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# Negotiating the Delta: Dr. T.R.M. Howard in Mound Bayou, Mississippi

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Negotiating the Delta:

Dr. T.R.M. Howard in Mound Bayou, Mississippi

by

William J. Southerland

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
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## DEDICATION

For my wife, Stephanie, and my sons Jackson and Andrew.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the racially segregationist practices and the integrationist, inclusionist formation of African American leader Dr. T.R.M. Howard during his tenure as a surgeon and entrepreneur in the all-black Mississippi Delta community of Mound Bayou, 1942-1956. The paper analytically investigates the careful racial negotiations that were required of Howard as he advanced a separatist but egalitarian economic and social plan for Delta blacks. This separatist plan, it is argued, is grounded in the racial pragmatism of the Seventh-day Adventist church which provided a bibliocentric, Tuskegee-inspired education to Howard from youth through medical school and beyond. Howard's adherence to Adventist racial codes provided him with unique tools to establish financial strength and social cachet whereby he could in time shift to a more inclusionist, desegregationist focus. Howard's separatist racial pragmatism is demonstrated in his creation of an economic power base in the 1940s. The 1950s shift to an inclusive position appears principally in three developments in Howard's Mound Bayou career: the founding of the Regional Council for Negro Leadership, his activism after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and his involvement in the trial of Emmett Till's killers. Evidence is given from a number of primary sources, including both regional and national newspapers and the collected papers of Mississippi House Speaker Walter Sillers. The thesis argues that Howard's pragmatism was both informed by Adventist racial pragmatism and provided the base whereby he could challenge Jim Crow directly; the pattern is accepting and enhancing racial segregation for the purpose of developing the means to work toward a racially

inclusive, integrationist ideal. This pattern appears in Adventist evangelist practice, and it appears, with striking resemblance, in Howard's work in Mound Bayou.

CHAPTER ONE:  
INTRODUCTION

*Work as much as possible.* (T.R.M. Howard's personal motto)

*It is my personal conviction that this nation will emerge from this depression with each racial group looking after its individual interests more than ever before in the history of civilized man. The Englishman will work for the welfare of the Englishman; the white American will work for the white American, the Japanese for the Japanese; and the Negro will have to do that which he has never done — depend upon the integrity of his own soul and work for the welfare of the Negro.* (T.R.M. Howard)<sup>1</sup>

The year was 1942, in the small, all-African American Mississippi Delta community of Mound Bayou; 10,000 gathered from across the region to witness something of a miracle, the opening of a \$100,000, 42-bed hospital meant to serve the black community of the Delta.

Through combined efforts, they had raised enough money to build a hospital in one of the poorest counties in the nation. For the first time, men and women could visit a doctor by walking through the front door rather than the side entrance for the “colored section”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, T.R.M. “The Negro In the Light of History”. *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*. August 4, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> Beito, David T. *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 181.

Those in attendance that day, gathered around the handsome building of the Taborian Hospital with its art-deco details, also witnessed the emergence of a leader: Dr. Theodore Roosevelt Mason (T.R.M.) Howard. Howard entered Mound Bayou as the chief surgeon of the new hospital; by the time he would left fourteen years later, he had created a small, all-black economic empire and gone on to challenge Jim Crow directly, both as a separatist competitor and as an integrationist activist. Howard’s movement between these two poles of racial negotiations, separatist/exclusionist and integrationist/inclusionist, and the influences that led to those diverse stances over time, are the focus of this paper. It is the goal of this paper to add to the existing literature on T.R.M. Howard by examining his years in Mound Bayou in light of his singular education, the influence of that education in his negotiations with both black and white worlds in Mississippi, and the ways in which Howard created both a racially separatist base and a significant forward effort toward wider integration and inclusion.



*Figure 1: The Inclusion/Exclusion Continuum.* Over the course of his career in Mound Bayou, Howard’s activity shifted along this racial spectrum; he was, in varying times and to varying degrees, both a racial separatist socially and economically and an integrationist politically. Howard’s plural stances represent the negotiated reality of African American life and progress in the Jim Crow Delta.

In some ways, Howard did not principally come to Mound Bayou planning to overtly challenge deeply entrenched white supremacy, yet he did just that, made the move toward organizing and activism in the name of absolute desegregation; in the words of one columnist in

the black press, Howard was “a Negro...whom the Fates will have to reckon with”.<sup>3</sup> Howard, despite his relative obscurity in history, played a critical role in the long black freedom movement, establishing a demonstrative example of the economic and social power of the African American community in the South.

Howard was first and foremost a pragmatist, and much of that pragmatism reflected the racial codes of the Seventh-day Adventist church that had sheltered and educated him since childhood. And Howard was successful, quickly building a small empire of local and regional businesses and creating support organizations within Mound Bayou to provide health care, insurance, and economic stability to African Americans across the Delta and beyond. Moreover, once the economic base and social cachet had been established, Howard leveraged his name, his businesses, and his organizations into direct challenges to Jim Crow politics, reflecting a pragmatism that is able to build itself as exclusion but exercise its power inclusively. Howard’s influence in the Delta would foment a period of great activity for the safe haven “Jewel of the Delta” Mound Bayou; as Mississippi newspaper editor Hodding Carter put it in 1946, Howard was “a one-man uplift movement”<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Three Vectors of Washingtonian Influence***

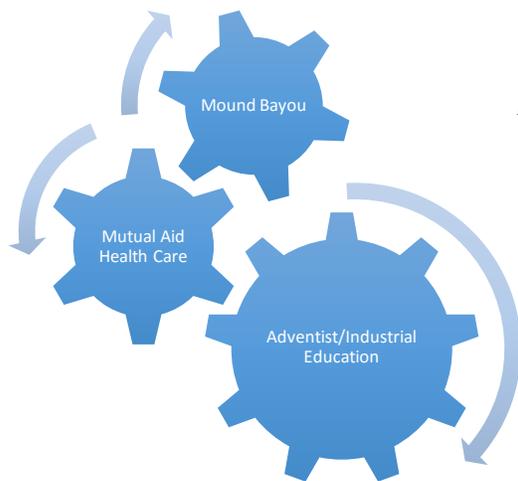
Howard’s Adventist history, as insular as it was, was not a unitary cause or defines a unitary process for Howard. Instead, it makes more sense to say that Howard, during his time in Mound Bayou, represented something of a trifecta of influence from Booker T. Washington and Washingtonian thought. First, (five decades prior to Howard’s arrival) Mound Bayou was

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<sup>3</sup> Prattis, P.L. “The Fates Must Reckon With Him”. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1955, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Carter, Hodding. “He’s Doing Something About the Race Problem”. *Saturday Evening Post*, February 23, 1946, 30.

founded on Washingtonian principles and christened by Washington himself. Second, the African American fraternal order that brought Howard to Mississippi, The Knights and Daughters of Tabor, operated as part of a Washingtonian uplift movement in health care and insurance in the black community. And finally, the practical, academic, and medical education provided to Howard from his youth, all under the auspices of the Adventist church, was based upon a dynamic combination of evangelistic, eschatological bibliocentrism and the Tuskegee model. Thus, in the fifteen years following 1942, we can see demonstrated in Howard's economic, social, and organizing activities a direct, practical application of his received uplift philosophy, enabled by a mutual aid organization, grounded in a community that was separatist in degrees from its founding.



*Figure 2: Three Vectors of Washingtonian Influence.*

- Mound Bayou as Washingtonian Enterprise/ Utopian Safe Haven
- Mutual Aid Health Care (Cooperative Economics) as Uplift Model
- Howard's Industrial/Professional Education (Tuskegee Model) via Seventh-day Adventist Institutions

These three vectors of Washingtonian influence, managed and manipulated adroitly by Howard, created an environment that existed in two worlds. In its interior, Mound Bayou under Howard's care manifested itself as a haven from Jim Crow, separate, independent, and, insofar as community resources and economic opportunities are concerned, relatively equal to the white world. Regarding the exterior, Howard's leadership acumen, critically combined with his

economic power, made him a stern negotiator with Jim Crow, able to fight for equal treatment initially, and full integration later. Howard was a complex figure, resisting segregation while holding to his own separatist tendencies, and this complexity directly reflected the tentative, negotiated Southern world left behind by the waves of the Great Migration. Howard established himself as an African American leader deep within the land of Jim Crow, and as “the most hated and the best loved man in Mississippi”<sup>5</sup> he fought steeply uphill, significant racial battles, losing ground as much as gaining it but still tenacious; nonetheless, he set in place the ground from which the Mississippi struggle of the 1960s could grow.

### ***Finding the Delta, Mound Bayou, and T.R.M. Howard***

Like many before me, I was first drawn to the Mississippi Delta by its music, particularly the 78-rpm enigmatic Blues greats like Charley Patton and Robert Johnson. In 2006, equipped with a rental car, an atlas, and a handful of web page printouts with maps to the graves of these Bluesmen, I skipped out for the day from the William Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference I was attending at the University of Mississippi and headed northwest. Immediately upon coming out of the hills and into the vast alluvial plain that is the Delta, I sensed something special and unknown in the disorienting, big-sky, full-compass landscape. I took that sense home with me, read as much as I could about the Delta, and then leapt at an opportunity to study formally there at a 2010 National Endowment for the Humanities Landmarks Workshop entitled “The Most Southern Place on Earth”, held at Delta State University. The 2010 workshop truly opened my eyes to the depth and breadth of the Delta story. It was then that I first was brought to Mound Bayou and introduced to the world of T.R.M. Howard, which I was immediately drawn to as an

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<sup>5</sup> “Little Man Will Win Fight, Says Miss. Doctor”. *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, August 11, 1955, 1.

alternative to the dominant narrative of the black freedom struggle, largely obscured by history; the Taborian hospital stood empty, trees growing through a collapsed roof, boarded up like so many of the remaining landmarks of Mound Bayou's past, but clearly there was a significant story there.

That story, the story of Mound Bayou overall, is one of defiance and purpose. It is etched in the very landscape. In most other small Delta towns, streets twist beside rivers and rail lines and detour haphazardly around extant private property. Mound Bayou is different; it is set out in a strict grid pattern that extends outward, covering not just the downtown area but the outer residential areas as well, the foundational railroad spur and Highway 61 running parallel and razor straight through the middle of town. Mound Bayou speaks of discipline and drive, of aspiration and attainment. This sense is quite visceral, casting one's eyes across the orderly plain of the town and the proud buildings of the hospital, the Taborian administrative building, and the Bank of Mound Bayou.

David T. and Linda Royster Beito's biography of Howard, *Black Maverick*, which is the only work that examines Howard at length, became a point of reference for my consideration of the Delta as a whole. Many of the leads that I followed and archival rabbit-holes that I dove into were based on footnotes in *Black Maverick*. Thus, using that book as my starting block, I ventured on a close study of documents surrounding Howard's time in Mound Bayou. I searched the archives of national black newspapers, read microfilm in Delta libraries, and worked my way through a wealth of information in the Walter Sillers (Mississippi house speaker) archive at Delta State. By piecing together editorials, interviews, announcements, policy papers, and speeches, a clear and somewhat surprising picture becomes clear. The path was certainly interesting.

Considering the material I uncovered in my research more broadly and theoretically, this paper presents the particular story of Howard in Mound Bayou in three ways: first, it was an active manifestation of Booker T. Washington's racial uplift philosophy; second, beyond being merely Washingtonian, Howard's distinctly negotiative approach to racial relations, his insistence that the white and black in Mississippi could sit at a "council table", augmented mere accommodation with continued, active negotiation across racial lines; and, third, Howard in Mound Bayou serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant inclusionism of black freedom struggle, but also as a narrative consistent with black separatism movements both past and future, and, as shall be shown here, a crucial link in the chain of the greater, multi-generational movement. The purpose of this paper is to expand upon the existing literature on Mound Bayou and T.R.M. Howard by both narrowing the focus to his Mound Bayou career and examining the formative thought, coming from his Seventh-day Adventist practice\* as well as the influence of Booker T. Washington, and the distinctly Washingtonian setting that grounded his significant work in the struggle for black freedom in America. Howard's resistance to white supremacy was not unique among his peers, but in many ways his particular strategy of resistance was. The many facets of this strategy, as demonstrated in Howard's work in the Mississippi Delta and his role in the long march for civil rights, are under examination here. The story of T.R.M. Howard in Mound Bayou is an important one in that it represents the variety of approaches, the numerous undercurrents of resistance to white supremacy, that characterized the long black freedom movement long before the heroic phase of the civil rights era; like the buildings of Mound Bayou

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\* Although not argued directly, this paper also presents evidence for a viewpoint counter to the widely-expressed idea that Adventism was a "silent church" in all matters of social justice; Howard's story demonstrates that Adventist thought did indeed play a role in this particular segment of the greater black freedom movement.

that are in dire need of protection and preservation, this is a story to be told to new generations of entrepreneurs and activists alike.

### *A Word on Historical Context*

Nothing exists in a vacuum, of course. Thus, a few words should be spent placing Howard's Mound Bayou in history, particularly because, like so much else in Mound Bayou, the position is unique. The period in question consists of boon economic years for the town, as first the war effort, then the expanding US post-war economy, kept cotton prices at profitable levels. As with the rest of the Delta, Mound Bayou was built upon and maintained by cotton; without it, there could be no progress, and indeed in the years that cotton prices were low (as in the depression years), the town stagnated where it did not outright decline. This introduces the first way that national and global history intersected with Mound Bayou, in the fluctuation of the cotton market; in truth, in the Delta, little else mattered.

The town's second major intersection with history during this period was linked to a 1954 upheaval that shook the region with power even greater than the concurrent *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, the automation of the cotton harvest at Hopson Plantation in Clarksdale, about thirty miles north of Mound Bayou. For an area that was already experiencing the outflow of population that was the two waves of the Great Migration, this was a final blow; those who had not left the Delta already found themselves surplus, unneeded labor, adding urgency and speed to the final large surge of this northern movement. Those who still did not flee north found themselves scraping at the edges of Delta existence. This rapid out-migration was a concern for black Delta leaders, just as the prevalence of black surplus labor concerned whites. Howard identified the northern flight as one of the most significant, if not the most significant,

issue for all Deltans; much of Mound Bayou's story during this period is in direct defiance of this trend, a deeper and more developed retrenchment.

These two vectors of large-scale historical influence, the cotton market and out-migration, and their importance in the development of Mound Bayou through its mid-century renaissance can hardly be overstated. There is yet a third aspect of historical context that must be considered. While cotton may have been the prime mover, and despite the town's designed insularity, Mound Bayou was not completely divorced from the outside world. It was a largely affluent town, filled with businessmen and professionals, and with that affluence came an attachment to world affairs through the prevalence of radios in Mound Bayou homes and the amount of travel (particularly north-south on the Illinois Central) that the town's residents could largely enjoy. Mound Bayou was a literate place, informed by the black press, and knowledgeable of world pressures. Even before his arrival in Mississippi, Howard was addressing worldly ideologies such as European nationalism and Marxism in his writing. It is hardly surprising that Howard's oft-repeated statement about black veterans returning from war who are still unable to enjoy the very freedoms they were defending reflects directly the widespread "Double V" (victory abroad, victory at home) movement being supported nationwide in papers like the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>6</sup> Still, it must be said that Mound Bayou during this period was both isolated by its existence in the Jim Crow surrounding world and very protective of itself, limiting, at times, the willingness to engage in "outside" issues. Mound Bayou is a unique product of history, held a unique place within history, but often protected *from* history.

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<sup>6</sup> "Victory at Home, Victory Abroad Sweeps Nation". The Pittsburgh Courier. March 21, 1942, 12.

