



National
Endowment
for the Arts

YOUR TOWN MISSISSIPPI DELTA



Shelley S. Mastran editor
Mark Robbins series editor

YOUR TOWN MISSISSIPPI DELTA

**National Endowment
for the Arts**

Washington, DC

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for Historic Preservation

Faculty of Landscape
Architecture
SUNY Syracuse

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Mississippi Delta.

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The goal of these activities is to reinforce the underlying tenet that social engagement and the highest level of design are not only compatible, but also essential in approaching change and the complexity of community development.

—Mark Robbins



Preface

Mark Robbins

Director of Design, National Endowment for the Arts

Each year since 1991, *Your Town: Designing Its Future* has offered four workshops that focus on design issues relevant to the quality of life in small towns and rural communities, including growth and suburban sprawl, historic preservation, land use, and housing. The *Your Town* program is an ongoing initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts, administered and staffed through the National Trust for Historic Preservation with the Faculty of Landscape Architecture at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF).

During the winter of 1999, through a series of discussions with the Arts Endowment, National Trust, and ESF, it was agreed that after 10 years the program should reevaluate its methods and broaden its impact on rural communities. As a result, changes in the *Your Town* format were made and new locales suggested. In addition, a greater diversity of design disciplines and perspectives came to be represented in the resource personnel conducting the workshops. It was also agreed that there were some communities within the already-underserved rural population that had yet to benefit from the experience of a *Your Town* workshop.

The enhancement of the existing program and the creation of a fifth annual *Your Town* in 2000 was made possible by a new Leadership Initiative in Design at the Arts Endowment. These new, focused sessions are intended to serve traditionally underserved communities with a

format that emphasizes case studies drawn from the participating areas. The outcome of these intensive conversations with community members can therefore include methods for implementing some of the conclusions of the workshop. The goal of these activities is to reinforce the underlying tenet that social engagement and the highest level of design are not only compatible but also essential in approaching change and the complexity of community development.

The first workshop to fully embody this new model for the program was a Your Town focused on historically African American communities, held in Cleveland, Mississippi, in fall 2000. In this inaugural session the tireless efforts of Shannon Criss, Director of the Mississippi State Small Town Center, were invaluable. Working with Shelley S. Mastran, Shannon organized rich and diverse presentations and ensured that the presentations about community and design were communicated in a clear and challenging way. An exceptionally qualified panel of resource people contributed their expertise to this effort. This panel included Craig Barton, Director of the American Urbanism Program at the University of Virginia, who discussed identity and architecture; Toni Griffin, Deputy Director of the Washington, D.C., Office of Planning, who addressed heritage tourism; and Glenn Smith, a landscape architect who focused on landscape as a cultural resource. All of their efforts resulted in a strengthened and invigorated program. Shelley Mastran also has my appreciation for her work as editor of this book. I am pleased that it is appearing as part of the NEA series on design issued by the Princeton Architectural Press. Kevin Lippert and Jennifer Thompson at the press and M. Christopher Jones of The VIA Group merit thanks for seeing the project into print.

We hope to continue with initiatives like this one, focused on diverse communities across the country. The intent is to develop an awareness of the importance of the physical environment as a locus for community identity and to stress the variety of the cultural landscapes that merit analysis, conservation, and preservation.



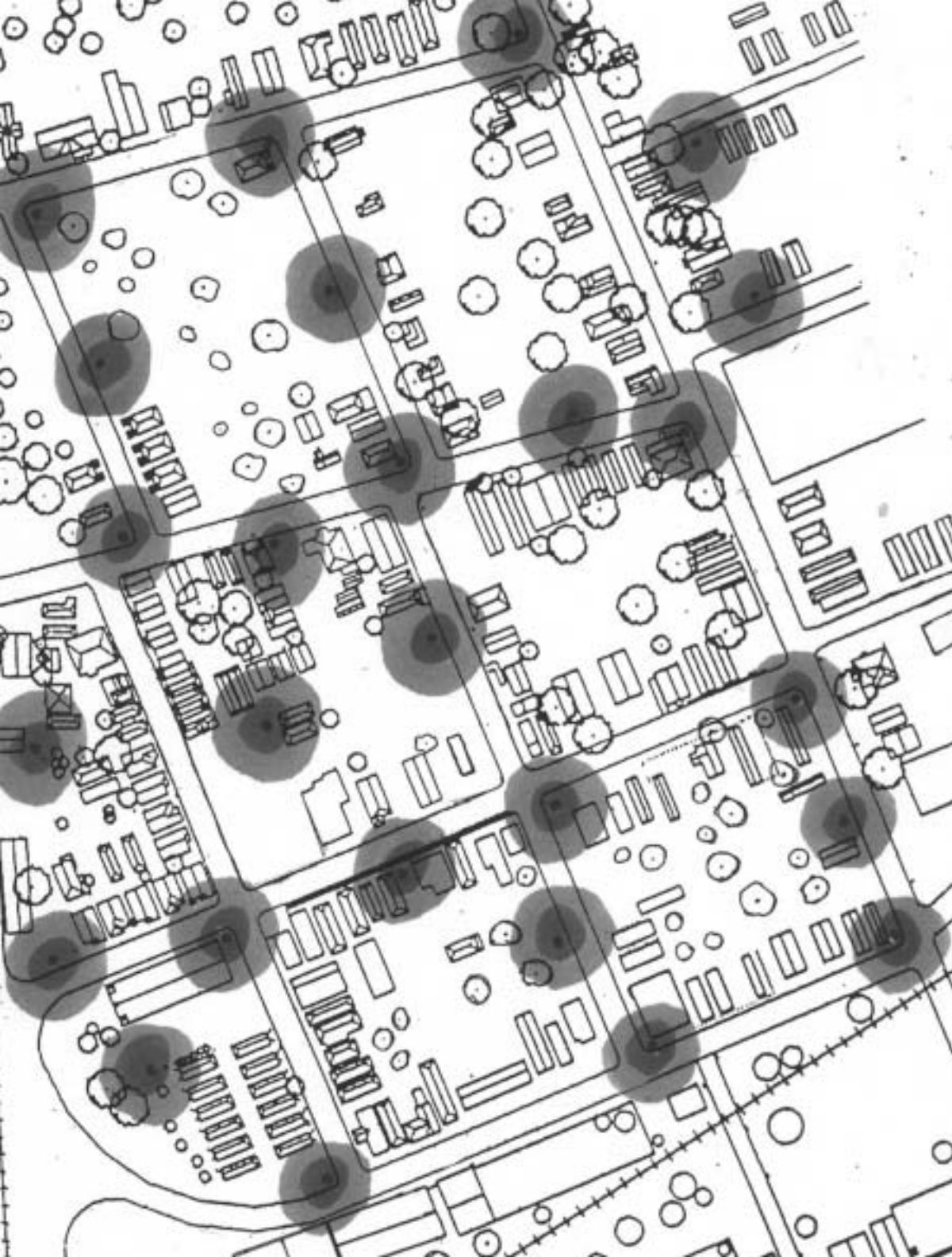
Your Town: Mississippi Delta

Shelley S. Mastran

Codirector, National Your Town Center

This publication reports on a special workshop session of *Your Town: Designing Its Future*, which focused on planning and design for rural African American communities of the Mississippi Delta. Held November 12–14, 2000, at the Center for Community Development, Delta State University, in Cleveland, Mississippi, and coordinated by the Small Town Center of Mississippi State University and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the workshop was a special initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Faculty of Landscape Architecture at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

Fifty-five participants convened in Cleveland to discuss a range of planning, development, and design issues. At the core of the workshop was a four-hour field trip along Highway 61 to visit three traditionally African American communities: Mound Bayou, founded in 1887; Jonestown; and Clarksdale, home of the Delta Blues Museum. Participants worked on design problems for these communities, including rehabilitating and reusing historic structures, enhancing community spaces, and maintaining cultural identity in the context of limited resources and high unemployment. Case studies on Mound Bayou and Highway 61 are included in this publication.




