

THE DAVISES AND THE MONTGOMERYS:
Two Brothers, A Father, and a Son

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by

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1 Thoughts from the Natchez Slave Market to 20th Century Racial
2 Politics

3
4 The theme of this conference, "Never Past: History and
5 Memory in the Old Natchez District," provides sharp guidance to
6 my effort in this paper. I am not a historian. I am an
7 historically minded political scientist. I will not trouble you
8 here with the serious intellectual divisions that political
9 scientists experience as to the nature of their subject matter.
10 I will merely say that one "school" reflected in the work of
11 Charles E. Merriam and Harold Lasswell says that the core subject

12 is power in human groups and its attainment, maintenance,
13 exercise, dissipation, use and loss (Long, 1960). This paper is
14 grounded in an inquiry into power. It is not grounded in
15 documentary study, by the professional standards of historians,
16 though that would be desirable. It is first steps in an
17 exploration.

18 Slavery is, of course, a quintessential system of power.
19 The entanglement of these two families begins with a transaction
20 in the Natchez slave market. Plantations required labor. Labor
21 was not hired in a labor market. It was bought in a slave
22 market. Joseph Davis bought people - slaves - in the market at
23 Natchez. This paper is about an entanglement of two families, the
24 white family Davis and the black family Montgomery, in a world of
25 slavery, and of some of travails as the world of official slavery
26 ended. It would be worthwhile to do a full study of both these
27 families. That is a task beyond my present capacity.

28 We begin at least with two brothers, Joseph Emory Davis and
29 Jefferson Finis Davis. Joseph Davis was the oldest of ten
30 children in a family that migrated from the Carolinas, Georgia,
31 and then Kentucky until it came to its settlement in Wilkinson
32 County. Joseph Davis was born three years before the 1787
33 Constitution was drafted at Philadelphia and died five years

34 after the Appomattox surrender and the collapse of Confederacy
35 had decisively remade that Constitution.

36 Jefferson Finis Davis, the youngest and most famous on a
37 world historical scale, was born in the last year of Thomas
38 Jefferson's presidency, and died when the effort to reinforce
39 African American citizenship in the remade government itself was
40 withering so much as to look as if it also were dead.

41 The father we mention was Benjamin Thornton Montgomery,
42 within our ken because of his servitude to Joseph Davis, is
43 someone whose we do not really know. We think it was about 1819,
44 which for the sake of historical comparison was also the year
45 Congress was retreating from the old Federalist notion that it
46 could preclude slavery from the new territories. Ben Montgomery,
47 to judge from the record we have, was man of extraordinary
48 talent. Possibly he may have exceeded his patently brilliant son,
49 Isaiah, who was born a slave, lived into emancipation, showed
50 hopes of group political achievement in a peaceful relation to
51 whites, and ended life as a sadly disappointed man.)

52 THE THREE ERRORS OF THE NEW YORK TIMES

53 Isaiah T. Montgomery (1847-1924) was one of the rare
54 Mississippians whose funeral was reported in The New York Times.
55 On Sunday, the 18th April, 1924, a story was captioned "Served

56 Jeff Davis, Founded Negro Town." New York Times, Sunday, April

57 The story said that Isaiah T. Montgomery had been "private
58 secretary to the President of the Confederacy," that in that
59 capacity he had followed "Davis through all the troubled days of
60 the war between the States," and that he was one of the last
61 surviving black members of the Mississippi state legislature."

62 Each of those statements is wrong. Though Isaiah Montgomery
63 had sometimes performed work for Jefferson Davis. Jefferson
64 became a senator in the four years before the Civil War began.
65 It would now be possible to know more exactly how much Isaiah
66 worked for Jefferson Davis. Sometimes, it would be useful to
67 check the Jefferson Davis travel records carefully. Perhaps
68 someone has done that already. The travel records would tell
69 when Senator Davis was home and how long he remained. Thus, we
70 would know how much time Isaiah could have worked for him.

71 I have seen Isaiah's autograph. It is in the book of
72 autographs of the 1890 Convention delegates, in the Mississippi
73 Department of Archives and History. A photographic copy of
74 Montgomery's autograph is reproduced in Montgomery (2004). It
75 should be possible, with electronic scanning, to look at the
76 letters and communications that Isaiah prepared to go to other
77 people and thus arrive at a reasonable estimate of how much he

78 did.

79 This lasted from age 10. When Jefferson went to the
80 steamboat, on his way to the Confederate Presidency, it was
81 Isaiah, not quite 14, who took him to the landing.
82 In 1861-63 Isaiah Montgomery was at the Joseph Davis plantation
83 called Hurricane.

84 He was then inducted into the Union Navy when Navy came
85 upriver in 1863. He and spent most of 1864-65 in Cincinnati.
86 So he could not have gone anywhere with the Confederate
87 President.

88 He also was no legislator. He testified himself that "as a
89 result of the election held July 29, 1890, I held my first
90 commission to any elective office, viz., as delegate from Bolivar
91 County to the Constitutional Convention." (ITM in Sillers
92 (comp.) 590). There is, moreover, a register in the Mississippi
93 Department of Archives and History that shows the times and
94 positions for which commissions were issued, and the he
95 legislative offices are not among them. Isaiah Montgomery is
96 what connects us to the 20th century, and 20th century racial
97 politics. (His controversial reputation amongst African American
98 politicians and scholars-to which I explicitly dissent in part-
99 also context us to 21st century racial politics.

