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A Tale of Two Plantations: The Comparative Development of the Ensley and Davies
Plantations in Shelby County, Tennessee and the Museums that Interpret Them

by

Emily Rosalind Schwimmer

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Abstract

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This study compares the histories of two plantations in Shelby County, Tennessee – the Ensley Plantation in Southwest Memphis and the Davies Plantation in Bartlett. During broad national transformations such as the Great Migration and suburbanization, proximity to or distance from the City of Memphis strongly influenced divergent land-use, demographic and socio-economic composition, and political and economic resources in each historic plantation area. The historical experiences of each area and its contemporary socio-economic and demographic composition, in turn, influences the way that a museum at each site addresses the past and, particularly, the historical presence of African Americans. The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa (located on the former Ensley Plantation) has made significant efforts to partner with surrounding communities to showcase the area's African American, while Davies Manor Plantation (located on the former Davies Plantation) has largely left African Americans out of its current interpretive programs.

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Introduction

Shelby County, Tennessee, which has its seat in Memphis, consists of 775 square miles.¹ In that space, it contains a huge variety of communities and institutions. A visitor to two Shelby County museums, the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa located in Southwest Memphis² and Davies Manor Plantation in the Brunswick area of Bartlett, will drive through two vastly different areas.³ The C. H. Nash Museum is located in the 38109 zip code, which, in the year 2000, had a population of 52,401. This population was 96.2 percent black and possessed a median household income of \$28,368.⁴ This area actually comprises several distinct neighborhoods with their own community organization. Although many of these neighborhoods lack some of the infrastructure and services available in other parts of Memphis and Shelby County, they contain numerous assets such as neighborhood associations, community centers, churches, and a state park. The 38133 zip code, where Davies Manor Plantation is located, had a total population of 18,937 in 2000. This population was 86.8 percent white and possessed a median household income of \$58,274.⁵ Until recently, this area remained largely farmland, but upscale suburban development now characterizes the landscape.

¹ Harkins, John E., *Historic Shelby County: An Illustrated History* (San Antonio: Historical Publishing Network, 2008), 7.

² Although Memphis did not annex many areas of today's Southwest Memphis until the 1970s, the term Southwest Memphis will be used to refer to the geographical area that comprises the contemporary southwestern corner of the city throughout this paper.

³ Bartlett is a relatively wealthy Memphis suburb located northeast of the city.

⁴ U. S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, Zip Code Tabulation Area 38109.

⁵ U. S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, Zip Code Tabulation Area 38133.

Despite significant differences between Southwest Memphis and Brunswick, as well as between the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation, the two sites also share significant historical similarities. Prior to the Civil War, each site boasted large plantations fueled by the labor of enslaved people. In the post-bellum period, each site shifted to various combinations of sharecropping, tenant labor, and even convict labor in the cultivation of labor-intensive cotton. However, an increasingly divergent set of historical circumstances confronted each plantation, and the two sites embarked on differing paths of development that ultimately resulted in the current conditions at each location. These historical circumstances include proximity to the City of Memphis and demographic changes such as the Great Migration and suburbanization. Resultant demographic and socio-economic composition, in turn, influenced the political and economic resources available to the communities in each area. In the middle and late twentieth century, each area faced some of the same challenges, including the decline of cotton agriculture in the American south, increased technology, annexation, residential and industrial development, and the extension of utilities and infrastructure. However, the outcomes were dissimilar.

Upon reaching the C.H. Nash Museum and Davies Manor, the visitor will find that each museum interprets a specific aspect of its site's past. The C. H. Nash museum focuses on the pre-historic Native American occupation of the site and the southeastern United States, while Davies Manor Plantation focuses on the lives of early Shelby County settlers and farm life. The two museums have dissimilar origins, missions, structures, and interpretive programs.

Both the C. H. Nash Museum in Southwest Memphis and Davies Manor in Brunswick are currently undergoing processes of reinvention. As part of these processes, each museum is striving to incorporate more local history, including African American history, into the larger story it tells. These ongoing processes provide occasion for the reexamination of the histories of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick with emphasis on similarities and differences in their developments, the African American history in each area, and the evolving roles of the two museums themselves.

The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa

In 1940, a contingent of African American Civilian Conservation Corps workers digging a swimming pool for the new Shelby Bluffs State Park for Negroes just south of Memphis near the Mississippi River accidentally uncovered evidence of a pre-historic Native American village. This discovery generated much excitement among Memphians, archaeologists, and scientists. Work on the swimming pool stopped immediately, soon to be replaced by archaeological excavations at the site, which became known as Chucalissa.⁶ They would rely upon the labor of CCC workers, students, and even convicts from a local penal farm.

In 1956, a museum, now called the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, opened to provide increased public access to the archaeological remains of the Chucalissa site. Archaeologist Charles H. Nash became its first director. In 1962, the Tennessee Division of State Parks transferred the Chucalissa site to the Tennessee Board of Education, and it

⁶ The site was officially named Chucalissa in 1957 based on a Choctaw word meaning “House Abandoned.” Bevely Coleman, *A History of Tennessee State Parks*, (Educational Service, Tennessee Department of Conservation, 1968), 377.

became an important part of anthropology and archaeology programs at Memphis State University. Today, the University of Memphis continues to administer Chucalissa and the C. H. Nash Museum.

The mission of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, a division of the University of Memphis, is “to protect and interpret the Chucalissa archaeological site’s cultural and natural environments, and to provide the University Community and the public with exceptional educational, participatory, and research opportunities on the landscape’s past and present Native American and traditional cultures.”⁷ To achieve this mission, the museum utilizes a small building with exhibit areas and an auditorium and its extensive grounds to showcase regional Native American history and the archaeological process. The C. H. Nash Museum and the Chucalissa site provide important hands-on educational opportunities for students and serves as an important cultural resource for the public. With only a few full time employees, the museum relies heavily on University of Memphis graduate assistants, interns, and volunteers for the development and implementation of exhibits and public programs.

Additionally, the museum is beginning to address the *history* of the South West Memphis area. This includes interpreting and displaying cultural material and information regarding the African American cultural heritage of the area. The museum regularly works with community organizations to develop and implement programs at the museum and in Southwest Memphis community centers and churches. Most noticeably, area high school students developed a long-term museum exhibit that interprets the cultural heritage of African Americans in Southwest Memphis.

⁷ University of Memphis, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, <http://www.memphis.edu/chucalissa/index.htm>

Davies Manor Plantation

Davies Manor Plantation, a historic plantation and house museum, got its start without the fanfare that accompanied the discovery of the Chucalissa site. Davies Manor lies in Brunswick, a distinct area annexed by Bartlett in 2005. Throughout most of its history, Brunswick existed as a rural farming community. Brunswick area residents greeted the shift from rural to suburban land use in the middle and late twentieth century with both pragmatism and ambivalence. Davies Manor, the oldest building in the area and supposedly the oldest log home in Shelby County, became a nostalgic focal point that also had utilitarian potential. Heiress Ellen Davies-Rodgers and, later, the Davies Manor Association took advantage of increased area development to turn the old log home into a tourist attraction. At the same time, the site became a memorial to an imagined lost way of life. Indicative of this ethos, a *Press-Scimitar* reporter in 1981 described Davies Manor as well as Ellen Davies-Rodgers' home, "The Oaks," as "preserved like magnolias pressed between the pages of *Gone With the Wind*."⁸ For Davies-Rodgers and others whose families had lived in the Brunswick area for generations, the site became a physical embodiment of their past and pride. Thus, Davies Manor came to serve as the meeting place for several local hereditary organization chapters, including the Zachariah Davies Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Sons of the American Revolution, and Children of the Confederacy.

In 1977, Davies-Rodgers founded the Davies Manor Association to preserve and showcase the property. The Association took charge of hosting the "pilgrimages" to the manor, which had occurred sporadically for decades. The mission of the Davies Manor

⁸ "Bridge Salutes Pioneers, Preservationists," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 12, 1981.

Association, Inc. is “to preserve and enhance Davies Manor Plantation as a portrayal of early Shelby County farm life for the education and enjoyment of visitors.”⁹ Davies Manor Plantation interprets early Shelby County pioneer and plantation life, primarily through docent-led tours of the historic home, Davies Manor, but also through the utilization the grounds and outbuildings of the sprawling property. With two full-time and two part-time staff members, the museum relies on volunteer docents to lead tours and implement special events. University of Memphis interns also work on specific projects to modernize and professionalize the museum.

The involvement of Ellen Davies-Rodgers with the development of the museum, the association of the site with her family, and the demographic and socio-economic composition of the surrounding area influence the museum’s interpretive program. This program celebrates the lives of the white planter family and the pioneer spirit of the early settlers to the area. It also provides significant insight into early Shelby County farm life. However, it fails to adequately address the presence of African American workers on the site.

Structure and Purpose

This study will describe the state of the Ensley and Davies Plantations during each of three historical periods identified by historical geographer Charles Aiken – the Old South (1600s to 1965), the New South (1880 to 1940), and the Modern South (since

⁹ Davies Manor Association, Inc., “The Davies Manor Plantation Strategic Plan Executive Summary,” April, 2009.

1970).¹⁰ Additionally, it will profile changes taking place during and between each period and identify factors at each site that affected the nature of change. After comparing the long period of post-bellum development at each site, the study will turn to the histories and contemporary roles of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation. It will emphasize the historical development of each museum, its role in community life and development, the nature of its representation of African American life. The study will also adopt a comparative approach in discussing the two museums.

These two case studies provide a greater understanding of the development of post-bellum western Tennessee and show the diversity of post-bellum and twentieth-century development within the single space of Shelby County, Tennessee.¹¹ They also illustrate specific factors that contribute to divergent directions of development in each area. Hopefully, future studies at other historic plantation sites will reveal broad patterns in the factors that led to specific forms of post-bellum development.

Where possible, this study uses the cases of the Ensley and Davies Plantations to provide direct comparisons. The extant records related to each location do not always allow for this by providing parallel information. Taken together, however, the two case studies provide important insight into the divergent possibilities for development in the post-bellum South. The cases also speak to the role that history and memory can play in

¹⁰ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 10. For the purposes of this study, the Old South period in Shelby County, TN began in 1818 with the Chickasaw Cession, which first opened up the area for settlement by European Americans.

¹¹ Shelby County, Tennessee sits in the Mississippi Loess Plains, which stretch from southwestern Tennessee, southward across Mississippi, and into northeastern Louisiana. This geographical region is distinct from other southern plantation areas such as the lower Georgia Piedmont and the Mississippi / Yazoo Delta, and geography has influenced historical development. (Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 10-11).

the contemporary shaping and development of particular museums and the communities they serve.

Literature Review

This study intersects with and draws from several related groups of historical literature, including plantation life, development, and post-bellum change; the historical development of the South in general; the particular histories of Memphis, Shelby County, and Tennessee; and museum theory and studies. Together, these literatures provide a strong framework for discussing the Ensley and Davies Plantations as well as the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation. This study also makes clear contributions to the further development of each of these literatures. Since each of these literatures is vast in its own right, this literature review will highlight particular works that relate most directly to this study. It does not comprehensively analyze the rich scholarship that makes up each literature.

Plantation Life

Several descendants of pioneer and planter families have written books reflecting their families' historical experiences. These works often possess a genealogical focus and tend toward celebration and nostalgia. In this respect, books about specific plantations resemble plantation museums, as will be seen in chapter four. Such a genealogical and nostalgic focus can be seen in Ellen Davies-Rodgers' *Turns Again Home: Life on an Old Tennessee Plantation Trespassed by Progress*.¹ Davies-Rodgers provides a series of roughly chronological anecdotes regarding her family and her personal history at Davies Plantation. Davies-Rodgers' broader history of the Brunswick

¹ Ellen Davies-Rodgers, *Turns Again Home: Life on an Old Tennessee Plantation Trespassed by Progress* (Brunswick: Plantation Press, 1992).

and Morning Sun areas, *Along the Old Stage Coach Road: Morning Sun and Brunswick, Shelby County, Tennessee*, expands her discussion beyond her immediate family but retains the same parochial focus.² Similarly, in his *The History of Belle Meade: Mansion, Plantation, and Stud*, Ridley Wills II addresses the lives of his ancestors during the ante-bellum and immediate post-bellum periods.³ He focuses on life cycle events, relationships, property, and business ventures. Wills and, to a more limited extent, Davies-Rodgers, discuss historical events to contextualize the lives of their families.

Carolyn Baker Lewis discusses post-bellum life on the Hampton Plantation in South Carolina. Unlike the authors discussed above, Lewis is not a descendent of the Rutledges, the planter family at Hampton.⁴ However, she uses the writings of Archibald Rutledge, the last owner of the plantation as her major source. In fact, her article represents a compilation and synthesis of Archibald Rutledge's writings with an emphasis on changes in plantation life, including socio-economic relations between the planter family and plantation tenants. Although less directly attached to her subject, like Davies-Rodgers and Wills, Lewis provides a snapshot of life on a particular plantation. However, taken together, such works begin to speak to larger historiographical themes.

In addition to such parochial or narrowly focused writing, some works address multiple plantations or broader themes. For example, Marc R. Matrana's *Lost*

² Ellen Davies-Rodgers, *Along the Old Stagecoach Road: Morning Sun and Brunswick, Shelby County Tennessee* (Brunswick: Plantation Press, 1990).

³ Ridley Wills II, *The History of Belle Meade: Mansion, Plantation, and Stud* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1991).

⁴ Carolyn Baker Lewis, "The World Around Hampton: Post-Bellum Life on a South Carolina Plantation," *Agricultural History*, vol. 58, no. 3, Symposium on the History of Rural Life in America (Jul., 1984), 456-476.

Plantations of the South attempts to preserve a certain level of knowledge about the rapidly disappearing southern plantation landscape by discussing “estates whose man-made physical structures and associated agricultural operations have been completely destroyed or left only in the most basic rudimentary, often ruinous, forms.”⁵ The book contains sixty essays that address a corresponding number of such “lost” plantations. Where possible, Matrana addresses the lives of enslaved people as well as planter families. Additionally, he strives to take an objective rather than celebratory or romantic perspective. While this book still does not address broad, historical themes, it does preserve important cultural information that might otherwise be lost that other scholars can use for the basis of broader analyses.

In contrast to many of the works that address individual plantations or even groups of plantations, this study will attempt to situate two plantations within their historical contexts. By comparing the post-Civil War development of these plantations, this study will address broader themes such as labor relationships, racial politics, and demographic change. In doing so, it will contribute to a more historically focused perspective to the literature addressing life on particular plantations and raise questions about the evolution of life on plantations generally.

Historical Developments in the South

Beginning with C. Vann Woodward in his 1951 classic, *The Origins of the New South*, historians have argued about the fate of the southern planter elite after the Civil War. Woodward contended that the War led essentially to the death of this planter class

⁵ Marc R. Matrana, *Lost Plantations of the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), xiii.

and the rise of a new group of middle class businessmen.⁶ Beginning in the 1970s, other historians began to challenge this thesis, pointing to numerous examples of persistent landholding patterns in the decades following the Civil War. In his article, “Class Origins of the “New South”: Planter Persistence and Industry in North Carolina,” Dwight B. Billings argues for the predominance of the resilient planter class in steering the shift to the New South.⁷ James C. Cobb provides a thorough historiographical review of this debate in his article, “Beyond Planters and Industrialists: A New Perspective on the New South.”⁸ Cobb also argues for a common core of interests among planters and industrialists, which provided the impetus for both groups to move toward a New South.

In his *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, Charles S. Aiken defines plantations as “large, highly capitalized farms” and lists several additional characteristics that identify plantations. These include single product focus at both the farm and regional level, landholding and labor force large enough to achieve an economy of scale, and careful management throughout the year. Additionally, spatial characteristics such as the building from which management disseminates, housing for workers (traditionally nucleated), and a facility for processing the crop could generally be found on plantations.⁹ Aiken also identifies three distinct chronological periods of the plantation South – the Old South (1600s-1865), the New South (1880-1940), and the Modern South

⁶ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877 – 1913* (Louisiana State University Press and The Littlefield Fund for Southern History of the University of Texas, 1951).

⁷ Dwight Billings, “Class Origins of the “New South”: Planter Persistence and Industry in North Carolina,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 88 (1982), S52-S85.

⁸ James C. Cobb, “Beyond Planters and Industrialists: A New Perspective on the New South.” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 54, no. 1 (Feb., 1988), 45-68.

⁹ Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 4-7.

(since 1970).¹⁰ A period of profound change occurred between each period, reshaping the physical area and reconstituting the plantation in a new form. This study will roughly adopt Aiken's definition and characteristics of a plantation as well as his chronology.

In *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Kenneth T. Jackson discusses "the dynamics of urban land use, the process of city growth through the past, and the ways in which Americans coming together in metropolitan areas have arranged their activities."¹¹ Jackson provides a broad synthesis of these processes, placing them in an international context. Jackson concludes, "Suburbanization can best be seen as part of an urban growth developmental model. The spatial arrangement of cities depends less on ideology than on economics, less on national idiosyncrasies than on industrial development, technological achievement, and racial integration."¹² Although this work does not focus on the South per se, suburbanization and its accompanying land-use and lifestyle changes have profoundly transformed the region in recent decades.

Themes of post-bellum socio-political control, the fate of the planter class, and the evolution of tenancy will inform this study to the extent that they influenced the socio-political contexts of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick. However, these themes will not be the study's explicit focus. Rather, it will emphasize the evolution of land-use on the former Ensley and Davies Plantation, including demographic changes in these areas.

¹⁰ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 10.

¹¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 19.

¹² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 303.

Memphis, Shelby County, and Tennessee

Beverly Bond and Janann Sherman provide a broad overview of Memphis history with an emphasis on the history of race relations in Memphis and the historical experiences of both black and white Memphians in their *Memphis in Black and White*.¹³ This book spans the entire history of the city and provides an excellent illustration of change over time. Other scholars look at more specific aspects of history in Memphis and the region. For example, in his *Memphis in the Great Depression*, Roger Biles discusses the ways in which the city of Memphis responded to the Great Depression itself as well as to New Deal programs.¹⁴ In another example, Robert A. Sigafos focuses on the economic and business development in Memphis in his *Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis*.¹⁵

John E. Harkins has written one of the few histories of Shelby County as a whole. In his *Historic Shelby County: An Illustrated History*, Harkins provides an overview of many topics rather than an in depth discussion at a few. He discusses the pre-historic Native American occupation of the area, the political organization of the county, the political organization of county government over time, the Jim Crow era, suburbanization, and demographic change, among other topics, in 111 pages. Although this approach contains inherent limitations, Harkins has provided an important resource

¹³ Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston, Chicago, Portsmouth, and San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2003).

¹⁴ Roger Biles, *Memphis in the Great Depression* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Robert A. Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1979).

to local historians by putting such broad information about Shelby County together in one place. Additionally, the historical pictures Harkins uses to illustrate this work prove truly fascinating in their own right.¹⁶

Historical developments in the state of Tennessee necessarily affected the historical experiences of Shelby County, Memphis, and the Ensley and Davies Plantations. Carroll Van West has written and edited several works related to Tennessee history. Two of his edited volumes – *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture* and the *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture* (available in print and online), contain excellent, scholarly articles addressing a wide array of the state's history.¹⁷ They should be essential sources for scholars interested in any aspect of state and local history.

