Freedom's Outpost

Mound Bayou and the Fight for Free Expression in Jim Crow Mississippi, 1887–1941

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Few places in American history have more closely resembled a "free expression safe space" than Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Prior to the modern civil rights movement, it was a haven for those seeking the basic protections of the Bill of Rights, which were besieged on all sides by rigid segregation and disenfranchisement. Mound Bayou's best-known contributions to American freedom were from Dr. T. R. M. Howard, who came to the community in 1942. During the early 1950s, Howard's Regional Council of Negro Leadership organized rallies of as many as ten thousand, featuring such speakers as Thurgood Marshall. The Council also led boycotts of service stations that denied restroom access to African Americans and initiated the first major petition campaigns to integrate schools. Howard was a civil rights mentor for activist Medgar Evers, who also worked for him selling insurance. Later, Howard helped find witnesses to the murder of the fourteen-year-old Emmett Till and protected Till's mother (who stayed at his home) during the trial of the killers. These accomplishments, however, cannot be separated from an earlier historical context. Mound Bayou's struggles for civil rights and economic empowerment over the previous fifty years provided the necessary foundation for his work (Beito and Beito 2018, 51–188).

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Mound Bayou arose as part of the "black town movement" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Common goals of these efforts were to find an escape from worsening white oppression as well as outlets for self-government, property ownership, and entrepreneurship. Some prominent examples included Nicodemus, Kansas (1874), founded by "Exodusters" from the South; Eatonville, Florida, the home of Zora Neale Hurston and the setting of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Boley, Oklahoma (1905); and Robbins, Illinois, the birthplace of actress Nichelle Nichols (1917).

The Mound Bayou experiment has not fared especially well among historians. One of the best-known scholars of the subject, Norman L. Crockett, asserts that Mound Bayou, like other black towns—which he especially links to the philosophy of Booker T. Washington—rested on an inescapable contradiction that "some time in the future the race would be accepted into the mainstream of American life. In the case of the black town that meant that ultimately it would cease to exist." Crockett flatly concludes that if "Mound Bayou had in any way seriously threatened to disrupt the status quo in the Yazoo Delta, whites would have no longer tolerated its existence" (Crockett 2001, 51, 183).

Echoing this conclusion, historian Neil R. McMillen identifies Mound Bayou's shortcomings as "less the problems of economic scale than of economic separation" (McMillen 1990, 190). Similarly bleak is McMillen's portrait of the Black and Tan Republicans, a group with close ties to Mound Bayou, as "an anachronism" and "the plaything of the small, conservative black bourgeoisie." One of their main functions, he asserts, was to be trotted out every four years by the national GOP as "symbols to northern blacks that the party of emancipation still cared for racial justice long after that party ceased to care at all" (McMillen 190, 69–70). The overall portrait is of a harmlessly pathetic organization adeptly exploited by white Democrats to weaken any prospects for a competitive Republican Party.

From Davis Bend to Mound Bayou

The town's founders, Isaiah T. Montgomery (1847–1924) and Benjamin T. Green (1854–1896), learned about personal freedom from experience. Both were enslaved in Davis Bend, Mississippi, on the Brierfield Plantation of Confederate President Jefferson Davis (1808–1889) and the adjacent Hurricane Plantation of his brother Joseph Emory Davis (1784–1870). Joseph, who held official title to both properties, drew inspiration from the efforts of British reformer Robert Owen (1771–1858) to create a "social community" for his textile mill workers. Joseph, albeit in a more obviously constricted way, permitted considerable autonomy to slaves at Davis Bend in matters of self-government and punishment (Gauthier 2021, 3–13).

One person who made a particularly strong impression on both Davis brothers was Benjamin T. Montgomery (1819–1878), an inventor and "virtual genius." They increasingly entrusted him to help manage their plantations as

well as the financial affairs of the Davis family. Building on his relative freedom, Montgomery established a successful general store, and later his son Isaiah was a "private secretary and office attendant" for both Joseph and Jefferson Davis (Holden 2019, 139; Glymph 1994, 17–19).

When the Davis brothers left the area because of an imminent Union capture early in the Civil War, Benjamin T. Montgomery stayed behind to look after the properties. The remaining African Americans quickly embraced him as a leader. Union Admiral David D. Porter hired Montgomery to repair ships and took on fourteen-year-old Isaiah, who later witnessed the Confederate surrender at Vicksburg, as a cabin boy. By 1867, Benjamin T. and Isaiah T. Montgomery were sufficiently prosperous to purchase both Brierfield and Hurricane (four thousand acres) from Joseph E. Davis for three hundred thousand dollars ($6.3 million in 2025 dollars) in installments, with the final amount due in 1876. For the next few years, father and son prospered, becoming the third-largest cotton producers in Mississippi (Gauthier 2021, 22–25, 44–46).

Plummeting cotton prices and recurrent floods, however, put an intolerable economic squeeze on both the Montgomerys, who lost their main ally with the death of Joseph E. Davis in 1870. After Benjamin T. Montgomery died without a will and Jefferson Davis, who was much less sympathetic to their efforts, filed suit to take ownership, Isaiah's situation became untenable. Weighed down by the remaining installment payments, and understandably reluctant to face off in Mississippi's courts against the former Confederate president, he defaulted (receiving some small compensation) and let Davis assume ownership (Gauthier 2021, 54–57, 65–68, 73).

Founding and Early History

In 1887, Isaiah T. Montgomery, then in Vicksburg, learned that the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad was selling land at bargain basement prices along its right-of-way. He teamed up with his cousin Benjamin T. Green, who had also lived at Davis Bend, to purchase more than one thousand acres in Bolivar County, Mississippi, midway between Memphis and Vicksburg (Gauthier 2021, 78–82; Jackson 1937, 30). Montgomery and Green advertised their proposal for a self-governing black community to an African American population then under mounting assault. Both men stressed the opportunity to "buy land and own it and do for themselves what they had been doing for other folks for two hundred and fifty years" (Hermann 1999, 222). They chose the name Mound Bayou because of an Indian mound between two bayous on the property. In the first year, the pioneers cleared ninety acres, often covered by thick undergrowth, using saws, axes, and dynamite (Washington 1907, 9126).

