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Black Grocers, Black Activism, and the Spaces in Between: Black Grocery Stores during the Mississippi Freedom Struggle Movement

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BLACK GROCERS, BLACK ACTIVISM, AND THE SPACES IN BETWEEN: BLACK GROCERY STORES DURING THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM STRUGGLE MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of Black-owned grocery stores and their owners during the Mississippi Freedom Struggle Movement. The thesis highlights four Black grocery store owners, and the impact they had on the movement. Grocery stores played a vital role and were often sites of contestants. Black-owned grocery stores served as meeting spaces for Black activism, targets of White domestic terrorism, and safe havens for Black Mississippians. These spaces provided a space for political agency, leisure, and safety. Likewise, this thesis centers Black grocery store owners as fundamental to the progress of the movement. It explores an array of ways that owners were targeted and punished for their role in the movement. This thesis also examines the role of food in the movement, analyzing various ways it halted or progressed Black Mississippians' activism.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Annie Louise Fortner, Robert “Bob” Fortner, and other unsung Black Mississippian grocers who enriched their communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to convey my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my thesis advisor and mentor Dr. Shennette Garrett-Scott and my committee members Drs. Bruce O'Brian Foster and Jodi Skipper. Without their continuous support and guidance, this thesis would not be possible. I would also like to thank my parents and family for their mental support and words of encouragement throughout this process. My father's motto, "Work Hard, Pray Harder" echoed in my mind continuously while working on this thesis. I would also like to thank Mrs. Flobell, Gayle, Anita, and Yvette for participating in interviews. Lastly, I want to extend my gratitude to the entire faculty and staff of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture for their unwavering support despite a pandemic.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

As I closed my car door, I did a double take of my backseat to ensure that I at least remembered the oral history kit but seeing it offered me little reinsurance as I ventured into the field for the first time alone. While this was not my first oral history interview, my nerves were buzzing more than my first two. This interview was different. I had sole responsibility for the entire project from conception to execution. So far, the conception phase proved to be the easiest part of the project. I received positive responses when I talked about doing an oral history project on my family's grocery store, but the execution phase brought about many complications, primarily finding a suitable narrator to interview. Despite my mother and seven aunties working and visiting the store, no one had any information that they considered worthy enough for an interview, and my grandmother, who spent the most time at the store, recently developed a mental illness that deteriorated her memories of the store.

After weeks of cold calls and "Let me check back with you" responses, my mother intervened and suggested Mrs. Flobell, my grandmother's best friend who lived across the road from the store. Mrs. Flobell? Her name sounded so familiar. As a child, I had heard her name countless times while eavesdropping on "grown folk conversations", but I never saw her at any family gatherings. Mrs. Flobell belonged to a special group of people. People who I've hugged countless times following statements

like, “I haven’t seen you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper.” or “I haven't seen you since you were a little boy. You don’t remember me, do you?” This level of familiarity coupled with no significant interactions with Mrs. Flobell, made my racing nerves reach a boil as I gathered my recording equipment outside of Mrs. Flobell’s house. As I approached her lively, olive green door, I paused to take a deep breath as an ailment to my nerves, but instead I was bombarded with a harsh truth. In a couple of seconds, I would be interviewing a narrator that I knew nothing about while asking questions about a subject that I knew nothing about.

When I sat on Mrs. Flobell's couch to begin the interview, she asked, “What are you trying to find out about the store? Your mother should have told you everything.”[1] The statement floored me. I was intrigued and wanted to know everything that Mrs. Flobell believed my mother should have told me, so I sat back on her couch and started the recorder. What follows is a selective account of four Black-owned grocery stores that played a vital role in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement. This paper aims to explore the impact of food, Black-owned grocery stores, and Black grocery store owners during the movement.

While conducting research for this thesis, I quickly became frustrated by the lack of archival material available on Black grocery stores in Mississippi. I came across a multitude of sources and work devoted to White grocery stores in Mississippi. For example, Thomas Clark, an American historian, traveled throughout the South during the early twentieth century visiting grocery stores and asking for any ledgers, receipts, and/or inventory records from owners. This collection privileged only White-owned grocery

[1] Flora Bell Watson, interview by Keon Burns, November 8, 2019, hereafter Watson Interview.

stores; it does not include any Black-owned grocery stores. Many historians have overlooked the role of grocery stores on American history, and when grocery stores were given historical attention, the impact of Black grocery stores was erased from the narrative.

As I continued to search through sources, this erasure became more and more apparent. Therefore, I decided to conduct oral histories to overcome the absence of sources available. Karida Brown's work, *Gone Home Race and Roots Through Appalachia*, heavily influenced this decision. In her research phase, she also struggled to find adequate sources on the life of Black miners in Appalachia. Therefore, she decided to conduct oral histories. Like Brown, I intend to use oral history to "reinscribe" the narrative of Black-owned grocery stores into the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement.[2]

However, oral histories do have limitations as primary sources. Considering the time gap between my narrators' recalled experiences and present day, oral histories are susceptible to false memories and performative storytelling. False memories can result narrators forgetting vital portions of events or experiences, resulting in historical falsehoods and factual distortion. I have done my due diligence of fact checking events with other written sources, and I also provide historical context for events discussed in my oral histories. Overall, I use oral histories to highlight the relationship between of Black Mississippians and Black grocery stores during the Mississippi Freedom Struggle.

[2] In Brown's appendix, she uses the word reinscribe to refer Black Appalachia reclaiming their erased roots. Karida Brown, *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 195.

Although I struggled to find sources and work dedicated to Black grocery stores, I found an array of scholarship discussing the importance of various Black businesses to the movement. Tiffany Gill's work, *Beauty Shop Politics*, particularly appealed to my work with Black grocery stores. She argues economic autonomy and entrepreneurship were vital elements of Black activism and community building.[3] In other words, Black business owners were privileged to resist antagonistic racial repression such as economic reprisals, and owners often extended this protection to the Black community. Black-owned buildings provided a safe space for Black activists to gather outside the White gaze.[4] These spaces fostered political action and community building by allowing Blacks to covertly strategize, organize, and protest. In short, these spaces, "Gave African American a place to hide, a place to plan."[5]

Black people did not just occupy these spaces, they shaped these spaces through their interaction with the spaces. More importantly, Black people recreated meaning through their interactions with spaces such as Black grocery stores, and inversely, the stores shaped their individual behavior and collective action.[6] The notion of Black placemaking best summarizes this concept. In short, Black placemaking refers to ways that Black people created "sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance through social interaction."[7] A multitude of reasons motivate Black placemaking. The standard way of

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[3] Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1-2.
[4] For more on the White gaze consult: George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America,* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
[5] Robin Kelly, "We Are Not What We Seem: The Politics and Pleasures of Community," *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 44.
[6]Brian Foster, *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 171-172.
[7]Marcus Hunter, Mary Pattillo, Zandria F. Robinson, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Black Placemaking: Celebration, Play, and Poetry," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 7-8 (2016): 31-32.

thinking about Black placemaking has been through the lens of structural racism such as gentrification or redlining. To put it bluntly, Black people are viewed as helpless victims being pushed or pulled by forces beyond their control.

On the contrary, Black placemaking can also be motived by Black actions and thoughts for uplift, leisure, or everyday survival.[8] This is the type of motivation behind Black placemaking at Black grocery stores. Inversely, this perspective empowers Black folks and decentralizes White control over Black placemaking. My conclusion, then, is that Black-owned grocery stores offered spaces where Black folk could seek protection, political agency, and everyday leisure.[9]

Fortner Grocery opened in the 1940s and operated for nearly forty years. It aided Black Mississippians in their everyday search for joy and liberation amid an oppressive Jim Crow South. The store was a one-stop-shop for food, entertainment, leisure, gas, loans, and employment. Fortner Grocery played a vital role in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle Movement. The Movement is often oversimplified to only include organizers' efforts such as marches, boycotts, and protests, but other efforts were as vital to the movement such as supplying a space for relief during this tumultuous period.

Often Black businesses receive praise for financial contributions to the movement, but businesses such as Fortner Grocery also supplied a safe haven where Black Mississippians could find joy and feel liberated from their everyday problems. Furthermore, Fortner Grocery stood at the forefront of a Black Community who celebrated and cherished the opportunity to rely on their own community to supply their needs.

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[8]Foster, *I Don't Like the Blues*, 172-173.
[9]Foster, *I Don't Like the Blues*, 170-172.

Thesis Overview

This thesis is structured into three chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one aims to explain what led to Black Mississippians becoming disenfranchised by the early Civil Rights movement. The chapter begins with selective events that highlight the lives of early Black Mississippians, specifically enslaved laborers. Next, the chapter transition to Black life following emancipation and highlights laws and systems that were established to subjugate Black Mississippians back into a system of enslavement. To conclude, it skips forward to the Mississippi Freedom Struggle. It highlights several events that are pertinent to the following chapters.

Chapter two highlights the role of food and grocery store owners to the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement. It begins with by discussing how food was weaponized to halt voter activism in Belzoni and Greenwood, Mississippi. Next, it discusses how grocery stores were a site of contentment during the movement. It also highlights how grocery stores empowered their owners to make an impact. It concludes with experiences of three Black grocery store owners during the movement.

Chapter three highlights the pivotal role that Fortner Grocery played in Bolton, Mississippi. It begins with a brief history of Bolton and the great Hinds county area. Next, it gives biographical skeptics of the owners and manager of Fortner Grocery. It addressed the hardships experienced by Black business owners during the Jim Crow era, and it concludes with a discussion on the role of food at Fortner Grocery. The epilogue focuses on the legacy of Fortner Grocery, and other Black grocery stores.

of Black grocery stores as outline the history of the store through a collection of oral histories. Through the practice of narrative history, I intend to explore new ways that Blacks Mississippians found meaning in spaces. Fortner Grocery was a space carved out by Black Mississippians for community building, leisure, and consumption in the early twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2 "SAME OL' SIP": SELECTIVE HISTORY OF MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Slavery and Emancipation

By the time Mississippi territory was admitted into the union in 1817, the cotton boom was in full swing and greedy enslavers and farmers were abandoning their tobacco fields of Virginia and rice fields of Carolina to capitalize on the cotton fields of Mississippi. Seven years before the territory gained statehood, its total population consisted of forty-six percent of enslaved people, and twenty years after statehood, majority of the population were African Americans and Africans imported from trans-Atlantic slave trade.[10] Black enslaved labor played a vital role in the cotton plantations. In comparison to other commercial crops such as tobacco, sugar, and rice, cotton required an immense amount of time-sensitive labor to harvest properly. This labor-intensive crop quickly became Mississippi's main export. In fact, in 1806 America became the biggest English importer of cotton, and with the invention of new systems of labor and machinery that mechanized cotton production, cotton became the most valuable thing made in America.[11]

[10] Graham Hodges, "Mississippi," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.44894.
[11] Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 13.

According to Beckert, the mass production of cotton was cultivated in the Lower South states such as Mississippi and Alabama. The labor of Black enslaved Mississippians was not only required to cultivate cotton, but it also "transformed conquered Indian lands into fertile plantations of Alabama and Mississippi."[12] Enslaved laborers were responsible for chopping and uprooting trees and other shrubby, engineering irrigation systems, and leveled fields.[13] The unceasing demand for forced labor in Mississippi created an ever-expanding labor vacancy that relocated millions of Black men, women, and children into the state. On the eve of the Civil War, Mississippi had an overwhelming majority of Blacks, majority of whom were enslaved workers. At the onset of the war, Mississippi's economy was so firmly rooted in enslaved labor that it quickly pledged its allegiance to the Confederate States of America who fought for pro-slavery rhetoric and slavery expansion westward.

During the war, many Black Mississippians served as service roles for the Confederacy such as cooks, body servants, teamsters, and builders who were forced to go with their enslavers into battle. However, many Black Mississippians were reluctant to serve the Confederacy especially as soldiers, and in addition, White Mississippian authorities were wary of equipping enslaved workers with weapons.[14] Given the long history of Black Mississippians actively resisting their enslavement prior to the war, many Whites feared that if Blacks were allowed to become soldiers, they would attack the Confederate army instead of the Union army.[15]

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[12] Beckert, *Slavery's Capitalism*, 13-14.
[13] Beckert, *Slavery's Capitalism*, 13.
[14] Hodges, "Mississippi," 2-3.
[15]The fear of slavery insurrections ramped up significantly during the war, but even before the war, Mississippi counties such as Hinds experienced violence and lynching as a product of White fear of enslaved insurrections. For example, in 1935 the Nashville Republican published an article entitled, "The Intended Insurrection of Slaves in Mississippi." The article reveals that most White citizens in Hinds

Disenfranchisement and Jim Crow

Following the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union victory, Mississippi's economy was decimated because its most valuable resource, enslaved labor, was now obsolete.[16] When freedom was announced to Black Mississippians by Black Union soldiers, Mississippians fled plantations by the bulk leaving Mississippi's most profitable business, cotton, halted and labor deprived. Newly emancipated Mississippians looked to engage society as celebratory citizens by demanding wages, taking part in consumer economy, and pursuing education. However, the federal, state, and local governing bodies tried to halt the progress of newly freed Mississippians being integrated into society as equals with full citizenship rights.