This program grew from a long-standing commitment of the National Endowment for the Arts to provide access to design, preservation, and planning assistance to all communities that have generally been underserved. The Your Town workshop brought a broad range of speakers to the Delta, including William Harris, Richard Lloyd, and Alferdteen Harrison from Jackson State University; Craig Barton, University of Virginia School of Architecture; Toni Griffin, Deputy Director of the Washington, D.C., Office of Planning; Glenn Smith, a landscape architect; Beverly Meng, Executive Director of the Mississippi Main Street Association; Michael Hervey of the Historic Farish Street Neighborhood Foundation; and Isaac Johnson of the Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia.

This publication includes excerpts from several of their presentations. These selections represent a cross-section of the workshop content and reflect its special focus. Although the workshop examined issues related to historically African American communities and linkages within the Mississippi Delta, its messages speak to diverse communities nationwide.

Participants worked on design problems for these communities, including rehabilitating and reusing historic structures, enhancing community spaces, and maintaining cultural identity in the context of limited resources and high unemployment.

—Shelley S. Mastran

An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood with a river. A large white architectural plan is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, showing a grid of streets, building footprints, and a large landscaped area with trees and a pond. The plan is oriented vertically, matching the river's flow.

Ours is the responsibility not to forget
and to make the rest of American society
not forget that the narrative we use to
describe American history is incomplete
if it doesn't contain our hopes, our
aspirations, and our contributions.

—Craig Barton

Perspectives on the Issues



Invisibility on the Land: A Perspective on African American Culture

Craig Barton

Associate Professor of Architecture, University of Virginia

Note: This is an excerpted transcription of a slide presentation given by Professor Barton.

I understand the enormity of the task that faces those of us who are interested in trying to preserve, manage, and interpret the historical assets of communities. In this case, let's talk about the African American community, though it is difficult to separate the history of African Americans from the history of the country as a whole. In fact, as we all went through school, that was more or less the recipe we got. We got a singular history in which we as Black folks did not play a particularly poignant or visible role.

There was a question today about what we mean by the word *landscape*. It is a term that in many ways defies a precise and concise definition, but I'm going to try. I'm going to use the words of the cultural geographer Dennis Cosgrove, who defines *landscape* as "the land shaped." We might go to someone else like J. B. Jackson, landscape historian and designer. He talks about landscape by saying, "I suspect that no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless perceived as an organization of spaces, and unless we ask ourselves who owns the land, who uses the space, how these spaces were created, and how they may be transformed." I think the issue of land transformation and ownership is

Aerial view of proposal for National Voting Rights Museum and Interpretive Center, Selma, Alabama. This view illustrates the location of the Interpretive Center.

critical to understanding the task of managing cultural resources in African American communities.

The structure of the land bears in it a record, a memory if you will, of patterns of use and in some ways a method or vehicle to represent aspects of culture. Why is that important to African Americans? We have typically not had access to the civic processes by which civic buildings and memorials were constructed. In fact, ours has been a tradition of passing significant information to one another from family to family, from person to person, through a variety of processes that were not necessarily embedded in the built environment. Oral histories, art, and music are a few of the forms of memory in the African American community. Typically, architecture wasn't used to "store" the memories of African American communities. When African American communities were intact, the ephemeral forms of memory were quite powerful; but in the wake of *Brown vs. Ford*, African American communities splintered and many of the cohesive pieces holding the communities together began to disintegrate. In the mid-20th century we found that African American communities, as well as other communities, began to break apart, making it even more important, more critical now, to find a way to leverage the resources that are embedded into the landscape as a means to narrate the presence and importance of African American history in the Delta, in Virginia, in New England, and across the nation.

We know that African American history and culture are extraordinarily diverse, and often obscured or invisible. For instance, in the Black Belt counties of Alabama and Mississippi where the black population often exceeded 50 percent of the total, the physical history of African Americans is often nearly invisible.

I'm going to suggest some strategies we can examine for making African American historical artifacts more visible. I suggest this is important because African Americans bear a special responsibility in American culture. Ours is the responsibility not to forget and to make the rest of American society not forget that the narrative we use to describe American history is incomplete if it doesn't contain our hopes, our aspirations, and our contributions. We know that the land is a vehicle to begin

to narrate the story. And it's a vehicle in our farmland, in our rivers, and in our cities evident even now in contemporary American society. Ours is the responsibility to remember and to pass on to subsequent generations the bits and pieces, the interstitial information that fills in the gaps of American history.

As African Americans, how is it that we have somehow gotten “written out” of the picture? Let me offer at least a partial explanation. I would argue that part of the difficulty in finding our cultural assets dates back to *Plessie vs. Ferguson*, which established the doctrine of separate but equal. While we understand separate but equal as being primarily a series of legal mechanisms separating black from white, for an architect these legal mechanisms have profound spatial implications. We see them every day—in two systems that were used to educate our population, two systems for simple public convenience—and by virtue of having two, a hierarchy was created with a major and minor player. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who the minor player was. What happens in this case is that the resources of the black community become more profoundly obscured.

Our firm, RBGC, was asked by the Nature Conservancy to assist the residents of Bayview, a historic African American community on the eastern shore of Virginia, prepare a very small and defined grant to help improve the water quality. Because of its soils, the community has a unique problem. The residents of Bayview are unable to secure permits to allow them to build septic systems because the soil in the area doesn't percolate. So the majority of Bayview residents, who live about 85 miles south of the nation's capital, still use outdoor privies. In addition, Bayview residents don't have a potable in-ground water infrastructure and are forced to use hand pumps to pull drinking water from shallow wells. In concert with the Nature Conservancy, Bayview obtained a grant to help improve water quality. It quickly became apparent that this grant was going to allow them to do something else—to develop a master plan articulating their vision for the community's growth.

We met with the members of the community to plan a design charette. We began by asking the community, “What would you like to

do? How would you like to see your community grow?” Designers played the role of both helping the community to see its future and providing residents with the materials to build it. One of the things the residents noted was that other planning strategies tried to introduce suburban land use and building patterns, providing each house with about an acre’s worth of land. Everyone involved except the planners at the county level thought this would be the death knell of the community, because the cost of the land and the cost of maintaining the houses would be prohibitive.

We took some of these ideas and used our skill to construct very simple drawings and collages, to help describe the residents’ vision of the community. Using the Cole’s Family Chapel—a nondenominational facility that tended to the spiritual needs of the community—as the basis of the design, we drew a new site plan for Bayview, including new housing models. We used the charrettes to explore the design of units to allow for shared spaces, to use some efficiencies of scale to keep the carrying cost of the units down. We designed a duplex containing shared spaces, which sit between entrances and independent bedrooms, and yet provide each homeowner their own front door. The houses are perceived as single units, though in fact they are duplexes with two independent entries. In addition, we were able to draw upon the local building vocabulary of the houses on the Eastern Shore to construct new houses for other members of the community. The Cole’s Family Chapel in its restored state will once again serve as the core of the community, meeting both its religious and its secular needs.

...I remember as a child that my weekly allocation of TV was interrupted one Sunday night in March to see the images of black citizens being beaten on the side of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. It left an impression because, as a kid growing up in a suburban neighborhood in Connecticut, this was far, far from my daily experience. Later, when I got to Virginia, I thought I’d moved to the South, but I was quickly disabused of this idea and told that if I wanted to see the South, I needed to get into a car and drive to the Black Belt. So I got in a car and drove to the only place that I knew, that was familiar on the map. I knew it because it was part of my collective unconscious. I got myself to Selma, Alabama.

