THE LEVEE BOARDS OF THE YAZOO MISSISSIPPI DELTA:
A FIGHT TO CONTROL THE RIVER AND REGION

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

THE LEVEE BOARDS OF THE YAZOO MISSISSIPPI DELTA: A FIGHT TO CONTROL THE RIVER AND REGION. (August 2012)

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This thesis traces the historical geography of local Mississippi River control in the Yazoo Mississippi Delta from the 1850s through the present, dividing each distinct period in its flood control history into spatio-temporal “landscape eras.” Local leaders in each of the Delta’s historic landscape eras had slightly different strategies for managing Mississippi River flooding, and these differences manifested themselves on the Delta’s physical, political, and economic landscape. Since the spatial diffusion of power and resources in the Delta directly stemmed from the region’s flood control policies, those who controlled the river, controlled the region. Today however, as each large flood event causes the nation to question the lower Mississippi’s current system of structural flood control, the Delta’s historic power structures are changing.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Dr. Peggy J. Bodine, for fostering my interest in history and space through her work on historic Memphis neighborhoods, and through her constant support of my scholarly endeavors.
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There are many parties that have contributed to this research and need special recognition here. First of all, I would like to thank the Office of Student Research at Appalachian State University for providing me with a research grant to travel to the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee Board’s (YMDL) archives in Clarksdale and purchase a portable scanner with which to make electronic copies of many of their historical resources.

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I am also incredibly grateful for the help and support I received at Appalachian State. I would like to thank Dr. Mike Mayfield for initially encouraging me to develop my interest in Delta flood control into a thesis. Dr. Baker Perry, though not involved directly in this project, was a wonderful mentor to me during my graduate studies and gave me time to pursue my thesis research when I probably should have been concentrating on his assignments. My friends and fellow geography grad students Alison Singer and Ginger Kelly have given me wonderful advice, encouragement, and the occasional kick in the pants. I would like to thank Alison in particular for providing me with a place to stay in Boone and for her expert writing and editing pointers.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In April of 2011, snows high in the Western Rockies began to melt, trickling eastward down mountainsides, across prairies, and into ever widening watercourses on their ancient, annual journey. Eventually, the winter’s former snow crystals met the wide, turbid waters of the lower Mississippi, where they rolled and tumbled south to the Gulf of Mexico. Such had been their path for millennia.

But this year, something was different. Record snows had fallen across the continent over the winter, which cool temperatures had kept in place through the past months. In April, these snows started melting rapidly and all at once. And as the mountains and high plains steadily sloughed sheets of water, river engineers and hydrologists began anxiously eyeing the Mississippi. The river was rising and they needed to prepare. Unless they could confine the floodwaters, lower reaches of the river would spread across its inhabited floodplain to drown houses, farms and towns.

The impending 2011 flood excited journalists and historians, who used the opportunity to remind the American public of its nation’s long battle with Mississippi River floods (Barry 2011). Since the time of early European settlement, individuals, counties, states, and the federal government had worked to control the river’s periodic
flooding with engineered earthen berms—or levees—so that Americans could farm and settle its rich alluvial plain. One editorialist in Mississippi even equated the flood control effort to the wars America had successfully fought over the past few centuries (Mitchell 2011). In fact, the current system of earthen levees along the lower Mississippi is longer and taller than the Great Wall of China, and one of the planet’s few man-made defense systems visible from space (Rogers 2011).

Though it might have been conjured in the imaginations of florid journalists, this war metaphor was hard to ignore during the 2011 high water. The record flood safely reached the Gulf without causing a major catastrophe, but such a victory did not come without casualties. On May 3rd, the rising river compelled the Army Corps of Engineers to dynamite the levee at Bird’s Point in Missouri. As the pre-dawn sky lit with an unearthly orange glow, floodwaters poured through the blasted levee onto low-lying Missouri farmland.¹ The emergency detonation relieved pressure on the mainline levees lining the river further south, but also flooded tens of thousands of acres of crops.

This destructive tactic² was the culmination of a nearly two-hundred-year-old struggle with the river and its great floods. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, armed guards patrolled the river during high water ready to shoot anyone they caught tampering with their defensive lines (Percy 1941). During low water, flood fighting reconvened to levee camps, where blacks and penniless immigrants endured heat, disease, impossible days, and backbreaking work to shore up levees for the next round

¹ The Bird’s Point levee is part of a comprehensive federal flood control system authorized by Congress in 1928. The 1936 Federal Flood Control Act appropriated funds for the purchase of one time “flowage easements” across land in the designated Bird’s Point emergency spillway in case the Corps ever needed to dynamite the levee. The Corps had only activated the spillway once before, during the flood of 1937 (Mississippi River Commission 2011).
² The Army Corps of Engineers also opened emergency spillways at the Morganza and Bonnet Carre spillways in Louisiana during the May 2011 Flood.
(Barry 1997; Cobb 1994). After they were all finished, the ancient bed of the Mississippi lay open, dry and empty; for confining the river had “exposed geography as the dying of a body exposes its defenseless mortality” (Faulkner 1942, 200).