One of the main purposes of this study is to provide historical context for the development of two Shelby County plantations since the Civil War. Therefore, it draws heavily on works of local history. Hopefully, the synthetic and comparative natures of this study will also leave the literature related to local history with a new perspective.

Race in Greater Memphis History and Politics

Several works explicitly address race and racial politics in the Memphis area. In his *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers, 1948-1968*, David M.

¹⁶ John E. Harkins, *Historic Shelby County: An Illustrated History* (San Antonio: Historical Publishing Network, 2008).

¹⁷ Carroll Van West, *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998); Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011), tennesseencyclopedia.net.

Tucker takes a top-down approach, analyzing the politics and political leaders in Memphis during a pivotal 20 year period. Tucker gives an in depth discussion of the structural changes and political leadership in the city, with a focus on the roles of and consequences for African Americans. In doing so, he provides an excellent starting-point for others who to analyze deeper aspects of race and politics in the city.¹⁸

In her *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, Sharon D. Wright “examines black political behavior and empowerment strategies in the city of Memphis” between 1880 and 1890 with a focus on the themes of “mobilization, emergence, and incorporation.”¹⁹ She uses Memphis as a case study to inform the historical understanding of the role of race in urban politics more broadly. Along a similar line of inquiry, social scientists Marcus D. Pohlmann and Michael P. Kirby explore the political and demographic factors that led to the successful 1991 election Memphis’s first African-American mayor in their *Racial Politics at the Crossroads: Memphis Elects Dr. W. W. Herenton*.²⁰ They also analyze the political history of Memphis with an emphasis on politics in the white and black communities and the personal histories of key political players. The authors argue that historical and demographic factors left Memphis, unlike many other cities, unable to form a liberal electoral coalition. “Racial reflexivity,” or the overwhelming tendency for populations to vote for candidates of their own race, forced Memphis to wait for a numerical majority of African Americans before it elected its first

¹⁸ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980).

¹⁹ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Politics, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 3.

²⁰ Marcus D. Pohlmann and Michael P. Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads: Memphis Elects Dr. W. W. Herenton* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996).

black mayor. Additionally, changes in election and annexation laws allowed for a greater possibility of black electoral success. Beyond the scholarly contribution of the argument itself and the importance of the election analyzed, this work provides an invaluable contextualization of Memphis social politics from a historical perspective.

Laurie Green analyzes the socio-political behavior and philosophical state of black Memphians on a more personal level. In her *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, Green analyzes the struggle by African Americans in Memphis to not only overcome the legal and social realities of segregation and discrimination but also the mindset of subservience bred by those realities.²¹ Taking a different approach than many authors who have addressed black politics in Memphis, Green utilizes numerous oral histories to focus on the masses rather than elite political leaders.

Racial politics will form an important theme throughout this study. In fact, racial politics forms an explanatory factor in the differential development of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick. The insights of the works discussed above color the discussion and findings of this study.

Museums

Theories and critiques related to museums have existed for almost as long as museums themselves. The extensive literature addresses a variety of topics, including what museums are, how and what they should collect and display, who museums serve, what this service entails, and how museums fit into communities. In *Reinventing the*

²¹ Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift, Gail

Anderson addresses these issues. Anderson has compiled a series of essays exploring the evolution of the museum field and thought about museums over time.²² This evolution has involved a shift from collection and object-focused institutions to institutions that exist to serve and educate the visitor. Additionally, in recent years, museums have become increasingly interactive and co-creative.

Museums continue to evolve, particularly in response to larger societal changes. The Center for the Future of Museums analyzes past and present societal trends to predict the future that museums will need to adapt to and recommends steps that museums should take to prepare for the future. In the Center's publication, "Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures," Reach Advisors, a marketing strategy research firm, provides such an analysis.²³ This report focuses specifically on demographic change, globalization, new forms of telecommunication, and new expectations about narrative and the consumption of culture. In the Center's newer publication, "Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums," the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago explores the implications of the rapid increase of minorities in the American population for the future of museums.²⁴ This report calls on museums to better serve their diversifying communities.

²² Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004).

²³ Center for the Future of Museums, American Association of Museums, "Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures," December 2008.

²⁴ Center for the Future of Museums, American Association of Museums, "Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums," 2010.

One of the most important ways for museums to remain relevant and better serve their communities is to become truly participatory institutions. In *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon provides a practical guide for museums to evolve into more visitor-centered, participatory institutions.²⁵ Simon defines a participatory cultural institution as “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content.”²⁶ For Simon, visitors can and should be involved in the creation of museum content. By allowing co-creation, museums provide a setting for diverse perspectives, dialogue, social interaction, and personal fulfillment. All participatory projects, however, should fit with museums’ mission statements and further institutional goals. If designed properly, participatory exhibits and programming can transform museums into dynamic assets.

Although there are a number of books and articles discussing the proper relationships between museums, communities, and visitors, fewer explicitly address the appropriate way for museums to incorporate and represent African American history. This problem of incorporation and representation is particularly urgent in the case of plantation museums where African Americans formed the traditional work forces and the largest historical population. African Americans are almost universally under-represented in such museums.

Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small provide a rare book-length analysis of the representation of African Americans and, particularly, slavery in plantation museums.²⁷

²⁵ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, (online edition) <http://www.participatorymuseum.org>.

²⁶ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, preface.

²⁷ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).

After analyzing 122 plantation museums in three states, Eichstedt and Small argue that most such sites “tell a story of American history that centers around whites, males, and elites, and that these sites erase or minimize the presence, labor, and lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans.”²⁸ They also identify several strategies by which plantation museums, often subconsciously, minimize or ignore the presence of enslaved people at their sites.

In his chapter, “How We Study Museums or Cultural Studies at Monticello,” Eric Gable addresses the process of incorporating African American history into the story told at a particular plantation museum, Monticello, and he highlights the difficulties inherent in this process.²⁹ Docents at Monticello struggled to discuss slavery with visitors without impugning Thomas Jefferson. Additionally, they reacted with dismissal or anger to questions regarding Jefferson’s purported liaison with his slave, Sally Hemings. In order to incorporate African American history into Monticello’s program at some level, the staff highlighted life of a particular enslaved individual. Additionally, the museum invited prominent African American speakers to major events. These efforts proved insufficient in addressing the problem of the perceived exclusion of African Americans in the site’s interpretive programming. Eichstedt and Small and Gable point to clear inadequacies in the current representation of African Americans at plantation museums.

The final chapter of this study will address the evolution and contemporary roles of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa in Southwest Memphis and Davies Manor

²⁸ Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 4.

²⁹ Eric Gable, “How We Study Museums or Cultural Studies at Monticello” in Janet Marstine, ed., *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 109-128.

Plantation in Brunswick. The past, present, and future of the museum field will be vitally important to this discussion. In addition, the roles and representations of African Americans are important themes throughout the study. The discussion of the two museums here will contribute to museum studies literature in generally, and particularly to the scholarship on representation of minorities. Most specifically, it will increase the depth and breadth of the literature regarding the representation of African Americans in plantation museums.

Chapter 1: Pioneers and Plantations

The Old South (1818-1865)

If Shelby County, Tennessee, formed part of the Old South, it did so only for a short period of time. With the Chickasaw Cession in 1818 and the creation of Shelby County the following year, white farmers began to move into the area to develop and farm the land.¹ Enslaved people of African descent, brought to the area by pioneering farmers, provided a significant portion of the labor force.² Southwest Memphis and Brunswick, located in opposite sides of Shelby County, both proved to be promising sites for the development of cotton plantations. River valley rich topsoil, among other factors, recommended these sites. Opportunity lured Enoch Ensley and brothers James and Logan Davies to Shelby County. However, factors such as the physical locations of each plantation and personal ambition led the two families to adopt different lifestyles and the plantations to develop along different trajectories. Although these factors contributed to great divergences in later periods, the two plantations shared many similarities, particularly in regard to land use and labor source, during the ante-bellum period.

According to Aiken, an agricultural enterprise does not need to be huge in order to be considered a plantation. Rather, a plantation must possess certain characteristics. In regard to size, it must be large enough to achieve an economy of scale, or about 300

¹ Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 7.

² Eichstedt and Small use the terms enslaved and enslaved person / people rather than slaves to emphasize that who these people were “exceeded their status” as slaves. This study also adopts this language and perspective. Eichstedt and Small also use the term master-enslaver to refer to white planters. This study will not adopt this term in the belief that who these people were also exceeded their status as enslavers. (Eichstedt and Small, *Representing Slavery*, 4-5.)

acres, in Aiken's estimation.³ During their early histories, both the Ensley and Davies Plantations met the size criteria – the Ensley Plantation stretched to 40,000 acres at its peak, and the Davies Plantation reached 2000 acres. Each plantation also possessed the rest of Aiken's plantation characteristics (high capitalization compared to other types of farms, single product focus at both the farm and regional level, landholding and labor force large enough to achieve an economy of scale, and careful management throughout the year).

In 1859, Enoch Ensley acquired 10,000 acres of overflow land just downstream of Memphis on the Mississippi River. He also brought nineteen enslaved people to the area to work his land. The location of the Ensley Plantation in the southwestern corner of Shelby County on the river and near the rapidly growing city of Memphis allowed its enterprising owner to take advantage of numerous economic opportunities. Although Ensley managed the plantation directly, he lived in the City of Memphis with his family. In addition to farming, Ensley developed significant business interests both in Memphis and in Birmingham, Alabama. For example, Ensley became one of the original directors of the Union and Planters Bank when it formed in 1869 and became president of the Memphis Gas Light Company when it formed in 1872. He also played a significant role in the development of steel and coal industry in Birmingham. When Ensley gave up direct management of his plantation in the mid-1880s, it had grown to at least 40,000 acres, four times its original size.⁴

³ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 5.

⁴ Paul Coppock, "The Alladin of the South," "Mid-South Memoirs," *The Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1978.

In 1838, a decade before Enoch Ensley acquired his plantation, the Davies family purchased a piece of property in an area later known as Brunswick. This land later formed the basis of the growing Davies Plantation. For the first several years in which they owned property in the Brunswick area, the Davies family actually resided in neighboring Fayette County. In 1851, brothers James Baxter Davies and Logan Early Davies moved to the area, bought additional acreage, which included a log house⁵, and began managing the plantation more directly.⁶ As on the Ensley Plantation, enslaved people comprised the early labor force.⁷

Although the Davies family became wealthy landowners, the Davies Plantation never grew particularly large by pre-Civil War standards. In fact, at its largest, it employed, at most, about fifteen enslaved individuals and contained less than one tenth of the acreage of the Ensley Plantation.⁸ In contrast to the Ensleys, the Davies family and Davies Plantation remained relatively isolated. The Davies brother focused primarily on

⁵ This log house, purchased from Joel Royster and long-rumored to have been built by an “Indian chief,” formed the original Davies Manor. This is considered by many to be the oldest log building in Shelby County. The Davies family later expanded this dwelling.

⁶ Davies Manor Plantation, “A Brief History,” <http://daviesmanorplantation.org/davies-manor-a-brief-history/>.

⁷ Although it is difficult to ascertain how many and which slaves lived and worked on Davies Plantation at any one time, sporadic records document the presence of individual enslaved people. For example, an 1838 document describes the purchase of a man named London by William E. Davies. (John W. Younger, Legal Document, “London,” 1838, Davies Manor Association Collection). A similar document describes the “hire of four Negroes to wit Mary Molly Elizabeth and Diannah” for \$12 in 1855 (R S Williams, Document, 1855, Davies Manor Association Collection).

⁸ Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 52. By some definitions, a true planter employed at least 20 slaves (Robert Tracy McKenzie, “Civil War and Socioeconomic Change in the Upper South: the Survival of Local Agricultural Elites in Tennessee, 1850-1870,” in ed. Carroll Van West, *Tennessee History: the Land, the People, and the Culture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 201-223, 204.

their agricultural enterprise, and although the Davies descendents adopted additional professions, such as medicine, farming remained a preeminent family enterprise as late as the 1970s.⁹

War

In describing the effects of the Civil War in Tennessee, historian Larry Whiteaker claims, “Nothing before and nothing afterwards would have as much impact on the state.”¹⁰ The war directly revolutionized labor and race relations, changed economic patterns, and catalyzed new directions in industry and development. Along with the state and the county, the Ensley and Davies Plantations underwent significant changes during and after the Civil War.

In June of 1861, Tennessee became the eleventh and final state to secede from the Union. The western portion of the state, including Shelby County, provided the impetus behind this move. Although both located in the strongly Confederate Shelby County, the Ensley Plantation and the Davies Plantation witnessed differing manifestations of the Civil War. The Ensley Plantation, along with Memphis itself, likely remained unscathed by battle. Most of the area Confederate soldiers had been deployed elsewhere when Union forces attacked Memphis by way of the Mississippi River. The short-lived river skirmish on June 6, 1862, known as the Battle of Memphis, ended the city’s tenure in the

⁹ In 1976, Davies Manor Plantation joined the Tennessee Century Farms program administered by the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. Properties recognized through this program have been farmed continuously by the same family for at least 100 years.

¹⁰ Larry H. Whiteaker, “Civil War,” in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011) tennesseencyclopedia.net.

Confederacy. It weathered the rest of the war as an occupied territory and an important Union supply center and Confederate smuggling hub.¹¹

Union control of Memphis did not effectively extend to the surrounding countryside, and fighting continued in these rural areas after the fall of Memphis.¹² For example, the Battle of Morning Sun occurred on June 30, 1862, in an area adjacent to Brunswick. The battle broke out when a group of Confederate attacked a Union supply train. Author, county historian, and Davies family heiress, Ellen Davies-Rodgers often recounted in interviews and written works an incident related to this battle in which her grandmother at Davies Manor successfully prevented a Union soldier from stealing her horse using only courage and a knife. The Tennessee Historical Commission also commemorated this “dramatic episode” with a 1953 historic marker.¹³ Although war-related incidents likely occurred in still-rural Southwest Memphis, none has been documented as occurring on or near the Ensley Plantation. Additionally, no records have yet been found regarding the Civil War service of Enoch Ensley and his family.

The Davies family’s experiences are illustrative of the experiences of the larger area of rural west Tennessee. James Baxter Davies served in the Confederacy during the Civil War, while his brother, Logan Early Davies, remained behind to manage the family farm. James Davies joined the Confederate army in 1863 and eventually surrendered at Missionary Ridge in 1865. During the war, he participated in the Georgia campaign in 1864 before coming north with General Hood. Additionally, he fought at Franklin and at

¹¹ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 52-53.

¹² Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 66.

¹³ Davies-Rodgers, *Along the Old Stage-Coach Road*, 40-44.

Nashville.¹⁴ Like so many others, the Civil War emotionally devastated James Baxter Davies. In the aftermath of the War, he repeatedly attempted to harm himself and his family, and this prompted his wife to successfully sue for divorce.¹⁵

Like other Southern plantations, both the Ensley Plantation and the Davies Plantation suffered physically and economically as result of the war. Wartime deployment and the loss of the labor of enslaved people led to the decay of infrastructure and the decrease of crop production. Additionally, due to wartime shortages, it became common to dismantle outbuildings for use as firewood.¹⁶ To the extent that plantations could still produce cotton, they did not bring in ante-bellum level profits. The quantity of cotton in the post-bellum market exceeded the demand, leading to depressed prices.

Post-Bellum Changes

The end of the Civil War brought significant changes to all areas of the South, including Shelby County, Tennessee. Politically, Tennessee escaped many of the more radical components of Reconstruction. In 1866, it became the first formerly Confederate state to re-enter the Union, and a Republican minority controlled state politics for only a brief period of time.¹⁷ Nonetheless, questions such as economic recovery and the political role of African Americans plagued the state in the aftermath of the war.¹⁸

¹⁴ Obituary of James Baxter Davies, June 17, 1896, Davies Manor Association Collection.

¹⁵ Chancery Court of Memphis, Pauline L. Davi[e]s vs James B. Davi[e]s, Divorce Affidavit, September 25, 1867, Davies Manor Association Collection.

¹⁶ Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 78.

¹⁷ A detailed discussion of the political and economic implications of Reconstruction is beyond the scope of this study.

The Civil War brought the institution of slavery to an end, forcing planters and newly freed men to develop new forms of labor relationships. In the post-bellum world, wage labor, sharecropping, and other forms of tenancy replaced the labor of enslaved people on southern plantations. Despite such changes within the southern agricultural system, however, few freedmen escaped the system itself. In 1880, seventy-five percent of African Americans remained in the former Confederate states where they primarily engaged in agricultural work.¹⁹

War and defeat also left the economy of the state in shambles. A congressional committee calculated Tennessee's total economic loss during the War to be over \$185 million. Nearly half of this economic loss resulted from the emancipation of enslaved people.²⁰ Some aspects of economic decline, particularly in agriculture, persisted for decades. Cotton trade, a mainstay of western Tennessee commerce, did not return to antebellum levels for more than fifty years.²¹ Letters received by Logan Early Davies from cotton factors illustrate this point. For example, an 1874 letter from Herron, Connor & Co., Cotton Factors & Commission Merchants criticizes the quality of cotton received from the Davies Plantation and states that "there has been too much cotton raised to make

¹⁸ Robert Tracy McKenzie, "Reconstruction," in in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011) tennesseeencyclopedia.net.

¹⁹ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 307.

²⁰ McKenzie, "Civil War and Socioeconomic Change in the Upper South," 209-210.

²¹ Wayne C. Moore, "Cotton," in in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011) tennesseeencyclopedia.net.

it profitable to the producer, and we hope the ensuing season planters will make less cotton and more corn.”²²

In many ways, African American freedmen, newly emancipated during the Civil War, experienced the most profound post-bellum changes. As the Union army advanced in Tennessee, as many as 275,000 slaves fled plantations and towns. The army set up camps, known as contraband camps, for these escaped slaves. These camps, four of which were located near Memphis, provided housing, education, and employment. They also served as a recruiting ground; 20,000 African American men from Tennessee eventually joined the Union army. The camps also formed the basis for the development of some post-bellum African American neighborhoods.²³

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, also played an important role in African American life during the immediate post-bellum period. Until Congress discontinued the Bureau in 1872, it provided important legal, labor relations, and educational assistance for freedmen.²⁴ Many of the institutions developed under the aegis of the Freedmen’s Bureau continued to serve African American communities after 1872.

In addition to the resources provided through contraband camps and the Freedmen’s Bureau, freedmen developed their own educational, religious, and political

²² Offices of Herron, Connor, & Co., Cotton Factors & Commission Merchants, Letter to L. E. Davies, April 3, 1874, Davies Manor Association Collection.

²³ Bobby L. Lovett, "Contraband Camps," in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011) tennesseencyclopedia.net.