Mound Bayou's founders wanted both a refuge for the beleaguered values of liberty and civil rights and a model to inspire other African Americans to spread those values (Hood 1910, 118–21). Decades later, an elderly Montgomery told local children how he had "established this community in order that Negroes may have the freedom of expression and freedom to live and

earn a livelihood" (Barron 1980). The design of Mound Bayou was intended to foster economic openness, stability, and legal equality. Many early settlers had fled "whitecapping," envious whites' practice of destroying the property of aspiring blacks (Jackson 2002, 29–30).

The contrast between Mound Bayou and the rest of Mississippi was becoming ever more tragic. Since Reconstruction, whites had whittled down the suffrage through fraud and intimidation (McMillen 1990, 35–48). This trend culminated with the Mississippi state constitutional convention of 1890. In what proved a dubious honor, Isaiah T. Montgomery was the sole African American and Republican delegate. Pessimistic from the outset, he knew only too well the determination of whites to slash the franchise for African Americans, then constituting 61 percent of the state's voting-age population. The convention's president expressed the prevailing sentiment of the delegates when he bluntly declared that their purpose was "to exclude the Negro. . . . Nothing short of this will answer" (Holden 2019, 141; Turnipseed 2016, 111–12).

In the most controversial decision of his life, Montgomery voted for the convention's final document, which included poll taxes and literacy tests. His leading critic, Frederick Douglass, lamented that "no thoughtless, flippant fool could have inflicted such a wound upon our cause as Mr. Montgomery has done." Nevertheless, Douglass praised Montgomery's integrity and did not minimize the tremendous pressures he faced. "Such a man," he observed, "is not to be dismissed by calling him a traitor, nor a self-seeking hypocrite for he is neither the one nor the other. . . . Like a general on the field of battle, he has retreated when he could no longer fight and has surrendered a post which he thought he could no longer successfully defend" (Holden 2019, 137, 143).

Montgomery regarded the proposed state constitution as a fait accompli, though he likely underestimated the severity of the future loss in voting rights (Gauthier 2021, 101). The document relied heavily on the understanding clause portion of a literacy test that, taken by itself, may have disenfranchised six out of ten voting-age African Americans. The constitution also empowered local registrars to racially target through arbitrary questions, some dealing with minutiae in the U.S. Constitution and the Mississippi constitution (Turnipseed 2016, 117–18). A key motivation for Montgomery's actions was to preserve Mound Bayou as a ray of future hope.

Mound Bayou prospered in the next decade despite the violent death of cofounder Benjamin T. Green in 1896 (Jackson 2002, 32). After a trivial argument in his store over five cents' worth of rivets (or tacks), an African American outsider, armed with a Winchester rifle, blasted Green through a glass door. Although Montgomery offered a "liberal reward," the assailant was never caught ("Reward for a Negro Murderer" 1896; Hood 1910, 65). Green's widow, Eva, kept the store open and soon remarried J. W. Francis, her husband's junior partner. In 1900, a newspaper article described her as the richest black woman in the United States

(Jackson 2002, 37; "Mrs. J. W. Francis The Richest Colored Woman" 1900).

A Hub of African Commerce, Education, and Culture

By the 1910s, about one thousand African Americans resided within the city limits of Mound Bayou, while another seven thousand lived in the periphery (Jackson 2002, 34). The town had a newspaper, ten grocery stores, two sawmills, a soda bottling plant, four cotton gins, two loan and investment clubs, two clock and watch repair shops, a hotel, two doctors, two attorneys, a bank, and ten churches. The lone white-funded institution, an Andrew Carnegie Library, had come about as a result of Booker T. Washington's personal request to the steel baron ("Entire Southern Town Composed of Black Men" 1910; Hood 1910, 19, 35; "Negroes Get Library" 1909). A visiting black journalist considered himself "as free as a Junebug, because I am in a town owned and operated by my people, and I am free to walk the streets and if I feel like going out on the streets and shouting there is no one of another race to tell me to stop" (Glymph 1994, 320–21). Visitors disembarking from six daily passenger trains had such entertainment choices as "the brassy glamour of the gramophone" as well as such places of amusement as "the Lyceum, the Casino, the Bon-ton café (with jazzy music), the Luck Coles restaurant," and "many advertisements of minstrel shows" (Hood 1910, 36; Graham 1920, 293).

The quality of Mound Bayou's schools was comparable to, or better than, that of schools for whites in Mississippi. The schools were in session for nine months a year, for example, compared to the four or five months that other black schools held classes. On land donated by Montgomery and Green was a well-equipped high school, the Mound Bayou Normal and Industrial Institute, with two hundred pupils. Although described as public and administered by a board of local trustees, the funding came through tuition and voluntary contributions (including books and supplies) from the American Missionary Society and the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church. While the curriculum gave a prominent place to vocational education, it also laid heavy emphasis on the liberal arts, including music. Any of Mound Bayou's educational achievements came despite, not because of, white politicians (Hood 1910, 12–15, 36; Jackson 2002, 4, 120–22). African Americans in the state did not have a single four-year tax-funded public high school and received only 19 percent of educational funds, though constituting 60 percent of the school-age population. Overall, Mississippi spent only $1.53 per black pupil compared to $8.20 per white pupil (McMillen 1990, 73, 85).

J. W. Covington, the editor of *The Mound Bayou Demonstrator* (no issues of that paper apparently survive), drew a contrast between the town's hope-filled children and those in segregated urban areas, who had come to believe "that they can never amount to anything" (Crockett 2001, 121). He had faith that Mound Bayou's children, as they walked past their well-maintained schools, would "realize the benefit that comes from the industry and thrift that they see about them" (Tong

1910, 396). According to a local educator, another purpose of the schools was to communicate "the beauty of being black" (Graham 1920, 295).

The unchallenged superstar of Mound Bayou's business community was Charles Banks (1873–1923). Hailing from nearby Clarksdale, he grew up in a shack later converted into a chicken coop. Along with pluck, he had some early luck. Like many African American notables, he had benefited from the patronage of a prominent white family—in his case, the family that employed his mother as a cook. After moving to Mound Bayou in 1903, Banks showed a Midas touch in whatever he did (Crockett 2001, 124–25). Described as having the physique of heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, and the speech pattern of a "college-bred American," he "liked the jingle and clink of the dollars of commerce and the sound is as pleasing to [his] ears as the rhapsody of a Beethoven sonata" (Tong 1910, 395; Jackson 2002, 12). Banks was a jack-of-all-trades, equally at ease "standing before the Sunday school class and elucidating knotty points of scriptural interpretation" or seizing "the baton of the musical director and successfully persuad[ing] harmony out of the discordant instruments of a brass band" (Hood 1910, 52).

