1998

American Legacy; My African American Heroes; 1998

Andre Braugher

A. Philip Randolph

CELEBRATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

American Legacy

Spring 1998 • Volume 4 / Number 1

My African-American Heroes *by*

Johnnie Cochran ▪ George Bush ▪ Andre Braugher
Jimmy Carter ▪ Al Sharpton ▪ Ruby Dee ▪ Loretta
Devine ▪ Ann Richards ▪ J. C. Watts ▪ Jim Brown
L. Douglas Wilder ▪ Jack Kemp ▪ and more . . .

Plus, an Exclusive Interview With President Clinton:

"What My Grandfather Taught Me About Race"

HEROES FOR ALL TIMES

Some well-known Americans tell us of the African-Americans they most admire and why

AS OUR PUBLISHER, RODNEY REYNOLDS, EXplained in the letter that opens this issue, he recently sent a query to leaders in politics, the arts, and education, asking them to name their African-American hero in history—the person whose accomplishments they most admire. We received a heartening number of responses that offered a variety of candidates as well as a few repeats. But one thing was clear: Of the chosen heroes, almost all belonged to modern times, leaving many remarkable figures of the previous three hundred years unacknowledged. So, we concluded, there *is* a real need for *American Legacy*. In this and future issues we will surely discover that for African-Americans, history didn't just begin in the twentieth century.

Jim Brown, actor and former football player

Paul Robeson, because of his amazing ability to succeed in so many fields—sports, law, entertainment. Also because of the strength he showed in holding to his beliefs no matter how unpopular they became.

Orlando Bagwell, executive producer of the upcoming WGBH series Africans in America

It was a difficult choice to pick one of the many people I rely on each day for strength, guidance, and example. But it's a pleasure to have the chance to list Bob Moses as one of my heroes. I'd like others to learn about this wonderful person I've had the pleasure to know.

In the summer of 1960 Moses was a young schoolteacher from New York City who traveled to Mississippi to work with Amzie Moore and other NAACP activists to begin the national campaign to register black voters in the heart of the racially segregated South. He was not seeking fame or notoriety; he did not go to be a leader. He traveled to Mississippi to help others learn to lead.

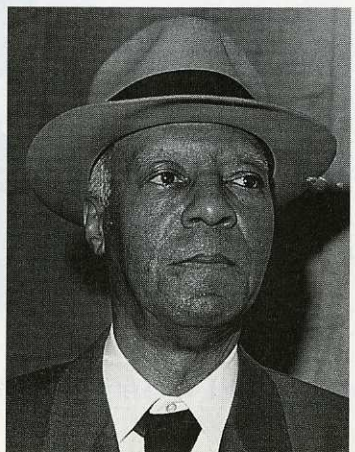
I met Bob Moses about twenty-five years later while doing research for the documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*. On weekend afternoons we sat together outside his kitchen. Through the din of household activities, Bob told me the stories of the Mississippi movement. He didn't talk about himself; instead he remembered the people of Mississippi who had lived and died trying to change their towns and counties. Bob taught me that as human beings our strength lies in our compassion and that our commitment to struggle must be unconditional. Through his example I learned that as men and women, our salvation depends on our love and respect for one another as well as ourselves. Bob showed me that it is in the wisdom of our elders that we find our way.

His movement continues today as he works to organize communities, families, and children through the Algebra Project, which is committed to the power of knowledge and excellence. The program has now spread to several different school districts around the country. He is willing to give his all so that each of us can be our best. He is the best of us. He is a hero.

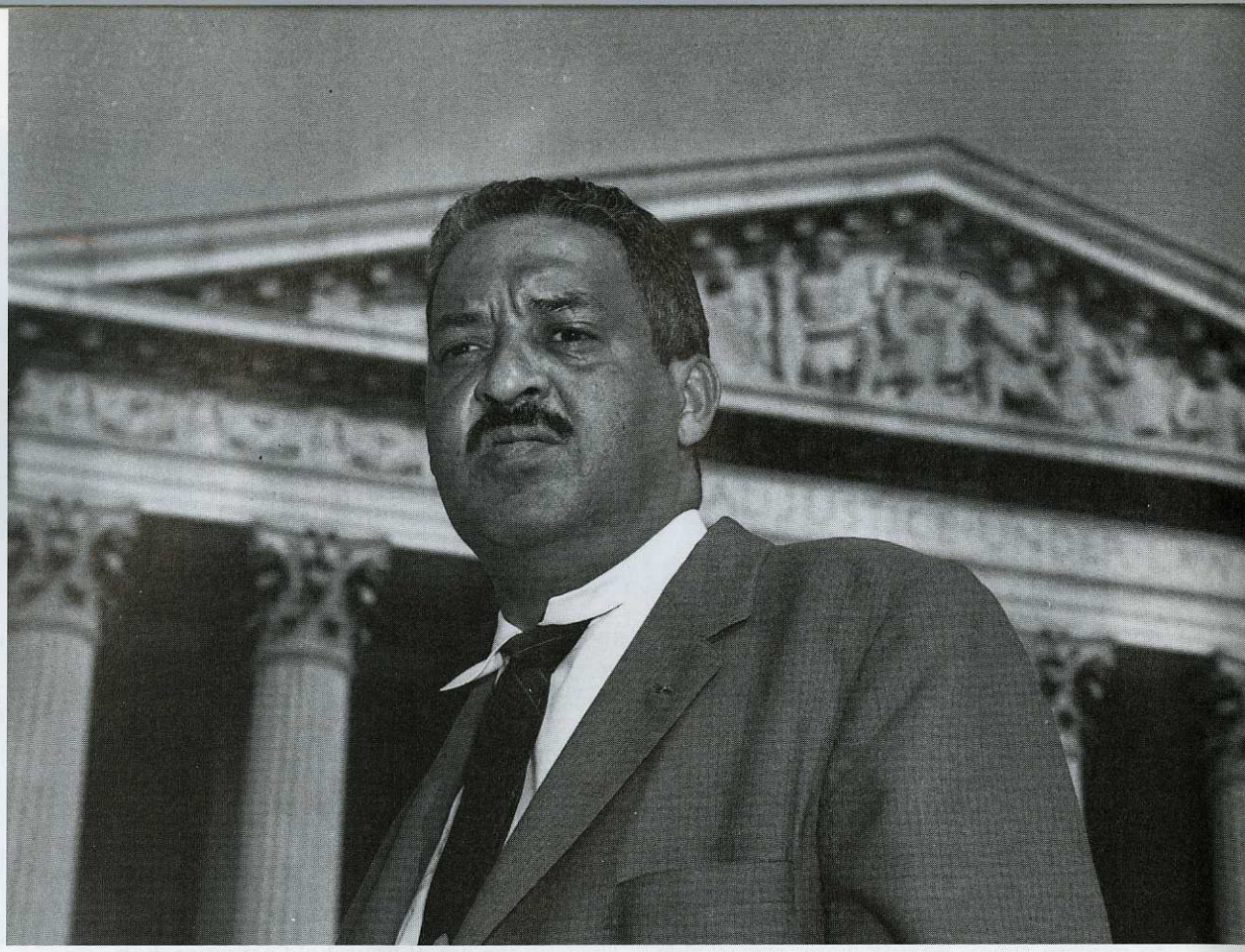
Andre Braugher & A. Philip Randolph

Andre Braugher, actor, starring in the television series Homicide: Life on the Street

A. Philip Randolph is my hero, because he brought



LEFT: PARAMOUNT PICTURES; RIGHT: CORBIS-BETTMANN



Johnnie Cochran & Thurgood Marshall

together the talents of thousands of working men and women, marshaling their energies toward a goal of self-sufficiency, respect, collective action, and political change.