Following the Civil War, an organization was organized by congress to aid in Black Mississippians being introduced into society as equal citizens. In March 1865, the US Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) was established and headed by General Oliver Otis Howard.[17] Shortly after operations began, the Mississippi branch, Mississippi Freedmen's Bureau decided that establishing a standard practice for wages and labor between former enslaved and enslaver was the

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county were living in a perpetual state after someone allegiantly overheard Black Mississippians discussing an insurrection. According to the article White Mississippians were hypervigilant "expecting [at] every moment to be burned up or have [their] throats cut by tho [sic] negroes." The alleged slave insurrection was discovered a week before it occurred when a Black enslaved laborer divulged the details of the insurrection to his White enslaver. After receiving this information, the enslaver confirmed these claims by spying on a planning meeting for the insurrection. According to McKibben, a county-wide manhunt ensued for anyone allegedly connected to the insurrection, and a committee was formed in Hinds county that served as the interrogators, jury and executors for "the trial." Over thirty people were tortured, beaten, and lynched for their possible involvement in the insurrection.

[16] Hodges, "Mississippi," 4.

[17] Becca Walton, "Freedmen's Bureau," *Center for Study of Southern Culture,* July 1, 2017 http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/freedmens-bureau/.

most effective way to aid in Black Mississippians gaining independence. The fair labor contracts stated that employers, former enslavers, were to lease land to employees, former enslaved, in exchange for crops, and if employers did not pay proper wages to employees the land was supposed to be forfeited to employees.[18] In addition, agents dispersed over the state to aid freedmen in contract negotiations.

However, because the Mississippi Freedmen's Bureau operated understaffed and under resourced, it often fell short of the needs of Black Mississippians. For example, in 1866 there were only twelve agents assigned to help the entire state of Mississippi.[19] In addition, these twelve agents received little aid from the federal government to protect Black Mississippians or enforce any policies that they established. Immediately after Union troops were removed from the Mississippi, White Mississippians began using violence to reestablish systems and etiquette akin to slavery. The Mississippi Freedmen's Bureau's solution to this issue was to advise Black Mississippians to seek justice from their local and state authorities, who often sanctioned this behavior.[20]

However, as the Bureau tried to devise a plan for Black Mississippi to gain their societal rights, a new organization, the Ku Klux Klan, sought to halt these rights.[21] The organization, originally named Knights of the White Camellia, was made up of former Confederate Army veterans who imposed their will to restore racial relations of slavery. They used violence and terrorism to force free Black Mississippians into a level of quasi-slavery via the sharecropping system created by the Bureau. Blacks were forced to work land leased to them, usually by their former enslavers, and they were forced to accept

[18] Hodges, "Mississippi," 5.
[19] Walton, "Freedmen's Bureau,".
[20] Walton, "Freedmen's Bureau,".
[21] Hodges, "Mississippi," 5.

exploitative labor contracts that prevented them from upper mobility. The contracts enforced a level of submissiveness and inferiority upon Black Mississippian to depend on their formal enslavers to supply living wages, adequate housing, and fair compensation. Plantation owners and wealthy landowners often did not provide any of three to a satisfactory level for Black Mississippians.

To conclude, Black Mississippians following emancipation, continued to endure systems of controls that subjugated them to a similar dynamic as slavery. Many Black Mississippians were trapped through exploitative labor contracts or indebt to state prison plantations because of vagrancy or unemployment laws known as "Black Codes".[22] The next section skips forward several decades to discuss selective events from the Mississippi Black Freedom Struggle. The section highlights how activists were able to foster change in cities such as Greenwood and Belzoni, Mississippi where Black Mississippians life still resembled chattel slavery one century after emancipation.

Mississippi Civil Rights Movement

As I fumbled with cords trying to set up my new oral history kit, Mrs. Flobell grabbed the remote off her coffee table and turned down the volume on the five o'clock news. As she waited patiently for me to untangle my equipment, she decided to gather some premeditated answers for the interview. She asked me, "Do you want to know just about the store in Bolton or about your great grandparents too?" I responded, "Everything." Before I could connect the last wires together to power my microphone, she immediately jumped into action. She began telling me stories about my great

[22] For more on Black Codes in Mississippi consult: John Hartwell Moore, "Black Codes of Mississippi," *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, Vol. 3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 275-280.

grandparents. How they looked, how they talked, how they walked, and her life growing up next to the store. One of the stories nearly brought her to tears with all the laughter and glee. She explained that Annie Louise Fortner had such a light complexion that when Bob Fortner would go with her to the movie theater, they could not sit together. Annie Louise would be on the Whites only side, and Bob would be on the Blacks only side.

This story illustrates how important racial division in public spaces was to Mississippi legislators. It was a contested issue that sparked a rise of activism in the 1960s. Following *Boynton v. Virginia*, the state of Mississippi was instructed to desegregate all public interstate transportation, but the state refused to allow commingle races on public transportation. [23] In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was erected to challenge the states' willingness to follow the court case ruling. To ensure compliance with the law, CORE gathered volunteers who were willing to ride different public transportations through various States. The CORE program, Freedom Rides, met resistance when the Black riders attempted to board public transportation in Mississippi. They were arrested and jailed for trying to use White-only facilities.[24] On November 1, 1961 this sparked a federal backlash led by the U.S. attorney general Robert F. Kennedy. Kennedy created stricter laws on desegregation policies that the Interstate Commerce Commission put into effect.[25]

The following year, Mississippi played another pivotal role in dismantling Jim Crow through federal aid. In 1962, James Meredith became the first African

[23] Ronda Penrice, "Mississippi," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, Accessed April 2, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.45913.
[24] Penrice, "Mississippi," 5-6.
[25] Penrice, "Mississippi," 6.

American to successfully be enrolled into the University of Mississippi. The news of his integration spread quickly through the state. Many Black Mississippians viewed his integration as a successful battle in the long fight for civil inequality in Mississippi. A teacher in nearby city, Coffeeville, recalls the atmosphere of the local Black community when they received news of Meredith's admission. The teacher, Dorothy A. Kee, was an activist and trailblazer in her own right. Following Meredith's integration, she would go on to integrate the Yalobusha county school district and serve as the first Black teacher at Coffeeville High School. When asked about the integration, Dorothy A Kee responded, "We were elated, but fearful."[26]

This fear would be realized on September 30, 1962 when Meredith's second attempt to physically enter the University of Mississippi prompted a violence riot that resulted in mayhem.[27] President John F. Kennedy sent five thousand federal troops to subdue the chaos at the University of Mississippi. This decision impacted the Civil Right Movement because it set a precedent for the federal government to intervene if civil rights were in jeopardy. After Meredith graduated from the University of Mississippi, he was asked how he felt about having the National Guard show up. He responded, "I didn't have any feelings. As far as I was conserved, the United States military was my military."[28] Meredith did not have any fear because he felt that he should be given the same rights and protection that other citizens experienced.

[26] Kee, Dorothy and Burns, Keon, "Kee, Dorothy" (2019), *Black Families of Yalobusha County Oral History Project*, 5, https://egrove.olemiss.edu/blkfam_yalo/5.
[27] Penrice, "Mississippi," 5.
[28] *Door Ajar*, directed by John Afamasaga, (2019; Oxford, MS), documentary.

The Last Great March

Meredith wanted other Black Mississippians to feel the same level of fearlessness in striving for their civil rights. On June 5, 1966 he began his solo 220-mile walk from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi to proclaim the end of fear for Black Mississippians pursuing voting registration and racial equality.[29] On the second day, Meredith's march was brought to a sudden halt when he was shot by sniper Aubrey James Norvell with a shotgun a couple of miles south of Hernando, Mississippi.[30] Meredith was rushed to hospital in Memphis, Tennessee where the leadership of various civil rights organizations gathered in response to Meredith's assassination attempt including, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Urban League, CORE, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The organizations engaged in an intense debate on how to continue with Meredith's march.

The NAACP and Urban League both wanted to continue the march with the support of President Lyndon Johnson's administration, national known personalities, and liberal-minded organizations. Their goal was to gain support for a new civil rights bill that would enable desegregation activists to protest under the protection of the federal law. The national attention from Meredith's assault and partnering with the Johnson administration would create an ideal platform to launch this campaign for federal protection for civil rights workers.

[29] Penrice, "Mississippi," 7.
[30] Akinyele Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 132.

However, two other organizations, SNCC and CORE, had opposing beliefs about the goals of the march. The leaders of the organizations proposed that the march should focus primarily on politically and economically empowering Black-majority counties and cities in Mississippi through enfranchisement, education reform, and local Black leadership. SNCC and CORE were extremely skeptical of involving outside personalities and liberal groups whom the march's goals may be catered to. Also, they were critical of the Johnson administration for not protesting Meredith during his march and wanted to issue a public statement critiquing the administration's negligence in Meredith's assault.

In addition, SNCC and CORE wanted to bring in a Louisiana-based, armed self-defense organization known as the Deacons for Defense. This organization volunteered to participate after hearing news of Meredith's assault, and they were fully prepared to serve as the sword and shield of the march. One Black publication outlet reported, "[Deacons] vowed to put trigger happy whites in the cemetery."[31] The Deacons of Defense represented one of the first Black paramilitary groups to organize in Mississippi; they distinguished themselves from earlier armed resistance groups through military-like structure and chain of command. They viewed themselves as filling the void for a lack of local, state, and federal protection of the Black community.[32]

However, this message of an eye for eye did not align with all civil rights organizations. The NAACP, Urban League, and SCLC were firmly against the Deacons of Defense joining the march, and NAACP and Urban League were both against publicly criticizing the Johnson administration. Both organizations were trying to form a

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[31] Lance Hill, *Deacons of Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 246-249.
[32] Akinyele Umoja, "It's Time for Black Men," in The *Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 204.

partnership with the administration to progress the movement through legislation. The five organizations could not reach a plan for the movement that was mutually beneficial for each group. The fate of the march stood as a deadlock between SNCC and CORE and the NAACP and Urban League, but after SCLC agreed to let the Deacons of Defense march if the march maintain a banner of nonviolence, NAACP and Urban League withdrew from the march.[33]

The march went ahead under the nonviolent condition, but the addition of the Deacon of Defense and leadership for SNCC and CORE marked a radical change in the Black Freedom Struggle. There was a shift from the nonviolent, segregationist approach to pursuing change, and instead, the focus was armed resistance, economic autonomy, and political empowerment.[34] This new ideology culminated on June 16, 1966 when the march arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi. Following the arrest and release of Stokely Carmichael, SNCC leader and gifted orator, he addressed a crowd of six hundred who had been primed for his Black Power speech all evening.[35] During the speech, Carmichael passionately challenged the crowd by continuously asking, "What do you want?" Initially, only a few SNCC workers responded, but eventually most of the crowd began responding with, "Black Power!" (see Image 1).[36]

[33] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 148.
[34] Robert Browe, "Black Economic Autonomy," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 2 (1971): 26-31, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41203680.
[35] "Stokely Carmichael," *SNCC Digital Gateway*, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, https://snccdigital.org/people/stokely-carmichael/.
[36] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 148.

Image 1 Stokely Carmichael, Greenwood,. Mississippi, June 16, 1966
"At a night rally in Broad Street Park, a furious Stokely Carmichael delivers his famous 'Black Power' speech." Source: *The Bob Fitch Photography Archive: Movements for Change*, M1994_Meredith_018, Stanford Digital Archive, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, hereafter archive *Bob Fitch Photography Archive*, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/fitch/catalog/zh072sv4912.

The march sparked record levels of political organizing and enfranchisement in Mississippi. For small majority Black towns such as Belzoni, Mississippi, the march inspired hundreds of plantation and farm workers to register despite the economic reprisal imposed by White supremacists and plantation owners.[37] The number of Black registered voters reached one hundred and fifty, which was an increase of one hundred and forty-eight Black voters compared to one decade previous (see Image 2).[38]

[37] Gene Roberts, "Marchers Ranks Expand to 1200," *New York Times*, June 20, 1966, 20.
[38] See chapter 2, section "Reprisal in Belzoni" for more information on the earlier decade.