Banks had barely arrived when he teamed up with J. W. Francis, the husband of Green's widow, to start the Bank of Mound Bayou. With Banks as chief cashier and Francis as president, it became the state's leading black-owned financial institution, declaring annual dividends for its first six years and scoring an A-1 rating from Dun and Bradstreet (Jackson 2002, 136, 159; Mound Bayou Citizens' Committee for the Official Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration 1937, 21–22).

Banks became vice president of the National Negro Business League, the main U.S. clearinghouse for black business, soon after its founding by Booker T. Washington (Jackson 2002, 90). Banks demonstrated his affinity for that organization by naming streets in Mound Bayou after the League's officers: Booker T. Washington, T. Thomas Fortune, Emmett J. Scott, Fred R. Moore, and Charles Banks ("Banks Names Mound Bayou Streets After Business League Officers" 1905). Banks preached uninhibited self-reliance in the tradition of both Frederick Douglass and Washington: "Give me nothing because I am black; deny me nothing because I am a negro. Get out of my sunlight and then if I fail to make it, it will be my fault. Let me sink or swim" ("His Destiny in His Own Hands" 1906; Sandefur 2018, 1–140). Showing mutual admiration, Washington declared that if black Mississippians needed a leader, "a burst like that of a political nomination will rend the air with 'Banks! Banks!!'" (Jackson 2002, 54).

As African Americans exuded pride in Mound Bayou, sympathetic whites were noticing, too. Ordering his train to make a special stop in 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt hailed the community as "an object lesson full of hope for the colored people and therefore full of hope for the white people, too" ("President Gives Advice" 1908). Similarly, Booker T. Washington, who ranked Mound Bayou as a top priority, praised it for giving each African American "inspiration by seeing what other members of his race

have accomplished . . . [and] where he has an opportunity to learn some of the fundamental duties and responsibilities of social and civic life" (Hermann 199, 233; Jackson 2002, 57–58).

A high point was the opening of the Mound Bayou Cotton Oil Mill in 1912, manufacturing such products as cottonseed meal and oil. Banks served as general manager and Francis as treasurer, but the mill was also a community effort (Jackson 2002, 171, 175). Montgomery rounded up wealthy white investors in New York and Washington, D.C., while Washington persuaded Julius Rosenwald, the president and chair of the board of Sears, Roebuck and Company, to subscribe to twenty-five thousand dollars in bonds. Called "the largest thing of the kind ever undertaken by Negro people," the mill was capitalized at more than one hundred thousand dollars ($3.3 million in 2025 dollars). The mill opened to great fanfare in 1912 in a ceremony that featured Booker T. Washington pulling the cord for the whistle to start operations. "The pride in the community is the Mound Bayou Oil Mill," proclaimed *The New York Age*, "which is the direct outgrowth of the National Negro Business League" (Jackson 2002 171, 175; "Mound Bayou's Great Oil Mill Started" 1912; "Mound Bayou Improvements" 1912).

Figure 1
Booker T. Washington speaking at the dedication ceremony for the Mound Bayou Cotton Oil Mill (1912)

Political Participation and Criminal Justice

In line with the intent of Mound Bayou's founders, the town's political structure was spartan, flexible, and informal. The mayor, council members, and other officials worked part-time and usually had successful businesses that occupied most of their time. An early history of Mound Bayou stated that each resident felt that there was "no position, office, or station to which his son or his daughter may not worthily aspire. There is a new experience for him and a revelation" (Hood 1910, 121).

Another new experience, of course, for many residents was voting itself. As in the rest of Mississippi, a key qualification for the franchise, other than being male, was paying a poll tax of two dollars (more than sixty dollars in 2025 dollars) at the county seat. This amount, required for two consecutive years before voting, was just enough to screen out many lower-income residents. Mississippi's officials did not generally turn away African Americans who paid poll taxes, believing perhaps that other voting restrictions were sufficient barriers, but there were exceptions. "On more than one occasion recently," wrote Luther P. Jackson in 1948, "officials have refused to accept payment from Negroes on the ground that too many of them were seeking to pay and vote." It did not help, of course, that the often intimidating county sheriffs played prominent roles in collection of these taxes (Ogden 1958, 75–76; Jackson 1948, 9–10). Once a Mound Bayou resident paid his poll tax, however, the process became much easier. Registration and voting were at the local polling place under the supervision of African American election judges and poll workers who had little inclination to enforce such requirements as the understanding clause ("Challenge Votes of Mound Bayou" 1946). In 1937, the poll books of Bolivar County showed that 241 out of the town's 834 residents were registered voters (Jackson 1937, 86; Ogden 1958, 52–53).

Along with conventional voting, Mound Bayou left many decisions to "a simpler and communal" grand town meeting. Hiram Tong, a white visitor, elaborated that "whenever a question of importance arises, the town assembles in a body, and the matter is decided according to the wishes of the majority." Participation was not subject to literacy tests, poll taxes, or understanding clauses, and women had "full representation" (Tong 1910, 397). For residents, these meetings could become a vehicle to enforce collective moral standards. Tong aptly compares this motivation to that of isolated mining camps in the West, though the meetings in Mound Bayou had the added function of instilling a "racial *esprit de corps*." An example was a town meeting that cooperated with the local churches to delegate a canvassing committee to go door-to-door to find out about marital status. "Forty couples were detected violating the Mississippi marriage law," writes Tong, "and the forty were given the alternative of a legal marriage or instantaneous expulsion from the colony." These town meetings illustrated both the empowering and the sometimes oppressive features of Mound Bayou's variant of direct democracy (Tong 1910, 396–98).

Montgomery stepped down as the first mayor in 1902 but provided informal leadership as a patriarch until his death in 1924 (Hood 1910, 47). The town

predictably voted overwhelmingly Republican just as Mississippi went solidly Democratic. In the 1908 presidential election, for example, Republican William Howard Taft won 99 percent of the votes in Mound Bayou but only 6.5 percent in the state ("One Bryan Vote in Negro Town" 1908). The combination of the all-white Democratic primary and only nominal opposition by Republicans ensured that African Americans had no meaningful electoral voice in county and state races.

