

EX-SLAVES DREAM OF A MODEL NEGRO COLONY COMES TRUE

**Mound Bayou, Mississippi, in the Heart of the Fertile "Delta"
Is a Community of 8,000 Where No White Man Can Own a Square Foot of Property.**

By Thomas H. Arnold.

THE story of Mound Bayou, Miss., reads like a romance, and yet it is the simple truth of the wonderful work accomplished by a sturdy set of negroes, who, while they are ambitious, have no thought or hope of putting themselves in competition with the white man as an economic or social factor, who claim that there is much that is good in their people, that can be brought out and developed by proper application and example.

They have come up from a race of ex slaves, but under the leadership of old Isaiah Montgomery they have planned and builded so that the last vestige of the environment of slavery is a thing of the past with them, even to that "free slavery" that is yet so prevalent in the plantation life of the South the system of "share-cropping," which they realize is a species of bondage worse than was ever endured in the days "befoh de wah."

There is a lesson in Mound Bayou that it would well pay the negroes throughout the United States to study and profit by. It is a lesson of how they may become prosperous and self-reliant, of how they may build for their posterity in a way that will bring forth the blessings of those who are to come after them.

To segregate the negro from the white race and yet have him prosperous and contented has been, heretofore, a problem that was considered incapable of solution, but Mound Bayou is a living contradiction of the assertion and a revelation in that line of undertaking.

Other similar colonies are in process of incubation, and before another quarter-century has rolled around I predict that they will have blossomed into full being, and that many of the negroes who are leading an idle and humiliating existence in the "negro quarters" of our cities, heeding the call of "back to the farm," will join the throng that is now singing the praises of old Isaiah Montgomery, "The Father Abraham of Mound Bayou."

A STUDY in black and white principally black.

"The Black Metropolis of the South," with the people black and the houses white.

Such is the town of Mound Bayou, situated in Bolivar County, Miss., a town where no white man can own a foot of property, invest a dollar in its improvements or enterprises, nor till any of the 40,000 acres of rich delta soil that goes to make up the "Colony of Mound Bayou."

With the bare exception of \$10,000 put into a library building for the benefit, enlightenment, and advancement of the people of this unique community and those who will come after them, by Andrew Carnegie, no man of white blood has a dollar in the colony nor in the property nor enterprises of the village itself.

It is a town founded by negroes, built up by negroes, managed by negroes, all of whom are descendants of the real old-time African race into whose veins has crept no germ of that shiftlessness, worthlessness, criminal tendencies, or self-importance that characterizes so many of the race who have grown to be such a fester upon the average city, and who live upon the proceeds of thieving and of crime.

That kind of blood has never found permanent lodgement in the citizenship of Mound Bayou, nor of the farming element of the "colony." It may have existed to a certain extent in the pioneer days of the place, when Isaiah Montgomery and Benjamin Green, two ex-slaves, blazed their way through the wooded wilderness of Bolivar County and started the undertaking that has resulted in a monument to them that will be as permanent as the everlasting hills.

In the very heart of the wonderful Delta country, where the soil is as rich as the proverbial cream more fertile than the famed Valley of the Nile or the most lauded granaries of the Old World, on the line of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, is situated Mound Bayou. Leaving New Orleans the train speeds on, passing the Louisiana State line and rushing northward through the counties of Wilkinson, Franklin, Jefferson, Claiborne, Warren, Sharkey, and Washington, with the huge levees towering on the left to prevent the Spring freshets from devastating the great stretch of jet black alluvial lands with the floods from the mighty "Father of Waters," and then Bolivar County is reached the garden county of all that wonderful "American Valley of the Nile," of which Rosedale is the county seat.

As the train draws near the Mound Bayou the traveler notices that the broad plantations, with their palatial homes and dotted in greatest profusion with newly whitewashed tenant cabins and cotton houses, and through miles and miles of whose cotton fields the train speeds as a great vessel might cleave the waves of the ocean, have disappeared. They are conspicuous by their absence here, and in their places are found innumerable small holdings, each worked by a separate negro owner or negro tenant, and in place of the great white plantation houses are the low, squatty houses of these independent tillers of the soil, who know no taskmasters and who are not held in eternal servitude by the demon "furnishing system" in the yoke of which their less fortunate brothers who work for the great plantation owners as "share croppers" have their necks from the day they stick a plow into the ground until they come to occupy the only six feet of earth about the possession of which they will never be disturbed.

In the midst of this district of negro farmers lies the village of Mound Bayou, quite picturesque and surely a unique proposition in the history of town building in this great country. If one had said to me a few years ago that it were possible or practical for the negro to segregate himself and without the aid of the white man and his advice and means to build up a community of his own race exclusively that should be a complete credit to himself, his State and his people, a community where crime and criminals are not tolerated, where law is enforced along legal lines, where business is conducted on strict business principles, and where, at least, 90 per cent. of the heads of families own their own properties or have snug bank accounts, I should have lustily pooh-poohed the idea.