In this thesis, I examine the warlike process by which the Mississippi’s levee boards—political bodies organized to construct earthen levees that control river flooding—reshaped the geography of the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley. From the mid-nineteenth century through the present, a combined local and federal flood control effort has transformed the Mississippi’s inundated and uninhabited floodplain forest into one of the nation’s industrial agricultural powerhouses. But the political process of taming the Mississippi did more than simply change the great river’s physical landscape; it also affected the spatial pattern of economic and political development in the region. Inevitably, those with the money and power to subdue the river benefited at the expense of those without. The historical ebb and flow of their capital and clout have marked the landscape just as plainly as the Mississippi’s floods.

The Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley stretches from the confluence of the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois to the Mississippi’s bird’s foot Delta in the Gulf of Mexico. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, this region’s local leaders and elites began to organize levee and drainage districts all along the river’s flood-prone tributary basins, such as the White and Tensas in Arkansas, the Yazoo in Mississippi, and the Atchafalaya in Louisiana (Harrison 1951). Over the years, these districts taxed their citizens and competed for the best levees and most generous federal appropriations.

I concentrate the investigations in this thesis on the contested flood control geography of one of these tributary basins: the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, or colloquially,
the Delta. Though its ecology and environment are little different from analogous basins in Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri or southern Illinois; its size, sharply delineated geomorphic features and unique cultural geography have made the Delta a distinct region in both Southern and American history (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994; Willis 2000).

Figure 1: Map of Mississippi showing major geomorphic features.
The football-shaped Yazoo-Mississippi Delta stretches lengthwise for approximately 150 miles between Memphis, Tennessee and Vicksburg, Mississippi. Between these two cities, a sharp bluff, 100 to 300 feet high, arcs inland, bulging 65 miles at its furthest point from the river. This bluff could be the protruding toenail of the Appalachians, and it neatly separates the near-flat alluvium of the Yazoo Delta from hill country’s rolling aolian loess.

Run-off from these hills drains westward into the Yazoo’s tributaries, which then convey it south through the Yazoo Delta. Geologist Harold Fisk theorized that sometime near the end of Pleistocene glaciation, the Mississippi ceased to drain in classic glacial outlet braids and began its single, meandering trajectory (Smith and Winkley 1996). Fisk believed that the Yazoo River formed in one of the former braid channels, and thus runs roughly parallel to the bluff line until it empties runoff from the entire Delta through its mouth at Vicksburg (Albertson and Patrick, 1996). Before its modern flood control regime, streams flowed sluggishly across the dead-flat Delta, shifting, meandering in complex contortions toward the Mississippi. And every year, the Mississippi’s gushing headwaters robbed topsoil from the Midwestern prairies and conveyed it south, until the river slackened and spread this sediment across the entire breadth of the Yazoo Delta. Over thousands of years, these processes built some of the richest, deepest soils in the world (Saikuu 2005).
Figure 2: Mississippi River Commission Geological map of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta showing the Mississippi and Yazoo’s historical meander courses and the corresponding soil depositions that built the region (Kolb et al., 1968)
Even though the Delta’s fertile soil initially lay covered under a dense, flooded jungle of swampy bottomland hardwood forests, nineteenth century pioneers could not ignore its agricultural potential. Thus began the processes of timbering, levee construction, and state-sponsored plantation agriculture that defined the Delta and continue today. Writers have delineated and chronicled different epochs of this infamous region, and examined each’s significance to the South’s racial, economic and cultural development over the past two centuries (Barry 1997; Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994; Dattel 2009; Moore 1967; Percy 1941). However, too few have noted the differences inherent in each historical era’s treatment of flood control (Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005); and none have explored the overarching effect that these different flood control tactics had on racial, economic, and cultural geographies in the Delta.

Therefore, I intend to explore the Delta’s history using the novel, spatially-derived concept of “landscape eras.” Instead of simply organizing the Delta’s flood control history as narrative chronology, I divide each significant Delta time period — from its pre-colonial days, to its antebellum settlement, to post-Civil War Reconstruction years, to the days of early twentieth century federal public works, to the present— according to the manner in which its leaders choose to control the Mississippi. Each change in Delta’s physical and political flood control infrastructure created analogous changes on the Delta’s physical and political landscape. I contend that since these changes are clearly identifiable in archival sources, the Delta’s shifting history may be encapsulated and understood according to its inhabitants’ evolving relationship with its landscape.
The “landscape era” can be a useful tool for historical geographers examining any distinct geographic region. However, the Delta provides a model case study for the concept. The entire Delta sits in the bed of the ancient Mississippi. Life there would simply be impossible without massive, man-made structural control of the river; and all subsequent landscape transformations via timbering, agriculture, human settlement and societal organization stem from the river’s subjugation. Though historians and public policy scholars often use the western United States to link river control to the development of a distinctly American form of government and society (Ellison and Newmark 2010; Pisani 2000; Reisner 1993); the Delta’s soggy frontier provides an earlier and arguably more influential counterpart.

