

Mound Bayou

A Short History of The Jewel of the Delta

By Sizwe Dumisani

To understand the history of Mound Bayou, we need to begin with the Montgomerys of Davis Bend. The Montgomery family resided on land bordered by a bend in the Mississippi river. The Montgomery patriarch was self-taught surveyor, mechanic, machinist, and inventor Benjamin Montgomery—born in Loudon County, Virginia in 1819. Montgomery, his wife and their children were all literate. Benjamin Montgomery believed in Black self-reliance and had a life-long dream of forming an independent, self-reliant Black community.

Benjamin Montgomery and his family were enslaved on a plantation on Davis Bend by Joseph Davis, brother of Jefferson Davis (Brown Hamilton 19). Jefferson Davis would become president of the Confederacy, and Ben Montgomery eventually ended up owning and successfully running the plantation on which he and his family were formerly enslaved (Brown



**Figure 1 Isaiah Montgomery,
founder of Mound Bayou
ca. 1887**

Hamilton 19, 20, 23, 34). One of Mr. Montgomery's two sons, Isaiah (Figure 1), inherited from their father a contagion of self-reliance and community building aspirations. Like his father, Isaiah Montgomery envisioned Black folks working together and building together to establish a self-sufficient, self-reliant all-Black town, controlled by Black folk—the free and the formerly enslaved, as he and his entire family were¹.

Montgomery recruited his cousin Benjamin Green (Figure 2) and six others to implement his town-building vision. They built such a town, and called it Mound Bayou—an homage to the



**Figure 2 Benjamin T. Green
Co-founder, Mound Bayou**

indigenous people who erected ceremonial mounds throughout the Mississippi bayou.

Mound Bayou was Black-planned, Black founded, Black developed and Black-led. Isaiah Montgomery and the initial seven brave pioneers began implementing the vision in the swampy Mississippi Delta in the hot, sticky summer—just 21 years after freedom. Their task was to make the land livable and farmable by clearing the land of trees and brush and preparing the land so that

houses could be built and farms established. This land was being cleared for the first brave souls who were planning to start their new lives the following February (Crockett 10). In doing the work to prepare the land for farming and building their homes, these new pioneering homesteaders encountered bears and other wild animals in the bayou that eventually became their home (Brown Hamilton 29). Their leader and founder, Isaiah Montgomery, was dedicated to building Mound Bayou, making decisions to ensure its survival and serving its residents—even if these decisions resulted in political compromises in his interactions with racists.²

Montgomery often reminded the new pioneers that they and their ancestors worked without pay for their enslavers, building a future for their enslavers and their enslavers' progeny. He would admonish them by reminding them that they should work even harder to build their own future and lay a foundation for their own children, grandchildren and future generations. Montgomery knew his people—the formerly enslaved. Being enslaved himself, although the Montgomerys were allowed more privileges than the average enslaved person, he knew what they had endured and knew what the race was capable of. He was able to motivate newcomers by reminding them of their shared history, the shared experiences of the race in building a future for their oppressors.

Isaiah Montgomery: “I told them much of it was wild land, but that they might as well buy land and own it, and do for themselves what they had been doing for other folks for 250 years” (qtd in Gauthier 82; Hamilton 28).

These Mound Bayou pioneers worked together to build a self-reliant town and established several businesses and institutions: cotton seed oil manufacturing; a cotton production business, the Bank of Mound Bayou, led by Charles Banks (Figure 3), associated with the “Tuskegee Machine” because of his close ties to Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute (Brown Hamilton 38). Mound Bayou also had grocery stores, shoe shops,

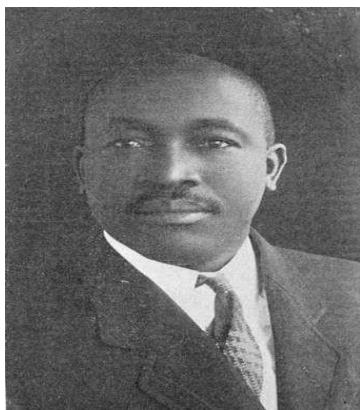


Figure 3 Charles Banks, founder of the Bank of Mound Bayou. Photo credit: Schomber Center

seamstresses and tailors, a photographer, a bakery, a hotel, a bottling company, churches, schools, a hospital (Taborian Hospital); newspapers (ads placed in The Demonstrator newspaper were a key source of recruiting new residents)—all Black-led and operated (Brown Hamilton 39, 55). Mound Bayou also eventually had a “telephone exchange, waterworks, and an electric power station.”³