Mound Bayou was a stronghold of the Black and Tan faction (so named because it had a biracial membership) that, with some short interruptions, dominated Mississippi's Republican Party. As a result, community leaders had considerable influence over federal patronage and delegate selection for national presidential conventions. Banks attended every national GOP convention between 1904 and 1912 and had President Roosevelt's ear on political issues. In 1908, black delegates picked him for a seconding speech for future President Taft but, for reasons of "political expediency," he backed out (Crockett 2001, 128).

Banks soon broke with Taft because of the president's favoritism toward the rival "Lily White" GOP faction. That group contended that allowing African Americans in the party leadership made it impossible for the GOP to compete in Mississippi's political environment. Banks complained that when Taft "came into office we had four Negroes holding presidential post offices," but "today we have none save in the exclusively Negro town, Mound Bayou" (Jackson 2002, 144, 147). The usually upbeat Banks lamented that African Americans were "now worse off in Mississippi than ever since emancipation." The Mound Bayou trio of Banks, J. W. Francis, and Fred H. Miller, a locally prominent businessman and planter, also gave the community a prominent stake in the Lincoln League, a national black Republican group, which pushed anti-lynching bills and other civil rights initiatives ("Banks Gets Back at 'Em" 1912; "The Mississippi Delegation" 1920). The story of the League not only underlines Mound Bayou's role but provides further illustration of the well-documented interdependence between black businesses and civil rights advances (Ferleger and Lavallee 2020, 494–515; Ferguson and Witcher 2021, 150–93; Butler 1991, 282–88).

Observers often highlighted Mound Bayou's unusually low crime rate as a marker of success. In its first twenty years, the town had only two homicides, and of 163 criminal offenses, fifty were committed by outsiders, sixty-eight were for disturbing the peace, and twenty-eight were described as "of so trivial a nature that no fine was imposed." Montgomery attributed the low crime rate to "the force of public opinion" and wide recognition that the laws "represent the sentiment of the community and are imposed for their own good. It is not so easy for them to realize that where the government is entirely in the hands of white men" (Washington 1907, 9128, 9129). Another resident commented that the "only rowdyism of any consequence ever known in or about the place was caused by some poor whites coming to Mound Bayou on a Fourth of July picnic and getting drunk on whisky they had brought with them. There is not a loafer or vagrant in our town" ("Law and Order Rules Negroes" 1905).

Meanwhile, the gulf in political rights continued to widen between Mound Bayou and the rest of the state. In 1896, only

6 percent of Mississippi's African Americans of voting age were registered; by 1940, that number had fallen to under 1 percent (Turnipseed 2016, 122). Whole black-majority counties in the Delta area did not have a single nonwhite voter. A staple of the speeches of Governor and later U.S. Senator James K. Vardaman (1861–1930) was that African Americans were fit only for menial tasks (McMillen 1990, 72). While speaking in New York, Banks reacted to this trend by bringing "greetings from Mississippi, the only state which has a Governor Vardaman to say we are still alive. . . . I hail from a state that tries the souls of black people possibly more than any other state in the Union" ("Mississippi Tries the Soul" 1905).

An obvious question is how Mound Bayou was to survive and persist. This was, after all, a period of horrific white violence against similar black empowerment experiments. Examples that come immediately to mind include the "race riot" in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, as well as the mob violence in 1921 that destroyed "Black Main Street" in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and two years later left whole communities in Rosewood, Florida, in flames.

One possible explanation was that Mound Bayou's leaders had put unusual emphasis from the beginning on building up stores of goodwill with white elites and patiently forging mutually beneficial economic relationships. These black elites, quite self-consciously, nurtured the impression to whites that their little community was completely nonthreatening and even presented an opportunity for the powers that be to indulge in some bragging rights. To some defenders of segregation, Mound Bayou showed that Mississippi's status quo not only was fair to African Americans but had opened a unique pathway for their progress. Finally, the almost total success of whites by the 1910s in establishing segregation and disenfranchisement may have instilled smugness and, to some degree, tolerance of this one exception.

An example of how the community was to step back from the brink of disaster was a rapid and well-coordinated response to an altercation in 1913 between an inebriated white outsider and a black ticket seller for a local "negro carnival show." Acting in clear self-defense, the ticket seller shot and killed the white man and wounded his grown-up son and then successfully made his escape ("Both Races Join to Avoid Lynching" 1913). Mayor B. H. Creswell promptly phoned the sheriff, who soon arrived. In a most unusual occurrence, the victim's family requested that a delegation from Mound Bayou attend the funeral. Even more unusual, the white minister asked Montgomery to make some remarks. The *Chicago Defender* marveled that it was possible for a Mississippi black man to "kill one white man and wound another without being lynched, and that Negroes could attend the funeral of the victim without being disturbed, and that a Negro was called upon to speak at the grave of the white victim of a Negro's shot" ("Colored Young Man Killed Southern Lyncher with His Own Gun" 1913).

Decline and Persistence

A long economic decline after World War I ultimately did more to imperil Mound Bayou's survival than any white violence. Like many small rural towns in the Delta, a failure to diversify beyond a cotton-based

economy led to a situation in which many local farmers had to sell at prices below the cost of production (Gauthier 2021, 144–45; Jackson 1937, 36–37). The population within the city limits dipped to just over eight hundred people in 1920 and hovered at that level for the next twenty years. The most visible casualty of these hard times was the Mound Bayou Cotton Oil Mill. It started at a disadvantage when Banks and the other promoters, perhaps hoping to prevent a white boycott, recruited Benjamin Harvey, a prominent white cotton broker in Memphis, to subscribe an additional fifteen thousand dollars and to lease the mill for five years. But Harvey soon proved to be a scoundrel, embezzling funds to shore up his failing Memphis mill. Banks took him to court and eventually prevailed, but the delay was costly (Jackson 2002, 175–81).

On the plus side, Rosenwald continued to show confidence in Banks, and the mill was sufficiently profitable that the Buckeye Cotton Oil Company, a subsidiary of Procter & Gamble, offered to purchase it and keep it running. Banks, however, still in an uphill struggle to pay off the debt created by Harvey, spurned this lifeline (foolishly, some later said), fearing "the loss of our identity as a race with the Oil Mill." In 1915, the mill suspended operations but then reopened. It sputtered along, closing again for long periods then periodically reopening for several years at a much reduced level (Jackson 2002, 175–81; "Mound Bayou Oil Mill to Operate" 1919).