In the following chapters, I will explore the Delta’s shifting attitudes and policies toward Mississippi River control through four distinct landscape eras. Chapter III first summarizes the geographic transformation of the Delta from its pre-colonial natural flood regime to its present environmental challenges. Chapter IV then details the shift from this first, natural landscape era to a second, characterized by a more formal system of governmental flood control in the Delta’s antebellum years. Chapters V and VI examine the conflicts and debates surrounding the third landscape era, or era of increasing federal support for flood control between 1865 and 1930. Chapter VI also describes the beginnings of the fourth landscape era in the present-day Delta. In this newest era, the Delta’s levee boards must embrace decreased federal flood control appropriations and new racial and environmental attitudes to remain relevant.

Throughout each of these eras, I show how levee building is often steered by individual Delta leaders. These leaders’ actions represent and highlight their era’s
prevailing attitudes toward nature, towards class and race, and towards their fellow
Deltans living with this alluvial land’s idiosyncratic floodplain hydrology. The result has
been a constant struggle, not only with the river, but between those living on the riverside
versus those in the interior Delta backcountry; those in the slightly elevated upper Delta
versus those in the soggier lower half; planters and large landholders versus small
farmers, laborers, and sharecroppers; and the entire Delta versus its home state of
Mississippi. These flood control “wars” define each landscape era of the Delta.

A key element in the research presented here is that, for a variety of reasons,
leaders in the Yazoo Basin established two separate levee boards, one for the northern
counties and one for the southern. The boards’ specific institutional histories are
important in the context of national water policy because they first show how the need for
flood control gave rise to bizarre administrative units (levee boards) that have often
operated outside the typical confines of local government. The Delta’s racial and
environmental attitudes are then articulated through the unusual power and influence of
levee boards.

The levee boards’ histories also reveal that despite the assumption of coordinated
federal flood management, these types of organizations still compete with one another to
secure superior protection (O’Neill 2006). Moreover, seemingly insignificant political
choices made during the boards’ separate formations fuel this competition today. By
connecting the boards’ early history to current controversies, I show how the two boards
historically settled on different sides of common conflicts that later widened into chasms.
These chasms expose the naked bones of the Delta’s — and the nation’s — enduring racial
and environmental tragedies.
CHAPTER II: RESEARCH AND METHODS

Contribution to the discipline of geography

This thesis will contribute to the work of historical geographers and other social scientists examining the dynamics of space and political control in the Yazoo Mississippi Delta landscape. Human geographers have observed the manner in which changing agricultural land use spurs changes in geographic distribution of marginalized populations, namely blacks (Prunty 1955; Aiken 1990). In 1955, Prunty noticed how the sharecropping system, where blacks spread out over the landscape with their own gardens and homesteads, eroded the land use efficiency of clustered plantation-era slave quarters. Later, Aiken (1990) recognized that the late twentieth century trend toward larger, highly mechanized farms reversed this scattered spatial pattern and once again forced underemployed black agricultural workers to cluster into rural ghettos of small Delta towns. Though a large percentage of the Delta’s black population left the Delta for northern cities during the nation’s Great Migration from the 1910s through the 19450s, Brown (2001) and Brown and Cromartie (2006) have noted incidences of recent return migration to the Delta, fueled by improving political conditions for blacks and a desire to explore family and cultural roots.
My research acknowledges the profound spatial effect of race and class based political marginalization in the Delta, but it also seeks to explore underlying associations between such political developments and the natural environment. Biologists, ecologists, and environmental historians have begun to chronicle the human-induced changes to the South’s natural landscapes (Hurley, Carr 2010). In the Delta specifically, researchers have published information on the region’s history of land use change (Saikku 2005), degraded forest and freshwater ecosystems (Twedt and Loesch 1999), and altered fluvial geomorphology (Rogers 2011; Smith and Winkley 1996). But while this information is helpful in an environmental management context, scholars in both environmental science and human geography see the need to apply the synthesizing frameworks of the political ecology field to the US South (Hurley, Carr 2010), especially given the tradition of historical inquests into the region’s unique manifestations of race and class inequities. By doing so, they can begin to better understand how nature and society constantly interact with and shape one another over time.

Political ecologist Roderick Neumann (2010) defines the essence of a region as its cohesive history of nature-society interactions. He complains that to date, political ecologists have misused the human geography-generated concept, and can perhaps form a more rigorous theory of region by returning to its history of natural resource conflicts and other shared social encounters with the environment (Neumann 2010). Geographers have been developing a distinct political ecology of the South for many years (Hurley, Carr 2010), though such explorations are largely absent from the Delta. While the Delta shares many environmental characteristics with the South in general, its unique history built on the bulwarks of man-made flood control make it especially ripe for this field. Therefore, I
I intend to focus on the Delta’s political history of call and response with the great river that shaped it.