There are ways, many of them, in which this people could assume to put themselves on a plane of equality, if only for a brief period, with the white visitors whose business relations with them make visits now and then a matter of necessity. But they do not avail themselves of the opportunities.

As one sits and talks to Isaiah Montgomery, now almost 70 years of age, he is struck with his rugged honesty and his unassuming frankness. You can't help liking him, although his skin and his hair mark him as one of the fast disappearing type of "befoh-de-wah" darkies. The people of Mound Bayou call him the Hon. Isaiah Montgomery, and he has well won the title, for his record stands out of honored among them, with never a tarnish nor a semblance of a stain. And, as a talented writer has before expressed it, he is "The Father Abraham of Mound Bayou."

His controlling idea, as well as the idea of all the principal citizens of the place, is race building. They are carrying it out to a most successful degree. One of their chief characteristics is the entire frankness and complacency with which they regard the fact that they are black men, and that they are in reality an inferior race, a race that has come up from slaves. Unlike the average negro found in our city communities, the Mound Bayou citizens frankly admit that they have no thought of trying to put themselves on a plane with the whites.

They have none of that assumption, that false pride that leads to a great majority of complications in their every day association with white people, and that have made the race problem all the more difficult of solution. Even the leading men of the colony refer to each other as negroes, and to their race as the negro race.

Isaiah Montgomery is proud of what he has accomplished in this race building. And yet he has lived in a romantic period, a period whose cycles of success would have turned the head of many a less well-balanced man, even those with white skins. He was born a slave, on a plantation that was the home of a brother of Jefferson Davis. Like every other slave he had nothing scarcely that he could call his own when the war liberated him, but to-day his wealth is variously estimated at from \$75,000 to \$100,000.

But between that eventful day and this time has been a world of interesting events, a wealth of race and stamina building in history, that he turns the pages of with an evident and surely pardonable pride. He delights in recalling the days of his first experiences with the colonists and in recounting some of the difficulties he encountered in cheering them on in their herculean task of transforming the wilderness into the productive, happy, prosperous home place that it is to-day. He gladly and interestingly tells the story to those who are interested listeners, and elaborates his narrative, if urged on the least, with extracts of the speech he made to the first colonists as they stepped from the train and faced the great battle that was before them.

Pointing to the great stretch of forest he said: "Why fear the difficulties that are before you? Have you and your fore perform the same heroic duty for yourselves and for your children that are to come after you, that they may worship and develop under their own vine and fig tree?"

Two other examples of the stamina, intelligence, and reliability that are predominating characteristics of the Mound Bayou negroes are J. W. Covington, editor of The Demonstrator, the newspaper of the colony, and Charles Banks, cashier of the Bank of Mound Bayou, a financial institution that started its existence with a capital of \$10,000, but which has only recently been increased to \$25,000.

Covington is a man of more than ordinary intelligence, who conducts a most creditable publication with an ever-present determination to better and build up his people and their community. In his mind and in his utterances there lurks no suspicion of smothered shame of his race. He not only admits his race, but he is ever engaged in the work of improving it, and is constantly, though perhaps unconsciously, manifesting his pride in the strides that have been made and the stability with which the social structure is being builded.

When a certain writer recently expressed a doubt as to the future of the colony after the present generation of its founders have passed away, the editor took him to a window, and, pointing to a group of school children that was going home, tidily clad and with books neatly strapped under their arms, said:

"Do you think that our boys and girls can go to and from the well regulated schools every day and not realize the great benefits that come to them from the industry and thrift that they see about them? What chance has the negro boy or negro girl who lives in the 'nigger quarters' of the cities? They soon learn to think they can never amount to anything and to despise their race, no matter talk without being able to see the speaker one would imagine him to be a college-bred American.

It was Banks who first advocated before the convention of the Negro Business Men's League of Mississippi ideas that would broaden the racial activities and encourage the business and mechanical development of the negro people, and which efforts resulted in the establishing of a cottonseed oil mill at Mound Bayou. The stock was placed at \$4 a share so that every negro in the State might have an opportunity to invest his savings in the enterprise. It has been but recently established and will be a success. Banks believes this, and his reasoning is excellent.

“We selected the cottonseed oil industry,” he said, “because our people are cotton raisers; they have made most of what they have from handling cotton. The demand for cottonseed oil, cottonseed meal, and cottonseed hulls is far in excess of the supply. Oil mills are earning from 20 to 50 per cent. We gin our own cotton now; we sell it through our own cotton men; we finance our own crops. Why should we not reap the benefits of its by-products?”