²⁴ Kathleen R. Zebley, "Freedmen's Bureau," in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011) tennesseencyclopedia.net.

structures and institutions. As the inequalities of Jim Crow became embedded in southern society with the passage of time, these institutions became central community pillars. The Independent Pole Bearer's Association provides a good example of such a community institution. This mutual aid association first organized after the Civil War, incorporated in the 1880s, and developed chapters throughout Shelby County. It served primarily as a burial society, but it also provided a social and organizational function. Along with funerals, the organization also held annual business meetings and community picnics.²⁵

African Americans also developed or expanded independent churches rapidly after the Civil War. These served as an expression of freedom and independence in the post-bellum world as well as important centers for community development.²⁶ For example, White's Chapel AME Church in Southwest Memphis has served the area for over 100 years, beginning in the decades after the Civil War (circa 1887).²⁷ Similarly, freedmen in Brunswick and neighboring areas formed Bush Grove Baptist Church and Morning Grove Baptist Church shortly after the Civil War.²⁸ These churches and the black church writ large became a centerpiece for education, socialization, and self-help in African American communities. They also provided an opportunity for civic

²⁵ James Chisum, "Burial Customs Rooted in Ex-Slaves' Pride," *The Commercial Appeal*, Nov. 30, 1976.

²⁶ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 257.

²⁷ Debra Elliott-Tenor, "White's Chapel Celebrates 100 Years of Worship," *The Commercial Appeal*, December 25, 1997.

²⁸ Bush Grove Baptist Church was founded in 1865 to serve freedmen formerly enslaved by John Griffin, and congregants built the first church building in 1870. (Bush Grove Baptist Church, "History of Bush Grove # 1 Missionary Baptist Church," <http://www.bushgrove.org/about.html>.)

involvement otherwise denied in segregated southern society. They remain important community pillars and organizational spaces in the present.

Even as profound post-bellum lifestyle, political, economic, agriculture, and labor changes unfolded, an influential segment of Southern, urban leadership began to steer the South in yet another direction. These leaders began actively courting industry, investment, and immigration in order to diversify and modernize the heavily cotton-dependent, agricultural economy of the region. Thus, the New South, which sought to balance agriculture and industry began to take shape.

Chapter 2: Gaining and Losing Equilibrium

The New South (1880-1940)

After the end of Reconstruction, southern cities still struggled with how to reconstruct themselves into viable, modern entities. One of the major components of this internal reconstruction involved the diversification of the economy through attracting commercial interests. The term New South refers to this period in which many southern cities and their boosters sought to attract business and industry to the region. They did so by emphasizing the availability of resources and inexpensive labor. The South as a whole benefited from the greater economic diversity of the New South. However, the boosterism of the period only masked continuing social ills.

At the same time, rural areas in the South retained their traditional social and political orientations. In western Tennessee, the *relative* distribution of wealth remained largely unchanged, although *real* wealth may have may have declined. Certainly, individual members of the planter elite experienced precipitous socioeconomic decline.¹ Despite severe post-bellum obstacles such as the physical destruction on plantations, plummeting cotton prices, and individual insolvency, wealthy planters continued to control much of the region's economic, political, and agricultural resources.²

During the early twentieth century, a level of prosperity returned to the region, particularly to its cities. However, this period of prosperity proved brief. Soon after the end of World War I in 1918, the Great Depression racked the nation, taking a particularly

¹ McKenzie, "Civil War and Socioeconomic Change in the Upper South."

² McKenzie, "Reconstruction."

serious toll in agricultural regions. This crisis saw the end of a brief equilibrium achieved in the southern plantation regions during the New South period.

Labor, Land, and Plantations

As Charles Aiken notes, “the Southern plantation was not destroyed by the fall of slavery, and slavery was not the critical element that defined the plantation.”³ In fact, the cotton plantations of the South reached their numerical apex in the early twentieth century.⁴ The vast majority of African Americans remained in the South throughout the early twentieth century, and most continued to live and work on plantations. Many of those who fled plantations during the Civil War returned during its aftermath. Contraband camps even instituted a policy of transporting African Americans back to rural plantations.⁵ However, the end of slavery revolutionized the labor relationships between landowners and African American laborers.

Landowners needed labor to fuel their plantations, while freedmen, eager to assert their newfound freedom, would not accept labor arrangements reminiscent of slavery, such as gang or squad labor. Above all, formerly enslaved people wanted to own their own land and manage their own time.⁶ Over time, these competing needs and desires led to the development of a new labor system that included tenant farming, sharecropping, and convict labor. Tenant farming involved the renting of parcels of land, sharecropping

³ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵ Lovett, "Contraband Camps."

⁶ Harold D. Woodman, "Class, Race, Politics, and the Modernization of the Postbellum South," 21.

involved paying for the use of land and various supplies with a percentage (generally one third) of the harvested crop, and convict labor represented a system in which planters could essentially rent convicts to work their land. In many cases, freedmen and their descendents also acquired their own plots of land. However, the more common sharecropping system often led to debt peonage.⁷

Such labor arrangements coexisted in the Southwest Memphis and Brunswick areas. A *Commercial Appeal* article refers to the use of convict labor on the Ensley Plantation⁸, while the excavation of a 1920s farmstead in the area as well as oral histories point to other labor arrangements. At the Davies Plantation in Brunswick, ledger books, oral histories, historical writings, and extant structures document the presence of sharecroppers and day laborers.⁹ In addition to agricultural work, many freed men and women also found domestic work on plantations, and this is similarly documented in the case of the Davies Plantation.¹⁰

⁷ This occurred when agricultural and household supplies, called “the furnish,” purchased throughout the year on credit were worth more than the harvested crop as calculated by the landowner or lender. When this occurred, the sharecropper was obligated to work on the plantation again the next year.

⁸ “Old Ensley (Enoch) Place On the Mississippi Reclaimed By Weeds and Water Was Famous Plantation During River’s Heyday,” *Evening Appeal*, April 15, 1933. According to this article, up to 300 convicts worked on the Ensley Plantation under conditions that resembled slavery through the early 1880s.

⁹ Ledger books dating back to the 1880s can be accessed at Davies Manor Plantation (Davies Manor Association Collection). Oral histories of James Earl Brewer Williams and Andy Payne recount their families’ experiences as sharecroppers (Davies Plantation Oral Histories, Davies Manor Plantation, Fall of 2010). Ellen Davies Rodger discusses the workers of African descent at Davies Plantation in the “Back Porch Court” chapter of her *Turns Again Home*, 178-199. A “tenant cabin” where Davies Plantation worker, Mose Frazier, once lived still stands at Davies Manor Plantation.

¹⁰ See for example, the “Back Porch Court” chapter in Davies-Rodgers’ *Turns Again Home*, 178-199.

The landscape of the Old South Plantation, however, did not survive in the post-bellum world. During the New South period (1880-1940), the geographic center, physical layout, and internal relationships of Southern cotton plantations underwent profound changes. Technology and new labor relationships were among the major impetuses for these changes.

During the Old South period, the major centers for cotton plantations lay in the lower Georgia Piedmont, in coastal areas, and on the banks of the Mississippi River. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the center of cotton agriculture largely shifted to the Mississippi Delta, a region previously filled with virgin cypress forest. The growth of railroad lines and federally funded drainage projects made expansion of agriculture into this region possible.¹¹ Other areas, such as the Loess Plains where Shelby County is physically located, remained viable agricultural regions, although they did not experience rapid agricultural expansion in the same way as the Delta.

While the City of Memphis technically lies outside of the Mississippi Delta, it formed an important part of the post-bellum Delta cotton economy. With the expansion of plantation agriculture in the Delta after the Civil War, the role of Memphis in the cotton market also expanded. In fact, cotton merchants built the Memphis Cotton Exchange in 1874 and the city quickly became the largest spot cotton market in the country.¹² The local cotton market served nearby plantations, including those in Brunswick. Additionally, both the growth of plantations in neighboring Mississippi and

¹¹ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 59.

¹² Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 19.

the growth of the City of Memphis affected the development of the area that would become Southwest Memphis.

The demise of slavery and forms of labor reminiscent of slavery and the resultant rise of various forms of tenant labor led to dispersed rather than nucleated settlement patterns on plantations. Freedmen built small, rudimentary homes near the fields they worked. They also built institutions such as churches and schools, which became symbols of freedom.¹³

Technology, especially the building of railroads and more complex agricultural infrastructure, such as large ginneries, further contributed to the reordering of the New South plantation landscape. The early railroads of the South were constructed to and through important plantations.¹⁴ They became increasingly common throughout the mid and late nineteenth centuries. For example, the Memphis and Ohio Railroad lay a track near Brunswick in 1856.¹⁵ In Southwest Memphis, Illinois Central Railroad affected the ways that nearby neighborhoods developed. When the railroad experienced major growth during the 1920s, it built a switching facility in the Southwest Memphis area called Nonconah Yards. This site included an ice plant, the railroad shop and facilities for the manufacture of boxcars, and it provided a major source of employment for areas residents. The reuse of discarded timber and planks used at the site for the building of

¹³ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 20-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁵ Davies-Rodgers, *Along the Old Stage Coach Road*, 9.

homes gave the Boxtown neighborhood its name.¹⁶ The growing agricultural industrial complexes in rural areas and small towns concentrated along such railroad corridors.

Large, centrally located community ginneries replaced the small, plantation gins of the Old South era. This allowed for the processing of larger amounts of cotton and compensated for the loss of slave labor to run plantation gins. Merchants or agri-business factors often owned the community ginneries. These same entities frequently provided the capital and supplies needed for cotton farming.¹⁷ Compresses, machinery for compressing cotton to a smaller size for shipment and storage, became common in the Loess Plains region.¹⁸ Compresses made storage easier and allowed farmers to sell their crop when they could get highest prices. However, they also contributed to the build-up of cotton surpluses. Brunswick became the site of a large ginnery that served farmers from the surrounding area. James Earl Brewer Williams, who grew up in a sharecropper family in the nearby community of Ellendale, remembers traveling with his father to Brunswick in the early 1950s to bring the cotton crop to the community gin.¹⁹

In order for plantations to function, the planter or central management must exert strong, centralized control over all aspects of operation, including the labor force. Planters asserted control over the lives of their workers through the commissary or company store, which provided the annual “furnish.” Planters also controlled workers through liens on the crop, control of marketing, allocation of work stock and equipment,

¹⁶ Ann Meeks, “Boxtown,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 4, 1993.

¹⁷ Aiken, *The Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 39.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 45.

¹⁹ James Earl Brewer Williams, Davies Plantation Oral Histories, Davies Manor Plantation, Fall 2010.

and control of the political system. Planters or local merchants provided the “furnish,” or the annual provision of food and agricultural supplies, to sharecroppers on credit secured by liens on the crop. Payment for the “furnish” was subtracted from the sharecropper’s portion of the crop. The commissary or the company store was generally the only place where plantation workers could obtain necessary goods and supplies. Once workers’ delivered their cotton to the planter or directly to the gin, the crop passed out of their control and into the control of planting. Thus, planters exclusively handled the marketing and sale of the crop and the division of the profits. Planters usually controlled work stock and equipment, housing mules and equipment in structures near their own or their manager’s residence.²⁰ Over time, disenfranchisement allowed planters and other elites to take political and legal control of the region.

Not all Southern plantations successfully made the transition from the Old South to the New South. As previously noted, older plantation areas such the Lower Georgia Piedmont became less viable for plantation agriculture during the post-bellum period. At the same time, new transportation technology, such as railroads, opened up the fertile Yazoo Delta for agricultural development. Variations in the success of post-bellum plantation agriculture also occurred within particular regions, and this was the case for Shelby County, Tennessee.

The Davies family successfully guided their plantation to renewed success under the New South model. They employed sharecroppers and day laborers, managed a commissary, and continued growing cotton. Examples of the typical New South

²⁰ Aiken, *The Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 54-55.

Plantation landscape, including a tenant cabin and a commissary, survive to the present day.

Conversely, the Ensley Plantation exhibited many of the characteristics that led to post-bellum plantation decline. For example, Enoch Ensley and his family were absentee landlords whose focus centered on enterprises beyond the plantation. By the mid-1880s, Ensley no longer managed the plantation; he focused on business interests elsewhere. In the immediate post-bellum period, the increasingly industrialized and diversified economy opened up new opportunities for societal elites, including landowners. During the New South Period, many landowners and, particularly, the children of landowners, moved to cities and adopted professions other than agriculture. In many cases, cash tenants rented large swaths of land and sublet portions to sharecroppers.²¹ This seems to have been the case with the Ensley plantation.

Sometime around the turn of the century (exact date unknown), Dover Barrett acquired the former Ensley Plantation. He rented out large swaths of land, eventually selling a significant portion to long time renters, the brothers Joseph and John Gallina.²² In 1920, he also sold 6400 acres to E. T. Tyson of Memphis.²³ Additionally, he sold a portion to Shelby County for the creation of state park for African Americans. Other portions of the once-sprawling plantation became sites for industrial and residential development. Thus, Ensley Plantation, as an entity, did not survive this period of change, and, therefore, it never completed the transition to the New South plantation.

²¹ Aiken, *The Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 34.

²² John S. Shepherd, interview, Southwest Memphis African American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Summer 2011.

²³ “75 Years Ago – Feb. 7, 1920,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 7, 1995.

Race Relations and Racial Politics

The Civil War and Reconstruction shattered the existing socio-political structure in the South. During the Reconstruction, African Americans gained a considerable degree of political power, but, in Tennessee, Reconstruction came to an end in 1866. After that point, labor, politics, and economics in the state took decades to reach a stable state. Race played an important role in the eventual stasis reached by the early twentieth century. Although slavery itself ended with the Civil War, the Jim Crow era, which quickly followed the end of Reconstruction, ushered in new forms of oppression. These included disenfranchisement, segregation, and lack of employment options.

Race relations in the New South period affected every aspect of life. Although the ethos of white dominance permeated the entire South, the actual functioning of race relations varied from place to place and particularly between urban and rural areas. Disenfranchisement, segregation, and economic repression formed important components of the social control exercised by white Southerners over African Americans. However, personal and political patronage also played an important role in this system. Within Memphis, Edward Hull Crump built a powerful political machine that virtually controlled city and regional politics between 1911 and the early 1950s.²⁴ Crump relied on black voters to help achieve his electoral goals.²⁵ However, Crump did not allow African

²⁴ Edward Hull Crump, Jr. first became active in Memphis politics in 1909 when he was elected mayor. He later formed a powerful political machine through which he controlled Memphis and Shelby County politics and exerted considerable influence over Tennessee politics for three decades. Davies family Heiress, Ellen Davies Rodgers, became an ardent Crump supporter and, in turn, grew to be a political powerhouse in her own right.

²⁵ Memphis became the only southern city where African Americans were not fully disenfranchised, and no white democratic primary was ever established. However, measures like poll taxes and coercion limited the scope of enfranchisement for black voters.

Americans to gain leadership positions within his political organization or run for elected office.²⁶ Nonetheless, many black leaders supported Crump and other white leaders who indicated a willingness to provide a certain level of patronage in the form of infrastructure improvements or jobs.²⁷ Sharon D. Wright provides an apt description of this situation: “Black bosses of ‘submachines’ mobilized the black vote for the machine’s candidates; yet the black community received few incentives.”²⁸

A rather typical patronage-oriented notice promulgated by the black Shelby Democratic Association in 1940 provides a striking example of the direct exchange of patronage for black votes. This notice, with the heading, “Attention Colored Voters,” opens with the words, “President Roosevelt and the local Democratic Organization have been your friends. Actions speak louder than promises. The Republican Party has never redeemed a promise made to the colored people.” It then lists specific infrastructure improvements for the black community under the current national and local Democratic administrations, including schools, hospitals, electricity, and paved streets. The notice then urged black voters to continue to support the administrations based on these concessions. It then closed with the words, “We should be grateful for those who have made good on their promises. All colored citizens are therefore urged to vote for, Roosevelt, McKellar, Cooper, and Dunlap.”²⁹

²⁶ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Politics, and the Political Emergence of Memphis*, 2.

²⁷ See G. Wayne Dowdy’s *Mayor Crump Don’t Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press, 2002) for more on the Crump machine.

²⁸ Wright, *Race, Politics, and the Political Emergence of Memphis*, 1-2.

²⁹ Shelby Democratic Organization, Campaign Notice, 1940, Walter Chandler Papers, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

In addition to the political manifestations of patronage, in urban and semi-urban areas, patronage from powerful white men was often necessary for black men to secure good jobs or for infrastructure improvements to be made in African American communities. For example, Rev. T. O. Fuller, the influential leader of the black First Baptist Church Lauderdale often wrote subservient-toned letters to Crump asking that certain black Memphians be given municipal jobs. In 1939, Fuller wrote to Crump asking that an acquaintance be appointed Special Delivery Messenger.³⁰

Patronage and accommodation played out somewhat differently in rural Brunswick, which lay outside of Memphis. While machine politics had much less affect on black socio-political life in that area, personal patronage, however, remained vitally important. On plantations, including Davies Plantation, the white landowners exerted a high level of control over all aspects of their workers' lives. In most cases, landowners provided their workers with certain benefits such as medical care, holidays, and even Christmas gifts. However, even these seeming boons perpetuated a system of inequality and a myth of contented dependence.

In her *Turns Again Home*, Ellen Davies Rodgers claims,

The people, the workers on the plantation have continued to be very special in their own way. Throughout the years, whether slave or free, each contributed to the general welfare of their environment. Each was in the hearts of the landowners considered a family member. Each was treated with respect. The dignity of cooperative effort has prevailed as life has been experienced, since before the Civil War to the present time.³¹

³⁰ T. O. Fuller to E.H. Crump, letter, November 30, 1939, E. H. Crump Papers, Memphis Public Library.

³¹ Davies-Rodgers, *Turns Again Home*, 178.

Davies-Rodgers's words are more indicative of a defensive attitude taken up by upper class white southerners than reality. The myth of such a hierarchical yet cooperative relationship as well as the benevolence of the planter developed as a justification for the continuation of the plantation system and Jim Crow culture that subjugated African Americans in the American South. Such a statement belies the actual conditions in which the Davies Plantation residents of African descent lived and worked and contrasts with the clear paternal relationship that actually existed between the Davies family and these individuals.

An anecdote more accurately illustrates the relationship between the Davies family and the African American workers on the plantation. Andy Payne grew up in a sharecropping family on Davies Plantation. He lived in the approximate location of today's Stonebridge golf course. Payne vividly recalls an instance in which Ellen Davies-Rodgers paid him for two weeks of work raking leaves with a pack of gum and fifty cents. Of his parents, Payne says, "They never got paid for nothing hardly."³²

Further illustrating the paternalistic attitudes of elite white Southerners like the Davies family, a 1961 *Press-Scimitar* article describes a Christmas scene at Davies Manor:

On Christmas Eve, the old plantation bell, will ring out a "Merry Christmas" to the families on the plantation, calling them to gather around the brightly lit Christmas tree on the front lawn to receive Christmas gifts and baskets from "Miss Ellen and Mr. Hill" as they are known to them. On Christmas morning, all of the households will be called in around the house tree to receive their gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Rodgers.³³

³² Andy Payne, Davies Plantation Oral Histories, Davies Manor Plantation, Fall 2011.