I hope to also engage the critical geographic debate over neoliberalism in environmental management by situating my research squarely within the regional framework of political ecology. Geographers have looked at the incorporation of neoliberal economic evaluations of nature with pragmatic enthusiasm (Jenkins et al. 2010) or with critical suspicion (Castree 2010), but most assume that the adoption of its philosophies is inevitable.

However, O’Neill (2006) and McDonald (2010) argue that the Delta has managed to resist neoliberalism in its flood control advocacy in the past decades. They show how the Delta levee boards and local political organization cling to nineteenth-century arguments that the state should underwrite structural flood control, rather than accept that a natural flood regime with swamps and floodplain forests might have an economic benefit through ecotourism dollars and free, natural, non-structural flood control services. I seek to build on their hypothesis, but also sum up my research to reveal how the Delta’s levee boards have a more nuanced approach to neoliberalism, and one very much dependent on regional history and physical geography.

My aim is broad, and my hope is that by providing a narrative account that weaves together the landscape era concept with these theoretical elements, I can inspire more specific geographic inquests into this rich and often ignored region. This thesis largely focuses on historical background, but I believe that such background may provide fodder for a host of geographic subspecialties. With this research as an introduction, they
can apply their individual tools to understanding the political legacies of a region, and a nation struggling to control its mighty waterways.

**Prior Work**

Setting this research in the Delta is also of critical importance. Historians and human geographers have long used the region as a backdrop for exploring the concepts of how space delineates race, class, and political and cultural identity in the American South (Aiken 1990). It provides an ideal laboratory, because its unusual post-bellum prosperity perpetuated many of the characteristics of the old plantation system well into the twentieth century (Aiken 1990, Brandfon 1967, Cobb 1994). While the rest of the South slowly modernized after Reconstruction, The Delta’s thriving cotton economy gave it the distinction of being “the most Southern place on earth” (Cobb 1994). It spawned opulent lifestyles for white planters; and for black sharecroppers, became the birthplace of the blues. But Brandfon (1967) introduces and Cobb (1994) expands on the idea that the Delta was always tied more closely to the federal government than to its region, or even to its own state of Mississippi. Delta elites fostered this unique relationship in order to secure outside capital for the flood control and cotton subsidies that enriched their plantations. But, this arrangement ultimately bound them in a colony-like, unsustainable dependence that impoverished their region. To Cobb, the Delta is a cautionary tale of the glaring social injustice, wealth inequities, and extraction-based nonchalance this type of relationship engenders.

Because levee building and flood control are so integral to the Delta’s economic development, most broad histories of the region cover its trajectory. Brandfon (1967), Cobb (1994), and Willis (2000) discuss levees’ significance in expanding crop acreages
and fueling the Delta’s hunger for laborers after the Civil War. Saikku (2005) attends to levees in his environmental history of region, which places its human history in the context of its floodplain ecological and biotic attributes. He shows how levees, along with logging, land clearing, and cotton farming facilitated the swift transformation of a majestic, hydric jungle into a drained and decimated plain. In fact, flood control in the Delta has so altered the hydrology of the region that, even if abandoned, most of its current farmland could no longer support the diverse forests that once grew in the inundated landscape (Gardiner and Oliver 2005, Saikku 2005).

The Delta’s levees and levee districts are specifically significant to the development of national flood control policies too. In his popular *Rising Tide*, John Barry (1997) memorably profiles the Percys of Greeneville, Mississippi and other Delta elites spearheading the local flood fighting efforts in 1927, as well as their forays into local and national politics. He simultaneously examines the changing roles of federal river authorities, the United States Army Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission, in working astride levee districts to manage the river before and after the flood. In doing so, he deconstructs both the formal and the backroom frameworks for flood control that existed all along the river prior to 1927. He then shows how these frameworks, the Delta, and the nation came unmoored after the river crashed through a levee above Greenville in the spring of 1927.

*Rising Tide* is sweeping in scope, but it does touch on the ways that early twentieth century Delta levee board politics wriggled their way into federal flood control planning and disaster relief operations. However, the book tells the story of the 1927 flood, which did not affect the upper Delta. Thus it makes no mention of the Yazoo
Mississippi Delta Levee Board, nor the antebellum levee board begun by James Lusk Alcorn, an upper Delta planter. Similarly, O’Neill (2006) emphasizes the part that Mississippi levee districts played in shaping the 1928 and 1936 Federal Flood Control Acts. Her *Rivers by Design* argues that even though this legislation was intended to enact a disinterested, comprehensive management plan for the lower Mississippi, the form it took kept the power of the local levee boards intact. As a result, even though federal money flows freely, top down environment planning and resource management have been difficult to implement. But while O’Neill (2006) does cover the formation of the two distinct boards, she treats them as a united front.