View of proposed project site, Hwy. 80 approaching the Edmund Pettus Bridge. This view shows the site of the "Bloody Sunday" confrontation as it appears today.



Martin Luther King, Jr., among the leaders of the Selma-to-Montgomery march.



And I was fortunate to have been befriended in Selma by some extraordinary people, Louretta Wemberly and J. L. Chestnut. In conversations, I learned that while Mayor Joe Smitherman had a certain view of events that had transpired in Selma in March 1965, Louretta, J. L., and other members of the black community had a significantly different view. It was critical to these citizens, who struggled for the right to vote, that their views be articulated. We began to talk about what the role of design might be in this process and how to interpret the events that occurred at this site. If you have ever driven west from Montgomery on Route 80, you have likely been over this bridge. It was built in the 1940s after the war. In almost every way, except for its name, it is nondescript. And it doesn't begin to give witness to the significance of the events that transpired there.

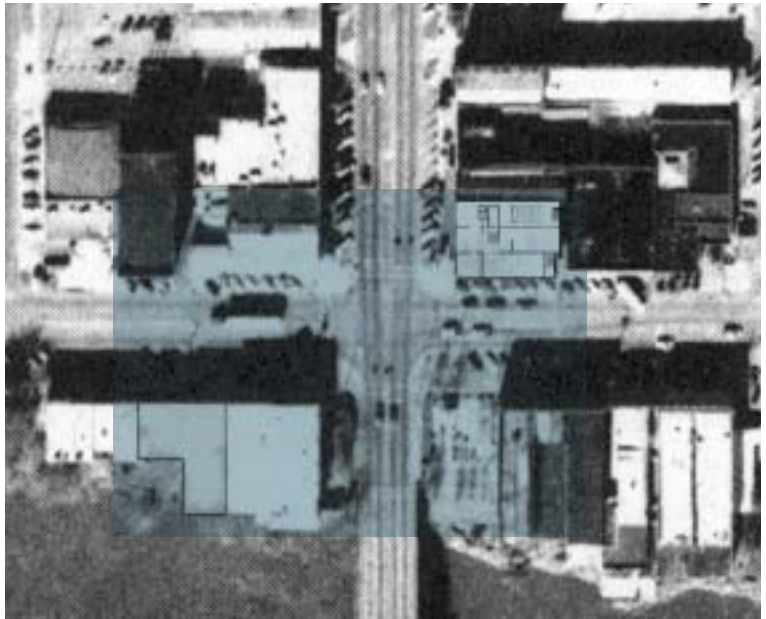
Our challenge as architects is how to work with this rich, complex historical narrative. The traditional preservation strategies of trying to crystallize the moment had long since passed at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, because the hamburger joint that once served as a backdrop had changed into a car dealership, and that car dealership was now defunct and the building in disrepair. I have to say that except for the bridge, there were very few physical things here.

The films of the event show the line of marchers moving in a slow and steady progression, which was then suddenly disrupted by the Alabama state troopers and their unofficial deputies. We tried to use the process of abstraction to extract the sense of the rhythm of the march, and found a way to construct a foundation to support this idea by claiming a piece of the site and focusing attention on it. We constructed a very straightforward building containing a simple sequence that brings you to a place where you can look across Highway 80 to see the site of the demonstration. We structured the sequence so it provides a view of the bridge and a view of Selma and takes you through a series of narrated steps, providing you with enough information so that, when you do arrive at the site, you are able to understand its significance.

This strategy works for the pedestrian, but it was also important for us to design a way in which the building could be understood from a



Conflict and resistance on the march from Selma to Montgomery.



Aerial view of an alternative location for the National Voting Rights Museum on Broad Street in Selma.



vehicle. The building's façade is therefore made of a series of louvered screens displaying images of the march. Those images describe the events of Bloody Sunday and the voting rights movement. We also used the surface of the ground itself, placing rumble strips into the pavement to mark the site. We wanted people to understand that something had happened here, and the sound of the tires on the pavement offers testimony to the events of March 1965.

If we don't steward our cultural resources, no one else will. What I've talked about today are a few that are in the process of being attended to. At some level they will be made more visible and that is a success in and of itself. One site of cultural importance in Memphis is the Lorraine Motel, which is now part of the National Civil Rights Museum. Then there is the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, one of the first seats of the young minister Martin Luther King. Ironically, just up the street is the Alabama State Capitol. Their relationship eloquently speaks about the process of black empowerment in the city of Montgomery.

While Dexter Avenue, the Lorraine Motel, and the State Capitol are highly visible, other pieces are more obscure: an African American schoolhouse in Lowndes County, Alabama; or a small church in Le Flore County, Mississippi. Even an apparently commonplace house can have significance, like the houses in Jackson, Mississippi, that were built with VHA money after World War II. They are in fact unique because they were owned by black veterans in Jackson who were going to become members of the middle class. One house in particular is notable because it's the house where Medgar Evers lived. One should be able to get to this site and also to the Bynam Store in Money, Mississippi, and understand that these are the treasures of the African American community.

I'll leave you with a quote from one of my favorite authors, Ralph Ellison. In *The Invisible Man*, the narrator says, "Ask your wife to take you around to the barber shops, juke joints, and the beauty parlors where they're cooking hair...there's a whole lot of unrecorded history going on there...."

View of one of the galleries in the proposed Interpretive Center.

The African American community is **not** pathological or sick. The community is **not** in danger of decay....The community is **not** evil and self-destructive. When considered in light of the many external oppressive factors, it is clear that the African American community is quite sustainable.

—William M. Harris



Our African American Communities: The Forces at Work

William M. Harris, FAICP, Ph.D.

Professor, Jackson State University

When the many variables that influence the quality of life are considered, the Mississippi Delta lags behind nearly every area of the nation...The purpose of my presentation is to introduce briefly some of the forces that have an impact on African American communities in Mississippi... I have identified five of these determining forces and I will take each of these in turn.

Self-Determination

The essence of a democratic society is the ability of its citizens to make decisions that affect their lives without coercion. It never fails to amaze me that white Americans appear to have failed to embrace this reality when it comes to the lives of African Americans. We live in a republic; this means that our political views are articulated through representation. The purest form of that representation is realized when citizens vote without constraints of any kind. In a worthy democracy, citizen suffrage is not constrained by social, economic, or political barriers. No individual understood this principle more than the Delta's civil rights champion, Aaron Henry.

In the Mississippi Delta, as it is nationwide, black self-determination continues to be determined by those other than blacks. When carefully considered, it becomes clear that the primary effort of the African presence in America has been that of acquiring self-determination through social, political, and economic means. That tradition continues.

Race Relations

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois posited that the problem of race in America is the color line. That observation remains true today as it was a century ago. The continued preoccupation with race has influenced every aspect of the nation's development....Being white in America affords automatic affirmative action in economic opportunity, social attainment, political privilege, and environmental protection....In the Mississippi Delta, no single issue, not even cotton, has a greater role in the characterization of the region than race relations.

Economic Development

No racial or ethnic group in America has been so adversely affected by the exploitation of capitalism as African Americans....The great American myth is that wealth is best acquired through hard work. If that were true, those who built the Delta would have become wealthy. If that were true, those who made cotton king would have become wealthy. If that were true, those who built the roads, constructed the public buildings, and cleaned the houses, and tended the children would be wealthy. The great myth of hard work belies the monstrosity of institutional slavery...and today African Americans still have less than 1 percent of the nation's total wealth.

Housing

Housing is more than shelter. In this nation, housing is both shelter and future wealth. It remains the American dream to own a home. It is the goal of every family to live on personally owned property in a safe area. It is the wish of nearly every citizen to be able to pass along some measure of wealth to surviving children or family....The gap between white and black homeownership is staggering....For most rural and inner-city African Americans, homeownership is beyond a reasonable dream.

