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PRESERVATION AND PUBLIC HISTORY IN MOUND BAYOU, MISSISSIPPI

by
Walker Alan Bray

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of the history of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, an all Black community in the Mississippi Delta formed by freedmen in the wake of Reconstruction. This paper also discusses the ways in which Mound Bayou citizens are working to preserve their history and make it known to a wider audience. In particular, this work discusses the recently opened Mound Bayou Museum of African American Culture and History and related efforts to restore and preserve historic structures in Mound Bayou. In addition, this work also seeks to explore ways in which the University of Mississippi can effectively supplement Mound Bayou's resources while maintaining a healthy partnership.

The paper's first section is focused on Mound Bayou's overall history. This section's content is sourced from secondary scholarship along with written primary sources and interviews, mostly found in the J.D. Williams library Archives and Special Collections. The second half of the paper is drawn from conversations with Mound Bayou citizens and leaders and discusses their endeavors in public history.

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Introduction

When I first passed through the city of Mound Bayou in late Spring of 2020, my intentions had little to do with research or history. Instead, my journey with the town began during a trip in which I accompanied my girlfriend to visit Peter's Pottery, a locally owned and operated pottery shop established in Mound Bayou. As we cruised down mainstreet, I took in the scenery from my passenger's seat window. At first glance, the city appeared to me like any other Mississippi Delta town, a cluster of trees and buildings huddled together amidst vast, unending fields of cotton, soybean, grains and other crops. Also like many Delta communities, Mound Bayou is a small town, with a population of 1,533 as of 2010. The histories of such towns are often complex tales, interweaving themes of class inequality, man's struggle against nature, better days gone by and racial strife, many of which owe back to the days during the Delta's status as a cotton empire. Mound Bayou is no stranger to these themes, but it has interacted with them in a way that not many Southern towns have, as I soon found out. While gazing across town, I noticed a large brick mansion down the street and as we passed by I abruptly asked my girlfriend to pull over.

The house was in great disrepair but still stately in appearance and architecturally different from the bleach white antebellum mansions I typically expect in the area. A small plaque explained that this was once the early 20th century home of Isaiah Thornton Montgomery, a Black entrepreneur and founder of Mound Bayou. A nearby sign also indicated this to be one of America's most endangered historic places, a fact we

bemoaned as we took a few quick pictures and resumed our trip. As we continued, my mind was flooded with questions over the location. Who was I.T. Montgomery? Wasn't his home built during the middle of Jim Crow? If so, how did an African American man attain such wealth and status during this era without being harassed?

A quick google search yielded several answers. Mound Bayou is a city that was founded by the formerly enslaved men and women of Joseph Davis. After gaining their freedom, they established a town that was remote enough to afford them a degree of safety from the worst of post-reconstruction harassment. Here they cultivated a spirit of Black entrepreneurship and free thought that essentially functioned as a safe space for individuals who otherwise saw the worst of the segregated South. Though they often faced harassment from the state government and surrounding White communities, they managed to carve out their own place in the Delta bottomland. Though not our main stop that day, nor our longest, our visit to the town stuck with me and I often revisited the town's history over the next several months.

When I joined the Honors College midway through my Junior year, I immediately knew what I wanted to write about for my thesis. I commenced working on the project that summer but my aim with the project has changed a great deal since then. What began as a project where I would simply explore and write about the history of Mound Bayou has changed into something much more hands-on. A community history such as this needs to involve that community in some way that involves listening respectfully to residents. After all, this is their story and while I get to learn and write about it, they have lived it. Thus, over the course of the project, I have made multiple trips to Mound Bayou, spoken with several of its residents and explored many local historical sites.

What I have found is that many projects are to varying degrees already underway and there is still much to analyze and preserve in regards to the Mound Bayou's history. I have also realized the potential for sharing resources between Mound Bayou in the University of Mississippi and have been working to build a relationship between the school and community leaders. The historical relationship between the University and African American communities has provided its own unique challenges. However, this relationship has also provided opportunities to learn more about our own place in history and what these relationships can look like in the future.

This thesis consists of two main chapters that are divided by smaller parts. The first chapter relies on written primary and mostly secondary sources to provide context and present a general overview of the history of Mound Bayou, Mississippi. This section begins with the town's origins in the 1820s as a utopian experiment and concludes with Mound Bayou's involvement in the modern Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and subsequent economic decline. The second chapter shifts to a present day, first-person approach as I explore my experiences as a white college student connecting with Mound Bayou leaders. In this section I discuss learning about their efforts to preserve and share their town's history, particularly through public history and likewise discuss my own small parts of that story. The content of this chapter is likewise drawn from several conversations I have had with Mound Bayou leaders as well as University faculty during the Winter and Spring of 2022. The thesis then concludes with a few ideas on ways in which the University of Mississippi could play an effective role in helping to tell the story of Mound Bayou and its important place in Mississippi history.

Chapter One: Finding the Dream

Part One: Before Mound Bayou

Davis Bend

In the summer 1825, a prominent lawyer from Natchez, Mississippi boarded a stagecoach for a trip across the rural backcountry of Pennsylvania. Sitting across from him was Robert Owen, a Scottish utopian idealist whose plans for a self-sufficient model community in New Harmony, Indiana were already under way. Having recently read Owen's latest book and possessing his own interest in the ideas of such Enlightenment thinkers, the Natchez lawyer struck up a lively discussion with Owen. The two men spent the duration of their ride discussing the intricacies of enlightened labor management and modern industry. By the end of their journey, the lawyer had determined that he would attempt to apply Owen's ideas to plantation life in his home in Mississippi, where cotton was king and enslaved laborers toiled under its mighty rule.¹

The Natchez lawyer's name was Joseph Davis. He was already notable for being a veteran of the War of 1812, having served as a delegate to the first Mississippi Constitutional Convention in 1817 and for the purchase of around 11,000 acres of bottomland at a bend in the Mississippi River south of Vicksburg. In later years, he would be known for being the older brother of Jefferson Davis, president of the ill fated slave republic, the Confederate States of America. Like his younger brother, Joseph had inherited several enslaved persons after the death of his father and like many other

¹ Janet Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 3-7.

prominent Southerners, he was determined to try his fortunes at being an aristocratic planter. Unlike many other plantation owners, however, Davis attempted to embrace the enlightened philosophy espoused by men such as Owen. Although the notion of building true utopian society while a large portion of society is held in bondage may seem odd, when compared to his neighbors Davis was something of an enlightened experimenter.²

On 5,000 of his 11,000 acres at the bend in the Mississippi, Davis established Hurricane Plantation, and later Brierfield Plantation for his brother next door. Though he commanded the operation with a paternalistic mindset typical of his era, he took the health of his enslaved laborers seriously. He provided full health and dental care as well as open access to any food on the plantation and encouraged the independent cultivation of crops and poultry, so long as these activities did not interfere with expected duties. He also encouraged and provided his laborers not only educational attainment but also curiosity and the pursuit of whichever topics they may find interesting. It was in this environment that an enslaved man named Benjamin Thornton Montgomery would find himself upon his arrival at Davis Bend in 1836. It is with him that the story of Mound Bayou begins.³

Benjamin Montgomery

Born into slavery in Loudoun County, Virginia in 1819, Benjamin Montgomery found his life uprooted when at seventeen years old he was sold and brought to a market in Natchez, Mississippi. From Natchez, he was purchased by Joseph Davis and brought to Hurricane. Likely shaken by his experience of being torn from the only home he had known and tossed into an isolated plantation in Mississippi, Montgomery promptly ran

² Hermann, 17.