100 Joseph Davis and Ben Montgomery

101 Joseph Emory Davis came to the Old Natchez District when it
102 was both the political and financial center of Mississippi and
103 still the outpost of American authority in Mississippi. He came
104 to Natchez, practiced law, evidently made a good deal of money,
105 and entered into the life of Natchez's elite. He was one of the
106 founders of Trinity Episcopal Church. He was friend of the
107 Howell family, whose daughter Varina eventually married his
108 youngest brother, Jefferson.

109 He established a plantation upriver. Natchez-based
110 investment was moving northward, even beyond Vicksburg and across
111 the Yazoo into the Delta. But Joseph Davis does not seem to have
112 gone northward into Mississippi, though he did have investments
113 in Louisiana and Arkansas as well. The river flowed southward,
114 turned westerly, then southerly again, then easterly and once
115 more southerly. This peninsular loop got the name of Davis Bend.

116 In 1867, engineering work was done so that this bending was
117 cut out, and the river flows more or less straight south on
118 eastern side. Joseph Davis wrote a letter to Jefferson in which
119 he explained "By work done by officers of the Freedman Bureau
120 they have succeeded in cutting of the bend and it is now the main
121 channel of the River. . . . (Strode, Private Letters, 266.)

122 Davis Bend became Davis Island.

123 Joseph Davis's plantation (about 4000 acres) was down river
124 from Vicksburg. The plantation there was known as Hurricane.
125 From around 1835, Joseph Davis had let Jefferson clear and
126 cultivate probably about half the Davis land. Jefferson and his
127 wife worked hard, sometimes made some money, and built the house
128 that has become famous. This was on the plantation named
129 "Brierfield." But Jefferson Davis had never owned a foot of
130 Davis Bend land. Title was never vested in anyone except Joseph
131 Davis. Why title was not given in the twenty five years before
132 the secession is unclear. But this would prove a major source of
133 trouble after the Civil War.

134 Enter the Montgomerys: Who Was Accurate?, Hermann or Strode?

135 One of Joseph Davis's slaves was called "Ben." Eventually
136 he would be called Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, what Alfred
137 Kazin called a "triple barreled name" suitable for the Episcopal
138 House of Bishops. Where even the name "Montgomery" comes from is
139 a mystery. We do not know the origins of Benjamin Thornton
140 Montgomery or his family. There is a flat contradiction, which I
141 have never found remarked in literature, between two
142 distinguished writers.

143 Option 1. Was the man himself brought from Virginia and

144 bought in the Natchez slave market by Joseph Davis?

145 The commonly stated view, stated as if there were no doubt,
146 is in the work of Janet Sharp Hermann. Hermann has written
147 brilliantly. Yet the simple account may itself partake of more
148 than one historiographic myth.

149 One historiographic myth is that of that of the African
150 slave who is taught to read and write by the young master. So it
151 is here:

152 Born in Virginia in 1819, the brilliant
153 Montgomery learned to read and write along
154 with his young master. Each afternoon the
155 slave persuaded the white boy to teach him
156 the letters and words learned that morning.

157 (Hermann, 1990, 57.)

158 Hermann further tells us that "For unknown reasons, the
159 partnership [between the young master and the slave Ben] ended
160 abruptly in 1836, when Ben was sold to a trader who marched him
161 overland to the busy slave market in Natchez. . . ."

162 If the Hermann version is correct, were two brothers brought
163 from Virginia? Neither Hermann, nor any other author whose work
164 I have seen, mentions any siblings being brought from Virginia
165 with the boy at first referred to as Ben. But Isaiah, when a

166 Government official in 1903, refers in a letter on Interior
167 Department stationery to "Peter T., brother of my father, and his
168 son, B. S. T. Montgomery (and employee of the 6th Auditor's
169 Office). . ." (Letter from Isaiah T. Montgomery, to Henry Baker,
170 Patent Office, Sept.15, 1903.)

171 Option 2. Was the father of Ben so bought in Virginia and
172 brought to Natchez?

173 Hudson Strode was the biographer of Jefferson Davis and says
174 that Jefferson Davis:

175 was particularly impressed by a responsible
176 and gifted Negro named Benjamin Thornton
177 Montgomery, whose father John had been born a
178 slave in Loudon County, Virginia. . . . As a
179 youth John had been brought to Natchez where
180 Joseph Davis purchased him. (Strode, 112.)

181

182 Herman also tells us that he marched him overland to the
183 busy slave market in Natchez. The story has probably entered the
184 popular culture as true, since a version has appeared on a web
185 site sponsored by New York Life Insurance Co. In that version,
186 if I recall properly, Jefferson Davis bought the young person in
187 Virginia and forced him to walk a thousand miles while Davis rode

188 his horse. I wrote the California State University professor- -
189 a professor not connected with this conference - - whose name
190 appears on this version. I asked for a citation to the source of
191 the information. Hopefully, in due time I shall receive a reply.
192 The question of being marched overland from Virginia to Natchez
193 also may be historiographic myth. Perhaps it could have happened
194 exactly that way, but it would have been better if the writer had
195 been able to offer a reliable proof of how slaves normally were
196 moved in interstate commerce.