CHAPTER TWO:  
AN ADVENTIST EDUCATION

*As I see the total darkness which is enveloping the nations of the earth today; as I see how the hearts of men are failing them; as I feel the earth shaking as we have felt in California. and as I see Mr. Wells' war cloud gradually drawing nearer to us, as I read the forgotten book, the Bible, I am made to believe that the end of all things earthly is at hand. (T.R.M. Howard)<sup>7</sup>*

It is important at the outset to note a distinction between T.R.M. Howard and his more urban peers and predecessors. From a very early age, Howard was ensconced in the educational system of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, a sheltered existence that added to the provincialism of Howard's rural childhood experiences in Murray, KY (a locale prone to racist violence) at the same time that it limited his exposure to black intellectuals. There is no evidence that Howard had any experience, at least during the formative years, with W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, or any of the authors of the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances. What experience he did have with the uplift philosophy of Booker T. Washington was indirect, filtered through Adventist schools (particularly Oakwood College) that were built on a Tuskegee model<sup>8</sup>. The nearly-exclusive bibliocentrism of Adventism and the apparent censorship significantly

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<sup>7</sup> Howard, T.R.M. "Negro In the Light of History". The (Los Angeles) California Eagle, October 13, 1933.

<sup>8</sup> Beito, David T. and Linda Royster Beito. *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight For Civil Rights and Economic Power*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009, 9-10.

influenced Howard's world view, setting the stage for the pragmatic segregationism that would become a feature of his entrepreneurial and activist career in the Mississippi Delta.

At the age of twelve, while still living a life in rural Kentucky punctuated by violence in the home and the regular, violent visits of night-riders in the community, Howard fell under the influence of Dr. Will Mason, a Seventh-day Adventist and the head of Murray's white hospital, initiating the first layer of Adventist formation in the young man. This mentorship, intended by Mason to develop Howard in the medical field, did not go unappreciated; Howard later added "Mason" to his name as a salute to the doctor<sup>9</sup>. Funded by Mason, Howard advanced his education formally beginning in 1924 at age 16, entering the Oakwood Junior College, Huntsville, AL, to finish the last two years of his high school career; Howard stayed in Huntsville for four more years, completing his bachelor's degree at Oakwood College. Before looking further into Howard's unique education, it is important to consider the philosophy that allowed for schools like Oakwood, meant for black youth, to exist; here we find the shadow of segregationist separatism as it is cast against the doctrines of Seventh-day Adventism, and it is here that we can place the earliest formation of Howard's political and economic attitudes.

### ***Adventism and the Tradition of Racial Pragmatism***

Adventist attitudes toward and involvement with the world at large, particularly regarding racial oppression and racial conflict, has a certain duality. On the one hand, Adventists had long proclaimed equality of the races before God, that the God of blacks is the same as whites<sup>10</sup>. Simultaneously, Adventists historically recused themselves from challenges to segregation or other rights-centered activities, and have accepted and even promoted segregation within their

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, Benjamin J. *A Place Called Oakwood: Inspired Counsel*. Huntsville, AL: Oakwood College, 2007.

congregations. Regarding the former, the history of scriptural interpretation, public letters, speeches, and doctrinal statements coming from Adventist leaders, including the foundational Ellen White, express a consistent inclusive and positive position regarding racial equality. Concerning the latter, however, the praxis of the church and the practical guidance given church membership by its leaders, historically and well into the period under discussion, not only kept church members away from race-related rights activities, it perpetuated racial segregation within the ranks of the church. In short, it was affirmed that God created the races equally and offers salvation to the races equally, but that does not mean that the churches, or any other social institution, need be desegregated themselves. And, in fact, it may very well be within God's plan that the races remain separate.

At the heart of the matter here, the source of this racial duality, was evangelism, the spreading of the gospels to all corners of the world. Seventh-day Adventists were not only staunch fundamentalists and biblical literalists, they were also sectarian in their ecclesiology, meaning they believe that theirs is the one true interpretation of scripture, theirs is the one path to redemption, and theirs is the only saved church. Accordingly, adherence to Adventism means adherence to active evangelism; having found the one true path, it is now incumbent that the believer spread the news of a salvation that is available to everybody. This "everybody" does include all races, and the statements of Adventist leaders consistently emphasized this point, going all the way back to abolitionist efforts that were connected to the Millerite church, the predecessor to the Adventists. Adventism depends upon continual, concentrated interpretation of scripture, particularly when it comes to eschatology, as it is a core belief that the end times is now and that all is revealed biblically. As the Civil War approached and conflicts over slavery grew, Adventist prophetic reading interpreted the two-horned beast in Revelation 13 as America

itself, which preached freedom and equality while holding millions in bondage<sup>11</sup>. Adventist leader Ellen White, regarded by Adventists as God's direct messenger, wrote of abolition from her earliest days, condemning followers who owned slaves or benefited from slave labor<sup>12</sup>.

Adventist evangelism, then, is held as a primary requirement for believers, a fact that had direct implications, most pointedly that the church would be not only evangelizing blacks as well as whites, but also expanding beyond its northern boundaries and into the more contentious land of the American South, where the church's inclusive racial position was less appreciated. Quickly, the roadblock of southern racism met the missionary efforts, and adjustments to church racial policy had to be made in the name of evangelism. The core principle here is that anything that interferes with the spreading of the good news is to be avoided, that evangelism is first and foremost, trumping concerns of social justice and racial inclusion. If the missionary is working in a community that enforces segregation by race, then the gatherings of that mission church will be segregated by race, in the interest of being able to avoid distracting conflict and thus communicating the saving message to all the more people. During Howard's time, the church affirmed that segregation, bondage, and all forms of racial oppression are injustices is affirmed by the church, but if challenging the local racial codes will complicate preaching, then the injustices can be accepted, at least for now. In God's plan, Adventists then believed, these problems will be resolved; it is not in the interest of evangelizing, sectarian Christians to involve themselves in this work; that is not the work of the church. In short, to employ a term that is crucial to the consideration of T.R.M. Howard's work, the Adventist church took a *pragmatic* racial stance — equality is the divine reality and the social inevitability (as God's work

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<sup>11</sup> Plantak, Zdravko. *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

proceeds), but segregation can be overlooked in the meantime if it is in the interest of evangelism (and is thus in the interest of a saving God).

Other Adventist principles guided the racial policy of the church, as well, further promoting segregation as accepted church practice while simultaneously affirming the equality of all in the eyes of God. For example, the doctrine that the world is currently in the prophetic end-times, that the literal application of the Book of Revelations is occurring in the here and now, both results in and requires doctrinal occasionalism, the belief in a “divine mind” that is acting in the material world and is in complete control. This idea, that everything, including social conflict, is God’s direct action upon history hinders any collective church drive for action, creating a laissez-faire attitude with regard to sociopolitics.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Adventism focused itself directly on the individual believer and that believer’s personal relationship with God, which is manifest not only in piety, but also in temperance, rationality, and physical health. All is dependent upon the individual to act in accordance with God’s will; social ills, including racism, result from bad interpersonal relationships, including the relationship with the divine. The stated solution to all social problems, then, is the conversion of every single person globally<sup>14</sup>. This, of course, leads us back to the racial paradox of Adventist evangelism — all are created equal, but racial separation is acceptable where not plainly desirable. In the end (which, for Adventists, is very imminent), God will sort out the believers from the nonbelievers, and all other division will disappear. Churches will remain racially divided, and racially divided social institutions will not be challenged, in the words of Ellen White, “until the Lord shows us a better way”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> London, Samuel G., Jr. *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Plantak 1998, 77.

The most significant statement in the Adventist church regarding race is White's speech "Our Duty to the Colored People", given in 1891. The speech, which upholds the church's views on the equality of all while it also demonstrates a marked ambivalence toward racial matters themselves, is noted to have inspired White's son Edson to initiate the southern missionary effort that came to include the founding of Oakwood College. In the closing lines of the speech, White takes a racial position which combines a call for inclusivity, although it is moderate, with a reticence to act on that call,

You have no license from God to exclude the colored people from your places of worship... They should hold membership in the church with the white brethren... At the same time we must not carry things to extremes and run into fanaticism on this question.<sup>16</sup>

There is a requirement of white Adventists toward the black population, but White's position is more patronizing than equalizing. Still, here is located the pedagogical zeal that led to Adventist educational efforts.

We should educate colored men to be missionaries among their own people. We should recognize talent where it exists among the people, and those who have ability should be placed where they may receive an education.<sup>17</sup>

Let there be equality, but equally let there be separation if it is in the interest of evangelism:

There are able colored ministers who have embraced the truth. Some of these feel unwilling to devote themselves to work for their own race; they wish to preach to the

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<sup>16</sup> Baker 2009, 168.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 169.

white people. These men are making a great mistake. They should seek most earnestly to save their own race<sup>18</sup>.

Thus equality under God was the ultimate reality, integration the human goal, and pragmatic segregation the current state through which that goal can be achieved. This combination of egalitarian idealism and the practical acceptance and full utilization of present segregation was a model that is directly echoed in the activities of Howard, whose activist confrontationalism was both tempered by and built upon more moderate, segregationist, racially-aligned economic and social practice.

### *Oakwood College*

Certainly, Howard's formative years at Oakwood provided a grounding for both his later entrepreneurialism and activism. Founded in 1896, the church held up Oakwood as an exemplar of the potentials of Adventist education. Education, which is another requirement for effective evangelism, has long been a central concern for the church. Insofar as Adventism relies heavily upon the eschatological interpretation of scripture, particularly the difficult words of the Old Testament prophets, it promotes an advanced form of literacy education (developed in Bible studies and in the use of Adventist doctrinal primers); While this literacy education does not, as mentioned above, include any exposure to theoretical, polemical, or socially-informed literature beyond the Bible and Adventist publications, it does endorse a level of critical thinking practiced in the institutions. In addition, the church promotes "right living" through health and wellness teaching. Clearly, the Adventist approach to education, particularly in the evangelist efforts in the American South at the turn of the 20th century, can be identified as an "uplift" philosophy,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 169.

even before any Washingtonian influence is examined. Consider this, from the Oakwood student bulletin of 1896,

The managers and many other deeply interested persons have desired to see a school established in the South, where worthy young colored men and women might be educated in the lines of moral, mental, and physical culture, which prepare for the practical duties of life<sup>19</sup>.

Ellen White expands on this viewpoint, giving the education of African Americans a theological context:

To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose of his creation might be realized, this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life<sup>20</sup>.

Industrial education soon became connected with Adventist educational goals in the black community. Thus Tuskegee became a point of reference for Oakwood's founders. In some respects, although White and others endorsed industrial education, the industrial school was camouflage for Adventist evangelism, even activism. Again, there is a distinctly pragmatic approach to conflict over race:

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<sup>19</sup> Millet, Garland. "Spiritual Life at Oakwood". *Adventist Heritage*, April 1976, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Why then did church leaders establish an industrial school? They were influenced by the social and political constraints of the time which frowned on “Yankee come south to teach n— equality”<sup>21</sup>.

Indeed, the Adventists may have needed the industrial ruse to be able to establish their schools in the first place, a concern of Edson White in the South<sup>22</sup>. And Oakwood was successful as an industrial and agricultural school, but even more so as a school for black professionals. An indication of the centrality of health and health care in Adventist practice was the fact that the first five graduates of Oakwood were nurses, the sixth ministerial. The school blended traditional academics into the industrial curriculum from the outset, and “literary” education had become as much a part of the Oakwood experience as trade education by the time of Howard’s arrival<sup>23</sup>. As Howard experienced, even the offerings of a medical nature at Oakwood (including courses in hydrotherapy, for instance) were connected to the Adventist cause, as an Oakwood catalog states, “a knowledge of these simple treatments has been found to be a most excellent means of opening doors for the entrance of the gospel worker”<sup>24</sup>.

Whether the focus was industrial or academic, the second thread that ran through the Oakwood experience was deeply and actively religious. Although Oakwood catalogs and announcements firmly stated that adherence to Adventism was not a requirement, each semester had a requisite bible class, and attendance at Sabbath services and Sabbath schools was mandatory. Additional religious opportunities abounded, from regular vespers services to prayer “power hours” and one group in which Howard was particularly present, a missionary society.

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<sup>21</sup> Barnes, C.J. “Industrial Education at Oakwood”. *Adventist Heritage*, April 1976, 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Beito and Beito 2009, 13.

This is significant in that it is in Howard's activity as Adventist missionary that we can see trade wedded to faith; already, Howard's entrepreneurial spirit was apparent during his "colporteur" summers, where he would raise money for the school's coming fall by traveling — in Howard's case, through the Tennessee Valley — and selling Adventist books and materials door-to-door. Howard outpaced his competitors, one time selling \$1400 worth of books in one day<sup>25</sup>.

Additionally, Howard in his later years at Oakwood founded, along with a roommate who would later go on to become an Adventist leader, "The Young Men's Betterment Society", where he honed his oratory skills while lecturing peers on chivalrous action and the love of God<sup>26</sup>. As stated, this intermingling of worldly skills (speaking, salesmanship, as well as medical training) with religious intent is a point to be considered. It is my argument that the grounding of these skills in religion and, insofar as evangelism is central to Adventism, religious expression makes the connection between the two all the more complex and all the more complete. The key, which I think is demonstrable in Howard, is an internalization of Adventist belief; take, for example, this statement from a 2014 study of African American Seventh-day Adventist youth, which avers,

Religious organizations expect certain forms of role performances from its members.

When these performances are internalized, behavior becomes unconscious to the extent people see themselves in unity with the religious group<sup>27</sup>.

Surely, Howard to some degree internalized his practice, if not his belief, an internalization experienced after an intensive, and prolonged as Oakwood was just the beginning, Adventist

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ramirez, Octavio, et al. "What Does It Mean To Be a Christian? Exploring the Religious Identity of Intrinsically and Extrinsically Religious Black Seventh-day Adventist University Students". *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 2014, 60.

education. It is from here that the later ripples and waves of both his separatist development and his integrationist activism arose. The multivalent racial approach, calling for full integration while practicing segregation, which characterized Adventist history, marked Howard's years in Mound Bayou.

***The California Eagle, "Negro in the Light of History/Our Fight"***

Howard's Adventist education continued its consistency long past his Oakwood experience. His initial postgraduate work and his extended medical education were at Adventist institutions as well, Union College (Lincoln, NE) and the College of Medical Evangelists (Loma Linda, CA). Howard's community, racial, and religious consciousness led to a measured tolerance of his existence for a time as the only African American student at Union, forced by school policy into segregation, including the requirement that he dine separately from white students. Opportunities for Howard to rebel against such racial strictures arose, including invitations from other students to join them in eating, but a "don't rock the boat" pragmatism was already holding sway; as Howard wrote to a friend, "I set [sic] at a table where there is no one, and other[s] come and eat with me. If 'staying in my place' will cause me to get through Union with friends, I sure mean to do that"<sup>28</sup>. Howard's tenure at the College of Medical Evangelists, on the other hand, saw him become increasingly politically involved, a prelude to his future activism, campaigning for Upton Sinclair's California gubernatorial challenge and writing a regular column for a significant black newspaper, *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*. In his writing for the *Eagle*, at times relying on scripture to punctuate his ideas, Howard

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<sup>28</sup> Beito and Beito 2009, 17.

addressed and criticized such worldly concepts as Marxism and nationalism along with Jim Crow.

Howard's *Eagle* column, which lasted a little under two years, ran under two titles: "Negro in the Light of History" and later, "Our Fight". Howard began the column with the theme of informing the African American reader of his/her heritage, but that dedication only lasted a few columns before Howard went to tackle more timely themes. Across the *Eagle* columns, he addresses a diverse array of topics, but with a striking consistency, Howard confronts racial conflict and inequality with an even hand, relying heavily upon the power of the black dollar and the black vote. In one column from April 13, 1934, Howard decries the segregationist housing policy of the Los Angeles county hospital which would have barred black nurses from hospital housing, but does not propose direct resistance, or decry the fact that the black nurses are forced to live in a separate, inferior building. Note that here Howard avers that African Americans have regularly accepted less without complaint, but that there is power in the black community, economic and political. In this instance, the power to change lies in the power of the black dollar and the power of the black vote:

Race hatred in this matter is naked and unashamed. Should I appeal to you out of the depths of my soul? Those girls must not be allowed to give up that home! They accept the humility of being "Jim Crowed" in a home back of the contagious disease building. We, the citizens, must see to it that they are not made to suffer humility. 60,000 taxpayers have a voice in this matter. 60,000 voters will have a vote on this matter<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Howard, T.R.M. "Our Fight". *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, April 13, 1934.