³ Ibid, 14-17; John Ingham, and Lynne Feldman, *African-American Business Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 38-39.

away. He was quickly recaptured, however, and brought back to his new owner. When Davis discussed with Montgomery the cause for his attempted escape, he discovered a literate and intelligent young man and the two came to an understanding.⁴

Benjamin Montgomery soon made full use of the library at Davis Bend and kept himself busy learning the trades of land surveying, mechanical engineering and levee building, a vital skill when living on the Mississippi River. He was most proficient, however, in the art of business and soon found himself managing not only his own riverside mercantile store but also the accounts of both Hurricane Plantation and neighboring Brierfield Plantation. With the profits Montgomery acquired from his business activities, he built a new combined store and living quarters. Upon marrying, he also used his profits to pay for the labor of his wife and children, ensuring that they were not subject to manual labor. He also ensured that his sons were educated and his youngest, Isaiah Thornton Montgomery, showed serious potential. Joseph Davis noticed this potential as well and, despite protests from the elder Montgomery, he eventually took Isaiah to live with him as his personal secretary.⁵

Though Isaiah may not have had the choice to work for Davis, he excelled at almost everything he attempted. He was given full access to the plantation's library and newspapers and as a teenager took on the business of running the plantation's accounts. These activities gave him a good understanding of events taking place in the wider world and no doubt prepared him for the business he would undertake on his own terms later in life. More immediately, these skills would be of great use to him, his family and others on the plantation during the coming chaos of the American Civil War.⁶

⁴ Ingham and Feldman, 38-39.

⁵ Hermann, 20-21.

⁶ Ingham and Feldman, 39.

The War Years

As with most individuals living in the U.S. during the 1860s, the Civil War fundamentally altered life for those living at Hurricane. Following the loss of New Orleans to the Union, Joseph Davis decided to seek shelter further inland from the Mississippi River, fleeing to Tuscaloosa, Alabama with several slaves and important papers. Benjamin Montgomery was left to run the plantation, as well as his store, himself. The South's rapidly deteriorating social structure made this a difficult if not impossible task. The entirety of the year's cotton crop and much of the plantation's sustenance crops were destroyed, severe flooding threatened to overtake the bend and the plantation faced repeated harassment from bands of marauders and an early Union raid ransacked several homes, especially the Davis mansion. Many of the plantation inhabitants likewise decided to take their chances with true freedom and fled. Still, Ben Montgomery maintained the survival of his family and those remaining at the bend despite the anarchic conditions of the war torn South.

The fortunes of Davis Bend soon changed once again. The arrival of Union officer Admiral David Porter provided the plantation with a relatively new degree of security. Recognizing the propaganda value of turning the Davis family plantation into a camp for freed slaves, the Union opted to establish a contraband camp on the site. Like Davis, Admiral Porter also noticed the intelligence of the Montgomerys and he soon helped most of the family to seek refuge in the North. Likewise, after taking note of the skill and charm of Isaiah Montgomery, Admiral Porter enlisted him as his personal attendant, with Isaiah spending several months accompanying him to various events during the war. These experiences served to further broaden the Montgomerys'

knowledge and skill sets and by the war's end, though beleaguered, Benjamin and his family had not only survived. Rather, they also found themselves in a unique position to take bold steps in the changing post war South.

Rebuilding and Reconstruction

During the war Benjamin Montgomery and his family had managed to settle in Cincinnati where they found work in a boatyard. Although they were living comfortably, they were not completely satisfied. By the end of the war Benjamin longed to return to Mississippi and revive his store and take up agricultural business, this time on his own accord as a free man. His return would not be without its challenges. In his absence the plantation had come under federal control and though many well meaning Northerners and Union officers were providing resources to freedmen, yet another unequal power structure had developed between the Black farmers and the federal agents. Montgomery, fueled by his ambition and determination to act on his own accord, decided to openly challenge the bureau after a series of disputes regarding unfair pricing and a faulty cotton gin. Using his pre-war connections, Montgomery wrote to a now elderly Joseph Davis explaining the situation and they eventually developed a way to regain the plantation.

In the turbulence of the post war period, President Andrew Johnson had granted pardons to many of the South's leading planters, stretching his administration to its political limit. While in many cases these pardons also restored the lands of many of the Confederacy's leading actors and likely contributed to several of the failures of Reconstruction, in this particular case it resulted in a success. Joseph Davis was included among those pardoned, after writing up a lengthy oath of loyalty. Though not immediate, his lands were also restored to him once the leases of the freedmen had expired.

However, rather than attempting to reassert the authority he once held over his domain, Davis almost immediately sold both Brierfield and Hurricane to his former subjects and for a reasonable price of \$300,000. At last Benjamin Montgomery was not only free but one of the largest landowners in the region as well. Though he still had a hefty mortgage and interest to pay off, Benjamin Montgomery was shrewd and had every reason to believe that his ambition and business skills would succeed.⁷

Joined by cousin Ben Green, the Montgomerys managed to reconstruct Davis Bend into a functioning community by the end of the 1860s. To say the task was difficult would be an understatement. Almost the entire industry of the bend was in need of repair, from the cotton gin and tool repair shops to the sawmill. Likewise, they needed vast amounts of labor. For the immediate period they succeeded in both challenges. They put out several advertisements and wrote letters to formerly enslaved persons from Davis Bend appealing to those with specific skill sets and a good work ethic. This also ensured that those arriving at the bend had a good idea of what situation they were getting themselves into and soon they had a sizable work force and machines that were in good working order. Similarly, in keeping with the plan of elevating their social status, the Montgomerys found themselves attaining important local positions.⁸

First, William Montgomery was named the local postmaster, followed by his father Benjamin's appointment as a justice of the peace, a quite significant post during the era. This made Benjamin the first Black man to hold political office in the state of Mississippi and one of Reconstruction's early successes. Likewise, they managed to begin large scale production of cotton and even invested in the purchase of neighboring Ursino

⁷ Ibid, 109; Joseph Davis Papers, Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

⁸ Hermann, 112-114; *Vicksburg Daily Times*, November 21, 1866.

Plantation. Unfortunately, these economic successes would be short-lived and in 1867 the first of a series of major disasters struck Davis Bend.⁹

The Plan Falls Apart

One major issue that has plagued the Mississippi Delta from its earliest settlement into the present day is the yearly flooding from the Mississippi and contributing rivers. For Davis Bend the situation was no different. Upon surveying the system of levees surrounding the bend, Montgomery and his neighbors determined that during the Civil War the large dams had been pushed to the brink without constant maintenance. If they were not repaired immediately, disaster was imminent. Benjamin Montgomery was well aware of this and almost as soon as he returned to the bend, he began raising alarm about the dire situation. To his misfortune, his neighbors do not seem to have taken him seriously until it was too late. By Spring of 1867, an intense struggle had broken out between the hundreds of workers of various Davis Bend plantations and the heavy rains and snow that had plagued the Northern states for months. Day and night, every man available from the farm hand to the desk clerk to the Montgomerys themselves, fought bitterly to reinforce the mighty earthen dams against the rapidly swelling Mississippi.¹⁰

Their efforts were valiant but in vain. When the first levee broke, the entire population of the Bend scrambled for high ground and watched as their enterprise was swallowed by the roaring waters. Many inhabitants of the Bend fell sick from exposure and exhaustion, others fled entirely, deciding to stake their fortunes elsewhere. Upon watching one of his first crops buried beneath the Mississippi and remembering his mounting debts, Montgomery was quite reasonably distressed, but he was determined to

⁹ Hermann, 129-130; Ingham and Feldman, 40-45.