197

198 The Function Of Ben Montgomery

199 Whatever is to be said of how Ben Montgomery go into the
200 picture, he was a remarkable character. Within a world of
201 slavery, he had an extraordinary personal freedom. His master -
202 - the Latin word dominus applies here - - was his tutor, as well
203 as his owner. Ben learned to be what is now called a paralegal,
204 copying letters and briefs. He kept a store and did business
205 even with members of his master's family. He learned surveying
206 and planning for levees, and invented a boat propeller for which
207 the patent application was rejected because he was black.

208 (Hermann, op cit.; and, for further detail, Sluby 2004, 32-34.)

209 Davis was delighted with Montgomery's

210 progress and encouraged him to undertake new
211 challenges. As an avid reader himself, the
212 master guided Ben's systematic journey
213 through his library, which was filled with
214 works of political theory and philosophy. As
215 Ben finished each book in his spare time, the
216 two men would discuss it in light of other
217 reading and the current scene. Since Davis
218 himself was self-taught, he considered this
219 the proper way to educate his pupil. Their
220 erudite discussions late in the evening would
221 have shocked many racist planters who
222 denigrated the slaves' intelligence while
223 living in fear that they might revolt.

224 (Hermann, 59)

225 This would be a vital point as to Joseph Davis's conception
226 of what the young man could absorb, and even as to Davis's idea
227 of human nature. Unfortunately, the footnote reference does not
228 seem to show a specific reference to any evidence.

229 Methodologically, it may now be possible to put this to some
230 objective test. If there are enough documents available in Ben
231 Montgomery's handwriting, it should be possible to see what ideas

232 enter into whatever he wrote. If we know what Joseph Davis is
233 said to have taught him, then we can know how to look for
234 evidence of it.

235 As to the working relationship, we may suppose that Benjamin
236 Montgomery ultimately stood in relation to his master more as the
237 Biblical Joseph did to the Pharaoh, as recited in Genesis 41:40.
238 "Thou shalt be over my house, and according to thy word shall all
239 my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than
240 thou." Perhaps it was not to the same degree, but it seems to
241 have far beyond the norm of the master-slave relationship.

242 Yet there was at least one thing Ben Montgomery was, he
243 could not do. He could not exercise the simple paternal decision
244 to control his own son's education. When Isaiah was ten, which
245 would have been 1857 or the year of Dred Scott, Mrs. Davis wanted
246 Isaiah to come and live in the main house. He would be a servant
247 to her husband. She was, in effect, making her husband a present
248 of this boy. Ben objected, on the ground that Isaiah's studies
249 would be neglected. But Joseph being dominus, Mrs. Davis was
250 domina. In the end, Ben no enslaved man with any prudence would
251 force the choice between his own will and that of domina upon the
252 dominus. Isaiah went to live in the main house.

253 Isaiah wrote many years later:

254 I was inducted into the domestic life of that remarkable man,
255 Joseph Emory Davis. He soon established with me relations of the
256 uttermost confidence. I do not remember how it was accomplished
257 but the fact remains. His wish became law, and I was totally
258 free from responsibility to any one else.

259 In fact, it appears that Isaiah was soon trained more as Ben
260 had been trained twenty years before. Isaiah went through, as
261 his father had, the 19th century version of the paralegal
262 internship: filing, getting the newspapers; copying Joseph
263 Davis's correspondence. As noted above, he served not only
264 Joseph but sometimes Jefferson, when Jefferson Davis was at home.

265 The service to Joseph had to have ended in 1862. Isaiah was
266 then 15. Joseph Davis moved off Davis Bend in 1862. He wanted
267 to out of the war-affected area. In the eight remaining yeas of
268 his life, he never re-established residence on the island.

269 THE BENEFIT OF THE DAVIS IDENTIFICATION TO THE MONTGOMERYS

270
271 The Montgomerys had the benefit of Joseph Davis as protector
272 as well as captor. The latter point should be remember for a
273 slave master is someone who, however, benign the method, holds
274 you captive. The protector benefit disappeared with the death of
275 Joseph Davis.

276 The Montgomery descendants, and the town of Mound Bayou of

277 which he as partial creator, got the benefits of legitimation.
278 The urgency of legitimation can be shown. In the books and
279 articles written by most Southern white authors, from the Civil
280 War until the 1950s civil rights eruption, attitudes range mainly
281 from patronizing superiority, contempt, to outright hostility.
282 (Frank A. Montgomery; Otken). Books and papers written for white
283 Mississippi audiences contained few approving references to
284 people of color.

285 That is why the Montgomery descendants appreciated even the
286 few references to Isaiah T. Montgomery as body servant or as
287 amanuensis to Jefferson Davis. (Rowland, .) The Davis connection
288 might induce white audiences to believe that there was even
289 something of value in the existence of such a place as Mound
290 Bayou.