Figure 2
The President's Office of the Bank of Mound Bayou (1910)

The cotton depression of 1914 brought the failure of more than one hundred banks in the state, and the Bank of Mound Bayou faced a similar fate until Rosenwald gave the bank an emergency loan of five thousand dollars. Although the loan tided it over, the state regulatory authorities, much to the shock of Washington and Banks, shut down the bank's operations. Officials questioned the worth of its securities, which had centered on black-owned real estate, much of it in the Mound Bayou area. Banks accused the regulatory authorities of "unwarranted hostility" and claimed that they subjected African Americans to a standard never applied to "members of their own race." Over the years, local investors from Mound Bayou established more banks, but these never passed muster with regulators ("Mound Bayou Standing Up" 1914; Jackson 2002, 160–63; "Bank at Mound Bayou Closed by Examiners" 1922).

Even in its diminished state, Mound Bayou retained a reputation as more prosperous and entrepreneurial than other predominantly African American areas in the state. In 1937, the town had five gas stations, twelve groceries, three blacksmith shops, two restaurants, a pharmacy, a dime store, a barber shop, a pool hall, and a beauty shop. Fifty-seven percent of the homes were owner-occupied, and the town had many more married households than the average for rural Mississippi. Eight out of ten of Mound Bayou's men, for example, were married, compared with only six out of ten in rural Mississippi (Jackson 1937, 55–57, 62).

A major factor tainting the interwar period was incessant factional conflict, sometimes mounting to soap-opera levels of intrigue and duplicity (Crockett 2001, 142). On Isaiah's death, Eugene P. Booze, the husband of Montgomery's daughter Mary Cordelia, assumed de facto leadership of the Montgomery faction. He was blue-eyed and light-skinned, and many resented him for perceived obsequiousness to the white Delta elite, though, if the truth be told, this approach had brought the town some needed philanthropic improvements. He ran repeatedly for mayor but always lost (Jackson 2002, 13–18; Hood 1901, 52; Gauthier 2021, 132). The factional leaders sometimes showed an ability to cooperate in response to real or perceived threats to the community, including the joint effort of Montgomery and Banks to save both the oil mill and the Bank of Mound Bayou (Jackson 2002, 13, 37, 166–67, 171). The factional fault lines also defied the usual political or ideological generalizations. A member of a particular faction might be bold and outspoken in one context but conservative and cautious in another.

Mound Bayou's persistence in pursuing the dream of black freedom and self-government was instrumental in the town's weathering the decline in the two decades after World War I. No person was more effective in keeping the town afloat than Mayor Benjamin A. Green (1889–1960), who was both a son of Benjamin T. and Eva P. Green and the first person born in the community. Returning with a Harvard Law degree, he overwhelmingly won the election for mayor in 1919 and served until his death in 1960. Green was a zealous but also realistic champion of Mound Bayou's historical importance (Gauthier 2021,

234–35). His diplomatic skills proved critical in navigating external threats and keeping internal peace. Green's status as a bachelor left him somewhat more detached from the hold of the town's prevailing kin networks.

Continued low crime (with two notable exceptions, which will be discussed later) was a key accomplishment of Green's tenure. It was impossible to attribute this record, including the lack of a single murder for a twenty-five-year span, to harsh or extensive law enforcement. The jail had closed in 1929 as a "needless expense," and the town had only part-time police: a town marshal, who doubled as the local "hot-dog man," and a black deputy delegated by the county sheriff ("High Homicide Rate May be Erroneous" 1930; Young 1941; Waldron 1938, 34). According to *The Afro-American* of Baltimore, many people there had "grown from childhood to manhood and womanhood without ever having seen a uniformed policeman" ("Children Grew Up: Never Saw Cop" 1928).

African Americans, and some whites, cited these crime statistics to challenge stereotypes that blacks were more likely to be lawbreakers. To Joel A. Rogers, the leading American popularizer of black historical accomplishments, Mound Bayou "does not prove that the Negroes are not criminal but does show that conditions make them so." The town's record, he elaborated, also raised broader questions about the veracity of official crime statistics for other areas with large black populations. "Now there is no doubt," Rogers asserted, "that a black man usually receives a harsher sentence than the white being thus marked as a criminal; the white, sometimes with powerful influence in the courts, gets the lighter penalty, being rated as a minor offender" (Rogers 1929). When Mound Bayou closed its jail in 1929, *The Chicago Defender* found it ironically strange that this was possible "in a state that leads in the lynch race yearly and where every other city pretends that it maintains its jail mainly to preserve order among dark folks" ("The Week" 1929).

The institutional backbone of local criminal justice was a regular mayor's court presided over by "Judge Green" for disputes and complaints. According to outside observers, the proceedings combined situational flexibility with "commonsense" justice. One news story reported that Green, after hearing the facts about a juvenile who had stolen a dollar from the grocery, seemed especially intent on admonishing the father for taking all the boy's wages. He also had a "kindly talk," which "straightened the quarrel between Sammy and Hoke over a boundary line," and "Jack had been cured of speeding and the marital troubles of Roxie and Luke fixed up." As with his predecessor Montgomery, Green attributed the low crime to an atmosphere where the "Negro is living in complete self-respect. In other words, he lives a normal life. Normal impulses have play" (Waldron 1938, 34).

The irony, of course, was that many of Mississippi's white judges barred Green, a Harvard Law graduate and a veteran of the Judge Advocate Office of the 92nd Infantry Division, from their courtrooms (Jackson 1937, 42; Mollison 1930, 53–59). A small indicator of the slights he endured was a nationally syndicated cartoon

from 1936 partly intended to advertise Mound Bayou's accomplishments. Depicting an imagined public meeting in the "Exclusively Negro Community of Mound Bayou," it highlights an obese and ostentatiously dressed figure with a gold watch dangling prominently from his vest who boasts to a delegation of citizens: "AS MAYOR OB DIS H'YAR TOWN, I'SE TO WISH TO BESTOW 'DON YO' MAH MOS' SINCERE CONGRATULATIONS! AMEN!" ("It's a Fact . . ." 1936).