Let me share with you some troubling statistics of housing affordability in two Mississippi Delta counties....In Panola County, when total family income is considered, the maximum that is affordable monthly is \$145, while the fair market rent is \$297 for a one-bedroom unit....In Quitman County, the maximum that is affordable monthly is \$242, while the fair market rent is \$297 for a one-bedroom unit....In a civilized nation, safe, decent housing is a right.

Environmental Health

Health is the absence of illness. For African Americans, health too often is a distant commodity. It was the Mississippi Delta's own Fannie Lou Hamer who said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." For blacks in both rural and urban areas, the quality of health conditions lags behind that of all other racial groups. When compared with whites, African Americans have 500 percent fewer doctors per individual, double the rate of child mortality, and much lower life expectancy. These disparities may be linked directly to environmental conditions that African Americans are forced to endure because of poverty, brutality of police and corrections systems, lack of adequate educational opportunity, location of waste disposals near residential areas, exposure to dangerous farm chemicals, and inadequate health insurance.

Conclusion

Let me be very clear. The African American community is *not* pathological or sick. The community is *not* in danger of decay....The community is *not* evil and self-destructive. When considered in light of the many external oppressive factors, it is clear that the African American community is quite sustainable. The task ahead for African American communities in the Mississippi Delta and elsewhere is to continue the struggle against those oppressive factors, build increasing confidence and respect in one another, and know that nature and history are on our side.

For many African Americans, the past presents a complex and often unpleasant mix of memories. It was our intention from the beginning to address this reality directly in an effort to explore the meaning of preserving physical reminders of one's heritage and to find a way to speak and act upon that history.

—Shannon Criss

The Mississippi Delta



Planning the Workshop

Shannon Criss

Former Director, Small Town Center, Mississippi State University

Identifying the Critical Issues

The Your Town program has been critical in educating the general public about natural resources and community design at the most fundamental level. It has introduced the design process in rural communities, including graphic and mapping techniques as well as management skills in financing and marketing. In organizing this workshop, we felt it was important to present this material in light of the key issues facing African American communities in the Delta.

For many African Americans, the past presents a complex and often unpleasant mix of memories. It was our intention from the beginning to address this reality directly in an effort to explore the meaning of preserving physical reminders of one's heritage and to find a way to speak and act upon that history. As Toni Griffin said in her presentation, *Community Renaissance: Making Place for a Cultural Economy*, "The physical fabric of place—the land, building, public spaces—tells the story of key moments in our history, including segregation, desegregation, economic downturns, and prosperity." Identifying the value of historic sites and buildings that have not yet been rediscovered became a particular focus of this session.

Local residents, as well as those from outside the region, need to



Photos in this section show participants and their active involvement in the success of the workshop sessions.

be educated about the value of the Delta’s physical history. Musicians, literary figures, and civil rights activists from the Delta are world-renowned. Strengthening awareness of this cultural heritage and identifying ways to bring it to national attention were another topic for discussion.

Highway 61 provides a vehicle for linking this culture to a series of places. Historically an important roadway for local economies, it physically connects the Gulf Coast to Memphis. The stories surrounding the Mississippi Delta continue to draw people from outside the state. Highway 61 offers great potential for heritage tourism, the fastest-growing sector in the tourism economy. Again quoting Griffin, “Americans, as well as international travelers, are increasingly becoming aware of the richness of our nation’s diverse ethnic history and are seeking venues to see, learn about, and experience other cultures first-hand. This interest, coupled with the need to pay serious attention to places on the verge of ruin, makes heritage and cultural tourism an exciting option for creating a community renaissance.”

During the Your Town workshop it was also critical to consider the most basic economic and social needs of the Delta communities. The Welfare Reform Act had a great impact on families and their choice to remain, or not remain, in small communities. Industrialization of agriculture has left many people without jobs and their towns without an economic base. Fortunately, it also has left these communities with assets that include infrastructure, buildings, and often most importantly, a specific sense of community and place. Many historically significant buildings have been abandoned, and these present opportunities to house new uses. By identifying these needs and working with local leadership and others, it is possible to establish self-sustaining and empowered communities. Each community in the Delta has its own idiosyncratic qualities, and identifying those qualities provides the hope of their preservation.

Inviting National Speakers and Regional Leaders

From the initial discussions, it was decided that nationally recognized speakers would bring other perspectives and raise the level of the discussion. Local citizens were thus challenged to think about their problems and opportunities in broader ways. During presentations, speakers cited examples of what might be possible, and discussion sessions made other alternatives apparent. It was also critical to have the participation and support of local leaders.

Team leaders were selected to bring together a diverse set of backgrounds and professional expertise; they included a member of the regional office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a landscape architect, a planner, an architect, and a member of the Mississippi Heritage Trust. These leaders were able to address a wide range of issues and also helped establish the initial problem statements. We selected a moderator from Jackson, Mississippi, versed in issues of community development, to facilitate the workshop.

Identifying the Workshop Participants

Approximately 300 to 400 invitations were sent out. Although only 18 confirmations were received just prior to the event, in the end, 46 participants plus 10 students attended the event, with an even number of African Americans and whites and a good mix of ages and genders.

Attending to the Details

This event required one year for proper planning, particularly to secure the commitment of well-recognized speakers. The National Endowment for the Arts provided approximately 50 percent of the required funding, with another 35 percent coming from in-kind services and funds contributed by the hosting agencies (Mississippi State University's Small Town Center, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Delta State University's Center for Community Development); the last 15 percent was raised through other grants.

A location that could provide the proper facilities was also necessary. A variety of spaces were needed, including a large meeting room for the speaker sessions and for catered meals, and five or six small rooms for breakout sessions. Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi, was selected because its Center for Community Development could meet the physical requirements and provide the needed local support as follow-up to the event.



Each community in the Delta has its own idiosyncratic qualities, and identifying those qualities provides the hope of their preservation.

—Shannon Criss

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Justified, Certified, and Corrected by the County Clerk of the County of...



Map for MISSISSIPPI DISTRICT NO. 1, 1933, New York

Vertical text on the left side of the map, likely a title or address, including the words 'MISSISSIPPI' and 'DISTRICT NO. 1'.



Case Study: Highway 61 through the Mississippi Delta

Shannon Criss and Shelley S. Mastran

Highway 61, which bisects the United States from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, cuts through the heart of the Mississippi Delta, a region composed of 18 counties with approximately 490,000 people. The southern stretch of the road between Memphis and New Orleans is known as the Blues Highway because it links the hometowns of so many blues performers. The highway is a potential icon for the Delta region.

Much of Highway 61 through the Delta is rapidly being developed as a limited-access road, similar to an interstate. While this provides convenience for long-distance drivers, it cuts off access to local towns and businesses. A portion of Highway 61 has become a direct route from Memphis to the casinos of Tunica, Mississippi, whose revenues benefit the region. Tourist travel, however, is limited farther south in the Delta, where the economy has traditionally been agricultural.

Highway 61 is emblematic of the Mississippi Delta, a region with a rich and profound heritage but pervasive poverty and a host of attendant social problems. Nearly 28 percent of all people receive public assistance. Though 36 percent of the population, which is split almost evenly between black and white, live in poverty, the average income of African Americans is only approximately 38 percent of that of white citizens.

A map constructed by workshop participants highlighting the heart of the Mississippi Delta "cultural corridor."