Again and again in his *Eagle* writings, Howard turned to the economics of the black community, and the inevitable link between that economy and racism:

The building up of the Negro's faith in the Negro is the only thing that will lead us out of our damnable economic condition. We must get money circulating among Negroes. If most of our doctors are no good surely there are some who are the best in town. The color of the white doctor's skin doesn't make him a bit better. It is the lack of faith and confidence that makes us go to him and he laughs and says 'what simple fools'<sup>30</sup>.

Those few sentences alone could be said to characterize the bulk of Howard's future work in Mound Bayou. Note as well that not only does Howard hold Booker T. Washington up in the same column as the last African American leader who was "big enough, yet humble enough to build up the confidence of the American Negro in the American Negro"<sup>31</sup>, his advice to the young working blacks of California is textbook Washingtonian thought:

The young Negro must be taught that there is more honor in planting a row of beans than running a racket for some political candidate; that there is as much honor in planting a row of potatoes as there is in preaching a sermon<sup>32</sup>.

It is within "Our Fight" that Howard, now ten years into his Adventist education, makes a plain proclamation of faith, indication that even as his horizons were broadening, as he was maturing, and as his focus on race issues was growing, Adventism still held influence in his thoughts and actions:

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<sup>30</sup> Howard, T.R.M. "Negro in the Light of History". *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, August 25, 1933.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Howard, T.R.M. "Negro in the Light of History". *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, September 1, 1933.

We believe in the soon return of Jesus Christ... We believe in the strict observance of the Ten Commandments, including the fourth commandment found in the Book of Exodus 20th chapter. We keep the seventh day Sabbath. We give one tenth of our earnings to the church. We believe in the principles of diet and health as taught by the Bible. We believe in and follow a thorough system of religious education. We take the Bible as our daily standard<sup>33</sup>.

Additionally, in one of the very few times Howard would take on a ideological tone, his opinion of communism as a global threat (expressed in a two-column debate with a Marxist fellow columnist under the name of “Sonia”) takes on similar, eschatological overtones,

The future holds nothing in store unless the forces of righteousness, as outlined by the religion of Jesus Christ, can overtake and bring under rational and moral control the spirit of war and crime which stalks threateningly among the peoples of the earth this very hour<sup>34</sup>.

In 1935, Howard graduated from the College of Medical Evangelists with a completed medical degree, the only black member of his graduating class<sup>35</sup>.

Seventh-day Adventism, at least in the years that stretch from Howard’s youth through his medical education, fueled both ends of Howard’s racial consciousness, the segregationist and the inclusionist. Howard grounded his racial pragmatism as a segregationist in the practical arm of his industrial/trade/religious education and experience; beyond this consideration, the inclusive shift that Howard publicly made in the wake of the *Brown* decision (a time of

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<sup>33</sup> Howard, T.R.M. “Our Fight”. *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, April 27, 1934.

<sup>34</sup> Howard, T.R.M. “Negro in the Light of History”. *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, February 2, 1934.

<sup>35</sup> Beito 2000, 185.

Mississippi reticence to act upon the court's order) and the Emmett Till event, both turning points for Howard, extends rather than negates the church's racial pragmatism, reaching for the goal of true racial equality and integration that the church has long held as both ideal and precept. Howard's view is bold and broad, displaying in his community (economic, social, political) consciousness the moral requirement of equality and human rights found in scripture and in Adventist doctrine. Howard's pragmatic separatism, which will come to bear quickly upon his arrival in Mound Bayou, echoes the pragmatic separatism of his Adventist teachers and forebears; likewise, Howard's inclusive turn, which he is able to make solely because of the local import he acquired as a pragmatic separatist, is consistent with, indeed fulfills, the inclusive wishes of the Adventist church founders. The Jim Crow world of the 1940s-1950s Mississippi Delta was one of, as noted, continuous negotiation between and within the races; clearly, Howard's Adventist-tinged attitudes can be identified as a player in the negotiations of his place and period. In this, his approach as an African American leader was unique. And, for a few years of both struggle and glory in the Delta, he gained ground.

CHAPTER THREE:  
BUILDING ECONOMIC STRENGTH IN MOUND BAYOU

*“Peace abides in Mound Bayou, where no white men dwell”.*<sup>36</sup>

Mound Bayou, MS is a unique place in the Mississippi Delta. Founded by slaves released from the Davis Bend, MS plantation belonging to Jefferson Davis’ brother Joseph, the community was created in 1887 under the leadership of freed slave Isaiah T. Montgomery as the first African American-founded community in the United States. The town was coined “the Jewel of the Delta” by none less than Booker T. Washington himself, who spoke at the founding ceremony. Washington further characterized the qualities of Mound Bayou thus: “Outside of Tuskegee, I think I can safely say there is no community in the world that I am so deeply interested in as I am in Mound Bayou”.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, and importantly, Washington also averred that Mound Bayou is a “place where a Negro may get inspiration by seeing what other members of his race have accomplished...”.<sup>38</sup> With these Washingtonian endorsements, Mound Bayou maintained a reputation as an accommodationist utopia as Montgomery brought Tuskegee-based uplift to bear in the community:

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<sup>36</sup> Behymer, F.A. “The Town Where They Have No Jail”. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 8, 1946, 3C.

<sup>37</sup> “The Mound Bayou Story”. Cleveland, MS: The Delta Center for Culture and Learning, n.d.

<sup>38</sup> Beito, David T. “Black Fraternal Hospitals in the Mississippi Delta, 1942-1967”. *The Journal of Southern History*, 1999, 109.

In a manner characteristic of the Tuskegee group, [civic leader Charles] Banks and Montgomery asserted the philosophy of salvation through economic development and bourgeois virtues with the help of ‘the best white people,’ and through self-help and racial cooperations and ‘taking advantage of the disadvantages’ of segregation.<sup>39</sup>

Howard’s arrival took accommodation one step further, although along the same self-help and cooperative vectors, into a successful economic separatism, creating and/or developing in the town during the 1940s a number of socioeconomic structures that paralleled, but not intersect, the white Delta world.

### ***Mound Bayou as Negotiated Racial Utopia and Washingtonian Enterprise***

Mound Bayou, as noted above, became the perfect explicitly-Washingtonian environment for the essentially-Washingtonian Howard. In this, a word more on Mound Bayou’s creation and condition in 1942 need be said. Mound Bayou has been regarded academically as nothing less than a utopian enterprise, a social, political, and economic endeavor meant to realize the egalitarian vision not of founder I.T. Montgomery, but rather of slave owner Joseph Davis, whose “antebellum experiment”<sup>40</sup> at his Hurricane Plantation on the banks of the Mississippi River featured a marked egalitarianism and a focus on mutual economic gain, while never subverting the master/slave relationship. Hurricane Plantation was destroyed, and the “experiment” postponed, because of war, but in its day the plantation, under Joseph Davis’ command, supplied opportunity and advantage to its slaves and the slaves of neighbor and brother Jefferson in the form of business education, investment options, profit sharing, and

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<sup>39</sup> Meier, August. “Booker T. Washington and Mound Bayou”. *Phylon*, August, 1954, 396-7.

<sup>40</sup> Hermann, Janet Sharp. *Pursuit of a Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, 29.

access to a regionally-famous library that included European utopian literature.<sup>41</sup> Montgomery took up the experiment again, relocated to the Delta, and put into motion as Mound Bayou. In some ways, Mound Bayou did in fact grow to become an African American utopia, a widely proclaimed and widely acclaimed “Place of Refuge”, “Beacon of Hope”<sup>42</sup>, even “Shangri-La”<sup>43</sup> deep within the white supremacist world of Jim Crow Mississippi, and much of that growth occurred under the watchful eye of T.R.M. Howard. It was lauded in the press for its pacific existence, without police force or jail, and with the only racially inclusive railroad depot waiting room in the Delta (not that there were often white passengers at the Mound Bayou depot; as one reporter stated it, “a white person on being caught between trains in this town would have to stand outside if he were a stickler for the law”<sup>44</sup>). It is easy, however, to romanticize the town and its creation as something more than it actually was.

The founding of the town was the result of the hard work and financial acumen of Montgomery, and the struggle and sacrifice of his family and those who followed him upon their eviction from Davis Bend a decade after the war; this is certainly true. It is, however, equally true that Mound Bayou is a fortuitous combination of man and rail; railroad companies were an all-powerful force in the economically and agriculturally exploding world of the postwar Delta, and the Louisville, New Orleans and Texas Railroad Company had already sent surveyors through the land they would sell to Montgomery, as it is centrally located in the northern Delta and ripe for a connecting spur between the Mississippi and Sunflower rivers, halfway between the trade centers of Memphis and Vicksburg<sup>45</sup>. Undeveloped Delta land was notoriously difficult

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<sup>41</sup> Rosen, Joel Nathan. *From New Lanark to Mound Bayou: Owenism in the Mississippi Delta*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2011, 103.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Untitled Item, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 25, 1942, 54.

<sup>44</sup> “Post-War Building Boom Seen in Mound Bayou by Founders”. *Chicago Defender*, March 1, 1943, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Rosen 2011, 126.

to clear, requiring scores of man hours per acre to make arable, habitable or, in the interest of the rail, transversable. Railroad authorities in the south found themselves in a situation much like other white-owned southern agriculture and industry — what to make of, and how to employ, the newly freed. In Montgomery and his supporters, railroad officers found a work crew that was willing and able to clear the land and make way for the rail (the remnant of the Illinois Central spur bisects Mound Bayou to this day), as well as buy the surplus right-of-way land parcels (842 acres total, at \$7 an acre<sup>46</sup>) There is a much-lauded speech by Montgomery, probably apocryphal, that paints this particular aspect of Mound Bayou’s foundation; it is more than clear what the new settlers were up against, and it was not just the opposition of local whites — note both the Washingtonian resonance and the prophetic zeal:

Why stagger at the difficulties that confront you; have you not for centuries braved the miasma and hewn down forests like these at the behest of a master? Can you not do it for yourselves and your children unto successive generations that they may worship and develop under their own vine and fig tree?<sup>47</sup>

In truth, and unfortunately, Mound Bayou owes its existence to the needs of the railroad as much as the altruistic attitudes and actions of its founder and leaders. As a 1946 portrait in *The St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch* states regarding the town’s creation,

Sixty years ago the Mississippi Delta was a land of pestilent swamps which white men shunned. Only Negroes, it was believed, could live and work in them. There was a railroad that had great possessions in Delta swamplands and wanted them subdued. The

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<sup>46</sup> “The Mound Bayou Story”

<sup>47</sup> Rosen 2011, 127-8.

only way to do it was to bring the Negroes in. The way to get them to come was to find a leader [Montgomery] they would follow.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, Joseph Davis' moves toward education, egalitarianism, and mutual benefit arose from just that — benefit, as in profit. In I.T. Montgomery, just as in his father, Davis saw business skill; he certainly utilized it to his own benefit even as he cultivated it — Davis was well-known as a shrewd businessman — well before granting freedom and blessing to black Davis Bend families, Montgomery's included; his assumed egalitarian spirit, lauded in literature but rarely above the paternalistic gesture<sup>49</sup>, overplays Davis' importance as a figure of philosophical influence. All of this is by way of saying that Mound Bayou, while the creation of an African American community *for* African Americans, the first of its kind, was itself a racial negotiation the likes of which will continue to be present throughout its lifespan, one in which the interests of the white supremacist power structure, having power over freed blacks via new vectors of Jim Crowism and Klan terrorism, were negotiated as part of the founding of the town itself. It is the intersection of black and white interest, here literally the intersection of a railroad spur and a main street, that made Mound Bayou possible in many ways; similarly, the intersection of white and black interest would characterize Howard's tenure in Mound Bayou and the renaissance the town experienced in the 1940s and 1950s, due in significant part to his activities. Howard's racial policy, as has been said, was a combination of pragmatic separatism and ideal integration; the many factors that led to the creation of Mound Bayou continued to have influence, and Howard's success largely lay in his skillful negotiation of a white world, facilitated by his existence in a black one.

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<sup>48</sup> Behymer 1946.

<sup>49</sup> Hermann 1981, 14.

### *Mound Bayou's Mid-Century Renaissance*

Mound Bayou's success waxed and waned in the first few decades of its life, but overall growth was positive, particularly in the opening years of the new century, which saw the establishment of the Bank of Mound Bayou (with investment from Washington's inner circle) and the Mound Bayou Loan and Investment Company. The initial boom years went dry with a failed investment in an experiment focusing on cottonseed oil extracted by the Mound Bayou Oil Mill, a failure that hurt many white investors as well, including northern philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, who invested in the oil mill on Washington's advice<sup>50</sup>; this was in 1915, coincidentally the year Booker T. Washington died. And it seemed that the dream of Mound Bayou was indeed dead in the years following the 1915 crash, decades of slow or no growth exacerbated by poor crop yields and low cotton prices, a disastrous fire, and internecine battles among town leaders and the descendants of Montgomery. In one assessment,

Emerging from the crash [of 1915] was a predictably yet significantly stratified order that may have been spared so much of the horrific racial violence that had spread throughout the South...but was more or less determined to destroy itself from within through long-simmering and concentrated political and social friction<sup>51</sup>.

Indeed, friction rapidly arose in the wake of Montgomery's death, the loss of the town patriarch, in 1925. Montgomery family leadership shrank to just the personage of daughter Mary Booze. A crisis simmered between Booze and rival sister Estelle (at the time the only national black delegate for the Republican party<sup>52</sup>) regarding control of the estate and, by extension, control of

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<sup>50</sup> Meier 1954, 397.

<sup>51</sup> Rosen 2011, 147.

<sup>52</sup> "Post-War Building Boom"

the town. The conflict reflected unrest in Mound Bayou as a whole, and represented a schism within the town, centered on town leadership. A 1927 letter from Estelle to none other than W.E.B. DuBois claims a number of conspiracies set against her by the Booze camp, whom she sees as the downfall of Mound Bayou and everything her father had built, even going so far as to claim that Booze poisoned I.T. Montgomery, her father<sup>53</sup>. As can be seen by the fact that Estelle took the fight to DuBois, this familial battle had great significance for Mound Bayou and the success of the town's uplift endeavor, even to the extent that Estelle places these familial concerns over the fact that Mound Bayou was simultaneously, like the rest of the Delta, suffering significantly in the aftermath of 1927's great flood (Estelle and Eugene Booze, both, would be killed in an unsolved murder, presumably over the Montgomery estate). This is the environment that Howard entered in 1942, although some pessimism was alleviated by the founding of the hospital, as shown below. Hodding Carter, in the aforementioned flattering portrait of Howard in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1946, described the scene well, characterizing Mound Bayou before the hospital-fueled growth set in, thus:

One could pick out a handful of presentable homes, a scattered and threadbare-looking business and residential section intermixed along the dusty dirt and gravel roads bisecting the highway, three or four nice looking brick churches, and, two blocks off the highway, a school that, for a Negro building, looked right good. But most everyone would agree Mound Bayou wasn't anything to write home about<sup>54</sup>.

That was, Carter notes, before 1942. In 1946, people driving through what they thought was just another sleepy Delta hamlet along Highway 61 "began to slow down when they drove through,

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<sup>53</sup> Personal Correspondence, Mary Booze to W.E.B. DuBois, June 5, 1927.

<sup>54</sup> Carter 1946, 30.

and now a lot of the drivers...come to a full stop".<sup>55</sup> The reason for the full stop, Carter continues, is "the new, red-brick Taborian Hospital,...financed, designed, built, staffed and used entirely by Negroes"<sup>56</sup>. Carter, white and generally moderate editor of *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times* also praised the hospital on his paper's editorial page, as an "Example in Concrete", which he links to the ongoing war effort abroad. Here, in particular, is the implied conclusion that a segregated hospital is a feat of interracial harmony:

This [hospital] is just another proof that bloods of all nations can live and prosper together. And Hitler, who believes otherwise, will learn ere long that as they have lived they can fight together. Fight for this right to live and prosper together.<sup>57</sup>

With the Taborian Hospital, and with the influence of Howard, came the boom years, with roughly 40 business (including a nightclub), 6 churches, a train station, a newspaper, a post office, a public library, a zoo, and a public swimming pool, many of the properties belonging to Howard himself. Mound Bayou was, for a time at least, a success. 1942 saw the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church seek to establish a copy of Mound Bayou in Alloway, NJ<sup>58</sup>, and 1956 saw Maxine Sullivan have a moderate hit with the song "Mound Bayou", with lyrics that lauded the town's assets, accompanied by a dig at those who have fled north.