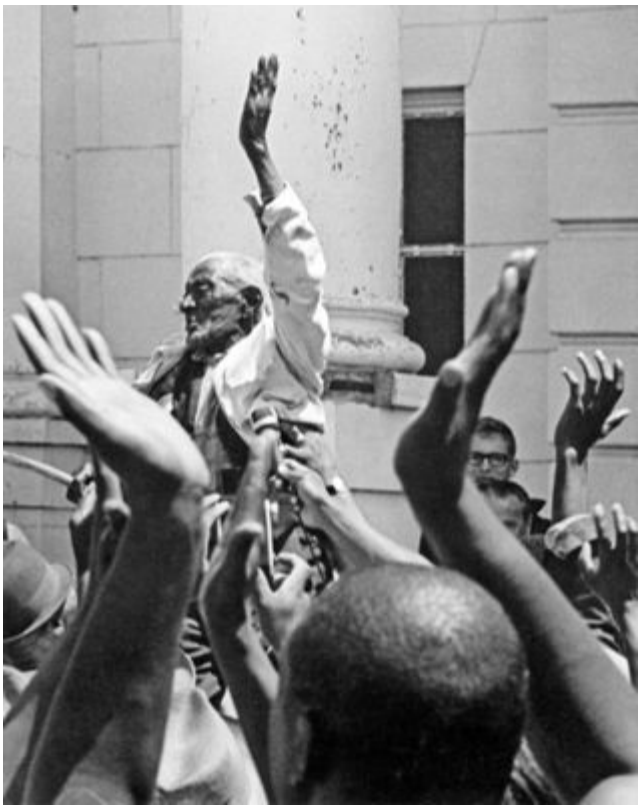

Image 2 El Fondren in Batesville, Mississippi, 1966
"106-year-old El Fondren is hoisted victoriously above crowd after registering to vote." Source: *Bob Fitch Photography Archive*, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/fitch/catalog/zh072sv4912.

The march also inspired activism in the younger generation from elementary children to teenagers. James Riley Swearengen, an Oakland, Mississippi native, remembers him and his brother riding on the back of a pickup truck to Grenada, Mississippi to join the march as teenagers. Swearengen recalls the excitement and energy from the movement as he followed along for several days before returning home. Soon, he channeled that energy into helping organize grassroot political organizations in his hometown. Eventually, Swearengen would be voted in as an alderman of the district and later become the first Black Mayor of Oakland.[39]

[39] James Riley Swearengen, interview by Keon Burns, March 10, 2021, In the process of being archived in egrove, University of Mississippi.

The march concluded with Meredith rejoining for the final stretch to the capital, Jackson, Mississippi. On June 26, 1966, nearly fifteen thousand people gathered in support of the march in Jackson, Mississippi. Over the span of three week, the march inspired four thousand Black Mississippians to register to vote and thousands more to march and protest White supremacists, intimidation, and violence. Some historians refer to Meredith's March against Fear as the last great march in the Civil Rights Era.[40] The march provided a new direction for the Black Freedom Struggle movement and incited further activism in Mississippi. The next chapter will discuss the role of food, grocery stores, and grocery store owners in the movement. The chapter will focus on two Delta cities who were inspired by the march, Greenwood and Belzoni.

[40] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 390.

CHAPTER 3 "COCK YOUR CROPS": WEAPONIZING FOOD AND POLITICIZING GROCERY STORES

Introduction

Toward the end of my interview with Mrs. Flobell, I asked her about other stores in the area. I wanted to interview other people about the stores then combine the experiences, but her response halted my hopes. Her response was swift and dismissive, "No, the next store was far away, and it was run by Joe, a white man." Unfortunately for many Black Mississippians, the only stores available for them were often White-owned stores. African Americans in Mississippi often found themselves in a conundrum when they shopped at White-owned grocery stores.

This chapter provides the historical role that grocery stores and Black grocery store owners played in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement while Fortner Grocery was operational. Grocery stores were sites of contentment during the movement; grocery stores served as the location of boycotts, economic reprisals, and violence during the movement. Likewise, food and food access played a vital role in the movement. During the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement, food was politicized and weaponized to halt the movement or progress it.[41] Also, Black grocery store owners

[41] Bobby Smith, "The Greenwood Food Blockade: The White Citizens' Council, SNCC, and the Politics of Food Access," *Southern Foodways Alliance*, https://www.southernfoodways.org/the-greenwood-food-blockade/.

played a pivotal role in the movement; Black grocery store owners experienced economic repression and violence because of their activism in the movement.

First, this chapter will begin with a discussion of the weaponization and politicization of food and food access during the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement. The chapter highlights the Greenwood Food Blockade to discuss the importance of food and food access to the movement. Secondly, the chapter will assert the vital role that grocery stores and Black grocery store owners played in the movement. The chapter will examine the impact of three Black grocery store owners Gus Courts, George Lee, and Booker Wright during the movement. It is important to understand the historical role that food and grocery store owners played in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement to fully understand the impact that Fortner Grocery had on an all-Black community in Bolton, Mississippi.

Greenwood Blockade

Throughout the Mississippi Civil Rights movement food was used as a weapon to attempt to halt progress in the movement.[42] For example in 1962, the All-White board of Supervisors met in Greenwood, Mississippi and ended the federal food program in Greenwood.[43] This program fed over twenty thousand locals, mostly African American families who struggled to secure food outside of harvesting seasons. The meeting of the board of supervisors came on the heels of an influx of Black activists arriving in Greenwood, Mississippi. The city was home to a local Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field office and a White Citizen Council (WCC) office. The influx

[42] Smith, "The Greenwood Food Blockade,".
[43] Smith, "The Greenwood Food Blockade,".

of Black activists was caused by recent voter registration efforts by SNCC in response to Leflore county being home to two-third Blacks, but less than five percent of eligible voters were registered.[44]

The decision to cut the federal surplus program in Greenwood was racial-motivated, although the official reason given by the board of supervisors was the program became too costly. Considering that the food provided by the program was fully funded by the federal government, and the city was only paying administrative costs which amounted to only $12,500 the previous year.[45] However, providing food for sharecroppers during the winter months no longer aligned with the board's priority, and it offered the WCC an opportunity to halt the voter registration drive. Over the last decade, farming technology improved which decreased the amount of sharecropper and farmers needed for farming, so the board of supervisors decided that $12,500 was too much money to spend on the twenty-two thousand eligible recipients in Greenwood.[46]

The response to shut down the program that provided food to Black sharecroppers and farmers between cotton seasons was a direct response to the attempt to organize a voter registration drive for the Afro-Greenwood community.[47] This was the first step in what some activists have labeled the Greenwood Food Blockade.[48] The Blockade prompted immediate action by activists organizations such as SNCC and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who sent out a

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[44] "Sam Block goes to Greenwood, Mississippi," *SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University*, Accessed April 2, 2021, https://snccdigital.org/events/sam-block-goes-greenwood-mississippi/.
[45] "Agenda for a Meeting of the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights," February 6, 1963, Jane C. Schutt Papers, Coleman Library, Tougaloo College.
[46] Dittmer, *Local People,* 142-145.
[47] Dittmer, *Local People*, 143.
[48] Smith, "Greenwood Food Blockade,".

national call for assistance. One of the first to respond were two young activists both students at Michigan state in East Lansing, Ben Taylor and Ivanhoe Donaldson.[49]

The student packed up a pick-up truck with over-the-counter medicine and food and headed to Greenwood to distribute the supplies. However, their actions were subdued by Greenwood police who searched their cargo and arrested the students for transporting narcotics across interstate lines.[50] Ivanhoe and Taylor stopped in Clarksdale, Mississippi to rest, and they were awoken and thrown in the Clarksdale jail for eleven days.[51] The arrest and imprisonment of two students who drove cross-country to deliver food, aspirin, and vitamins to alleviate the blockade fueled national attention and support for Greenwood, Mississippi. Shortly after the NAACP paid a hefty bail of $15,000 to free the students, nationwide support in the form of donations, food drives, campaigns, and a flood of activists into Greenwood, Mississippi.[52]

After the additional supplies and support arrived in Greenwood, the local White Citizen council doubled down on their efforts to uphold the food blockade. Incoming supplies continued to be intercepted by local authorities, and when supplies did make it into town, local terrorists would steal or destroy the supplies before they could be distributed. For example, on February 19, 1963 six thousand pounds of supplies were sent from Chicago to Greenwood to alleviate the blockade. Shortly after the supplies arrived, a fire started in the Black business district that consumed four buildings right next to the SNCC main office. This fire was no coincidence. Moments before the arson

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[49] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 80.
[50] "Ivanhoe Donaldson," *SNCC Digital Gateway*, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, Accessed April 2, 2021, https://snccdigital.org/events/sam-block-goes-greenwood-mississippi/.
[51] "Ivanhoe Donaldson,".
[52] Dittmer, *Local People*, 145.

began, an anonymous tip was received at the SNCC office that the supplies would not be distributed the following day. In addition to destroying resources and stalling legal proceedings for federal relief, local White authorities also attempted violence to uphold the food blockade.

For example, nine days after the arson, SNCC organizers were holding a meeting. It was interrupted by Jimmy Travis, a young activist from Jackson, Mississippi, who observed an unmarked Buick surreptitiously parked outside of the meeting.[53] The SNCC workers assumed that the vehicle belonged to someone who intended to assault the SNCC members and use the Buick to flee the crime scene. Fearing for the safety of the group, the meeting was ended, and everyone was instructed to return to their counties safely. While Bob Moses, Randolph Blackwell, and Jimmy Travis were headed west to Greenville, Mississippi in Travis's car, the Buick reappeared and sprayed the car with heavy gunfire. Travis was shot twice, once in the neck and once in the shoulder, and news of this ambush sparked anger and rage nationwide.[54] This energy was channeled into providing Greenwood with additional support and supplies and putting more pressure on the federal government to provide immediate action in Greenwood (see Image 3).

[53] Dittmer, *Local People*, 147.
[54] Dittmer, *Local People*, 147.

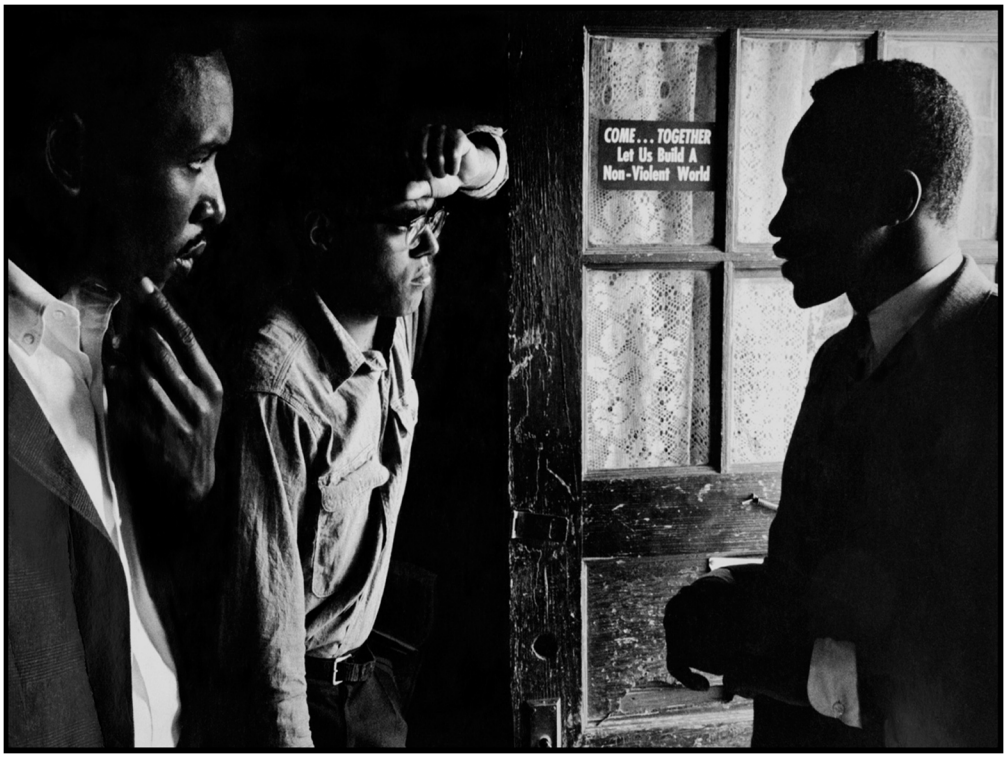

Image 3 Frank Smith, Bob Moses, and Willie Peacock in Greenwood SNCC office, March 1963
Source: Danny Lyon Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement 44, dektol.wordpress.com

Overall, the mass food shortage resulted in activism efforts being redirected into supplying the Afro-Greenwood community with adequate food and supplies. For a period, the local WCC's food blockade was successful in halting the voter registration drive in Greenwood, Mississippi, so they were able to weaponize food for political gain.[55] However, the political gain was short-lived as Black organizations and citizens nationwide formed a coalition to alleviate the food shortage in Greenwood, and furthermore, promote voter activism in the Afro-Greenwood community. The local White authorities attempted to combat this with false arrest, violence, and destruction, but it was not enough to uphold the food blockade. Throughout the Mississippi Civil Rights

[55] Smith, *"*Greenwood Food Blockade,".

