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Mississippi Zion: The Struggle for Liberation in Attala County, 1865-1915

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ture has weathered the march of “progress.” Many people think of Appalachia as homogeneous, but this text gives greater nuance to the area of Appalachia, its citizens, and culture. Some stories recount economic deprivation, others political power lost, yet most focus on the personal sense of dispossession that residents and even generations removed feel. Families were cut off from their land, missed economic potential, forfeited a connection to their past, and sometimes just lost the place they called home. Throughout these stories, one can read about the plight of the residents who were removed, the nuances of the local communities that the National Park Services and TVA did not understand, and the shared values of an idyllic past that may have not existed for the people living it, but nevertheless remembered down through the generations that has become synonymous with the Appalachian identity.

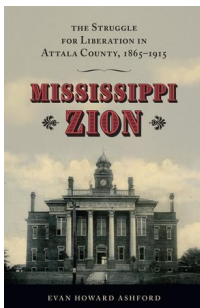
Other books of interest

Disappearing Appalachia in Tennessee: A Picture of a Vanished Land and Its People by Harry Moore and Fred Brown – a journalistic look at the Appalachian of yesteryear that includes stories of the creation of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park.

An Appalachian New Deal: West Virginia in the Great Depression by Jerry Bruce Thomas – a snapshot of Appalachia in the Great Depression with stories of families affected by poverty through a period of economic crisis for the country.

William F. Brogdon, II, University of North Georgia

Mississippi Zion: The Struggle for Liberation in Attala County, 1865-1915



Evan Howard Ashford
Jackson: University Press of
Mississippi, 2022
ISBN: 9781496839725
248 p. \$99.00 (Hbk)

Of necessity, much of the scholarship on African American his-

tory has focused on slavery, segregation, and oppression. At the same time, going back at least as far as W.E.B. Du Bois in the late 1890's, there has been scholarship that has emphasized the perseverance and success of African Americans as active agents in resisting and overcoming their difficult historical circumstances in the United States. Ashford's *Mississippi Zion* clearly falls into this category.

Using Attala County, Mississippi for an in-depth analysis, Ashford explores the theme of African American liberation during the first half-century following the end of the Civil War. Ashford, who is African American, says he essentially began this project at age 11 by writing to family members in Attala County inquiring about family history and requesting photographs (p. x). This early curiosity informs his intention to write a different sort of history with the focus more on African American agency and less on white power (p. 7). Instead of viewing the period 1865-1915 as simply a slide into the Jim Crow era in Mississippi, Ashford makes a point of emphasizing this as an era in which formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants engaged in a constant and rather successful campaign of liberation.

The book is organized both chronologically and thematically with specific examples of Attala County residents engaged in the liberation struggle via education, economic development, political participation, and use of the legal system to achieve some level of justice. While emphasizing African American successes, Ashford is realistic and does cover the ongoing efforts of white “redeemers” to roll back the gains of the formerly enslaved since for most whites in the area, the concept of equality between the races, was intolerable. Interestingly enough, Ashford cites several examples where African American women successfully sued to ensure that their children borne of white men received legal recognition as citizens and heirs. He even states, “Black women saw they could use their sexuality to their advantage” noting that under such circumstances, African American women and mixed-race children “represented a threat to the redemption agenda” and helped undermine white power (p. 74).

Another unconventional observation concerns Ashford's assertion in regard to differing attitudes toward education. For African Ameri-

cans, education “represented mental decolonization and a pathway to becoming a better person” which certainly is plausible but “as whites downplayed or ignored education, their status as a people remained stagnant or declined” (p. 85). The latter assertion may be debatable; on the other hand, Ashford does supply two tables that indicate African American school enrollment increased while white school enrollment decreased and with African American monthly school attendance rates as higher than white attendance rates for the years 1882-1885 for the state of Mississippi (p. 85).

Ashford even manages to identify elements of African American liberation as some whites attempted to maintain white supremacy through violence which includes lynching. Citing the 1902 lynching of Jim Gaston and Monroe Hallum, the six alleged perpetrators were brought to trial in 1903. Although the jury was all white and two African American witnesses moved to Arkansas and proved unavailable for the trial, this was a victory of sorts because it was the first time in Mississippi’s history that white men were brought to trial for the lynching of an African American (pp. 128-131). Due to delays and missing witnesses, however, the trial ended with no verdict and no real justice.

By the 1910’s, says Ashford, Attala County had settled into a social pattern with African Americans focusing on liberation and whites concentrating on “redemption” (p. 145). Ashford notes that during this time, as well as in succeeding decades, there was some interracial cooperation and “not all African American men feared white men or their retaliations” (p. 162). In conclusion, the author states, “foundations of freedom lay in forcing the greater society to accept peoples’ identity that society sought to oppress” (p. 165).

The book provides scholarly support including numerous endnotes, a bibliography, statistical tables, and two appendices. A real treat are the numerous photographs of people, buildings, and documents referred to in the text. The bibliography contains a respectable list of secondary sources (books and journal articles); although, it would have been helpful if the author had provided a list of the primary sources consulted. The detailed endnotes and source attributions for statistical table data indicate that Ashford consulted primary sources such as newspapers, periodicals,

Attala County and state of Mississippi school records, and the U.S. Census among other resources.

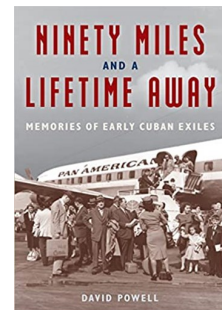
While some of the conclusions or interpretations of African American agency (liberation) in the face of white oppression (redemption) may be unconventional, the scholarship and extensive research presented by Ashford is solid. The audience for this book is primarily academic, but many non-academic readers will find *Mississippi Zion* to be a good read, too. Certainly, the conclusions and the abundant examples of African American liberation efforts give the reader much to ponder.

Recommended for academic and large public libraries collecting in the areas of African American, Southern, and Civil Rights history. It would also be a great addition to collections in most Mississippi libraries, large or small, academic or public.

Tim Dodge, Auburn University

Ninety Miles and a Lifetime Away: Memories of Early Cuban Exiles

David Powell
Gainesville: University Press of
Florida, 2022
ISBN: 9781683402572
326 p. \$30.00 (Hbk)



In *Ninety Miles and a Lifetime Away: Memories of Early Cuban Exiles*, Florida attorney David Powell weaves dozens of oral history interviews he conducted with First and Second Wave refugees (1959-1973) into this arresting volume that describes life on the island before the revolution, Cuba’s transformation under the Castro regime, and the varied experiences of those who left their homeland and adapted to new environments. Though most interviewees initially believed their exile was only temporary, this book traces their evolution from reluctant refugees into American citizens who embraced their new home and enriched it through their agency.

Ninety Miles and a Lifetime Away is not a scholarly monograph about the Cuban Revolution or a comprehensive study regarding Cuban Americans. Rather, the purpose of this book is to