Mound Bayou, got to cover ground for  
Mound Bayou, that's the town I'm bound for!  
Wish my arms were long enough, here's what I'd do,  
I'd reach and wrap them gently round my Mound Bayou!

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Carter, Hodding. "Example In Concrete". *The Delta Democrat-Times*, February 11, 1942, 2.

<sup>58</sup> "A.M.E. Connection Sponsoring Model Community in N.J.". *The New York Age*, February 21, 1942, 12.

Mound Bayou, I can hear you callin'!

All my friends are lucky to be way back there,

If they knew what I've been through, they'd stay back there!<sup>59</sup>

As was the case with Howard's success, Mound Bayou's new growth was dependent upon health care, particularly mutual-aid health care, embodied by the Taborian Hospital itself.

### *The Taborian Hospital and Mutual-Aid Health Care*

The 40-bed hospital was funded and constructed by an African American fraternal order, the Knights and Daughter of Tabor (a name derived from a Galilean site mentioned multiple times in the Old Testament). The Tabors, a national order founded in 1872 by a freed slave, had all the trappings of a fraternal order similar to the Freemasons, complete with prescribed costume and ritual, but more importantly they served a financial purpose for the black community: the provision of both burial and health insurance, the latter (for black Mississippians, at least) centered on the Mound Bayou hospital. The hospital itself was the brainchild of "chief grand mentor" and Mound Bayou native Perry M. Smith, who saw in the hospital not just increased health opportunities for oppressed Deltans but also a locus for the cause of greater membership.<sup>60</sup> The fraternal hospital was not the first of its kind in the Delta; the Afro-American Sons and Daughters, an organization similar to the Tabors, established a hospital in the Delta border town of Yazoo City in the 1920s. Yet the health care situation in the Delta remained dire; 1929 saw a mere six hospitals in the entire state that would offer charity care; Bolivar County, MS, home to Mound Bayou, could at the time only offer twenty beds allotted to blacks, serving a county

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<sup>59</sup> Lyrics, "Mound Bayou". lyricsplayground.com.

<sup>60</sup> Beito 2000, 183.

African American population of 52,000.<sup>61</sup> The introduction of the Taborian Hospital, with its central Delta location, served a distinct need in the black community; the numbers of participants in the Taborian insurance program grew rapidly and had a draw from across the Delta, even reaching northern cities as Howard's and the hospital's reputation spread. The numbers are impressive: 25,000 members in 1942, growing to 47,000 in just three years. An annual fee of \$8.40 per adult (in 1940s dollars) entitled the policy holder to 31 days of hospitalization, minor surgery, and a \$200 death benefit for burials. Policies for children were priced at \$1.20, with comparable benefits.<sup>62</sup> On occasion, the policy was paid and maintained by plantation bosses, usually deducted from sharecropper earnings at the annual settlement. The plan of the fraternal hospital thus was favored by both the black and white communities, both glad for the policy affordability and the quality of care offered.<sup>63</sup>

The effect of the hospital on both the Delta, Bolivar county particularly, and the Taborian order was distinct. For the former, hospital membership in the county was such that it can be fairly said that in the same period measured above, from 1942-1945, a clear majority of black residents of Bolivar county were paying Tabor members and thus had ready and available health care.<sup>64</sup> Three surrounding Delta counties also had high membership rates, and statewide, membership mushroomed, as noted above. This was the effect the hospital had on the order: it was a rousing success and breathed new membership life into the order nationwide. Patient policy at the hospital was notably liberal; while people came to the hospital with a variety of

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<sup>61</sup> Beito, David T. and Linda Royster Beito. "Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are: The Afro-American Hospital and Black Health care in Mississippi, 1924-1966". *Social Science History*, 2006, 551.

<sup>62</sup> Beito, David T. "Black Fraternal Hospitals in the Mississippi Delta, 1942-1967". *The Journal of Southern History*, 1999, 109.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>64</sup> Beito 2000, 186.

complaints, including minor ones, overuse of the hospital's resources was not decried. Indeed, the open-door policy was advertised:

“Don't stay at home until you are down and out, then come to the hospital. Remember, a stitch in time saves nine. Our medical staff is efficient but God alone can do the impossible”.<sup>65</sup>

Smith was making sure that the “timber to build Tabor” (that is, the membership in the insurance program) was carefully chosen, not too old or infirm. Still, as one Taborian head nurse, Louella Thurmond, noted, the insurance policy application included “a few health questions but it didn't seem to hinder anyone from joining.”<sup>66</sup> This heavy taxation of hospital resources did come at a cost, however, one which Howard both worked to profit from and alleviate with his establishment of the initially complementary, but quickly competing, Friendship Clinic, detailed below. Howard's “solution” to an expanded health care reach would be his undoing with the Tabors.

### ***Howard's Economic Advances***

Quickly, over the course of just a few years after his arrival in Mound Bayou (most notably, in the four years before Hodding Carter wrote his *Saturday Evening Post* portrait of Howard in 1946), Howard expanded his community presence beyond the hospital itself. He established a nightclub, The Green Parrot Inn, meant to provide a social outlet for his wife in the relative obscurity of the Delta. Howard, who during his time at Loma Linda had been a prize

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

orator for a local temperance union, justified his ownership of a “dancing pavilion” and “beer garden” by requiring that beer only be sold with food, and only for as long as the Green Parrot was able to present itself as a “healthy” alternative to the ubiquitous Delta juke joint.<sup>67</sup>

Additionally he developed a public zoo, a community swimming pool (a first for Delta blacks), a parcel of newly-built and reasonably-priced housing, and a 1300-acre farm with its own allotment of prize livestock and tenant farmers.<sup>68</sup> His home was a point of pride, “the showplace of Mound Bayou”.<sup>69</sup> Howard’s investments in the Mound Bayou community established him as a successful and somewhat philanthropic Deltan; make no mistake, his primary concern, at least in the 1940s, was his own affluence, but he simultaneously provided impressive community services in the Delta town, services that would earn him the esteem of the region’s black residents while being, at least for a while, largely ignored by whites. It was not long, however, before Howard would overstep his bounds and challenge Taborian leadership, a move that resulted in his break from the Tabors and the development of new, Howard-led health care alternatives for African American Mississippians.

The original conflict surrounded Howard’s establishment of The Friendship Clinic in the Green Parrot Inn building, directly across Mound Bayou’s Main Street from the Taborian Hospital. Initially, Howard used the clinic as an entryway to the hospital, controversial in that patients who were not admitted to the hospital were charged a dollar for their visit. Clearly, this violated the Taborian insurance promises, leading to a confrontation with the heads of the

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<sup>67</sup> Humes, H.H. “Mound Bayou in Bolivar County Is Exclusive Negro Town of the Delta”. *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, December 31, 1943, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Feldman, Glenn. *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Ratcliffe, Robert M. “No Longer a Ghost Town”. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 22, 1954, 13.

organization. When, in 1946, Howard directly challenged Taborian leaders in a failed coup\*, the Tabors summarily dismissed from his duties at the hospital. This event spurred rather than hampered Howard's continued economic presence in the Delta, as he promptly established a fraternal order of his own, The United Order of Friendship (UOF), which offered comparable health care coverage using the growing Friendship Clinic. Order membership, drawn largely from established Tabors, would top 5,000, with 149 lodges throughout the region, by the end of the year.<sup>70</sup>

Howard's community leadership and economic prowess continued to grow, giving him the authority and personal power that would impress Delta blacks and increasingly confound Delta whites. Howard's purchase of The Magnolia Mutual Insurance Company, already established in Mound Bayou, further broadened his regional influence.<sup>71</sup> When Howard does appear in literature concerning the Delta and the early civil rights effort, it principally is regarding his relationship with future NAACP Mississippi field secretary Medgar Evers. A combination of Howard's mentorship aimed at developing Evers' organizational skills and the pavement-pounding work of selling Magnolia Mutual policies across the Delta created in Evers the racial awareness and organizing prowess that would serve him well in the NAACP. As noted in the introduction to Myrlie Evers' *Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, Medgar's experience as an insurance salesman in the Delta was eye-opening in itself, revealing to him not only the condition of poor blacks in the region, but also demonstrating the modest empowerment made available in the purchase of insurance policies:

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\* After being threatened by Taborian Grand Mentor and Mound Bayou native Perry M. Smith regarding the Friendship Clinic, Howard turned and challenged Smith's leadership directly, forcing a vote among Taborian leaders that would fall far short of Howard's wishes.

<sup>70</sup> Beito 1999, 109.

<sup>71</sup> Feldman 2004.

Medgar could scarcely believe the incredible poverty and backwardness of the Delta region. “That experience gave him his real taste of poverty on the plantations,” Myrlie now reflects, “He said to me, ‘At least I can call these people Mr. and Mrs. I can give them a sense of dignity. I can help them when they need to escape’”.<sup>72</sup>

In a final interview, published in *The New Amsterdam (NY) News*, Medgar further details Howard’s influence and his growing focus on equality:

[Evers] said that of all the people he met who impressed him and encouraged him to join [sic] the company in Mound Bayou and that much of Howard’s crusading for the Negro’s equal rights rubbed off from him.<sup>73</sup>

Myrlie, separately, said of Howard himself,

One look told you that he was a leader: kind, affluent, and intelligent, that rare Negro in Mississippi who had somehow beaten the system.<sup>74</sup>

Howard delivered a eulogy at Evers’ funeral, noting his pioneering work in Mound Bayou and calling for increased membership in the NAACP.<sup>75</sup>

### ***Howard and Mound Bayou’s All-Black VA Hospital***

A distinct separatism colors Howard’s initial development, an amplification of the pragmatic model he received in his Adventist training, and an amplification of the Washingtonian principles of both his education and his environment. In addition to Tri-State, it is

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<sup>72</sup> Evers-Williams, Myrlie and Manning Marable. *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Slack, Sara. “The Last Interview with Medgar Evers”. *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 29, 1963, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Evers-Williams, Myrlie and William Peters. *For Us the Living*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967, 76.

<sup>75</sup> Howard, T.R.M. “Eulogy for Medgar Evers”, June 15, 1963. Available at archive.org.

also important to consider at this point Howard's promotion of an all-black VA hospital for Mound Bayou, started in 1945. The proposed federally-funded hospital, large enough to house 100 beds, was perceived as a new opportunity by Howard, and he slyly maneuvered among and manipulated the segregationist tendencies of Mississippi governmental officials as he lobbied for the hospital. These officials were indeed power-players; Howard, by appealing to their racist and segregationist sentiments, skillfully led these men in Mississippi government toward his case for the construction of the hospital in Mound Bayou, where it would naturally fall under his sphere of influence. Among those he communicated with directly (a privilege granted by his reputation as a Delta leader) were the virulently racist Mississippi congressmen Theodore "The Man" Bilbo and House Judiciary Committee Chair John Rankin.<sup>76</sup> Howard also canvassed lesser Mississippi figures, such as Mississippi House Speaker Walter Sillers. Howard's maneuverings were adept; he balanced his own segregationist thought against that of the white officials, letting them perceive his efforts as playing into white segregationist hands while carefully engineering a decision that would work to his benefit. What better plan for a black hospital, he argued, than to place it in an all-black community? (Principally white McComb, MS, in the southern part of the state, was also under consideration, primarily because it fell within Rankin's legislative district, despite white resistance and the presence of limiting policies such as a curfew for African American residents.) Hodding Carter editorialized in agreement, "since the hospital is going to be for Negroes, we think it altogether proper that it should be established in a town for Negroes" and, acknowledging Howard's leadership, averred that whites would benefit from the economic boon of the VA hospital, as well, "the economic improvement of the Negro inevitably means the improvement of all of us who live here".<sup>77</sup> There was plenty of resistance to the segregated

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<sup>76</sup> Feldman 2004.

<sup>77</sup> Carter, Hodding. "Mound Bayou or McComb?" *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, April 18, 1946, 4.

hospital in a segregated community, and not just from local whites, as stated by *The Chicago Defender* (note the negative Washingtonian characterization):

Why send Negro ex-soldiers from Northern cities...down into the wilderness of Dixie hate to be Jim Crowed and humiliated at segregated institutions like Tuskegee Veterans' hospital? The Northern Negro soldier has suffered enough during this war without being forced to go South...<sup>78</sup>

Although the federal government eventually cancelled the project outright, through no fault of Howard's, his efforts reveal an astute understanding of the segregationist mindset. A telegram from Rankin to Sillers dated June 7, 1945 demonstrates Howard's direct communication with the influential senator, and the positive response his communication received:

I have a telegram from a Negro doctor by the name of Howard at Mound Bayou asking that the all Negro veterans hospital to be built somewhere in our section of the south be located at Mound Bayo [sic]. Since this is to be an all Negro hospital with Negro patients, Negro doctors and Negro nurses, it seems to me it shoudp [sic] go to a Negro town or Negro community in order to avoid friction. I am anxious to have this all Negro hospital established because the lack of segregation in some hospitals is causing friction.<sup>79</sup>

Sillers, initially sold on the Mound Bayou program ("an ideal place for this hospital", he would tell Rankin initially<sup>80</sup>), withdrew support just a few days after receiving the Rankin telegram once he was informed of white resistance to the hospital within Mound Bayou's neighboring communities (Marigold and Shelby, MS, specifically). The subsequent communication between

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<sup>78</sup> "Is Jim Crow the Only Way?" *The Chicago Defender*, December 22, 1945, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Personal Correspondence, John Rankin to Walter Sillers, June 7, 1945.

<sup>80</sup> Personal Correspondence, Walter Sillers to John Rankin, June 8, 1945.

Sillers and Rankin, however awkwardly written, reveals the hostile, racist, and segregationist atmosphere in which Howard was working:

In view of this opposition that has arisen, and the further fact of the agitation from the north and the ideologies, social equality, equal rights and God knows what all, sponsored by the New Deal administration, Mrs. Roosevelt, the association to advance the interest of colored people, and many other organizations, I am doubtful about the wisdom of locating this hospital in Bolivar County.<sup>81</sup>

For nearly two years (1945-47) Howard lobbied for the hospital's placement in Mound Bayou, using his own segregationist tendencies (of the time) to work in collusion with racist white officials in the attainment of his goal. While the hospital never made it further than governmental wrangling, Howard's concerted effort demonstrates the firm and mature segregationist attitude that would be his near trademark until his turn toward an inclusive integrationism in the period between *Brown* and the Emmett Till event, explored in subsequent sections.

Here the fairly linear narrative of Howard's development of an economic empire, hardly modest by Delta standards, combines with Booker T. Washington's influence on the Mound Bayou environment. Having come up through the Tuskegee-influenced Adventist educational system, Howard was familiar with at least that manifestation of Washington's self-reliance philosophy, filtered as it was through Adventist causes such as health and well-being. In Mound Bayou, an African American Delta town that actively and explicitly reflects the instruction of Washington, Howard found a near-perfect milieu for impressive financial gain and sociopolitical pull. Howard was far from a Washingtonian accommodationist because of his separatist

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<sup>81</sup> Personal Correspondence, Walter Sillers to John Rankin, June 8, 1945 (2).

tendencies, but it is upon the lessons of Washington, again received through the bibliocentric Adventist lens, that Howard builds. Without his foundation in Mound Bayou, Howard would have been unable to effectively enter the realm of race politics; there would be no RCNL, no boycotts, no financial support for those suffering the economic pressures of the Citizens' Councils, no influence on statewide educational decisions, and no involvement in the prosecution of Emmett Till's killers. Howard's activism, including the inclusive turn he would take after *Brown*, relied on his social cachet among Delta blacks and the eventual grudging respect of Delta whites. The period between his arrival in Mound Bayou in 1942 and the establishment of the RCNL in 1951 saw impressive growth in Howard's material holdings; without this base, future efforts would have likely had a decreased influence verging on futility.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
THE REGIONAL COUNCIL FOR NEGRO LEADERSHIP

*The fight in Mississippi will be won by the little man in overalls.* (T.R.M. Howard)<sup>82</sup>

December of 1951 found Howard leveraging his skill, economic power, significant by then, and social cachet in a formal organizing effort for the black community of the Delta. Howard formed the Regional Council for Negro Leadership (RCNL) as a black counterpart to the white Delta Council. The Delta Council was not overtly involved in racial issues in the region; it acted (and, still in existence, acts) as a business-promoting and -advising body, particularly for agricultural concerns. It is a non-profit advisory body, similar in nature to a chamber of commerce, endorsed and chartered by Mississippi's Secretary of State in 1935.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, the Council was significantly less ideological or political than it was economically focused, a statement that must be measured against the fact that it was designed to create and maintain Jim Crow capital. This economic pragmatism meshed well with Howard's egalitarian, yet still distinctly separatist, aims; he moved forward with the RCNL toward the goal of creating a cross-racial partnership with the Delta Council. In this, he was mistaken.