Movement, economic reprisal such as the Greenwood Food Blockade were weaponized as tools to force political or social change.

Economic Reprisal in Belzoni

The standard way of thinking about the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement is voting, marches, and violence, and the impact of economic reprisals on the movement is often undervalued. Economic reprisals were common tactics used to halt or progress the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. For example, in 1964 SNCC workers began organizing in Humphreys County, a county in the Mississippi Delta region that was infamous for its discrimination.[56] The local White authorities feared that the newly arrived activists who they referred to as "Freedom Riders" would encourage the local Black community to begin registering to vote.[57] To prevent SNCC members from gaining traction in the community, the local WWC utilized economic reprisals to stop locals from interacting with SNCC workers.

The threat of losing employment, food, income, and housing was enough to prevent most Black families in Humphreys county from lodging, feeding, or talking to any SNCC workers. However, there was a family in Belzoni, Mississippi who was known for lodging and feeding any activists who came through the city. The Hazelwood family disregarded the warning from the WCC, and they were financially reprimanded

[56] In fact, the county was named after Mississippi's first governor during the Reconstruction period, Benjamin Humphreys. Humphreys served as a Brigadier general in the confederate army which initially prevented him from taking any public, but he unlawfully inaugurated himself and served as illegally as governor for ten days until President Johnson begrudgingly pardoned him. Humphreys would serve for one term before he was forced out of office during his second term for his anti-Black policies and role in disenfranchising African Americans. Many Jim Crow policies that Humphreys put into place continued to plague African Americans for the next century. Humphreys is infamously quoted for stance on emancipation, "The Negro is free, whether we like it or not; we must realize that fact now and forever. To be free, however, does not make him a citizen, or entitle him to political or social equality with the white race."

[57] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 153.

for it. A local farmer and head of the family, Aaron Hazelwood, was denied from securing loans to supplement his income, local grocery stores would not sell him supplies, and his neighbors were advised not to supply him anything.[58] The local white authorities prophesied that he would not receive a dime unless he stopped housing those Freedom Fighters.[59]

Despite the economic reprisal, the Hazelwood family continued to help SNCC members, and Aaron Hazelwood's son, Willie Hazelwood, who was the leader of the Humphreys county NAACP branch, invited Rudy Shields to Belzoni.[60] There were also regular occurrences of nightriders firing multiple shots into the Hazelwood's home at night, and the family received numerous threats on their lives. In addition, other neighboring farmers were also deprived from purchasing goods and receiving funds despite them not housing any SNCC workers.[61] The motivation behind this tactic is to place pressure on neighbors to convince the Hazelwoods to stop helping SNCC workers and prevent neighbors from purchasing supplies for the Hazelwood family.

These economic reprisals were highly effective in hindering progress of the movement, so as a result Humphreys county was home to less than three percent of registered Black voters despite being a majority Black county. However, Black Mississippians utilized methods to resist these tactics such as boycotts. In Belzoni, Mississippi a boycott was called in response to the economic reprisals and other demands by the local Black community such as fair wages and voter registration.[62] Rudy Shields

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[58] Dittmer, *Local People*, 342.
[59] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 161.
[60] Rudy Shields was a known activist who had a history of successful boycotts and protest in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. For more on Rudy Shields consult: Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 136-143,159-178.
[61] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 162.
[62] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 162.

instructed Black workers, who were paid under minimum wage, to demand an increased wage, and if they did not receive it, to quit. Before the boycott began, Willie Hazelwood announced the boycott to the White authorities. He stated it was avoidable if Black voter registration was permitted in Humphreys county.

However, the White political powers denied this request as an increase in Black voters could easily topple the all-White political structure because Humphreys county consisted of sixty-six percent Black majority.[63] This would result in White supremacist losing political control in Humphreys county for the first time since Reconstruction end, so of course, they refused Willie Hazelwood's demands. The boycott began. According to reports from the Sovereignty Commission, a list of business who engaged in discrimination were collected and distributed to the Afro-Belzoni community.[64] The list includes grocery stores that denied service to the Hazelwood family and other local activists.

People were instructed not to patronize these stores for any reason because of their role in economic reprisals against the movement. The local White grocery stores owners used access to food to persuade local Blacks to not help SNCC members and activists, so the boycott punished these stores by halting all their business from the Black community. Whenever a Black Mississippian was caught violating the boycott, they were attacked by "Da Spirits", a group of Black Mississippians who ensured the boycott was strictly followed by all.[65] According to Luella Hazelwood, if the word got around that

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[63] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 163.

[64] The Sovereignty Commission was an organization erected by the state of Mississippi to inform and report on racial matters during the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. This organization's goal was to halt the Mississippi Freedom Struggle and return Black Mississippians to subjugation. For more on Sovereignty Commission consult: Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

[65] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 165.

someone had shopped at a store on the list, " They [person who violated boycott] got their tail whopped."[66] Da Spirits served as a system of self-policing and accountability for the boycott in Belzoni. According to a report by the Sovereignty Commission, the boycott was eighty percent effective in Humphreys county, meaning it had massive success after only two weeks of implantation.

The fear of Black retaliation subdued White violence and physical backlash. This message echoed through the Belzoni community since the Meredith March against Fear two years prior to boycott.[67] One organization included in that march, Deacons for Defense, implied they were ready to respond with armed retaliation to any incidents if needed in Humphreys county.[68] The willingness to meet force with force meant that local Whites were reluctant to attack local Blacks for their activism. In fact, a constant reminder was plastered on a brick wall in the Greenwood community of "[E]ye for an eye… [I]f you kill one of us we'll kill one of you".[69] This served as a reminder to the Black community that if they suffered injustice at the hands of Whites it would not go unpunished. Safety in the Belzoni Black community was welcomed after decades of White terror oppressing the Black community.

The boycott was successful due to a combination of fear instilled by the "Da Spirits", dedicated Black boycotters, and fear instilled by armed activists by the Deacon of Defense. Prior to the boycott, several Black farmers and known activists were denied patronage from many stores, so this made it effortless for many families such as the

[66] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 165.
[67] For more on the March against Freedom consult: Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 145-154.
[68] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back,* 154,164.
[69] Dittmer, *Local People*, 396.

Hazelwoods to transition to boycotting. However, for those local Black who depended on White stores in Greenwood for supplies, this meant significant change for their life.

While some people decided to try to sneak and shop at boycotted stores, people such as Lorene Starks felt that it was not worth the risk. She did not want to take a chance on shopping at boycotted stores because getting caught meant being sanctioned by the Da Spirits, so she would travel sixty miles south to Jackson to pick up her grocery even if she only needed one or two items.[70] Her fear of sanction from the Da Spirits was rooted in people who tried to patronage at the boycotted businesses and were caught. There were several incidents reported by the FBI that people were threatened or beaten for violating the boycott, and not all these sanctioned were carried out by "Da Spirits". There is one report of a girl who was threatened by three other girls that if she bought something from the store she would be beaten with a strap.[71]

This communal-policing effort around the boycott made it difficult for local White authorities to halt the boycott, but attempts were still made. Mainly, limiting the movement of Rudy Shields in Humphreys county. They saw Rudy Shields as an outside race agitator who drove the local Blacks to boycott and protest, so by arresting Shields on multiple trumped-up charges such as operating a motor vehicle with no tag, marching without a permit, or obstructing the sidewalks.[72] This constant bombardment of arrest and imprisonment did result in Shields spending less time in Belzoni, Mississippi, but it did not halt the boycott or activism. Both continued for months while Shields was in prison and out of the county.

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[70] "Rudolph Arthur Shields," FBI Racial Matters, February 2, 1968, Jackson, MS, 2, FBI Files.
[71] "Rudolph Arthur Shields," 24.
[72] "Belzoni, Mississippi," Report from L.E. Cole, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, February 28, 1968, 1-112-0-30-1-1-1, MDAH, available online.

While the coordination and organizing of the boycott was spearheaded by Shields, the desire for better working conditions and wages, more equitable education and opportunities, and a medium for their voice and demands to be heard had always been in Belzoni, Mississippi. So, even with Shields efficiently being removed from the equation the boycott continued because it was driven by the community's need for economic and political change. Shields gave the community an effective tool to foster change, but he did not give the community the desire to boycott. The desire to boycott was a product of the inequality suffered by Black Mississippians at the hand of local White authorities for decades.

Role of Grocery Store Owners

Activism in Belzoni, Mississippi a decade prior to this boycott, meant death or forceful exile. In 1959 Dr. Martin Luther King addressed the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi about the importance of Black votes and organization to increase the amount of registered Black voters. King exclaimed, "We must make a determined effort to achieve the ballot. One of the most important steps that the negro can take at this hour is that short walk to the voting booth."[73] King continues and explains why this short walk was taking so long for many African Americans in Mississippi. He gave two primary reasons why less than twenty thousand African American were registered to vote in Mississippi out of a possible nine hundred thousand

[73] "Martin Luther King address at Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi," September 23, 1959, *Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Online*, Folder ID # 2-126-1-30-8-1-1 https://da.mdah.ms.gov/sovcom/result.php?image=images/png/cd05/040133.

Black Mississippians.[74] According to the United States Census Bureau, this amounts to around two percent of the total Black population in Mississippi. For comparison, approximately one hundred percent of the eligible White voters were registered to vote in 1960.[75]

The first reason that Dr. King asserted for low voter registration in Mississippi was internal resistance from Black Mississippians who had the means and access to register but opted not to for personal reasons such as laziness or faith in the power of the vote.[76] These people could benefit from addresses or sermons about the impact and importance of the Black vote, and Dr. King encouraged the ministers to spread how impactful the vote was through their ministries. The address was aimed to increase registration of Black Mississippians who needed some extra motivation to get to the polls, and simultaneously, spread awareness of the impact from voting.

However, King's analysis that Black Mississippians only needed motivation or faith in the ballot minimizes the long, violent oppression of voter efforts in Mississippi. Considering Mississippi counties such as Humphreys, where no Black Mississippian has been on the voter registration since the Reconstruction era despite having a Black majority for eighty years. It seems absurd to assume that every eligible Black voter between 1876-1950s simply lacked the will or desire to register to vote. Furthermore, the economic reprisals of registering to vote in Mississippi could result in entire families being punished for activism. Considering that the majority of Black Mississippians

[74] Mark Lowry, "Population and Race in Mississippi,1940-1960," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, no. 3 (1971): 576-588.
[75] "The Struggle for Voting Rights in Mississippi ~ the Early Years," *Civil Rights Movement Archive*, Accessed April 2, 2021, https://www.crmvet.org/.
[76]"Martin Luther King address at Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi," 7.

worked as farmers or sharecroppers, they often depended on local Whites for resources such as supplies, land, or credit during the off seasons. Therefore, Black Mississippians were especially susceptible to economic reprisals from Whites angered by their activism.

The second reason that Dr. King's address identified for the low voter registration in Mississippi was the external resistance experienced by potential Black voters. External resistance for voting came in many forms: literacy test, poll tax, threats, zoning laws, violence, and deceit. The most visible form of resistance is the White violence and backlash from local White authorities. When Black Mississippians attempted to help register Black voters, they faced all sorts of resistances from economic incentives to violence. In his address King described two members of the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi, Gus Courts and George Lee, who faced for their efforts in registering people to vote in Belzoni, Mississippi in the early 1950s. King described these actions as, "The story of Gus Courts and the Reverend George Lee here in Mississippi is a familiar one, and the violence inflicted upon these men constitutes one of the most shameful stories of American history."[77]

Today, their story is not as familiar as it once was in King's time, but their story along with Booker Wright's story illustrates how important Black grocery store owners were during the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. This section will begin with a brief biographical sketch of Reverend George Lee's impact and involvement in the movement. Next, Gus Courts will be introduced as his activism crosses path with Lee in Belzoni, Mississippi. The section discusses their triumphs in the movement and the resistance that they faced as activists in Belzoni. Finally, the section concludes with experiences of

[77]"Martin Luther King address at Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi," 8-9.