The most thorough recital of both boards’ intertwined histories appeared in 1951, in Robert W. Harrison’s *Levee Building and Levee Districts in Mississippi*. In it, he gives a detailed account of the founding of the two levee boards and their activities up until the early 1930s. He mines their institutional detritus —the meeting minutes, presidents’ and engineers’ reports, ledgers, and accounts— and delivers a summary of the floods, the cubic yards laid, and the money expended since the 1850s. The information it contains is useful, yet it does not delve into the politics of the day or explore the thinking behind the boards’ major policy shifts.

At the time he compiled the boards’ history, Harrison (1951) was an agricultural economist working for the United States Department of Agriculture. The Delta Council, a local economic development organization for the Delta’s mainly agricultural interests, published his research. Its implicit aim seems to be to showcase the amount of local effort and funds Delta citizens contributed to flood control before the federal government began to help. And though Harrison (1951) never states it, one can infer that the Delta
Council and other regional players planned to present his findings to the United States Congress, proving just how much they had sweat and spent, and how much they deserved continued appropriations.

Like O’Neill (2006), Harrison (1951) treats the two boards’ separate incorporation and leadership as a minor administrative detail. This research demonstrates that though the boards worked routinely as a team, they became quite distinct entities with agendas that sometimes conflicted. And from the early beginnings of organized local flood control to modern day environmental controversies, their conscious autonomy veritably maps the geography of race and land use in the Delta.

Water policy historian Donald Pisani (2000) challenges other researchers when he observes, “how large plantation owners along the Mississippi River used levee districts to dominate local politics through money paid to local contractors is another story that needs to be told” (Pisani, 479). Though innuendo abounds\(^3\), specific inquests into local levee board dealings are virtually non-existent in the scholarly literature devoted to the Delta or to Mississippi River flood control history. Thus the following chapters intend to take up Pisani’s challenge, at least in part. But while local corruption and conflict of interest are certainly part of the Delta levee boards’ narrative, it is not all. Their routine dealings, and conflicts with their constituents, state, nation, and most importantly — each other— are a window into Delta residents’ hopes and dreams for their collective future.

\(^3\) For example, Barry (1997) mentions that at the turn of the twentieth Century, “the levee board spent more money than any other enterprise in the area on everything from attorney fees, bond commissions, and printing contracts, while guaranteed that certain newspapers would support a board while others would oppose it, and it kept its deposit in favored banks” (Barry, 99).
**Research methods**

My research methods begin, in some ways, where Harrison’s (1951) left off. I too amassed a great deal of first-hand institutional history from the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee Board (YMDL) office in Clarksdale, Mississippi. The board’s extensive archives contain meeting minutes, presidents’ reports, engineers’ reports, personal correspondence, photographs, lobbying pamphlets, reprinted speeches, and self-composed histories dating from 1884 to the present. I then compared the decisions, milestones, and opinions from this material with historical newspaper articles and other archival documents in order to better place them in the context of corresponding local and national events. I also worked to align my archival findings with secondary regional histories as well as biographies of key levee board players, so that I could better understand the motivations—public and personal—behind recorded decisions. For the more recent events, such as the Yazoo Pumps controversy detailed in Chapter V, I relied heavily on newspaper articles from national and local outlets, and on semi-structured interviews with levee board members and employees.

I concentrated the bulk of my primary source research at headquarters in of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee Board for two reasons. First, the history of this levee district, in the northern and inland counties, has been less well documented than that of the Board of Mississippi Levee Commissioners (Mississippi Levee Board) to the south. Second, the YMDL was formed later than the Mississippi Levee Board, and largely in response to its territory’s initial exclusion from the southern levee district in 1865. Since this research concerns the differences in the two boards, the YMDL’s records speak
directly to the ways in which it consciously chose to vary its operations from the standard set by the Mississippi Levee Board.

I then looked closely for differing articulations of class, race, and environmental attitudes in this combination of historical, primary archival, and contemporary materials. And where differences existed, I found that space and location in relation to the Mississippi River itself often formed the basis for divergent opinions. However, in constructing the historical narrative of the Delta’s levee affairs, I treated these attitudes as implicit, assumed, and understood for several reasons.

First, large, fertile, but expensive-to-maintain farms created an obvious class distinction between wealthy Delta residents and the poor hardscrabble farmers in the rest of Mississippi. Next, racial marginalization of blacks was an underlying tension in nearly every facet of the South’s history, and implicit racism certainly affected the way that both levee boards formed and operated. However, a systematic and specific examination of the ways that Delta levee boards historically perpetuated racism is beyond the scope of this research.