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<sup>82</sup> "Little Man Will Win Fight, Says Miss. Doctor". The (Los Angeles) California Eagle, August 11, 1955, 1.

<sup>83</sup> "Delta Council". [deltacouncil.com](http://deltacouncil.com).

### *The RCNL, Commercial Egalitarianism, and the White Delta Council*

An editorial in the (*Memphis, TN Commercial Appeal*), dated just days before the first meetings of the nascent black Delta council, praised Howard's new organizational endeavor and foresaw a bright future,

This body's aim will be to improve the economic and educational conditions of members of the Negro race in the fertile alluvial plain. Dr. T.R.M. Howard, who has won international acclaim for his efforts to improve health conditions among Negroes in the region, will be one of the leaders; he has assurances from Maury Knowlton, president of the Delta Council, that there will be cooperation and encouragement from that quarter.<sup>84</sup>

The editors spoke to soon, as "cooperation and encouragement" from the extant whites-only Delta Council was hardly forthcoming, withheld under the shallowest of pretenses. The conflict between the RCNL and the Delta Council began as simply as a misjudgment on Howard's part in naming the organization the *Delta Council for Negro Leadership*. The similarity of the name of Howard's organization to the white Delta Council, an egalitarian gesture on the part of Howard, was met with the firm resistance of council president Maury S. Knowlton. Howard, upon receiving word of the objection, quickly changed the name, first to the Progressive Council for Negro Leadership before formalizing the organization as the RCNL.<sup>85</sup> Correspondence between Howard and Knowlton in late 1951 is revelatory; Howard, in an effort to appease the council official and disengage any sense of racial threat, stated clearly to Knowlton the aims of his organization. Note that at this point the focus continues in the spirit of Howard's earlier racial pragmatism, segregationist and separatist with the establishment of parallel, black economic and

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<sup>84</sup> Editorial, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, December 19, 1951.

<sup>85</sup> Personal Correspondence, T.R.M. Howard to Maury Knowlton, n.d. (December 1961).

social structures. The main point for Howard remains “separate but *really* equal”, reflected in the initial naming of the organization, and in the lack of any direct demands for inclusivity in Howard’s presentation of the RCNL’s goals to Knowlton; the initial correspondence with Knowlton, an invitation to attend and address the organizational meeting of the still-misnamed RCNL, clearly presents a non-threatening, practical partnership proposal with segregated but essentially equal footing on both sides of the color line (see in particular the civic religiosity of the last sentence):

If the chosen leaders of the masses in Mississippi get together in a great organization through whose committees, working with the white Delta Council and other proper agencies in our State and Nation, we may arrive at a solution to most of our problems. This will lead us into the more abundant life.<sup>86</sup>

Howard’s second letter to Knowlton, sent after Knowlton expressed his displeasure with the organization’s name, further promotes a white-black partnership on equal but separate terms. Among the “problems” referenced in this letter is the continued loss of black Delta population to the North, while the “problems” of Jim Crow and barriers to full black participation in the political process garner, at this early point, no prolonged attention. Racial disparity under Jim Crow is acknowledged, but with no call for inclusion beyond a slight reference to voting rights; inequality in education is also listed, foreshadowing Howard’s and the RCNL’s involvement in Mississippi’s response to the *Brown* decision, but he never alluded anything further, particularly not education desegregation.<sup>87</sup> I would thus argue, as an extension of existing Howard scholarship, that the RCNL was not from the outset an organization directly promoting the black

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<sup>86</sup> Personal Correspondence, T.R.M. Howard to Maury Knowlton, December 17, 1951 (1).

<sup>87</sup> Personal Correspondence, T.R.M. Howard to Maury Knowlton, December 17, 1951 (2).

franchise *in practice*. Yes, voting and registration does appear as the second point of the RCNL's initial fourteen-point plan, but in action their voting rights activity was initially minimal, or at least not outspoken or directly confrontational.<sup>88</sup> Rather, as can be seen in both the local and black national press, voter's rights did not come to be regularly associated with the RCNL until two to three years after its foundation.<sup>89</sup> What began as segregationist shifted to integration and inclusion, but only as part of a gradual process, a "partnership basis":

I believe, Mr. Knowlton, that you will agree that the many complex problems can best be worked out by leaders of both [black and white] groups sitting down at a council table and working them out together... Where there is a sincere desire on the part of the leaders of both groups to bring about better relationship between the two groups, this can be accomplished on a partnership basis.<sup>90</sup>

Two days after the initial organizational meeting of the nascent RCNL, Delta Council manager B.F. Smith addressed an unaffiliated African American group, stating plainly that the RCNL was largely superfluous, and that the multi-point plan of the white council for the development of black Deltans (a public park, modest educational reform, the construction of new medical facilities, and the training of health care personnel) was sufficient.<sup>91</sup> Knowlton did accept Howard's invitation to speak at the RCNL's initial meeting, but, using the naming controversy as a fairly transparent excuse, did not offer the Delta Council's support for RCNL causes and explicitly refuses to endorse RCNL activity, present and future. Knowlton's prepared response is notably sober, sidestepping the race issue while continuing to focus on the harm done

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<sup>88</sup> "Mississippi Leaders Make Broad Gains in School Reforms". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 1, 1952, 20.

<sup>89</sup> Feldman 2004, 79.

<sup>90</sup> Howard to Knowlton, n.d. (December 1951).

<sup>91</sup> Tens, Bob. "Smith Explains Council's Work to Negro Group". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, December 28, 1951, 1.

by the similar organizational names, but a hand-written addendum on the back of the speech itself, presumably read or referenced by Knowlton during his RCNL speech, reveals a truer cause for the white Delta Council's reticence, speaking more honestly for white fears in the face of black organizing in the Delta:

Because [sic] your statements of aims and objectives, the first purpose [of the RCNL] is political. We cannot therefore bless your org[anization] or give it our unqualified endorsement.<sup>92</sup>

It was fear of black political power, not a dispute over names, that fueled Knowlton's and the white Council's rejection of RCNL egalitarian, cooperative advances. Howard's stated desire for a black/white partnership falls very short in its early days, significantly out of white fear of black political organizing. It was important for the survival of the organization that it not, at the outset at least, be perceived as such.

### ***Growth of the RCNL as a Political Entity***

The RCNL, under Howard's leadership, grew quickly, despite the resistance from the white establishment. The initial meeting of 100 (sometimes reported as 200) Delta black leaders, representing all 18 Delta counties<sup>93</sup>, was quickly complemented by a larger public meeting held in Mound Bayou; the gathering would become, beginning in 1952, an annual event that lasted throughout the decade; thousands of Delta blacks would be attracted to the array of speakers ranging from Archibald Carey to Thurgood Marshall, vast amounts of food, and variety of entertainment that made up the annual meetings; despite attention given to the speakers, these

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<sup>92</sup> Knowlton, Maury. Speech before RCNL Leadership (handwritten notation), December 28, 1951.

<sup>93</sup> "Negro Leaders to Organize Friday". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, December 26, 1951, 2.

meetings were times of collective celebration as much as collective action or the formation of policy.<sup>94</sup> It is interesting, though hardly surprising, to note that coverage of the RCNL's early years in the newspapers is largely limited to these annual events. Still, reporting on and editorializing about the RCNL mass meetings was, particularly in the national black press, positive and energetic. Reporting on the second, 1952 RCNL rally, *The Pittsburgh Courier* presented a full spread of photographs of the large tents set up for the thousands in attendance, with lively captions like "Mound Bayou was in gay holiday spirit for the big event," and "Dr. Howard, a forceful leader and orator, sparkplugged the program".<sup>95</sup> The message of the keynote speaker of the same meeting, Illinois Congressman William Dawson (the first black congressman to speak in Mississippi since Reconstruction), resonated with the black press; after praising Howard as "one of the greatest Americans of all time", Dawson gave a rousing speech:

With thousands of serious-minded Mississippi Negroes listening in rapt attention to some of the soundest advice they have heard in almost three-quarters of a century, [Dawson] sounded a clarion call...saying "Let's stop getting mad, and start getting smart!"<sup>96</sup>

That line would echo in the black press across the country, indicating that the real effect of the RCNL and Howard's organizing activities was not going to be pragmatic, economic, agricultural, or cooperative; instead, the RCNL (meeting the fears of Maury Knowlton), grew as a political enemy to entrenched white supremacy.

Yet for all the forward political movement it was seeing, the RCNL was still grounded in the economic savvy of Howard and other black professionals in leadership, apparent in the early

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<sup>94</sup> Beito and Beito 2009.

<sup>95</sup> "Mound Bayou, Mississippi: Scene of Equal Rights Rally". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 24, 1952, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Ratcliffe, Robert M. "Don't Get Mad, Just Get Smart". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 10, 1952, 1.

activity of the organization, particularly in the 1952 “Don’t Buy Gas Where You Can’t Use the Restroom” bumper-sticker boycott. The campaign was largely considered a success despite strident white resistance, not insofar as it led to changes among white station owners, but rather in the increased black patronage of black businesses, including service stations (like that of Cleveland activist and future NAACP leader Amzie Moore).<sup>97</sup> *The Delta Democrat-Times* decried the boycott, acting as apologist for the service station owner who can’t or doesn’t want to spend money on extra facilities for customers he doesn’t necessarily want or need, found problems with the wording of the sticker itself, “that would seem to demand *more than equal facilities*”.<sup>98</sup> This development is consistent with Howard’s message of black business-based uplift presented as far back as his early 1930s column for the *Eagle*.<sup>99</sup> The response to racial disparity in commerce is, for Howard and his RCNL supporters, increased economic segregation in the use of the African American dollar.

By mid-decade, RCNL activity concerning equal access to the vote, and the idea of the strong black vote, was becoming central to the organization. It is important to consider at this point what we can garner regarding Howard’s and the RCNL’s attitude toward the vote, because there is a singular, and again very pragmatic, view of the political franchise taken here. Unlike later activities in the black freedom struggle in the American South, Howard did not attach the franchise to concepts of freedom or even a generalized citizenship. For Howard, the vote was practical, political power that was to be wielded by a collective black community for their interests. In this, he needed only look outside his window at Mound Bayou, which elected its

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<sup>97</sup> Feldman 2004, 87-88.

<sup>98</sup> Carter, Hodding. “A Sticker That Doesn’t Help”. *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, September 14, 1952, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Howard, T.R.M. “Negro in the Light of History”. *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, February 23, 1934.

own officials, within and for itself, with the blessing of the Jim Crow political structure. As with the case of the California nurses cited above, Howard was well aware of the power of the vote,

The Negro's only weapon is his vote. Fellow citizens, we have no other method of defense in this republic.<sup>100</sup>

Howard, too, long recognized that this power had been denied southern blacks.<sup>101</sup> Once involved in RCNL organization and activism, Howard's response to voting rights disparities was not immediately confrontational. Rather, just as his *Eagle* columns presaged, he was pragmatic, seeking gains where they are available, such as in the self-governance of Mound Bayou. Nonetheless, the RCNL's mission in the critical 1954-1955 span indeed did turn its focus to registration, voting, and addressing the injustices of the poll tax and the literacy test. Never did the RCNL use directly oppositional tactics like those that would characterize the registration drives of the years that follow, but it can be said that the RCNL, characterized by Hodding Carter as a "home grown NAACP"<sup>102</sup>, followed in the footsteps of its larger forebear in that it would seek to take the battle over voting rights to the courts and would raise funds accordingly.<sup>103</sup> And, always, the focus was upon a separate, cooperatively autonomous, economically independent black community.

Still, Howard's separatist economic savvy and leadership prowess made itself manifest, even when considering the organizational effort of the RCNL, most directly and effectively along business lines, or rather at the intersections where economics and politics meet. The

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<sup>100</sup> Howard, T.R.M. "Our Fight". *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, June 29, 1934.

<sup>101</sup> Howard, T.R.M. "Negro in the Light of History". *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, September 15, 1933.

<sup>102</sup> Carter, Hodding. "Turnabout". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, February 4, 1955, 4.

<sup>103</sup> "Negro Group Plans Fund to Increase Registered Voters". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, April 27, 1954, 1.

importance of Howard's economic power in the years between the foundation of the RCNL and his flight to Chicago after his involvement with the Emmett Till event can hardly be understated. It is worthwhile here to explore Howard's involvement with the Tri-State Bank, an African American bank in Memphis, where Howard sat as vice president, as it appears at the time of the *Brown* decision, which would mark a turning point for Howard and the RCNL. At issue here was the creation of the White Citizens' Councils in 1954 as a white supremacist establishment response to *Brown*. The RCNL is examined closely in the next section, but Tri-State should be mentioned here as a close link between Howard's economic strength (and black public regard) and his activism, the first fueling the possibilities of the second. Tri-State, supported with funds collected in the North (including under the auspices of the NAACP<sup>104</sup>) as well as the South (urged on by the RCNL, four Mississippi black fraternal orders switched funds to Tri-State, including the Tabors<sup>105</sup>), offered to Mississippi blacks a needed alternative in the face of Citizens' Council pressure, the white-collar Klan which by design took an economic, instead of violent, form. As the Councils called in loans and mortgages, or simply refused loans to those African Americans who dared to exercise their franchise or associate with the NAACP and RCNL, Tri-State offered a reasonable, necessary alternative, keeping many black Mississippians afloat financially despite the power of the Citizens' Councils.<sup>106</sup> Howard's economic pull via racial leadership was not limited to Tri-State, as the RCNL bumper sticker boycott demonstrated.

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<sup>104</sup> "Support Pledged Negroes Facing Economic Boycott". *The (York, PA) Gazette and Daily*, December 21, 1954, 34.

<sup>105</sup> Wilson, L. Alex. "May Pull Millions From Miss. Banks". *The Chicago Defender*, January 15, 1955, 1.

<sup>106</sup> Beito and Beito 2009.

### *Changes at Mid-Decade*

Howard and the RCNL faced in the middle of the decade two distinct challenges that introduced a first wave of racial inclusivity to the organization. The first was the response of Mississippi officials to the *Brown* decision, embodied by governor Hugh White's proposal of white/black school equalization (at the significant expense of the Mississippi taxpayers) or, barring that, the outright abolition of the public education system in the state. This instance, detailed below, marked a distinct move away from RCNL/Howard segregationist practice and a distinct change in Howard's political action. The second challenge that brought Howard and the RCNL into the public eye was the Emmett Till controversy. In this case, the change was in the perception of the organization's goals. The northern black press (*The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Chicago Defender*) increasingly wrote of the RCNL as a voting rights group during the Till period<sup>107</sup>, accurately representing a public organizational stance that was (just as Knowlton feared) an overtly political force for black participation in the voting process and broader racial inclusion. Howard's involvement in the Till case nonetheless indicated a return to equality-focused segregationist pragmatism, a focus on equal treatment under the law. This forwards/backwards movement along the inclusionist-segregationist continuum was common in the volatile atmosphere of the year between May of 1954 (*Brown*) and August-September of 1955 (the Till event). Representative of this volatile atmosphere was Howard's involvement in post-*Brown* educational policy in Mississippi, detailed in the next section. Howard controversially endorsed educational integration (as opposed to school equalization), presented at the meeting of a number of black leaders with Mississippi's governor.<sup>108</sup> Governor White,

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<sup>107</sup> "Mother's Tears Greet Son Who Died A Martyr". *The Chicago Defender*, September 10, 1955, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Howard, T.R.M. Speech Before Governor Hugh White, July 30, 1954.

misjudging a base of support among black leadership for the equalization program, was surprised and responded sternly to Howard's and the RCNL's endorsement of integration in Mississippi's educational system. Concurrent with Howard's rejection of the governor's plan, press statements from the RCNL (which shared the front pages of Delta newspapers with NAACP condemnations of continued school segregation) encouraged continued segregation and equalization, or at least only the very slow movement toward integration in the state.<sup>109</sup> This dichotomy represents well the uncertainty in Mississippi in the months following *Brown*; Mississippi blacks, along with resistant whites, struggled to be consistent in policy positions and public pronouncements.