Booker Wright, another Black Delta grocery store owner who played a vital role in the movement. This section takes a critical view of how the occupation of a grocery store owner empowered them to impact the movement. Furthermore, this section explores the space of grocery stores as a site of contestation for the movement.

Courts and Lee were both members of the NAACP (Courts was the President of the Belzoni branch), grocery store owners, and both were shot for their role in a voter registration drive in Belzoni.[78] Reverend George Lee was a preacher who moved to Belzoni, Mississippi to begin his ministry in the 1930s. He also possessed a high business acumen; he started several businesses while in Belzoni including a grocery store and a printing press company. His occupations made him a powerful and influential member of the Black Belzoni community, and it allowed him to be more active in his activism without fear of losing financial support from White community. Reverend Lee's businesses served the Black community. Therefore, he was not dependent on the White community to maintain his business, so he was not susceptible to economic reprisal from the White community. This gave him the drive to become an advocate for the Black community in Belzoni.

George Lee served as the vice president of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), a black organization that advocated for self-help, business, and civil rights in Mississippi.[79] This organization was founded by one of the most notable African Americans entrepreneurs of the civil rights era, Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard. Howard established RCNL in Mississippi after he moved to the all-Black

[78] "Lee, Rev. George and Courts, Gus," *Mississippi Civil Rights* Project, Accessed April 2, 2021, https://mscivilrightsproject.org/humphreys/person-humphreys/rev-george-lee-and-gus-courts/.
[79] "Lee, Rev. George and Courts, Gus,".

Mississippian town, Mound Bayou, and became the chief surgeon at the hospital of Knights and Daughters of Tabor. He erected several businesses in the area before starting the organization including: a life insurance company, zoo, park equipped with Mississippi's first Black public swimming pool, hospital, construction company, and farm with livestock and cotton.

The organization uplifted the Black community through communal protest and group displays of activism. For example, the RCNL protested gas stations that operated on anti-Black discrimination policies that prevented Black customer from access to the entire facility such as bathroom and water foundations. However, these businesses still profited from Black customers buying gas and other items from the gas station, so with the intention of forcing gas stations to provide equitable service for Black consumers the RCNL began a campaign to boycott the gas stations.

Despite this being their first campaign, it was widely successful. The organization had bumper stickers printed with the slogan, "Don't Buy Gas Where You Can't Use the Restroom.", and these stickers were distributed to automobile drivers all over the state of Mississippi.[80] These stickers served as a reminder to Black consumers not to spend their money at gas stations who discriminated against them, and a reminder to gas station owners that there were consequences for anti-Black policies. Through the power of group economics, this protest was successful in establishing equality for Black consumers.

[80] "RCNL Holds First Mass Meeting Mississippi Delta," *SNCC Digital Gateway*, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, Accessed April 2, 2021, https://snccdigital.org/events/rcnl-holds-first-mass-meeting-mississippi-delta/.

Image 4 Don't Buy Gas Where You Can't Use the Restroom Bumper Sticker Campaign, 1952
Source: Ernest Withers, https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Don-t-Buy-Gas-Where-You-Can-t-Use-the-Re/DCDC07864FEFE8C5

As the vice president of RCNL, George Lee helped to spearhead this campaign and made it an early success in the early Mississippi civil rights movement. He also helped to create other programs that resulted in unprecedented success that had not been since the Reconstruction era. Such as a campaign against police brutality that resulted in a public apology and a promise to enforce equal protection for Black motorists in Mississippi.[81] This apology came from the head of highway patrol, and it was not a common occurrence for White authority to issue public apologies for anti-Black discrimination. During this time, few Blacks held political power in the form of voter registration or public offices, so White authorities had little fear of reprimand for their violence against Blacks. However, despite having little to no power through the ballot,

[81]"Lee, Rev. George and Courts, Gus,".

Blacks Mississippians found other effective ways to demand their political and social freedom.

For example, the city where Lee lived and erected his businesses, Belzoni, Mississippi, was infamous for its violent political suppression. In fact, the press named the town "Bloody Belzoni" for a series of economic reprisals and violent attacks to force Black voters to withdraw their names from the registered voter list.[82] According to an article in the Pittsburgh Courier, local Citizens Councils passed around the names of registered Black voters to prevent those registered from getting loans, credit, or jobs. One name on this "black list" was Gus Courts, a local grocery and president of the NAACP branch in Belzoni. In addition to Whites forcing him out of his business for registering to vote, they also shot him in his own grocery store for refusing to take his name off the list (see Image 5).

Image 5 Fight in front of a Mississippi store,1966
"A fight breaking out one night in front of a store." Source: *Bob Fitch Photography Archive*, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/fitch/catalog/mp620gf7441.

[82] "'Bloody Belzoni'...60 Years Later, Murder Still Bedevils Mississippi Delta Town," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18, 2015, https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2015/05/18/bloody-belzoni-60-years-later-murder-still-bedevils-mississippi-delta-town/.

These attacks in Belzoni were representative of the political attitude of White authorities in the greater Humphreys county. Despite the county boasting a sixty-five percent Black majority, there were no Blacks holding political office and prior to George Lee registering, there had not been a single Black registered voter since Reconstruction. Meaning this county consisted of majority Black sharecroppers and farmers went nearly eighty years without having a single Black registered voter. When the early Mississippi Civil Rights movement began, Whites did not welcome the increase in Black voter registration, especially in Humphreys County.

When Courts and Lee co-founded the first NAACP branch in Belzoni in 1953, they intended to register as many Black voters as possible. However, they had early struggles when attempting to register themselves or any other African American. The two-faced voter intimidation in the form of threats, harassment, economic reprisals, and violence. When they were able to physically enter the local circuit court, they faced more registration resistance in the form of poll taxes with accumulated back taxes and literacy tests.

After years of fighting for the right to register through state, local, and federal level courts, George Lee and Gus Courts sued the local sheriff and known segregationist, Ike Shelton, for voter intimidation and to avoid federal prosecution they were allowed to register.[83] George Lee became the first African American to register in Humphreys county since the Reconstruction era nearly eight decades, and Gus Courts registered

[83] "NAACP Official 'Shot Down' in His Grocery: In Belzoni, Mississippi," *Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA), December 3, 1955.

shortly after George Lee.[84] Also, they helped register an additional ninety-two new Black voters in Humphreys county. However, their political activism brought about an influx in White violence toward African Americans in Belzoni. The registered voters including Gus Courts and George Lee were the primary targets of this White Backlash, but any African Americans in the area could be attacked during this time as racial tension reached new heights.

A major part of this White Backlash in 1955 was the economic reprisals. White authorities continued to use this tool for decades to suppress Black voters. Gus Courts and George Lee both operated Black grocery stores, and both of their businesses suffered a similar demise for their involvement in the early Civil Right Movement. Whites placed both men's names on a list and circulated it around to local banks, creditors, lenders, and suppliers in the Mississippi Delta to ensure that the men did not have access to any funds to purchase material needed to run their businesses. Even if Courts and Lee acquired funds from elsewhere, Whites instructed wholesale suppliers not to do business with the men and threatened donors, which meant the men could not secure goods even when they received donations from organizations or people who believed in their cause.[85]

The local Citizen Council advised Courts that if he took his name off the register and revealed the names of the other members of the NAACP chapter, he could return to normal business operations, but he hunkered down and refused to give into the external pressure. Despite pressure from local suppliers, Courts refused to shut down his grocery

[84] Chris Asch, "George Washington Lee (Minister and Activist)," Mississippi Encyclopedia, *Center for Study of Southern Culture*, July 11, 2017, https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/george-washington-lee-minister-activist/.
[85] William Hustwit, "Gus Courts," Mississippi Encyclopedia, Center for Study of Southern Culture, July 10, 2017, https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/gus-courts/.

store; he began to drive hours south to Jackson, Mississippi, or hours north to Memphis, Tennessee to find suppliers who would sell to him.[86] The local Citizen Council made even these trips next to impossible by forcing gas station owners to not sell him fuel for these trips. In addition, the Citizen Council attempted to further cripple his businesses by warning Black customers not to purchase from Courts's grocery store, or they too would suffer the consequences at the hand of the council. This tactic caused Courts's sales to rapidly decline, and as a final straw his landlord tripled his rent effectively exiling Courts from operating his business in Belzoni, Mississippi.[87]

George Lee suffered similar economic assaults with his businesses that placed immense pressure on him to close his businesses in Belzoni. However, before Whites forcibly banished George Lee from Humphreys County, a group of domestic terrorists murdered Reverend George Lee on May 7, 1955, to maintain White supremacy and continue to disempower the Black voters.[88] The evidence at the crime scene suggested that it began as a drive-by shooting when a rifle shot blew out Lee's right tire causing his car to come to a stop.

Afterwards, the perpetrators approached the back of his car and fired several lethal rounds at point-blank range ripping off parts of George Lee's face. Initial reports from the sheriff, Ike Shelton, and press stated that George Lee had been severely injured in a car crash, but he staggered away from the scene alive and later died in route to the Humphreys County Memorial Hospital.[89] Despite skepticism from members of the NAACP and RCNL, Sheriff Shelton insisted that Lee had died in a car crash, and there

[86] Chris Asch, "George Washington Lee (Minister and Activist),".
[87] "Lee, Rev. George and Courts, Gus,".
[88] "Lee, Rev. George and Courts, Gus,".
[89] "Lee, Rev. George and Courts, Gus,".

was no need for an autopsy to be performed. When Medgar Evers, the NAACP field agency at the time, came in town to investigate Lee's death, Shelton told him that the lead fillings found in the tissue of Lee's jaw were consistent with dental fillings not a gunshot wound.[90] Evers, even more skeptical about Lee's death, requested two outside Black physicians perform an autopsy that revealed Evers's suspicions.[91]

Lee had been murdered at point-blank range; the shooters fired two to three shots into his cab with one connecting with Lee's lower left side of his face. The NAACP rallied behind the murder of George Lee, and thousands of people attended his funeral and were inspired by the work he did. Black press from all over the county flooded in to pay homage and spread his legacy nationwide. His widow Rosebud Lee decided to hold an open casket funeral despite her husband's face being disfigured, and many views Lee's murder as one of the first civil rights activist to be murder during the Civil Rights movement. The murder of Emmett Till in a neighboring county, Sunflower, would occur three months later, so it is possible that Rosebud Lee's decision to hold an open casket influenced Mamie Till's decision to do the same for Emmett Till (see Image 6).[92]

[90] For more on Medgar Evers consult: Michael Wiliams, "Medgar Wiley Evers," Mississippi Encyclopedia, *Center for Study of Southern* Culture, November 12, 2016, https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/medgar-wiley-evers/.
[91] William Hustwit, "Gus Courts,".
[92] See "Is Mississippi Hushing Up A Lynching? Rev. George Lee Murdered in Belzoni," *Jet*, May 26, 1955.

Image 6 Rev. George W. Lee in casket, May 1955
Source: @RevGeorgeWLee, March 4, 2014 Tweet,
https://twitter.com/RevGeorgeWLee/status/440953955024003072?s=20

The White Citizen Council would not have to wait long for the Black Belzoni community to respond the murder of George Lee. Following George Lee's funeral, Gus Courts continued to drive the voter registration movement in Belzoni. He registered twenty-two African Americans the following week. However, the fear of death coupled with intimidation and economic boycotts plotted by the local White Citizen Council forced many registered Black voters to remove their name from the registration. Six months after Lee's funeral, virtually every person that Courts and Lee helped register had removed their name from the voter registration; only two names remained on the ballot by November 1955. One of these names was Gus Courts who despite the constant intimidation and economic pressure refused to remove his name from the list of registered voters, so on November 25, 1955 a group of White men approached Courts in his grocery store and shot up his store. This resulted in Courts being rushed to a hospital in Mound Bayou where we recovered successfully, but effectively these acts of domestic

terrorism put an end to voter activism in Belzoni county for several decades (see Image 7).[93]

Image 7 Gus Courts of Belzoni, Mississippi
"NAACP member Gus Courts of Belzoni, Mississippi lying in hospital in Mound Bayou in critical condition after being shot, November 26, 1955." Source: Photographer unknown, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. LC-USF33- 030538-M2

[93] William Hustwit, "Gus Courts,".

