

DEEP SOUTH

A Collection *of* Photographs



MICHAEL JOSEPH

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DEDICATION

To the First and the Last.
Thank you.

“The farther the outward journey takes you, the deeper
the inward journey must be.”

Henri J. M. Nouwen

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Truth + Forgiveness

When you change your way of looking at things,
the things you look at will change for you to see.

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FOREWORD

Road trips are a solid bet to spot unique sights that normally get lost when traveling via other modes of transportation, like planes and trains. Not only can you proverbially stop and smell the roses, but you can find hidden details, and this is where Michael Joseph excels. In *Deep South*, his images seek—and find—depth and stories from often-missed, likely forgotten locales.

The photos in *Deep South* can answer the question “what became of...” His photographs not only present the subjects at hand as they stand today, but they intrinsically revive history—such as that of the farmers who once made their livelihoods on these lonesome swaths of land with the now-decrepit barns and tractors, or of agricultural industries that no longer exist in their regions. Michael Joseph’s photography in this book serves as a time capsule that was never buried underground. Some imagery has a focal point, even in the vast land of the countryside, while other images comprise a variety of elements that collectively contribute to the greater story as seen through the lens.

While Michael Joseph’s *Synchronicity* book comprises image collections of towering architecture throughout worldwide metropolises, *Deep South* serves at the opposite, bringing it literally and figuratively back down to earth. If it were a human, *Deep South* would be a best-selling rock star who’s accustomed to playing sold-out arenas but occasionally performs in a desolate, hole-in-the-wall venue. Perhaps said musician is going back to their roots, or maybe they seek an escape from big city life. But no matter where they are, whether in an urban or rural setting, they find a story that is worth telling. *Deep South* does just that.

Omar Perez



INTRODUCTION

Deep South comprises a collection of 121 photographs that I made between 2022 and 2024, traveling by car, back and forth from Connecticut to Florida. I have made many excursions and have driven on back roads and bypass roads seeking to discover a forgotten time. A time when life was slower, simpler, and when things were built with a predication on style and form, not just a basic function.

On one of those trips, I discovered Route 301, a road that ran through seven states, from Delaware to Florida. It offered everything that I was seeking to find—old motels, gas stations, rest stops, country stores, and more. The architectural ruins of a nation can be witnessed in the vanishing wood barns, rusted metal structures, and abandoned buildings. The photographs have been carefully arranged into five thematic chapters: *Bygone Barns*, *Forgotten Farms*, *Plantation Fields*, *Shanty Shacks*, and *Southern Fronts*.

Each chapter opens with a short story to support the subjects overall, to set a mood, and to provoke thought. There's something sacred about a country drive through the Deep South. The road stretches like a hymn, winding past cotton fields, weathered barns, and front porches that still hold the memory of rocking chairs and sweet tea. It's not just a drive, but a pilgrimage into a slower rhythm, where time softens, and stories linger in the air like magnolia blossoms.

As you roll down Route 301 or some forgotten two-lane road, the land opens up with grace. Pecans fall in silence, Spanish moss sways like prayer shawls, and the sun casts golden mercy across rusted silos and hand-painted signs for boiled peanuts. Every mile hums with history—church steeples, gospel stations, and roadside stands selling peaches and hope.

You drive not to arrive, but to receive. To let the land speak. To remember that grace is often found in the ordinary: a smile from a stranger, a field kissed by dusk, a diner where the biscuits taste like forgiveness. The Deep South doesn't shout—it whispers. And if you listen, you'll hear echoes of resilience, tenderness, and the quiet beauty of being. Get up, get out, and get going. Roll the windows down and let the wind blow back your hair. Allow the road to lead and let your soul catch its breath.