291 In 1937, when Isaiah T. Montgomery was dead and gone, his
292 daughter and son-in-law seem to have emphasized the idea that a
293 separate black town had been encouraged by Jefferson Davis. This
294 was supposed to have been in conversation that Jefferson Davis
295 had with Ben Montgomery before the Civil War. I myself am a bit
296 skeptical. The son-in-law, Eugene P. Booze, apparently had some
297 connections Jefferson Hayes-Davis, the grandson of Jefferson
298 Davis. And I suspect a desire to maintain that friendship, and

299 to use its impact back in Mississippi to get important white
300 people to help protect Mound Bayou.

301 THE MONTGOMERYS AS A DAVIS FAMILY LIFE OF DEFENSE

302 The Montgomerys were, at an earlier time, a part of the
303 Davis family line of defense against what might have been Federal
304 encroachment. In 1862, Joseph Davis left Hurricane. He went to
305 live at Bolton, east of Vicksburg and just a few miles west of
306 Jackson. Ben Montgomery was left in charge of the Hurricane
307 properties. In turn, Ben and his family came to the attention of
308 Admiral D. D. Porter when the Union Navy came upriver. Thornton
309 was taken into the military as was Isaiah, the latter as a cabin
310 boy for the Admiral. Ben Montgomery was advised by the Admiral
311 that he should let Isaiah go with him and that the family should
312 go North, "to escape the hardships of war." In the end, the
313 whole family was at Cincinnati for about two years. It cannot
314 have been a happy time for them. They were poor, at least by
315 their usual standards, cold, and had to undergo hard physical
316 work at somebody else's command. As soon as possible, they
317 returned to the South. The Benjamin T. Montgomery-Joseph E.
318 Davis relationship survived the Union conquest.

319 When the Montgomerys returned from Cincinnati, Joseph Davis
320 sent a message to Jefferson asking for his consent to sell it to

321 the Montgomerys. (Jefferson Davis had been caught and held in
322 military prison, and released in 1867. He was never actually
323 brought to trial in civil courts.) Joseph actually made the deal
324 before he got a final word from Jefferson.

325 Strictly speaking, this was not legally necessary. But the
326 correspondence shows mutual regard. In the interest of peace in
327 the family, it made sense to seek Jefferson's agreement. As
328 noted before, no title had been conveyed to Jefferson in the
329 twenty six years from his clearing the land (1835) to his
330 departure for the Confederate Presidency (1861). Once secession
331 occurred, it would it would have invited trouble to change titles
332 and identify the property with the President of the Confederate
333 States. It might have made it vulnerable to physical attack or
334 to legal attack. After the surrender, it might have been subject
335 to demand for expropriation.

336 Jefferson did so agree, partly on the argument that this
337 might protect against Congressional attempts to punish him by
338 taking some action against the estate. But he did not think it
339 would work. "Unless the Negroes exceed my expectations, they
340 will never complete the payments." (Everett, 90.)

341 Joseph Davis does not show himself precisely naive on the
342 subject. In March 1867, he wrote:

343 My Brother

344 I have closed the contract with Ben. This was delayed by an
345 act of the State Legislature forbidding then purchase or sale of
346 real estate by Negroes. I have before stated the conditions of
347 the contract. Nine years credit with six per cent per annum
348 interest payable the 1st of Jany of each year. The debt bound by
349 Mortgage of the property sold. (Strode, Private Letters, 265-
350 266.)

351 Joseph goes on to inform Jefferson of the opinions of
352 others, and of his stronger hopes.

353 Few expect the contract will be complied
354 with. I trust it will if Ben lives. He is
355 ambitious to be a rich man, and will control
356 the labor. (Strode, Private Letters, 266.)

357 Joseph Davis continues, pointing out other unfavorable but
358 realistic conditions.

359 The prospect of a general overflow the present year will add
360 to the distress of the Country and this is I fear inevitable. A
361 few places may escape. I hope the Bend may escape, upon it
362 depends the payment of the interest for the present year.
363 (Strode, 266.)

364 Due to floods, pests, and business conditions the Montgomerys

365 were never able to keep the payments current. This had been a
366 burden to Joseph, no longer as rich as he once been, though he
367 seemed in letters to Jefferson always to show optimism and to
368 accept the Montgomerys' explanations as valid. Even in his will,
369 Joseph Davis urged the executors to show forbearance to the
370 Montgomerys.

371 THE MONTGOMERYS IN THE FIELD OF CONFLICT IN THE DAVIS FAMILY

372 The estates problem, and the Montgomery presence, was the
373 vehicle for a major dispute within the family in the later 1870s.
374 This came to a peak after Joseph Davis's death, which occurred in
375 1870.

376 Within the following five years a severe dispute developed
377 over the Brierfield plantation. The Montgomerys could not help
378 being in the middle of this dispute. The sale of the estate,
379 which included all the land, to the Montgomerys, was a problem.
380 Joseph Davis's granddaughter claimed the whole property. In due
381 course, Jefferson Davis sued to make his claim to the ownership
382 of Brierfield.

383 The Montgomerys were implicated, as Brierfield was part of
384 what they had bought. Most historical writing on the problem seems, by the way, to take no
385 account of time or business conditions. The time is that, from the Montgomerys' return to
386 Joseph's death was four years. The business conditions factor is that, in that period, there was

387 no demand from other potential users of the Davis Bend property. There seemed to be no other
388 buyer with better capitalization to step up and acquire the properties if the Montgomerys were
389 foreclosed.