Booker's Place

In 1966 Booker Wright, a Black grocery store owner, waiter, and civil rights icon, appeared as the only Black person on an NBC special, Mississippi: A Self Portrait. He recounted his typical day as the only Black waiter in Lusco's, a restaurant that only served Whites in Greenwood, Mississippi.[94] During his interview, Wright described the humiliating social etiquette required to maintain his job, while also exposing the level of performance that required to appease customers. Even though Booker owns and runs his own grocery store in the Black district of town, Booker's place, he still needs to income from Lusco's to compensate for the earnings from the grocery store.[95]

Wright would work at his grocery store by the day and would come to wait tables at the restaurant by night to provide for his family.[96] This routine carried on for twenty-five years until the release of the documentary that angered many Southern Whites. Lusco's fired Wright, Whites firebombed his business, and he suffered police brutality at the hands of Greenwood police. Ultimately, he was murdered in 1973. Booker Wright remains a civil rights icon for addressing the social inequalities that existed in Mississippi on a public platform, and he received White backlash for it. Anytime Black Mississippians fought against their subjugation of White supremacy they were punished for it. Punishment is often viewed through the lens of violence, but there is another form of punishment that was just as powerful, economic reprisal.

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[94] *Mississippi: A Self Portrait*, directed by Frank McGee (1966; New York City, NY: *NBC News*), documentary.
[95] Yvette Johnson, *The Song and the Silence: A Story about Family, Race, and what was Revealed in a Small Town in the Mississippi Delta while Searching for Booker Wright*, (London: Atria Books, 2017).
[96] *Mississippi: A Self Portrait*, Frank McGee.

Economic reprisals are particularly effective against Black entrepreneurs, and they also served as a tool for Blacks to fight for their civil rights. Before Booker Wright faced domestic terrorism, he was the victim of economic deprivation because his income was distributed. Lusco's restaurant fired Wright, and domestic terrorists destroyed his business, Booker's Place.[97] These discriminative crimes guaranteed that Mr. Wright would not be able to financially provide for his family or any other dependents. This had a ripple effect through the community because his income impacted so many people in his community. In the documentary, he names a couple of areas that his income contributed to including food for his family and education expenses for his children, but there are other areas that would be impacted by his livelihood being stripped away from him.[98]

The greater Afro-Greenwood community suffered a great loss when their grocery store was fire-bombed. For consumers in town this meant jeopardizing their convenience, dignity, time, and scarce resources to secure the same goods. Grocery stores were often miles apart which could result in patrons of Booker's Place having to travel hours on foot to reach the next closest grocery store. Also, Booker's Place had a reputation for being a prestigious grocery store where higher class African Americans would shop, so other Black grocery stores in Greenwood did not have the same social acclaim as Booker's Place. The biggest loss of the attack on Booker's Place was the loss of a reliable source of grocery and supplies.

[97] Johnson, *The Song and the Silence*, 58.
[98] *Mississippi: A Self Portrait,* Frank McGee.

Conclusion

This chapter asserted the historical role of food, grocery stores, and Black grocery store owners in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. The chapter focused on activism and economic reprisals in two Delta cities, Greenwood and Belzoni. Food played a pivotal role in the movement. The WWC utilized it as a weapon to stall the movement, and SNCC, and other Black organizations, utilized it as a political tool to unite and inspire voter activism in Mississippi.[99] Grocery stores were sites of contentment, and often targeted by local terrorists for arson or vandalism. Likewise, Black grocery store owners experienced economic repression, exile, physical violence, and death for their pivotal role in the movement. It is important to understand the historical role of food and grocery store owners in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle movement, to fully understand the impact that Fortner Grocery had on an all-Black rural community in Bolton, Mississippi.

[99] Smith, "The Greenwood Food Blockade,".

CHAPTER 4 "FORTNER GROCERY HAD IT GOING ON!": FORTNER GROCERY AND THE LIVE OAK COMMUNITY

The plastic squeaked as I relaxed and sunk into Mrs. Flobell's beige floral couch. I exhaled a sigh of relief, as we approached the portion of the interview where I could sit back and listen. Mrs. Flobell must have realized it as well. Immediately, she hollered to the backroom to ask her grandchild to turn down the volume on her TV, and then she leaned forward until she was at the edge of the couch. Almost on cue, the door squeaked, and Mrs. Flobell said, "Here comes some more help!"[100] Her two daughters, Gail and Anita, walked in and greeted me. They had come to their mother's house to check on their bed-ridden father, Clyde Watson, but they were quickly enthralled after hearing I wanted to learn about the store. After they overcame their initial shock that I knew nothing about the store, Anita sat down on the couch beside her mother and Gail leaned on the arm of the couch next to her sister.

Anita seemed especially eager to share experience about working in the store. She jumped right in, "We [Anita and Gail] would get paid ten to fifteen cents, that was a lot of money back in those days."[101] As she recounted her memories of Fortner Grocery, I was amazed and shocked. No one told me that the store employed other people in the community. I had only heard of my family members working in the store, so I thought

[100] Watson Interview.
[101] Watson Interview.

my family operated it completely. Anita continued, "Bob Fortner always had somebody doing something, and he would compensate them well." For me, this moment affirmed my decision to research the store as the correct choice. Fortner Grocery enriched the community through employment, entertainment, and leisure experiences. Within the first five minutes of my interview, the grocery store had transformed from a dilapidated slab in Bolton, Mississippi into a gas station, restaurant, juke joint, casino, church reception hall, and above all, the heart of the Live Oak Community.

This chapter is about the impact that Fortner Grocery had on the Live Oak Community. First, it gives a brief background of Fortner Grocery, including a history of Bolton, Mississippi and biographical sketches of the owners of the store. Next, it will highlight how the store and community shaped one another including: procurement, production, consumption, and employment. Furthermore, this section highlights the unique struggles and challenges of operating a Black Business during the Jim Crow era. Next, the chapter will highlight the various roles that Fortner Grocery occupied in the community including food, entertainment, and leisure. The goal of this chapter is to assert why the Live Oak community cherished Fortner Grocery and explain why Black-owned stores such as Fortner Grocery served as the cornerstones of the Black community.

Fortner Groceries was a country grocery store located in the heart of the Live Oak community. Live Oak was a small community consisting of Black farmers and sharecroppers in Bolton, Mississippi.[102] The name derives from a central road that runs

[102] One of Live Oak's most famous members is Bennie Thompson, a politician currently serving as the U.S. Representative for Mississippi. Thompson has held this position for nearly thirty years, and before becoming a U.S. Representative, he served as the mayor of Bolton, Mississippi. For more on Bennie Thompson consult: Bennie Thompson and Chester Morgan, "Oral History with Bennie Thompson." Oral History with Bennie Thompson. Hattiesburg, 1974.

through the community. The road is effectively a tunnel because of a thick brush of oak trees that cover each side of the road and form a canopy above the road, giving the community a sense of isolation from the outside world. On the opposite side of the tunnel, was an all-White business area effectively known as the "Town of Bolton".

Outside of the town of Bolton, Bolton's geography served primarily as farming land for crops.[103] Because Bolton functioned as an agricultural community for much of its history, no scholars have focused on the town's boycotts, marches, and voter activism in comparison to Jackson or Vicksburg. However, Bolton still has a rich, unsung history of leisure and entertainment that benefited the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement.

Fortner Grocery played a crucial role in providing that for Black Mississippians. "[Store] owners considered it their responsibility to bring the comfort, choice, and contact with change to people in rural, isolated areas."[104] Ultimately, store owners decided what goods would be available to the community. The owner of Fortner's Grocery, Annie Louise Fortner, and the manager, Robert "Bob" Fortner, held this responsibility for the Live Oak community.

Bob and Annie Louise Fortner

Robert "Bob" Fortner was born August 15,1914 in Cohay, Mississippi. Bob worked as a farmer and sharecropper for most of his early life until he married his second wife, Annie Louise Mellon, and began to manage the store. He handled logistics for

[103] Majority of the farming land in Bolton has been owned by one landowner, Gaddis and McLaurin farms inc. This organization, originally a massive plantation, has been the biggest employer of the Black Bolton community since emancipation. The organization also owns a feed and supply store that opened back in 1871 according to their Facebook page. The store began as a plantation store for the greater Bolton area, but for branding purposes decided to remove plantation from their name over the years.
[104] Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty & Culture, 1830-1998*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), *134.*

Fortner Grocery. Gayle Watson details the location of his securement of goods: "He was from Louisiana, and he would often make trips to Louisiana to pick up goods."[105] According to Ownby, New Orleans, Louisiana was a trade city that store owners visited to procure goods. Ownby stated, "Shopping in cities like New Orleans connected wealthy Mississippians to a large world of possible imports. Choices of goods were extraordinary in a city where ships came, as early as the 1840s… The goods wealthy men and women identified as special and exciting almost always came from cities [Like New Orleans]."[106] Gayle Watson recalled, "That Bob would come back with all sorts of things, even turtle sometimes."[107] In addition to exotic goods, Bob Fortner would also procure essentials needed to operate Fortner Grocery.

Annie Louise Mellon was born December 25, 1909 as ninth and final child of William Mellon and Ollie Cromwell.[108] William and Ollie were two of the largest landholders in Bolton, Mississippi. Her father owned hundreds of acres of farmland that he worked and paid other farmers to work the land. When her parents passed, she received a significant amount of land and real estate properties, and there is a possibility that one of these properties was the building where Fortner Grocery would eventually operate.[109] Annie Louise Fortner worked outside of the public eye for Fortner Grocery; she handled the ledger, record keeping, and legal documentation for the store.

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[105] Watson Interview.
[106] Ownby, *American Dreams*, 38-39.
[107] Watson Interview.
[108] 1910 United States Census, Beat 2, Hinds, Mississippi, digital image s.v. "Annie Louise Mellon," Ancestry.com.
[109] There is some controversy around her father, William Mellon, belonging to the famous Mellon. There is census evidence that suggests that this claim could be true as there is a group of Mellons who migrated from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Raymond, Mississippi in the mid-1850s. However, I was not able to prove that this claim was true or false, so additional research will be required in the future. If this claim was true, it would explain how William Mellon was able to accumulate so much land, property, and business acumen.

Although Fortner Grocery was strongly associated with her second husband, Bob Fortner, she owned the store, and it was built on her land. In addition to owning and operating real estate in Bolton and Jackson, Mississippi she also taught school in Bolton and worked as a midwife.[110] When I went to the Hinds County Chancery Court in search of deed records, my property search revealed a series of right-of-way records. Annie Louise Mellon and her father William Mellon signed these records. I also came across a ton of small sales where Annie Louise would sell a small portion of land for ten dollars.[111] Between facilitating childbirth, being the landlord of numerous real estate properties, and teaching most Afro-Bolton residents she was well known and respected around the community. Her demeanor and presence demanded respect from everyone who met her.

[110] For more on the role and lives of midwives in Mississippi consult: Jenny M. Luke, *Delivered by Midwives: African American Midwifery in the Twentieth-Century South,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

[111] Further research is needed to search land deeds for other records. My initial research did not come across any real land holding; I only found rights of way instrument deeds and warranty deeds: "Right of Way Instrument," s.v. "Annie Louise Mellon" Book 160, page 110, February 29, 1956, Hinds County Chancery Court, Bolton, Mississippi; "Warranty Deed," s.v. "Annie Louise Mellon" Book 252, page 422, August 26,1975, Hinds County Chancery Court, Bolton, Mississippi.

Image 8 Annie Louise Fortner Graduation Photo
Source: Author's Personal Collection

Whenever anyone spoke to me about my great-grandmother, they always addressed her as Mrs. Annie Louise Fortner even in casual conversations. I imagine that this made her a very formidable landlord and business owner. She had a reputation around the community for being very meticulous about finances. Her granddaughter, Yvette Butler, remembers riding with Mrs. Annie Louise Fortner to pick up rent from her various properties, including cabins, homes, and apartments. Yvette noted that every time a tenant did not have money for rent that Mrs. Fortner would document it in a little black book that she always carried with her on rent days.