¹⁰ Hermann 116-119.

exhaust every option before giving up. He decided to write to Joe Davis and explain the situation. Unlike many former and current Southern aristocrats, the elder Davis was not only sympathetic, but quite encouraging, offering to ignore interest payments for that year. His brother Jefferson, on the other hand, was less enthused. The real lasting effect of the flood however, was not simply lost crops.

In keeping with the area's name, Davis Bend was a large peninsula surrounded on three sides by a large meander in the river. When the levees were breached they spilled over into a large flood ditch spanning the length of the peninsula. As the waters receded from the rest of the bend, they remained along the span of the peninsula and it quickly became clear that the river had chosen a new, significantly shorter course. Davis Bend was now Davis Island. If this had been the last disaster to befall the Montgomerys operation, their plan might have survived long term but their experiment in Black self sufficiency was not destined to remain on the island.

By the 1880s, despite managing to maintain cotton production as well as their autonomy, the colony at Davis Island had fallen through. The flood had essentially drained what profitability the venture had maintained as the cost of transporting goods to a dock on a neighboring plantation across the island and then having to ferry goods across the river outweighed the rewards. The 80 year old Joseph Davis died in Vicksburg a few years after the flood, and a disheartened Benjamin Montgomery had also passed, with Isaiah and his brothers taking their father's place. Isaiah was a more than capable leader, but he did not yet have the same degree of political or business connections that either his father or Joe Davis had maintained. A changing cotton market and the increasingly hostile post reconstruction political climate likewise did not bode well for

the enterprising young man. However, the real breaking point came from closer to home, from Jefferson Davis.¹¹

Although Joseph Davis had allowed his brother to maintain influence over his assets, including Brierfield plantation, Jefferson had never embraced the same idealism Joseph had regarding the Davis Bend community. Jefferson had belonged to a younger generation, one that was much more committed to notions of racial superiority and the “positive aspects of slavery” espoused by his contemporaries like John C. Calhoun. In fact, one could reasonably claim that Davis harbored a degree of resentment towards the inhabitants of his former domain and it is likely that he had been waiting for a chance to reassert himself in the status quo. As political conditions worsened for African Americans around the South, that chance came. By 1881, Isaiah was still struggling to pay the debts accrued on his purchase of property and when his creditors soon demanded that he pay the entire sum immediately, he was forced to abandon the property to be sold at public auction. Jefferson Davis immediately stepped in, and for \$75,000, both Hurricane and Brierfield plantations returned to the Davis family.

A New Opportunity

The Montgomerys were forced to retreat to Ursino where they at least owned the property in full and for the next few years Isaiah attempted to rent out the property to his previous tenants. However, by the mid 1880s the Montgomerys had completely left Davis Island for good. Instead, Isaiah left for Vicksburg where his brother had commenced operation of a mercantile business that was thriving in the city’s Black community. Here he and his relatives lived comfortably but, like his father, Isaiah was never satisfied with just being comfortable. Instead he spent much of his time speculating on what had gone

¹¹Ibid, 203-209.

wrong with the operation and how these issues could be avoided. Despite having a brief interest in the “Kansas Fever” overtaking many Black Mississippians during the era, Montgomery discovered his future still laid within Mississippi. While living in Vicksburg, Isaiah was approached by an acquaintance working as an agent on behalf of the fledgling Louisville, New Orleans and Texas Railroad. The railroad had purchased a large swath of land straight through the heart of the Mississippi Delta all the way from Vicksburg to Memphis. The railroad was looking to sell at a reasonable price to anyone with the skills and motivation to develop the land along the railroad right-of-way, hopefully developing towns, stations and potential customers along the way. Naturally, a man like Isaiah saw the potential for such an opportunity and he was more than interested. The dream of a home where African Americans could conduct business and live freely was not dead. In fact it was going to thrive in the heart of Mississippi, at Mound Bayou.

Part Two: Building Mound Bayou

Compromise

When the Mississippi State Legislature convened in Jackson on November, 1st 1890, Isaiah Thornton Montgomery arrived to find himself the only Black delegate out of a 134 man convention. To Montgomery and his contemporaries this lack of representation would not have been shocking, despite the state's overwhelming Black majority population. On the contrary, this format was by design. After the Civil War, as a condition of Mississippi rejoining the Union, the state had to develop a new constitution that was consistent with federal law. Likewise the new constitution also provided a guarantee of civil rights for the state's newly freed Black population. Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, however, the state's old elite power structure sought to re-consolidate its power both politically and socially. Over the next 13 years, Southern Democrats returned to the ballot and many of the state's important offices, in large part due to the violence and instability plaguing elections statewide, much of which targeted Black Republican voters. The new 1890 State Constitution could be considered a final piece of this consolidation.¹²

When the delegates gathered in Jackson, it quickly became clear that one of, if not the primary goals of the convention was to disenfranchise the African American voter. Though the U.S. Constitution prohibited the convention from creating laws that were explicitly designed to disenfranchise, the talk of the convention was very overtly

¹² Isaiah Montgomery and Matthew Holden Jr., *What Answer? Speech in Support of Franchise Committee Report, Mississippi Constitutional Convention, 1890* (Isaiah T. Montgomery Studies Project, 2004).

anti-Black. Convention President S.S. Calhoun emphasized this point, declaring “We came here to exclude the negro. Nothing short of this will answer.”¹³ Knowing that the law could not overtly remove Black voters, the convention opted to instead institute a series of workarounds that would exclude two thirds of eligible Black Voters and around ten percent of White voters. Upon facing this hostile environment, Isaiah Montgomery was certainly aware of the pressure of being the sole delegate to represent a large majority of the state's population. Likewise, when it came time to endorse the state’s plan to effectively exclude tens of thousands of its population, all eyes went to Montgomery.

To the disappointment of thousands of African Americans, Republicans and supporters of Civil Liberty, Montgomery chose to endorse this plan, an act for which his legacy is most often remembered. For this he was reviled by many of his contemporary critics as a “traitor” and a “Judas” but immediate condemnation, though valid, does not provide complete analysis of his decision. Though his ultimate endorsement of disenfranchisement can only be viewed as negative, in his speech in support of it Montgomery offers a much more complex reasoning. As political scientist Dr. Matthew Holden explains, whether or not Montgomery provided endorsement would not have changed the outcome of the delegation. The state’s hostile White politicians had determined that they were going to disenfranchise Black voters before they even stepped foot in the building. To outright defy them would have cost Montgomery not only any hope of political maneuverability in the future but also the opportunity to work out a compromise.¹⁴ Still, one can imagine the humiliation and frustration African Americans around the country felt knowing that one of their own, and one of the most influential at

¹³ McMillen, Neil R. *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 41.

¹⁴ Montgomery and Holden, 8-13.

that, had been among the first to draw the color line. Likewise, in later years Montgomery would also come to deeply regret his decision.

