

CHRONOLOGY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORICAL EVENTS BENTON COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI HILL COUNTRY PROJECT

Compiled by Aviva Futorian from information by Benton county residents

Note: despite its length, there is no analysis in this chronology. It is designed to jog people's memories by providing background, by detailing events and by naming names. This is a work in progress, which improves by input from everyone. If you can correct any misinformation or add new information, I would be most grateful. Contact me at 773-348-3899 or futorian@mymdu.com

FORMATIVE YEARS

Benton county was formed out of eastern Marshall and western Tippah counties in 1870. The cultural center of the area was Salem, founded in 1836, 3 miles NW of Ashland. Cemetery dating to 1840 remains (white cemetery; where is the oldest black cemetery?)

Old Lamar was founded in 1840's. Burned in civil war -> relocated several miles to the east.

Michigan City was founded late 1830's, early '40's, center for plantation culture on the railroad between Memphis and Corinth. It was a very lively town in the early 20th century. (The entire town is now overgrown with weeds.)

The Ashland courthouse was built late 19th century by a Black carpenter, a former slave who lived to be 105 years old. He died not long before 1965. (Does anyone remember his name? Was it Crawford?)

RACIAL VIOLENCE

Oliver Maxey, half-white, owned a lot of land. He was a merchant. He built a school on his farm and was a teacher in it. He had a store on what is now Highway 72. He was killed by white people and his store burned down.

In 1923, 2 **Pamm brothers** were accused of running whiskey in Grand Junction, TN. They were caught and killed, but first they killed several whites. The remaining Pamm family members, who owned land, fled to Memphis, leaving the land to be taken by whites.

Between 1920 and 1930, **John Henry Remmer**, a Black man, killed a white man on Hwy 5 over an argument. Remmer was arrested and taken to Ashland jail, where he was intercepted by a mob and lynched.

Between 1937 and 1940, two Black men named **Hugh Smith** (or ___ Hughie) and _____ Jones were lynched by whites for allegedly burning down a white person's store. Jones was also accused of killing an officer. They were hung from a tree at or near the Double 0 Ranch. The next day their bodies were displayed on the ground with ropes still around their necks for all who passed by to see.

LAND OWNERSHIP

Black people owned land at the time Benton County was established, and they bought land throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. They also lost land to white people and were killed for their land. I had the impression that the amount of Black-owned land had declined by the 1960's.¹

VOTER REGISTRATION PRIOR TO 1960'S

Between 1902 and 1937, 109 Blacks², including two women, registered to vote. (In some

¹ Some details and names of Black land ownership are contained at Appendix II to this chronology.

² The names of all 109 registered voters are contained in Appendix I at the end of this

districts of the county, no Blacks registered after 1919.) Black registration was not limited to those who owned land, as long as the registrant could pay the poll tax. Many of the Black registrants listed other people as their employers (i.e., on whose land they farmed). I have been told that if a white man "vouched" for a Black man, he was allowed to register.

How many of those who registered actually voted, or tried to vote?

EDUCATION PRIOR TO 1960'S

I am not clear at what point the state or county government paid anything for Black children's education. Early Black schools were in churches. **Mose Terry** sold an acre of land to the county to build a one-room school house, in the vicinity of Old Salem school, near St. Lukes Church. But it was Black residents themselves who obtained surplus federal property (i.e., lumber) and built either this and/or other schools for their children.

Ginevera Reaves came to Benton County from the Mississippi delta in 1944 to work in the Benton county schools. The State paid her. **Walter Webber** started teaching 1951 in a one-room schoolhouse in Benton, near Grand Junction, Tenn. The county paid him.

CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVITIES PRIOR TO 1960'S

Henry Reaves and **Clarice Campbell** (she was not from Benton, he was) used to go to NAACP meetings in Mound Bayou. Henry Reaves began a civil rights group, the Citizens Club, during World War II. This group may have been related to the Mound Bayou group. They met at Greenwood and Macedonia churches.