390 When Joseph Davis had gone, the Montgomerys were on their
391 own. Jefferson Davis suffered severe financial embarrassment, it
392 is believable that he, his wife, and others in the family became
393 increasingly disenchanted. Indeed, my own interpretation is that
394 Jefferson Davis had come to dislike Benjamin Montgomery. He now
395 seemed to say that Ben Montgomery was greedy and oppressive, and
396 that the whole purpose had been to let him have the plantations
397 in order to provide for the freed Africans. In fact, that does
398 not appear to be what either he or Joseph had said earlier. They
399 had emphasized realistic business and management reasons. But
400 with severe financial pressure weighing on his mind all the time
401 (Strode, 1995), with recurrent health problems, it would have
402 quite normal to have a great resentment against Ben and his
403 progeny.

404 However, the Montgomerys' defaults were less tolerable to
405 Jefferson and to Mrs. Davis, who were often desperately short of
406 money. (Strode, ed. shows this.) This troubling situation

407 continued for another four or five years. By 1875, the
408 Montgomerys had decided to call it quits, at least as to
409 Brierfield. As to finance, Isaiah wrote that their entire
410 capital had been "engulfed." They retired from the cotton
411 business. (ITM, Sillers, comp., 589) The law suit had not yet
412 been decided, but there was no chance that the Montgomerys'
413 interest could prevail. Ben Montgomery, indeed, is said to have
414 testified that Joseph Davis had intended Jefferson to have
415 Brierfield.

416 Meantime, the legal dispute with the grand-daughter
417 continued. In due course, having lost at the trial court level,
418 he won in the court of appeal. He won the Brierfield portion, and
419 the granddaughter the Hurricane portion. The Montgomerys, in any
420 event behind on their payments, were out of the picture.

421 The Montgomerys on Their Own

422
423 In this time, the Montgomerys were comparatively well off.
424 Not only were they better off than most former slaves. They were
425 better off than most white people. William Thornton Montgomery
426 was county treasurer until 1879. (Foner, 1996, Rev. Ed.,)

427 Isaiah was a delegate in the Republican County Convention of
428 1884, in the Congressional District Convention, where he
429 delivered a nominating speech for someone.

430 These were ambitious people, not so well off compared to
431 their aspirations. Their situation was changing, and not for the
432 better. The Montgomerys' Warren County world was turning against
433 them, both in money and in force.

434 Perhaps the worst situation the Montgomerys had to face was
435 the 1874 Warren County crisis, which was the door opener to an
436 1875 crisis. There had some disputes about Warren County
437 control. The black sheriff (a man named Peter Crosby) was in the
438 middle of this. Among other things, Crosby called out his own
439 posse comitatus. But this was, in effect, a black militia, and
440 the white militias were vastly better organized and armed.
441 The Montgomerys knew, and had been politically associated with
442 Sheriff Crosby, at least to the extent that he had come to
443 campaign at Hurricane. But they do not seem to have been in the
444 fray.

445 In the confrontation, there was a vast amount of killing.
446 Edward C. Mayes, chancellor of the University of Mississippi, and

447 son-in-law of Lucius Q. C. Lamar wrote one account of the Warren
448 City situation. If I accept the numbers in Mayes's book, I get
449 15 killings of black persons by the white militia. If the county
450 population was 20,000 then that is a killing rate of one in every
451 1333 persons. If I apply that killing rate (1:1333) to an
452 assumed 7, 000, 000 people in New York City on September 11,
453 2001, I get a total slaughter of 5251 human beings. That exceeds
454 the awful total actually did take place.

455 This is merely a method of computation to show the severity
456 of political massacre against blacks in Warren County in 1874-75.
457 The historian William C. Harris used two numbers of the killed.
458 (Harris, 19 .) The low number (based on reports that he said
459 planters out) was 25 persons or one in 800, which would yield a
460 9/11 number of 8750. Vernon L. Wharton used the number of 35,
461 which yields a killing rate of 1:571 for a estimated 9/11 number
462 of 12, 559. (Wharton, .) Harris seems to regard the number of
463 300 are more accurate which would yield a killing rate of one in
464 66, for a total killing of 105, 105.

465 If the numbers are varied, for example by assuming a larger
466 population base, the deaths per thousand of population will come

467 down, but they will by any reasonable test equally and usually
468 exceed the 9/11 rates. In short, the massacre a means of
469 political action was being more widely accepted and practiced.

470 For the Montgomerys, this meant that the atmosphere in which
471 they worked was increasingly unfavorable. They began to look
472 elsewhere. (Harris, .) In the tenth year after the father's
473 death, the Montgomerys left Warren County. The question was
474 whether to leave Mississippi. William Thornton went to North
475 Dakota. Isaiah, cousin Benjamin T. Green, and others from Davis
476 Bend moved to settle the new colony in the virginal forests of
477 the Delta. That colony still exists as Mound Bayou. The
478 settlement is in Bolivar County.

479 There is one other historiographic myth. It is the doctrine
480 that Jefferson Davis somehow helped "his" former slaves to find a
481 place for themselves and that Mound Bayou is its result. George
482 Will made this part of a column written to endorser Mel Reynolds,
483 who claimed Mound Bayou birth.