In the statements and activities of Howard and the RCNL there was a foundational consistency, one which is again an echo of the racial structures Howard learned under the care of the Adventists; true inclusion/integration is the goal, and that goal is foremost. This also entailed a belief that true integration cannot be acquired, was indeed impossible, without there first being a revival within the black community focusing on community economic growth and stability. And if that revival, just as the Adventists stated about the propagation of the gospels, required racial segregation in order to develop efficiently, then so be it. The RCNL represents the height of Howard's organizational efforts in the Delta. The quest for a practical, business-centered partnership with the white Delta Council, at the core of the RCNL's initial public policy, characterizes the organization's early positions. Challenges faced by Howard and the RCNL, namely the aftermath of the *Brown* decision and the Emmett Till event influenced the development of desegregationist policy in the RCNL. This inclusionist shift was not a refutation of the segregationism, akin to that of the Adventist evangelists, that Howard experienced during

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<sup>109</sup> "Delta Negro Group Decides Not to Push Integration" The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times, June 6, 1955, 1.

his unique education and would practice in Mound Bayou, but is rather an extension, a next step, toward the inclusive, fully racially integrated ideal. As stated, the events that punctuated the RCNL's lifetime were moments of intense racial positioning and the negotiation of Jim Crow racial norms; it is remarkable to note that, within these negotiations, Howard's racial/political/economic stance remained remarkably steady, grounded demonstrably in Washingtonian racial codes learned from Adventist sources, despite shifts in the racial continuum of the turbulent Delta.

Howard fled the Delta in 1956 (after publicly preparing for the move beginning in late 1955) due to increased white pressure following his involvement in the Till case.<sup>110</sup> After this point, with RCNL leadership having shifted to Clarksdale's NAACP activist Aaron Henry, the black franchise and an integrated educational system moved to the fore, firmly associating RCNL policy with inclusive integrationism. Nonetheless, without Howard at the helm locally, the RCNL faltered. Annual meetings, which earlier in the decade attracted up to 10,000 attendees, moved away from Mound Bayou (and away from the Delta) and decreased significantly in size.<sup>111</sup> The RCNL's influence also waned gradually, and in 1961 the organization made its last appearance in the press, an editorial on increasing numbers of black Mississippi voters.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> "Howard Eyes Chicago". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1956, 3.

<sup>111</sup> "Negro Group to Meet Here to Map Out CR Complaints". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, January 25, 1960, 1.

<sup>112</sup> "Negro Voters Increase in State Is Civil Rights Officials Report". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, October 1, 1961, 4.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
THE *BROWN* DECISION AND SCHOOL EQUALIZATION IN MISSISSIPPI

*The Negro citizens of Mississippi realize that this segregation issue strikes at the heart of all the South has stood for ever since there was a South. (T.R.M. Howard)<sup>113</sup>*

When discussing “the *Brown* decision” that called for the end of the legal practice of school segregation, the meaning of that term is set to be inclusive not only of the event of May 17, 1954 but also of the months leading up to that date, which saw a spate of political posturing in the national and Mississippi regional press on both sides of the segregation line, and in Mississippi for the full year that followed, it was a period when the state reeled under conflicting, often violently conflicting, racial positions. Howard’s and the RCNL’s involvement with *Brown* in the Delta indeed begins months before the Supreme Court action, demonstrated in distinctly different position statements made in the local and black national press. Prior to *Brown*, Howard and the RCNL held a public line within the South that emphasized equality, not integration, in education<sup>114</sup>, while simultaneously issuing statements in the black press that indicated a possible call for immediate enforcement of a favorable court decision. The culmination of this period, however, comes three months post-decision, in July of 1954; Howard, along with and speaking for other black Mississippi leaders, rebuffed Mississippi governor Hugh White’s educational

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<sup>113</sup> “Voluntary Segregation Hope Fade as Negro Leaders Emphatically Reject Whole Idea”. *The Clarksdale (MS) Press Register*, July 31, 1954, 1.

<sup>114</sup> “Negroes to Follow Lead of U.S. Supreme Court”. *The Clarksdale (MS) Press Register*, November 4, 1953, 1.

plan of continued segregation, insisting instead on nothing short of full school integration statewide. This was a distinct moment for Howard when his racial practice eschewed any acceptance of segregation, even segregation with equity, taking instead a firm inclusionist/integrationist stance. This is not a reversal of Howard's prior pragmatic segregationist approach, but rather an outgrowth of that very same pragmatism, a recognition that at that particular moment (before the governor) and with his level of leadership prowess, community respect, and economic influence, the time was right for a desegregationist move. The point to emphasize here is Howard's focused practical approach — black political power is based in black economic power; now that the latter has been achieved (in Mound Bayou), the former can be broached.

### ***Howard, Gov. Hugh White, and School Equalization in Mississippi***

Public challenges, or at least threats of public challenges, to the state segregation of schools and to Mississippi governmental authorities came from various national and Mississippi organizations, the NAACP most notably, for years prior to the *Brown* decision. Note, for instance, a 1952 story in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, on the preparations for legal action against Gov. White and Mississippi House Leader Sillers made by Rev. H.H. Humes, head of the Mississippi Negro Baptist Convention and an open rival of Howard's.<sup>115</sup> Two years before *Brown*, and just months before the RCNL would issue its first platform, with education equality (*not* integration) at the top of the list, it can be seen that public rhetoric and legal action regarding school desegregation in Mississippi was already in motion, and that a variety of leaders in the state were already positioning themselves for and against the eventual desegregationist decision.

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<sup>115</sup> "Mississippi Delta Leaders"

Assuming that the RCNL would support voluntary segregation on the basis of school equality, Gov. White had every reason to believe that Howard and those leaders under Howard's sway would support his school equalization plan, given that the only other option presented was the statewide shut-down of all public schools, black and white. The RCNL, now looking at school integration in a manner similar to their other social concerns, endorsed a moderate approach that featured interracial cooperation, a position echoed by NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall in the keynote speech at the 1954 RCNL rally just days before the Supreme Court decision.<sup>116</sup> By appealing to the pro-segregationist sentiment present among both races at the time, White was certain he would be able to garner enough public support for the implementation of school equalization. His plan was endorsed by a number of black Mississippi leaders, although not Howard. As White stated in an interview one month prior to the meeting, "I'm very much pleased as far as the Negroes are concerned."<sup>117</sup> White's position was a barometer of the time — Mississippi opposition to school desegregation was so fervent that proposing a \$40 million tax bill, white money to be spent on black schools, was seen as more politically viable than supporting integration in any form or at any speed. In White's mind, school equalization was less an evasion of new desegregationist law than a cooperation with the spirit of the law and, ultimately, a gift to the black people of Mississippi. Again, he had every reason, by this logic, of expecting widespread black support.

The meeting between Gov. White, Howard, and a number of other African American leaders from across the state, which Howard advertised as a meeting to "work out the segregation

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<sup>116</sup> "NAACP Leader Says Segregation On Way Out in the South". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, May 7, 1954, 2.

<sup>117</sup> "White Says Negro Group to Cooperate", *The Clarksdale (MS) Press Register*, July 1, 1954, 1.

problem”<sup>118</sup>, convened on July 30, 1954. Howard, a gifted and recognized orator, nonetheless rarely spoke extemporaneously. For his speech before Gov. White, as was his habit, he had a prepared statement. Howard was careful in this, so as to avoid being misquoted or having statements exaggerated. Despite openly refuting the governor, Howard’s speech also offered an olive branch that came to separate the RCNL’s position on school desegregation further from that of the NAACP. There is no general call on Howard’s part for rapid action; in fact, Howard affirmed his and the RCNL’s position that the state should wait for the Supreme Court’s implementation decision before taking any action.<sup>119</sup> Howard’s foremost demand in the speech, the point on which he closes, is for the formation of an evenly divided biracial committee of fifty men to map out the future of desegregated education in Mississippi, as slowly as the Supreme Court sees fit and no faster.<sup>120</sup>

This olive branch did not detract from Howard’s strident inclusionist message in the speech to the governor. Howard marked his integrationist turn away from pragmatic segregationism by opening the speech with an oft-repeated sentiment and catch-phrase. The future of education in Mississippi must be a joint development with representatives of both races; whites cannot, as they have tried to do in the past and regarding other issues, come to the table with a completed package to be accepted by Mississippi blacks. Howard insists on a black voice in the process:

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<sup>118</sup> “Negro Group Applies Pressure for Integrated Classrooms”. *The Statesville (NC) Daily Record*, June 6, 1955, 1.

<sup>119</sup> The RCNL would go on to confirm publicly that they would not seek desegregation in the upcoming 1954-1955 school year. (“Regional Council of Negro Leadership to Oppose Desegregation”, *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat Times*, September 12, 1954, 3.)

<sup>120</sup> Howard Speech to Gov. White.

A question as vital as the question which is before us today, cannot be settled by decree, or by a committee of one group going behind closed doors — bringing the solution to the other group on a “take it or leave it” proposition.<sup>121</sup>

Howard revisited this line later in the speech, connecting it to a further admonition he was already known to make publicly: white leadership is simply incapable of making the right decisions for the black populace.

We are asking a chance to help shape our own destiny. We have seen so many costly blunders made in Negro school buildings and in other matters affecting the Negro simply because the Negro was not consulted. You may think you understand our problem, but you have got to be a Negro in Mississippi at least 24 hours in order to understand what it means to be a Negro in this state.<sup>122</sup>

Again, Howard’s proposal is rooted in the formation of a biracial educational committee, and that fact, with the associated conclusions that can be drawn regarding the implications of shared governance, was never far from Howard’s mind. As was the case with the initiation of the RCNL as a black counterpart and partner to the white Delta Council, Howard brought the focus once again to an egalitarian approach that assumed the equal participation of both races. This fact alone created a bridge between his prior pragmatic segregationism and this new inclusivity; in each case, he laid the groundwork in the necessity of interracial, equal (while still fully separate) partnership. Note that, although he could have done so, Howard calls not for elected representation (the inclusion of voting that has an effect on white Mississippians), but for equality in appointed offices. In this, his integrationist stance is measured, but there is no

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

doubting that he was accurately reading the signs of the times to determine what would be reasonably tolerated. At the very least, Howard was adept enough to know that he had to sugar the pill of his assertive stance, defusing predictable lines of white reaction:

Your big fear, of course, is social equality. There is not a thinking Negro in Mississippi today that bothers about social equality, but we are mighty concerned about equality of educational opportunity.<sup>123</sup>

While the development of a biracial educational committee may seem a modest proposal, one that would hardly raise the ire of the governor, other position points in the speech called for more direct action. Notable in this is an ongoing question that was facing Mississippi's leadership at the time of the meeting, the question of Medgar Evers' status as a law student at the University of Mississippi (Evers had applied, but the university repeatedly delayed by his admission). Howard states that the situation, in this particular case, can be and must be resolved promptly and positively. While decisions were being made regarding the creation of black industrial colleges in Mississippi (Howard calls for three), the doors of public institutions of higher learning, the university included, must immediately open their doors to all races. Howard expanded upon this statement, staying within the bounds of slow, measured progress in desegregation overall, but with the condition that, where facilities and faculty make it possible to do so without stressing the system, all schools should immediately take what desegregationist action is feasible to them at the time, without waiting for judicial word; Howard notably applies this rule to higher education alone in the speech; he recognized that the younger the student, the longer the change would be in coming.<sup>124</sup> These calls to immediate action, more than the request

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

for the creation of a committee, were at the heart of the governor's strong reaction to Howard's speech. Openly countered, and in some ways bested, by Howard, White (similar to Maury Knowlton of the Delta Council) withdrew all support for black involvement in the school integration plan. School equalization failed, largely due to the public's negative response to the proposed tax bill; the eradication of Mississippi's public schools faltered when it became apparent that there would not be enough private school room available to educate even the children of professional whites. The third option, the active integration of Mississippi's schools, hampered by legal maneuverings and obfuscation from white resistance beginning with Gov. White, also floundered.

### ***Positional Uncertainty in Post-Brown Mississippi***

Howard's speech on education before Gov. White marked Howard's distinct turn away from pragmatic segregation. Still, the speech can be viewed as ideologically muddled. He did not follow the call for school committee representation with the next inclusive step, emphasis on the black franchise. His proposal for schools to be built in, and their attendance determined by, local neighborhoods, disregarding the fact that the segregated nature of Mississippi housing would unavoidably lead to continued school segregation. His final word was that he and other black leaders be included, equally and as partners, in educational decisions, a position that harkens back to the separate-but-*really*-equal, cooperative partnership days of the early RCNL. There was clearly an ideological advance made here, however the final message reflects the uncertainty of the eventful 1954-1955 year in Mississippi. Positions taken and publicly released in uncertain times are, inherently, uncertain in themselves; the negotiations are ongoing. In this, apparent ideological contradictions can be understood. Consider the resolution of a group of thirty black leaders who met in Jackson, MS on the eve of Howard's speech. The statement of this group

shows that organizations on both sides of the color line had to accept a degree of ideological flexibility in those politically heated and unresolved days. Look closely at two of the policy positions issued in the same document by the these Jackson black leaders:

[Point] III: As an aid to preparation [for school desegregation] and to help create that spiritual climate of understanding and mutual respect so necessary to the helpful achievement of these goals we propose the following considered action: That Negroes be appointed on all policy making boards and committees at all levels in matters of human relations.

[Point] IV: As a representative committee we respectfully request that our state leaders and agencies will not ask us to do those things which will destroy our influence with our own people.<sup>125</sup>

The former, point III, represents an inclusivity “at all levels in matters of human relations” that, as modest as it ultimately would have to be in practice, still pushes beyond any segregation, even segregation on equal footing. In this is represented Howard’s later years in Mound Bayou, after *Brown* forced him to look beyond and build upon his pragmatic separatism. The latter, point IV, alludes to the ideology of Howard’s early Delta days and reflects the (not unreasonably, given the setting) need to keep white influence out of the black community in order for the black community to thrive. That these two divergent points follow each other in one July 1954 document demonstrates that disorder held sway in the *Brown* aftermath, or, if not disorder, irresolution.

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<sup>125</sup> Statement Issued by Negro Leaders From Every Area of the State of Mississippi, July 30, 1954.

Just as the Jackson statement combined separatist and integrationist demands in one document, so too did Howard and, by extension, the RCNL, move between these poles, more flexible in ideology than, as might be initially concluded, directionless. It is notable that, despite uncertainties, *Brown* gave a needed push, by way of a point of focus, to the RCNL; having had the mantle of political activism thrust upon it (or, having grown into political activism), the RCNL expanded to fit its new outline in both form and content, with *Brown* as the catalyst. Among the RCNL events hosted in Mound Bayou in 1955 was a May “grievance meeting” of 7,000, where Howard “brought forth numerous individuals who claimed they were mistreated because they were Negroes”<sup>126</sup>; rights issues, including school desegregation, would be taken, with the RCNL’s funding and assistance, through the courts, thus putting the RCNL directly in the arena with the NAACP (Howard, in this period and long after, was actively fundraising for both the RCNL and the NAACP<sup>127</sup>). Or, that was the plan, at least, before the world of the Delta went through a subsequent, resultant, convulsion three months later. The era of post-*Brown* uncertainty would have its end in a moment that called for a focused, unified response: the death of Emmett Till and the acquittal of his killers.