In his final report, Montgomery repeatedly condemns the convention's decision while demanding that his people be allowed to develop socially and economically without interference from that point forward. Of course, this demand would ultimately be in vain but Montgomery did not have the benefit of modern retrospect. Instead, he had already found room to carve out his own safe haven for Black advancement and likely believed that others could do the same. After all, by this point he was the leader of a young, independent Black town: Mound Bayou.

“Land To Do For Themselves”¹⁵

In 1886, Isaiah Montgomery, his cousin Benjamin Green and several other men arrived by train to a site about halfway between Memphis and Vicksburg. The area was enveloped by dense forest and swampy terrain but by the fall of that year, the men had succeeded in clearing around 90 acres of land and had erected a sawmill and several small houses. The spot they chose was near the convergence of two small bayous and the site of Native American mounds, thus the settlers christened their new town Mound Bayou.

The dream of a self-sufficient Black community was alive once again, though notable differences did exist between Isaiah's plan and his father's ideas for Davis Bend. Whereas the old plantation had been located in relatively close proximity to Vicksburg and originally on the main channel of the Mississippi River, Mound Bayou was in isolated woods, with its main connection to the wider world being a railroad line that

¹⁵ Hermann, 222. To inspire his men in clearing the site, Montgomery reportedly gave a speech in which he proclaimed, “that they might as well buy land, own it and do for themselves what they had been doing for other folks for 250 years.”

operated with a predictable schedule. Also important was the fact that the land the men were clearing was profitable almost immediately. By the late 19th century, Mississippi was a major producer of lumber in large part due to its extensive old growth forests covering much of the state, hence the settlers constructed an on site sawmill. As soon as the settlers cleared an acre of land, they could cut up its timber and prepare it for immediate shipment on the adjacent railroad, where it could then be sold for profit. This meant that although managing finances was not easy, Montgomery was able to avoid financial issues on the scale he faced at Davis Bend.

Perhaps the most important difference with the new project was that in Mound Bayou each settler would maintain ownership of their own property. Although free African Americans had inhabited the plantations of Davis Bend, Benjamin Montgomery had maintained a paternalistic control over the land, renting it out to tenant farmers in a way that mirrored the emerging sharecropping system. Isaiah and Ben Green, on the other hand, managed to sell almost all of the 800 acres of Delta land they had initially purchased to build Mound Bayou. Their reasoning was that personal ownership would give residents motivation to innovate and develop their lands productively. This strategy seems to have worked.

By the beginning of the 20th century a thriving community of around two-thousand people was developing in and around Mound Bayou. The town was complete with several large farms, a newspaper, cotton gins, a thriving sawmill, and many other enterprises, all Black owned. Central to the town's growing business institutions was the Bank of Mound Bayou, operated by the aptly named Charles Banks. Banks was an ambitious man with an entrepreneurial mindset. Born and raised in

Clarksdale, just north of Mound Bayou, Banks' family, though lacking in wealth, had instilled within him the value of education since boyhood. Likewise the Banks family maintained a good relationship with the prominent Clark family for whom Clarksdale is named and for whom Charles's parents worked for several years. It is thus with John Clark that Banks had his first exposure to the world of business. Likewise, when Charles came of age the Clarks helped pay for him to attend Rust College. The few years he spent there exposed him to the connections and education that allowed him to enter into the circles of both older and newly emerging Black elites.¹⁶

When Charles Banks returned home to Clarksdale after attending college, he immediately set to work applying his experience and soon he was successfully managing his own mercantile firm, Banks & Co, still the entrepreneur's ambitions were not entirely satisfied. After visiting Mound Bayou, Banks sensed opportunity within the town's emerging Black built economy and decided to leave the mercantile to help open The Bank of Mound Bayou. After acquiring a sufficient amount of resources, the bank quickly became not just the heart of Mound Bayou's economic development but also a nucleus for Black development in surrounding areas. Banks invested heavily in several local Black owned enterprises, including an ambitious Oil Mill project valued at \$100,000. Though the mill project would encounter several setbacks once operations commenced, within his first few years in town Banks had established himself not only as Mound Bayou's leading businessman but also its leading citizen. After all, not only had the bank done much to ensure that the town's capital would remain with its own citizens,

¹⁶ David Jackson, *A Chief Lieutenant of the Tuskegee Machine: Charles Banks of Mississippi* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 16-17.

the bank was also a symbol of pride for the town, demonstrating the independence to which its citizens aspired.

“The Jewel of the Delta”

It may go without saying that during this era Mound Bayou did not remain notable only for its economic activity. In the early 20th century the town became a thriving education center, constructing multiple state of the art schools and centers of learning. In 1920, the three story brick Mound Bayou Consolidated Negro School was constructed and opened. Likewise, in this era the town also attracted the attention of steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, partly due to the town’s economic success. The town was soon able to boast of having a Carnegie Library, the first of its kind for African Americans. Though funding for books and other materials would be inconsistent, the library became a focal point of social activity, providing citizens with a place to study and converse. Naturally many African Americans in the town’s vicinity traveled to Mound Bayou for their education. The town possessed better facilities than many of the state’s underfunded segregated schools and it also provided something intangible: freedom of thought and expression. While many Black Southerners faced persecution for simply voicing their opinions, in Mound Bayou they started large social clubs, taking an active role in their local politics.

It was also in this era that Banks and Montgomery established a relationship with Booker T. Washington. Washington was an instant supporter of the project as many of his ideas on Black self improvement were on full display in Mound Bayou. Washington and the town leaders kept in constant contact, with Washington traveling to Mound Bayou on multiple occasions. At the opening of the Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing

company, Washington delivered a speech in which he predicted that the efforts of the townspeople would do much to elevate their status in the eyes of White Mississippians. However, to Mound Bayou's eventual misfortune, this prediction would not turn out to be completely true.

For the immediate period Mound Bayou had cemented itself as an emblem of what African Americans were capable of when not deliberately prevented from achievement. Though the townspeople had to endure an outside legal and social system designed to abuse them, within their town they were able to build a successful life. This was not lost on many outside observers either. Upon hearing of the town, President Theodore Roosevelt decided to visit the town during one of his famous whistle stop tours. According to town tradition, during his stop President Roosevelt moved to give a speech off the back of the train. Gazing over the rows of well built homes, active cotton gins and the well dressed population he christened Mound Bayou "The Jewel of the Delta" and the name stuck. His statement captured the sentiment felt by many of the town's residents. Having risen above the abject poverty that had been forced upon many African Americans, Mound Bayou had come to be representative of a new kind of American Dream. To many Black Mississippians it was a promised land.

Though quieter days have since fallen upon Mound Bayou, the large brick mansion left by Isaiah Montgomery as well as the former Bank of Mound Bayou building are emblematic of this early era. The Montgomery home is one of the last of the grand houses built by the town's early elite. Likewise, the Bank building remains as a symbol of a thriving center of commerce. For these reasons, preservation of these sites is critical to the culture and history of Mound Bayou.

