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### ***Voter Disqualification***

Were the provisions of the 1890 Constitution fair? Which of them have been repealed? (See Chapters 15 and 17.) How did these provisions affect your great-grandparents if they lived in Mississippi at this time?

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### **The Debate over Disfranchisement**

The disfranchising provisions were hotly debated on the convention floor and outside the halls. The Natchez *Democrat* said the "understanding" clause was drawn up to give corrupt officials an opportunity to restrict white as well as black voters. Mississippi was the only state, said the Port Gibson *Southern Reveille*, to make its constitution "an instrument of fraud."

Supporters of the clauses argued that the increased residence requirement would disfranchise many blacks, since they moved more often than whites. Early voter registration and the poll tax would keep many poor people from registering. In effect, supporters argued, these provisions would not discriminate directly against blacks, but against what were called their "racial characteristics." Thus, they said, the Fifteenth Amendment would not be violated.

S. S. Calhoun left no doubt about the purpose of the disfranchising provisions or, indeed, of the convention. "Let's tell the truth if it bursts the bottom of the Universe," he told the delegates. "We came here to exclude the Negro. Nothing short of this will answer."

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### ***Isaiah T. Montgomery and the Idea of Mound Bayou***

In the Constitutional Convention of 1890, the lone black delegate rose to speak. His race had been terrorized and their votes misused for the previous fifteen years. The convention itself intended to eliminate blacks from Mississippi politics.

Montgomery spoke for an hour. He was willing to offer this "fearful sacrifice laid upon the burning altar of liberty," he said, because eliminating blacks from politics would improve relations and "bridge the chasm" between blacks and whites.

Then, with full knowledge of what he was doing, Montgomery voted for the voting restrictions which would keep blacks out of Mississippi politics for the next 70 years.

What kind of man was this?

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Isaiah T. Montgomery was born in 1847 on Joseph Davis's plantation at Davis Bend. His father, Ben Montgomery, a brilliant man who had made several inventions while a slave, taught him to read. He then became Joseph Davis's private secretary. When the Davis families fled as Grant took control of the Mississippi River, they left the Montgomerys in charge of their plantations. Isaiah later served as a cabin boy in the Union navy in the battles of Grand Gulf and Vicksburg.

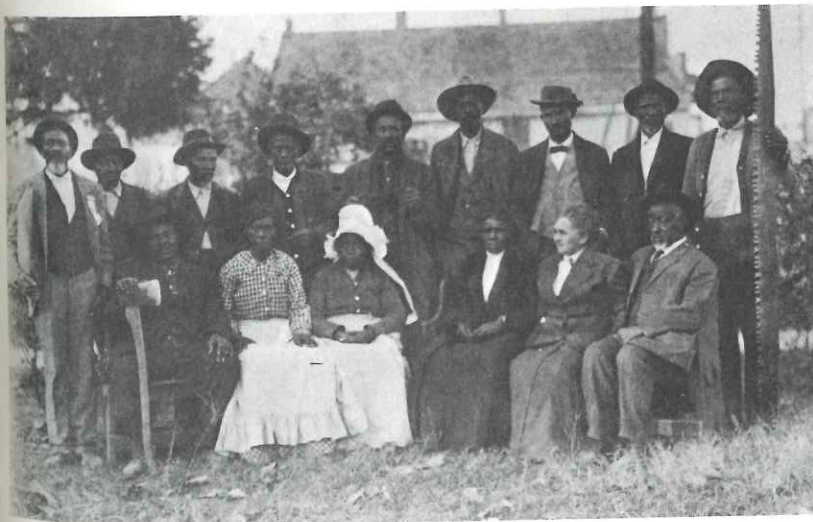
From 1866 through 1878, the Montgomerys ran the former Davis plantations which they had bought. In 1873, Montgomery and Sons, the third largest cotton producer in the South, won all the prizes for cotton at the Cincinnati Exposition. By 1874, however, Reconstruction was beginning to end. Then the Montgomerys' strange relationship to white Mississippi began to be seen. When Sheriff Peter Crosby of Vicksburg was removed by whites, blacks rushed to his aid. According to a Jackson newspaper, however, Ben Montgomery tried to stop them.

Crosby commanded about 700 Negroes to come to Vicksburg from Hurricane armed with guns. They started out, but old Ben confronted them and bade them return to their homes. He spoke so eloquently they turned back; thus was much bloodshed spared. If such men as Old Ben were more plentiful, what a land of peace and harmony we should have!

In 1878, Jefferson Davis sued his own relatives and won control of the plantations. The Montgomerys' ownership was over, and Ben died.

Nine years later, Isaiah Montgomery led several of the Davis Bend settlers to land he had bought in the Delta. They founded Mound Bayou, the South's first all-black town. Mound Bayou was an attempt to create a way for blacks to survive and grow in a racist and sometimes hostile society.

After Montgomery died in 1924, ten local white planters chipped in to pay for his tombstone. This stone is a symbol of one part of his complex personality—the part including his 1890 convention speech. The existence of Mound Bayou, still an independent town today, provides another kind of memorial.



*Montgomery is seated at the right in this group portrait of Mound Bayou pioneers.*