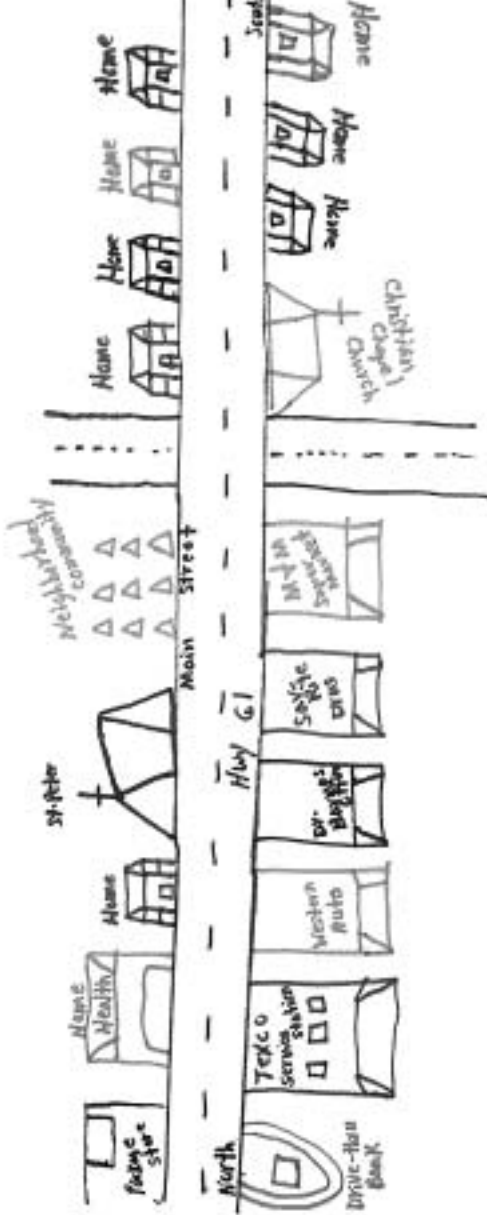
Although the Delta has a number of institutions of higher education (with four community colleges and two universities), adult illiteracy rates are high. Fifty-seven percent of the African American residents have less than an eighth-grade education, and dropout rates are high. Infant mortality rates, births to teenage and unmarried mothers, and crime among youth are far above national percentages.

The area has abundant natural resources in land, water, and hardwood forests, and the land is productive. Historically, however, the Delta has not developed a manufacturing base to assist in adding value to the cotton, soybeans, and rice it produces.

Housing conditions in general are substandard, with many homes lacking adequate plumbing and sewage systems. More than 6 percent of black-occupied homes lack complete plumbing facilities, and 26 percent do not have a telephone. In a region without a system of public transportation, 32 percent of African Americans do not own a vehicle.

Heritage tourism offers a way for Delta communities to recognize and value their identity, history, and geography. Toni Griffin, one of the distinguished Your Town workshop speakers with experience in economic development, gave advice to participants in considering the creation of a “Highway 61 Cultural Corridor.” Griffin emphasized the importance of defining where tourists should go, where the buses should stop, and what kinds of public infrastructure are needed to make destinations attractive. Other important considerations included establishing a common vision for the highway and the story it tells, as well as determining the audience for this history.

CITY OF PORT GIBSON



The Delta, like the blues, belongs to black people, the people here say, though many do not own enough of it to root a vine. It was their sweat that cleared its vast forests and transformed the 19th-century jungle into the richest farmland on earth.

It lies in the deltas of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers, an indistinct triangle of vast fields, islands of trees and small towns extending south from Memphis for about 200 miles, covering an area about 70 miles wide on both sides of the Mississippi.

No other place, blues men say, could have nurtured the blues. What other place saw such toil, such pain?

“The Blues Is Dying in the Place It Was Born,”
The New York Times, April 22, 2001

A drawing of Port Gibson by workshop participant Michael A. White.

NAACP
Dr. Martin Luther King



Kermit the Frog



Delta State

Blues Museum

Peters Pottery

Home of
Oldest Black
SWEET POTATO in N

River

Silk screen

Watermelon

Capitol

1st Black M

Boycott



Alcorn

Coke

KUDZ

1st Black
Ban
TRAIL

ANTE

Ant Home

SLAVE
TRADE

Design Problem: Develop a Heritage Tourism Plan for Highway 61

The rich narratives and landscapes of the Mississippi Delta continue to attract people from beyond the borders of the state, but often once there, tourists have difficulty grasping the history and the meaning of the place. Here, perhaps more so than in other places, one needs to be an insider to know where to go and what to see. The interpretation of Highway 61 through a heritage tourism plan could assist in making the assets of the region more accessible and provide the needed spur to economic development. Places along the route could be identified that would reveal the distinct character of the region in its landscapes, industrial sites, and historic landmarks and buildings. Local artistic, musical, and cultural traditions will also draw tourists and help strengthen an economic base.

Each group of workshop participants was asked to develop a heritage tourism plan for Highway 61 identifying specific sites and placing them on county maps. Participants gave careful consideration to the key elements of the corridor that provide tourism opportunities. The flat landscape itself is a significant feature of the region. Access to the Mississippi River, which parallels the north-south highway, is limited, and only a few communities are actually located adjacent to it. Oxbow lakes and manmade attractions along the river could draw people to spend time there, yet bayous, lakes, and hunting areas remain inaccessible or unknown to those from outside the region. Potential recreational sites were identified in these areas. In addition, several Native American mounds and burial sites, which have not been appropriately preserved and marked, could be highlighted. Many cotton gins and buildings related to farming and the railroad are in ruin. Preserving and giving focus to these artifacts could become important in preserving the history of the Delta.

Perhaps the best known aspect of the Delta is its blues musicians and musical traditions. Participants felt that not enough had not been done to recognize the individuals who created this unique legacy. Also, live performances of the blues are infrequent except at special festival events. More regular programming and identification of public venues for

Details of the Mississippi Delta "cultural corridor," compiled by workshop participants.

performances could increase awareness and travel to the region.

Other significant contributors to the cultural life of the region and the nation need to be recognized. The contributions of civil rights leaders such as Aaron Henry, Fannie Lou Hamer, Blanche K. Bruce, Amzi Moore, and Hodding Carter deserve marking in a physical place. Literary figures such as Clifton Taulbert, Willie Morris, Richard Wright, Walker Percy, Elizabeth Spencer, Bea Richards, Shelby Foote, and William Alexander could be recognized, as well as entertainers such as Morgan Freeman, James Earl Jones, Holt Caulier, Ike Turner, and Jim Henson. The presence and value of local folk artists and craftworkers were also suggested. Many of their products, such as handcrafted quilts, pottery, and paintings could be advertised more widely and made available in buildings that are more visible along Highway 61.

Each group also identified sites that have distinctive characters and offer interesting stories. The Blues Museum, for example, housed in the old train station in Clarksdale, was recently renovated. It is now a destination spot for tourists from all over the world and serves as a model and inspiration for rehabilitation throughout the Delta.

The design solutions of the workshop were based on the principle that linking many sites together thematically provides increased opportunities for tourism. One group envisioned a comprehensive map identifying the locations of significant sites; a brochure based on the map would be made available in town halls, businesses, and gas stations throughout the corridor. This information could be posted on a web site as well. Another group developed a marketing plan that included web sites, a well-designed publication, a theme song for radio stations, kiosks, and an information package to be distributed at casinos and other tourist attractions.

There was general agreement that a series of visitors' centers along Highway 61 could be of value. A "Delta Welcome Center" was proposed at the junction with Highway 49 to provide visitor information as well as locally produced foods, music on CDs, crafts, and artwork. It was suggested that one or more sharecropper shacks along Highway 61 could serve as visitors' centers with information provided on a video. The

history of the cotton industry could be revealed and connected to a particular plantation or agricultural site.

It was clear in all of the discussions that the Delta region offers great heritage tourism potential and Highway 61 presents a real opportunity to be the connecting link for interpretation and exploration of the area in a way that would preserve the Delta's heritage and enhance local economies.