And finally, though it has obvious precursors in nineteenth and early twentieth century history, the modern environmental movement did not exist during most of Mississippi’s local levee building heyday. The uncompromising nature of the Delta’s relationship with the river — most of its now-habitable landscape simply would not exist without man-made flood control — did not lend nineteenth century engineers and levee board members the same level of environmental awareness we employ in contemporary critiques. However, the very implicitness of rigid social, racial, and environmental attitudes throughout the levee boards’ historical operations make their modern struggles
with these issues so illuminating. My aim is to link the very explicit way in which the two levee boards currently discuss and address class, race and environment today and their subtly differing historical treatment of each.
CHAPTER III: THE DELTA’S PRECOLONIAL LANDSCAPE ERA AND TRANSFORMATION

On April 28, 2005, *The New York Times* ran a jubilant story covering the re-discovery of the elusive ivory-billed woodpecker in a forgotten wetland stretching along the lower Mississippi River. The last confirmed sighting of the bird occurred in 1944, and many ornithologists considered it extinct. However, for 60 years, the Mississippi’s remnant alluvial swamps seemed a likely habitat if indeed the bird persisted. In February 2004, a team of ornithologists set out into an Arkansas wetland to investigate a promising lead. On their second morning, the “great god bird” himself momentarily burst from the thick woods in front of their canoe. One of the scientists immediately broke into sobs (Gorman 2005).

Though the purported “sighting” has since been questioned and ultimately dismissed, the ivory bill remains a potent symbol for the lost alluvial expanse straddling Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In the 1820s and 30s, John Audubon (1832) described this “favourite resort” of the ivory-billed woodpecker as “filled with deep morasses, overshadowed by millions of gigantic dark cypress, spreading their sturdy moss-covered branches, as if to admonish intruding man to pause and reflect on the many difficulties which he must encounter, should he persist in venturing farther into their
almost inaccessible recesses” (Audubon 1832, 342). But man did persist, and in a little over a hundred years, forged an “untreed land warped and wrung to the mathematical squares of rank cotton” (Faulkner 1942, 337).

Cotton catalyzed an empire of levees, axes, and cadastral surveys that finished the ivory bill, but also propelled bottomland settlers to great wealth and far-reaching influence. Separating the Mississippi from its floodplain took the sort of energy and capital rare in Audubon’s day, but over time, became the symbolic key to controlling all aspects of commerce and culture in this vast delta. Bottomland settlers utilized racial subjugation, engineering, tight political organization and federal coffers to subdue the Mississippi, proving that whoever controls the river, controls the region. This flow of power shaped the lower Mississippi’s environment just as surely as its age-old ecological processes.

But the planters’ victory over the river and its swamps was never totally complete. The Mississippi’s hydraulics have always created a natural chaos and disorder among its settlement enterprises. Today, the United States Army Corps of Engineers oversees a massive, coordinated system of flood control structures along the length of the Mississippi that has opened nearly all of the alluvial plain for farming. However, seasonal high water still defiantly fills backwater swamps along the mouth of the Yazoo River and elsewhere. A new age of environmental awareness could threaten power structures that connect federal dollars to structural flood control to regional political control. Will the area’s leaders find new ways to bend the river toward their ends? Is a future possible that can accommodate both the secret, flooded wilderness of the ivory bill and flat fields of
cotton? Each rampage of the Mississippi River exposes how far the Delta is from reaching consensus.

*The Pre-Colonial Landscape Era*

The Delta’s first landscape era begins before European settlement and man-made flood control efforts. Under natural conditions, Mississippi floods did not gush and tumble as they do at steeper gradients. In the winter and spring, the river began rising, inch upon inch, seeping through bayous, sloughs, and small breaks in the natural levees to cover the entire Yazoo Delta basin in a shallow sheet of water (Saikku 2005; Rowland 1907). Flooding was a slow, gentle process, like a deep inhalation reaching from within the continent.

The Mississippi’s floods also created natural levees, perhaps the only source of visible topography in the Yazoo Delta before European settlement.4 When river water first spilled from its customary channel, only its heaviest sediments dropped out of the current. The smaller, lighter silt particles stayed suspended until the water eventually stopped moving. Over time, the courser soils built up on the channels’ rims, elevating them above the swampy low areas farther inland (Starling 1901). During high water, the only dry land in this whole inundated expanse lay along the sinuous natural levees. Then in the summer, the river exhaled and the water gently fell, leaving low wet swamps in former meanders and abandoned channels.

This wondrous hydrologic regime spawned a hardwood forest so rich, verdant, and immense that it is difficult now to imagine. The few Indian tribes who lived and farmed on the natural levees surely witnessed it (Saikku 2005), but Hernando de Soto’s party were the first Europeans to experience a Mississippi River flood and record the

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4 Other than the Indian mounds constructed by the Pre-Columbian Mississippian peoples (Saikku, 2005).
vision. Historians and anthropologists believe that Desoto and his conquistadors first crossed the Mississippi near present day Tunica, about 30 miles south of Memphis (Saikku, 2005) in the 1540s. During their sojourn, they had the rare privilege of observing what must have been one of the river’s great high water seasons. In the spring of 1543, one of Desoto’s soldiers wrote that:

The flood was 40 days in reaching its crest, which came on the twentieth of April. And it was a most magnificent spectacle to behold. That which previously had been forests and fields was converted now into a sea, for which each bank the water extended across more than 20 leagues of terrain. All of this distance was navigable in canoes and nothing was visible except the pine needles and the branches of the highest trees (Vega 1951, 554).