Johnnie Cochran, lawyer
My hero is my father, Johnnie L. Cochran, Sr., without a doubt. He's been my hero my whole life. He taught me early to believe in myself, in God, and in the value of education. In the law field Thurgood Marshall was the one person I wanted to be like, but still it always came back to my father. On all the big decisions I go to him and ask his advice. He's my counselor and my guide, he's there for me now and always has been a strong figure in my life. He recently turned eighty-two, and I'm really blessed to have him with me still—he lives with me even today. I'm very proud to bear his name.

Loretta Devine & Mickey Leland

Loretta Devine, actress, starring in Waiting to Exhale
Being a native of Houston, Texas, I choose Barbara Jordan and the late Congressman Mickey Leland.

When I worked as artistic director of a black arts center in Houston in the late 1970s, Mickey Leland came to talk to me and my students and helped clean up the alleyways and the prostitution and drugs in the area so that the neighborhood kids could come and study theater and art.

Barbara Jordan was in a position of pride for all of us to observe, and the mere timbre of her voice inspired me to strive to be better than I ever dreamed. They are both gone, but their contributions touched my life by filling my heart with hope.

Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States
Former U.S. Ambassador Andrew Young, who also served as the mayor of Atlanta in the 1980s, is one of my personal heroes. I first met Andy in 1969, and we quickly found that we shared many personal and religious philosophies. He was one of my best and earliest supporters when I ran for President. He profoundly influenced my view of politics when he said, "Religion is about life. When you pray the Lord's

TOP LEFT: REUTERS/CORBIS-BETTMANN; TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM RIGHT: UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN; BOTTOM LEFT: BARRY KING/GAMMA-LIAISON

prayer, you say, 'Thy kingdom come on earth.' And in a democratic society, if the kingdom is going to come on earth, it's going to come by voting and by legislative action that appropriates taxes humanely and spends money on life and development, rather than on death and destruction."

For more than thirty years my friendship with Andy has inspired me. His courage, honesty, and willingness to stand for what he believes is right, even when it's not popular, makes him a role model for all Americans. He is one of our national treasures, and a treasured friend to my wife, Rosalynn, and me.

Deval L. Patrick, former Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights

What a great idea to ask that question! The person whose accomplishments I most admire is Eddie Quaintance, my sixth-grade teacher. She had a gift for making kids with little of material value feel immensely valuable, and she helped us imagine the great things expected of us.

Ruby Dee, actress and social activist

As an actor keenly aware of the influence of film in our lives, I am enormously impressed by the work of the Commission on Arts and Letters of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. In the 1970s, under the leadership of the national presidents Lillian Benbow and Dr. Jeanne Noble, the group organized the production of a film in Nigeria titled *Countdown at Kusini*. The film was produced mainly with their own resources.

I believe Spike Lee, for example, follows in the tradition of such determination and energy. The aim of Spike Lee and of the Deltas is to have some input into the images by which we live and are defined.

William Loren Katz, author of award-winning books on African-American history

It is virtually impossible to choose from among dozens of heroic figures I have known or written about. But how can one leave out these people:

Ida B. Wells, who went to work with the two guns when she edited her antiracist newspaper, the Memphis *Free Speech and Headlight*, in 1892.

Paul Robeson, who stood so tall and so personified the civil rights movement long before the 1960s.

Lucy Parsons, who, beginning in the 1880s, championed the cause of the oppressed of the world, women's rights, and antiracism.

Lucy Terry, a former slave who fought for African-American civil rights in Vermont before and after the American Revolution.

But I guess my greatest hero would be a little-known black Seminole chief, John Horse, who, regal and diplomatic force that he was, led his nation in Florida in the 1840s, in Mexico in the 1850s and 1860s, and in Texas in the 1870s and 1880s—after having negotiated his people's return to the United States intact as a nation in 1870.

L. Douglas Wilder, former Governor of Virginia

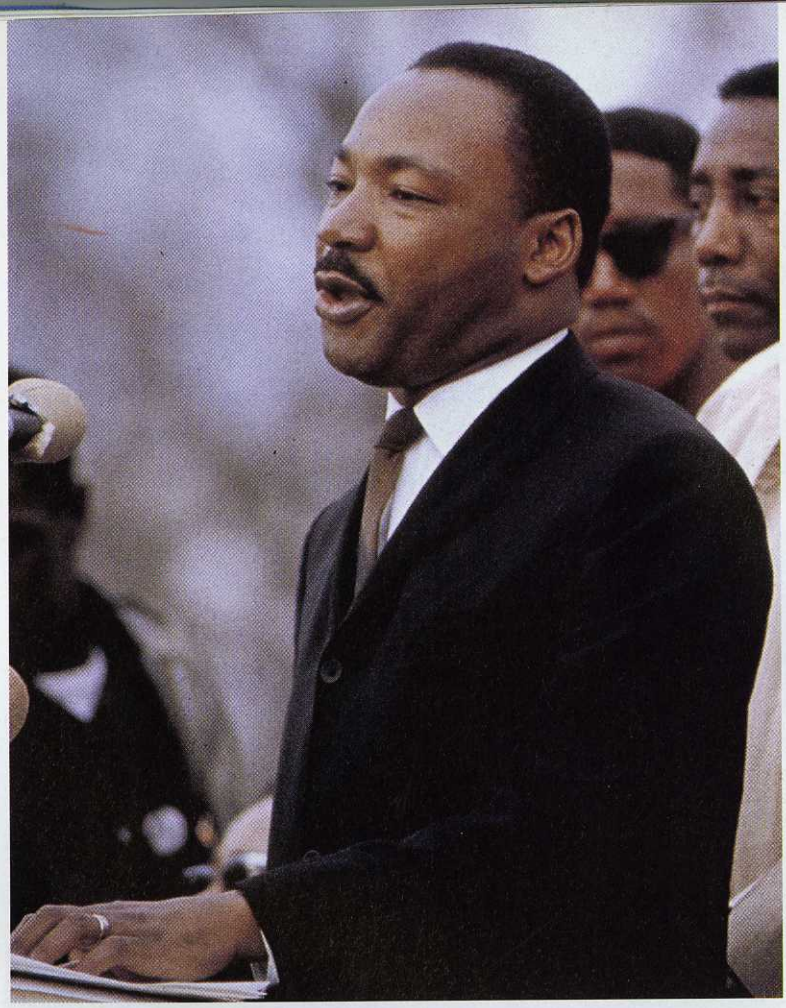
I have never been able to single out one person who inspired me. Among those who have are Lt. Col. Charles Young, the third black graduate of West Point, who, in order to fight an excuse used to deny his promotion, demonstrated his physical fitness by riding his horse on a journey of hundreds of miles from Ohio to Washington. [*Editor's note:* See our "Pathfinders" column for more about Colonel Young.]