Mayor Phillips introduces participants to Jonestown, Mississippi.





Port Gibson Main Street Program

Al Hollingsworth
Main Street Manager

The first thing a visitor sees when coming into Port Gibson is a sign that reads, “Welcome to Port Gibson, Mississippi, the town too beautiful to burn —General U.S. Grant.” A lot of what we try to do is be sure that history is accurately told, so I have to start with a confession: General U. S. Grant never said that. The Chamber of Commerce loves it, though.

Port Gibson is the only incorporated town in Claiborne County. It sits at the junction of Highway 61, the Blues Highway, with the Natchez Trace Parkway. Its population today is about 1,800; Claiborne County’s is about 12,000. Evidence of Native American culture stretches back to about 7000 B.C. in our county, and their mounds and village sites have been explored by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Native Americans also left us a number of our roads, which still look today as they did centuries ago, and we’re trying to preserve them.

The town was the third to be incorporated in what was once the Mississippi Territory—then the states of Mississippi and Alabama. It was established by Samuel Gibson, an entrepreneurial young man who built Gibson’s Landing in 1788 at the point where the Natchez Trace trail crossed the Bayou Pierre. In 1803 it became the county seat, and in 1811 it was named Port Gibson.

The first public library in the state of Mississippi was established

The Presbyterian Church of Port Gibson, Mississippi, with its 11-foot high golden hand reaching skyward.



The most dramatic development on Market Street was the building of the County Administration building. Initially planned as two double-wide trailers with a Roman brick front, the final results were far superior. The Board of Supervisors understood that they were building for future generations.



The city and county jointly funded the rehabilitation of the building that became the Harriette Person Memorial Library, perhaps one of the most community-friendly spots in Port Gibson.

here. The state's second newspaper began publication in 1818 in Port Gibson. In 1830 the Presbyterian Church established Oakland College here for the education of its young men. In 1871, the state of Mississippi acquired the campus and created the first land grant college for the education of black people. We are proud of what the past has left for us to enjoy. There is the Planters Hotel, a federal-style building downtown; Wintergreen Cemetery; the Gothic-style Catholic Church (probably the most integrated church in town); and in Romanesque revival style, our most famous landmark, the Presbyterian Church with an 11-foot-high golden hand with finger pointing heavenward.

The National Main Street Center wrote about Port Gibson: “Torn apart by intense racial strife during the 1960s, downtown Port Gibson suffered severe economic deterioration. Although racial tension gradually improved, the economy didn’t. So, in 1990, the community joined the Mississippi Main Street Program. With an ethnically diverse board of directors, the leaders of Main Street rolled up their shirtsleeves and began to work.”

—Miracle on Main Street

In 1901 a little brown bug known as the boll weevil came to Mississippi and devastated the economy. For 91 years that would mean no significant commercial development in Port Gibson. The shape of downtown Port Gibson was also affected by the civil rights activities of the 1960s, including the economic boycotts. Beginning in the late 1970s, a series of court actions resulted in the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that peaceful boycotts were a justifiable means to resolve economic oppression.

In 1980, the Main Street Program was begun under the direction of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Mississippi ran an associated program through the Mississippi Main Street Association. Port Gibson's Main Street Program was chartered in 1990. From the beginning, the founders knew that it would take the power of the city government and the power of both the black and the white communities coming together to make it work. The founders of our program based their strategy on the need to be inclusive, and no one has ever been excluded from Main Street proceedings.

The Main Street district is 13 blocks long and two to three blocks wide and includes the commercial center and two residential neighborhoods on either end. Our goals were to clean up the downtown, restore pride, create economic incentives, and guide building renovation. A vision statement was created to facilitate the revitalization of the downtown commercial district in the context of historic preservation. We made sure that the value of the National Register district (established in the late 1970s) was understood and that the zoning ordinance was respected. We established an urban renewal district to overlay the Main Street district. A tree board was also created, and city and county preservation ordinances adopted. We focused on the historical uniqueness of the town, on maintaining its architectural integrity and developing a strong community.

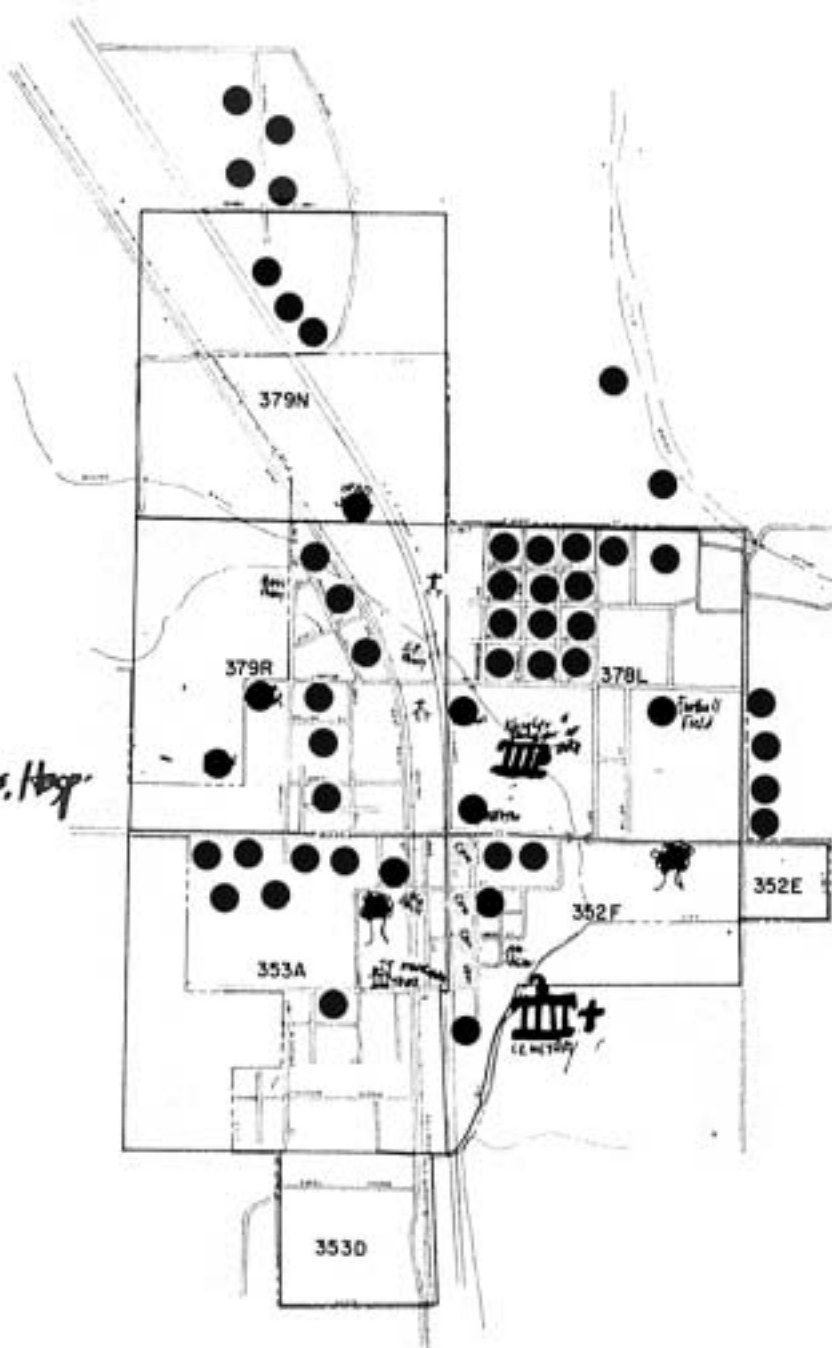
In the 10 years since the Main Street Program was established, the public investment in downtown Port Gibson has been \$3,625,000, with \$1.5 million invested by private interests. That can happen only when people feel comfortable about their investment—when they feel that the community and its governance are stable.