Benton people who were involved in the early Citizens Club/NAACP were **Walter and Annie Mae Webber, Sarah and Joe Washington, Jessie and Kenny Crawford, Mabel Traylor, Sarah Robinson, Robert Lee Bean, Loyal Thompson**. Main focus was voter registration. Also raised money for NAACP lawyers to bring voter registration and other anti-discrimination lawsuits.

In the early '60's **Frank Smith**, a student at Rust College, did some civil rights organizing in Benton County, particularly in the area around Highway 72, east of highway 5.

1964 & BEYOND: CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVITIES

June 1964: civil rights workers, under the Council of Federated Organizations, specifically working for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), came to Benton County, contacted **Henry Reaves** and helped him revitalize and expand the Citizens Club. Names of some of the workers that summer were **Pete Cummings, Ralph Featherstone, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Bob Feinglass, Frank Ciecioraka**; freedom school teachers were **Marjorie Merrill, Gloria Xifaras, Fern Gelford, Pam Parker, Aviva Futorian**. There was one freedom school in Mount Zion Church. I don't recall if there were more. At that time, Blacks constituted 47% of the population of Benton county.

The Citizens Club undertook activities involving voter registration, fair treatment by the government in agricultural programs, improving the Black school, and preparing a suit for school desegregation.

In the fall of 1964, at the end of the COFO summer project, **Aviva** stayed on as the outside civil rights organizer in Benton county. She was supported (\$10/week) by Boulder, CO Friends of SNCC. Also working in the county were **James Batts** (local person), **Frank Ciecioraka, and Robert Smith**. During the winter of 1964-65, Frank and Aviva held a "college prep" class during evenings at Howard and Annie Evans' home. Students were **Clay and Laura Batts**,

chronology.

Earnestine and Janieval Evans, Alberta Tipler, George Dewey Washington, Roy Nunnally, and Roy DeBerry (of Marshall County). Freedom schools were also conducted in the summer of 1965. Aviva left in the fall of 1965, and **Alberta Tipler** became the full-time civil rights organizer in the county. For a few months, she was assisted by **Don Jelinek**, a volunteer lawyer from New York. Alberta went on to college at the University of Wisconsin in the autumn of 1966.

Benton County Freedom Train: Beginning in June 1964 and lasting consistently for two years and sporadically for two more years, the Citizens Club put out a mimeographed newspaper called the Benton County Freedom Train which had news, stories essays and poems about Black empowerment and freedom written by Benton county adults and children. **Beulah Mae Ayers** was the editor; many people were active in writing for and distributing the newspaper. Sharecroppers working white people's lands would run out of the fields to grab a bunch of Freedom Trains when a civil rights worker's car passed by. It was reported that Freedom Trains were found in many white people's homes by Black domestic workers.

Church burnings: Sanctified Church of God in Christ; Everetts Chapel (September 1965). Neither hosted civil rights meetings, but both were accessible to "night riders", being on Hwy 72. **Antioch Baptist Church** in Tippah County, an active civil rights church, was burned down in October, 1964. Many Benton residents participated in its rebuilding, which was completed two months later, in December.

MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY:

Civil rights workers and Citizens Club leaders worked on developing a non-racist alternative to the official Mississippi Democratic Party. Benton county had one of the highest percentages of MFDP members in the State during the summer of 1964.

In August 1964, the Citizens Club sent Henry Reaves as its MFDP delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City --- the convention where the Democratic Party offered to seat one of its delegates, Fannie Lou Hamer. The delegates refused the offer. Mr. Reaves also went as the MFDP delegate to the Chicago convention in 1968, when they were seated.

The MFDP held a mock presidential election in the autumn of 1964. The results of the mock election in Benton county were: Lyndon Johnson 755, Goldwater 0; Aaron Henry, MFDP nominee for senator, beat John Stennis 747 to 5; and Fannie Lou Hamer, MFDP nominee for Congress, beat Jamie Whitten 748 to 5.