Other heroes of mine are Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser, whose words ring now as they did when he was captured and about to be hanged. Also, George Washington Carver, who used his brain and inventiveness to dispel the myth of genetic inferiority. And

L. Douglas Wilder & Nat Turner

LEFT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; RIGHT: REUTERS/CORBIS-BETTMANN

Jack Kemp & Martin Luther King, Jr.



Paul Robeson, who was stellar in every endeavor—scholarship, athletics, drama, and music—but still waged the war against bigotry and discrimination and would not knuckle under.

Jack Kemp, former Vice Presidential candidate

I have always admired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for his courageous commitment to the noblest of American dreams: to extend the blessings of freedom and justice to all our nation's citizens. When Dr. King stood in the shadow of Lincoln and invoked the words of Jefferson as he spoke of his dream, he was calling on America to fulfill the magnificent promises of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, promises first articulated by Jefferson and later forged in the fires of the Civil War by Lincoln. Dr. King's heroic efforts have helped America come closer to realizing those promises of freedom, which are, in Dr. King's words, "the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God."

Ann Richards & Barbara Jordan

Ann Richards, former Governor of Texas

Barbara Jordan: Humor, ethics, and bravery—she had them all.

William H. Gray III, former pastor and Congressman, president of the United Negro College Fund

I call two men my heroes. My father, William Gray, Jr., and Martin Luther King, Jr. My father was a minister and educator, a positive role model and a loving and caring father. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a Christian minister whose work went beyond the pulpit. I knew Dr. King on a personal level: Our families were friends for three generations. Thus, my life's work—ministry, education, public service, and international concerns—was influenced by these two giants.

Ruth J. Simmons, president of Smith College

Vernell Lillie, a former teacher at Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston, is my hero. She inspired hundreds of African-American youth to push through barriers of race, gender, and class to achieve excellence. Today, as a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, she continues this selfless work. She is emblematic of all the African-American teachers who have inspired us and led us to success in many areas.

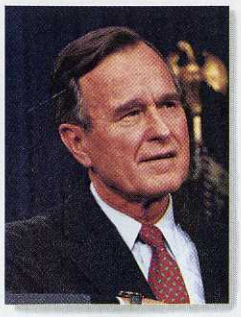
Bennie G. Thompson, Congressman from Mississippi

My hero is my mother, Mrs. Annie Thompson-Jeffers. She sacrificed so I could attend college. She never complained but made it crystal clear that I had to get my lessons done. She provided the inspiration for me to be the best that I can be. For that I thank her, and I will always be grateful to her for being there when I needed her.

George Bush, former President of the United States

I am delighted to share with you two of my true African-American

TOP RIGHT: CORBIS-BETTMANN; ALL OTHERS: UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN



George Bush & Colin Powell

heroes. The first is a dear old friend, Bill Trent. Bill and I go back to my days at Yale, when he first got me involved with the United Negro College Fund. I learned a lot from Bill—about friendship, and decency, and helping others. He died in 1993, but his example lives on in the countless lives he touched.

The other name that comes to mind when you mention the word *hero* is Colin Powell. To me Colin represents what's right about our country, and what's best about our armed forces. Throughout his life and career, he has overcome adversity; he has made the most of his opportunities; and he has always —always—done so with a sense of principle that underlies his strength of character. I was proud to have him at my side when I was President, and prouder still to call him my friend. Best wishes to all at *American Legacy*.

Al Sharpton & Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Rev. Al Sharpton, Pentecostal minister and social activist

My hero from history is unquestionably Congressman and minister Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. He did more tangible and concrete things to empower and give social freedom to the disadvantaged and to African-Americans than anyone in the twentieth century. Powell was the trailblazer in the protest movement and in politics.

J. C. Watts, Congressman from Oklahoma

Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington: two giants who led the way and cast even longer shadows today.

Colin L. Powell, former U.S. Army General and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Other than my parents, I don't cite most or best or worst characterizations. Too many people influenced me over the years to single out one. By the way, the magazine is terrific. ★

Who is your hero in history? Write to: Atiya Butler, Associate Editor, American Legacy, *60 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, or e-mail us at amlegacy@americanheritage.com.*

TOP, BOTH: UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN; BOTTOM LEFT: AP/BETH A. KEISER; BOTTOM RIGHT: AP/WIDE WORLD

Bethune's confidence shines through in a 1944 portrait by Betsy Graves Reyneau.

Mrs. BETHUNE

THE AMBITIOUS DAUGHTER OF EX-SLAVES, MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE MADE HERSELF INTO A NATIONAL FIGURE LOBBYING THE PRESIDENT AND CONGRESS TO TAKE ACTION ON CIVIL RIGHTS. HER IDEAS INSPIRED COUNTLESS BLACK ACTIVISTS. SO WHY ISN'T SHE BETTER REMEMBERED?

ONE DAY ABOUT TWO YEARS BEFORE HER DEATH IN 1955, MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE pointed to a shady spot behind her Daytona Beach home and told Dr. Richard V. Moore, her hand-picked successor as president of Bethune-Cookman College, that this was where she wanted to be buried.

"And Mr. President," she said, "I want a rugged stone on my grave, the biggest you can find." She had already donated her two-story frame house and its contents to a foundation named for her and dedicated to preserving her record. Her will made no provisions for her family; everything would go to the foundation. Moore and others had expected her to move out of the house, since climbing the stairs to her bedroom put further stress on her already weakened and diseased heart. But Bethune refused to even consider the idea.

"I'm going to sleep in my own bed, eat at my own table and keep working at my desk until I die," she said. "When the end comes, perhaps there'll be a dishcloth left unwashed. People will be able to say: This is where Mary McLeod Bethune stopped."

When the end did come for the seventy-nine-year-old Bethune, the dishcloth was washed and neatly folded. She was standing on her back porch looking out over her campus when she fell dead of a heart attack.

The gravestone is just as she wanted it, massive and unpolished, reminding the tourists who pass each day that this woman knew who and what she was. She was not beautiful by the standards of her day—heavy set and dark skinned, full lipped with a broad, flat nose—but she was rugged, like the stone, and ultimately impenetrable.

Her home—now a National Historic Landmark—is the shrine she wanted it to be, down to the smallest detail. Her various awards and medals fill a display case; the photos of her family and of her political patrons, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, are neatly displayed; one china place setting sits on her dinner table,

BY BROWARD LISTON

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

She would promise candidates the backing of the President and could deliver votes in the millions.

the rest on view in an English cabinet given her by a neighbor, John D. Rockefeller, whose winter home stood nearby. In her bedroom her favorite evening gown hangs on the wardrobe door as if she were planning to dress for the evening.

During the last years of her life Mary McLeod Bethune's chief occupation was the care and nurturing of her legacy—that of a barefoot girl, the daughter of freed slaves, who had left the cotton fields to serve and advise five Presidents, found a college, write a syndicated newspaper column, and take her place on the world stage. But even at the height of her powers, when she would promise favored candidates the backing of the President of the United States and counted the number of votes she could deliver in the millions, her eventual legacy was never far from her thoughts. She wanted to inspire, to embody the adage that even God's lowliest servants could rise up—indeed should rise up—to overcome any obstacle.