³³ Katherine E. Dickey, "Lighted Living Tree at Brunswick Can Be Seen for Miles Around," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 21, 1961.

While plantation residents likely appreciated this gesture, it symbolizes a larger relationship of dependence.³⁴ Similarly, Ellen Davies Rodgers often attended funerals for Davies Plantation workers and even spoke during the services. However, her speeches focused on anecdotes related to work.³⁵

Clearly, race played an important role in daily and political life in New South era Shelby County. The ways that racial tensions and inequalities manifested varied between specific locations and circumstances. However, these racial undertones profoundly influenced all aspects of life throughout the South. They also helped determine the course of development for areas like Southwest Memphis and Brunswick.

Land-Use

Although the South remained predominantly rural through the 1920s, agricultural fortunes declined following World War I. At the same time, Southern cities experienced a period of prosperity and rapid growth.³⁶ Industry moved to the South, attracted by city boosters and the relatively cheap cost of labor. Planters sold some of their land to make room for this new form of development, and workers once employed in agriculture

³⁴ Similar paternalistic Christmas rituals also took place on other plantations throughout the South. For example, at the Hampton Plantation in South Carolina, the Rutledge family distributed Christmas gifts among tenant families. Later, children were admitted to the ballroom via the back door, where candy, toys, and clothing were laid out for their taking. These children then expressed their gratitude by dancing for the Rutledges. (Lewis, "The World Around Hampton, 472).

³⁵ Davies-Rodgers, *Turns Again Home*, 183.

³⁶ Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 4.

gradually shifted to industrial work. Local conditions affected the nature of development on land once part of ante-bellum plantations.

Industrial development gained a foothold slowly in rural areas like Brunswick and even Southwest Memphis, where plantation agriculture and small farming still thrived. These areas experienced industrialization largely through the piecemeal process of mechanization of agricultural equipment and the accelerating outmigration of the traditional work force.³⁷ The majority of African Americans remaining in the area continued to work in either agriculture or domestic service. By the dawn of the twentieth century, many African Americans in Brunswick and the surrounding area owned their own small farms and also worked as day laborers on the larger plantations.³⁸ Well into the twentieth century, the ledger books from Davies Plantation reflect the presence of a variety of labor arrangements, including tenant farming, sharecropping, and day labor.³⁹

Natural disasters helped determine the course of development in Southwest Memphis. These became important deciding factors in the fate of the Ensley Plantation and the surrounding Southwest Memphis area. Severe floods of the Mississippi River devastated the entire river valley in 1927 and 1937. The particularly disastrous 1927 flood spurred Congress to pass the Federal Flood Control Act of 1928. Thereafter, the Army Corps of Engineers built levees and completed other large-scale flood control

³⁷ The massive shift of the African American population from the rural South to the urban North began during this period. This Great Migration will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

³⁸ Jonathon Kennon Thompson Smith, *Tombstone Inscriptions in Older Black Cemeteries, Et Cetera* (Jonathan K. T. Smith, 2001), 13.

³⁹ Davies Family Ledger Books, Davies Manor Association Collection, Davies Manor and Plantation.

projects along the river.⁴⁰ Although frequent flooding had always been a part of life on Ensley Plantation, the river control projects resulted in changed flooding patterns. As a result of these changes, parts of the Ensley Plantation frequently flooded, and the area became less viable for agriculture.⁴¹ Over time, farming in this area gave way to massive industrial development. In fact, a large area the former Ensley Plantation, enclosed by levees in the aftermath of the great floods of the 1920s and 30s, later became the site Frank C. Pidgeon Industrial Park. Over time, industry, a power plant, and a sewage treatment facility moved into former plantation land. Parcels of the formerly vast plantation also became the sites of residential and recreational development.

The New South Plantation in Crisis

Cotton trading increased significantly during World War I. However, with the end of the war, the demand for cotton, particularly abroad, waned. The cotton market finally bottomed out in 1933. At the same time, tractors and mechanical cotton pickers began displacing workers. Sharecroppers, both black and white, migrated to cities like Memphis. However, these cities could not provide the needed employment and sustenance for these migrants.⁴²

The Great Depression catalyzed changes in patterns of agriculture, labor, and demographics. Agriculture suffered particularly with the prices of staples such as cotton

⁴⁰ For an analysis of the effects of the 1927 flood, see John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

⁴¹ “Old Ensley (Enoch) Place On the Mississippi Reclaimed By Weeds and Water Was Famous Plantation During River’s Heyday,” *Evening Appeal*, April 15, 1933.

⁴² Bond and Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 106.

dropping drastically. Along with economic depression, concurrent disasters of a natural variety, such as the introduction of the boll weevil, further devastated the cotton economy. In addition to depression, overproduction, and pests, governmental responses to the nation's economic roles deeply transformed the socio-economic, physical, and demographic makeup of the South. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, for example, motivated planters to reduce the quantity of crops and, consequently, also reduced agricultural labor needs. This, in turn, forced many remaining agricultural laborers to seek what work they could find in cities.

The South saw a rapidly increasing drain of the black labor on which it had always relied as migrants moved from rural areas to cities and from the South to the North in search of better lives. This Great Migration, which began during World War I, gained momentum during the Depression period. Southerners became alarmed at the loss of their traditional labor force, and this was the case in the Memphis and Shelby County area.⁴³ Coupled with the utilization of the black vote by the powerful Crump machine, this trend led to the intensification of the system of patronage and accommodation in the relationships between city and county leaders and the African American population. This sort of relationship took a variety of forms ranging from everyday interaction to the exchange of jobs for support to massive infrastructure developments, such as T. O. Fuller State Park.⁴⁴

⁴³ Aiken (*The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 64) notes that changes to plantation agriculture may have instigated the Great Migration. Likely, the Great Migration and agricultural change functioned as a feedback loop, stimulating each other.

⁴⁴ T. O. Fuller State Park, in Southwest Memphis, was built by an African American Civilian Conservation Corp company as a segregated state park for the use of African Americans. It was originally known as Shelby Bluffs Negro State Park. It will be discussed in detail in a separate section.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal also profoundly affected the South, and, to varying degrees, the lands of the Ensley and Davies Plantations. During the New Deal period, states and municipalities traded a significant amount of local control for federal money and expertise. A stunning array of "alphabet agencies" implemented a diverse set of programs designed to stimulate the American economy, provide relief to needy families, redevelop land and infrastructure, and modernize the country's economic and agricultural systems.

The modernization of Southern agriculture really began during the New Deal period. This Agricultural Adjustment Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture established in 1933, spearheaded associated changes in the American agricultural system. Created by the Agricultural Adjustment Act, this agency attempted to reduce agricultural surpluses and increase prices. As part of this program, farmers plowed up millions of acres of cotton in exchange for government payment. Locally, boards made up of planter elite controlled this program and the distribution of funds. Sharecroppers and other tenants, who had the legal status only of laborers, relied on the often-lacking benevolence of the planters for whom they worked for their share of the money. Since the Agricultural Adjustment Act mandated crop reduction, many sharecroppers and other tenants were evicted, others were reduced to the status of simple day laborers. Crop reduction and soil conservation programs ended the long tradition of monoculture, while newly available federal funds sped a shift from sharecropping and tenant-fueled plantations to mechanized, commercial agriculture. This shift benefited large landowners, but it also displaced landless agricultural workers.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 154-155.

New Deal public works programs also altered the physical landscape of the area. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) provide the most notable examples. The WPA existed for the purpose of putting people to work. The program, which lasted from 1937 to 1943, employed thousands of Tennesseans on projects ranging from building Crump Stadium in Memphis to resurfacing sidewalks to aiding flood victims. These projects significantly increased the physical infrastructure of Tennessee and its urban areas in particular.⁴⁶ Congress established the Emergency Conservation Work Program (later renamed the Civilian Conservation Corps) in 1933. It resembled the military in its organization and in the structure of participants' daily lives. It put single, unemployed, young men (seventeen to twenty-three) to work on a variety of conservation related projects ranging from soil conservation to building national parks. These projects altered the physical landscape of broad swaths of the nation.

Other programs also dramatically transformed the nation in general and the South in particular. For example, the New Deal program with the possibly greatest lasting effect in the region, the Tennessee Valley Authority (established by Congress in May of 1933) transformed the Tennessee valley, providing flood control, conservation programs, and, most importantly, inexpensive electricity. Coupled with the rural electrification program and rural modernization programs, this agency transformed the physical, economic, and cultural shape of the South.

⁴⁶ Thomas H. Coode, "Works Progress Administration," in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002-2011) tennesseencyclopedia.net.

T. O. Fuller Park

The CCC, in conjunction with the National Park Service, provided the largest infrastructure development in Southwest Memphis during the New Deal. In 1938, a black Civilian Conservation Corps company began construction on one of the region's only state parks for African Americans on former Ensley Plantation land.⁴⁷ The construction of T. O. Fuller State Park is so illustrative of the socio-political atmosphere of Memphis and Southwest Memphis that it deserves a more detailed discussion.

The building of T. O. Fuller State Park should be viewed in light of political expediency, changing land use, and demographics. In 1927, a devastating flood on the Mississippi River severely damaged the plantation. Many of the residents moved to higher ground, establishing a community that came to be known as Boxtown. Levees built to control the river had actually contributed to the flooding of this area and led to a portion of the plantation being chronically flooded and unsuitable for agriculture.⁴⁸ After another devastating Mississippi River flood in 1937, Shelby County purchased 500 acres of this land from Barrett, and the state of Tennessee later acquired an additional 500 acres.

On April 4, 1938, the Shelby County Commission announced plans to create a state park for blacks near Memphis. This announcement followed in the wake of a particularly important Democratic primary. This primary became important for two reasons: Crump reasserted his dominance on the state political scene, and a large

⁴⁷ Booker T. Washington State Park, the only other Tennessee state park for African Americans, was built near Chattanooga in 1938.

⁴⁸“Old Ensley Place on the Mississippi Reclaimed by Weeds and Water Was Famous Plantation in the River's Heyday,” *Evening Appeal*, Memphis, April 15, 1933.

contingent of black Memphians voted against his candidate.⁴⁹ At this time, Crump began to stifle independent black political leaders while continuing to provide patronage to the black population. The timing of the announcement of the park in the wake of an important primary with a contested black vote provides powerful circumstantial evidence for the argument that T. O. Fuller Park formed a type of political patronage.

In the 1930s, African Americans constituted a considerable proportion of the Memphis population. Many blacks had migrated to Memphis from the surrounding countryside. These citizens performed an important function within the city, and civic leaders viewed black laborers as necessary for the economic well being of the city. After World War I, African Americans began moving to the north and west in considerable numbers as part of the Great Migration. During that period, the Industrial Welfare Committee of the Memphis Chamber of Commerce conducted a special study of the problem, concluding that blacks were necessary for the city's industry. Therefore, Memphis business leaders began to actively develop incentives for black citizens to stay in the area.⁵⁰

Since T. O. Fuller State Park was located near a large black population and away from any center of white residence or commercial activity, the white community did not raise any large-scale objections to the stationing of a black CCC camp in the area or the building of the park. Demographics coupled with the changing viability of agriculture in the area and the proximity to Memphis made the former Ensley Plantation the ideal location to build a segregated state park for African Americans.

⁴⁹ Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It*, 98, 109.

⁵⁰ Robert A. Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street*, 137.

The building of the park provided an important recreational space for African Americans in the Memphis area. Its presence also became a factor in later discussions about industrial and residential development in the Southwest Memphis area. However, it is important to note that like most Jim Crow arrangements, this park was not only separate but also unequal to similar facilities for white citizens. Including the Chucalissa site, at its completion, T. O. Fuller State Park contained about 1000 acres. Along with Booker T. Washington State Park, built for African Americans in the Chattanooga area, T. O. Fuller State Park was the smallest park in the Tennessee system. In comparison, the white Shelby Forest State Park north of Memphis stretched for about 12,500 acres.⁵¹ The Tennessee Division of State Parks generally chose parkland because it showcased some sort of natural phenomenon or scenic beauty. However, the Division chose this park site for its proximity to a large black community (and its distance from white residential and commercial centers). Although the onset of World War II delayed construction and improvements at all state parks, the situation at T. O. Fuller State Park was more severe and long lasting than at other Tennessee state parks.

In later decades, after desegregation of the Tennessee state parks and other recreational spaces, black Memphians largely abandoned T. O. Fuller State Park in favor of recreational areas to the north and east, such as Shelby Farms and Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park. Beginning in 1997, the Friends of T. O. Fuller Park have hosted an

⁵¹ T. O. Fuller State Park was considered to be the black counterpart of Shelby Forest. A 1942 map of Shelby County actually labeled T. O. Fuller State Park as the Negro Shelby Forest. (Shelby County Planning Commission, "Map of Shelby County," 1940, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library).

annual event called Fullerfest for the purpose of generating renewed interest in nearby communities.⁵²

Despite the significant changes it ushered in, New Deal programs did little to alter the socio-political landscape of the Jim Crow South. The programs themselves, which were controlled at the local level, operated on a segregated basis. More white citizens than black were able to participate in these programs, and most of the public building projects in the South benefited white citizens. African Americans could access only limited, segregated areas in many courthouses and similar municipal structures. In most cases, utilities and public infrastructure funded through New Deal programs were not extended into African American neighborhoods. Only white citizens could patronize recreational facilities, including state parks and museums. T. O. Fuller State Park, the exception to this rule, was built for the exclusive use of black citizens.⁵³ However, this park was limited in size, scenery, and facilities compared to the other parks in the Tennessee state park system. Nonetheless, over time, the state added a swimming pool, golf course, and camping facility to the park, making it an increasingly valuable Southwest Memphis asset.

The New South period, beginning roughly in 1880, saw a brief, renewed equilibrium for surviving southern plantations and the demise of others. However, this period of equilibrium proved brief. By 1940, World War I, the Great Depression, and the New Deal had spurred vast changes in American society. Southwest Memphis felt these

⁵² Pamela Perkins, "Fullerfest Hopes to Draw State Park's Neighbors to Festivities," *Commercial Appeal*, October 14, 1999.

⁵³ Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape: a Guidebook* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 8.

changes more directly, but accelerating demographic change in areas like Brunswick augured greater changes to come in the Modern South period.

Chapter 3: Development, Modernization, and Reorganization

Transition to the Modern South

The period between the beginning of World War II and the end of the Civil Rights Movement witnessed a significant transformation in American society. By the end of this period, the landscape of the Modern South had fully replaced that of the New South. This included either the demise or the re-nucleation and mechanization of southern plantations. It also involved a major population shift from the countryside to the city and later to nearby suburbs. Industry and post-industrial activities became increasingly important components of the region's economy.

World War II itself disrupted daily life in a profound way. Much of the nation's young, particularly white, male work force deployed overseas. The temporary loss of the traditional skilled work force, in turn, accelerated the Great Migration of African Americans from rural areas to cities and from the South to the North as they sought to take advantage of the consequent employment opportunities. The Great Migration relocated the centers of African American population from the rural South to urban areas, particularly in the North. After the war, other developments, such as the mechanization of agricultural work and the building of the Cold War era interstate system, further transformed the physical and demographic composition of the South and the entire nation.

Deployment did not occur on an equal basis, and the sudden depopulation of young, white men from the Memphis area exacerbated racial tensions. For example, one group of women wrote to Mayor Walter Chandler, "And the very most important thing is

coming; THE AWFUL MEAN NEGROES: THAT we are going to have war with NOW.”¹ Another woman wrote to a Shelby County draft board, “We beg you for the safety of your wives, mothers and daughters to take advantage of the act to accept men with venereal diseases into the armed forces, to take the negro man.”²

Additionally, the irony of fighting overseas while living in a Jim Crow world at home catalyzed the black freedom struggle that became known as the American Civil Rights Movement. The Cold War and the international anti-colonial movement also served as big picture backdrops for local change. Black Memphians actively joined in protests against official discrimination and segregation during the Civil Rights era.³ This activity included student sit-ins, boycotts against downtown retailers, and public protests against police brutality, among other efforts. In the most infamous local event of the period, a sniper assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while he was in Memphis to support a sanitation workers’ strike on April 4, 1968. This event led to further racially charged violence and lingering anger. Additionally, the resultant mar on Memphis’s reputation may have contributed to slowed population growth and out-migration from the city.⁴

¹ Group of Women. Letter to Mayor Walter Chandler, 20 September 1942, Walter Chandler Papers, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee. (The misspellings and capitalization are taken from the original).

² Woman. Letter to Shelby County Local Draft Board No. 7, September 19, 1942, Walter Chandler Papers, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

³ Although the definition and length of the Civil Rights Movement is a popular topic for scholarly debate, for the purposes of this study, the period referred to stretches roughly from 1945 to the early 1970s.

⁴ Pohlman and Kirby, *Racial Politics at a Crossroad*, 9.

Shelby County experienced significant demographic changes related to these broad historical events. Beginning with the period after World War II, the population of the greater Memphis area began to shift to the suburbs and this larger area became increasingly suburbanized. Middle class whites comprised a large proportion of this demographic shift. This transition formed part of a larger national trend. By the time of the 1980 census, more than forty percent of the national population lived in suburbs.⁵ Federal policies and incentives, including “FHA and VA mortgage insurance, the highway system, the financing of sewers, the placement of housing at the center of ghetto neighborhoods, and the location decisions of federal agencies and the Department of Defense” catalyzed and accelerated suburbanization.⁶

Historical changes also affected the demographics of historically black neighborhoods, including those in Southwest Memphis. The end of formal segregation allowed African Americans greater choice in matters such as housing, education, and employment. Many people with the means to do so left these neighborhoods to pursue education and career options and did not return. This, in turn, led to the socio-economic decline. At the same time, the federal government invested little in the upkeep and upgrade of urban infrastructure.⁷

In a period of rapid regional and national change, the residents of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick adapted in ways unique to their particular situations. The two areas experienced many similar changes, including changing land-use, annexation, and

⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid*, 293.

⁷ *Ibid*, 293.

the placement and distribution of utilities. However, the differences in population and resources in the two areas led to divergent strategies and outcomes. By the 1970s, the Boxtown area of Southwest Memphis contained some of Shelby County's worst rural slums.⁸ This neighborhood, which sits on former Ensley Plantation land adjacent to T. O. Fuller State Park, received its name from the practice by local people of using discarded boxcar material from a nearby rail yard to build homes. During the same period, Davies descendent Ellen Davies Rodgers referred to Brunswick as "the Country Club section of Shelby County."⁹

Agricultural Evolution

Cotton agriculture never reverted to the pre-Depression status quo. The Roosevelt-era Agricultural Adjustment Act had led to higher cotton prices, but this, in turn, also made American cotton uncompetitive in the international market. Cotton acreage remained at reduced level, and cotton-related businesses in the city of Memphis also declined.¹⁰

As the South entered the modern period, cotton plantations took one of two possible courses – decline and demise or mechanization. Decline of central management contributed to the inability of some plantations, like the Ensley Plantations, to weather the challenges of the Civil War, labor changes, and natural disasters during the New

⁸ "Boxtown Talks To Begin Today: Conference Will Outline Renewal to Union, Negro Leaders," *The Commercial Appeal*, October 3, 1961.