Part Three: Renaissance and Resistance: The Post War Years

The Road to Recovery

Despite the Mound Bayou's impressive early success, during the 1920s and 1930s the town verged on complete collapse. Following the passing of Montgomery, Banks and other town founders, the town had difficulties with finding consistent leadership. Up to this point the town's commerce, while substantial, had been almost entirely dependent on cotton. After World War I, the cotton market completely collapsed, leaving much of Mississippi in abject poverty. Mound Bayou was not unscathed. Even worse, this was only the beginning in a series of unfortunate events. Operations at the once promising Oil Mill had been compromised amidst a legal battle between Charles Banks and a devious investor from Memphis. Likewise, the end of the decade brought the Great Flood of 1927, which decimated the entire Delta region, as well as the wider Great Depression which precipitated a further local financial collapse. To add misery to misfortune, in the mid 1930s a fire destroyed much of the downtown district, including the town's Carnegie Library. At this point the town seems to have been running out of air. Amid the Great Migration many Mound Bayou citizens opted to take their chances up North and many of those who stayed had no choice but to take up work as sharecroppers or domestic workers. It is said that "By 1940 a visitor described Mound Bayou as a dilapidated, depopulated town with little left to excite racial pride."¹⁷

¹⁷ Janet Sharp Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 243.

However, an era of renewed prosperity was on the horizon. In the late thirties, the Mississippi chapter of the international fraternal organization Knights and Daughters of Tabor voted to build a new hospital that focused primarily on the first class treatment of Black Mississippian. The Chief Grand Mentor of the organization, Perry M. Smith had been pushing for the approval of such a project for some time by this point, likely due to a negative experience he had when seeking treatment for his son. After having waited at a White hospital for several hours and ultimately not receiving treatment, Smith ventured far south to the Afro-American Hospital of Yazoo City. Here his son received first class treatment and was treated with respect and dignity. Smith also recognized that to build such a hospital in a community hostile to African American progress would face hurdles such as restrictive building codes, intimidation and sundown laws. Thus when the time came to build the location, The Knights and Daughters of Tabor looked to P. M. Smith's hometown of Mound Bayou.¹⁸

The Doctor

In November of 1941, the organization established the hospital's bylaws and membership expectations. As many fraternal benefit hospitals of the day operated, the hospital was funded through membership dues collected from patients. Anyone who wished to join simply answered a health evaluation and then committed to paying a yearly fee of \$8.40. This fee covered the expenses of up to 31 days of hospitalization including major and minor surgeries and was a generally successful innovation. Though

¹⁸ David Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 181-183.

many of the hospital's staff initially complained that the system would be abused for minor or insignificant ailments, the practice was later semi encouraged as they realized the benefits of preventive care. Furthermore, quality health care would not be the only benefit the hospital brought to Mound Bayou. As a regional center for Black Mississippians across all of Bolivar and surrounding counties, the hospital brought a much needed economic boost for the city by renewing interest into the area as well as attracting plenty of new customers.¹⁹

Arguably one of the greatest benefits the hospital brought to the town was its chief surgeon, Dr. Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard, or T.R.M. Howard for short. Generous, patient and extremely intelligent, Dr. Howard carried a sharp aversion to the color line and had graduated from medical school as the only African American in his class. Although he was a native of Kentucky rather than Mississippi, he quickly adjusted to life in Mound Bayou, becoming one of the community's leading citizens. In addition to providing excellent health services to the community, Dr. Howard invested much time and money into ventures such as a local construction firm as well as an insurance company. Likewise, as much business as he received from Mound Bayou, he also gave back to the community as well, establishing a park, a zoo and notably the first swimming pool for Black Mississippians.²⁰

Another of his successes was the establishment of a second hospital across the street from the one run by the Taborians, the Friendship Clinic. He managed to run both for a time until he was requested to step down from his position with the Taborians, going on to form his own organization in response, the United Order of Friendship. Despite this

¹⁹ *By-Laws of the Fraternal Benefit and Hospital Departments*, Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

²⁰ Beito, *Mutual Aid*, 185-191.

split, it is safe to say that Dr. Howard was well liked and respected by the town. He even received a degree of respect from many White Mississippians, that is until he stepped out into active support of the Civil Rights movement putting his leadership to the test.

Dr. Howard had begun his political journey well before arriving at Mound Bayou, but it was in Mississippi that his political leadership truly developed. In 1951, he founded the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. In his position with the RCNL, he organized a large boycott against gas stations that forbade the use of their restrooms to Black customers, openly challenged the state to enforce *Brown v. Board* and even held large events to help with voter registration. He likewise acted as a mentor and friend to multiple developing Civil Rights leaders. He hired Medgar Evers straight from college to come work for his Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company, eventually promoting him to agency director. Evers later joined Dr. Howard in organizing the RCNL and Dr. Howard encouraged him to take an active role in the NAACP, of which he would eventually become field secretary for the state. Dr. Howard would also maintain friendships with Fannie Lou Hamer and Amzie Moore, also providing them with refuge and medical aid.

Perhaps Dr. Howard's defining moment in the history and struggle for Civil Rights came during the summer of 1955. It was during that August that 14 year old Emmett Till was murdered in nearby Tallahatchie County. During the highly publicized trial of J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, Till's murderers, Dr. Howard played a prominent role in aiding the prosecution attempting to avenge Till's death. He provided refuge to Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till, inviting her to stay in his Mound Bayou home, hiring armed guards to defend against the violent harassment she would have surely faced

elsewhere. Despite facing harassment and witness intimidation, Dr. Howard provided money and resources to conduct an investigation into the murder, finding key witnesses in the process. His home became something of a command center as he opened his mansion as a safe haven for journalists and witnesses. His influence during the event is likewise evident in several photographs in which he is present standing with Mamie Till and several other figures during the trial.²¹

Though the result of the murder trial was a blatant miscarriage of justice, Dr. Howard did not immediately resign from the fight for his people's civil rights. Later that year on November 27th, Dr. Howard would give a speech at a Montgomery church expressing the need to take a strong stand for individual rights. Four days later, one of the event's attendees, Rosa Parks, would defy the color line herself by refusing to give up her bus seat, thus sparking the Montgomery bus boycott and thrusting the modern civil rights movement into the larger American consciousness. Unfortunately, Dr. Howard's time in Mississippi was not to last. His very public involvement with the Emmett Till case had attracted the attention of hostile forces such as the Citizens' Councils. Even worse, local White men with whom Howard had formed solid business connections and even friendships began to distance themselves from him as the racial divide in Mississippi widened. This not only served to isolate him socially but economically as well and he found it increasingly difficult to conduct business. Though he maintained that he was dedicated to remaining in Mississippi to care for the people who needed him, his family began to be shaken by repeated death threats. Finally, Howard decided enough was

²¹ David Beito and Linda Beito, *T.R.M. Howard: Doctor, Entrepreneur, Civil Rights Pioneer* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 135-136.

enough and in 1956 he relocated to Chicago, ending his reign as Mound Bayou's most prominent citizen.

The 1960s to Now

Despite the loss of the town's most prominent leader, Mound Bayou continued to serve as a center of Civil Rights activism and a Black safe haven throughout the remainder of the 1950s and early 1960s. Many thriving business and social clubs continued to operate in and around Mound Bayou and the town's citizens maintained close ties to prominent leaders such as Medgar Evers. Likewise, when Fannie Lou Hamer fell ill due to complications from cancer she continued to receive treatment at the Taborian Hospital until her passing in Mound Bayou in 1977. Unfortunately, this era of prosperity would wane by the final decades of the 20th century. As with many Black communities, when the South began to integrate many African Americans left their tight knit communities to take advantage of new economic opportunities that had formerly been prohibited. Likewise, Mound Bayou found itself affected by changing economic conditions in the surrounding Mississippi Delta. As agriculture became increasingly mechanized, much of the Delta's labor pool found itself without a steady source of income. Eventually, even the Taborian Hospital shuttered its doors along with several of the town's prominent businesses.