If there is one story about Bethune that the casual reader of history is likely to know, it is the story of how in 1904 she started her school, the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Girls, "with five little girls, a dollar-fifty and faith in God," as she often said. She would tell of how she had funded the school with sales of sweet potato pies and had frightened off the Ku Klux Klan one night by standing fast and leading her girls in the singing of spirituals. From nothing, the story went, and against great odds, she had brought forth a mighty institution of higher learning.

Well, sort of. The truth is that Bethune, from the very beginning, was a crafty dealmaker. Her school benefited from her ability to wrangle financial support from white benefactors, and few black schools, even land-grant colleges, can look back to such advantageous beginnings. At the turn of the century Daytona and the neighboring town of Ormond were establishing themselves as winter residences for some of the world's wealthiest families. Bethune knew that the big new hotels and houses badly needed help in the winter season and that she could expect support if she started a school to train young girls as domestics. James Gamble of Procter & Gamble was the first president of her board of trustees. Other benefactors included Thomas White, of the White Sewing Machine Company, Sen. Frederick C. Walcott of Connecticut, and John D. Rockefeller, the retired chairman of Standard Oil.

In the late 1930s Bethune picketed a Washington, D.C., drugstore that refused to hire black workers.

Bethune's efforts at the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute would have been successful had she done no more than teach the girls to cook, sew, iron, and wash. But she also added academic classes and devoted much of her energies to developing the school's nursing program. Bethune shepherded the institution through its formative years, overseeing its evolution into a coeducational junior college when it merged with the Cookman Institute for Boys, in 1923. But soon her attention was drawn away by her involvement in various social causes. In 1924 she became head of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), a three-hundred-thousand-member federation of African-American women's clubs. Under the dynamic leadership of women like Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, the NACW had fought for women's suffrage and an end to lynchings in the South. Bethune sought to push the NACW even further by making it a highly centralized political body that would act as a lobbying group for civil rights.

She traveled around the country raising money for the NACW's scholarship fund and rallying the organization's members to become actively involved in their communities. She also continued to cultivate relationships with influential whites. In 1918 Senator Walcott had introduced her to Thomas Marshall, Woodrow Wilson's Vice President, and Marshall subsequently recruited her to help integrate the American Red Cross. Her work and visibility led to invitations from two subsequent Presidents, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, to attend national conferences on child welfare. It was these credentials, along with the thousands of potential votes from women who belonged to the NACW, that eventually would bring her to the attention of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she would pressure to help improve conditions for black America.

Bethune's origins could hardly have been humbler. She was born in 1875 on a farm in Mayesville, South Carolina, to former slaves. Her parents, Samuel and Patsy McLeod, had had to reassemble their family after emancipation from the various farms and plantations to which their children had been sold. The McLeods owned a five-acre plot that would never yield enough to support them, so they continued to work for the whites who had once owned them.

Under such circumstances Mary McLeod's prospects for a

Education freed her from the cotton fields, but she never saw it alone as the solution for her race.

life beyond subsistence farming were slim. When she was ten, however, Trinity Presbyterian Mission School for black children opened five miles from her home. Only one of the family's children could be spared for schooling, and her parents chose Mary. Three years later, with help from her teacher at Trinity, Emma Jane Wilson, she went on to Scotia Seminary, a missionary boarding school for girls in North Carolina. She spent six years at Scotia, completing a course of teacher training designed to send her to a mission school like the one that had given her a start. But Mary, already showing an appetite for travel, wanted to work as a foreign missionary, so she took a year's course at Dwight Moody's Institute for Home and Foreign Missions, in Chicago.

After graduation she applied for a position as an African missionary for the Presbyterian Church but was turned down because of her race. She would later describe the rejection as "the greatest heartbreak of my life."

She had escaped the fields by going to school, escaped the South by moving North, and had sought an occupation that would put her alongside whites on an equal footing—and failed. So now she would return South, to a life among field hands. She married Albertus Bethune, a store clerk from Sumter, South Carolina, and soon gave birth to a son, Albert. Any thought of reapplying for missionary work had ended with her marriage and pregnancy. The marriage was never successful—the couple would eventually separate though never divorce—and she took little joy from motherhood.

In 1899 Bethune and her husband and child moved to Florida, where she started a mission to bring food and clothing to sawmill workers and chain-gang prisoners and to preach the Gospel. She took her cause to railroad camps where former citrus workers, idled by crop-destroying freezes, were living in thatched huts. "As slaves, Negroes had been aware of their illiteracy," she once said, "but now I found children who had never even seen a book, who had never learned the basics of hygiene and sanitation." Such misery outraged her, and she felt compelled to improve conditions for her people. In 1904 she founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Girls.

Soon she was also running a temperance league, giving public lectures on black history, and serving as president of the Florida Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Somewhere along the way she found her true calling: politics. Although schooling had freed her from the cotton fields, she never saw education alone as the solution for her race; she began to believe that real political power would be needed before blacks could overcome all the social and economic ills they faced. By 1924 she was heading the National Association of Colored Women. She became a human dynamo, criss-crossing the country, attending conferences, speaking to women's clubs and teacher groups, and organizing relief when disasters—whether natural or economic—struck. Between engagements she slept on trains and seemed to know by name every Pullman porter in the nation.

Bethune's influence reached to the top of government. She used her friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt to urge on the fight against Jim Crow.

In 1927 Bethune was invited to the home of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, future governor of New York and President. The occasion was a lunch given by his wife, Eleanor, to honor the heads of some two hundred women's clubs. The scene was typical of many in Bethune's adult life. As president of the National Association of Colored Women, she was the only black present. There was a good deal of anxious tittering and a bit of jockeying for chairs when the women were called to the dining room. None of the other guests felt comfortable, it seemed, sitting next to the lone black. This predicament was one that Bethune would face hundreds of times. She was usually content to let the whites squirm but was always quick to put any person embarrassed on her behalf at ease with her calm good humor. In this case FDR's mother, Sara, quickly sensed the confusion, took Bethune by the arm, and led her to a seat next to the hostess. By the end of the afternoon the two Mrs. Roosevelts, who were never good friends themselves, were both fast friends of Mary McLeod Bethune.

Her association with Eleanor Roosevelt was probably the most important of her life. Mrs. Roosevelt, who as a younger

CORBIS-BETTMANN

woman had called blacks "darkies" and never thought of them except as servants, was profoundly influenced when tutored by Bethune in the ways of race relations. Bethune's relationship with President Roosevelt is less clear. She wrote an article for *Ebony* about her "secret meetings" with FDR, in which she quoted the President as saying: "Mrs. Bethune, I shall not fail you. Your people shall have their chance." And: "Mrs. Bethune, you've helped me so much. I was so glad to see you. You always come in behalf of others—never yourself." And this: "Come in, Mrs. Bethune, have a seat right here. How are you? How are your people? What progress are they making?"

But the dialogue is suspiciously formal and stilted, very possibly invented. Roosevelt thrived on gossip and intrigue in private meetings and he thirsted for ward-heeler minutiae.