⁹ "Homeowners Will Oppose 44-Acre School Proposal," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, March 19, 1972.

¹⁰ Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump*, 144.

South period. The further challenges of the Great Depression, Great Migration, and New Deal cemented their demise.¹¹ Those plantations that did survive the New South period and into the transition to the Modern South did so by adopting innovative technology, labor arrangements, and agricultural practices.

Historically, cotton agriculture has been incredibly labor-intensive. Through the New South era, plantations relied on a large, subservient, cheap labor force, first in the form of enslaved people and later in the form of sharecroppers and other types of tenants. Aiken estimates that in 1930, 150 hours of labor went into the cultivation of each acre of cotton.¹² There are three peak labor periods in cotton agriculture – planting, weeding and thinning, and harvesting. Innovators developed technological / scientific solutions to address each of these labor phases. However, these solutions became available at different times, with the entire suite finally complete around 1955. Tractors replaced mule drawn implements for planting, precision, mechanical sowing techniques eliminated the need for thinning, herbicides made weeding unnecessary, and mechanical harvesters replaced armies of cotton pickers. After this technology became available, the mechanization of plantations that were to survive occurred rapidly. In many cases, however, this mechanization occurred in a piece-meal fashion, leading to some anachronisms in plantation life. For example, well into the twentieth century, plantation owners in Mississippi and Arkansas sent trucks into the Memphis area seasonally to

¹¹ Aiken, *The Plantation South Since the Civil War*, 63, 68.

¹² *Ibid*, 96.

recruit and transport workers to chop or pick cotton even after much of the rest of their operations had been mechanized and sharecropping no longer proved cost-effective.¹³

The Ensley Plantation never successfully transitioned to a mature New South plantation. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, successive owners increasingly subdivided and sold parcels of land. While farming continued on some parcels, others became sites for residential, industrial, and recreational development. Such changing land use and development accelerated during the transition to the Modern South.

The Davies Plantation did transition to a mature New South plantation and persisted in that form for a period of time. In 1958, at the death of Ina Stuart Davies, the mother of Ellen Davies-Rodgers, Ina Davies's estate included approximately 1000 acres of land in the Brunswick area. At that time, several tenant cabins still dotted those tracts.¹⁴ In 1976, Ellen Davies-Rodgers applied for a Century Farm Certificate claiming that her family had continuously farmed her land over a century. The application indicated that she owned and farmed over 1,410 acres at the Davies Plantation. At that time, the products of the plantation included cattle, hay, soybeans, wheat, corn, and timber.¹⁵

¹³ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 26. During the New Deal period, city and state agencies also facilitated the transfer of urban African American laborers to cotton plantations during peak cultivation phases.

¹⁴ John D. McClanahan, Appraisal of Seven Real Estate owned by Mrs. H. P. Rodgers, January 1959, Davies Manor Association Collection, Davies Manor Plantation.

¹⁵ Ellen Davies-Rodgers, Application for Century Farm Certificate, 1976, Davies Manor Association Collection, Davies Manor Plantation.

However, the Davies Plantation failed to fully transition to the plantation system of the modern South. Changing land-use and demographics in the Brunswick area and the growth of larger neo-plantations in other areas of the South made the Davies Plantation increasingly unviable for plantation agriculture. The Century Farm applications indicated that Davies Plantation no longer produced cotton by 1976. After the 1975 death of her husband, Hillman P. Rodgers, Ellen Davies-Rodgers scaled down her agricultural operations and subdivided and sold much of her land for residential development.¹⁶

Socio-Political and Demographic Change

The City of Memphis began decreasing in population in 1970. Much of the population loss occurred among prosperous, white citizens. This resulted in the loss of an important tax base for the city and became a politically and culturally significant demographic transition.¹⁷ While Memphis lost population, particularly in the form of affluent, white citizens, nearby suburbs and unincorporated areas grew significantly. Coupled with changing land-use, this demographic transition transformed Brunswick and similar areas from rural to suburban.

Annexation provided an important tool by which the city attempted to combat this trend. Between 1951 and 1967, Memphis annexed sixty-one square-miles and 54,000 people, and this annexation was disproportionately white.¹⁸ By annexing predominantly

¹⁶ Sale of Davies Plantation land actually began in the 1960s, but accelerated after the death of Hillman P. Rodgers.

¹⁷ Pohlman and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroad*, 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 108.

white unincorporated areas, Memphis could dilute the growing numerical and, therefore, political power of the African American population remaining in the city while also increasing the tax base. In fact, changes in state law that made the process of annexation more difficult proved to be a contributing factor in the election of Memphis's first African-American mayor in 1991.

When the city annexed an area, it theoretically agreed to provide that area with regular municipal services. The desire to gain city services led some areas, such as the Walker Homes neighborhood in Southwest Memphis during the 1960s, to petition the city for annexation.¹⁹ In some cases, this provision of services either did not occur or was significantly delayed. When Memphis annexed the Boxtown neighborhood in Southwest Memphis, for example, it proved so slow to provide citizens with appropriate services that the local branch of the NAACP actually filed suit.

Unincorporated areas did not always welcome annexation by Memphis and citizens often turned to legal measures in attempt to thwart such measures. The Boxtown quagmire became a warning against annexation in rhetorical and legal arguments. Such arguments claimed that it would be irresponsible to annex additional areas while Boxtown remained underserved.²⁰

Until 1955, Tennessee municipalities could only annex through state legislative action, but in 1955 a state law allowed annexation by municipal ordinance. At that point, if citizens wanted to legally challenge annexation plans, they had to prove that they would not sufficiently benefit from such action. A new law in 1974 shifted the burden of

¹⁹ "Suburbs Need Annexation," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 10, 1966.

²⁰ Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, 109-110.

proving that annexation was necessary for the well being of both the city and the annexed area to the annexing city.²¹ This law slowed the rate of annexation and allowed African Americans to reach numerical parity with whites in the city.²² This proved an important factor in the rise of African-American political power in Memphis.

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans have a greater degree of choice in residence, education, and career than in previous times. The ending of official segregation has, however, ironically led to a certain level of decline in many historically black neighborhoods and businesses. For example, Walker Homes resident Lajuana Beasley remembers the neighborhood as a good place to grow up. Many of the women in the neighborhood worked as teachers and nurses. Many of the men were military veterans who worked in “good jobs” at places like International Harvester and Firestone.²³ However, in several Southwest Memphis neighborhoods, including Walker Homes, children of area families have been able to reach educational and career goals that have led them to move out of their neighborhoods. Most have not returned. Therefore, a considerable portion of the remaining residents is comprised of the elderly and of less-stable families that cannot afford to live elsewhere. Long-time Southwest Memphis resident Mose Carroll describes this situation:

Once they [residents] graduated from high school and college and went out east and went to Frasier and all of the other parts of the city, Cordova and other places and kind of left the community we was raised in instead of coming back and developing and building around it and improving the

²¹ Pohlman and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, 109.

²² *Ibid*, 198.

²³ Lajuana Beasley, interview, Southwest Memphis African American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Summer 2010.

property. They just left. Some were fortunate enough to inherit some property. Their parents have left. They chose not to make an effort not to repair it, fix it up... In some instances houses were torn down.²⁴

The shrinking tax base of the city as a whole left little money for urban infrastructure investments, further contributing to the decline of such neighborhoods.

Completing the Transition from the Ensley Plantation to Something Else

During the period after World War II, many areas within Southwest Memphis underwent significant changes in racial composition. John S. Shepherd, a man now in his 70s who spent his childhood in an area of Southwest Memphis known as West Junction at the time, estimates that the larger area was about twenty-five percent white and seventy-five percent black in the period between 1920 and 1950. Many of the African Americans in the area worked in agriculture and in industries such as Nonconah Yards and the adjoining ice plant. Others owned small businesses like grocery stores.²⁵ Ralph Thompson, an African American resident of Westwood²⁶, has lived in the area for about thirty years. He remembers the Walker Homes²⁷ and Westwood neighborhoods as predominantly white when he first moved to Southwest Memphis.²⁸ John Dillihunt, a

²⁴ Mose Carroll, interview, Southwest Memphis African American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Summer 2010.

²⁵ John S. Shepherd, interview.

²⁶ Although I have used the term Southwest Memphis to refer to a larger geographical area, it should be noted that this area is actually composed of several distinct but interconnected neighborhoods, including Boxtown, Walker Homes, Westwood, Coro Lake, Indian Hills, and Riverview. Boxtown and Walker Homes are the most significant in relation to the former Ensley Plantation, but Westwood is geographically and socially similar.

²⁷ Although Mr. Thompson referenced Walker Homes in his interview, it is likely that the area was predominantly black by the time he moved to Southwest Memphis.

lifelong resident of Walker Homes, who graduated high school in 1948, remembers the area differently. He recalls Walker Homes as segregated and black, and he remembers the areas that are now Walker Homes and Westwood as being filled with cotton fields during his childhood.²⁹ Regardless of whose memories are more accurate, certain neighborhoods, for example Coro Lake, were largely white into the 1970s.³⁰ Today, the entire zip code area is more than ninety percent black. Similar demographic changes took place in the City of Memphis as a whole during this period, and African Americans became the majority population in the city.³¹

Even with all of the changes of the early twentieth century and the subdivision of the Ensley property as early as 1890, farming continued in the area known as Ensley bottoms well into the 1950s, and modern development remained at a minimum.³² In 1958, a *Press-Scimitar* article claimed, “Memphis industry is moving in on what was river wilderness inhabited only by a few hardy fishermen, wildlife, mosquitoes and moonshiners only 10 years ago.”³³ While this statement reflects a clear lack of knowledge of and sympathy for the small farmers living on the land, it does speak to the overall lack of modern development up to that point. With federal money available for

²⁸ Ralph Thompson, interview, Southwest Memphis African American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chuculaissa, Summer, 2010.

²⁹ John Dillihunt, interview, Southwest Memphis African-American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Summer 2010.

³⁰ Clark Porteous, “City to Be Bigger Friday by 5,800 New Inhabitants,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 29, 1975.

³¹ Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 97.

³² “Map of the Ensley Plantation,” Shelby County Archives, Chancery Court Document, 1890.

³³ “Taming the Batture Lands,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 22, 1958.

levee projects, the City of Memphis and the County of Shelby came to view the Ensley Bottoms area as ideal for the expansion of industry. The city and county acquired land in the area through purchase when possible and through condemnation when satisfactory agreements could not be reached.³⁴ The earliest industry attracted to the Memphis area tended to produce agricultural related products such as chemicals and machinery.³⁵ In 1960, “after years of advertising Ensley Bottoms as a good place for industry to locate,” the Shelby County Planning Commission officially rezoned the area from agricultural to industrial usage.³⁶

The transition from rural to urban in Southwest Memphis, and particularly the Boxtown area that borders Chucalissa and T. O. Fuller Park, generated considerable controversy. With the building of seven miles of levees, completed in 1962, the Frank Pidgeon Industrial Park in Ensley Bottoms opened for business. A steam plant, later known as the TVA Allen Fossil Plant, opened in the area in 1959. At the time, Major Thomas Allen, President of Memphis LG & W made the claim that the typical wind direction in the area would prevent the plant from polluting Memphis skies. Of course, at the time, Memphis had not officially incorporated the Southwest Memphis area, so the claim may have had some merit. Today, however, the local Sierra Club consistently

³⁴ “Option to Buy 7627 Acres – Four Major Parcels in Ensley Bottoms,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 1, 1957.

³⁵ Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroad*, 10.

³⁶ *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, “Ensley Bottoms Being Rezoned: Correction of an Oversight,” September 28, 1960.

names the Allen Steam Plant as Shelby County's top polluter.³⁷ Other industries, including a wastewater treatment plant and several manufacturers soon followed.

While providing a limited amount of economic growth for the area, these industries also posed disproportionate environmental hazards for Southwest Memphis residents. Despite being exposed to disproportionate industrial hazards, Southwest Memphis residents and other African Americans tended to be restricted to the most menial jobs through employer and union discrimination.³⁸ As industry developed in Ensley Bottoms and nearby Presidents Island, city and county planners began to consider the problem of housing for the laborer who would power the new industry. Although African Americans could not obtain the more prestigious or skilled jobs, they provided an important element of the labor force.

As early as 1960, planners considered the possibility of redeveloping the Boxtown area of Southwest Memphis, which remained relatively rural in character, as housing for this new black industrial labor force. According to Memphis Housing Authority director Walter Simmons, the area lent itself to redevelopment for a number of reasons. In 1960, Simmons told reporters,

We think this is a very good spot, very close to the city and adjoining the 840 acres of T. O. Fuller Park. There is a golf course, swimming pool and playground in the park. These are little used now. We think it's good because it is near the steam plant and close to Ensley Bottoms which obviously is going to develop industrially in a few years and will need a labor market.³⁹

³⁷ Sierra Club, "Shelby County's Terrible Ten," Environmental Justice Program, 2010.

³⁸ Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, 55.

³⁹ "MHA Favors Renewal Plan For County," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 19, 1960.

For city planners like Simmons and even newspaper reporters, Southwest Memphis in the 1960s presented a scene of stagnation and backwardness open for re-imagination and redevelopment. Officials viewed industrial development and urban renewal plans for the area as representative of modernity and progress. These officials, reporters, and, likely, much of the public viewed current residents of the area as passive subjects rather than partners with agency. A 1961 *Press-Scimitar* article aptly titled “Sleeping Wilderness to Be Introduced to 20th Century,” represents this viewpoint.

According to the article,

Sitting quietly among the gray shacks and wooded hills of Ensley Bottoms, on the south edge of Memphis by the river, is a gleaming industrial giant. . . . The big steam plant is ready to power this sleeping wilderness – and the people in it – into 20th century life.⁴⁰

The same article continues, describing a visit to the area by Walter Simmons. As Simmons drove through Southwest Memphis,

At the edge of the bluff (a million dollar view) washed clothes hung on a sagging line outside a tired gray shack. [Simmons’] car turned into beautifully kept Fuller Park, past its empty pavilion and swimming pool, past flags waving silently on the deserted fairways of its neatly kept golf course.⁴¹

He also encountered people, including one woman who raised mules, pigs, corn, and potatoes. She worked hard but paid very little in taxes on her property. Simmons planned to ask the Tennessee Legislature for special permission to conduct an urban renewal project in the area, which, at the time, remained outside Memphis city limits. This project would promote industry and increase the tax base for Shelby County and eventually the city. In the vision of Simmons and others of like mind,

⁴⁰ Charles Goodman, “Sleeping Wilderness to Be Introduced to 20th Century,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 14, 1961.

⁴¹ Goodman, “Sleeping Wilderness to Be Introduced to 20th Century.”

Where sagging shacks are now scattered between little corn and 'tater patches and whisky stills in the Bottoms, a whole new city of workers for the industrial park will move into some 8800 negro homes flanking broad streets, near to shopping centers, schools and churches.⁴²

Despite the views of many city leaders and serious obstacles toward achieving a reasonable standard of living in the area, the people of Southwest Memphis did possess agency and actively advocated for changes that would bring an improved quality of life on their own terms. Even prior to the annexation of Boxtown by the city of Memphis, residents struggled to gain basic services. For example, after three Boxtown homes burnt while Chickasaw Fire Department firefighters looked on, area residents signed petitions and protested. These efforts resulted in the subsidization of fire services by Shelby County and the extension of additional water lines into the area.⁴³ Southwest Memphians continued such activism during the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Reverend James Netters of Mount Vernon Baptist Church in the Westwood area of Southwest Memphis remembers working with Dr. Martin Luther King and being arrested for his activities. He recalls,

I was involved in a lot of civil rights acts for the city and even the state and nation. I worked with Dr. Martin Luther King rather closely, with him in 1963 when they had the first pilgrimage in Washington DC. I also was the first to go to jail in Memphis when they opened up the buses. I was arrested on the streetcar with 5 other citizens.⁴⁴

⁴² Goodman, "Sleeping Wilderness to Be Introduced to 20th Century."

⁴³ Thomas BeVier, "Lord Thanked for Still Day: Firemen Watch As Blaze in Slums Leaves 20 Without Homes," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 26, 1966; "Three Homes Burn: Firemen Look On," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 26, 1966; "Moore to Seek Boxtown Water," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 31, 1967; "\$100,000 Project Approved for Boxtown Water Lines," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 24, 1967.

⁴⁴ Rev. James Netters, interview, Southwest Memphis African American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Summer, 2010.

The sister of Westwood resident, Norma Alexander, became one of the first eight African-American students to attend Memphis State University. Alexander also recalls her nephew's participation in several marches and a strong level of civil rights activism at her church.⁴⁵ Walker Homes resident Lajauna Beasley also recalls a high degree of activism in her neighborhood.⁴⁶

During this period of broad national and local change, Southwest Memphis officially became the southwestern corner of Memphis. The City of Memphis annexed the Boxtown area in two stages in 1968 and 1971. During the 1971 annexation, the city acquired a large swath of the southwestern edge of Shelby County and "probably more variety than any previous annexation." This area of about eighteen square miles and 5,800 inhabitants included everything "from the shanties of Boxtown to the fine homes around Coro Lake [a more upscale and, at that time, white Southwest Memphis neighborhood]."⁴⁷ However, the City of Memphis did not treat Southwest Memphis residents as true municipal citizens. Although city officials promised regular city services to all of the annexed areas, it proved slow in keeping this promise, at least in the case of Boxtown where services such as water, gas, and sewage lines remained largely unobtainable.

In a reversal of the previous city and county position, Charlie D. Hill Jr., deputy director of community development, lamented, "The problem is that of costs vs. the

⁴⁵ Norma Alexander, interview, Southwest Memphis African American Cultural Heritage Project, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Summer 2010.

⁴⁶ Lajauna Beasley, interview, Southwest Memphis African-American Cultural Heritage Project, Summer 2010.

⁴⁷ Clark Porteous, "City to Be Bigger Friday By 5,800 New Inhabitants," *Press-Scimitar*, December 29, 1971.

number of people down there is such that our dollars have a greater impact in other areas. Boxtown probably shouldn't have been annexed in the first place. The land is just not conducive to development."⁴⁸ City and county agencies proffered this and other excuses to account for the slow pace of infrastructure progress rather than proactively addressing the problem. This situation prompted the NAACP to file suit against Memphis in 1974, charging the city with neglect of this poor, predominantly black area. The NAACP dropped the suit in 1976 after the city promised to spend millions of dollars on improvements for the area.⁴⁹ However, residents and neighborhood groups continued to struggle over much of the following decade to obtain much need infrastructure and services.

County Commissioner Minerva Johnican lent important support to community activists seeking better city services. Other political leaders, such as City Councilman James Ford,⁵⁰ also played important roles. However, the most important catalyst for change lay with civic-minded community members and community organizations such as Community Uniting for Resources and Energy (CURE).