VOTER REGISTRATION:

During the summer of 1964 and after that, many people tried to register to vote but were turned down because they "failed" to interpret sections of the Mississippi constitution to the satisfaction of **Lawson Mathis**, the county registrar. Many people tried several times, perhaps chief among them was **Berne Alexander** who tried at least 13 times before succeeding. Whenever someone tried to register, his or name was published in the *Southern Advocate*, the local county newspaper, for two or three weeks. Berne Alexander's name was constantly in the paper!

On December 1, 1964, the U.S. Justice Dep't brought the Benton County registrar to trial in federal court in Oxford based on the strong evidence presented by scores of Black citizens who repeatedly tried without success to register to vote, despite the county's efforts to intimidate them by publishing their names in the newspaper. Just before the trial was to begin, Benton County, knowing it would be found guilty, asked for a continuance to try to work out an agreement with the Justice Department. The result was a temporary settlement whereby the voter rolls were wiped clean, and the registrar's office was closed, pending a final agreement.

In May, 1965, the voter registration office was temporarily re-opened, but the registrar was "failing" 37% of the Black voter applicants. As a result, the Justice Department obtained a court order permitting people to register to vote without paying poll tax and without having to interpret

the constitution.

On May 27, 1965, the "new" voter registration office opened. By June 18, 150 Blacks had successfully registered, but 90 had been turned down. The Justice Department attorney, **J.H. "Nick" Flannery**, had expected that 90% of those who applied would be accepted. The registrar would not accept printing or bad handwriting, would not tell people why they "failed", and did not give people a chance to correct their mistakes.

The result of large number of voter applicants and the county's stubbornness was that on September 25, 1965, Benton county became the fifth and smallest Mississippi county to have a **federal registrar** appointed because the county registrar refused to implement the voter registration law fairly. Within one month over 700 Blacks were registered voters in Benton County. By the end of 1965, about 1,000 Blacks were registered to vote, leaving some 200 unregistered. This was one of the highest, if not the highest, voter registration rates in the state.

AGRICULTURE

Black citizens felt they were not getting their share of agricultural program benefits, including cotton allotments, subsidies, FHA loans. The county agricultural programs were run by locally elected county committees. Black people had never been nominated for or elected to these committees.

In November of 1964, the Citizens Club filed nominating papers for 8 black candidates. Anyone who worked the land could vote in these elections, whether s/he owned land or not. At the request of the Citizens Club, federal agents were present at the counting of the ballots. Three of the 8 black candidates won election to an agricultural committee -- the first time since Reconstruction that Blacks were elected to public office in Benton county. The three were **L.B. Paige, Sarah Robinson, and Clabon Jackson**.

BLACK SCHOOLS

The principal of the Black school, Old Salem Attendance Center, was **W.B. "Woody" Foster**. Citizens Club members went to see him on more than one occasion to try to get him to strengthen the educational programs in the school. He ignored them.

In January, 1965, white civil rights worker **Aviva Futorian** was arrested and jailed for attending a basketball game at Old Salem School (the school was playing a Holly Springs parochial school, and white nuns who taught there also attended the game, but without incident). The news of the arrest spread faster than imaginable, because every child getting off the school bus that day told his/her family about the arrest. It had the effect of solidifying anger against the school principal, who had initiated the arrest by asking Aviva to leave the school and calling the superintendent when she refused. The superintendent; the sheriff, superintendent, and the State's Attorney came into the gym and arrested Aviva. (The Freedom Train, by the way, reports that bail was made by **Jeff Alexander and Roy Williamson**. My recollection is that **Joe King** also made bail.)