Left: Pictures of the famous people Bethune counted as friends cover the walls of the parlor in her Daytona Beach home. Right: Students stroll the campus of the college she founded in 1904.

Perhaps Bethune exaggerated her intimacy with him when she claimed that she met privately with him on about six occasions, always in the White House residence after hours. Roosevelt's commitment to civil rights was virtually nonexistent, though liberal New Dealers in his administration had a free hand to set their own agendas. It was those liberals who appointed more than a hundred blacks, including Bethune, to administration jobs in Washington.

By the mid 1930s Bethune was one of the most powerful African-Americans in the country. In 1935, having worked hard to bring black votes into the coalition that sent Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to the White House, she concluded that the NACW was too hesitant in the political arena and that its leadership often discriminated against the darker-skinned, less educated women of her race. So she started her own organization—the National Council of Negro Women—and promoted it as unafraid to advance a coherent agenda for black women and children. NCNW members collected and disseminated information about blacks and employment, raised money for scholarships, worked with the League of Women Voters to register black women to vote, and began a "Hold Your Job" campaign to encourage African-Americans to develop marketable skills.

In 1936 Bethune was appointed head of the Negro Affairs Division of Roosevelt's National Youth Administration (NYA), in charge of administering grants to black colleges and overseeing employment projects for black youth. She took the opportunity to look beyond her own department to the other new black political appointees in Washington, and she organized them into the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, known informally as FDR's Black Cabinet. Historians usually describe the Black Cabinet as an advisory group to the President on racial issues, but it is by no means clear that FDR ever actually sought its advice. The Black Cabinet was entirely Bethune's creation, and she wanted it to act as a policymaking board. The group's revolving membership kept few records and usually met informally in her Vermont Avenue home. But what is known is that it eventually came to see itself as the genesis of a larger congregation of black federal policymakers and social leaders who aimed to formulate a broad array of civil rights legislation to be forwarded directly to the White House and to Congress for action.

As Franklin Roosevelt expanded the federal government to play a greater role in the lives of citizens than ever before, Bethune may have been the first civil rights leader to fully understand the effect this change could have on black Americans. She was determined that the new activist government's policies affecting blacks be set by blacks. She wrote to Roosevelt in 1937 that she was "mindful of the fact that during the past four years many benefits have come to the Negro . . . and we are grateful. However, until now, opportunity has not been offered for Negroes themselves to suggest a comprehensive program for their full integration into the benefits and responsibilities of the American Democracy."

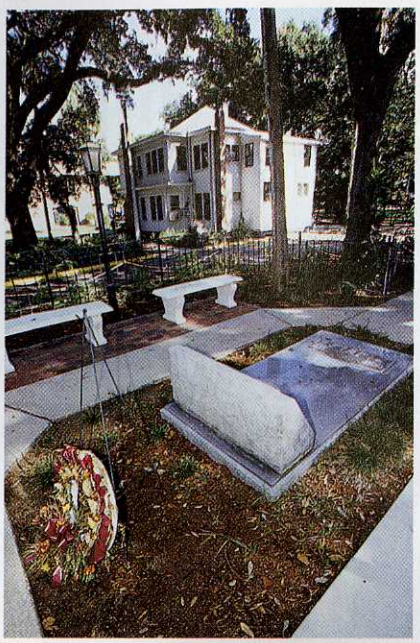
That year she gathered together black policymakers in the federal government and leaders in the church, education, labor, business, law, and medicine for the National Conference on

BOTH: JIM TILLER

Much of her civil rights agenda was implemented before she died, by the Truman administration.

the Problems of Blacks and Black Youths. The meeting's ostensible purpose was to address the special problems of black children during the Depression, but the delegates, who included such luminaries as Walter White and A. Philip Randolph, also called for a federal antilynching law, the extension of Social Security benefits to domestic and agricultural workers, the desegregation of the military, land reform for tenant farmers, and support for black schools.

Expectations were enormously high, and Bethune hoped the occasion would be the highlight of her career. Blacks had worked to elect Roosevelt and then to reelect him, and now the payoff would come in the form of political self-determination. Bethune urged FDR to address the opening session of the three-day conference, but he declined. Eleanor Roosevelt came in his place, and she confined her remarks to the needs of black children, ignoring the larger implications of the gathering. In the end Bethune's agenda was passed by the conference but never acted on by either the White House or Congress.



Her Daytona Beach house overlooks her grave, which bears the rugged stone marker she requested.

If Bethune was disappointed by this outcome, she never admitted it. If she felt abandoned by the Roosevelts, not a word of recrimination passed her lips. When the NYA was dismantled, its budget sacrificed to war production, she took an advisory post with the Army on recruiting black female officers. Patriotic to the bone, she sought service even after she was accused of being a Communist and called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1943. War had made discontent suspect, and blacks who insisted, as Bethune did, that the armed forces be integrated were subjected to harsh scrutiny. Through it all Bethune maintained her composure and dignity. When asked about the charges leveled against her, she said she would "continue along the straight, true course I have followed through all these years." The investigative committee could come up with no evidence against her, and her name was eventually cleared.

Even after leaving her government post, she remained active in politics. In 1944 she joined other prominent black leaders—among them Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Thurgood Marshall—in signing a Declaration by Negro Voters that stated that blacks were wedded neither to the Democratic nor the Republican party and would only support candidates who favored racial equality. And she continued to lecture around the country and write columns for the Pittsburgh *Courier*, the *Washington Post*, and the Chicago *Defender*.

She had resigned as president of Bethune-Cookman College in 1942 because of her failing health, but she remained active in social causes. By the end of World War II she, like her friend W. E. B. Du Bois, was viewing civil rights as an international struggle. She fulfilled her lifelong dream of visiting Africa and developed an interest in the black nations freeing themselves from colonialism. She traveled to Liberia to help found a chapter of the NCNW there and went to Haiti to accept its highest honor, the Medal of Honor and Freedom.

She lived long enough to see much of her civil rights agenda implemented, most of it by the Truman administration. The antilynching bill passed, Social Security benefits were extended, minimum-wage laws tightened, and the military was desegregated. And in a series of cases the Supreme Court began to dismantle Jim Crow.

Had Bethune been able to push through the comprehensive agenda of her 1937 Conference, she might be remembered today as the greatest of all civil rights leaders. Nevertheless, her failure bore much fruit. Her conferences assembled the best black minds of her generation and set them working together, and her failure to make change come from inside the government defined the course for a half-century of agitation from the outside.

If she is not remembered today alongside the likes of Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, it's not because they succeeded where she failed. It's probably because of our own limited perspective. She was simply unique. Look at her any way you choose and there is really no one in American history quite like her.

After President Roosevelt died, his wife visited Bethune and brought her a gift. Eleanor had heard that her friend had a hobby of sorts: She had a small collection of canes that had belonged to famous men. So Mrs. Roosevelt gave her a cane that had once belonged to her husband and had been a gift to him from another President, his cousin Theodore Roosevelt. Mary McLeod Bethune treasured that cane but she rarely used it. She preferred to stand on her own two feet. ★

Broward Liston is a freelance writer who lives in Daytona Beach, Florida.

