

Program: “Road Map to Racism” – Making of 1890 Mississippi Constitution

Speaker: Dorothy O. Pratt, Professor of History Emeritus, University of Notre Dame

Guests: Linda Yee, David Schimmelpfennig, Nancy Schimmelpfennig, Everett Schimmelpfennig, Lars Schimmelpfennig, Sisir and Heather Dhar

Attendance: 104

Introduced and Sponsored By: Bob Yee

Scribe: Bill Elliott

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Today’s interesting talk was taken from the book “Sowing the Wind: The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890” which was written after 9 years of research by today’s speaker, Dorothy Pratt. The talk was about one particular person involved in the 1890 constitutional convention for Mississippi which rewrote the constitution of Mississippi previously adopted after the civil war.

The person in question was Isaiah Montgomery, a wealthy black man from Mississippi. He was the only black delegate to the 1895 constitutional convention. Black persons at that time railed against his involvement in the convention, calling him a Judas to his race. The talk today was to tell, as Paul Harvey said “The rest of the story”. In doing this, she partially rehabilitates Isaiah for his part in the convention.

Included in the convention were Senator J.Z. George, who crafted the new constitution as well as other white legislators, and Isaiah Montgomery. Excluded were 2 black senators Hiram Rubbles, and Blanche Bruce and John Roy Lynch, member of the U. S. House or Representatives. The purpose of the convention was to have the power remain in the hands of the paternalistic white population who were only 45% of the population, and suppress the vote of the 55% black majority. The reason for calling the convention was because of increasing white violence against blacks. The constitution was carefully drawn up to avoid being ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States in violation of the the 15th amendment which states “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude”. They got around this amendment by

1. Apportionment which under-represented certain areas of the state.
2. A poll tax.
3. Stringent requirements for state citizenship
4. Loss of voting rights for certain felonies and misdemeanors
5. Literacy requirements. Literacy was decided by the court clerks, so as to include illiterate whites

The constitution was so blatantly unfair that it was unlikely to be ratified by the state legislature, and so it was merely stated to be the law (promulgated).

Because of his hand in this constitution, Isaiah Montgomery was shunned by other black citizens, but ironically was supported by other black businessmen who had become middle class, owned land, and had previously been slave owners.

Why did he do this?

Isaiah’s father was Ben Montgomery. Ben was owned by Joe Davis who was the brother of Jefferson Davis, and who was very wealthy owning 3 plantations on the Mississippi river. Joe had a very interesting way of managing his plantations in that he gave the right to make the rules to the slaves, gave them a guilty or innocent vote on violations, and let them assign the punishment. His very capable intermediary was Ben Montgomery who was well rewarded for his efforts, and became

wealthy in his own right. When Isaiah was born, Joe Davis agreed to educate Isaiah in reading, math, religion and other things. Isaiah became extremely well educated under his tutelage and by using the plantation library.

Isaiah went on to found the town of Mound Bayou on the Mississippi Delta. This was an all black community which educated its children, held church every Sunday, and functioned much as the Davis plantation had.

Mound Bayou is a city in [Bolivar County, Mississippi](#). It is notable for having been founded as an independent black community in 1887 by former slaves led by [Isaiah Montgomery](#).

The second point in his favor was that the paternalists in Mississippi had always kept their word to Isaiah. This would change when racism surpassed paternalism around 1920. Isaiah had no crystal ball, so this was his decision.

The Conclusion of Professor Platt was partial rehabilitation for Isaiah Montgomery.



Dorothy O. Pratt, Professor of History Emeritus, University of Notre Dame