Today, Mound Bayou is a relatively quiet town similar to many others in the Mississippi Delta, but its history is strikingly different from that of its neighbors. Its citizens have not forgotten their history either. On the contrary, they are quite proud of their heritage. Some of the town's current and former residents have written books discussing the stories of Mound Bayou's key figures such as I.T. Montgomery. The

town's older residents are more than happy to discuss their memories with anyone who wants to listen and many have given interviews on their history. Ms. Minnie Lucinda Fisher was one such citizen. Born in Mound Bayou in the 1890s, she worked in the town's library, served on the city commission, and was an overall community leader. She lived well into the 1980s and her memories are wonderfully preserved in a few different interviews, including one located in the University of Mississippi archives.

Likewise, residents such as Hermon Johnson Sr. and his family have continued to speak on their experiences of living and working in Mound Bayou. His sons Darryl Johnson and Hermon Johnson Jr. have recently opened the Mound Bayou Museum of African American Culture and History, which is dedicated to preserving and discussing the town's unique place in American history. Still, there is much work to be done. Though many of them are advancing in years, there are residents of the town that remember a time when Mound Bayou was a promised land of Black safety and free expression. Their memories are valuable to this story and it is crucial to capture and record those thoughts while we can.

In summary, during a time of racial terror and persecution, Mound Bayou stood as a defiant force against those who claimed that African Americans were not capable citizens who could not do for themselves. This town was home to a highly educated and proud population of bankers, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, innovators and leaders that were living out and embracing the opportunities that their nation claimed to offer. Perhaps more importantly, Mound Bayou offered an escape, a refuge for those who were persecuted elsewhere. This town afforded its residents a space where they could maintain freedom of thought and expression in a time and place where they could be killed just for

that very thing. It was thus natural that the citizens of Mound Bayou played a role in the civil rights movement and were involved in the stories of Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer and even Emmett Till and his mother Mamie Till. Its citizens actively took part in advancing the cause of African Americans not only through activism but by striving to advance their town socially and economically. The residents of Mound Bayou chose to deal with the world not as the system of Jim Crow and segregation dictated that they should, but on their own terms, as proud and capable individuals.

Chapter Two

Shifting Priorities: The Phone Call

By the Fall of 2021, after several months of research, I believed I had gained a solid grasp on the story of Mound Bayou and its people. I was not wrong, but I was not completely right either. When engaging in this sort of work it is often best to get as close as possible to the place you are studying. While many of Mound Bayou's oldest structures are now gone and many of those still standing are in disrepair, the town is still made up of people, many of whom are directly descended from and familiar with the town's founders. Likewise, putting oneself in the location being studied can help paint a better picture of what life was like for the persons being studied. Thus, I knew that eventually returning to the town to conduct research had to be a priority. Unfortunately, this point in the project was also about a year and a half into the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although restrictions were beginning to ease up, traveling to a new community while also dealing with local outbreaks in Oxford did not seem wise. In any case, I decided to work around this obstacle until conditions had improved. I made much use of Google street view as well as 20th century maps of Bolivar County in the library's federal document depository to study the modern and historical layout of the town. I likewise combed youtube and news sites for information related to Mound Bayou. During one of these browsing sessions, I came across the website for the Mound Bayou Museum of African American History and Culture, a museum that had recently opened during the summer of 2021. Though hesitant to set up a visit immediately, that winter I decided to

call the museum phone number to learn more about the town's history and establish contact with someone else in the community. This moment led to the beginning of a new, much more involved phase of the project as my goal shifted from simply writing a detailed history to assisting those already working to preserve it.

That afternoon I had a lively and productive conversation with Mr. Hermon Johnson, the director of the museum. Though only a few months old the museum had acquired a sizable collection of memorabilia and artifacts related to local and national African American history and were beginning to outgrow their space. We also discussed much about the town's history and what I had learned through the university archives. Ultimately, we decided to wait and schedule the visit later, but over the next few weeks we kept in contact. During these discussions over the phone we began sharing the different resources we each had access to and our excitement for the visit grew after each conversation. Finally, on February 5, 2022, I made the journey down to Mound Bayou. As I approached the town, I eased off of the current 4 lane iteration of highway 61 onto Edwards Avenue, the highway's original route. Old 61, like many Mississippi highways, hugs the original Illinois Central Railroad the right of way. I couldn't help but picture Isaiah Montgomery and his companions arriving at the site for the first time, surrounded by virgin forests determined to build a home for themselves.

Making the Museum: A New Dream For Mound Bayou

Shortly after linking up with Mr. Hermon at the town post office, we began our tour of the town. Though, like many Mississippi small towns, Mound Bayou has passed its zenith, the reminders of its status as a hub of African American business and culture are everywhere. Most prominently are the still standing I.T. Montgomery house and the

bank, but dozens of other sites carry significance as well. We also visited the city hall, the first home made out of Mound Bayou Brickcrete, the site of the old railroad depot, an industrial cotton gin used by Mound Bayou farmers, the Mound Bayou Cemetery and the Taborian Hospital. We also toured outside of the American Legion post which lists the names of scores of Mound Bayou veterans across both World Wars. After driving around for about 40 minutes, Mr. Hermon turned us around to finish our tour by seeing the museum. About this time I asked him what in his opinion was an important site that had received little attention so far. Without hesitation, he pulled over by a Spanish mission style building.

“This is the Taborian Headquarters,” he replied. “This is probably the most important building not on most people's radar.”

The museum certainly did not disappoint either. Their collection is housed in what was once the JFK Memorial High School band hall, located behind the old high school. The main room of the museum is filled with cabinets and display cases related to African American and Mound Bayou history. These main displays are constantly rotating as well, so while the centerpiece on my first visit was a collection of Black sports memorabilia, it was a collection of early 20th century photographs and newspapers on my second. The walls are lined with dozens of shelves as well, but the content displayed here is meant to show a different side of African American history. These shelves are made up predominantly of racist caricatures and iconography. According to Mr. Hermon, these artifacts demonstrate a piece of the cultural aspect of Jim Crow. This sort of paraphernalia reinforced negative racial attitudes and stereotypes and was conjoined with a system of legal codes and extralegal violence used to relegate Black Americans into

second class citizenship. These ideas were then commodified and sold to consumers. Though these items will likely make visitors uncomfortable, these displays are necessary to gain an understanding of some of the historical context in which African American history takes place.

The second room was under construction the last time I visited. It currently houses a collection of items arranged to mimic a set from the television series *Women of the Movement*. Set in 1955, this series depicts the investigation of the Emmett Till murder and subsequent trial, all from the perspective of his mother, Mamie Till. This series likewise portrays a part of history integral to Mound Bayou's story. Though not the center of attention, the town plays a role in the story as a safe haven for Mamie Till and others unfamiliar with the world of Jim Crow Mississippi. Dr. T.R.M Howard is present all throughout the series, providing financial resources and advice just as he did in real life. To top it all off, most of this collection is composed of pieces actually used on the set of the television series, donated from a studio employee who maintains ties to the town. Future plans include not only further set displays but potentially also a display dedicated to the funeral of Emmett Till, also using set pieces from the show.