On February 1, 1965, a delegation of parents then went to the (white) county school board, presented a report on the substandard conditions at Old Salem, and asked that Foster be replaced by the vice principal, **Lloyd Peterson**, a Benton county native (which Foster was not). They also had several other requests for strengthening the educational program at Old Salem (e.g., the hiring of a librarian and establishment of a library).

In March, 1965, the school board had two meetings with the Citizens Club delegation. The board offered a "deal": it would accede to the Citizens Club's demands and would let the Blacks run their school if the Citizens Club would agree to stay away from the "white" schools.

The Citizens Club refused this deal and on March 9, 1965, voted to boycott the school. On the first day of the boycott, March 10, 1070 students stayed away, 130 students attended school.

During the school boycott, five freedom schools were set up on the model of the freedom schools established during the 1964 summer project. Rust College students, including the current President of Rust, David Beckley, volunteered to teach in the freedom schools, which were held in one-room wooden churches, poorly heated with wood burning stoves, but with great lunches supplied by enthusiastic parents. The spirit of the freedom schools was exhilarating, and many adults who were students then remember the schools fondly.

A number of Black school bus drivers who supported the boycott were fired (how did they support the boycott? By refusing to drive?) This included **Earl Price, Loyal Thompson, Bud Beck, Eugene Steward**, who worked in maintenance at the school, was also fired. On the day they were fired, the bus drivers left work and integrated the white cafe in Ashland (though they were not the first to do so – see Uncategorized Events below).

At the end of March, 1965, because the county was losing state money in proportion to the lowered student enrollment, the school board finally gave in, removed Foster and replaced him with Peterson. On April 5, 1965, Mr. Foster submitted his letter of resignation.

However, in May, 1965, the Board failed to renew the contracts of **six or seven Black teachers** (can we recall their names?) who were supportive of the Citizens Club. In addition, **John Farese**, the local attorney, had the fired principal, **Woody Foster**, sue ten leaders of the Citizens Club and Aviva for libel, claiming that the Freedom Train had defamed him by calling him a "Puppet", a "Dummy" and an "Uncle Tom", among other things. Foster sought \$600,000 in damages. The suit was seen as an attempt by the white "power structure" to silence the movement, by hitting its participants in their pocket books. The libel trial was held in August 1965. The defendants were represented, amazingly by volunteer lawyers for the Lawyers' Constitutional Defense Committee, **Mark DeWolfe Howe** and **John Saltonstall**, two pre-eminent lawyers from Boston, Howe also being a renowned constitutional law professor at Harvard. **Judge Walter O'Barr** awarded Foster \$60,000.

Two happy events grew out of the suit. First, the Mississippi Supreme Court reversed the verdict and declared that the Citizens Club had a right to comment critically on the public school system and its principal because he was a public figure. No money ever had to be paid by the defendants. Second, the next time Judge O'Barr ran for judge, the voter registration rolls were filled with Black people, and they turned him out of office -- despite his sending letters to all the Black voters in Benton county begging them to let bygones be bygones and vote for him.

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

In May 1965, the Black community applied to the federal government for a **Headstart Program**. At the same time, the county had federal money to open a kindergarten which it attempted to operate on a segregated basis. One Black child, Naomi Reaves, was permitted to register at the "white" Ashland kindergarten school. Twelve other Black children were told registration was full, but they were permitted to register at the Old Salem kindergarten program, which was all-black.. After much pressure, 10 more black children enrolled in the Ashland kindergarten, but they were kept in a segregated class.

In June 1965, 44 parents and 107 students filed suit against Benton County to desegregate its school system. They were represented by **Henry Aronson** of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.

In July, 1965, the federal court ordered the school system to initiate a "freedom-of-choice" school desegregation plan. This was a staggered system of allowing black children at certain grade levels to "choose" to attend the white school. Black parents who wanted their children to attend formerly white schools had to step forward to register their children in a very conspicuous fashion. In July 1965, the plan applied to the 1st, 10th, 11th and 12th grades; the next year, it applied to more grades, etc.