Another challenge for Green and other Mound Bayou leaders was overcoming the persistent doubts of some fellow African Americans. Many of these anticipated later negative assessments by historians. One of the earliest of the critics was L. M. Hershaw in *Horizon,* a journal edited by W. E. B Du Bois, a key rival of Booker T. Washington. Hershaw charged that Mound Bayou's leaders were undesirable Americans who had revealed "a lack of moral fiber and purpose" to "control their homes, except as between Negro and Negro. . . . Mound Bayou is simply a little segment of a white country turned over to a black exploiter in payment for giving his consent to the disfranchisement of his people" (Hershaw 1910, 7–8).

Over the next two decades, a portrait of Mound Bayou as a complacent, somewhat smug, but isolated and ineffective black outpost began to emerge. One of the most nuanced examples was the view of Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University. While he regarded Mound Bayou as "an interesting cultural enclave in the American society," he concluded that "the group disadvantages often outweigh the shadowy advantages of individual escape." Instead, Johnson recommended that African Americans seek "normal participation in the life of American communities, even though this involves much frequent personal disappointment and much disorganization during the gradual process of acculturation" ("A Footnote on Isolation by Prominent Sociologist" 1938).

Interwar Political Assertiveness

As already mentioned, more recent historians have not given due consideration to Black and Tan contributions to civil rights or to Mound Bayou's role in making those possible. Black and Tan assertiveness, often directed from Mound Bayou, dated from the era of Charles Banks and continued for decades thereafter. An illustrative case was a meeting in 1921 of the executive committee of the GOP Third Congressional District of Mississippi (an area that included Mound Bayou). The meeting, which advertised the presence of Isaiah T. Montgomery as its "inspirational spirit," applauded President Warren G. Harding's endorsement of the Dyer Bill to "curb the lynching and burning of human beings" ("Important Measures Adopted" 1921). Taking this stand carried some risk for African Americans in a state where anger against any prospect of federal anti-lynching intervention was deep and wide. One of Mississippi's U.S. senators, Pat Harrison, was a leader of a tightly coordinated, successful Democratic filibuster that ultimately killed the Dyer bill after it had prevailed in the House ("G.O.P. Whipped by Filibuster, Kills Dyer Bill").

The most influential Mississippi black Republican during the interwar period

was Isaiah's daughter, Mary C. Booze, a member of the Republican National Committee from 1924 until 1952. A fellow prominent Black and Tan Republican from Mound Bayou was Fred H. Miller, a brother-in-law of Mayor Green and the longtime head of the Mississippi Elks as well as a past president of Alpha Phi Alpha, the oldest and largest black college fraternity ("Mother of Mound Bayou's Mayor Dies" 1941; Felder 1940; "Black, Tans Elect G.O.P. Delegates" 1940).

Mary C. Booze had first become a symbol of racial controversy purely by happenstance. During the 1928 presidential campaign, Democratic Governor Theodore Bilbo, perhaps the most visible racist demagogue at the time, charged that Republican candidate Herbert Hoover had danced with Booze, a "negress," on the Mound Bayou train platform while he was secretary of commerce, during a brief stop as coordinator of Mississippi flood relief in 1927. Bilbo had framed this allegation to incite white voters, always on a hair trigger against any hint of "social equality." Mary C. Booze promptly, and adeptly, deflated the story, calling the statement "ridiculous. As a matter of fact, I am upwards of 50 years of age, a consistent member of the Methodist church and do not dance. I have no idea whether Mr. Hoover dances or not" ("Negress Doesn't Dance" 1928; Lisio 1985, 46–47).

Rather than seeking confirmation for the claim, which even his acolytes found difficult to swallow, Bilbo demanded that Hoover answer if it "would be offensive to you or indecent, infamous or disagreeable for you to come in contact with or dance with a woman of the negro race. If according to your ideas of social equality you do not think it indecent or infamous to have it said of you that you danced with Mary Booze, a member of the negro race, then why do you get exercised and all 'heated up' when it is said of you that you danced with Mary Booze" ("Governor Bilbo Questions Hoover in Connection with Story of Dance with Negro" 1928). It is doubtful that anybody took this too seriously, though someone sent this scurrilous ditty to the *Clarksdale Press Register*: "Al Smith is a Catholic, to the world that's no news; Hoover is not a prohibitionist, Cause he likes Mound Bayou 'Booze'" ("Good-Night!" 1928). Bilbo, a virtuoso manipulator of racist passions, later admitted that he had intended to bait Hoover to say something to offend either African American or white voters: "It was just like asking old high-collar Herbert if he had quit beating his wife. He couldn't say yes and he couldn't say no" (Hilton Butler 1931, 501).

Although Booze, along with her husband, continued to maintain a cordial relationship with Hoover that had begun during the flood relief period, she did not hesitate to speak out about his presidential appointments. She led the campaign against three presidential nominees: Lester G. Fant (for district attorney for the Northern District of Mississippi), Edwin W. Holmes (for the Circuit Court of Appeals), and B. B. Montgomery (for federal marshal for the Northern District of Mississippi). Fant's appointment in 1929, despite his "well known aversion to colored people," went through, but Booze lobbied successfully against Holmes a year later. This time

Mayor Green, in his capacity as an attorney, played a role. Booze presented Hoover with affidavits quoting a court transcript showing that Holmes, while a judge in Clarksdale, had ordered a white defendant to replace Green with a white lawyer. Moreover, Fant, who was one of the lawyers present that day, had interjected, "Did you hire a nigger lawyer to defend you?," and then elaborated sarcastically, "This is another of those Mound Bayou nigger lawyer cases." Because of the uproar, Hoover backed off from nominating Holmes (Lisio 1985, 13; "Committeewoman Opposes Lilywhite Appointment" 1929; "Federal Judge in Mississippi Who is Seeking Promotion Meets Storm of Objection Because of Race Bias" 1930; "His Attitude on Negroes Defeats Another Judge" 1930).