Later, French missionaries traveling upstream from New Orleans visited the Delta, picking wild grapes from overhanging vines, eating turtle eggs and wild bear, swearing at mosquitoes, battling strange fevers, and searching in vain for dry land to camp (Kip 1846). But beyond these and other sparse accounts, the pre-colonial forest is now lost forever. The past two centuries’ work of clearing, levee building, and cotton farming has all but wiped it from American cultural memory.

The land’s most recent transformation began in the early nineteenth century, as explorers and settlers came west in search of adventure, timber, or good cheap land. John Audubon visited the Yazoo Delta, stalking the ivory bill and hunting swamp panthers (Audubon 1832; Saikku 2005). Loggers began felling the valuable swamp cypress and floating it on floodwaters down to Vicksburg and New Orleans (Moore 1988). Ambitious settlers discovered the fertility of the Delta’s soil, and wrested wilderness plantations from the canebrakes growing on the elevated natural levees (Saikku 2005; Willis 2000).

By 1850, there were small towns and steamboat landings facing the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers, but the population remained sparse prior to the Civil War (Willis...
By all accounts, the interior Yazoo Delta was a foreign, jungle-like place. One naturalist describes how “climbing vines, such as the *Rhus toxicodendron* (poison ivy), *Bigonia radicans*, and a gigantic *Smilax* (flowering vines), overspread the limbs of the trees and bent them to the water, where their leaves floated like the foliage of aquatic plants” (Drake 1850, 130). During his spring boat trip up the Yazoo, the naturalist noted that “the inundation was perfect, and, in fact, extended, with but little dry land, to the Mississippi, distant 30 or 40 miles to the west” (Drake 1850, 130).

An urban woman writing for a popular magazine published an account of an 1858 trip to Bolivar County to see her Uncle Leon, “a bachelor who set his affections upon cotton bales.” She explains, “geographers describe it as the Great Mississippi Swamp; planters exalt it as the garden-spot of the earth;… yet, to one who takes wide views, and who values a varied experience, this unique region is well worth visiting—once” (Thorpe 1875, 528).

Apart from mere curiosity, the real reason for traveling to the Yazoo Delta was cotton. Indeed, the region’s entire modern history results from the biological relationship between *Gossypium* and the Delta’s alluvial soils. More than 30 varieties of wild and domesticated *Gossypium* exist throughout the world, but the strains cultivated in the South, *Gossypium hirsutum* and *barbadense* are endemic to the arid highlands of western Mexico and Peru (Towle 2007). Like most desert plants, *Gossypium* will tolerate drought. But it really blossoms when treated to good soil and water.

Cotton cannot stand sogginess however, seemingly casting it as a poor crop for a swamp. But the Delta’s swamp was not like other swamps. Its soils originated in silts and sands from the Alleghenies, the Rockies, and the high plains. Much of it held water
simply because it lay along the rising Mississippi’s path, not because it was made of muck that could not drain. Early settlers found that as long as they could keep the river off of it with dikes or on the natural levees, this unique, self-draining, “yellow-brown loam” (Walker 1884) seemed made for cotton. This soil and the cotton plant were so well suited that in 1910, the Delta’s cotton was robust and healthy enough to withstand the boll-weevil blight that decimated cotton crops throughout the rest of the south (Saikku 2005).

Meanwhile, former cotton producing soils of the settled Upland South began to wear thin, and second and third sons from privileged backgrounds set out to make their fortune in Mississippi. The Yazoo Delta also became especially attractive to wealthy slave-holding families from southern Border States who were worried about growing abolitionist sentiments (Harrison 1950). They were eager to invest in Delta land and had the means and manpower to successfully farm in this challenging region. They believed that cotton would create capital for more land, more slaves, and better flood control. Then, they could be truly rich.

By 1860 however, despite some man-made protection from flooding via levees, all Delta settlements remained on the elevated natural levees of the Mississippi, Yazoo, and other interior tributaries. Antebellum settlers and planters had not cleared one-tenth of the great swamp (Willis 2000), and at the outbreak of the Civil War, the Delta was still very much a wilderness. In the spring of 1863, when General Grant attempted to take Vicksburg via the interior Yazoo instead of the fortified Mississippi River, one member of this expedition wrote, “had the immortal bard desired a subject from which to draw a
picture of the way that leads to the realms of darkness and despair, he had only to picture the Yazoo Pass” (quoted in Larke 1879, 185).