Banks, as I have said, is also cashier of the Bank of Mound Bayou. It was through his energies that it was organized and through his efforts mainly it has been built up to the stable institution that it is. It has deposits of upward of \$50,000, and has on a single day transacted more than \$22,000 of business. It handles without difficulty the cotton, lumber, and various other industries of the community, and in the financial flurry two years ago continued specie payment when many of the strongest white banks of the State had to resort to cashier's certificates. It stands A1 in Dun's and Bradstreet's, has never been in the least embarrassed, and is a regular commercial institution, clearing with the best banks of New York and the East.

Every official of Mound Bayou is a negro, and even the white Sheriff of Bolivar County does not intrude officially on the colony, but appoints a colored deputy to represent him in that district.

But there is little use for officers in this colony of black people. It is almost a proverb with them that the Deputy Sheriff and the constable are the only idle men in town. That's wonderful, isn't it, in a town of negroes? But the condition is perhaps best explained in the language of old Isaiah Montgomery, who said:

“Our people, both educated and illiterate, are behind the laws we make. They know that every law is the sentiment of the community, and that it is their law and stands for their good. No lawless influences from the outside can harm us. When the better class of white people of this country know just what we are doing and if harm threatened, the white Sheriff of Bolivar County could get enough deputies from among the best people of Mississippi to protect us in every way.”

And the best white people, including the Sheriff, afterward confirmed the statement to the fullest extent.

As an example of how their affairs are regulated and the respect they have for law and order may be cited an incident that occurred in 1905. A citizenship meeting was called, for it had been discovered that several “blind tigers” were being operated in the village. The matter was thoroughly discussed and the sentiment emphatically expressed that this character of lawlessness would not be tolerated, and the “blind tigers” vanished and there ceased to exist.

It was not many years ago, that the local option party of Mississippi made a strenuous effort to abolish local option in Bolivar County, and the whisky men ascertained that the success of the movement hung on a half dozen franchised voters of Mound Bayou. They immediately set to work to endeavor to corrupt these voters. This move came to the knowledge of the colony, a citizens' meeting was called, and the suspected voters were reprimanded in a stern but kindly way. It was reasoned that saloons and rum shops in the county, even though they were absent from the colony, might demoralize some of the members of the colony and result disastrously. Accordingly the village delegates were instructed to cast their ballots with the prohibition party of the county, and that saved the day in Bolivar for prohibition.

It might be supposed that the white visitor to a community composed entirely of blacks would be expected to put himself on a plane with them, and if he sought their hospitality he must break bread with them on terms of perfect equality. But such is far from the case.

If a white man desires to spend the night in Mound Bayou he finds that certain rooms in the hotel are reserved exclusively for white visitors. They are neat and cleanly to a degree of nicety, far in advance of what is found in

the average country hotel, and instead of being asked to eat at the table, or even in the same dining room with the colored boarders, the white sojourner's meals are served in his own room in a most appetizing manner.

For more distinguished white visitors a pretty, cheerful room is set aside in the home of Isaiah Montgomery, the hospitality accorded being probably best expressed in the language of a Memphis newspaper writer, who was one of the first white men to spend a night in the colony.

"When I realized," he said, "that we would be compelled to remain over night in Mound Bayou I began to wonder what treatment we, the only two white people in the place, would receive. I asked Montgomery about some place to eat and sleep, and he replied that there was a room at his home that had never been occupied excepting by white people. To his house my companion and myself were taken. We were met in the hall by Montgomery's wife and two daughters, neatly dressed and with a manner and refinement that were a revelation. They had prepared for us a savory supper, which we ate with much relish in the regular dining room all by ourselves.

"Our bedroom was neat, clean, and as nicely furnished as you will find in the average hotel. After some conversation with Montgomery concerning his colony and the general condition of the negro farmers of Mississippi we retired to our room. The thought occurred to us, while the storm was raging outside, what a difference between our position and the position of two negroes who might have strayed into a town populated entirely by whites, and in which negroes were not permitted to live. Here we were at Mound Bayou two white men among 7,000 negroes, and our treatment had been irreproachable."

Because he is economically and industriously free, the negro of Mound Bayou is successful. The system of crop-sharing, or, as it is designated in the South, "share-cropping," is a thing that the colonist abhors and he avoids it as he would a pestilence. He buys his land from a member of his own race, who is interested in his success and upbuilding, at a low price and a low rate of interest, rather than buying from a white man at a high price and ruinous rate of interest, or renting it on a crop-sharing contract.

As one writer has put it, share-cropping is the Southern planter's joke at the Fifteenth Amendment. It is the means of keeping the negro in eternal servitude on the plantations. The planter furnishes the land, a little "box house" to exist in, a mule, and a plow, for a rental of one-half the crop. All of the provisions the tenant gets must, in most cases, be purchased from the plantation commissary, at prices from 25 to 40 per cent. higher than they could be purchased in the ordinary way, and in addition the share-cropper pays a high rate of interest on the debt when the season is over, the crop turned in, and the time for settlement comes. It is rare, indeed, that the tenant winds up a season without finding that a large debt is hanging over him to be carried to the next season.