In August 1965, crosses were burned in front of the Citizens Club office, in front of civil rights activists' homes, and in front of the home of the white school superintendent. In October, there was an attempt to burn down the Citizens Club office.

The last year of freedom-of-choice was 1970. After that Old Salem became the elementary school for all children in the northern part of the county, and Ashland School (formerly all white) became the high school for all children in the northern part of the county.

There was one school in the southern part of the county: Hickory Flat. It was for all students in the southern part of the county. But since almost no blacks lived in the southern part of the county, the school was and is almost all white. In addition, a number of whites in the northern part of the county give false addresses in the southern part of the county so that they can attend a "white" school. Every day a large number of parents can be seen dropping their children off at the northern border of the Hickory Flat school district boundary, to be picked up by the Hickory Flat school bus.

For a time in the early '70s, a private "academy", **Gray Academy**, one of those **Christian academies** (i.e., private schools for white kids) was established in Benton county. It was short lived because white kids figured out how to "cheat" and go to Hickory Flat, or they went to schools in other counties. There are very few white children at the Ashland schools and very few Black children at Hickory Flat.

The result is there is almost total **re-segregation** of the schools, but with a significant difference: the black schools do not get hand-me-down books and equipment; facilities seem to be relatively equal, and the black students are getting a better education than they got 40 years ago. It is, however, still not good enough – for blacks of whites.

Some time after 1965, one black person, **Johnny Lee Daugherty**, became a member of the school board. Currently there is at least one Black person on the 5-member school board, elected from the 2nd District.

UNCATEGORIZED EVENTS

In February, 1965, two groups of Black women, including **Beulah Mae Ayers, Lorsie Jones, Onie Lee Williams, Calburdia Tipler, Thelma Thompson and Allie Jane Beck**, applied for jobs at a new shirt factory in Ashland in 1965. After they had filled out applications, they integrated the two white cafes in Ashland. They were treated courteously and served, but the State's Attorney came running over to the cafes, and demanded to know each of their names. The sheriff trailed their cars out of town.

Aubrey Bean integrated the Cotton Patch Café, at Hwys 72 and 7 in February 1965.

The fall and winter of 1965 saw a revival of KKK activity, including riding through Black areas shooting off shotguns, and holding rallies at the fair grounds.

APPENDIX I: EARLY BLACK REGISTERED VOTERS

This is a list of Black people who registered to vote in Benton County between 1902 and 1938 (some registrations are crossed out for failure to pay poll tax). I copied it from an old voter registration book in the Circuit Clerk's office.

Canaan Precinct District 1: (8 blacks registered)

Ben Walls, Sam Bostick, EPJ Brown, John Smith, Walter Parham, JFW Hoyle, Arthur Bostick, WL Spencer. No Black registrants after 1931.

Maxey's Store District 4: (5)

JW Davis, LA Gholson, Robert Stewart, Arthur Bostick, Sam Bostick. No Black registrants before 1919 or after 1931.

Hamilton Precinct District 1: no Black voter registrants

Michigan City Precinct District 2: (47)

Wilson Golson, WJ Hubbard, Watt Stornes, Oliver Maxey, John Rutherford, Freelin Brown, Henry Jackson, Lee Williamson, SM Williamson, Jessie Coley, Amos Blackwell, Will Bosley, Robert Epps, Jessie Pointer, Henry Shelton, Jim Thompson, Earnest Epps, Perry Kilgore, Clarence Wyatt, Jim Watkins, Jack Spencer, Robert S. Williams, Frank Graham, David Bramlett, Clarence Williams, EW Watkins, Hardy Strickland, RB Williams, Sam Williams, Audrey Terry, John Moore, Lawson Turner, Edd Pointer, JL Hicks, JW Hicks, WM Williamson, Ella White (female!), RA Littleton, Laura Jackson (female!), George Epps, Syrus Perry, Lee Jimerson, Clabon Jackson, Alex Greer, Marvin Shelton, CR Wyatt, Henry Davis