We have created a seasonal banner and a bench program. (We've bought 16 benches, and they've been distributed in public spaces.) Promotion activities are important. We have a heritage festival that includes a 5K walk-run, arts and crafts and children's activities, a food court, historic tours, and of course, music. In addition there are the Original Mississippi Venison Cookoff, an Easter egg hunt, and a Halloween celebration. There have been 28 ribbon cuttings in Port Gibson in the last 10 years, and the start of 44 new businesses, which have created 146 new jobs.

Main Street is about creating a common agenda; it's about giving the public an opportunity to come together and work for the benefit of their community and building trust among the people of Port Gibson.

Our goals were to clean up
the downtown, restore pride,
create economic incentives, and
guide building renovation.

—Al Hollingsworth



-  churches
-  Public schools, Hosp.
-  Residences
-  commercial
-  PARK
-  HISTORICAL

MOUND BAYOU

A map overlay created by workshop participants outlining land use and pinpointing the historic locations of Mound Bayou, Mississippi.

Case Study: Mound Bayou, Mississippi

Shannon Criss and Shelley S. Mastran

Mound Bayou is a rural Delta community of some 2,200 people in Bolivar County, Mississippi. It is eight miles from Cleveland, the county seat and site of a state university. The redevelopment of Highway 61 as a limited-access road has displaced Mound Bayou from the major transportation artery, but the town is still connected to Memphis, 122 miles to the north, and Jackson, 143 miles to the south. Mound Bayou is located in a prosperous and fertile agricultural area specializing in the production of cotton, soybeans, grain sorghum, rice, and vegetables.

Mound Bayou was one of a number of African American settlements established during the post-Reconstruction period. Isaiah Thornton Montgomery and his cousin Benjamin Green, slaves of the Jefferson Davis family, established a settlement south of Vicksburg but had to abandon the site in 1883 because of flooding. Granted a large tract of land in Mississippi, the Louisville, New Orleans and Texas Railroad asked Montgomery to assist them in soliciting African American workers to the Delta region, as they believed that only African Americans had the ability to adapt to life in the semitropical climate. Montgomery founded Mound Bayou at the convergence of two bayous that drained the Delta, near a large Indian mound.

From the beginning, Mound Bayou prospered because of its location along the railroad. In 1904, the Bank of Mound Bayou was founded. The Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing Company, built in 1907, was the largest enterprise of its kind in the state. In 1912 Mound Bayou received a town charter that established an alderman form of government with a mayor, town marshal, and five aldermen as elected officials. By 1920, the Mound Bayou public school served Bolivar County's African American children. During the early 20th century, numerous shops, stores, fraternal buildings, institutional buildings, and private residences

were constructed. The Taborian Hospital was opened in 1942, providing health care to African Americans throughout the Delta.

Unfortunately, in the past two decades, the community has declined. Recent plant closings in the region have had significant impact on Mound Bayou. The railroad that brought the founding fathers to the community no longer runs, and the tracks have been removed. The health care center is the largest employer in Mound Bayou, with the Bolivar County school system being second. Agriculture is still an important economic activity for the community, and many farmers own their own land. Several farmers in the area have recently formed a cooperative to better compete in the region. Still, the town has an approximately 24 percent unemployment rate with an average annual per capita income of only \$4,000.

The historic Mound Bayou commercial district has suffered as well. The only historic commercial building in the community is the 1904 bank building. Other commercial buildings, primarily along old Highway 61, are struggling mom-and-pop businesses. Many buildings in the commercial core are vacant. The former railway forms a green space in the center of town, yet this space has never been developed. Of the 715 housing units in Mound Bayou, only 347 are occupied. Most are single-family ranch-style houses, but there are several apartment complexes and a number of mobile homes.

Mound Bayou has several important historic resources. The Isaiah T. Montgomery house, home of the town's founder, is a National Historic Landmark and has received funds from the Save America's Treasures program. The Taborian Hospital and the old Bank of Mound Bayou are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Both suffer from neglect but hold the interest of the community. Other historic buildings have been changed significantly and, although not eligible for listing in the National Register, have been designated local landmarks by the town's Historic Preservation Commission. Mound Bayou has recently completed a Heritage Tourism Plan and hopes to build on the historic resources and the heritage of the community to attract visitors.

Design Problem: Form a Vision for the Future of Mound Bayou.

The challenge was to create a vision for this community's future through an analysis of its existing physical structure. Groups were asked to identify all of Mound Bayou's anchoring institutions, such as schools, churches, and civic institutions, as well as discrete neighborhoods, and then propose physical changes that could bring distinction and positive value to the neighborhoods and the community in general.

Each workshop group recognized Mound Bayou's strong assets: the fact that it was the first all-black community in the state with an interesting story to tell; the historic structures that have supported the community's history; and the physical access to Highway 61, which provides opportunity for businesses associated with travel and heritage tourism. There are a couple of industries developed by families within the community that are just now becoming better known to those outside. A sweet potato processing facility has become successful in the past decade. The community has an annual festival to celebrate the harvest, which draws many visitors. Also, a family has begun a potter's shop, which produces artifacts popular throughout the region.

Each group also identified Mound Bayou's challenges. The community lacks a clear boundary and cohesive identity. There is no defined entrance or center to the town. It is difficult for the traveler to know what to visit, as there are no historical markers. Basic infrastructure is needed to provide food, public restrooms, and community services to residents and visitors. There is a real lack of retail services. The overall visual quality and image of the community (with wrecked cars and other unsightly areas) needs to be improved.

Workshop participants recommended that Mound Bayou develop an African American cultural center to provide information about its history, the Civil Rights Movement, and access to the folk arts of the region. Mound Bayou has an ample stock of interesting historic buildings plus proximity to Highway 61, and if developed appropriately, it can be a sig-

We hope to continue with initiatives like this one, focused on diverse communities across the country. The intent is to develop an awareness of the importance of the physical environment as a locus for community identity and to stress the variety of the cultural landscapes that merit analysis, conservation, and preservation.

—Mark Robbins

Workshop Schedule

Center for Community Development, Delta State University
November 12–14, 2000

7 am		Continental Breakfast	Continental Breakfast
8 am		Design Process & Graphic Techniques—John McRae 60 minutes	Case Study Housing 60 minutes
9 am		Case Study Port Gibson Main Street 60 minutes	Design Problem #3 Meeting Local Needs 2 hours
10 am	Registration 2 hours	Design Problem #1 Your Town Vision 1.5 hours	
11 am		Travel to Luncheon	Break Available Resources & Getting Assistance—Jerry Robinson
12 pm	Introductions & Opening Remarks 40 minutes	Luncheon Heritage Tourism—Toni Griffin 1.5 hours	Lunch Visioning Financing & Marketing Your Town—Beverly Meng 1 hour Pin-up & Set-up Group Projects
1 pm	Our African American Communities: The Forces at Work—William Harris 60 minutes		
2 pm	Load Buses for Case Study Tour Case Study Tour to Mound Bayou, Jonestown, & Clarksdale 4 hours	Case Study African American Churches 60 minutes	Group Reviews & Final Comments Departure
3 pm		Design Problem #2 Identifying the Heart & Soul of the Place 2.5 hours	
4 pm			
5 pm			
6 pm	Break	Break	
7 pm	Dinner & Craig Barton	Dinner & Alferdteen Harrison	

Faculty and Speakers

Craig Barton

University of Virginia
School of Architecture
P.O. Box 400122
Charlottesville, VA 22904