Her decision to keep a running log of credits from her tenants highlights her financially savviness and attention to details. However, her tenants were not the only debtors who appeared in her little black book. My mother, Jonice Burns, recalls that when Mrs. Fortner was behind the counter at Fortner Grocery, she would often consult her little book to jot down amounts credited to customers. My mother says that she would credit anyone who came to the store, but she would never credit a customer who had a credit due with no exceptions. As a Black business owner during the Jim Crow era, Mrs. Fortner had to protect her bottom line, but she also felt a sense of responsibility to rectify the exploitation from White owned stores such as Plantation Stores.

Plantation Stores

This section will examine Black Mississippians' experiences with plantation stores and assert the role that racist stereotypes of Black consumerism played in the economic repression of Black Mississippians. Black Mississippians endured discriminatory service from businesses because of racist stereotypes that asserted Black consumers were wasteful, indulgent, and impulsive when given autonomy over their finances. Many plantation store owners capitalized off these stereotypes. The racist stereotypes benefited owners in two ways. Firstly, they aided in Whites maintaining control over Black life through finances. Secondly, they reinforced racist ideas about Black inferiority and White Supremacy. Black consumer stereotypes encouraged economic repression of Black Mississippians by plantation store owners.

Racist consumer stereotypes aided in plantation store owners maintaining control over Black Mississippians. Stereotypes implied that Black Mississippians required an

outside entity to manage their finances due to a lack of intelligence. This encouraged patriarchal systems of control such as plantation stores that exploited and undermined Black consumerism. White landlords who ran plantation stores, which served as general stores, used various methods to force sharecropping tenants to shop there. In Mississippi, the owners of the plantation stores, wealthy landowners, asserted it was advantageous for their tenants to exclusively shop at their plantation store.

In fact, in 1906 a wealthy landowner, Leroy Percy said, "I don't think it's a good idea to let Aaron Fuller [a Black sharecropper] get his supplies anywhere except at the [plantation] store."[112] Percy's motivation behind the exclusivity of his store is not driven by profit. Percy expounded, "The fact of it is, it will lessen your control over him, and it puts notions in the heads of the other negroes."[113] Plantation stores owners utilized their stores to reinforce White supremacy and Black inferiority. Percy advised other owners to maintain control over their sharecroppers by limiting their consumerism to only one store. Forcing Black sharecroppers to make all their purchases from one store limited their ability to negotiate and their mobility. Sharecroppers often challenged this oppressive system of control and found ways to fight against plantation store policies.

Whites often used violence against sharecroppers, who constituted most of the Black Mississippian population, at plantation stores to enforce the power dynamic between Whites and Blacks. When a dispute arose between a Black sharecropper and a White clerk, a violent outburst ensued to remind the African American of his societal

[112] Leroy Percy to J.B. Ray, 28 December 1906, *Percy Family Papers*, ser. 1 box 1, folder 14 MDAH, Greenville, Mississippi.
[113]Percy to Ray, *Percy Family Papers*.

place, beneath the White clerk.[114] C.C. Barbour recalls an incident that occurred while he was working as a clerk in a plantation store in Mississippi. He had a dispute with an African American over the amount of debt he owed. After the man refused to pay, Barbour swung at him with brass knuckles and later pulled out his pistol to end the dispute. Barbour told a coworker, "I have got to finish him now or else we will have trouble all fall when settling with the negroes."[115]

This account highlights the inhumane services that Black Mississippians were subjected and displays an example of a sharecropper challenging the system of oppression by speaking out against the injustice that he suffered. It also highlights the violence required to maintain control over sharecroppers. Barbour's use of deadly force to preemptively deter other sharecroppers from challenging his absolute authority shows the level of violence that plantation stores were willing to go to uphold White supremacy. This account also supports the idea that plantation stores did not prioritize profit and business sensibility, instead they focus on power relations and racial dynamics.[116] Physically assaulting your patrons or threatening to kill them over a business transaction are actions that would decrease profits.

Secondly, racist stereotypes created a fictitious, inferior Black consumer that White Mississippians referenced to maintain a higher moral compass. Therefore, White Mississippians maintained a facade of racial superiority as the only responsible consumer. For example, "In their desire to see themselves as responsible parts of independent rural households, many white men and women identified consumption as a

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[114] C.C. Barbour, *Autobiography of C.C. Barbour, To Which Some Reminiscences Are Added* (Gulf Breeze, Florida: Ralph E. Barbour, 1993), 49.
[115] Barbour, *Autobiography of C.C. Barbour*, 50
[116] Ownby, *American Dreams*, 68.

weakness that threatened both their own image of themselves and served to identify the vices they saw as part of being black."[117] Although many White Mississippians viewed consumption in a negative light, Black Mississippians saw it as a symbol of freedom, autonomy, and citizenship.

Black consumer efforts were diminished as wasteful purchases by racist consumer stereotypes, but for Black Mississippians, these purchases gave them control over their life.[118] Following emancipation, Blacks fought to gain control over their wages and finances.[119] Black Mississippians wanted the ability to possess their own wages and decide how to spend or save their money. Considering that the bulk of Black Mississippians worked as sharecroppers on leased farmland and lived on leased property of wealthy landowner, consumerism offered a welcoming opportunity to feel autonomy. However, the twentieth century marked the beginning of a mindset shift for Black Mississippians. A paradigm shift occurred for employment, a change from submissive servants and overbearing overseers to Black consumers and Black producers.[120]

Struggle of Black Business owners

My mother reenacted an event where someone tried to buy groceries, but she owed an existing credit, "Now Margie you know that I can't let you buy anything else until you pay off what you owe."[121] As my mother reenacted this memory, she mimicked

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[117]Ownby, *American Dreams*, 5.
[118] Shennette Garrett-Scott, *Banking on Freedom: Black Women in U.S. Finance before the New Deal,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 21-22.
[119]Garrett-Scott, *Banking on Freedom, 21.*
[120] For more on how this shift in mindset happened, consult: Juliet E. K. *Walker, The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship,* (London: New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA,) 1998, 182-223.
[121]Janice Burns interview by Keon, Burns. November 09, 2019.

Mrs. Fortner's voice which was exceptionally soft and gentle without an ounce of sternness or aggression. Her voice and delivery sounded like she was reminding one of her 5th grade students to stay in a single-file line. The delivery was graceful, but there was an assumption made that the patron or student should know the rules by now. Whenever customers tried to bargain with Mrs. Fortner, the result was always the same; she would not bulge with no exceptions for anyone who owed credit.

Both my mother and Yvette Butler, remember asking their grandmother for a piece of candy priced for one cent in the store. They both recalled her saying, "No baby. If I gave it to you then you would eat up all my profit."[122] Although Annie Louise Fortner did not allow her grandchildren to purchase goods without money, she did extend this privilege to her patrons by allowing them to purchase goods on credit.

Because of Bolton being primarily an agricultural community, many local consumers did not have cash on hand year-round. Many general store owners did not accommodate farming customers because it limited the owners' ability to purchase new goods. "Agricultural people typically did business by making purchases on credit and paying at the end of the crop year, and store owners believed this stifled their desire and ability to buy new goods."[123] Furthermore, many stores in Mississippi selectively decided which customers were honest enough for a sale on credit, and Black Mississippians were disproportionately considered irresponsible and unworthy by most White Mississippians. Therefore, Black Mississippians were often denied the privilege of buying goods on credit at White-owned stores.

[122] Janice Burns interview by Keon, Burns. November 09, 2019.
[123] Ownby, *American Dreams, 124.*

Sometimes Black Mississippians were denied the privilege of buying goods even when they had cash in hand. Many White store owners used their establishment to reprimand Black Mississippians for actions that threaten their White Supremacy way of life. Actions such as voting, registering to vote, or assisting in the facilitation of civil rights for Black Mississippians resulted in economic reprisal of individuals and their families. For example, *We Will Shoot Back* highlights the terrorist violence and financial deprivation directed at Willie Hazelwood and his family for housing civil rights activists during the Freedom Summer in Humphreys County.[124]

Fortner Grocery held a unique position in the community by enabling Black Mississippi consumers to acquire goods without cash. Flobell Watson recalled Annie Louise Fortner's credit policy, "She would credit people all the time; she would credit everyone."[125] This credit policy allowed the Live Oak community to receive fair treatment as consumers, and her willingness to credit everyone gave them the freedom to procure food year-round.

Now, when my mother reflected on these events, she views it as her grandmother being very stingy with finances and penny pinching. However, often penny pinching determined the difference between a business owner operating or filing for bankruptcy. Now, compounding this with unique hardship with operating a Black Business in a Jim Crow South. Black Businesses are historically undercapitalized, overtaxed, and receive loans at exponentially higher interest rates with shorter return periods than their white

[124] Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*, 140-150.
[125] Watson Interview.

counterparts. This means that Black businesses often do not have the necessary amount of capital to operate which forces owners to seek outside funding that they disproportionately were denied funding. Those Black business owners who did receive loans faced higher cost to borrow funds and had less time to pay back the principal and higher interest rates.

Also, Black business owners during the Jim Crow era were susceptible to policies, laws, and practices that debilitated Black citizens' income. This rhetoric of discrimination is often referenced as a Black tax or the additional financial cost of living black in America in comparison to White counterpart. This tax is omnipresent and pervasive for every metric and determinant of wealth in America. From housing to employment to insurance, studies and data highlight that when all other factors are identical Blacks pay more for the same products and services while being paid less for the same products or services rendered. These practices and policies functioned as a thorn in the hand of Black citizens depriving them from the same opportunities as their White counterpart.

The politics and practices that affected Black citizens and consumers also impacted Black producers, Black manufacturers, and Black entrepreneurs.[126] In *Beauty Shop Politics,* Gill asserts that Business operations are often more complex than the terms used to describe them.[127] Terms such as producer and consumer or manufacturer, worker, and entrepreneur can describe the same person simultaneously therefore the line can often be blurred. As a result of this, policies aimed at helping businessmen and

[126] Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010)
[127] Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 12.

businesswomen had a ripple effect on the community since this businessperson could also be a consumer, worker, producer, and/or manufacturer. However, when policies dismantle the power of the Black consumer. Again, the ripple effect would lead to Black business being dismantled. This effect is twofold.

Firstly, Black consumers had less income which meant they had less purchasing power to buy goods and pay back their debts. This disproportionately affected Black businesses such as Fortner Grocery whose primary customer base was Black consumers. Therefore, Fortner Grocery patrons had less money to spend and pay off their store credit. This is evidenced by the amount of times that my mother recalls her grandparents allowing customers to purchase groceries on store credit. It is further highlighted by the number of customers who asked for their store credit to be extended because they need groceries but could not afford to pay their previous debt due.

Secondly, the actual owners of these businesses are also consumers who would be affected by discriminatory practices and policies. So, in addition to Black businesses owners comparatively having less income to invest into their businesses, they also were charged higher prices for similar goods and services. Consequently, Black groceries paid more money to secure the same goods for resale in their grocery store. This left grocery store owners such as Annie Louise Fortner in dire financial situations. The slim margins meant that they had to be hypervigilance of their profit line, and often this meant that Black business owners had to be more financially savvy to maintain operations. This could result in extreme levels of frugalness, more risky maneuvers, higher product cost, or lowering the quality of product.

Black businessmen and women are often portrayed as middle to upper-class individuals who came from wealthy or prestigious backgrounds. However, not all entrepreneurs were these monumental figures who headed the community and acquired wealth. In fact, many businessmen and businesswomen operated on thin margins and worked multiple jobs to meet financial responsibilities.[128] Black entrepreneurs were often working-class individuals who sold excess products or rendered services to earn extra income. A Black entrepreneur could be a farmer or sharecropper who sells crops from their personal garden for cash or a domestic worker who sews garments in her spare time to sell to the community. During the Jim Crow era many Black entrepreneurs including grocery store owners often found themselves working multiple jobs to compensate for low profit margins.