JIM TILLER

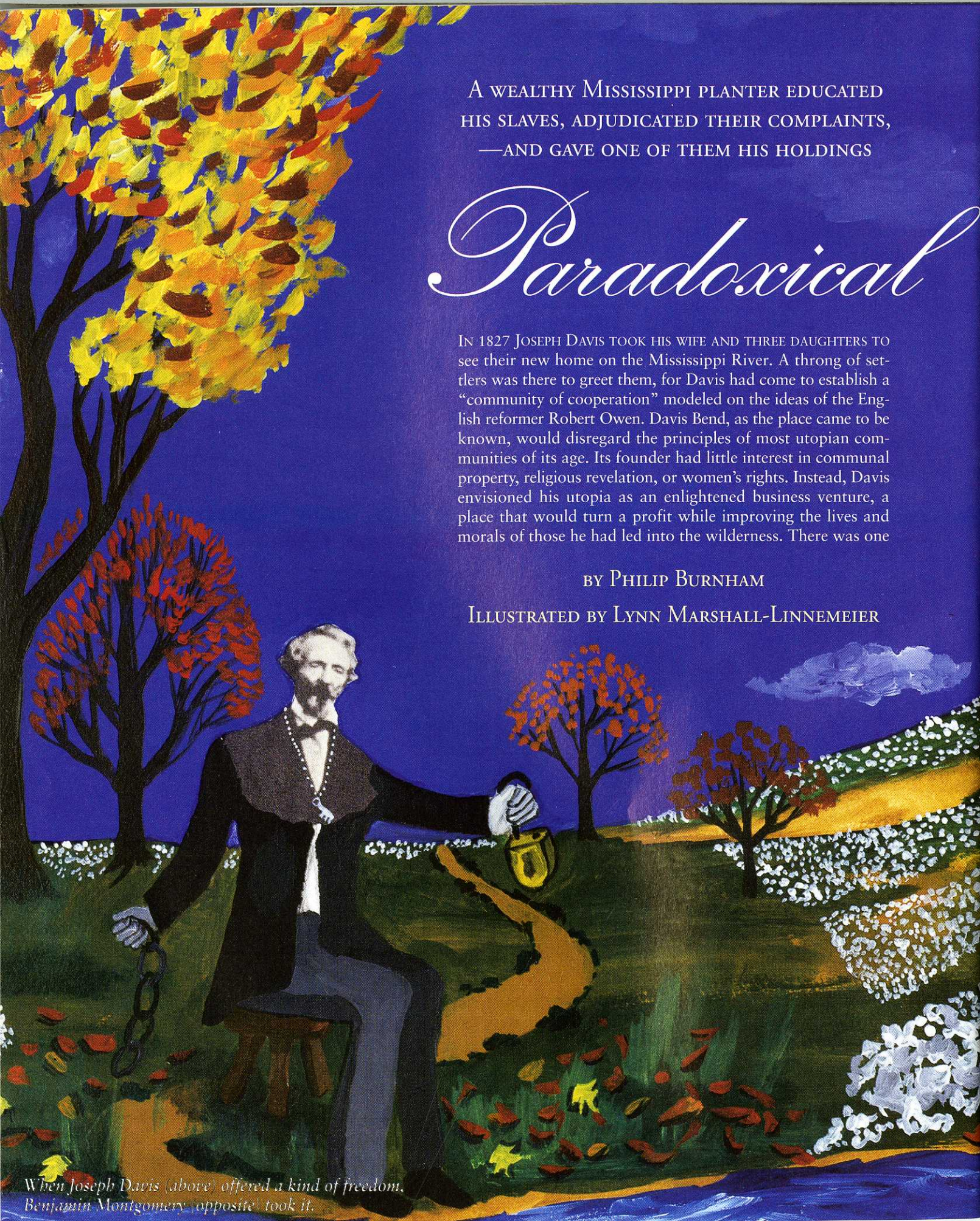
A WEALTHY MISSISSIPPI PLANTER EDUCATED HIS SLAVES, ADJUDICATED THEIR COMPLAINTS, —AND GAVE ONE OF THEM HIS HOLDINGS

Paradoxical

IN 1827 JOSEPH DAVIS TOOK HIS WIFE AND THREE DAUGHTERS TO see their new home on the Mississippi River. A throng of settlers was there to greet them, for Davis had come to establish a "community of cooperation" modeled on the ideas of the English reformer Robert Owen. Davis Bend, as the place came to be known, would disregard the principles of most utopian communities of its age. Its founder had little interest in communal property, religious revelation, or women's rights. Instead, Davis envisioned his utopia as an enlightened business venture, a place that would turn a profit while improving the lives and morals of those he had led into the wilderness. There was one

BY PHILIP BURNHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY LYNN MARSHALL-LINNEMEIER



When Joseph Davis (above) offered a kind of freedom, Benjamin Montgomery (opposite) took it.


Plantation
ACCOUNTS
Hurricane

other unusual feature of this community twenty miles south of Vicksburg, Mississippi: The settlers who worked for Davis would be chattel slaves.

Joseph Emory Davis, born in 1784, was no simple dreamer. Founder of the Mississippi Bar Association, he was a delegate to the state legislature in the 1820s and by the time the Civil War struck was one of the largest slaveholders in Mississippi. He was also the elder brother of Jefferson Davis, who would become the Confederacy's president and who shared Joseph's idealistic dreams, if not his enthusiasm for black self-improvement. Jefferson's plantation, Brierfield, sat next to Joseph's, which was called Hurricane. Yet Joseph Davis and his colony might have been forgotten if not for the efforts of Benjamin Montgomery, born into slavery in Virginia and sold down the river at age seventeen. Bought by Davis on the Natchez slave block in 1836, Montgomery would eventually become one of the wealthiest landowners in Mississippi, the heir to Davis's dream—and his estate—and lauded by *The New York Times* as the "practical and sagacious" leader of one of the boldest black settlements of Reconstruction.

The wealthy landowner and the onetime runaway slave made an unusual pairing.

But when Montgomery first came to the Bend in 1836 his future didn't seem so bright. Arriving in a shipment with some twenty other bondsmen, he escaped. The only slave reputed to have run away from Joseph Davis before the Civil War, he was quickly recaptured. The response of most masters would have been severe, but according to Montgomery's son Isaiah, Davis "inquired closely into the cause of [Benjamin's] dissatisfaction." This prominent landowner with no male heirs and the recaptured runaway trapped in the Deep South made an unusual pairing.

Davis seems to have quickly spotted Montgomery's potential. Offering him use of his library, Davis watched the young slave improve reading skills he had gleaned from his first master as he studied surveying, architecture, and the mechanical arts. Soon touted by Davis as having "few Superiors as a Machinist," the largely self-taught Montgomery took control of the Davis Bend cotton gin and invented a steamboat propeller that Jefferson Davis tried to register in Montgomery's name in Washington, D.C., only to be told that a slave couldn't be issued a patent.