Shannon Criss

Small Town Center
Mississippi State University
Mississippi State, MS 39762

Milburn Crowe

CLG Coordinator
City of Mound Bayou
404 Renee Street
Mound Bayou, MS 38762

Tony Griffin

D.C. Office of Planning
801 North Capitol Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20002

William Harris

Department of Urban &
Regional Planning
Jackson State University
3825 Ridgewood Road
Jackson, MS 39211

Alferdteen Harrison

Margaret Walker Alexander
National Research Center
Jackson State University
P.O. Box 17008
Jackson, MS 39217

Michael Hervey

Farish Street Historic District
Neighborhood Foundation
P.O. Box 24263
Jackson, MS 39225

Al Hollingsworth

Port Gibson Main Street
P.O. Box 607
Port Gibson, MS 39150
Tom Howorth
115 Courthouse Square
Oxford, MS 38655

Isaac Johnson

2553 Wheeler Road
Augusta, GA 20904

Michelle Weaver Jones

Mississippi Department of
Archives & History
P.O. Drawer AQ
Mississippi State University 39762

Richard Lloyd

Department of Urban &
Regional Planning
Jackson State University
3825 Ridgewood Road
Jackson, MS 39211

Shelley S. Mastran

2031 Hillside Drive
Falls Church, VA 22043

John McRae

Dean, School of Architecture
Mississippi State University
P.O. Drawer AQ
Mississippi State, MS 39762

Beverly Meng

Executive Director
Mississippi Main Street Association
P.O. Box 2719
Jackson, MS 39207

Sierra Neal

National Trust for Historic
Preservation
456 King Street
Charleston, SC 29403

Joe Phillips

Mayor of Jonestown
P.O. Box 110
Jonestown, MS 38639

Mark Robbins

Director of Design
National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20506

Jerry Robinson

Center for Community
Development
Delta State University
P.O. Box 3134
Cleveland, MS 38733

Glenn L. Smith

Washington/Alexandria
Architecture Center
1001 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Stella Gray Bryant Sykes

Executive Director
Mississippi Heritage Trust
P.O. Box 577
Jackson, MS 39205

Participants

Libba Alford

President
McComb Main Street Association
PO Box 802
McComb, MS 39649

Louis Armstrong

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Amelda Arnold

Mayor
City of Port Gibson
PO Box 607
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Lula Arnold

Port Gibson Main Street
202 112 Fanner Street
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Joan Beesley

Port Gibson Chamber of
Commerce Port Gibson Main
Street/HPC
PO Box 466
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Margaret L. Bogle

Executive Director
USDA-Agricultural Research
Service 10825 Financial Centre
Parkway, Suite 309 Little Rock, AK
72211

Mary Boteler

CLG Coordinator/President
City of Leland/Leland Historic
Foundation
301 East Third Street
Leland, MS 38756

Tazwell Bowksy

Supervisor
Pike County District One
PO Box 431
Magnolia, MS 39652

Adrian Brown

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Luther Brown

Director
Delta Center for Culture and
Learning/DSU
PO Box 3152
Cleveland, MS 38733

Arjang Ryan Ehsan

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Dudley Ford

US History Teacher
Callaway High School
5155 Wayneland Drive #F-2
Jackson, MS 39211

Deborah Grison

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
jackson, MS 39211

Kate Groover

Executive Director
McComb Main Street Association
PO Box 802
McComb, MS 39649

Kim Hilliard

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Patricia Hoban-Moore

Senior Community
Builder/Coordinator
Department of Housing and
Urban Development
100 West Capitol Street, Room 910
Jackson, MS 39269

Libby Hollingsworth

Historic Preservation
Commissioner
City of Port Gibson
1001 Church Street
Port Gibson, MS 39150

George Irby

Director of Federal Programs
City of Columbus
PO Box 1013
Columbus, MS 39703

Johnny Johnson

Assistant Treasurer
Knights and Daughters of Tabor
105 MLK-Box 540
Mound Bayou, MS 38762

Annie Joiner

Special Populations Personnel
Coahoma Community College
3240 Friars Point Road
Clarksdale, MS 38614

WJ Jones
Mayor
Town of Coahoma
PO Box 23
Coahoma, MS 38617

Martha Lott
Supervisor
Claiborne County
PO Box 279
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Doris Miller
Consultant
Mississippi Conference of Black
Mayors
PO Box 1665
Clarksdale, MS 38614

James Miller
302 Mansion
Port Gibson, MS 39150

John Morgan
Alderman
Town of Morgan City
PO Box M
Morgan City, MS 38946

Gene Mosley
Historic Preservation
Commissioner
City of Jackson
1968 Wingfield Circle
Jackson, MS 39209

Haneefah Muhammad
Delta Service Americorps Member
Mercy Care
PO Box 98
Mound Bayou, MS 38762

Kinchen O'Keefe
Proprietor
Sunflower River Trading Company
252 Delta Avenue
Clarksdale, MS 38614

Deborah Oakley
Preservation Specialist
Historic Preservation Division
Mississippi Department of Archives
and History
PO Box 571
Jackson, MS 39205

Ed Owen
Architectural Review Board
Member
City of Meridian
2420 24th Avenue
Meridian, MS 39305

Elvin Parker
President
Port Gibson Main Street
PO Box 183
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Paul Purdy
Prentiss Normal & Industrial
Institute
2111 Queens Road Avenue
Jackson, MS 39213

Clovis Reed
Claiborne County Administrator
PO Box 689
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Josephine Rhymes
Executive Director
Tri-County Workforce Alliance PO
Box 1348
Clarksdale, MS 38614

Thelma Rush
Museum and the Marketplace 623
Locust Street
Vicksburg, MS 39183

Phoenix Savage
Medical Anthropologist
PO Box 242
University, MS 38677

Cissy Scanlon
Membership Services Mississippi
Heritage Trust
PO Box 577
Jackson, MS 39205

Jackie Scott
Community Educator/ AmeriCorps
Member West Tallahatchie
Economic & Community
Development Corporation
PO Box 563
Tutwiler, MS 38963

Denise Sibley
3890 Wolf Road
Columbus, MS 39705

Mattie Sink
Coordinator of Manuscripts
Division, Special
Collections
Mississippi State University
Libraries
PO Box 5408
Mississippi State, MS 39762

Participants (continued)

Andrew L. Smith

Executive Director
Small Towns and Rural
Communities Planning
Consortium
4628 Normandy Drive
Jackson, MS 39206

Mae Ruth Smith

Teacher Assistant/Lab Supervisor
RH Bearden Elementary School
Sumner, MS

Norma Thompson-Lewis

Assistant Administrator
Claiborne County
111 Whitney Lane
Port Gibson, MS 39150

Cassandra Tillman

DPP Tutor
PO Drawer 175
Lambert, MS 38643

Chukwunyere Ugochukwu

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Ben Wesley

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Joan Wesley

Graduate Student
JSU Urban & Regional Planning
3825 Ridgewood Road Box 23
Jackson, MS 39211

Michael A. White

City of Port Gibson
Port Gibson Alderman
206 Mimosa Street
Port Gibson, MS 39150

May Whittington

Representative
MS House of Representatives
PO Box 211
Schlater, MS 38952

Glendscene Williams

Center for Community
Development/America
Reads
1417 College Street
Cleveland, MS 38733

Leonard Williams

Mid Delta Workforce Alliance
3068 Radford Road
Memphis, TN 38111

Mayo Wilson

Executive Director
Comprehensive Urban/Rural
Ensemble, Tourism
628 DeSoto Avenue
Clarksdale, MS 38614

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Mississippi State University

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Architecture, Mississippi State
University

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Port Gibson

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School of Architecture, Mississippi
State University

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Port Gibson

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School of Architecture, Mississippi
State University



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