Political leaders and community members employed a variety of tactics, with relative degrees of success, to keep the problems of Boxtown in the public eye through media coverage and to consistently advocate for needed services. Bus tours formed one such tool employed by these activists. For example, when U.S. Secretary of Housing and

⁴⁸ "Boxtown Calling," *Press-Scimitar*, January 30, 1979.

⁴⁹ Peggy McCollough, "Boxtown Doesn't See \$1.7 Million Solution," *Press-Scimitar*, February 26, 1983.

⁵⁰ The Ford family of Southwest Memphis became arguably the most powerful black political force in Memphis at this time.

Urban Development Moon Landrieu visited Memphis in April of 1980, U.S.

Representative Harold Ford, his brother, City Councilman James Ford, and a busload of Boxtown residents met him at the airport.⁵¹ The residents spoke as they road toward their neighborhood and even sang a spiritual. Although, Landrieu was not able to offer specific measures of immediate assistance, this tactic led to newspaper articles, renewed political attention, and even national attention to this ongoing local problem.⁵²

Over time, Southwest Memphis has produced a number of strong community institutions and dedicated leaders. As previously discussed, organizations like CURE became important advocates for the underserved community. Other organizations adopted a more internal focus. For example, Geeter School provided an education for black residents of Southwest Memphis since the early twentieth century, when few options for local education were available for African Americans. The school boasted the first Shelby County bus for black students and educated the politically powerful Ford siblings, among others.⁵³

Brothers John, James, and Harold Ford, sons of a prominent funeral director, grew up in Southwest Memphis. They established political careers, serving at the local, state, and national levels. Other leaders from Southwest Memphis also provided service to their community throughout their lives. For example, Henry Earl Baskin Sr. led protest marches to bring essential services to the area, founded the Memphis Democratic League,

⁵¹ In 1974, Harold Ford became the first African-American Tennessean elected to Congress (Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, 69).

⁵² “HUD Secretary Aware of Boxtown’s Needs, But Does Not See Solutions,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 28, 1980.

⁵³ Yvonne Nelson, “Geeter Became Icon for Black Education,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Whitehaven Appeal), February 17, 2005.

and participated in the infamous 1968 sanitation strike.⁵⁴ Even Dr. W. W. Herenton, the first African-American mayor of Memphis had important ties to the Southwest Memphis area. He married into an important local family. His wife, Ida Jones, was the sister of State Representative Rufus Jones.⁵⁵ Additionally, Herenton became a dedicated member of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, located in the Westwood neighborhood.⁵⁶

The church has long formed an essential community institution in African American life. After the end of the Civil War, African Americans built numerous churches as an expression of freedom and as an important vehicle for self-help. Rev. James Netters described the past and present role of the church in black communities and, particularly, in Southwest Memphis:

The black [church] has served an all purpose institution for the community in particular this community. So many African Americans do not know how to go to places to get their needs met. Church can provide that for you... And the church, the black church has served as a institution for political, civic, social, as well as religious activities. All of these things must be joined together to bring things to pass and the black church has served as that one institution for blacks. To provide them information, provide for them also opportunities to get them involved that they would not be able to do because of many of them are limited with educational backgrounds and in my day you can understand I'm 80 plus and during my day blacks were not able to civic activities and have opportunities to vote like we do now. There were so many things that blacks were deprived of. But the church served as that institution to tell them that you can have what you need.⁵⁷

In the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans began to gain significant political power in Memphis, and residents of

⁵⁴ John Beifuss, "Community activist Baskin dies; led marches to help neighborhoods," *The Commercial Appeal*, August 17, 1994.

⁵⁵ Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads*, 75.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 89.

⁵⁷ Rev. James Netters, interview.

Southwest Memphis were well represented in elected offices. In 1991, Memphis voters elected Dr. Willie Herenton, the city's first African American mayor. In 2002, A. C. Wharton became the first black mayor of Shelby County. Notable Southwest Memphis residents elected to public office include several members of the Ford family, Rev. Netters himself (city council), and State Representative Rufus Jones.

Disproportionate environmental hazards also continue to plague the Southwest Memphis area. However, the citizens of the area continue to actively advocate for their community's needs. For example, plans to locate a landfill in the Frank C. Pidgeon Industrial Park adjacent to the T. E. Maxson Wastewater Treatment Plant drew at least 100 angry citizens to public meetings. These citizens claimed that locating a landfill in the area would amount to environmental racism.⁵⁸ Such efforts have not necessarily met success. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation did eventually issue a permit for a landfill. At the same time, the city promised to take steps to address the odor produced by the wastewater treatment plant.⁵⁹ However, depending on the direction of the wind, this unpleasant odor can still be smelled in the area. Other efforts at community advocacy have been more successful. For example, despite repeated threats from the state to close down the T. O. Fuller Park golf course, citizen activism has ensured that this community golf course remained open for a period of time.⁶⁰ Perhaps

⁵⁸ Tom Charlier, "Black Residents Decry Planned Landfill in Area," *The Commercial Appeal*, June 8, 1993.

⁵⁹ Tom Charlier, "New landfill licensed as neighbors protest," *The Commercial Appeal*, April 19, 1994.

⁶⁰ Since the time of my original writing, the golf course has actually been closed. It remains to see if local advocacy can again reverse this situation.

most successfully, churches and community groups have worked internally to ensure activities for youth, to encourage taking care of property, and to reduce crime.

Completing the Transition from Davies Plantation to Something Else

Mechanization of agriculture, the rise of large commercial farms, and the diversification of the west Tennessee economy contributed to the transformation of Brunswick from a rural to a suburban area. At least until the 1970s, most of the landowners in Brunswick descended from families that had farmed and lived in the area for generations. One resident described his neighbors in 1964: “I think Brunswick’s got to stay like it is for a while longer, until these people decide they want to sell this land. Most of them are old-time settlers and they want to keep the land in the family name.”⁶¹ However, the advent of the interstate system (following the Federal Highway Act of 1956), which cut through the area, lessened its viability for agriculture. This led to changes in land-use, and landowners began to sell their farms for residential and commercial development. In fact, the building of highway systems accelerated the decline of urban centers and the explosion of satellite cities characterized by “low density, relative racial homogeneity, greater affluence, lower crime rates, higher status, and, especially, better schools.”⁶² Such was the case in the Brunswick area. Suburban homes and businesses took the place of once-sprawling plantations and farms. One reporter provided an apt description of the transformation of Brunswick in the last quarter of the twentieth-century: “Acres that in their zenith produced cotton, corn, soybeans,

⁶¹ Margaret McKee, “Brunswick, Bolton Residents Are Happy With Their Lot,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 20, 1964.

⁶² Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 97.

hogs and fine cattle have been replaced by football field-sized yards where neighborhood kids toss the pigskin or play an impromptu game of baseball.”⁶³

Although the presence of African Americans persisted in the Brunswick area to a certain extent, white residents, capitalizing on greater transportation options and fleeing the increasingly desegregated city, helped maintain the area as relatively homogenous in regard to class and race. White residents in areas like Brunswick retained political power they lost in cities like Memphis in the aftermath the Civil Rights Movement and Civil Rights legislation. Additionally, by moving to suburban, semi-rural areas in the County, parents could avoid sending their children to city schools where busing was used to achieve integration. These schools were perceived as more dangerous and more poorly performing than Shelby County schools, which operated in a separate system.⁶⁴

As agriculture became increasingly industrialized during the second half of the twentieth century, the need for agricultural labor lessened, and an increasing number of former agricultural workers moved to cities such as Memphis to find new types of work. Children of sharecropping families left the area for war, marriage, or employment opportunities and did not return.⁶⁵ Part of the larger, national demographic transition of the Great Migration, these changes led to a significant decline in the African American population of areas like Brunswick.

⁶³ Shannon Massey, “Bound to history - - Once secluded, neighbors feel progress at doorstep,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 2008.

⁶⁴ Harkins, *Historic Shelby County*, 23.

⁶⁵ For example, James Earl Brewer Williams left the area when to attend college, and then enlisted in the military during the 1960s. He finally returned four decades later. James Earl Brewer Williams, Interviewed by Samantha Gibbs, Fall 2010.

However, African Americans did continue to live and work in the Brunswick area. In 1955, Independent Pole Bearers Association No. 6 applied “to build a subdivision for Negroes on Brunswick.” 21 African Americans bought lots, hired a white attorney, and appeared before the Shelby County Planning Commission “to tell what kind of houses they plan to build.”⁶⁶ Some African Americans continued to live in tenant houses on area plantations, such as Davies Plantations. Others lived and worked on their own farms, supplanting their income with day work on the larger plantations. Still others commuted from areas, such as Frayser in North Memphis to work in agriculture and related enterprises such as cotton gins.⁶⁷

Brunswick area residents carefully controlled the direction that their community developed within the constraints of larger societal changes. In fact, Ellen Davies-Rodgers herself wielded a great deal of personal control and political influence in this process.⁶⁸ As Brunswick transformed from rural to suburban, Davies-Rodgers subdivided and sold much of the Davies Plantation land. She carefully planned the disposition of the land, choosing developers who shared her vision of “choice residential development” and donating parcels to particular organizations, such as St. Phillips Episcopal Church and the Phi Mu sorority.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ “Historical Order Of Pole Bearers Plans Project,” *The Commercial Appeal*, October 9, 1955.

⁶⁷ Image accompanying a newspaper article, “Cotton quality poor, but crop beats schedule,” *The Commercial Appeal*, October 14, 1986, show African American workers who live in Frazier at the Brunswick Gin Co.

⁶⁸ Ellen Davies-Rodgers inherited Davies Plantation from her family. A powerful landowner, teacher, and historian, Davies Rodgers commanded the respect of state and local politicians and the ear of the press.

⁶⁹ “300-Acre Davies Tract Is Sold,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 11, 1967.

Davies-Rodgers and her Brunswick neighbors also organized in attempt to prevent undesirable development. For example, when a proposal to build a 44-acre school for “mildly to moderately disturbed” children came before the Shelby County Board of Adjustment, homeowners expressed their opposition. According to Davies-Rodgers, opposition was “based on the tract’s agricultural zoning, that it is too small, that it would devalue surrounding property and that ‘disturbed or problem children would disturb the community.’”⁷⁰ This confrontation actually represents one of the few examples of defeat for Ellen Davies Rodgers and her neighbors – Lakeside Behavioral Healthcare stands in the Brunswick area today.

At times, Davies-Rodgers’ vision also clashed with that of county agencies, the municipality of Bartlett, and various government agencies in regard to other aspects of Brunswick’s development. These clashes, which became well-publicized controversies, centered upon the placement of power lines in the area, the building of Interstate 40 through a corner of the Davies property, and the annexation of the Brunswick area by Bartlett. While Davies-Rodgers and her allies did not always achieve their goals, they did possess considerable political influence.

In the 1963, when the Shelby County government condemned about fifteen acres of Davies Plantation for the building of Interstate 40 through the area, Ellen Davies-Rodgers and her husband, Hillman P. Rodgers, sought to control where and how the highway would affect their land. With the personal help of Tennessee Governor Frank Clement and several senators, Davies Rodgers successfully lobbied the state and federal

Catherine Meacham, “Cousin Ellen, Versatile, Controversial Shelby Leader Is Always Involved and ‘Lives It Up,’” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 10, 1973.

⁷⁰ “Homeowners Will Oppose 44-Acre School Proposal,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 19, 1972.

governments to put a double curve and an overpass in the road so that it would by-pass the historic Davies Manor building. This effort proved successful, although Davies Rodgers paid the \$85,000 needed for the overpass out of the damages she received for her condemned land. For decades after the building of I-40, Davies Rodgers and the Zachariah Davies chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution decorated the bridge with garlands during the Christmas season.⁷¹

When, in 1969, Memphis Light, Gas & Water proposed to build a system of power lines that would cut through the Brunswick area, necessitating the condemnation of local property, area residents objected to proposed routes. True to form, Ellen Davies Rodgers organized a citizen's committee of at least fifty area homeowners to oppose the planned route.⁷² The citizens organized a bus tour, attended by five Memphis city council members among others, to illustrate the beauty and historic nature of the area that would be affected by the power lines. Additionally, the citizens provided attendees with speeches and boxed lunches.⁷³ Ultimately, the citizens prevailed; the city council, which oversaw the utility, refused to approve the original project. MLG&W built a longer route at a cost ten per cent higher than the original plan.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Clark Porteous, "Sparks Fly Over LGW Plan for Routing of Power Line," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 27, 1969; "Bridge Salutes Pioneers and Preservationists," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 12, 1981.

⁷² "Woman 'General' Maps Power Line Battle Plans," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 4, 1969.

⁷³ "Council Members Take Look at Power Line Route," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 9, 1969; Richard Lentz, "General's Campaign Mounts Line Attack," *The Commercial Appeal*, April 10, 1969.

⁷⁴ Orville Hancock, "LG&W Skirts Protesters with New, Longer Line," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 17, 1970.

The City of Bartlett (Memphis's largest suburb) included Brunswick in its eventual annexation area. The reasons that Brunswick proved appealing to Bartlett, Memphis' largest suburb, were completely different from the reasons Boxtown appealed to Memphis. Quite simply, Brunswick contained pricy homes and high-income residents, and, therefore, it provided a prime opportunity to increase Bartlett's tax base. Ellen Davies-Rodgers led a powerful opposition to Bartlett's annexation plans. In 1988, she filed a Chancery Court lawsuit to prevent Bartlett from annexing Brunswick. When the parties settled, Bartlett agreed not to annex Brunswick until 2005.⁷⁵ After that time, Bartlett moved forward with annexation.

Bartlett, including the Brunswick area, has transformed into a busy residential and commercial district. Highway 64, the Old Stagecoach Road, brings traffic from the interstate and from other suburbs past Davies Manor Plantation at 55 miles per hour toward the remaining semi-rural hinterland of the metropolitan area. The Davieshire neighborhood, with its large lots and homes and proximity to a golf course, has largely fulfilled Ellen Davies-Rodgers' idea of the country club section of Shelby County.⁷⁶

Comparing the Transitions

By the onset of World War II, the former Ensley Plantation and the persisting Davies Plantation occupied two very different socio-economic locations. During the period after World War II, when the two areas weathered significant and lifestyle changes, these pre-existing differences became even more pronounced. Persisting racial

⁷⁵ Davies-Rodgers, *Along the Old Stage Coach Road*, 265-281.

⁷⁶ This neighborhood was created from sub-divided Davies Plantation land.

inequalities in regard to access to resources, exacerbated by white flight, account for much of the differential development of the two areas during this period.

Although residents of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick encountered problems that were very different in nature and scope, they used many of the same tactics to organize their communities and demand the assistance of government officials. For example, residents of Southwest Memphis used bus tours as a way of confronting officials with problems of underdevelopment that plagued the area, while residents of Brunswick organized the same sort of tour to highlight the damage that could be wrought by a contested power line route. Although the two groups elicited different official responses, neither could be ignored for long. In February of 1980, when only Minerva Johnican out of a number of invited elected officials showed up for a bus tour to acquaint officials with problems in the Boxtown area, residents and activists remained undeterred. They simply scheduled another tour and continued to make sure their problems and the official response continued to reach the press.⁷⁷ Efforts by Brunswick residents received more immediate attention by officials, but, they too used the press to their best advantage.

Land-use in Southwest Memphis and in Brunswick took similar forms during the ante-bellum and even immediate post-bellum period. However, these two areas, in opposite corners of Shelby County look very different today for the reasons described above. Each area continues to face challenges. In Southwest Memphis, environmental injustice, crime, and underdevelopment plague residents. In Brunswick, tension between heritage and modernity, open land and sprawl still lingers. Today, as in the past, community organizations remain important in both communities. This is particularly true

⁷⁷ "Another Boxtown Tour Set After Low Turnout," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 22, 1980.

in Southwest Memphis where community groups, community centers, churches, and schools provide essential resources to a still underserved community.

Chapter 4: The Museums

The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation

The twentieth century has witnessed the transformation of the museum field. At the turn of the century, museums served as repositories for large collections of objects. Curators and other experts believed that, if properly and systematically arranged, objects, in and of themselves, could convey important knowledge to the public writ large. Museum visitors were expected to file past carefully arranged displays and somehow absorb objective knowledge about the world. Curators spent most of their time collecting, caring for, and arranging objects. The physical location of museums and high admission prices historically limited the race and class of museum visitors. Throughout the twentieth century, museums began to serve a more diverse audience and became more democratic in their decision-making processes. They have also become more focused on the visitors themselves and less focused on objects. Education and community have become two of the most important foci for contemporary museums. As the twenty first century unfolds, museums are continuing the constant process of reinventing themselves.¹

Demographic, cultural, economic, and technological changes in American society drive continued change in the museum world. Demographic factors are the most pertinent to this study. These include the large size of the aging baby boomer generation as well as the rapidly increasing percentage of minorities in the American population. The Center for the Future of Museums and its advisors estimate that by 2034 one in five Americans will be 65 or older. Therefore, museums will need to become more universally accessible and provide larger text and other sorts of media that will be more

¹ Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum*.

accessible to seniors. Additionally, retiring seniors will be increasingly important as museum program participants and as volunteers.² By 2034, minorities will comprise nearly half of the American population, and, in some states, the minority population will actually be the majority. This shift will necessitate museums to appeal to a broader audience than they currently do. Additionally, museums have the potential to facilitate cultural exchange and inter-cultural as well as inter-generational communication. This may be one of the most important roles for museums in the future.³ In order to adapt to such changes as economic downturn, budget cuts, and rising gas prices, museums need to offer increased value to visitors as well as interact with visitors in new, often remote ways.

Specific museums have responded to the changing nature of the field and their evolving constituencies with varying degrees of success. Since each museum is different in scope and audience, each needs to develop its own strategies for change. In the later sections of this chapter, I will discuss the specific histories and contemporary states of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation.

Related to the changes discussed above, the museum field as a whole has begun to adopt the mandate to serve communities. The word community has multiple meanings. It can refer to a physical location or neighborhood; it can refer to the people who live in a particular area; and it can refer to a group of people who share an interest or a characteristic. Museums can play an important role in development of social capital, identity, and even economic resources in the multiple communities they serve. There are

² Center for the Future of Museums, "Museums & Society 2034," 5-6.

³ *Ibid*, 6-7.

two types of social capital – bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital involves increasing solidarity within a particular group whereas bridging social capital involves building connections between groups.⁴

History, including history portrayed in museums, can be an important resource for shaping the future. It can prompt people to ask important questions about the past and the present. It can also lead to changed outlooks and socially conscious behavioral changes. Southwest Memphis and Brunswick each boasts a museum built on land that was once part of a large plantation fueled by the labor of African Americans. Each of these museums is, to some extent, attempting to incorporate the local and, particularly, African American and plantation history into its larger story. These efforts will help transform the museums into integral resources, which will help each community commemorate and understand its past, act knowledgeably and responsibly in the present, and weather future challenges.