Isaiah Montgomery was a leader in every sense of the word, who was very particular about the kind of homesteading pioneers he envisioned as residents of the town of Mound Bayou. He sought out Black men and women of good character who believed in themselves, had a faith in God and were willing to work with their hands and endure personal sacrifice to build a town where they could collectively live in peace and prosper. The words of Simon Gaiter, an early resident of Mound Bayou, reflects this drive of self-reliance:

There is no use in saying that a thing cannot be done until it has been tried to exhaustion and it was with a determination to exhaust every resource of energy and endurance that we came to build Mound Bayou (Gauthier 87).

In addition to recruiting residents who were willing to sacrifice and endure physical hardship, under Isaiah Montgomery's leadership Mound Bayou was committed to creating "a proper moral environment" (Gauthier 91). For example, when it was discovered that forty unmarried couples were living together in Mound Bayou, the couples were given an ultimatum: either get married, or get out of town (Gauthier 91).

When Black dollars were stretched too thin, Mound Bayou leaders negotiated with philanthropic White institutions such as the Rosenwald Fund and the Carnegie Foundation to help finance some of Mound Bayou's institutions. For example, African American architect William Sidney Pittman, a Tuskegee graduate and son in law of Booker T. Washington, designed the Carnegie-funded library in Mound Bayou. Pittman and Thomas W. Cook (a Black self-taught engineer) built the library. In addition, the Rosenwald Fund helped fund some of the Mound Bayou schools (Gauthier 113, 114). Some of these collaborations were successful, while others were not (Brown Hamilton 42, 44).

Mound Bayou was also home to civil rights activist and surgeon, Dr. T.R.M Howard (Brown Hamilton 66, 75). During the civil rights movement, and especially during the trial of Emmett Till's murderers, Dr. Howard (Figure 4) took the initiative to ensure that Black reporters were able to travel safely to and from the trial: Dr. Howard provided shelter in his residence and coordinated support for Black reporters and other trial attendees (76).



Figure 4. Dr. T.R.M Howard, chief surgeon, Taborian Hospital, escorting Mamie Till (Emmit Till's mother)

Mound Bayou was referred to as the Jewel of the Delta and its residents were proud of what the race had accomplished there (Brown Hamilton 24, 105). While Mound Bayou was never attacked⁴, many of Mound Bayou's residents had experienced violence and threats in the cities and towns that they migrated from—violence and threats, often rooted in jealousy (Brown Hamilton 29, 105).

My research has also made me aware of some surprising Mound Bayou connections, illustrated in Figure 5 below:

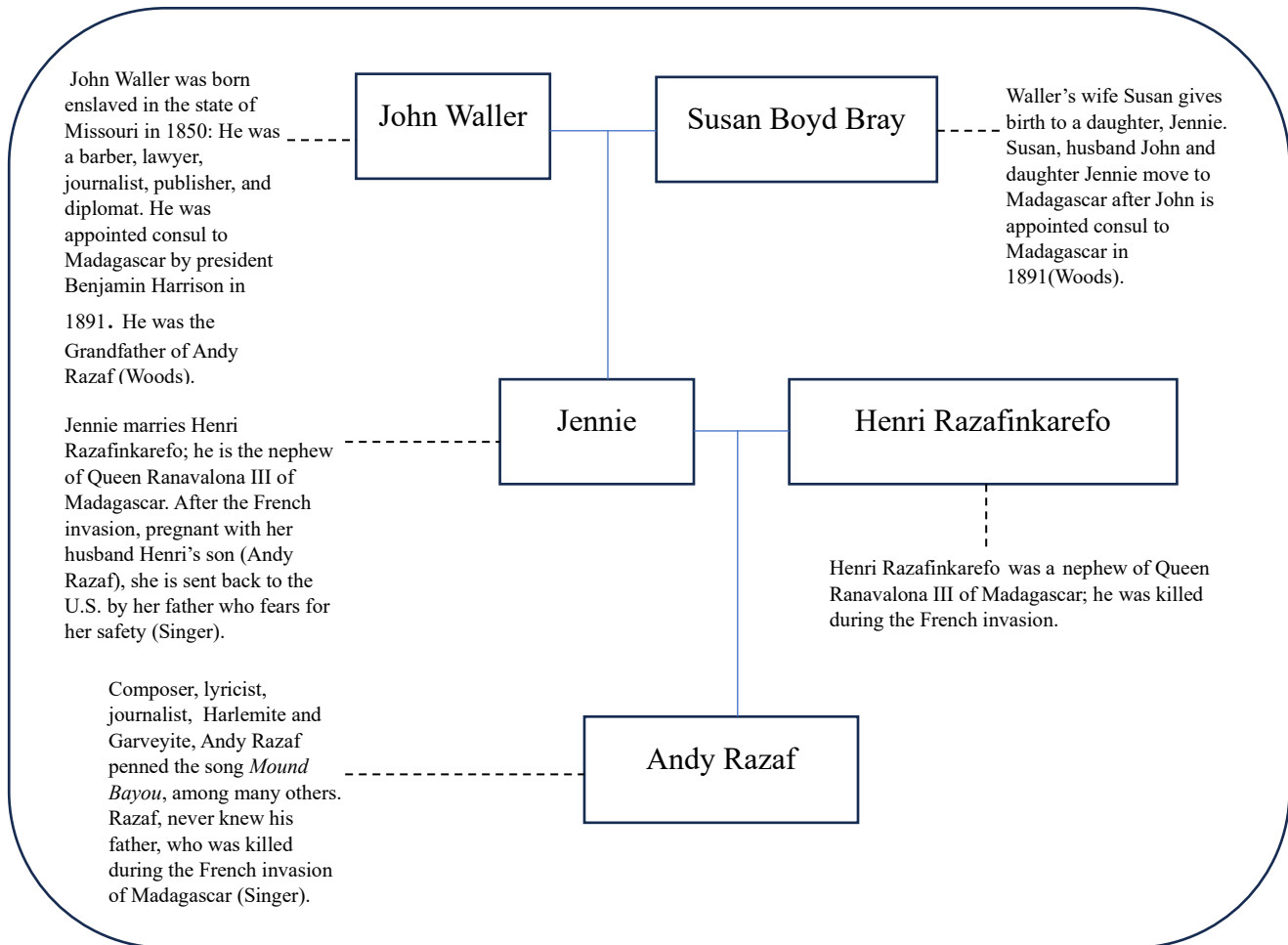


Figure 5. Partial ancestral tree of Andy Razaf. Razaf wrote the lyrics to the song *Mound Bayou*. Sources: Singer, Woods.

As noted in figure 5, John Waller—the grandfather of the songwriter Andy Razaf (who wrote the lyrics to the song *Mound Bayou*)—wore many hats. He was also an aspiring founder of all-Black ‘safe havens’; after he was appointed consul to Madagascar by president Harrison, Waller was given 150,000 acres of land by the queen of Madagascar (Woods 285), and he attempted to recruit African Americans to immigrate to Madagascar to establish homesteads on that land—which he named Wallerland.⁵ He also attempted to establish a Black safe haven in Cuba (Woods 412). As a journalist, Waller might have visited Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Some have speculated that Razaf heard about the accomplishments of the men and women of Mound Bayou from his grandfather; he lived with his grandfather, and extended family, the first 10 years of his life. His relationship with his grandfather when he was young might have inspired him later to pay homage to the Mound Bayou pioneers, by penning the song *Mound Bayou*.⁶