484 One of my political science colleagues should be mentioned.
485 He is a white person who cannot be challenged on grounds of
486 racial prejudice. He is multi-lingual scholar, whose research

487 and publication record is formidable. He is also Southern. When
488 he said, some years ago, with some assurance that he had thought
489 Davis had something to do with the conditions for settling Mound
490 Bayou I was astonished.

491 Within the past three months, I encountered the same view on
492 the part of a sophisticated woman who has had a great deal to do
493 with cultural affairs and higher education.

494 The existing evidence is that Jefferson Davis had nothing to
495 do with the Delta movement at all. At the time he was in
496 desperate financial straits, in poor health, and anxious to
497 finish his own book.

498 The evidence of his correspondence is that he felt his own
499 history prevented his finding the quality of job that he could
500 fulfill and earn satisfactory remuneration. That being so, his
501 ability to do anything to facilitate a deal with the railroad
502 company (Collis P. Huntington's Louisville, New Orleans & Texas)
503 which sold the land to the Montgomerys was also minimal.
504 Moreover, as I shall point in the next section, the best
505 hypothesis to guide new thinking is that the Montgomerys became
506 an object of hostility to the Davis family.

507 THE MONTGOMERYS AS DAVIS OBJECT OF HOSTILITY?

508 The Montgomerys may well be regarded as not out of the
509 picture as far as the family was concerned. There were at least
510 a few fragments of correspondence with Varina Howell Davis,
511 Jefferson's widow, after his death and as late as 1895.

512 The best hypothesis, one suspects, is that there was a
513 residue of family hostility toward the Montgomerys, especially
514 after 1875. Thus, one can again see something of the progression
515 of these two families, from the Natchez slave market into 20th
516 century racial politics. The Mississippi Constitutional
517 Convention of 1890 is the fabric in which this thread is woven.

518 This shows up, one believes, in regard to Isaiah, when he
519 had been elected delegate to the Mississippi Constitutional
520 Convention of 1890.

521 When the 1890 Convention was called, the African Americans
522 had been on a downward officeholding pattern since 1875. The
523 1875 coup left sixteen blacks in the House of Representatives.
524 The number dropped to 6 in the House of Representatives and 1 in
525 the Senate in 1878. There was never more than one in the Senate
526 or ten in the House until 1890. (Wharton, 207.) The Republicans

527 did not again offer a complete state ticket until 1889.
528 There was no county except Bolivar where a black candidate
529 actually ran for a delegate slot. Bolivar was heavily black,
530 heavily Republican, and the Republican leaders were black.
531 Whatever Union Army officers or carpetbaggers had been in Bolivar
532 County were gone. Sometimes there would be fusion deals in which
533 black and white slots would allocated.

534 This did not take place in 1890. All we have on the present
535 record is Isaiah T. Montgomery's version. "The Democratic party
536 having ignored that arrangement (fusion) in the selection of
537 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, I was earnestly
538 pressed by the Republican County Committee to become a candidate
539 in company with Hon. George P. Melchoir." (ITM's spelling.)

540 When Isaiah showed up at the Constitutional Convention, he
541 and his colleague met a challenge. "On motion of Mr. Farish, the
542 President appointed a committee of five to consider the contested
543 election case from Bolivar County."

544 The special committee to investigate was appointed on the
545 Third Day (August 14). The committee reported, on the Seventh
546 Day (August 19). The Convention disposed of it on the Eighth Day

547 (August 20). The Majority Report found that incorrect procedures
548 were followed in Bolivar County. The majority report was moved
549 by Farish. There was a substitute motion "That Geo. P. Melchior
550 and Isaiah T. Montgomery are legally entitled to and that they
551 retain their seats in the Convention as delegates from the county
552 of Bolivar." This motion was adopted: ayes 79; nos 27; absent
553 and not voting 28. (Journal of the Proceedings of the
554 Constitutional Convention, 76.)

555 The challenge itself is fascinating. No other delegate
556 seats were challenged. I can imagine three possible
557 explanations.

558 Possible Explanation 1. The challenge was racial. Was it
559 aimed at Montgomery because he was black? This might have been.
560 Issaqueena, the county Farish represented, had once had more
561 black officers than any other. (Morrison.) White people
562 resisted strongly.

563 Possible Explanation 2. The challenge was aimed less at
564 Montgomery and more at his colleague George Melchior because he
565 would not be consistently "white" in his political alignments?
566 It would have been easy for his Bolivar County enemies to let

567 their Issaqueena County friends know.

568 Possible Explanation 3. The challenge was personal, and was
569 aimed at Montgomery. Was there some grudge from within the
570 Davis family? I think the better answer is "Yes." Delegate
571 Farish of Issaqueena County was William S. Farish, a 47 year old
572 lawyer from Mayersville. Mr. Farish was a member of that family.
573 (Everett, Appendix, "The Genealogy of the Davis Family," 127)

574 It would have been wholly believable for a relative to take
575 it out on Isaiah in a political situation if the opportunity
576 presented itself. Indeed, it might have been impossible for him
577 to have done otherwise.

578 THE REPUTATION OF ISAIAH T. MONTGOMERY

579 The Mississippi Constitutional Convention represents a
580 Montgomery failure, both in the results in the world of practice
581 and in the impact on his own reputation.

