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January 12, 2007

“Remember! Act! Preserve!”

Prepared for Isaac K. Byrd “For My People” Awards Luncheon

Jackson, MS
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Professor McLemore, my colleague of many years:

Six months ago, my wife and I came to live in Jackson. She had never lived in Mississippi. I had not lived here since I was twelve going on thirteen. We had not the slightest imagination that on this day of having the profound honor to be invited. Indeed, I surprised some months ago, when Isaac Byrd called. He spoke in a peremptory tone like an entrepreneur in a hurry said “I want you to speak at this meeting.” I said “yes, Mr. Byrd!” Then Dr. Abston followed up and Dr. Harrison followed in detail. But no one said a word about my being an honoree.

The letter saying I would be an honoree was dated a week ago. This has been a busy week for me, so I did not really read and have the message about being an honoree sink in. I am above my station. Whatever bus Aaron Henry and Winson Hudson and Gilbert Mason may be on, I do belong at the back. And it is the deepest honor that I should be on this platform in the presence of Mr. C. C. Bryan and the other honorees. I would stand in line to speak to them.

In that spirit, I turn to my remarks for the next few minutes. The broad theme that I have

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noticed is “Where Do We Go?: Chaos or Community?” No one wants chaos. We have to search for what will support community. There is a second theme “Servant Leaders: Mississippi’s Civil Rights Leaders.” And within that second theme, there a third specifically about historic and cultural preservation and it is “Remember! Act! Preserve! African American Records, Sites, and Museums.”

“Remember! Act! Preserve!” **Memory has to be cultivated. We are cultivating social memory with a new population.** It does not just grow naturally. Half of the people today probably were about two years old when Gerald Ford became President, and they were not 21 until nineteen years had passed. Unless encouraged somehow, they have no reason to know much of Martin Luther King, who was dead three years before they were born. They have no reason to know much of Lyndon Johnson, the President with whom King had both cooperation and conflict. Bill Clinton is the President they first knew. The world Bill Clinton and the world of George W. Bush is all they really know. This is true of young African Americans, and it is true of young white people.

“Remember! Act! Preserve!” Recently, I heard the statement made that there are probably 500 African American attorneys in Mississippi. This new population does not see anything special about African American attorneys. I do not think they know my mind set, from the time when I was a boy, I knew one Mayor Benjamin A. Green in Mound Bayou. I heard there was one other, but I do not for sure who that was.

“Remember! Act! Preserve!” From time to time I go to Mound Bayou, and I drive past

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Belzoni. I am impressed by the economic facts of the catfish business, but I am always impressed by the memory of Rev. George Lee, pastor and small business man, murdered in the middle of his effort for the effort to show his church people how to register to vote.

The days of brutality are being erased from social memory banks, and that is no more to be accepted than the erasure of the Holocaust is to be accepted.

In the litany “Remember! Act! Preserve!,” one aspect is “Records.” **Sometimes you have to go on a serious detective effort to find records.**

One of our efforts is to find records of Isaiah T. Montgomery and the Mound Bayou community. Montgomery was the one black delegate in the 1890 Constitutional Convention in Mississippi. He made some political compromises there that have left him in doubtful reputation. But for a hundred and fourteen years his convention speech lay in obscurity. I cannot tell you in detail how we had to go into old New York microfilms, how we copied them into a computer, how we got them into book form, how my wife designed the book, and we got it printed. But we got a result.

The search for records and documents also demands a respect for evidence.

The evidence tells us something not found in the books even on African American history. **The books do not really tell us what he told the white people.** I do not know the circumstances, but I offer you two samples. The speech came about when the Convention had been in session nearly a month.

Sample 1 . “Mr. President, I regret to say it, and I hope not to be considered egotistical

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in doing so, that the debate has served to intensify race prejudice, and thereby to intensify the problem that must ever confront our beloved State and rudely disturb her fancied dream of security - - ever stalking before her as a threatening phantom. Like Banquo's ghost it will not down. Such is the color or race line to the people of Mississippi."

A few lines later, in Sample 2, he had discussed the economic history of the state and the cotton business. **"COTTON BECAME KING AND EVERY NATION PAID YOU TRIBUTE.**

. . . HOW MUCH OF LIFE, HOW MUCH OF PRIVATION, SORROW AND TOIL HAS IT COST MY PEOPLE? PERCHANCE EVERY ACRE REPRESENTS A GRAVE AND EVERY FURROW A TEAR. AND WHAT HAVE THEY BY WAY OF RECOMPENSE?"
AND WHAT HAVE THEY BY WAY OF RECOMPENSE!

"Remember! Act! Preserve!" means that sometimes we act to preserve sites or **physical buildings and properties.** Again, let us keep this in the mode of honoring Dr. King. Dr. King had a Biblical tradition that Protestants and Catholics and Jews could recognize. I mention the book of Nehemiah. We have a certain ideas about household workers and field workers, though those are not the exact words we use. The negative ideas we have about one or the other are putrid and should be renounced. Nehemiah was a household servant to the king. I take from *Nehemiah* Chapter 1, verse 11 the words "I was the king's cupbearer."

Nehemiah took advantage of his privilege to remember, to act, and to preserve. He was to rebuild Jerusalem. He asked the king for what amounted to a leave of absence (*Nehemiah* 2:3) and explained why. ". . . send me into Judah, unto the city of my father's sepulchres, that I may rebuild it." (2:5)

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All across Mississippi, and all across the country, are buildings, properties, and sites and institutions that need to be rebuilt. It is true in Mound Bayou, and some people are working on it. The Bank of Mound Bayou has gone through what I call a Phase 1—a beautiful job of saving a building. There must be a Phase 2 to put the build to a new active use. What still stands in need of preservation and renewal is the Montgomery residence and as well the Taborian Hospital. But I have a sense of urgency that tells me it is not happening nearly fast enough. I also know that the grandchildren of T. J. Huddleston are putting an effort into what he developed in the hospital at Yazoo City.

Historic preservation is not merely for ancestral respect, nor merely for pride and renewal. Though I have no more time to speak on it today, historic preservation and renewal is also a form of capital formation and capital growth. Physical reconstruction as a symbol for social reconstruction. We need to rebuild the social network that will extend, under new circumstances, the legacy we inherit from Mr. C. C. Bryant and the rest of the honorees here today. We will not do it perfectly. We will sometimes fail. But we need to do it to the best of our ability. That is how we will remember, act, and preserve.