of downtown highlighting many things related to *To Kill a Mockingbird*," says Penelope.

Several weekends each May, residents perform the stage adaptation, attracting far-flung audiences. The first act is set on the museum's front lawn, while the second act unfolds inside the courtroom. "The beauty of going to the play is that it's not reserved seating for the most part. You can run



upstairs [to the balcony] for the second act if you're willing to hoof it," Anne Marie says. "You can actually sit in the grand jury box. You feel like you are part of the play."

The annual tradition started in the early 1990s as a fundraiser for crucial renovations. Eventually Lee, who moved home from New York in 2007, started the Mockingbird Company to ensure the play's continuation. "All the actors in the play are volunteers and always have been," Anne Marie says. It's not uncommon for cast members to play different roles as they age or to act alongside family members. The current director, Carly Jo Martens, played Scout as a child, and her mother has portrayed Miss Maudie Atkinson.

In addition to the Old Courthouse, the Monroe County Museum manages and collaborates with various historic sites in the area to promote research and education. Places like Rikard's Mill in neighboring Beatrice and Old Bethany Baptist Church in Burnt Corn, one of the county's oldest settlements, represent other interesting aspects of the region's heritage beyond its distinction as the "literary capital of Alabama."

Still, the Old Courthouse serves as a gateway for tourists. "That is absolutely our biggest attraction here. The museum and the play are definitely our big draws," says Penelope. Earlier this year, the museum was named a National Historic Landmark.

When Lee died in 2016, she was buried next to her father and oldest sister, Alice, in their family's plot, less than a half mile from the historic courthouse she made famous worldwide.

"The effect she's had on our community has been exponential," Anne Marie says. "It is not unusual on any given week for me to be walking to the post office and meet people who are doing a cross-country drive, and Monroeville was on their bucket list just because they wanted to stand in that courtroom and breathe the air."

*For information, visit [monroecountymuseum.org/old-courthouse-museum](http://monroecountymuseum.org/old-courthouse-museum).*



An extensive Truman Capote exhibit equals the prominence of the museum's tribute to Harper Lee, his lifelong friend. Comprised of photographs, handwritten letters, and other memorabilia provided by relatives, the collection paints a picture of the eccentric author's early life in Monroeville. "Much of the exhibit has been donated by family members, some of whom still live in the area," Wanda says. A faded patchwork coat (bottom right) and a knit baby blanket (right) exemplify Capote's special bond with his cousin and childhood caretaker Nanny Rumbley Faulk, better known as Sook. In short stories such as "A Christmas Memory" and "The Thanksgiving Visitor," Capote models a character after Sook and takes inspiration from the town when setting the scenes. The typewriter on display served Capote as he worked on various projects, including *Summer Crossing*, published posthumously in 2005.