Booze similarly waged a campaign against the nomination of B. B. Montgomery (no relation to the African American Mound Bayou Montgomerys) by publicizing the nominee's public claim that there "are no chaste colored women." When the president sent the nomination to the Senate anyway, Booze accused him of complicity in an insult to her and "all the decent Negro women of the nation." In close cooperation with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and pro–civil rights senators, she promoted a filibuster that ultimately led Hoover to withdraw the nomination ("President Hoover Withdraws Name of B. B. Montgomery" 1932). These were genuine victories in a time of often fatal consequences for African Americans who expressed views of this type. In spearheading the fight against Holmes, Fant, and Montgomery, Booze, operating from relatively secure Mound Bayou, had contributed in a public way to creating a stigma against white racist statements and opposition to permitting black lawyers to practice law.[1]

These objections notwithstanding, the Boozes loyally supported Hoover in 1932 ("Mount [*sic*] Bayou Went Solidly Republican" 1932). While Mound Bayou gave Hoover a unanimous vote, it did so under the conditional justification, according to Eugene P. Booze, that "the Republican National Committee had repudiated the President's policy of Lily Whiteism" and that "a vote for the Republican ticket was not a vote for Hoover, but a vote of confidence in the Republican National Committee in repudiating Hoover and sustaining Mrs. Booze."[2]

A less publicized form of political assertiveness was participation by Mound Bayou's residents in the NAACP. In the 1920s, Green volunteered to be a possible attorney for the NAACP in legal cases. His willingness to publicly align with that organization was not an exception in the community. The Boozes carried on an extensive correspondence with the main NAACP leaders, and Mound Bayou had a higher NAACP membership as a

1. Mary C. Booze to Walter White, March 5, 1932, and Roy Wilkins to Eugene P. Booze, July 7, 1932, July 11, 1932, NAACP on B. B. Montgomery, July 1, 1932—July 31, 1932, NAACP Administrative File Subject File, Politics, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

2. Eugene P. Booze to Walter White, December 15, 1932, NAACP on Politics and Voting, November 1–December 31, 1932, NAACP Administrative File, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

percentage of black population than any other Mississippi community.[3]

Mound Bayou made another, more complicated contribution to the advancement of black freedom. According to DeMario Walker-Brown, there were "countless stories of the town serving as a safe haven for African Americans during the twentieth century" (Walker-Brown 2015, 20). In 1912, Captain C. H. Neyland of nearby Parchman State Prison complained that local citizens were "aiding and abetting the escape of convicts." Neyland reported that a trustee convict in a search party had fled to Mound Bayou, where "he was harbored by negroes at that place, provided with civilian clothing and then made good his escape." Incidents of this type had become so frequent that Neyland demanded "that drastic steps be taken" ("Help Prisoners Escape" 1912). In 1935, Milton Germany, "a giant negro," fled to Mound Bayou from Parchman after an arrest for the murder of a plantation manager. After arriving in Mound Bayou, he surrendered himself to town marshal John Thomas. Thomas turned Germany over to the white district attorney who then took him back to Parchman while "eluding a mob" ("Negro Is Held in Slaying" 1935).

Mutual Aid, Voluntarism, and a "Saving Remnant"

Mutual aid and voluntarism were essential drivers of creativity, self-government, and initiative in Mound Bayou, and groups such as the Odd Fellows, the Elks, and the Masons had active lodges. These organizations were also important sources of social welfare (Beito 2000, 180–83). Especially prominent locally was the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor. Local schoolteacher Perry M. Smith became head of the national organization (originally based in Indiana), which had developed out of a slave resistance group, the Knights of Liberty. The order's interlocking ties to the local political elite included Mayor Green, who was the order's official attorney, and Fred M. Miller, who was on the board of directors. During the 1930s, Smith led a campaign to raise money for the state unit of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor to build a hospital in Mound Bayou to serve the members ("Knights and Daughters of Tabor Face Serious Division over Ouster of Famed Physician" 1947, 1; Mound Bayou Citizens' Committee for the Official Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration 1937, 36, 47; Sims 2016, 49–83).

During these years, Mound Bayou's citizens conceived of themselves as preserving a kind of remnant of lost American black liberty. Their outlook had some parallels to the "saving remnant" identified by social philosopher Albert Jay Nock. Nock drew comparisons between the Old Testament remnant of the Jewish faithful and a tiny contingent of Americans who still advocated original principles "and by force of character are able, at least measurably, to cleave to them." Mound Bayou's remnant faced challenges and expectations not unlike those outlined by Nock: "They need to be encouraged and braced up because

3. Benjamin A. Green to William T. Andrews, April 19, 1928, Administrative File, Subject File, Lawyers Directories, April 9, 1928–June 14, 1928, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Financial Statement from January 1 to September 1, 1920, NAACP Branch Files, Duluth, Minn., 1920, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

when everything has gone completely to the dogs, they are the ones who will come back and build up a new society" (Nock 1991, 112, 124–25). The "saving remnant" in W. E. B. Du Bois's doctrine of the talented tenth (the very small black political and educational vanguard) also seems comparable (though Du Bois had no fondness for Mound Bayou). That remnant, Du Bois declared, "continually survives and persists, continually aspires, continually shows itself in thrift and ability and character" (Du Bois 1903, 44).

A kind of remnant phraseology often appeared in references related to Mound Bayou during this period. Mayor Green, for example, described residents "as the heirs of freedom" who will "forever look with disdain on acts of tyranny" and "have something vastly more important than material gain to offer the Negroes of America and that is freedom from petty prejudices and insults" (Wagner 1937). To journalist Enoc Waters, they were a "free people in a land of opportunity. And the Delta knows them as a different people. This recognition is reflected in their attitude toward Mound Bayou. People are 'Mr.' and 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' to whites to whom other Negroes are Mary, Sam, or Sue. 'Girls' and 'boys' here are children" (Waters 1943).

Mound Bayou's annual Founders' Day was an opportunity to keep the flame burning for the remnant. Each event featured a pilgrimage to the tombs of Green and Montgomery and highlighted the accomplishments of prominent African Americans. Founders' Day was not without controversy, however. In 1930, Republican Representative Oscar DePriest of Illinois, the only remaining black member of the U.S. Congress and perhaps the best-known American spokesman against Jim Crow and disenfranchisement, accepted an invitation. *The Jackson Daily News*, the Mississippi flagship paper for white supremacy, responded with outrage that Mound Bayou had given a platform to an "an agitator" and "an advocate of social equality." For reasons never explained, DePriest did not appear ("DePriest Speaker at Mound Bayou" 1930; "Rather Unfortunate" 1930). In 1937, DePriest's more cautious black Democratic successor, Rep. Arthur Mitchell, accepted an invitation but then backed out, telling Mayor Green (the Republican who had invited him) that it had become "inadvisable" for him to appear.