DEEP SOUTH

Route 301

There are roads that take you places, and there are roads that bring you back. “Highway 301,” primarily referred to as U.S. Route 301, is a 1,099-mile highway that stretches from Biddles Corner, Delaware, to Sarasota, Florida. This major North-South highway passes through seven states and provides a popular alternative to the modern interstate highway known as I-95, especially in the Carolinas and Virginia, connecting numerous cities and acting as a significant freight corridor. The old road, Route 301, is now a popular but slow-moving ribbon of asphalt that carries with it the echoes of a thousand lives, stories, and prayers.

Prior to the fast pace of modern life, when the major interstates came roaring through the Deep South like declarations of progress, Route 301 was the lifeline. It was “The Tobacco Trail,” “The Short Route from NY to FL,” and “The Getaway.” It was the revolutionary thoroughfare for family vacationers, honeymooners in convertibles, long haul truckers, and traveling salesmen. It was the motorway of filling stations providing fuel and country fried chicken, general stores with supplies, roadside stands with fresh-picked peaches and pecans, motels with flashing neon signs, and wayside chapels.

Our journey begins quietly on Route 301 via Emporia, Virginia, where the road truly begins to hum. Not loudly, but like a gospel hymn. A quiet song of what was, and what still lingers. The modest downtown main street is lined with brick buildings and the scent of pine forest permeates the atmosphere. The road eases past gas stations with rusted pumps and dilapidated diners with names like “Mack’s Garage,” “The Southern Spoon,” and “Mae’s Rest.” There are remnants of motor courts—six-room motels with screen doors and rocking chairs, whose brightly colored neon signs once blinked in the dusk like tired eyes.

Here, plantation houses still stand with their white columns reaching skyward, some crumbling and weathered, others preserved as monuments whispering stories of cotton and sorrow. Route 301 passes them all, not with judgment, but with sentimentality. It carries the weight of history in its asphalt bones.

Crossing the state line into North Carolina, the road grows slightly louder. Rocky Mount, Wilson, Fayetteville—towns that pulse with the vibrations of logging trucks and freight trains. Down here, the thick smell of burning hickory wood from smoked meat houses and barbecue joints lingers in the air. On the edge of town is a main attraction—an all-night diner with the decor detailed in bright chrome and shiny green vinyl. The jukebox is stacked with 45 records like Elvis, Sam Cooke, and Patsy Cline. Southern hospitality is where waitresses call you “hon” and pour a bottomless cup of coffee.

A place called “The Golden Griddle,” stood just outside of Dunn. It had a long counter with stools and at the front entrance a glass display case filled with fresh baked pies—pecan, sweet potato, and lemon meringue. Truckers stopped in for breakfast at 3 a.m., and families on their way to Myrtle Beach filled the booths by noon. The walls were lined with photos: couples on honeymoon, soldiers in uniform, and children with ice cream-stained smiles.

The motels here had names like “Starlight Inn” and “Traveler’s Haven.” The billboard advertisements featured photos of their alluring swimming pools of various fun geometric shapes—round, kidney, oval, and triangles. The guest rooms were spotlessly clean and smelled of fresh lemon polish. Now, most are shuttered closed, their signs rusted, black top parking lots cracked, and pools dry and overtaken by weeds. However, if you listen closely, you can still hear the laughter, footsteps, and prayers of the past.

Seamlessly entering South Carolina through a vast stretch of pine trees is a land filled with promise. Santee shimmers with its magnificent lake, a popular destination for anglers, swimmers, and nature lovers. At the Lake Marion Inn, the Spanish moss hangs from the trees like lace from a Victorian wedding dress. It once stood proud, its grand ballroom echoing with jubilant jazz and triumphant joy. Now, its chandeliers sway in the wind, and its gardens bloom wild.

The plantations here are from the gilded age. Some have been turned into historical museums, others left to the mercy of time. The churches here are small one-room houses with white steeples that can be seen from miles away, calling the faithful to their knees. Their beauty and brokenness are forever entwined; they stand like sentinels, reminding travelers that grace is not always clean—sometimes it is tattered.