As museums attempt to become more inclusive and reach out to new audiences, they must do so while remaining true to their mission statements. The C. H. Nash Museum, which “protects and interprets the archaeological site’s cultural and natural environments” should provide interpretive programming inherently different than the programming at Davies Manor Plantation, which provides a “portrayal of early Shelby County farm life.” However, both museums can tie past, present, and future together for the benefit of a larger public.⁵ Incorporating best practices and moving toward more

⁴ Barbara J. Little, “Archaeology and Civic Engagement,” in *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement*, ed. Barbara J. Little and Paul A. Shackel (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 2.

⁵ I have had the great privilege of working as an intern at both the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and at Davies Manor Plantation as they have begun this process of evolution. I am

equitable representations of all groups involved at the sites will enhance their abilities to do so.

Representing African Americans

Both the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation sit on historic plantations once fueled by slave labor and other repressive forms of predominantly black labor. The building of a state park for African Americans by a black contingent of CCC workers became the catalyst for the discovery of Chucalissa. Today, black neighborhoods comprise much of the surrounding area. African-American tenant farmers and sharecroppers continued to live and work on Davies Plantation into the 1960s. Morning Grove Baptist Church and the Independent Subdivision continue to form the centers of black life in the area and provide testament to the larger population that once lived and worked in the area. The stories traditionally told by these two museums remain important. However, each museum must incorporate more nuanced interpretations of its site history, including African-American history, into its larger narrative. Doing so will not only enhance the legitimacy of each museum but also forms a moral imperative.

In *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, Laurie Green addresses the “struggles by the post-plantation generation of African Americans in the urban South to articulate and achieve a new kind of freedom, freedom that would represent a genuine break from the daily humiliations they associated with the

currently employed at Davies Manor Plantation. My own experiences and observations will be incorporated into the following discussion.

oppressive rural relations of race, class, and gender they had already abandoned.”⁶ Green argues, “for urban black southerners in the civil rights era, the process of claiming freedom was about simultaneously uprooting white racist thought and liberating black minds from forms of consciousness they identified with slavery and its long aftermath.”⁷ As sites of production, display, and consumption of cultural knowledge, museums can play an important role in facilitating or impairing communities’ efforts to overcome such ways of thinking. As Green notes, sharing stories of the past, including painful stories of injustice, reflects “the significance of this history for today, when many Memphians continue to face serious problems of poverty and powerlessness and when, just as importantly, struggles for racial justice continue, often in complex multiracial contexts.”⁸ Museums can become positive facilitators in disrupting plantation and slave mentalities by partnering with a community in developing programs and exhibits that reflect that community’s self-perception. In other terms, museums can help create social capital and promote agency.⁹

The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa sits in a zip code that is 96.2 percent African American.¹⁰ Therefore, the museum’s challenge lies in reaching out to its surrounding community and representing that community in its exhibits and programs.

⁶ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid*, 3-4.

⁸ *Ibid*, 294.

⁹ Green defines agency as “struggles over not only external issues of rights but also internal, subjective problems of identity, both of which comprised understandings of freedom” (Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 11). Museums speak directly to the issue of identity. The word agency also conveys a sense of being an active participant with real power in determining one’s own identity and affecting historical change. By allowing communities to determine how their own identity is framed and displayed, museums promote this attribute.

¹⁰ U. S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, Zip Code Tabulation Area 38109.

Perhaps more importantly, the museum should provide opportunities for the communities of Southwest Memphis to represent themselves. In recent years, as will be seen in the next section, the C. H. Nash Museum has taken several steps in this direction. Today, the museum regularly works with community organizations to develop and implement programs at the museum and in Southwest Memphis community centers and churches. Most noticeably, area high school students developed a long-term museum exhibit that interprets the cultural heritage of African Americans in Southwest Memphis.

In many ways, Davies Manor Plantation faces the greater challenge to becoming more inclusive and equitably representing the history of African Americans at the site. Several factors, including the museum's association with a particular planter family that remained at the site into the late twentieth century, its situation in a predominantly white neighborhood, the development of the site by white, elite descendants of planters, and the interests of current visitors and volunteers, provide little incentive to change the status quo regarding the representation of African Americans. Most southern plantation museums share these and related retarding characteristics.

In *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small explore the ways in which southern plantation museums display or, more often, fail to display the system of slavery in a meaningful manner.¹¹ The authors define plantation museums as “sites based on physical structures that were originally used as part of plantation complexes during the period of slavery and which now are organized to provide exhibits and tours of southern history,

¹¹ Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*.

with an exclusive focus on the period of enslavement.”¹² Davies Manor Plantation does not quite fit this definition. Although the labor of enslaved people of African descent fueled the plantation during the ante-bellum period, the museum interprets a long period of history that stretches to the early twentieth century. Furthermore, Eichstedt and Small consider twenty enslaved people at the site to be the minimum for a true plantation, while the Davies family never possessed more than fifteen.¹³ Nonetheless, the authors’ findings still provide important insight to the situation at Davies Manor Plantation.

After analyzing 122 plantation museums in three states, Eichstedt and Small argue that most such sites “tell a story of American history that centers around whites, males, and elites, and that these sites erase or minimize the presence, labor, and lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans.”¹⁴ They identify four different strategies that these museums use when addressing the presence of enslaved people – symbolic annihilation and erasure, trivialization and deflection, segregation and marginalization of knowledge, and relative incorporation.¹⁵ At present, Davies Manor Plantation straddles the line between symbolic annihilation and erasure and trivialization and deflection in its representation of African Americans. Symbolic annihilation and erasure involves an interpretive program such that the presence of African Americans is either not acknowledged or only mentioned in perfunctory ways. Trivialization and deflection

¹² Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

involves a rhetorical strategy in which African American presence and mistreatment in such a way as to trivialize the significance of the experience.¹⁶

At Davies Manor Plantation, docents rarely mention African Americans during tours of the manor house. While certain buildings – a “tenant cabin” and a commissary – speak to the experiences of African Americans, these structures receive little interpretation. These structures have been incorporated in a recently created visitor’s guide to the plantation grounds, and a small sign on the front of the sharecropper’s cabin provides limited biographical information about its former resident. The sign describes Mose Frazier, the cabin’s resident, as a “faithful servant” and “nattily dressed.”¹⁷

Clearly, plantation museums like Davies Manor Plantation have, as a whole, have failed to adequately address the historic roles of African Americans. However, it should be noted, such museums face real challenges when they attempt to take positive steps in this direction. In his discussion of the struggles faced at the historic Monticello plantation during such a process, Eric Gable highlights some of these difficulties.¹⁸ Docents at Monticello struggled to discuss slavery with visitors without impugning Thomas Jefferson. Additionally, they reacted with dismissal or anger to questions regarding Jefferson’s purported liaison with his slave, Sally Hemmings. At the same time, museum officials, docents, and caretakers at Monticello insisted upon their own impartiality and refused to address the contested nature of history itself.

¹⁶ Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 147.

¹⁷ Davies Manor Plantation, “Mose Fraser,” Interpretive Sign.

¹⁸ Gable, “How We Study Museums or Cultural Studies at Monticello.”

In order to incorporate African American history into Monticello's program at some level, the staff highlighted life of particular enslaved individuals. Additionally, the museum invited prominent African American speakers to major events. These efforts proved insufficient in addressing the problem of the perceived exclusion of African Americans in the site's interpretive programming. According to Gable, "White museum administrators... feel that they are doing the right thing when they find and display black history for black audiences."¹⁹ However, the African Americans represented as focal points for black identity at Monticello were treated as second-class citizens in their own time. A more holistic discussion about the lives of African Americans at the site, the inclusion of African American communities in co-creating content, and honesty about Monticello's past shortcomings will be necessary for true incorporation to occur.

The ways in which the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation attempt to meet the challenge of incorporating African American history equitably will depend on each museum's unique history and structure. These same foundations will also determine the ways in which each museum interprets local history more generally and weathers larger community and museum field changes. The following sections delve more deeply into the missions, histories, structures, interpretive programs, and futures of these two museums.

The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa

The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa tells the story of the pre-historic Native American occupation of the region. Its mission is "to protect and interpret the Chucalissa

¹⁹ Gable, "How We Study Museums or Cultural Studies at Monticello," 119.

archaeological site's cultural and natural environments, and to provide the University Community and the Public with exceptional educational, participatory, and research opportunities on the landscape's past and present Native American and traditional culture."²⁰ Both the pre-historic and the historic past of the site vitally influence the contemporary and future of the museum's operations.

Before the arrival of Europeans to Southwest Tennessee, a group of Native Americans of the Mississippian culture built a town at the site now known as Chucalissa.²¹ In 1940, approximately 450 to 500 years after the site was abandoned,²² members of an African American Civilian Conservation Corps company discovered the Chucalissa site while building the Shelby Bluff State Park for Negroes (T. O. Fuller State Park) for the use of African American citizens. The archaeological site became an area for excavation, research, and tourism, while planners shifted the layout of the state park to accommodate these changes. While work on the park stagnated after the discovery of the remains of the prehistoric village, scientists and park officials prepared extensive excavations at the site.

Like so many other state projects, work on the excavations halted during World War Two. It resumed in 1952 under the auspices of the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society.²³ In 1955, the Division of State Parks employed Charles H. Nash as

²⁰ University of Memphis, C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, <http://www.memphis.edu/chucalissa>

²¹ The word "chucalissa" means abandoned house in the Choctaw language.

²² Don Holdeman, "Work Goes on at T. O. Fuller State Park," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 31, 1955.

²³ Bevely Coleman, *The History of Tennessee State Parks*, 68 – 370.

the state archaeologist, and he took over the excavations that were to become his life's work. Appropriations of state funds and penal farm labor allowed for the continuation of excavations and the development of "what [would] eventually be a complete, natural museum."²⁴ In 1956, under Nash's direction, the state added a museum and, in 1962, built a model Native American village at the site. Excavations, including burials, also formed part of the museum experience for the visiting public. Nash and his colleagues even recruited members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaws from a reservation in Mississippi to work in the village.²⁵ The exact tribal affiliation of the pre-historic residents of the Chucalissa site remains unknown, making the explicit employment of Choctaw workers and guides particularly questionable. These employees became objectified "Indians" and essentially served as extensions of the physical exhibits. The site remained under the purview of the Division of State Parks until its 1962 transfer to Memphis State University. In 1976, Memphis State University dedicated a new addition to the museum and renamed the entire facility the C. H. Nash Museum in honor of Nash who died in 1969.²⁶

A pamphlet created in the early period of Memphis State University's administration of the Chucalissa site describes the facility: "Ten native houses have been completed along with a covered excavation revealing the remains from 40 burials. There

²⁴ Don Holdeman, "Work Goes On At T. O. Fuller State Park," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 31, 1955.

²⁵ Bevely Coleman, *A History of State Parks in TN*, 373–374.

²⁶ Division of University Community Relations, Media Relations, press release, April 2, 1976, University of Memphis Special Collections.

is also an air-conditioned museum building.”²⁷ The pamphlet continues, describing the visitor experience:

Choctaw Indians guide visitors who enter the archaeological site through the museum building. The museum offers a 20-minute slide-illustrated lecture in surroundings which present various facets of life at Chucalissa and Indian cultural development in the Mid-South. The museum also houses the laboratory where specimens recovered from the town deposit are preserved and analyzed. During the summer months visitors may observe work in progress on the archaeological ‘digs’. The meticulous exposure of the details of prehistory is accomplished by MSU students under staff supervision.²⁸

“A full time staff of archaeologists and Choctaw Indians” operated the reconstructed village and museum.²⁹ In many ways, both components of the staff became part of the displays and visitor experience.³⁰ The archaeologists and other “experts” directed the messages and displays put forth by the museum as well as the role of the Choctaw demonstrators. The Choctaw did derive some benefit from the development of Chucalissa. It provided employment and housing for the families associated with the museum. Additionally, the West Tennessee Annual Choctaw Pow Wow was held annually at the Chucalissa site.³¹ However, archaeologist and anthropologists clearly set the agenda and controlled the relationship.

²⁷ Memphis State University, “Chucalissa,” pamphlet, University of Memphis Special Collections.

²⁸ Memphis State University, “Chucalissa,” pamphlet, University of Memphis Special Collections.

²⁹ “Chucalissa Indian Village,” *Tennessee Traveler*, November 11, 1974.

³⁰ In his chapter, “Cannibal Tours, Glass Boxes, and the Politics of Interpretation” within his *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: the Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 1992), Michael Ames notes that the process of putting other people’s cultural heritage objects in museums imposes academic classification or “glass boxes” upon these cultures (140). In the case of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, the Choctaw employees were also figuratively put in such “glass boxes.”

³¹ “Choctaws Bring Chucalissa to Life,” *Tennessee Traveler*, August 1, 1981.

By the late 1980s, the museum closed the burial mound with human remains to visitors. In 2003, it also removed the reconstructed buildings, which had fallen into disrepair.³² Native Americans, if employed at the museum, work under the same conditions as all other employees, rather than as semi-displays. As the museum replaces older exhibits, tribal groups represented at the museum are asked to design their replacements.

Not only has it changed the ways it interacts with and represents native groups, but, throughout the past decade, the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa has also made several efforts to become a true community resource in Southwest Memphis. In 2002, the museum joined the “adopt-a-school” program³³ when it “adopted” nearby White’s Chapel Elementary School. The museum supported the school by providing speakers, tutors, activities, and free field trips.³⁴ In 2008, the University of Memphis and the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa began a series of collaborative efforts with community organizations designed to better integrate the museum into its surrounding community. A collaboration of Westwood High School students, University of Memphis faculty, and graduate students worked together to create *Neighborhood Communications: L.I.F.E. As Process*, which premiered for thirty days at the University of Memphis Art Museum during the spring of 2008. Dedra Macklin of Westwood Indian Hills Neighborhood

³² Samantha Gibbs, “Discovering Cultural Heritage: Incorporating Community History into a Prehistoric Museum,” Practicum Report, University of Memphis, Fall 2010, 8-9.

³³ This program, initiated by Mayor Herenton, facilitated the provision of monetary or other types of assistance by a local business to a particular public school of its choice.

³⁴ Pamela Perkins, “Chucalissa Will Adopt White’s Chapel School,” *The Commercial Appeal*, October 24, 2002.

Development (WIND) and Dr. Robert Connolly, director of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, arranged for the exhibit to be displayed at the museum throughout August. During the fall semester of 2008, Westwood students, Macklin, Connolly, and community members collaborated with University of Memphis graduate students to create three banners that portrayed the history of African Americans in Southwest Memphis. Throughout this time, the Museum and WIND sponsored multiple showings of *Black Indians: An American Story* at the Museum and at the nearby Charles Powell Community Center.³⁵

In 2009, Connolly and Macklin applied for and received a Strengthening Communities Initiative Grant to fund a proposal in which eight area high school students would “conduct research and analyze artifacts that were discovered in an archaeological excavation of a 1920s farmstead located at the Chucalissa site,” and “from this research... the students [would] create a permanent exhibit for the CHNMC [C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa] of the everyday life of the early 1900s era African American community of Southwest Memphis.”³⁶ According to project coordinator Samantha Gibbs³⁷

Project goals were to use cultural heritage as a tool to empower the participants and area residents, document the process of the researchers, and reintegrate the museum into the surrounding community. In line with [its] revised mission, the

³⁵ Samantha Gibbs, “Discovering Cultural Heritage,” 4-6.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 5-6.

³⁷ Both Samantha Gibbs and I were students in the museums studies certificate program at the University of Memphis. I worked as an intern on projects at both the C. H. Nash Museum and Davies Manor as part of that program. Gibbs worked as a graduate assistant at the C. H. Nash Museum. She worked as the project coordinator of the African American Cultural Heritage in Southwest Memphis project to meet the practicum requirement for the anthropology masters program in which she was also enrolled. Gibbs worked on an oral history project at Davies Manor as a museum studies intern.

CHNMC [C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa] moved to interpret and incorporate the surrounding community through exhibits, collections, and programs. Through AACHSWM [the African American Cultural Heritage of Southwest Memphis project] the Southwest Memphis community developed a means to voice their cultural heritage.³⁸

Additionally, as noted in the grant application submitted by Connolly and Macklin, “Of critical importance, the project allows the area residents to create and tell the story of their cultural heritage, as opposed to heritage professionals creating and telling residents what their culture should be.”³⁹ Above all, project organizers hoped that it would lead to additional collaboration between the university, the museum, and community groups.

During the summer of 2010, the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa employed a group of nine area high school students to work on this project.⁴⁰ During a five week session, these student researchers conducted a series of oral history interviews, researched aspects of the area’s history, analyzed archaeological artifacts, visited Memphis-area museums for a behind-the-scenes look at museum work, listened to relevant guest speakers, participated in a bi-weekly writing workshop, toured the Southwest Memphis area in order to take pictures and video, and planned a multi-media exhibit. Throughout the process, the student researchers focused on five topical areas: religion, music, community leaders, history, and significant events. The oral histories became the most significant component of the project, and by the end of the five-week period, the student researchers had compiled approximately thirty hours of interview

³⁸ Samantha Gibbs, “Discovering Cultural Heritage,” 6.

³⁹ Samantha Gibbs, “Discovering Cultural Heritage,” Appendix A: Grant Proposal, 41. This avoids the pitfall of Michael Ames’s “glass boxes (Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 140).

⁴⁰ The ninth student was paid from the museum’s operational fund.

footage. These interviews, as well as other video and photographic material, became the basis for a twenty-minute documentary that became one of the project's tangible products.⁴¹ In its final form, the exhibit designed by the student researchers included multiple text and photographic banners, a glass case display with the 1920s archaeological artifacts and text, a video display station, a writing and resource center, and a memory board.⁴² The exhibit, known as *African American Cultural Heritage in Southwest Memphis*, opened on September 11, 2010, in a student researcher led ceremony, which included statements by the participants, a screening of the twenty-minute documentary, tours of the exhibit, and a pizza lunch. The exhibit continues to engage visitors in the process of co-creation through the memory board. Visitors are asked to write down memories of Southwest Memphis that are then displayed on the board and later archived in an accessible notebook.

After the completion of the summer program and the opening of the exhibit, museum staff and community members needed to determine how to move forward with collaborative efforts based on the project. In January of 2011, the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa hosted a meeting for stakeholders, including museum staff, student researchers, leaders of community organizations, and area residents. Collaboration with Memphis City Schools emerged as a immediate goal from the discussion at this meeting. Therefore, the C. H. Nash Museum began developing an educational program based on the exhibit for visiting schools. Additionally, museum staff will promote the documentary as appropriate for local social studies and history classes and the project as

⁴¹ The student researchers determined the direction of this documentary, and two of them served as narrators. Due to time constraints, I edited the documentary.

⁴² Samantha Gibbs, "Discovering Cultural Heritage," 38.

a model for participatory education that can be adapted by classroom teachers.⁴³ During the summer of 2011, the C. H. Nash Museum employed three of the student researchers from the previous summer for short terms to work on specific projects related to the exhibit.

As a division of the University of Memphis, the museum employs a PhD professor as the director and relies heavily on the work of graduate assistants. As such, the museum is able to stay largely in line with professional museum standards and provides creative and progressive interpretive programming. This programming now includes aspects of the area's historical past in addition to the pre-historical past it has traditionally interpreted. The Southwest Memphis communities have become important partners in the interpretation area's history and cultural heritage.