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<sup>126</sup> “Negroes Fight For Civil Rights”. *The Pittsburgh Press*, May 1, 1955, 2.

<sup>127</sup> “Good Street Baptists Set Mass Meeting”. *The Waco (TX) Tribune-Herald*, May 15, 1955, 21.

CHAPTER SIX:  
HOWARD AND THE EMMETT TILL EVENT

*We come now to what is perhaps the most fundamental and the most ineradicable cause of war — the spirit of fear and suspicion, hate and revenge, that encases the heart of the peoples of the earth. (T.R.M. Howard)<sup>128</sup>*

Before examining the Emmett Till event and Howard’s involvement in the trial, it is important to set the parameters of the time under question. The use of the term “event” is meant to be inclusive of the many facets of the Emmett Till case, ranging from August to September 1955, including the “wolf-whistle” occurrence at the Bryant grocery store, abduction, murder, public funeral, investigation, trial, acquittal, and, if one seeks to expand the time period, the published confession of the killers in January of 1956. Although encompassing, at most, only a few months, the event is still so intricate as to necessitate further focus — the period examined here begins, at least in its public reporting, as September 1955 opens. Initially, from the time of the discovery of Till’s body (August 31; the abduction occurred in the early hours of August 28), public opinion (as measured by the editorials of local newspapers) supported swift prosecution of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam for the murder. Consider the following excerpt from *The Clarksdale*

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<sup>128</sup> Howard, T.R.M. “Negro in the Light of History”. *The (Los Angeles) California Eagle*, March 23, 1934.

*Press Register*, the paper closest geographically to Sumner, MS, the trial locale, dated September 1, 1955 under the title “A Brutal Murder”:

Those who kidnapped and murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till, a crippled and retarded\* child, have dealt the reputation of the South and Mississippi a savage blow. It is a blow from which we can recover only by accepting this violent and insane challenge to our laws and by prosecuting vigorously the individuals responsible for the crime.<sup>129</sup>

Governor Hugh White, in the preemptive act of issuing an open letter to the NAACP upon the discovery of the body, made the sentiment official:

Parties charged with murder are in jail. I have every reason to believe that the court will do their duty in prosecution. Mississippi does not condone such conduct.<sup>130</sup>

It is additionally important to note that at this point in time, in the initial days of the investigation, Mississippi press consistently reported that the body was in fact Till’s. This assertion would quickly be challenged, and the tenor of the trial would shift dramatically.

### ***Circling the Wagons***

A sense of foreboding appears toward the end of the September 1 editorial; anticipating the significant involvement of the NAACP in the coming trial, the editorial continues:

It should not be that the nation nor the Negro citizens of our state feel it necessary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to send its agitating

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\* Till was neither “crippled” nor “retarded”. He did have a stutter, remnants of a childhood bout with polio, which would account for this crass characterization.

<sup>129</sup> “A Brutal Murder”. *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 1, 1955, 2.

<sup>130</sup> “White Wants Boy’s Death Investigated”. *The Clarksdale (MS) Press Register*, September 1, 1955, 1.

attorneys to intervene in the case. This newspaper does not believe such intervention is desirable or necessary.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, within the day this fear would be made, at least in the mind of Mississippi, a reality. Two incidents spurred this conclusion. First, Mamie Till-Mobley (then Till-Bradley, Emmett's mother) issued a public statement that the Mississippi press quickly misinterpreted. Speaking of the legal costs that she was sure to incur in the prosecution of the case, she stated that "Mississippi is going to pay for this", a statement that was quickly seen by white Mississippians as a blanket damnation of the state that is seeking greater, wide-ranging punishment. "A Just Appraisal", appearing in *The Greenwood Commonwealth* and reprinted elsewhere in the Delta and the state, details this sentiment:

[Till-Bradley's] determination to see that "Mississippi is going to pay for this", charging the entire state with the guilt of those who took the law into their own hands, is evidence of the poison selfish men have planted in the minds of people outside the South. If the mother had expressed determination to see that the guilty parties "must pay for this crime" she would have expressed the sincere desires of the people of Mississippi.<sup>132</sup>

Even as Mississippi circled the wagons, a damning open letter from Roy Wilkins, head of the national NAACP, was released, drawing Mississippi further into a defensive mode, fighting the northern forces that would challenge the established way of life, forces which now included the

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<sup>131</sup> "A Brutal Murder"

<sup>132</sup> "A Just Appraisal". *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 2, 1955, 1.

American Bar Association as well as numerous “communistic” northern trade unions.<sup>133</sup> *The Greenwood Commonwealth* editorial continues:

The NAACP has only revealed again its blindness and injustice in charging that “Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children” and that “the killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state no restraining influence. Not in the state Capitol, in the daily newspapers, the clergy, nor any segment of the so-called better citizens”. From its headquarters in New York, it has charged every citizen of the State with being an accomplice in the crime.<sup>134</sup>

Further NAACP threats of civil action against Mississippi authorities in the case of no conviction<sup>135</sup> and the fact that the very public funeral of Till in Chicago included NAACP fundraising<sup>136</sup> further exacerbated Mississippian viewpoints, as the appearance was made that northern, anti-Jim Crow forces would use the (staged) killing for financial gain. It was into this atmosphere, in which the acquittal of the killers was nearly a foregone conclusion after the perception of northern influence was introduced<sup>137</sup>, that Howard entered the scene in a supportive role for the prosecution. Howard, interviewed by *The Chicago Defender*, is unequivocal, and like Wilkins, spreads the blame and call for vengeance broadly: “There is going to be hell to pay in Mississippi”.<sup>138</sup> Immediately upon the heels of this perceived northern intervention, in public as he would on the stand, Tallahatchie County sheriff H.C. Strider first

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<sup>133</sup> “Shocked: Mississippi Murder Upsets Bar Group”. *The Washington (DC) Afro-American*, September 6, 1955, 1., also “Till Protest Meeting”, *Crisis*, November 1955.

<sup>134</sup> “A Just Appraisal”

<sup>135</sup> “Speedy Trial Planned In Kidnap-Slaying Case”. *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 7, 1955, 1.

<sup>136</sup> “Asks Law Against Displaying Bodies to Collect Money”. *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 8, 1955, 1.

<sup>137</sup> Whitaker, Stephen. “A Case for Southern Justice”. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Summer 2005, 189.

<sup>138</sup> “Mother’s Tears”

introduced the challenge that the body found in the Tallahatchie River was not Till's, despite conclusive identifications by Till's uncle and mother based largely on a ring he was known to wear.<sup>139</sup> A complete reversal of early calls for prosecution is reported by the second day of the trial itself, September 20, 1955: "The *Commonwealth* reporter found that there is a strong desire [among whites gathered for the trial] to see Milam and Bryant, the defendants, acquitted".<sup>140</sup>

Usually racially moderate, Hodding Carter's *Delta Democrat-Times* featured an editorial which strongly stated the case for NAACP manipulation of the trial, placing them in favor of an acquittal to further their efforts at damning Mississippi and the South. This position places the NAACP in the same group as white supporters of the defense. Carter writes:

It is becoming sickeningly obvious that two groups of people are seeking an acquittal for the two men charged with kidnapping and of brutally murdering afflicted 14-year-old Emmett Till, a Negro youth accused of "wolf-whistling" at a white woman. The two groups are the NAACP, which is seeking another excuse to apply the torch of world-wide scorn to Mississippi, and the friends of the two white men.<sup>141</sup>

Carter continues, drawing conspiratorial evidence (or at least the appearance of conspiratorial evidence) from the sensational funeral:

All the macabre exhibitionism, the wild statements and hysterical overtones at the Chicago funeral of the Till child seemed too well staged not to have been premeditated

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<sup>139</sup> "Grand Jury Indicts White Men On Kidnap, Murder". *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 6, 1955, 1.

<sup>140</sup> "Sidelights at Sumner Trial". *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 20, 1955, 1.

<sup>141</sup> Carter, Hodding. "Lynching Post Facto". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, September 6, 1955, 14.

with the express purpose of 1) inflaming hatreds and 2) trying to set off a reaction in reverse in Mississippi, where there had previously been honest indignation.<sup>142</sup>

Carter's coverage of the Emmett Till event as a conspiracy does not go far beyond this statement, although the coverage of the trial by *The Delta Democrat Times* continued to present the virtues of Mississippians as a counter to northern views of southern barbarism. September 22 saw Carter publishing an interview with a *Communist Daily Worker* journalist applauding the overall good behavior of trial observers and the hospitality received by the press from Deltans, an overt counterpoint to northern views being simultaneously propagated.<sup>143</sup>

### ***Howard's Role in the Emmett Till Trial***

Howard's initial role was to house and transport Mamie Till-Bradley and observer Michigan Congressman Charles Diggs, Jr., all under heavily armed guard. Howard regularly appeared at Till-Bradley's arm, escorting her to and from the courtroom, navigating the pressing crowd. Howard's Mound Bayou home quickly became a nerve-center for the investigation and prosecution of the case, as witnesses were actively sought. The fact of the matter was that Howard had uncovered witnesses to the killing, against the odds within the Delta's Jim Crow world, and that the witnesses had even initially come to him as a regional black leader; as one reporter expressed Howard's involvement,

We grabbed a Greyhound in Memphis at 4:45 AM and rolled into Mound Bayou, Miss. nearly three hours later, and then by car to Sumner for the farce. Breakfasted with militant Dr. T.R.M. Howard and his lovely lady before taking the final lap to the Sumner

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> "Cross Burning at Sumner Went Almost Un-noticed Yesterday". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, September 22, 1955, 11.

courthouse. It was at this breakfast that Dr. Howard first revealed that a midnight visitor to his home had told of witnessing the gruesome lynching.<sup>144</sup>

By September 21, 1955, during the trial, the press was reporting claims by Howard that he had found up to five witnesses to the slaying (four would eventually be revealed, only three of whom would testify<sup>145</sup>) and, significantly in that it could have relocated the trial venue to Sunflower County and into the backyard of Senator James O. Eastland, that it had been discovered (accurately) that the murder had happened in neighboring Drew, Mississippi, not at the banks of the Tallahatchie River, where the body was dumped.<sup>146</sup> Five decades later, Howard's concurrent statement that there were four white men and three black men present at the kidnapping and murder (not, as had been previously reported, Carolyn Bryant) has been largely accepted as fact in literature on the Till case. The re-opening of the Till case by the FBI in 2004, an effort which would ultimately not lead to any further indictments, would work from this evidence as initially presented by Howard. Howard's involvement in the case placed him within the conspiratorial reach of Tallahatchie sheriff H.C. Strider, who claimed as early as September 4 that Howard's access to cadavers, as a surgeon in a Mound Bayou hospital, made him a likely party in the northern-led scheme to plant a body in the river and claim it to be Till's.<sup>147</sup> This last point, that the body was a plant by the NAACP or some other "northern" organization, gained a great deal of traction as the trial advanced; it is an unfortunate twist of history that Howard's presence (as a doctor, with access to cadavers) in the trial opened up the significant conspiracist-thinking that would serve the defense attorneys well, as it did attorney John Whidden, closing for the defense:

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<sup>144</sup> "Opening Day of the Farce". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 1, 1955, 9.

<sup>145</sup> "Defense Rests 'Wolf-Whistle' Trial". *The Pittston (PA) Gazette*, September 23, 1955, 1.

<sup>146</sup> "State Ends Case Against Bryant and Milam; New Testimony Changes Scene of Crime". *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 22, 1955, 1.

<sup>147</sup> Whitaker 2005, 194.

There are people in the United States who want to destroy the way of life of Southern people... There are people who will go as far as necessary to commit any crime known to man, to widen the gap between the white and colored people of the United States. They would not be above putting a rotting, stinking body in the river in the hope it would be identified as Emmett Till.<sup>148</sup>

When the verdict came back not-guilty, after a mere 68 minutes of jury deliberation, Mississippi not only closed its legal books regarding the murder, it actively snubbed its nose at those same outside forces that sought, in their view, to change it. A *Commonwealth* editorial after the verdict, “It Was a Fair Trial”, puts the point plainly,

Mississippi can handle its affairs without any outside meddling and its long history of proper court procedure can never be questioned by any group. The trial at Sumner added another chapter to this fact.<sup>149</sup>

### ***Howard Post-Till***

As a part of the Till event, Howard became a race celebrity, both during and after the trial. Press coverage of his involvement in the trial, particularly in the discovery of witnesses, was broad, and a photo of Howard with Till-Bradley, Congressman Diggs, and the three testifying witnesses saw wide dispersal. Upon learning of Howard and the RCNL via the Till coverage, California musician and actor Sammy Davis, Jr. offered to play an upcoming RCNL rally (it never happened).<sup>150</sup> It was Howard’s most public role to date, so it is important to consider the nuances of his racial positioning during this period, particularly in that while Howard doubled down on

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<sup>148</sup> “Sidelights at Sumner Trial”

<sup>149</sup> “It Was a Fair Trial”. *The Greenwood (MS) Commonwealth*, September 24, 1955, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Crawford, Marc. “Sammy Davis Tells Why He Ousted Eartha Kitt”. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1955, 25.

his post-*Brown* positioning, further insisting on action in school desegregation and open access to the ballot box, his political practice returns to and becomes dependent upon a segregationist protectionism, as in the use of the Tri-State bank. There is a shift back to a separatist-tinged center in utilization of Tri-State and in Howard's fundraising activities to support those being targeted by the Citizens' Councils; that fundraising largely replaces the confrontational RCNL activities that were growing around voting rights at the time. The stress at that point, the RCNL pre-Till, was inclusion in the political process, a position that, as stated above, matured over time from the initial economic pragmatism of the organization. With the Till event, however, Howard would come once again to stress a segregated economy as a protective move on the way to political and social inclusivity. The push to be part of the political process, which had held the larger part of the organization's attentions overall pre-Till, persisted, but in the public eye the Mississippi issue was no longer *Brown* or the vote; it was Till.

Yet Howard never fully removed himself from the inclusive call for voting rights. Howard recognized by this point the undemocratic conditions in Mississippi, and, as mentioned, the RCNL at this time is largely presented, particularly by the northern black press, as being a voting rights group. The racial disparity in the Till jury, all white because no blacks were registered to vote in Tallahatchie County, was not lost on Howard. In a speech given in Baltimore, MD (and elsewhere, with little variation) after the Till trial, a speech which addresses *Brown*, the murder of George Lee in Belzoni, MS, and Till, he avers:

We have decided in Mississippi that we are tired of dying for something on Heartbreak Ridge in Korea that we can't vote for in Belzoni, MS.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Houck, Davis W. *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006, 117.

Yet, even as he made this statement, his stated specific goals can be seen as both segregationist and inclusive. There are, according to Howard, four factors that are needed for the success of integration and the defeat of Jim Crow in the South. The first was purely egalitarian, regarding education; he stresses once again equality in education (not, notably, the desegregation of schools). This is significant insofar as it indicates a retreat from the position taken in 1954, most likely connected to a need to defuse a situation that was becoming increasingly dangerous for Mississippi blacks. The second necessary element for black success is the “unrestricted ballot,” a distinct inclusionary turn in Howard’s rhetoric, but one which certainly matured as did the mission of the RCNL, even though the public cause of voting rights takes a back seat to concerns of justice and safety during this period. Thirdly, the need is economic equality; Howard’s statement on a livable wage applies to all, no matter where that money is coming from, black or white:

The colored people of the South don’t handle an awful lot of money. We must fight for fair employment at such wages we can keep some of them in our savings. We must remember that while we are fighting to end segregation, we’re not fighting to lose our identity as people.<sup>152</sup>

Howard’s fourth necessary element was Christian faith, which is certainly to be expected insofar as the Baltimore speech was directed toward a church audience, but it is still notable for two reasons. First, the significance Howard gives to Christian faith, naming it one the needed four factors for successful integration, and the skill with which he weaves this point into his greater text, indicate that Howard still held on to a distinct religiosity and was able to demonstrate that

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

fact when required. Second, that religiosity has a civic extension in Howard's view; the Christian message is not far removed from the American promise:

Finally, we must have the religion of Jesus Christ in an integrated society. Religion and democracy have been cooperating forces in American life. Thomas Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." This democratic statement was a religious affirmation and an acknowledgment of God as Creator. We are, indeed, fortunate that we have the hope and the belief that God created all men equal. Jesus said, "I came that ye might have life and live more abundantly".<sup>153</sup>

That such religiosity was available for Howard to utilize here in a post-Till public address, as it was on other occasions in his career, is indicative of the fact that, although Howard left Adventism behind in terms of church membership shortly prior his arrival in Mound Bayou (Howard opted for the more socially advantageous African Methodist Episcopal church while in Mound Bayou, which was also the denomination of his earliest youth), his religious education still held influence, or at least utility. As has been shown, Adventist racial codes are closely connected to Adventist theology; if Adventist-tinged Christian zeal is apparent in Howard, which this speech would seem to demonstrate, then the social influence of Howard's religious/racial education can also be clearly seen.