582 The idea has been circulated that he was elected to the
583 Convention because of a deal with the leader of the forces
584 advocating the elimination of the franchise for blacks.

585 The Mississippi Constitutional Convention represents a
586 Montgomery failure, both in the results in the world of practice

587 and in the impact on his own reputation. Here is where he faced
588 his greatest challenge and met, in the end, his most severe
589 defeat.

590 Montgomery was there by himself, with no one else with whom
591 to caucus, *unless it might be a white man*, and no one to second a
592 motion, *unless it might be a white man*.

593 Montgomery's experience, including his isolation as the
594 black delegate, should be seen in this light. Saunders Redding
595 told his readers that Montgomery "was seated at the convention
596 without protest." For this, he had John R. Lynch as a source to
597 thank for it (Redding, 104.) But the available evidence shows
598 that Lynch is wrong on this. (The fact of the challenge and the
599 way it was handled procedurally is all knowable from the official
600 journal of the Convention. It is possible that Congressman
601 Lynch, when writing about the experience many years later, was
602 operating from memory without close consultation of the official
603 record. Certainly, very few students of government have studied
604 the 1890 Constitutional Convention at all, and the official
605 documents have mostly been in the Mississippi Department of
606 Archives and History. In the era of segregation, hardly any

607 African American scholars could have had both the temerity and
608 the technique to use those sources.)

609 However, there was contest at the ballot box. There was a
610 credentials challenge. No one has yet said that the floor fight
611 was phony. Nor has anyone said that it was unexpected but got
612 out of hand, and that Senator George and had to work behind the
613 scenes to get the final vote that seated Montgomery and Melchior.

614 John R. Lynch also says that Montgomery's vote made the
615 difference between "the George faction" and "the Chrisman
616 faction," as to the Presidency. Wharton, a later historian whose
617 writing has been very influential, adopts this view also.

618 This must be wrong. There was a Judge Joseph B. Chrisman,
619 identified with railroad interests and putting property and
620 educational requirements on the suffrage. But Judge Chrisman
621 apparently did not have enough support to be put into nomination
622 as a leading contender. The fight for control was between the
623 financially-conservative planter elite (whose candidate was Judge
624 S. S. Calhoun of Hinds County [Jackson]) and the dirt farmer,
625 populist , group whose candidate was Chancery Clark Robert C.
626 Patty (Noxubee (Journal, 8.]) who the leader of the Farmers'

627 Alliance, the dirt farmers' organization. The Farmers Alliance
628 was then playing an important role in Mississippi politics. Its
629 leaders also played a large role in calling the Convention.
630 Calhoon received only 64 votes, Patty 61, and Wilson P. Harris 1.

631 Moreover, if there actually was a "Chrisman faction," its
632 members were not more favorable to an African American interest.
633 Chrisman's former law partner, Robert H. Thompson, said (years
634 later one has to admit): "The carpetbaggers had just been
635 thoroughly routed and most of them abandoned the state; the
636 scalawags relegated to obscurity and the Negro voters, then
637 largely outnumbering the whites, defeated and disorganized."

638 Vernon L. Wharton's later critique is a straightforward
639 repetition of Lynch. George Sewell and Margaret L. Dwight also
640 basically repeat Lynch. "Montgomery's vote helped George and the
641 Democrats elect the temporary chairman, thus gaining control of
642 the convention for the Democrats." (Sewell and Dwight, 1984,
643 162, Rev. and Enl. Ed). *The reader might think that there was*
644 *some choice other than Democratic control of the Convention.*

645 No realistic student of politics could say, *a priori*, that X
646 (e.g. Montgomery) could not have made some deal with Y (e. g.

647 Senator George.)

648 But such a proposition requires some specific evidence
649 (which Lynch does not provide). On the same point, Stephen
650 Cresswell, who has published most intensively on Mississippi
651 political history, says has seen no sign of any documentation in
652 support of any private deal between Montgomery and George.

653 The formal record does not show that Montgomery had a large
654 or visible role in the Convention. He was a member of the
655 Franchise Committee. His most important public contribution was
656 a speech reviewing the state situation and proposing an approach.
657 His work inside the committee has not been reported. The reason
658 mainly is that the committee worked in secret.

659 The Montgomery concept, in some respects similar to what is
660 now called "consociational democracy," recognized that the white
661 people of the state demanded they must rule. Montgomery did not,
662 contrary to anything said by critics, say this was correct or
663 that African Americans were incapable. He took it as a fact of
664 life that it was irresistible and that some action had to be
665 taken to restore confidence.

666 He further took it that, over the passage of time, with

667 increase of education and property holding, the African American
668 franchise would again increase.

669 This acceptance he described as a peace offering and asked of
670 whites "what answer?"

671 The Montgomery concept did not work.

672 In 1890, Montgomery had made the crucial assumption that
673 nobody who counted, outside of Mississippi, would exert
674 sufficient pressure to keep the Mississippi system honest. This
675 assumption had been fully affirmed in practice. What was also
676 true was that there were no curative or regenerative factors at
677 work within Mississippi politics. No major leader, nor any
678 significant interest, inside the Mississippi leadership class,
679 saw any incentive to allow any room for adjustment. For almost
680 all the state, almost all the time, the black person did not dare
681 go near a polling place. Those who dared courted reprisals.
682 By the 1920s and 1930s, political engagement was as nearly zero
683 as it ever got.