In towns like Manning, Olanta, and Bamberg, the road passes places with names like “Cotton Patch” and “Lewis Lodge.” These were places of rest and renewal. One establishment, “Buckles,” once offered motorist motel rooms and automotive repairs—a place where both cars and souls could be mended.

The road suddenly grows quiet again as it slowly slips into Georgia, through quaint towns like Jesup, Ludowici, and Statesboro. This is where Southern estates have long driveways lined with magnolia trees and live oaks, and you can hear the wind blow through them like a gentle sigh.

Route 301 becomes a mirror as it solemnly reflects the beauty and the burden of the Deep South. It asks questions without speaking: *What have we left behind? What are we carrying that we need to lay down? What grace have we received that we have yet to name?* The motels, rest stops, diners, and roadside attractions are fewer now—the path becomes one of solitude. However, the road still remembers, and if you listen carefully, the sound of the South can still be heard: gossip at the diner, children playing in pools, and gospel on the radio.

In Florida, the road reaches its ending, or its beginning, depending on your perspective. Callahan is where Route 301 meets the modern world and gently bows out. The road is detached here, and less sure of itself. The old favorite locations are replaced by the new—numerous fast-food franchises, supersized gas stations, and hotel chains—serving the fast-paced and disposable approach of today's society.

However, all is not entirely lost. One place still stands strong: The Flamingo Court. Pink and proud, with plastic lawn flamingos and a front desk manned by a teenager who prefers to read a book, the rooms here have a fresh aroma of seaside salt air. Bright sunlight fills the hotel, and the road outside sounds like a lullaby. Florida is where the road exhales and remembers all it has carried.

Route 301 is not just a road; it is the Deep South in slow motion. It is a spiritual metaphor—full of grit and grace. It is a path of reckoning and rest, teaching us that life is not arriving at a destination—it is the journey itself. It reminds us that memory is not static; it moves with us, riding in the passenger seat, and pointing out landmarks we forgot we knew. It reminds us that what we *want* may not be what we *need*. It is the way we honor what was and make room for what could be. And it offers not an escape, but an embrace. A place to stop, to breathe, and to reflect. To be mindful.

Today, major interstates have taken the traffic, the tourists, and the noise along with it. And that is just fine, because Route 301 has kept the soul. If you travel it, not in haste, but in reverence—you may find that it remembers you, too—a moonlight mile down the road.



BYGONE BARNs

In the Deep South, the landscape once pulsed with the quiet dignity of old barns and weathered structures—wooden sentinels that bore witness to generations of labor, love, and loss. These buildings, often handmade from local timber and tin, were more than functional—they were expressions of place, memory, and resilience.

Barns stood as the backbone of agricultural life. Their broad beams and sloped roofs sheltered livestock, stored hay, and housed tools that shaped the rhythm of rural existence. Each barn told its own story: faded red paint whispering of long summers, rusted hinges groaning with age, and lofts that once echoed with the laughter of children sneaking away from chores. These structures were built to endure, and they aged with grace, their decay a testament to time's passage and the changing tides of Southern life.

Beyond barns, the Deep South was dotted with corn cribs, smokehouses, cotton gins, and tenant cabins—each with its own role in the tapestry of survival and community. These structures were not merely utilitarian; they were vessels of memory, shaped by hands calloused from work and hearts rooted in the land. As modernity swept through the South, many of these buildings fell into disrepair or were replaced by steel and concrete. Yet their absence leaves a quiet ache. They embodied a slower, more tactile way of life—where seasons dictated labor and craftsmanship was passed down like heirlooms. Their silhouettes, now fading from fields and forests, once anchored communities in shared purpose and meaning.

Today, remnants of these bygone barns and structures still linger—leaning into the wind, cloaked in vines, whispering stories to those who pause to listen. They remind us that history is not only written in books but etched into wood grain and rusted nails. In their stillness, they offer a kind of reverence—a call to remember the lives lived within and around them, and to honor the enduring spirit of the Deep South that shaped them.

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