Many other artifacts are being stored in the museum as well, many of which have particular meaning to the Johnson family. Mr. Hermon explained that his father, Hermon Johnson Sr., has lived in Mound Bayou for several years and has kept records of almost every activity he has participated in. Perhaps most prominent among the items from Mr. Hermon's personal collection is a typewriter and desk he used while working for the Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company under Dr. Howard. These items are significant for having belonged to Medgar Evers when he worked for the company and it was

Hermon Sr. who filled Evers vacated position when he left to join the NAACP. Likewise, he has preserved many business records and personal letters including some from Milburn Crowe, a local historian.

After examining the museum's collection, we were joined by Mr. Hermon's brother, Darryl Johnson. Mr. Darryl is currently a store owner and pastor in Mound Bayou and has also served as the mayor in the past. Charismatic and lively, he is well connected and has used his resources to the advantage of the museum, acquiring space for the project as well as local support. Mr. Darryl's experience has thus been instrumental in helping me to navigate the community and local customs. It was also thanks to him that I was able to visit the Mound Bayou Bank building. Coincidentally, my trip overlapped with a visit from several architectural students at Mississippi State who were surveying the structure for a class project, with Mr. Darryl being the class's point of contact. I was thus able to access and take notes on several of the materials stored in the building. It wouldn't be until lunch, however, that I began to get a feel for how big this project really is.

The Mound Bayou Movement

As we settled back into the museum to eat our food, the brothers began explaining to me that the museum is just the starting point for a much larger project. Mr. Hermon had already hinted at some of the bigger ideas for the town such as a larger museum complex, restoration of important historic structures and a park complex, but now I had a chance to hear some of the details of how the plan was moving forward. To begin, the city has never tried to downplay or hide their history, but for the last several decades Mound Bayou's history has remained off the radar to much of the wider world. This has

changed over the last few years as many formerly uninterested parties have begun to reckon with their racial past. With awareness about African American history bolstered and popular media such as *Women of the Movement* featuring Mound Bayou attention from outside Mississippi has been growing rapidly. For example, University of Alabama professor of history Dr. David Beito explained in a recent opinion piece that the television series has piqued interest in Mound Bayou figures.

He writes that, “The recent ABC mini-series...introduced Dr. T.R.M. Howard to millions of Americans who had never heard of the late civil rights leader. They deserve to know more.”²²

This notion is supported by internet search trends, which show that interest in both Mound Bayou and Dr. Howard spiked tremendously after the show’s debut. The museum has likewise seen an increase in activity this year and has caught the attention of some important figures as well. A few weeks after my visit, the United States secretary of the interior Deb Haaland made her own visit to the town while working on details for an Emmett Till memorial in the Delta. Here, she received a personal tour from the Johnson brothers, where they outlined many of the same details they explained to me. She was quite receptive.²³

As of the time of writing their plan is still in motion and ever changing, but the end goal has remained steady. With the right amount of support and interest, both local and beyond, this museum has the potential to grow into a much larger opportunity for community revitalization. The Johnsons and their associates are working towards making

²² David and Linda Beito, “The inspiring truth about T.R.M. Howard: An unexpected Black History Month lesson,” *New York Daily News*, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-trm-howard-inspiring-truth-20220209-maz5doji55aitlicm4vt6mp55y-story.html>

²³ “Search Trends,” *Google Trends*, Google, last modified April 15, 2022, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?geo=US&q=%2Fm%2F0wpj7>.

this opportunity a reality and restore Mound Bayou to some of its former glory. However, in contrast to the town's past, this time they envision Mound Bayou not as a refuge from the outside world but rather as a bridge between that world and a very unique history. This can be a place where anybody from anywhere may come and discover Black history in a place that has made history. And finally, as Mr. Hermon put it, this museum is about healing. There are many successes on display in the museum but there is a lot of pain too. These displays are not meant to divide or create guilt but rather create discussion. In doing so we can not only acknowledge our past and learn from it but reconcile with it as well.

Building a Partnership: The Visit

As we finished our meal, I found myself invigorated by the vision these men had for Mound Bayou. In the meantime, there was and still is much work to be done. At this point we determined that a significant component of my own project could be helping to provide some academic resources for the museum. After all, our own university has worked with multiple community projects and public histories. Although such projects will require significant planning, we know we could at least lay the groundwork for something bigger in the future. Likewise, there is a wealth of material in the University of Mississippi library and archives related to Mound Bayou, including several primary source letters and documents, many of which the Johnson brothers had not seen. We decided that two main things needed to happen. First, I was going to find a way to digitize some of this source material. Second, we decided to plan a campus visit where the brothers could come and work with their history in our archives. I also recognized

that such a visit would be a wonderful way to familiarize the Mound Bayou leaders with university affiliates who may be interested in their project.

On my drive out of the Delta and back home the night after my first visit, my mind was abuzz with the possibilities these men not only had in front of them but the opportunities they were creating for themselves and their community. Though my own place in the project was not yet completely clear, when I arrived back in Oxford I set to work arranging a day for the Johnson's to come visit campus. Initially, I planned only for a short visit to the archives so that we could examine the materials we have stored there. However, the more I discussed the visit with faculty and friends, the more the idea grew. It was through this planning that I learned about the several different resources the University of Mississippi has to make projects like this possible. The McLean institute in Howry Hall is a great starting point for anyone interested in getting involved with a community project, especially in advocating for the Delta. The MPartner project specifically provides wonderful opportunities for University and community partnerships, especially projects that stimulate local economies. For the time being, however, we needed to focus on a way to facilitate this visit. This is where the Office for Diversity and Community Engagement came into play.

Despite my ever growing list of ideas for the visit, the staff on hand at the Community Engagement Office found a way to make it work. By this point, I had found myself bogged down by the minute details of the visit, but Dr. Castel Sweet and her team managed to get golf carts available for our tour, parking passes available for our guests and a space to eat lunch. Likewise, the Honors College was more than happy to provide lunch for our group.

The day proceeded perfectly. Though not the main purpose for their visit, it seemed that the best way to begin the visit was by finding a way to open dialogue about the University's place in African American History. After all, the University for decades stood as a force to maintain a very dangerous and harmful racial status quo, a status quo that Mound Bayou was founded for the very purpose of breaking down. Though there is still much ground to cover, this historical antagonistic relationship is beginning to disintegrate. One of the best ways to continue breaking down this system is by acknowledging and understanding our history, not for the purpose of creating a sense of further antagonism as some may suggest, but rather so that we can learn from our past and heal.

Thus we decided to open the visit with the campus slavery tour led by Don Guillory, a post grad student from the history department. This tour seeks to contextualize and discuss the University and its relationship with the institution of slavery. Particularly, the tour discusses this history as it relates to three of the university's oldest buildings, The Lyceum, Barnard Observatory, and what is now the Croft Institute. In many ways this tour has similar goals to the Mound Bayou Museum, that being reconciliation with the darker parts of our history. In the tour, Guillory discussed how the foundations of the University related to a desire to escape the influence of abolitionism in Northern schools. All three of these buildings were built using enslaved labor and evidence of the practice is clear in all the structures. Perhaps this is most noticeable on the building housing the Croft Institute. Many of the bricks that make up the structure bear the literal handprints and fingerprints of the enslaved persons who made them. Not only did the tour serve to further educate our group but it also opened up just the sort of conversations for which

we were aiming. Having grown up in an all African American town, Mr. Darryl and Mr. Hermon were both able to provide perspective on the University's history from their own experiences, something that seemed to benefit the members of our group.