It's possible that Mound Bayou's gradual decline could be attributed to several factors: its over-dependence on their former enslavers' staple crop—a crop whose nurturing, production and managing the farmers of Mound Bayou had mastered: cotton. Other factors contributing to the decline of Mound Bayou include strife among Mound Bayou town leaders. Like many communities and towns, Mound Bayou also had its internal conflicts. Some of these conflicts exposed some deep-seated psychological issues among some of Mound Bayou's citizens and even seeped into a small segment of its leadership cadre. For example, an unsuccessful attempt, allegedly by Eugene Booze—one of Mound Bayou's ‘leaders’, and son in law of Isaiah Montgomery—to create a ‘blue vein’ society was one notoriously infamous internal aberration (Brown Hamilton 37). Additional factors that could have caused the decline include: a claim by Dr. Brown Hamilton that the second generation of Mound Bayou leaders lacked the skills that their founders possessed. You can also look at the town's decline as stemming from the founders' insufficient training of the next generation; they didn't pass on the knowledge to their progeny of how to properly manage the town to ensure its growth and prosperity. Another factor was the general economic decline of the Mississippi Delta, and young talent leaving Mound Bayou

(Brown Hamilton 106). Some have suggested that desegregation was at the root of Mound Bayou's decline.⁷ If desegregation was a factor, this might imply that Mound Bayou's decline could have been caused by a lack of a particular desire—the desire to be self-reliant.

Some current residents of Mound Bayou envision Mound Bayou becoming a retirement community⁸. Others envision a revitalized Mound Bayou, and are open to investors contributing to a revitalization of Mound Bayou (Carr 39:43 – 40:18). Mound Bayou currently has a population of about 1,500 and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Notes

¹ Although the Montgomerys were enslaved by Joseph Davis, they were permitted more privileges than most enslaved Africans were afforded; their enslaver experimented with some of the “utopian ideas” of the British “social reformer” Robert Owen; Davis’ implementation of these utopian ideas included, among other privileges, allowing the Africans that he enslaved to educate themselves, to have an internal court (controlled by the enslaved) to address plantation infractions (Brown Hamilton 19, 20).

² Isaiah Montgomery was a delegate to the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890, and sided with racists to restrict the voting rights of Black people (Brown Hamilton 30). Some scholars claim that Montgomery was responsible for the effort to disfranchise Blacks. Others believe that there was nothing that Montgomery could have said or done to prevent the disfranchisement of Blacks. Mr. Montgomery’s “...primary concern was the future of Mound Bayou—its safety and autonomy” (Brown Hamilton 30, 36).

³ Juliet E.K. Walker. *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race and Entrepreneurship*. (Twayne Publishers. 1998), 174

⁴ Mound Bayou residents believed that racists did not attack their town, because racists knew Mound Bayou residents believed in using lethal force if necessary; they would use their guns to defend themselves (Brown Hamilton 105).

⁵ Waller was accused (by the French colonizers) of assisting the Malagasy people in resisting the French colonizers. The French sentenced him to 20 years in prison, at hard labor, put him in the hold of a ship and shipped him off to France to serve out his sentence; he was

released, with US government assistance and pressure from the African American press, less than a year after his imprisonment (Woods 301, 302, 304, 370).

⁶ Press the control key while clicking on the following link to hear a rendition of the song *Mound Bayou* by Maxine Sullivan: [Youtu.be/qMGHRyzz2Iw](https://youtu.be/qMGHRyzz2Iw)

⁷ Listen to the audio at the link below, (2:55 – 3:02), to hear the opinion of Rolando Herts, director of the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University, with respect to what caused the decline of Mound Bayou; on the Web page, at the top right, click on the arrow. See Block, Melissa and Nadworny, Elissa. “Here’s What’s Become of a Historic All-Black Town in the Mississippi Delta” npr.org/2017/03/08/515814287/heres-whats-become-of-a-historic-all-black-town-in-the-mississippi-delta

⁸ Read or listen to former Mound Bayou mayor Eula Peterson’s comment in the Block, Nadworny article and podcast here: npr.org/2017/03/08/515814287/heres-whats-become-of-a-historic-all-black-town-in-the-mississippi-delta

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