Food and Leisure

However, Black-owned grocery stores did not meet the needs of all African Americans patrons. Many middle-class African American disassociated themselves from cultural practices that were reminiscent of slavery time.[129] During the civil rights era, many middle-class African Americans worked to distance themselves from traditionally southern or soul food. [130] Therefore, Bob Fortner's renowned chitlins would not be

[128] Walker, "History of Black Business History,".
[129] For more on African American foodways and culinary history, read: Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, eds. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984); Anne Bower, *African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Jennifer J Wallach, "How to Eat to Live," Black Nationalism and the Post-1964 Culinary Turn, Study the South Journal (Center for the Study of Southern Culture, July 2, 2014), https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/how-to-eat-to-live/.; Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017).
[130] Jennifer Wallach, *Getting What We Need Ourselves: How Food has Shaped African American Life*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 136.

appetizing to many middle-class African Americans during that time. As Valerie states, "Bob Fortner's trademark was chitlins; he sold out every night and he wouldn't pick 'em. He would open the bucket [of chitlins] and dump them straight into the pot. He would add onions and orange soda. And people would come to Bob Fortner's [Fortner Grocery] for chitlins. That what he was known for."[131]

Chitlins have their origin in slavery, as remembered by a formerly enslaved man named Charles Ball: "December was a hog-killing time when slaves received a 'tolerable supply of meat for a short time' as they gorged themselves on the parts of the hog that the master's family refused to eat: chitlins (entrails), trotters (feet), the snout and jowls, scrapple (the neck of the hog), 'hog maw' (the mouth, throat, or stomach lining), and crackling or pork rinds (deep-fried skin, a by-product of rendering lard)."[132] In addition to chitlins, Valerie recalls, "They would also kill hogs and make cracklings… He would sell burgers, sandwiches, [Fried] chicken, and half-chicken plates… He made the potato salad, he made it all. Bob Fortner could do everything."[133]

Middle-Class African Americans did not want to associate themselves with slave or soul food, and many thought it would be problematic to shop at a store that primarily sold soul food.[134] According to Flobell Watson, when the store was at its peak performance under Bob Fortner no middle-class African American came to the store.

More on African American foodways, read Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999

[131] Watson Interview.

[132] Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave* (Pittsburgh: J.T. Shryock, 1854), 181.

[133] Watson Interview.

[134] On foodways and the Black body, see Ava Purkiss, '"Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat': Black Women's Aesthetics, Exercise, and Fat Stigma, 1900-1930s," *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 14-37; Ula Yvette Taylor, "Controlling the Black Body," in *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 44-56.

Watson recalls, "Everybody [who visited Fortner Grocery] then was poor, not poor poor [*sic*], but poor I would say that there was no upper class. And no middle class!" The absence of middle-class patrons is a result of Bob Fortner serving soul food; the absence of White patrons may also be a result of the soul food.

Black folk from not only Live Oak but the greater Afro-Hinds county would come to let go and enjoy the festivities. According to Valerie Watson, "One side [of Fortner Grocery] was a grocery store; one side was a cafe. They had pool tables, bar stools, and booths inside the cafe."[135] At night, the cafe would be the life of the town with live music performances, dancing, gambling, drinking, smoking, and eating.

Food, tobacco, and alcohol offered immediate pleasure and enjoyment for Mississippian[s] during the early twentieth century to escape the reality of agricultural labor, overbearing supervision and demanding family dynamics.[136] One place people were able to enjoy all these things was in the Juke Joints; they could drink, smoke, eat, dance, gamble, and relax in one place. The desire for this sense of escape and entertainment is what drove people into the cafe after dark. Mississippi has a rich history of Juke Joints, and Fortner Grocery belongs to this history. The cafe was a grocery store in the day and a juke joint at night.[137]

During the night, Bob Fortner would hire DJ's and local artists to come perform at Fortner Grocery to entertain patrons. This act of commerce allowed Bob Fortner to further enrich the Afro-Hinds county community. It also gave agricultural workers in the

[135] Watson Interview.
[136] Ownby, *American Dreams*, 94.
[137] Watson Interview.

community an opportunity to highlight their talents as musicians. According to Gayle Watson, "They played the blues… [Bob Fortner] would have local bands; they sounded good, but it wasn't nobody big." She also recalls, "Sam Brown, a DJ from Jackson, would often DJ at Bob Fortner's place." Blues musicians in Mississippi were often agricultural workers.[138]

By performing at the juke joint, local blues musicians were given the opportunity of upward mobility by earning income outside of agricultural labor. In fact, there were other juke joints and cafes that operated similarly that stretched from 100 Men Hall in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi to the famous Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York City during the early twentieth century until the 1960s.[139]

Although Fortner Grocery may not have attracted huge stars such as the king of soul, James Brown, or the queen of soul, Aretha Franklin, it is plausible that Fortner Grocery operated as one of the venues that constituted the chitlin circuit. Considering Bob Fortner's iconic chitlins and the large number of Black folks in attendance nightly, Fortner Grocery appears to be an ideal location for musicians and entertainers to perform as they head south to Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi or north to Memphis, Tennessee. At the very least, Bob Fortner observed other juke joints on the chitlin circuit, and he erected his establishment based on their business model. Unlike the 100 Men Hall in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi, there is no Mississippi Blues Trail marker to commemorate Fortner

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[138] Stephen A. King, *I'm Feeling the Blues Right Now: Blues Tourism and the Mississippi Delta* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 112-114.

[139] For more on juke joints read, K.V. Bennett, "Junior Kimbrough's Juke Joint: A Story to be Told," M.A. Thesis, University of Mississippi, 1996; Kristopher Ian Debnam, "A Sense of Community and Community Change: An Ethnographic Study of a Contemporary Louisiana Juke Joint as it Compares to Historical Literature on the Subject," M.A. Thesis, Louisiana State University, 2009; Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

Grocery. Therefore, it will not be inscribed in history and will fade away as participants' memories fade.

Fortner Grocery served as a venue to an array of services including community grocery store, soul food restaurant, popular juke joint, and a reception hall. Using one venue for multiple purposes is a theme that applies to the African American experience in Mississippi. Managing with limited resources, the majority of African Americans in Mississippi had to be frugal and conserve their scarce resources. During an interview, an eighty-nine-year-old native Black Mississippian, Mrs. Lillie Mae Caldwell Roberts, recalls "We did not have a [Black] school when I was growing up. We would get our lessons at church. Teachers would come to church to learn us."[140]

This excerpt from Mrs. Roberts highlights that Black-owned venues were often versatile in use. Fortner Grocery is no exception to this trend. Gayle recalls, "On Sundays evenings after church everyone would be at Bob Fortner's"[141] To some extent, Fortner Grocery served as a reception hall for the local Black churches. Church members from different churches would congregate after church together at Bob Fortner's; they would eat and converse with one another. The store strengthened the communal bond by designating one location for the Black community to gather on Sundays after church regardless of which church the individual belonged to. Bob Fortner would prepare food every Sunday anticipating the rush in patrons after churches ended.

Soul food and the Black church are deeply intertwined. Their linked origins begin during the enslavement of African Americans, and four hundred years later they persist.

Lilly Mae Roberts and Burns, Keon A., "Roberts, Lilly Mae" (2019). *Black Families of Yalobusha County Oral History Project*. 9.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/blkfam_yalo/9

[141] Watson Interview

Fried chicken is the traditional dish served at Black church following service, and fried chicken also generated racial stereotypes that continue into the twenty-first century. The prominent and stereotypical reference to the "Gospel" bird highlights the prominence of soul food, particularly fried chicken in Black churches.[142] Jessica Harris theorizes that fried chicken's convenience resulted in its high demand. Harris claims, "Fried chicken is a dish that could be consumed hot or cold and while on the go, and it was no doubt practical for those whose apartments provided scant cooking facilities."[143]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Fortner Grocery served essential roles for the Live Oak community. It provided needed leisure and entertainment for the greater Afro-Hinds community. Its owners, Bob Fortner and Annie Louise Fortner were vital members of the community. Especially Annie Louise who was well known in the community for her various occupations, and Bob Fortner who was renown county-wide for his cooking ability. Lastly, Fortner Grocery served a rural community that was not divorced from the Mississippi Civil Rights movement and played an underappreciated role in its success. This chapter explored the community dynamics between Fortner Grocery and Live Oak.

[142] Jessica B. Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2012), 178.
[143]Harris, *High on the Hog*, 178.

EPILOGUE "DILAPIDATED NO LONGER": LEGACY OF FORTNER GROCERY AND OTHER BLACK GROCERY STORES

So, as I reflect on Mrs. Flobell's words, "What are you trying to find out about the store? Your mother should have told you everything." Her statement came from confusion and shock as she could not comprehend how I did not know about the heart of our community. Immediately, I felt my stomach sink while my anxiety and guilt spiked. I explained that I only knew about the existence of the store and its owners. Thirty minutes later, I understood the initial shock Mrs. Flobell had when we began the interview, and I also understood why my mother did not express the same enthusiasm when discussing Fortner Grocery. My mother was too young to remember or experience it fully. My mother's experience began in the early 1970s when she was a little girl walking to the store, but the store's vitality existed decades before her trips to the store.

When Bob Fortner became sickly in the early 1970s, the operations of the store were taken over by my grandfather, Maurice Fortner. He continued to manage the store, but it no longer had the same appeal to the community as before. The greater Hinds county area began opening factories in Jackson and Clinton that caused many people from Bolton to relocate to more industrialized cities in Hinds. A major part of Fortner Grocery's nostalgia was lost when Bob Fortner passed away. Maurice attempted to gain patrons back to the store, but he lacked the charisma and lure of his father, Bob. In

addition, now he had to compete with a rise in department stores, chain groceries, and a nearby Black business district in Jackson. The district was known as Farish Street and it was established in the late nineteenth century, but given its role in following the Civil Rights Movement, many Black Mississippians desired to patronize there as a form of consumer activism.[144]

The story of the store became confusing and inconsistent after Maurice gained operations. However, two events aligned across all my interviews. Firstly, he operated the store for a period before deciding to sell the store. My mother remembered him saying that he did not want to raise his daughters, he had eight of them, in that style of environment. Another reason he decided to sell the store was he was drafted into the Vietnam war, and this played a major part in the decision to sell the store before he was deported. The second event that every interviewee discussed, is the store burning down around the end of the 1970s. The reasons for the fire ranged from arson to insurance fraud. All that exists of Fortner Grocery now is a dilapidated slab in Bolton, Mississippi, and the memories of the store from members of the Live Oak community.

As I reflected on my involvement in this research project, I reached an epiphany. I have dedicated hundreds of hours of research including archival work, oral histories, and secondary readings, and despite that effort over the entire span of my master's program. This thesis only represents a chip off the iceberg (It is not enough to even constitute the tip of the iceberg yet), but this little sliver of Fortner Grocery had played an instrumental part in directing my future endeavors. I wrote my initial seminar paper on

[144] For more on history of Farish Street consult: Robert Luckett, "The Farish Street Historic District: Mississippi's Little Harlem," *Association for the Study of African American Life and History* 4, no. 1 (2017): 20-54.

Fortner Grocery in my first semester of graduate, and following that semester, I had no plans to pursue the project further.

However, when the Covid-19 pandemic began, I was advised that my original idea for a thesis would be hard to execute given that archives were closed. Pursuing Fortner Grocery as a thesis during a pandemic, provided its own challenges, but it did solve my problem with archive closures. During the pandemic, the project created a purpose for community engagement. My mother told everyone that I was doing research on the store, and family members and kin folk began contacting me with information, sources, and words of encouragement. In retrospect, it was the right decision, and it served me well moving forward.

I was able to use an early draft of this thesis as my writing sample for a doctoral program in history, and the admission committee were impressed and intrigued by the project. It played a vital role in me being accepted into two PhD programs. It seems like perfect irony. My great-grandparents' story about owning and operating a grocery store in Bolton, Mississippi played a vital role in me being admitted into a PhD program. It was not their income made through the store that help me pursue higher education, but instead, their enrichment on the community that led to Mrs. Flobell wanting to tell their stories.

When I think about the legacy of Fortner Grocery and other Black grocery stores in Mississippi, the ideas of community enrichment and community building come to mind. Whenever these grocery stores were removed from the community, the communities suffered and struggled to fully recover. Using Bolton, Mississippi as an example, since the removal of the Black grocery store the community suffers from a lack

of access to fresh produce and food. From the late 1970s up until 2021, the Afro-Bolton community had to travel to a nearby city in Clinton or Raymond if they wanted to buy fresh food. To expand the scope of this idea, the Black grocers discussed in chapter 2, Wright, Courts, and Lee, had their grocery stores effectively taken from them in the early Civil Rights Era. Then decades later in the same cities Greenwood and Belzoni, Mississippi local Whites utilized food access as a weapon to combat the movement. If the Black grocers were still in business, this tactic would be less effective in halting the movement as the grocers could provide additional food for support of movement.

Over the recent year following the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the murder of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, there has been a call for a rise in Black entrepreneurship and Black capitalism. Meaning, citizens are advocating for more Black businesses especially in Black communities. Black grocery stores fit this criterion and have been the topic of my tweets about solving the food desert problem in Black community. I am excited that people are returning their attention to Black grocery stores as being pivotal for the vitality of Black communities. During this thesis, I did not come across any academic research that fixated Black Grocery stores as such, but my hope is that this thesis sparked conversation and future research on Black Grocery stores.

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