As the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa continues to evolve, it must continue a policy of community engagement and co-development. The Southwest Memphis Cultural Heritage Project played an important role in developing a mutually beneficial relationship between Southwest Memphis communities and the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa. The museum should continue to propose such partnership, bringing adults as well as students into the process of representing these communities at the museums. Most importantly, the museum must continue to diligently avoid objectifying or stereotyping either the Native Americans or African Americans that have lived on the site.

⁴³ Samantha Gibbs, "Discovering Cultural Heritage," 32.

Davies Manor Plantation

Davies Manor Plantation tells the story of the Davies family, a pioneer family that settled and farmed Shelby County. In fact, the continued association of the Davies family with the site marks an important difference from the Chucalissa site, which the Ensley family left more than a century ago. Since in the 1930s, Davies Manor has served as an important venue for heritage tourism, display of exhibits and artifacts, and community and group meetings. However, the ways that Davies Manor has fulfilled these roles has evolved over time. The Mission of the Davies Manor Association, Inc., the organization that administers the site, is “to preserve and enhance Davies Manor Plantation as a portrayal of early Shelby County farm life for the education and enjoyment of visitors.”⁴⁴ The history of Davies Manor Plantation itself plays an important role in determining the ways the Association approaches this mission.

Ellen Davies-Rodgers inherited Davies Plantation in 1931 and, over time, restored Davies Manor (referred to here as the manor house).⁴⁵ She maintained the property as a “privately owned shrine,” which she periodically opened to the public as a site for “pilgrimages.”⁴⁶ In 1945, Davies-Rodgers founded the Zachariah Davies chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which has met at Davies Manor throughout its existence. Members of this group acted as hostesses for the “pilgrimages” to Davies

⁴⁴ Davies Manor Association, Inc., “The Davies Manor Plantation Strategic Plan Executive Summary,” April, 2009.

⁴⁵ Although words like “plantation” and “manor house” may conjure up images of Terra-like complexes as seen in *Gone With the Wind*, it should be noted that Davies Manor is a rather crude, two-store chink and daub log structure that began as a one-room log cabin and was added to over the years.

⁴⁶ “Four Pilgrimages to Davies Manor in August,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 8, 1957.

Manor throughout the lifetime of Ellen Davies-Rodgers. Many contemporary Davies Manor Plantation docents still belong to the Daughters of the American Revolution as well as the Daughters of the Confederacy.

In 1951, the Zachariah Davies Chapter of the Daughters of American Revolution unveiled a historical marker commemorating the “Old Stage Coach Road” on the Davies Manor property. During the ceremony marking this event, D.A.R members dressed in ante-bellum dresses complete with hoop skirts, indicating the romanticized past they associated with the historic site.⁴⁷ In 1953, the Zachariah Davies chapter and the Old Stage Road Society sponsored another elaborate ceremony when the Tennessee Historical Commission placed a historical marker commemorating Davies Manor itself on the property.⁴⁸ In 1975, the National Register of Historic Places also added Davies Manor.⁴⁹

In 1977, Davies-Rodgers founded Davies Manor Association, Inc. to preserve and share the historic property and her family’s heritage. When she died in 1994, Davies-Rodgers left much of her property to the Association, including the manor house and thirty-two surrounding acres, which form today’s Davies Manor Plantation. The Association sold some of the property it inherited to create an endowment for Davies Manor Plantation.⁵⁰ The Association hired its first full time co-directors Jean Crawford

⁴⁷ “A Marker to Remind Us of Days of Stagecoach,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 6, 1951.

⁴⁸ Program, Davies Manor historical marker unveiling, December 5, 1953, Davies Manor Association Collection.

⁴⁹ “Register Names Davies Manor Historical Site,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 11, 1975.

⁵⁰ Shirley Downing, “Miz Ellen’s place – As one old home falls, another stands tall,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 16, 2006.

and Marilyn Van Eynde in 1996. They attempted to make Davies Manor into a “self-supporting tourist destination.” One of their major projects was to make each room in the historic manor house “as authentic to the time period as possible.”⁵¹ The current director, Nancy McDonough, succeeded Crawford and Van Eynde in 2004.

Eichstedt and Small describe a format common to most southern plantation museums. According to Eichstedt and small,

First, most plantation museums have a gift shop where guests can purchase site-specific and general memorabilia. Next, most sites include an introductory video designed to teach visitors about the history and layout of the property. Third, approximately 90 percent of sites offer tours led by a docent... In most cases, guided tours cover only the contents of the main house and possibly the kitchen. Outbuildings and gardens are generally toured without the guidance of a docent.⁵²

Except that Davies Manor Plantation lacks a gift shop, this analysis perfectly describes the formal interpretive offerings at the site.

An aging introductory video introduces visitors to the Davies family and the manor house. Beginning with Ellen Davies-Rodgers’ “pilgrimages” in the 1930s, docent-led tours of the manor house have formed the core of the visitor experience at the site. In addition to the manor house, the property encompasses several outbuildings that are either original to the plantation or have been moved to the property. These structures range from a commissary building to a “sharecropper cabin” to an outhouse. Additionally, the grounds include three gardens, a cotton patch, and several other structures and points of interest. A newly created visitor’s guide allows visitors to take a self-guided tour of the grounds.⁵³ This forms the only formal interpretation of the

⁵¹ Kriste Goad, *Commercial Appeal*, May 3, 1996.

⁵² Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 67.

plantation grounds. It is also one of the very few pieces of interpretive material that explicitly discusses the presence of African Americans.

This format, common to Davies Manor Plantation and many other plantation museums, can and does lead to inequities in interpretation. However, the layout and resources available to these museums largely determine the formulaic structure. The association of particular planter families with these sites also influences the type of information included in interpretive program. With thoughtful redevelopment, the current structure of Davies Manor Plantation and other southern plantation museums can become more equitable, responsive, and progressive.

Eichstedt and Small view plantation museums through the framework of representing slavery. Therefore, they did not explore the multiple roles these museums play in their communities beyond their formal interpretive programs. Like more and more contemporary museums, Davies Manor does serve a community and larger society in a variety of ways. These include conserving the natural environment, serving as a meeting place for community organizations, and taking preliminary steps to address the historical presence of African Americans.

Conserving the natural environment has been an integral part of the Davies Manor Association's broad preservation efforts. In 1998, Memphis Heritage Inc awarded the Davies Manor Association the Anona Stoner Award for efforts to preserve the natural environment. At that time, the Association's efforts included maintaining the grounds in such a way as to promote wildlife habitat and taking a low-impact approach to the

⁵³ I created this visitor's guide during my internship at Davies Manor Plantation. It has been in use since August 2011.

restoration of the manor house.⁵⁴ More recently, the Association has built a nature trail and begun the process of establishing a certified arboretum. Additionally, the Association maintains three gardens on the property. A kitchen and a medicinal herb garden showcase some of the crops that would have historically been grown and used on the plantation by residents. The Memphis Area Master Gardeners built a third garden in 2010. Members use plots in this garden for teaching and to provide produce for the Memphis Food Bank.

Davies Manor Plantation has served as the headquarters for a number of heritage organizations including the Zachariah Davies Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Shelby Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, the Old Stage Road Society, the Phi Mu Society, and the Children of the American Revolution. Today, the historic property continues to serve as a meeting place for a variety of groups. The Zachariah Davies Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution continues to hold its meetings at the site, and the Daviesshire Homeowners Association holds an annual meeting and picnic on the plantation grounds. Additionally, a quilting group and a writing group meet regularly at Davies Manor Plantation.

All of the groups that have met and currently meet on the property have an affinity for the history and heritage of the physical space. Although meetings held at Davies Manor Plantation are often only tangentially related to the Davies Manor Association's broader mission, they represent a manifestation of bonding social capital and community cohesiveness. Building bridging social capital will be an important challenge faced by the Davies Manor Association as it moves forward. In particular,

⁵⁴ Wayne Risher, "Saving woodlands a priority in preserving 1800s log home," *Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1998.

incorporating the important stories of the African Americans who lived and worked on the property and in the area will involve reaching out to groups that do not regularly associate with the museum.

Since at least 2003, the Davies Manor has been making efforts to better incorporate the history of African Americans on Davies Plantation into the larger story it tells. Much of this effort has focused on Mose Frazier, a long time Davies Plantation tenant and employee. This focus can be viewed as similar to Monticello's focus on a particular enslaved individual in incorporating enslaved people of African descent into its programming. Thus far, like Monticello, Davies Manor Plantation has not attracted a significant African American audience.

Frazier first came to Davies Plantation in the late 1920s or early 1930s from Walls, Mississippi where he had worked for Ellen Davies-Rodgers' uncle, Augustus Davies. Frazier became the caretaker of the grounds near the manor house and performed a variety of tasks, such as caring for the livestock, accompanying Hillman Rodgers on hunting trips, parking visitors' cars, and retrieving the mail. He lived and worked on the plantation until the early 1960s when he went to live with his daughter and her family. Mose Frazier died in 1969. Although she and her husband had a falling out with Hillman and Ellen Davies-Rodgers and were forced to flee the plantation, Frazier's daughter, Annie Mae Myles, has been involved for with Davies Manor Plantation for several years.⁵⁵ Notably, she has given two oral histories concerning her life and the life of her family on Davies Plantation.

Mose Frazier lived in several cabins during his time on Davies Plantation. The last building where he lived, often referred to as the "tenant cabin" or just Mose's Cabin,

⁵⁵Annie Mae Miles, interview, Davies Plantation Oral Histories, Fall 2009.

still stands at Davies Manor Plantation. Visitors can enter the interior of this structure and see what a “typical” cabin for African American workers would have looked like. Furnishings in the cabin resemble the items Frazier might have had. A picture of Frazier and a brief biographical sketch (the one that refers to him as a “faithful servant”) are posted on the front of the structure. A bottle tree and a cooking vessel sit in front of the cabin. This display provides the most cogent attempt to represent African American life at Davies Manor Plantation. However, it resorts to defensive language and does not delve deep enough into the experiences of the generations of African Americans that lived and worked on the plantation.

In 2003, a small team conducted an archaeological excavation in the area surrounding Mose’s Cabin. Ron Brister, Pink Palace collection manager and excavation team leader said of the project, “Everybody knows about the life of the people who live in the big house. We’re trying to bring to life some of the folks that lived on the plantation... We’re trying to enrich the historical record with this dig.”⁵⁶ This excavation, which lasted several weeks, turned up a small number of discarded items such as glass medicine bottles. However, the greater meaning of this project lay in the growing interest in the lives of tenants and workers on the plantation exhibited by the Davies Manor Association. Although the archeological excavation yielded limited results, a committee known as the Mose Frazier Committee continued with efforts to

⁵⁶ Jody Callahan, “Research of a Lifetime: Team sifts for past of Davies’ trusty tenant,” *The Commercial Appeal*, July 17, 2003.

uncover the site's African American history and, particularly, the history of Mose Frazier himself.⁵⁷

In the fall of 2009, the Davies Manor Association put out a press release regarding two projects designed explicitly to focus on the African American history at the site. One of these projects consisted of an effort to collect the oral histories of individuals who had lived and worked on the plantations or whose families had historically done so. The other project involved the annual quilt show – the 2010 show would focus on “Civil War Era and Slave Made Quilts.” The press release asked for anyone with connections to Davies Plantation or who owned a Civil War era or slave-made quilt to contact the Association.⁵⁸ This request received a limited response. In the fall of 2010, Samantha Gibbs, an intern at Davies Manor, began the process of collecting oral histories.⁵⁹ Gibbs eventually interviewed five individuals. Although Davies Manor Plantation has yet to incorporate these oral histories into its interpretive programs, such efforts should definitely be part of the museum's future. However, finding ways to make the subjects stakeholders and co-creators of concrete projects will hopefully increase response rates and effective implementation in the future. Efforts like the emphasis on quilts made by enslaved people at the annual quilt show should also be continued and expanded. In addition to these special projects, discussing the lives of African Americans in every day interpretive material such as the visitor's guide and, hopefully, docent-led tours remains

⁵⁷ Minutes, Mose Frazier Committee, Davies Manor Association, Inc., November 18, 2009, Davies Manor Association Collection, Davies Manor Plantation.

⁵⁸ Davies Manor Association, “Intern Programs News Release,” Summer 2010, Davies Manor Association Collection, Davies Manor Plantation.

⁵⁹ Gibbs also served as the project coordinator for the African American Cultural Heritage of Southwest Memphis at the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa.

vitaly important. Such a thoughtful approach will also bring Davies Manor Plantation closer to contemporary museum best practices.

In the last several years, the Davies Manor Association has become increasingly concerned with bringing Davies Manor Plantation more in line with current museum practices and standards. Development of the Davies Manor Association, Inc.'s first detailed three-year strategic plan began in April 2008. Building on that work, from March to April 2009 a series of board and staff meetings were held during which brainstorming and consensus reaching processes were used to clarify and review the organization's mission, develop a vision statement, and develop core functions.

To help facilitate the professionalization of the organization, the Davies Manor Association invited Dr. Robert Connolly, a professor of anthropology and museum studies at the University of Memphis and, incidentally, the director of the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, to join the board in 2010. Along with providing professional expertise and guidance, Connolly has also encouraged museum studies interns to work at Davies Manor Plantation. These interns, including Gibbs and me, spend 150 hours completing projects that directly move the museum's operations forward. Additionally, the Davies Manor Association has hired me to expand the museum's offerings and to help professionalize its operations.

Davies Manor Plantation has a long road ahead in its struggle to redefine itself as a first class, socially conscious museum. Much work remains to be done, particularly in the arena of equitably incorporating African American history into the larger story told at the site. However, the Davies Manor Association's mission demands that the museum continue this effort. African Americans played an essential role in early Shelby County

farm life and their stories must be included in any true portrayal of this life. In addition to incorporating the lives and struggles of the plantation workers into its regular interpretive programming, if Davies Manor is to succeed, it must also adopt a “much more radical form of honesty,” which will include conveying “its past complicities in history’s inevitable erasures.”⁶⁰ If Davies Manor Plantation adopts such a radically honest approach, it will be uniquely suited to become a center for dialogue about past inequalities and ways to move beyond them.

The C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor have developed into very different institutions in terms of structure, programming, community, and the representation of African Americans. The specific histories of each institution as well as the larger areas in which they are situated largely determine these differences. The demographic and socio-economic composition of each area, the resources available to each museum, and the association or lack of association of each site with a particular family also play important roles. Despite these differences, each museum has the opportunity to equitably represent its community’s past and to help lead each community into the future.

⁶⁰ Eric Gable, “How We Study Museums or Cultural Studies at Monticello,” 125.

Conclusion: The Past and the Future

Historian Harold D. Woodman, in discussing the development of agriculture in the post-bellum South, made an important statement about how historians should approach the region's past. It is worth quoting at length:

In the South the meaning in practice of various land tenure arrangements varied significantly over time and by region, indeed, even from place to place within a single county. It also varied in significant ways by race... Any full understanding of the development of southern agriculture must begin with a recognition of this variation that, in turn, requires the adoption of a long-term view that takes into account and seeks to explain significant changes over the more than six decades between the Civil War and the New Deal.¹

This study has employed such a long-term approach in examining not land tenure per se, but the differential trajectories of development in two ante-bellum plantations from the Civil War through the 1970s and into the present. By focusing on two plantations within a single county, this study highlights factors other than geographical location that account for variation. Many factors have contributed to the divergent paths of development in Southwest Memphis and Brunswick. Location, particularly proximity to or distance from the City of Memphis, clearly proved an influential factor in the fates of the Ensley and Davies Plantations. Demographic composition and change also strongly contributed to the options and outcomes for each location. The visions, voices, and agency of area residents have also played important roles in the development of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick.

In Southwest Memphis, area citizens had little say in the nearby industrial development, which altered the shape of their communities and eventually endangered

¹ Harold D. Woodman, "Class, Race, Politics, and the Modernization of the Postbellum South," 22.

their health. Most of the residents were, as they still are, working-class and black, and during an era of Jim Crow and segregation, officials did not listen to or record their concerns. The Gallina family, the major landowner in Ensley Bottoms during the 1940s and 1950s when the initial phase of this development occurred, gradually sold small parcels of land to various public agencies. Although they resisted the sale of their large plantation to Memphis and Shelby County, the major obstacle remained a matter of price rather than the welfare of area residents.²

In 1980, a *Press-Scimitar* writer claimed that the city of Memphis was able to get away with systematic neglect of the Boxtown area because “the people who live in Boxtown are black and poor and have no clout.”³ While the majority of area residents were and still are black and relatively poor, they have proven that they do have clout. As one *Press-Scimitar* article put it, “Every now and then Memphis is made to remember Boxtown. Boxtown just won’t let Memphis forget.”⁴ Through community organizing, filing a law suit, keeping their neighborhood in the public spotlight, and engaging local politicians, the people of Boxtown demanded and eventually received basic city services. Many socio-economic and social justice problems remain in Boxtown and the larger Southwest Memphis area today, but so does a strong spirit of community and advocacy.

Brunswick, being further removed from the expanding City of Memphis, confronted the problems of development somewhat later and in a different way. During the early twentieth century, the Independent Pole Bearers’ Society and the local black

² “Option to Buy 7627 Acres – Four Major Parcels in Ensley Bottoms,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 1, 1957.

³ “The Boxtown Tragedy,” *Press-Scimitar*, January 23, 1980.

⁴ “Boxtown Calling,” *Press-Scimitar*, January 30, 1979.

churches demanded and gained a certain amount of autonomy for the area's black citizens. However, with agricultural changes and the advent of the Great Migration, the black population in the Brunswick area diminished significantly. Today only the Independent Subdivision built by the Independent Pole Bearers, the historically black Bush Grove Missionary Baptist Church, and thought provoking outbuildings at Davies Manor Plantation testify to the large population of black laborers and also landowners who once tilled the land.

Ellen Davies-Rodgers, heiress of the Davies family, provided the most powerful voice in the debates and decisions regarding the development of the Brunswick area. She, along with other wealthy area landowners, commanded the attention of political leaders and accomplished many of her objectives. Thus, while the residents of Boxtown struggled to attain basic services such as electricity, Brunswick residents were able to control where and how infrastructure would be installed in their community.

The physical forms and organizational structures of the C. H. Nash Museum and Davies Manor Plantation reflect historical developments in Southwest Memphis and Brunswick. The current demographic and socio-economic composition of each community also significantly influences the nature of each museum's offerings. Additionally, the resources and expertise available at each museum vary greatly. These differences are particularly apparent in regard to the way each museum represents African Americans in its interpretive programming. As the two museums continue to evolve, they must ensure that they fairly and equitably represent their sites' pasts. By doing so, they will ensure their own future health and contribute to that of their communities.

The cases of Southwest Memphis and Brunswick demonstrate the ways in which particular context interacts with larger historical trends. They also illustrate the way individual and group actions can influence outcomes. By preserving and commemorating the rich histories of these two once-similar areas, the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and Davies Manor Plantation provide valuable resources that citizens can draw on as they shape the future of their communities.

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