Easily compensating for Mitchell's absence was the presence of Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens, who ran a "demonstration race," and African American aviator Colonel John C. Robinson (the "Brown Condor"), a volunteer for Ethiopia in the recent war against fascist Italy. Robinson added to the spectacle by landing his plane in front of the crowd of about ten thousand ("Thousands Attend Mound Bayou's 50th Anniversary Celebration" 1937).[4]

A Disastrous Family Feud

Mound Bayou had a dark side, however, which sometimes clashed with a generally well-deserved reputation for peace and freedom: a family feud that eventually erupted in violence and retribution. On one side was Mattie Estella Montgomery,

4. Arthur W. Mitchell to Benjamin A. Green, May 27, 1937, Correspondence, May 26–May 31, 1937, Arthur W. Mitchell Papers, Chicago History Museum, Research Center.

a daughter of Isaiah T. Montgomery, and on the other was her sister Mary and her brother-in-law Eugene P. Booze. The feud began in 1924 as a struggle over the estate of Isaiah T. Montgomery and continued with legal suits and countersuits until a tragic culmination in 1939. On October 1 of that year, Estella, who had been living for many years in St. Louis, came back to town, perhaps acting under dubious legal advice, to take up residency in the vacant Montgomery house. Eugene P. Booze rushed to the county seat to swear out a warrant and brought back two white deputies to carry out an eviction. This act flouted a local unwritten rule to rely on Mound Bayou's law enforcement officers rather than white outsiders. When the deputies, guided by Booze, forced open a door on the second floor, Estella was clutching something in her hand. According to Booze and the deputies, it was a butcher knife, but others later said it was just a paring knife and that a curl of apple lay on the floor. The deputies fired nine bullets, six of them piercing Estella's back. The white county coroner surprised no one when he ruled it justifiable homicide ("Mound Bayou Astir over Brutal Killing" 1939; Redding 1942, 303–6; Williams 1939).

Mayor Green, calling Estella's death "an outrage," presided over a well-publicized mass meeting of five hundred citizens demanding an investigation. The main participants included such notables as Perry M. Smith, the grand mentor of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, and Fred H. Miller, a leading figure in the Black and Tans ("Asks U.S. Death Probe" 1939; "Mayor B. A. Greene [*sic*] Pushing Mound Bayou Murder Probe" 1939). Green did not mince words: "Mound Bayou is facing a crisis as it never has faced since its founding. The very principles upon which it was founded, the principles for which the early pioneers left home in other communities to come to a wilderness, [are] being placed in jeopardy." The meeting approved a resolution deploring "that not even ordinary courtesy to our community was being exercised by a so-called leader [Eugene P. Booze]" and calling on the county "not to send any enforcement officer into our community unless he had reason to believe his orders will not be carried out by elected officers of our town" ("Asks E. P. Booze to Resign Position on School Board" 1939).

While most African Americans reacted with dismayed embarrassment about these unseemly happenings in a much touted "all-Negro town," leading black journalist George S. Schuyler, who had spoken there several years earlier, cited the protest meeting as a cause for optimism. It was welcome evidence that "there is one Negro community in the United States where support of civil pride and right conduct is so high that the citizens have gumption enough to take a stand against alleged disgraceful conduct and practices" (Schuyler 1939). But the course of the whole affair quickly veered off into another sharp and tragic turn on news that two unknown masked African American assailants had gunned down Eugene P. Booze outside his Mound Bayou office just five weeks after Estella's death. The crime was never solved ("Eugene Booze Slain" 1939).

The Booze–Montgomery saga was not over yet. In December 1939, the state of Mississippi, in cooperation with local authorities in Clarksdale, brought down overwhelming force on Mound Bayou by deploying four squadrons of the Mississippi National Guard. While the

authorities paid some lip service to "the arrest and conviction of Booze's slayers," their main stated purpose was to crack down on alleged illegal gambling and whiskey sales ("All-Negro Town Is Raided By State's National Guard" 1939).

The bad news never seemed to end. Mound Bayou hit rock bottom on the eve of World War II when disastrous fires wiped away much of the business district. The facts seemed to show that the pessimists were correct. "No progress is being made," concluded James Taylor in an article on Mound Bayou for *The Negro History Bulletin*; "in fact, the enterprise is retrogressing" ("Business Area in Shambles" 1941; Taylor 1940, 111).

Revival

Yet, during this low point, the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor was laying the groundwork for a revival. In 1942, the order finally opened the long-awaited Taborian Hospital, built by the mostly impoverished members over the previous decade without any governmental aid. By 1945, it offered affordable health care to nearly fifty thousand black members in the Mississippi delta (Sims 2016, 83–84; Reed 1939). In what eventually proved a game-changing decision for Mound Bayou, the hospital hired Dr. T. R. M. Howard, then living in Nashville, Tennessee, as its chief surgeon. During the 1940s, his entrepreneurial and organizing skills brought an economic surge for the community, which had the result of building a solid platform for the rise of a mass movement against Jim Crow. Howard also did more than anyone to publicize Emmett Till's murder in 1955 and, using Mound Bayou as a base, led an interracial investigation for evidence and witnesses during the trial of his killers.

Mound Bayou's role as an instigator and enabler of the modern civil rights movement was not a break from its previous history, however. Through both quiet and sometimes risky action, its citizens had persisted in good times and bad to chip away at the edifice of Jim Crow. In doing so, they sustained themselves in an environment that nurtured free speech, entrepreneurship, and constitutional rights. No place in Mississippi became a more secure redoubt of free expression for African Americans, making it possible for them to plan and ultimately succeed in launching one of the most formidable challenges to the racial status quo during the twentieth century.

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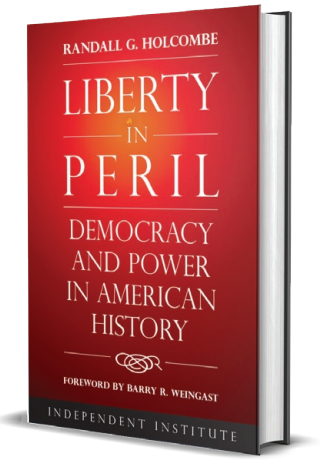

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