The negro colonist of Mound Bayou is a stranger to such conditions. If he does not own his land he rents it from a member of his own race at a standard and reasonable cash rental. His cotton is hauled to the gins of the colony, it is stored in the warehouse there, and it is sold in the market of Mound Bayou at the best market price. He buys his provisions, his fertilizer, and his livestock in the town and gets his lumber and building material from the Mound Bayou lumber yard. If he needs ready money he gets it at a legal rate of interest from the Bank of Mound Bayou, which is able and readily does finance every institution of the place. His medicine is gotten from a Mound Bayou doctor, and his teeth are looked after by a Mound Bayou dentist, and when the end comes he is laid away by a Mound Bayou undertaker.

It can thus be seen that the negro of this colony contributes to his own welfare by contributing to the welfare of his race and of his own town. Every dollar that is earned or made is kept at home and the profits of all transactions go to their own prosperity and upbuilding as a community. Through this principle of spending what they get from the soil among themselves the community of Mound Bayou is in a thriving and happy condition. There are about fifty stores in the village, and the business of the shops and cotton industries puts about

\$600,000 annually into circulation. The chief industrial enterprises are an oil mill, four cotton gins, a sawmill, and a lumber yard that exports staves, lumber, and ties.

In the matter of facilities for religious worship and for education Mound Bayou stands second to no community of its size in the South. Here all the principal church denominations are represented, the congregations being strong numerically and the houses of worship being structures of which the people may well be proud. The Green Grove Missionary Baptist Church has a membership of 600, and the house of worship has a seating capacity of 1,000, and the church maintains a monthly publication, The Baptist Echo. Then there is the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Christian Church, the Jerusalem Baptist Church, and others of various denominations. As a rule the services are well attended and ably conducted.

The character of the schools of Mound Bayou, the methods of administration, the scope of the curriculum, and, in short, the entire operation of the school system must command admiration. The Mound Bayou Normal and Industrial Institute is an especial point of congratulation to the people. They point with pride to good work it has done and the splendid progress it has achieved during the sixteen years of its pre-eminent usefulness. It carries an enrollment of 200 pupils, and from it have passed many young men and women who have won success in every way credit to their race.

The Baptist College carries an enrollment also of about 200 students and is a most thoroughly conducted and highly creditable institution. Besides these two institutions there is a public school that is as admirably and successfully conducted as any of the public schools of the State, and which also has an enrollment of over 200 pupils. With such an array of scholastic facilities who can dispute the assertion that the negro citizenship of Mound Bayou are seekers for knowledge and earnest workers in the field of race enlightenment and race upbuilding?

Sitting there, contemplating all of the wonderful things that have been accomplished and are being accomplished by this people, I could but wonder if the structure they had reared and were maintaining would stand, or if, with the passing of the generation that is directing the great work, it would crumble and pass to decay; and so I asked Charles Banks the question: "What of the future of Mound Bayou?" to which he replied:

"What Mound Bayou is now and what is already accomplished is largely prophetic of its future. Situated in the great alluvial Delta district, lands whose productive qualities are not surpassed by any in the world, covered by magnificent hardwood that finds ready sale at fabulous prices, her natural advantages are admirable indeed. No part of the great section has yet reached its full development; the beautiful, thriving, hustling towns dotted here and there throughout the Delta, with their factories, waterworks, electric lights and other modern improvements, have reached their present stage with the Delta only partially developed. What may we expect when practically all the lands have been cleared, properly drained and tilled and a full supply of contented and efficient labor everywhere to do the work desired?

"In proportion as the whole Delta approaches these conditions, Mound Bayou will progress also. There is another distinction that is more than likely to come to Mound Bayou: As the years go by and our schools, colleges, and churches improve in power and capacity, as our streets are drained and paved, our old lamps replaced by electric lights, the old, antiquated characteristic Delta pump is displaced by bountiful streams of pure artesian water, negroes will begin to inhabit their resident home, even though they are engaged in business or make their livelihood elsewhere; there will be an atmosphere in which to raise their children and a social status for their wives and daughters very much to their liking.

"There are those who ask, 'Are you not afraid that some day the whites will be moved to wipe out Mound Bayou by violence?'

“Knowing the controlling forces among the whites as I do in this section, gathered by a stay of thirty-three years among them, I say, no, we are not afraid. The negroes who shape and control the destiny of Mound Bayou understand conditions too well to allow any radical, nonsensical, and indiscreet policy to prevail here, on the one hand, and there are too many white men around us or in easy reach who are our friends and willing to see that no impediment is thrown in our way or undue advantage is taken of us by irresponsible parties on the other. This has been demonstrated on several occasions. Verily, the future holds much in store for Mound Bayou.