Lamar Precinct District 2: (26)

Henry Watson, MC Evans, EC Baird, Elex Seay, JK Evans, Preston Evans, ES Baird, Claibron Evans, James Bean, Sr., Dick Gholston, AM Washington, John Bell, Ned Greene, AT Jeffries, Jessie Avant, Jim Young, Tom McKennie, Laurence Cleaver, Lewis Brown, George Harris, Edd Cleaver, Baker Humpherys, Will Ray, Henry Rhyneheart, RL Evans, Salon Peterson. No Black registrants after 1927.

Ashland Precinct District 3: (23)

NH Williamson, Sol Rutherford, Charlie Baird, AG Gibson, Tom Mathis, JW Crawford, GW Hamer, JE Everett, Sam Wright, MP Price, Willie Mitchell, Nathan Luellen, JW Mason, Henry Beck, John Richard, Frank Baird, Major Baird, BV Elliott, Robert Cole, Arthur Hodges, James Elliott, Harvey Mathews, Charlie Littleton. No Black registrants after 1919.

Registration did not appear to be limited to black land owners, as long as the registrant could pay the poll tax. Many of the above registrants appear to list other people as their employers (i.e., on whose land they farm). I have been told that if a white man "vouched" for a Black man, he was allowed to register.

How many of those who registered actually voted, or tried to vote?

APPENDIX 2: BLACK LAND OWNERSHIP IN BENTON COUNTY

1870 census of Tippah County--Salem Post office area (subsequently Benton County) lists Black landowners: M. Boatner, Wash Collier, Aaron Cooper (I didn't get past the Cs).

The area known as Little Egypt (which I believe is East of Ashland) at some point had a lot of black land owners. Nan Gibson, John Farese's houskeeper lived there, as did or do the Wilsons, Hudsons, Jacksons. The North end of Snow Lake Shores was all black-owned; it is now a white-owned resort area.

Dick Robertson, b. 1833, the son of a white man and a slave, acquired over 3,000 acres of land in Benton (at the time Tippah) county. He made money by storing cotton with a white half-brother during the Civil War and then selling it at inflated prices after the war. He died in 1901. Not sure if mismanagement by his sons or white theft depleted the estate. A good deal of his land ended up in the hands of the Double O Ranch, north of Hwy 72 above Hwy 5.

Part of the Double O Ranch was called Berry Hill Place and belonged to Harry MacAme, a Black man who owned land and had a successful business. He was killed by a white man, and his land was appropriated by whites. His widow was still living in the '60's.

Much of the area around Michigan City was owned by Blacks, including Dick Robertson, after the Civil War until 1900. Ella Bailey was a large landowner. She ran a restaurant in Michigan City. She was run out of Mississippi.

Large white landowners such as Joe Hardaway and the McKenzies would sell off some of their land to Blacks. Willingness to sell might have had to do with the Depression.

Joe King may have been one of the earliest and largest Black land owners in Benton county (this would have been the father of Joe King who put up land for my bail in 1965). So was Alfred Gipson, who had land near Good Hope (Little Egypt). Other early landowners were Sachs Pamm, Dick Robertson, Perry Hill, Doug Perry, Tom Mathis (Mathews), Landy Perry, Freelin Brown, Alford Hoyle, John Crawford, Len Brown, Mose Terry, Wheeler Mathews, W.C. Royston, A.T. Royston, Clea Rutherford, Robert Beard, Mel Price, Eugene Steward's father (Robert? 1926), Levi Reaves (Henry Reaves' father). Will Ray, Earnestine Scott's great grandfather, bought land from Isaac Peterson, who bought it at some point.

A number of black people bought land in the early '40's: Nelma Tipler's father, Sam White; Nelma's father-in-law, Miller Tipler; Joe Bean (bought as well as inherited land).