684 AFTERTHOUGHTS ON I. T. MONTGOMERY

685 Montgomery grew weary and disappointed, though he carefully
686 kept this weariness and disappointment out of the view of the

687 white leadership. Finally, in the last few months of his life he
688 let some of this out, though even then very carefully. The
689 Committee of One Hundred was a group of Montgomery-style African
690 Americans from around the state. He did say something suggestive
691 to the Committee, the proceedings of which were published in the
692 newspaper.

693 "The martyred Lincoln, early in his career, gave utterance
694 to this immortal aphorism: 'This country cannot continue to exist
695 one-half free and one-half slave.'" The following sentence is
696 simple and obvious. "This saying is as true today as it was the day it was uttered. (ITM, 1923,
697 np.). This is to say to the white people, whom he would not more rudely challenge, that the
698 situation cannot go on forever.

699 No one can say what he meant. No one can say how he thought
700 it might be altered. The objective evidence is that the world
701 had begun to change, just enough to allow minimal disturbance.
702 It took another twenty years, however, for the beginnings to make
703 themselves politically apparent in the Deep South. In 1944, when
704 Isaiah T Montgomery had been dead for twenty years, a Texas law
705 suit, decided by the Supreme Court. The case is called Smith v.
706 Allwright. (321 U. S. 649.) What happened was that someone

707 tried to vote in the Democratic primary in 1940 in Texas. The
708 Democratic party officers had said "no," claiming the party was a
709 private association that the state did not control. Four years
710 later, the Supreme Court had said that the party could close its
711 primary that way.

712 It was another 21 years until the Voting Rights Act. The
713 present status of the Voting Rights raises a profoundly different
714 set of questions.

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730 make themselves politically apparent in the Deep South. In 1944
731 the U. S. Supreme Court decided in a Texas law case (Smith v.
732 Allwright. [321 U. S. 649]) that the Democratic party could not
733 call itself a private association and shut its primaries to black
734 voters. It was another 21 years until the Voting Rights Act. The
735 present status of the Voting Rights raises a profoundly different
736 set of questions.

737 CONCLUSION

738 There are many things where human beings need challenges to
739 folklore and to historiographic myths. Folklore is useful, but
740 it can grow as thick as weeds, with deep roots, and strong
741 resistance to change. Part of social memory is that claims to be
742 history should also be verified by the best means that we can
743 know. Hence, I offer this paper as a set of hypotheses, guiding

744 ideas, or disciplined speculations about where detailed research
745 will test (and affirm or overthrow) those hypotheses, guiding
746 ideas, or disciplined speculations.

747 In part, my task about has been to lay out the little we
748 presently know about these two families, and their interaction as
749 signs of the way the white-black relationship exists in
750 Mississippi.

751 Joseph Davis was, one may suppose, an example of the
752 Natchez-type investor, moving upriver, and playing a certain role
753 in the state. As an individual, he may have been highly unusual.
754 That is, so far as the little evidence shows, he had some
755 capacity to act as if his preferred African American dependent -
756 - though the term "African American" is anomalous when read back
757 in the 19th century - - could exercise judgment and discretion.
758 If one cannot accord the "other" - - whatever that other may be -
759 - room for judgment and discretion, then one can never establish
760 terms of reciprocity on the same ground. If Joseph Davis was

761 equivocal, Jefferson Davis was unequivocal. The persons of
762 African origin were of "an inferior race," and would always be
763 destined to fail. If we had time in the foregoing paper, we
764 could move to an examination of success and failure in the
765 economics of Davis Bend. Jefferson Davis had the seller's
766 impatience with buyers who did not pay. But we would also
767 examine the question of the economics of cotton, and the
768 environmental conditions of cotton in a high water area. What is
769 noteworthy is that neither Jefferson Davis nor anyone else made
770 any significant money very long after the Davis lawsuit recapture
771 of Brierfield.

772 If we had further time for study, we would also learn more
773 of Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, the father who generated in his
774 sons the ambition of making money, but who evinced (according to
775 Isaiah) little interest in "the suffrage question." One wonders,
776 if Hermann is correct about Davis teaching Montgomery political
777 theory and philosophy, what they can have discussed and how.

778 Isaiah, the son, was born under the shadow of the slave
779 market and had to learn to live in the more competitive world of
780 overt politics. But he had to learn the lessons of alliance,
781 submission, and collusion in a setting where the adversaries had
782 greater money and, always, the threat of force. What Isaiah
783 could learn, as a part of the projection of the Natchez District
784 mode, was to link himself to outside capital, as he did with the
785 railroad. What he could never learn was a means of defense
786 against the more insistent demographic movement that made the
787 politics of poor white demands so destructive to the
788 constitutional framework that he might have fancied would emerge.
789 One signal only: if Montgomery's numerical estimates had been
790 correct, and if the 1890 Constitution had been administered
791 fairly, the African American share of the voting population in
792 the early 1900s would have exceed the share that it is 100 years
793 later. But history has many "ifs."

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