In some ways, Howard's utilization of the pragmatic Adventist approach to race, segregation, and racial separatism is seen most distinctly in the Till event, insofar as it is a clear measure of the negotiated racial reality of post-*Brown* Mississippi. In his separatism *and* in his

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

integrationism Howard was not absolute; the stances were pragmatic, and thus negotiable. His business ventures and civic development, which drew directly upon racial separatism, shifted and mixed with a gradual cross-racial involvement and sought-after cross-racial partnership with the advent of the RCNL. The RCNL's change from an economic and development organization to a political organization, focusing on educational integration and the political franchise (thus fulfilling the fears of the white Delta establishment) was punctuated by the 1954 governor's meeting and Howard's call for educational integration. Note here that this inclusive turn, and support for those who would endorse it or seek to act upon it, still hinged, as mentioned above, on the ability of Howard, the RCNL, and the Tri-State Bank to offer a separatist, black-economy alternative to the white banking that was restricting black activity via the Citizens' Councils. The two positions, segregationism and integrationism, do exist as poles on the continuum of racial exclusion and inclusivity, but they are also blended in various combinations over the course of Howard's Mound Bayou career along the lines of pragmatic application and interracial negotiation. Once faced with a crisis of justice, and fully aware (as many Mississippians were) that the Till killing was the manifestation of anti-integration sentiment that concentrated itself post-*Brown* into greater resistance, Howard and the RCNL modified what by 1955 was becoming an increasingly unitary focus on voting rights. The Till case and its aftermath feature a racial negotiation under Jim Crow that is writ large; having embraced the cause of integration upon the occasion of the *Brown* decision, and having insisted upon the black franchise, Howard alters his focus to the protection of Mississippi blacks in the face of growing racial violence and the deprivations of the Citizens' Councils after September of 1955, a focus on *equal* protection under the law. As with the early days of the RCNL, it is necessary to separate word from practice; even as Howard was speaking nationwide as a participant in the Till event and as a

Mississippi activist, including a call for voting rights in speeches, reporting on the RCNL's voting rights activities diminishes after Till, focusing instead on an economic response to the Councils. It is notable, additionally, that the RCNL had publicly backed away from Howard's immediacy in school desegregation by this point (June of 1955), opting for a slower pace while still pursuing cooperation.<sup>154</sup> Howard, in an interview immediately before the Till murder, promoted the RCNL's position on the black vote in the face of Jim Crow voting restrictions,

In Mound Bayou, which is an all-Negro town, the election board simply refused to count the ballots... In Issaquena county, Negroes were refused permission to vote. In Sunflower county, Negro voters were denied the right to put their ballot in the box.... [White Mississippians] know integration is coming.... They know the time will come when Negroes will vote.<sup>155</sup>

Howard's speeches post-Till, alternatively, matching what is seen in the Baltimore speech, show the change in focus from voting to safety and protection. Here, Howard's resistance to Jim Crow becomes more generalized, while still linked to a notable religiosity (this time, in a speech *not* delivered in a church, but rather Madison Square Garden):

All the Citizens' Councils shall know that God's present time has struck down on Earth, and all second-class citizenship shall be cast into the depths of the sea.<sup>156</sup>

It is clear that Howard's racial positioning was mutable, at least in practice, depending on the practicality and needs of the situation at hand. And, once again, it all echoed the Adventist

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<sup>154</sup> "Delta Negro Group Decides Not to Push Integration". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, June 6, 1955, 1.

<sup>155</sup> "Little Man Will Win Fight"

<sup>156</sup> T.R.M. Howard Speaks at Madison Square Garden, 1956, at [archive.org](http://archive.org).

segregationist practice and Washingtonian uplift philosophy that are connected to the integrationist ideal, a position that was under constant negotiation in the Jim Crow Delta of the mid-20th century.

CHAPTER SEVEN:  
CONCLUSION

*...there is going to be an outbreak of violence in Mississippi that's going to shock the very imagination of the American people, and of the world. (T.R.M. Howard)<sup>157</sup>*

In the immediate wake of the Till verdict, Howard remained very public in his views about the trial and about the status of African Americans in Mississippi. The *Courier* gave an interview with Howard three full-page columns in the week after the trial to Howard, more than observing Representative Charles Diggs.<sup>158</sup> In the interview, Howard referred to his medical education to clear up the question of the identity of the body, affirming “professionally” that it was in fact Till. Howard accused the district attorney of being lax in the prosecution of the case, and confirms that there was a conspiracy on the part of the defense that sequestered crucial prosecution witness Henry Lee Loggins, who was held in a Charleston, MS jail for the duration of the trial; Howard brought Loggins into the public eye once Loggins was freed after the acquittal. A third point in the interview, one which would kick back against Howard in the coming weeks, openly questioned the lack of FBI presence in the investigation and called upon the agency to investigate the glaring irregularities of the case.

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<sup>157</sup> “Dr. Howard: Situation in Mississippi Extremely Serious; Tension is Continuing to Mount”. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 8, 1955, 1.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

The most revealing parts of the interview, are the opening and closing statements. First, in a statement that would become largely untrue in the ensuing weeks, Howard affirmed that, even under dire threat, he would not leave Mississippi, mentioning a drive that is both civic and religious keeping him in the state:

My belief in American democracy and my belief in the religion of Jesus Christ are the only things that keep me in a state like Mississippi.<sup>159</sup>

Second, Howard generalizes upon the topic of the Till case, expanding the view to encompass, and indicate, the state of post-*Brown* Mississippi:

You see, Mississippi is anxious for the rest of the world to know they are ‘mad’ about the Supreme Court’s decision outlawing school segregation, and they are determined that no Negro gets justice.”<sup>160</sup>

### ***Howard and J. Edgar Hoover***

Howard did openly criticize the FBI in this period for inaction, not just in the Till case, but also for inaction regarding the murders of Rev. George W. Lee (shot and killed in Belzoni, MS) and LaMar Smith (shot and killed on the courthouse lawn in broad daylight in Brookhaven, MS). One sentiment, present in the Baltimore speech but also delivered in Chicago and elsewhere, became a frequent line for Howard and elicited a noteworthy response,

It’s getting to be a strange thing that nothing happens when colored people are murdered in the South. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, with all of its knowledge, with all its power, can never work out who the killer is when a colored person in the South is the

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

victim.... Southern investigators of the department can never solve the crime when there's a black man involved.<sup>161</sup>

The response to this public statement came from J. Edgar Hoover himself, in a letter addressed to Howard in Mound Bayou and released to the press. That the press took notice of this exchange, indeed that Hoover rose to Howard's challenge, is a clear indication of both the regional and national importance that Howard had gained. Hoover was obliged to respond, based on the perceived influence of the accuser, calling the charges "false and irresponsible".<sup>162</sup> Howard, in a very adroit act that belies his ability to appeal to the public and the press, took the opportunity of Hoover's condemnation to issue in the press a longer, much more detailed presentation of his evidence against the bureau, refuting point-for-point the accusations and claims made in the Hoover letter. The rebuttal was nuanced and extensive, citing his right as an American citizen to accuse the lack of federal action, and answering Hoover directly on the details of each of the three murder cases. The closing of Howard's public reply is a bold statement (capitalization in the original):

I regret this controversy has arisen, since it tends to obscure the fact that the real issue is NOT OUR DIFFERENCES as to FBI action or inaction but the fact that American citizens are being wantonly murdered in MISSISSIPPI, and that their murders ARE GOING UNPUNISHED. YOUR CONDEMNATION MIGHT DO MUCH TO HALT THIS WAVE OF VIOLENCE.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> "Charges Against FBI Rules Chief". *The Standard-Sentinel (Hazleton, PA)*, January 19, 1956, 1.

<sup>163</sup> Washington, Chester L. "I Exercised My Right As U.S. Citizen to Criticize FBI – Howard". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28, 1956, 2.

Support for Howard was clearly seen in the reporting and editorial pages of the black press; as James Hicks, influential African American New York journalist, averred,

When we look at the record of what has been happening in Mississippi over the past few months we are forced to say that Dr. Howard has simply raised a question which many Negroes have had in their minds for a long, long time.<sup>164</sup>

### *Fleeing the Delta*

Here, by the beginning of 1956, Howard had compartmentalized his separatism, limiting it to the continued maintenance of his business interests (particularly in Tri-State), and was fully engaging the dominant, racist political culture not as equal partner, but as wronged accuser.

Howard was long the target of white supremacist threats of violence before the Till event, threats which he openly resisted. He became regionally famous for his large convertible car and the fact that he had added a secret compartment to the car so that he could travel armed without being detected by the police; on his trips around Mississippi, it was reported, he would hold the gun on his lap:\*

People have often wondered how he roamed the highways of Mississippi day and night, without threat to his life. . . . Dr. Howard had his weapon, and often, as he rode the highways, he would take the gun from its secret hiding place and put it in his lap, always

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<sup>164</sup> Hicks, James. "Dr. Howard vs. Mr. Hoover". *The New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1956, 8.

\* One recent author directly links Howard's arming himself and others to his status not as accommodator, but negotiator. While, it is argued, Howard always publicly stated his desire to cooperate with the white supremacist structure (particularly within white earshot), the fact that he kept himself armed indicates that a constant undercurrent of overt resistance and militant black empowerment. See Umoja, Akinyele Omowale. *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

cocked!... Where did he hide the gun that it shouldn't be found? That's Dr. Howard's secret, and he ain't talkin' .<sup>165</sup>

Yet, in the wake of his involvement in the trial and the accusation of his complicity in an NAACP conspiracy (an accusation that only gained ground as Howard went on a speaking tour to raise funds for the NAACP), the threats reached an unbearable pitch. Starting in late 1955, Howard liquidated close to \$200,000 of Mississippi assets, including his land and his Mound Bayou home, although by his own accounting he retained another million dollars in investments in the state.<sup>166</sup> By the end of the year he relocated his wife and children to Los Angeles. In the words of his wife Helen, life in Mound Bayou had become untenable: "It's awful down here... I don't know what is going to happen".<sup>167</sup> Howard largely removed himself from Mound Bayou at the same time, for all intents and purposes, spending the bulk of his time either with his family or barnstorming the country speaking on Mississippi, as in the speeches noted above. Indeed, Howard took it as an insult that Hoover's letter was addressed to him in Mound Bayou, and not in Los Angeles where he had publicly spoken out.<sup>168</sup> Howard finally fled Mississippi permanently in early 1956. He did not sever ties absolutely with Mississippi, continuing to fundraise and organize on the behalf of those still in the state, even to the extent of smuggling threatened residents out of the state<sup>169</sup>, but he forfeited his leadership of the RCNL in the process, as noted above, an upheaval from which the organization only temporarily recovered before succumbing totally in 1961.

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<sup>165</sup> "He Rode the Highways With Hidden Gun...Always Cocked!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 1, 1956, 41.

<sup>166</sup> "Dr. Howard to Leave? Today He Says 'Not Quite'". *The (Greenville, MS) Delta Democrat-Times*, December 15, 1955, 2

<sup>167</sup> Ratcliffe, Robert M. "A Man's Family". *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 13, 1955, 19.

<sup>168</sup> "Exercised My Right"

<sup>169</sup> Burly, Dan. "Mississippi Escapee Years to Return". *The Chicago Defender*, February 24, 1958, 4.

### *Legacy and Accomplishment in Mound Bayou*

Howard's Chicago career saw him expand in professional and activist dimensions, including a Congressional bid, having an impact in the continuing racial crisis although his attentions would also fall to reproductive rights. It is important to consider his legacy specific to his Mound Bayou tenure, primarily because it can be fairly said, in a surface assessment, that there is not much of it — desegregation in Mississippi would not be meaningful or immediate until 1969 and the black vote remained suppressed well into the era of Freedom Summer and beyond. Mound Bayou today is, sadly, a shell of what it was in Howard's era, doomed by continued out-migration from the region, lack of opportunity, poverty, and neglect. The death knell was certainly sounded in 1967 when the Taborian Hospital became a public endeavor, the Mound Bayou Community Hospital, which folded itself in 1983. The Taborian Hospital and the Taborian fraternal organization fell victim to rising trends of third-party payer insurance and government programs like Medicaid that made mutual-aid health care redundant.<sup>170</sup> There are signs of life in Mound Bayou, including the recent restoration of the hospital as a health clinic and the recovery of some property, like the Montgomery and Booze houses, but the most apparent signs of its significant past consist of a historical marker about Howard, a number of smaller markers identifying the historic buildings, like the Friendship Clinic, The Bank of Mound Bayou, and Mary Booze's home, and a sign on Highway 61 that defiantly proclaims the town to still be "The Jewel of the Delta". This could be seen as the sum of Howard's legacy, but that is a myopic view. By asking less what is left over, we can focus upon the significance of what has happened, when it happened, and how it happened.

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<sup>170</sup> Beito 2000, 196-7.

The central concern in looking back at Howard's Delta career is, of course, the pragmatism of his approach to flagrant, systemic, violent Jim Crow racism. Despite all the calls from his mother Ellen White for desegregation in the Seventh-day Adventist faith, son Edson White discovered in his contentious missionary work in the American South in the late 19th Century, which met some of its sternest resistance in, incidentally, the Mississippi Delta, that a strictly integrationist line could not hold where white supremacy ruled. Instead, he opted to "separate the work" between black and white<sup>171</sup>, gathering and preaching to them separately until enough true believers in Adventism, race equality and all, could be found to establish a church worthy of the inevitable racist challenges. This philosophy outlived Edson White, lasting well into the 20th Century, perpetuated by ongoing Adventist efforts like the black industrial education of Oakwood College. Oakwood is where this philosophy, augmented by Washingtonian uplift and Adventist bibliocentrism, intersects with T.R.M. Howard. What we see, then, in Mound Bayou is an echo of this Adventist racial policy of "segregation now, so that we may integrate later" apparent across Howard's time there, combined with a focus on personal uplift in health, economy, profession, and social status that is at once Adventist and Washingtonian.

The environment for Howard's racial experiment, the Washingtonian racial "paradise" of Mound Bayou, provided the perfect setting wherein Howard's singular approach to race could be exercised, building an economic stronghold, black dollar for black business, that can then provide the leverage for challenges to segregation when the time is right, as it was at the time of the *Brown* decision and, tragically, Emmett Till's death. In this, Howard embraces two distinct modes of thought that would grow in the heroic era of the civil rights movement just a few years

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<sup>171</sup> Plantak 1998, 90.

later. On the one hand, Howard laid the groundwork for further integrationist efforts in the Delta; indeed, Martin Luther King was slated to share the podium with Howard at the 1956 RCNL annual rally, although he missed the event,<sup>172</sup> and Rosa Parks, who said she was thinking of Till when she refused to give up her seat, heard of the Till case in detail from Howard in a speech four days prior.<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, however, Howard represents an arm of uplift that focuses on self-reliance and self-protection, which would become part of the Black Power platform in the coming decade. Far from being disjointed or contradictory, Howard's approach to inclusiveness was unified and progressive, building social integration, the goal, upon the structures established while racially separate. Howard's time in Mound Bayou was more than a brief moment in the sun for the sanctuary, it was truly a racial process, a procedure, playing itself out in the face of Jim Crow, and as such tested the waters for the generations of Mississippi activists that would follow.

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