But Benjamin Montgomery was more than an ingenious tinkerer. Entrusted with shipping the Davis Bend cotton crop from the Davises' twin estates of Hurricane and Brierfield, he established himself as a first-rate businessman. Though some balked at trading with a black man, Montgomery opened a successful dry-goods store in 1842. His customers included fellow slaves who grew produce for trade on entrepreneurial plots provided by Davis. An inveterate borrower and lender, Montgomery became a vital cog in the local plantation economy. "In one instance," recalled Jefferson Davis's wife, Varina, "[Benjamin] credited one of us with $2,000 on his account." The insubordinate runaway had become indispensable, occupying a delicate niche between master and slave. His eldest son, Isaiah, later recalled that his family "just barely had an idea of what slave life was."

Montgomery's affection for Davis—a blend of gratitude and self-interest—was not uncommon on the Bend. By treating his slaves with a modicum of decency, Davis could keep abolitionists at a safe distance. Montgomery and his peers, considered to be more like trustworthy children than human property, were known locally as "Mr. Davis's free negroes."

Which is to say they were free of the basic wants that dogged most slaves. Davis Bend's families lived in spacious two-room quarters, ate a plentiful and varied diet, had adequate bedding and clothing, and were offered regular dental care. In fact, living conditions on the Bend compared favorably with those of almost any utopian community of the era. Life expectancy appears to have been high; many slaves owned by the Davis brothers lived into their eighties. But Joseph Davis did more than care for his slaves' physical needs. He allowed them to educate themselves. When Montgomery hired tutors for his own children, Joseph didn't stop him; he even let whites attend the classes. (The school was closed when public outcry denounced the mingling of local black and white children.)

Davis Bend slaves also practiced an innovative form of self-rule. At the rear of the Hurricane estate stood a modest brick building known as the Hall of Justice, where Davis's slaves formed juries and passed judgments on complaints against fellow slaves. Davis presided over the court, sometimes softening its judgments. But the presence of slave juries only served as a reminder that Davis Bend, though a cooperative

Young Joseph Davis envisions his utopia on the Mississippi River.

community, was not a voluntary one. A Northern journalist who visited during the Civil War found "a band of iron, four inches wide and half an inch thick, with a heavy chain attached," near the Hurricane's big house. By day slaves had to wear these bands in the fields, Davis's former slaves told him. At night the bands were hung on a wall of the jail, presumably to discourage even the remotest thought of escape.

The driving passion on the Bend was business. In 1860 Hurricane was valued at one hundred thousand dollars, its prosperity maintained by a work force of some 350 slaves. "We had good grub and good clothes an' nobody worked hard," recalled a former slave during the 1930s. But her memory may have failed her on the last point: It was hard labor that allowed Davis Bend to be profitable. While slaves could enjoy relative comfort and freedom, they had to plant, harvest, and deliver the cotton crop to market in timely fashion. Some slaves reacted well to the handsome incentives Davis offered; one man was rewarded for picking 468 pounds of cotton in less than a day. Typical rewards included candy, shoes, pocketknives, or dresses. While Joseph (at Hurricane) and Jefferson (at Brierfield) were renowned for producing the best-quality cotton in the region, the real key to their success was no secret. "The less people are governed," Joseph Davis said frequently, "the more submissive they will be to control."

The paradox that Davis Bend embodied was very old. A well-read lawyer like Davis could have cited an array of famous precedents. Plato, for instance, had dreamed of an ideal republic supported by slaves, and Saint Thomas More described slaves bound with golden fetters in his treatise *Utopia*. But the rationalizations that linked utopia and slavery, at least on the Bend, didn't come just from the owners. Years later Isaiah Montgomery responded to a critic by remarking that Joseph Davis had "no hounds of any kind on his plantation, and absolutely no use for negro dogs, as none of his slaves were runaways." On the other hand, there is no record of the Davis brothers manumitting a single person in the thirty years prior to the Civil War. Davis believed that he had made the peculiar institution comfortable.

The Civil War doomed Davis's experiment—but also gave it a second life. In 1861 Jefferson Davis left the Bend to lead the Confederacy in Richmond. The following year, Joseph fled the plantation at the sign of approaching Yankees. Montgomery briefly managed the estate, then escaped north to freedom in 1863, leaving the land to its new owners, the Federal government. Now it was Washington's turn to work the Bend. The War Department appropriated the property and established a camp that grew to include some four thousand former slaves. The Bend became a magnet for Northern missionaries, carpetbaggers seeking to grow rich with cotton, and government agents attempting to devise a system where blacks could farm the land for their own profit.

But this meant working for Uncle Sam. Federal philosophy, it turned out, shared much with the paternalism of the Davis brothers. The government divided workers into "companies" with layers of supervision. Former slaves rented the land or hired themselves out to work it; ownership was out of the question. And yet the rhetoric of Davis's dream persisted. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant offered his hope that Davis Bend would become "a negro paradise"; meanwhile, a white monopoly controlled its cotton-gin concession. Davis's black-run court system was revived, but many soldiers thought it was a Northern innovation.

The Davis family seethed at the Yankee occupation of their property. But the war did not change their beliefs about black and white. "They [the former

slaves] made nothing [at Brierfield] or at Hurricane," complained Joseph in 1862 regarding shrinking profits, "a satisfactory evidence of their inability to live but by forced labor."

Davis didn't get the Bend back until he took a Federal oath of loyalty, more than a year after the war had ended. Given his brother's role in the rebellion, Joseph Davis feared the land might be reconfiscated. And though the Mississippi Black Code forbade the sale of property to blacks, Davis had an idea. In 1866 he secretly offered Davis Bend to the trusted Montgomery. The terms—no money down, seventy-five dollars an acre, minimal interest—were excellent. "The price you value it at would I fear involve me for life," Montgomery replied cagily to the offer. But Davis could think of no one better qualified to save Davis Bend from ruin. "The property is too large for the administrative capacity of a negro," Jefferson Davis would later warn. But Joseph insisted. "He is ambitious to be a rich man," he wrote of his former slave, "and will control the labor." It was a prophecy that proved true for a time.

Gen. Ulysses S. Grant hoped that Davis Bend would become "a negro paradise."