Following the tour, we sat down to eat lunch. This was another aspect of the visit that had grown significantly since the beginning of the project. Though still not sure what sort of relationship could be opened between the University and Mound Bayou, we knew that an excellent way to start would be by getting interested parties together at a table for discussion. Thanks to Dr. Sweet and the office of Community Engagement, we were provided with a spacious conference room in the Lyceum for our meal. For this part of the visit, we invited a few interested faculty members to learn about and discuss what the brothers were working on in Mound Bayou. Likewise, this provided a chance for Hermon and Darryl to see what resources the school may have available for such a partnership. Though we agreed that the process will take time, this conversation allowed us to begin building personal relationships that can facilitate a partnership in the future. Likewise, though we are still working out the details, we decided that the next step in this process is to take a trip to Mound Bayou with a group of interested University faculty to get some first hand experience with the town. Mr. Darryl summarized the importance of this conversation best.

“I think that a partnership between Mound Bayou and the University would be most appropriate, given the history between Ole Miss and the African American community.” He explained, “This could give the opportunity for the University to right some of the pain it has caused as well as help people in the community that are distrustful of the school to heal.”

Learning From the Living

Following our meal, I took the brothers over to the University archives to begin our research. When we arrived the archive staff had already prepared much of the material we had related to Mound Bayou. We immediately set to work. We began by examining written correspondence between Benjamin Montgomery and Joseph Davis. These letters highlighted the working relationship between the men, some of the businesses they were involved with following the Civil War, and the practical experience that later served as a basis for Mound Bayou's business aptitude. We next looked over the bylaws for the Taborian Hospital and several brochures related to Mound Bayou events, all documents related to the town's progress during the 20th century. Both Mr. Hermon and Mr. Darryl took detailed notes on these items as well as scanned them for use at the museum. Perhaps the most prominent item we examined in this collection was an oral history that I have yet to find anywhere else, an interview with Mrs. Minnie Fisher and Mrs Zee A. Barron.

Both Mrs. Fisher and Mrs. Barron were prominent community members who were deeply involved in Mound Bayou's history, and their story reflects this prominence. Their interview was conducted by two students from JFK High School in Mound Bayou, Portia Burton and Glenda Coleman. Though I have watched this tape several times now, by watching it with the brothers I believe that I gained a better understanding of what these sorts of interviews mean. As I rewound the VHS tape and began the recording, I felt like I already had a solid grasp on the interview's content. During my previous viewings, I took notice of the way these women looked at the camera, the excitement with which they told certain parts of their story or even the amazing eloquence they used when

speaking. However, these are just observations, Mr. Darryl and Mr. Hermon actually knew these women. As we watched the interview they would point out things like the eloquent speech patterns I had noticed earlier in my research.

“Do you hear the way they talk? That’s not natural.” Mr. Darryl remarked.

He then explained that this deliberate speech was a part of the town’s general culture that he experienced while growing up. According to him, their elders believed that presenting oneself the best one could and that self improvement and personal pride were the primary way to success. According to the brothers, as children if they ever used improper speech or coarse language within earshot of an adult they were not just called out for it but also corrected and reminded of the importance one’s impression can make. Perhaps this was not only an effort to be pleasing to the ear but also a way of attempting to overcome the terrible stereotypes thrust upon African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta during an era of white supremacy. In keeping with a Booker T. Washington model of Black self improvement, taking special care about how to speak in public could have been a small act of rebellion against a status quo that so desperately wanted to find fault in everything these people did.

There were several other details that took on a different meaning when watching this tape in the company of people from Mound Bayou. For example, I noticed a series of low groans while we listened to Dr. Coleman discuss being called a certain word as well as laughter as the women discussed ways in which they subverted expectations when doing business outside Mound Bayou. All of these instances highlighted the benefits to examining a part of history with people who have been personally impacted by it. Mr. Hermon and Mr. Darryl experienced the same challenges and victories, the same world as

Mrs. Fisher and Mrs. Barron. By listening to them I was able to share in that world ever so slightly. The same forces that have affected the experiences of these women, good and bad, have directly affected the lives of these men.

I believe moments like these reinforce the fact that often when we write about and study history we are not just learning about the past. In doing so we will learn about the world from the perspective of other communities and cultures, a necessary step moving into a more progressive and inclusive future. Rather, we are playing an active role in people's lives as well as determining the future of our institutions and communities. By making these academic resources more accessible and sharing them with these communities, we can supplement the tools they are using to reclaim and reinterpret their history.

Conclusion

Heading into the Summer of 2022, there is an increasing buzz of activity in and around Mound Bayou. The museum is open five days a week, Monday through Friday, with the opportunity to visit by appointment on Saturdays. Teams of students from the engineering school at Mississippi State have been surveying a few of the city's historic buildings and submitting ideas on how to restore them. On a larger scale, an ongoing campaign has sought to establish an Emmett Till national park in the Mississippi Delta nearby Mound Bayou. The National Park Service has likewise taken an interest in the idea and recently the Mound Bayou Museum has been working to create a potential partnership with the project. In the meantime, there is still a ton of ground work to be done and I believe the University of Mississippi can play a role.

There is not one clear answer on what the University can contribute to preserving Mound Bayou's history, but there are several possibilities. I think a good start would be to continue supplementing the museum's academic resources with our own, notably with what we have in our archives. For example, I have recently been working with Mr. Hermon and Mr. Darryl to create typed digital copies of some primary source letters that we have available. Likewise, departments like the Center for the Study of Southern Culture maintain the resources and skills to conduct oral history and other documentary work. Perhaps the technology we have may be used to supplement the work the museum is doing to listen and preserve the stories of Mound Bayou citizens. Another way that the

University could supplement the museum's resources may be to share archival skills when applicable.

We may also look at how the University has worked with Mound Bayou in the past. In 2012, a team of UM social work faculty and graduate students became involved with the restoration of historic buildings. Specifically, they assisted in the restoration of the Taborian Hospital which was at the time still significantly dilapidated. As with any community partnership, the key to maintaining a healthy relationship between the University and Mound Bayou is listening to the community. When discussing how the social work team would be involved in Mound Bayou, one faculty member explained that, "Our role is to find out what the community wants and what is important to them. We then work with them to help find the resources to accomplish that."²⁴ I believe that this is the best way to approach such a relationship moving forward. If we continue to listen, keep an open mind, and maintain honest dialogue then we will not only help preserve the town's history ethically and respectfully but also build a better future for all involved.

²⁴ Edwin Smith, "Social Work Students Continue Mound Bayou-UM Collaboration," *University of Mississippi News*, November 9, 2012, <https://news.olemiss.edu/social-work-students-continue-mound-bayou-um-collaboration/?msclkid=fdc48bdcc0a311ec9a01f252ebc6b5ab>.

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Collections in Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, University of

Mississippi

By-laws of the Fraternal Benefit and Hospital Departments, International Order of

Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, Mississippi Jurisdiction

Joseph Davis Papers

Organization, charter and by-laws of the Mound Bayou Foundation, Incorporated :

Mound Bayou, Bolivar County, Mississippi

Mound Bayou : a town of Negroes situated 104 miles south of Memphis, 116 miles north

of Vicksburg, is very near the geographical center of the great Yazoo-Mississippi

Delta

Mound Bayou: An Oral Report

Taborian Constitution, Mississippi