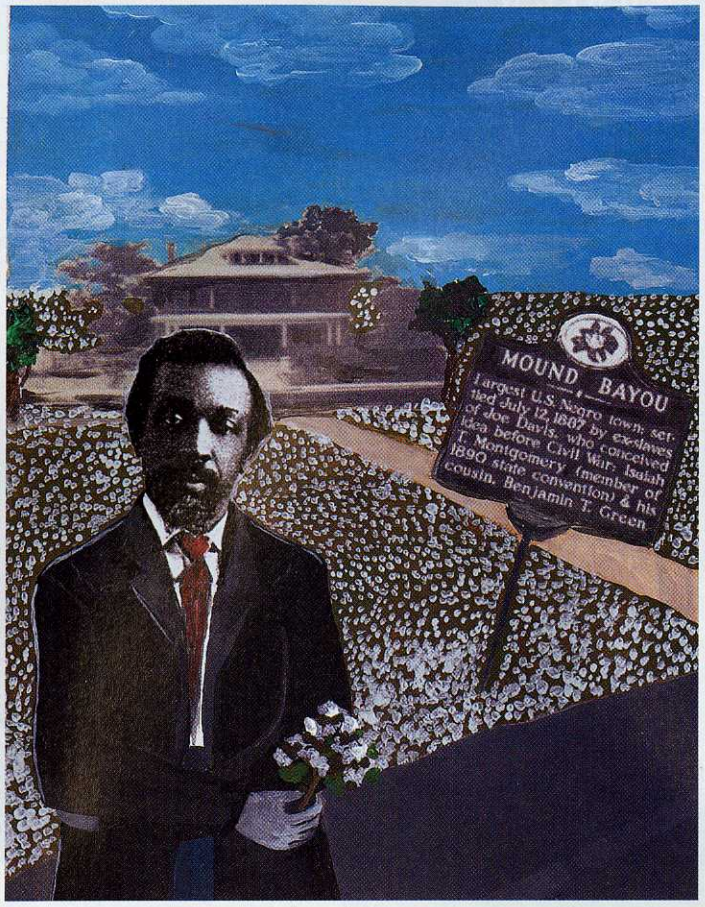
So began an ambivalent experiment in black farming. Montgomery was now one of the state's most prominent landowners—and debtors—and he groomed himself in Davis's image. By 1870 the former slave had taken up residence with his wife and daughters in the Brierfield big house, the Hurricane mansion having been destroyed during the war. From there he founded and governed the Davis Bend Association, a voluntary community of black people characterized by "honesty, industry, sobriety, and intelligence," according to a notice Montgomery placed in a Vicksburg newspaper in 1866. The community, the ad continued, hoped "to attain as much prosperity and happiness as are consistent with human nature." The world had been turned upside down. The semi-literate slave who had fled Hurricane thirty years earlier now ran Davis Bend.

Ironically, the terms Montgomery offered were all too familiar; freedmen and -women would work the land, but Montgomery would own it. Even sharecropping, he feared, permitted too much independence. Instead, by renting out his land at a flat fee, Montgomery hoped he could hedge against meager harvests. And in the first years he would see many. In 1867 flooding broke the levies. Later that year, when army worms invaded ("they devoured as the locusts of Egypt," the Vicksburg *Herald* noted), he hired children to pick the larvae from the plants that were being destroyed. Moreover, falling cotton prices meant that everyone had to work harder to see any profit at all.

Meanwhile, Davis had retired to Vicksburg to live off interest payments from the Bend—when Montgomery could make them, that is. Just as Montgomery's written salutations had changed from "Dear Master" to "Kind Sir," the terms of their relationship had subtly altered over the years. The possibility that Montgomery might shrug off his burden if the financial pressure became too great no doubt troubled Davis. In his final years Joseph Davis was dependent on Montgomery's income and occasionally Benjamin even sent provisions via a family emissary. And yet, when Davis died in 1870, at eighty-five, he still clung to a master's prerogative, willing two hundred dollars a year "for the benefit of the aged and infirm on the plantation."

The death of an old master did not impair the fortunes of the new entrepreneur, especially the business soon thriving under the name of Montgomery & Sons. In the 1870s better weather yielded larger crops and increased income. The store Montgomery had founded in the 1840s was now earning $50,000 a year, and his net worth, estimated at $230,000 soon after Davis's death, made him one of the richest planters in the state. Like Davis, he took the quality of the home crop seriously, winning a five-hundred-dollar prize for the best bale of long-staple cotton at the St. Louis Fair of 1870. Newspaper accounts of the competition gave no hint that the celebrated prize-winner was a black man.

In many ways, however, success only made Montgomery's life more difficult. In 1874 the local Hinds County *Gazette* congratulated him for being "a sensible darkey . . . who does not dabble in politics, and does not corrupt himself hunting offices that he is incompetent to fill." In fact, Montgomery had been appointed as justice of the peace for the Bend in 1867, and his son Thornton was serving as a constable; that they were the first black officeholders in Mississippi was apparently a well-kept secret. When an angry black crowd from Hurricane marched on Vicksburg in 1874 to protest the removal of a black sheriff, "Old Ben confronted them and bade them return



Montgomery's son Isaiah founded a community of landowners.

to their homes," reported a Jackson newspaper. "He spoke so eloquently they turned back."

But Montgomery couldn't win every battle. At Davis Bend he dealt with arson, robbery, petty theft, and brawling. After his death, in 1877, the community eroded. "Many . . . laborers are heavily in debt to [the Montgomerys] for supplies," wrote a journalist in 1879, "and these ran away." As the bleak realities of the post-Reconstruction South became clear, some followed the exodusters to Kansas. In 1881, with loan payments outstanding, Jefferson Davis successfully sued for foreclosure on Davis Bend. The utopian dreams of Davis and Montgomery seemed to be over—except for one final twist.

In 1887 Montgomery's son Isaiah, who as a slave had served as Davis's secretary, founded a settlement similar to Davis Bend in the Yazoo Delta of upstate Mississippi. But this was to be a true "community of cooperation." The town, called Mound Bayou, would offer the one thing Davis Bend had withheld from slave and freedman alike: land for purchase. Settlers came from all over, including a few old-timers from Davis Bend, to buy land that was priced starting at seven dollars per acre. "The negroes of Mound Bayou Colony are industrious, painstaking and shrewd," wrote a visiting reporter. By 1907 some four thousand settlers were producing more cotton than Hurricane and Brierfield in their most prosperous days.

As always, independence came at a price. Like his father, Isaiah was often torn between loyalty to his race and the realities of the society he lived in. As the only black delegate to the state constitutional convention of 1890, for example, Isaiah had supported the disenfranchisement of Mississippi blacks by voting for poll taxes and literacy tests, an act that drew the ire of, among others, Frederick Douglass. Isaiah viewed this as the only way to reassure his white neighbors that freed blacks would pose no threat to them. The colony prospered for several decades, even as Jim Crow laws took hold. But by the time of Isaiah's death in 1924, falling cotton prices and the departure of many settlers for Northern cities threatened Mound Bayou with financial collapse.

However quickly fortunes rose and fell during the long years of slavery and its aftermath, some things were painfully slow to change. A century after young Montgomery had come up the river from Natchez, the WPA guide to Mississippi remarked with no evident irony that in Mound Bayou "overnight accommodations for white visitors are available at the Montgomery home." Today Isaiah Montgomery's twenty-room brick house on Mound Bayou's West Main Street is a privately owned national landmark in a town of two thousand inhabitants, almost all of them African-American.

"They were not Uncle Toms," writes Janet Sharp Hermann in her groundbreaking work on the people of Davis Bend, "but rather . . . self-made men." Their dream of black independence—a blend of idealism and raw self-interest—was purely in the American grain; it grew out of the same commercial motives that drove slavery. But the hopes that Reconstruction promised were realized, at least in part, in Mound Bayou. "They might as well buy land and own it," Isaiah Montgomery once said, "and do for themselves what they had been doing for other folks for two hundred and fifty years." Defying the centuries, the Montgomery clan had gone back up the river. ★

Philip Burnham is the author of How the Other Half Lived: A People's Guide to American Historic Sites *(Faber & Faber, 1995). The story of Davis Bend is covered in detail in two books by Janet Sharp Hermann,* The Pursuit of a Dream *(Oxford University Press, 1981) and* Joseph E. Davis, Pioneer Patriarch *(University Press of Mississippi, 1990).*