For the expedition, “nature had laced greater obstructions in the way than any an enemy could place there...Cypress and sycamore trees lined the banks in great profusion, intermixed with gigantic cotton-woods bearing the wildest entanglement of wild grape-vines” (quoted in Larke 1879, 185). The river itself resembled “the course of a snake as he trails his way along the ground, winding this way and that, hither and yonder, going in all directions at the same time, and yet maintaining something of a regular course in the average” (quoted in Larke 1879, 185). The soldier’s account almost likens the Delta to something haunting and mysterious, yet to him “a more execrable place was never known” (quoted in Larke 1879, 185). His sentiments proved quite universal as well. Even though the Delta’s woods later became the backdrop for aristocrat’s bear hunts and hunting camps (Henderson 1920), most agreed that the Yazoo swamp had little merit in its natural state.
Formal Flood Control Mechanisms and the Delta’s Transformation

Thus began a truly massive and ambitious campaign to control the Mississippi and claim the riches it hid beneath its backwaters and thick floodplain forest. Timber men loved the flooding, as it provided transportation to and from valuable cypress stands in the Delta’s trackless interior (Moore 1967). However, as timber companies began to foist their cutover land on farmers, early local governments realized the need for an organized system of flood control (Moore 1967; Saikku 2005).

The simplest mechanism for hindering the Mississippi was to build earthen levees, or simple mounded barriers made of dirt. “Levee” is a French word that entered the American vernacular through New Orleans (Harrison 1951). French colonists began building them in the 1700s to protect the city and their lands from the Mississippi, and the model migrated upriver with settlement and exploration (Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005). Mississippi River levees find their precedents among the Netherland’s dikes and similar earthen structures lining Italy’s Po River (Harrison 1951). European settlers along the lower Mississippi found that the region had an abundance of sturdy, packable topsoil, so they took what they knew and used it to begin manipulating their new environment.

Settlers in the Delta began building their own, private levees in the early nineteenth century to protect their individual farms. But these were mere two to three foot borders that lined the river banks (Harrison 1951). Over time, provincial governments rallied to raise funds to strengthen and connect levees, placing more and more virgin land behind their protective barriers. In the decade leading up to the Civil War, the Delta’s population began to explode (Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005) and levees evolved into taller,
thicker, straighter structures based on better engineering principles and governmental standards.

During the Civil War, all flood control activity ceased, and existing levees often served as strategic targets for Union troops. After the war, the South was decimated and few landowners had the money to pay taxes for levee upkeep. Then several floods in the 1860s destroyed the few levees that had survived Union occupation. Delta leaders went to Congress for aid, explaining that “where prosperous agriculture once dominated the Mississippi Valley,” now “sad desolation… broods over it with the gloom of the grave, and farms once the haunt of busy industry and happy life are swept over by the pitiless floods, and constantly recede in the ever deepening shadows of their primeval forests” (quoted in Pabis 1998, 450).

Nineteenth-century Americans would not allow their lands to slide backward into wilderness; they were confident that reclamation and progress were their destiny. To take advantage of possible federal funding, prominent planters and local leaders quickly began to reorganize levee building after the Civil War (Barry 1997). After the Reconstruction years, they found an increasingly sympathetic ear with Congress concerning their flooding woes. Outside the Delta, the elites of both the military and civilian engineering world were travelling up and down the Mississippi river to better understand its hydraulics. Their goals were two-fold. First, they desired to help improve navigation, as the unpredictable Mississippi often thwarted commerce with snags and sandbars. Second, they wanted to help open up the Mississippi valley for agriculture and settlement through greater flood control (Barry 1997).
The personal and scientific rivalries between top hydraulic engineers provides a fascinating glimpse into the nineteenth-century conceptions of nature and progress. But most Delta residents only cared about flood control and cotton. Near the turn of the century, Mississippi historian Dunbar Rowland (1907) writes, “The teeming population of the fertile lands along the lower reaches of the Father of Waters are entitled to permanent protection from the annual floods so destructive to life and property” (Rowland, 101). Many powerful Deltans worked to ensure this would happen.

The first major repercussion of increased national attention along the Mississippi was the creation of the Mississippi River Commission (MRC) in 1879, headquartered at Vicksburg. The MRC’s mission was basically to help direct navigation. However, some engineers held that levees would confine the river and force it to carve deeper, straighter channels. With the River and Harbor Act of 1881, the United States Army Corps of Engineers realized that they could link flood control with navigation, and thus aid flood control projects on the Mississippi through increased cost sharing (Barry 1997; Cobb 1994). Next, Congress passed the Ransdell-Humphreys Flood Control Act of 1917, which increased flood control aid in a two-thirds federal, one-third local cost-sharing scheme, provided that the local levee boards secured the necessary rights of way (Barry1997; Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951; O’Neill 2006; Saikku 2005). The Delta’s levees grew from sinewy knee-high mounds, to thick, machine-built walls towering up to forty feet (Percy 1941).

Meanwhile, railroads and timber companies arrived from the North and the upper Midwest from the 1880s to the 1930s to buy land and reap the rewards of this new frontier (Gates 1940; Saikku 2005). Such investment fueled the region’s enthusiasm and
wherewithal to control flooding. Or as Faulkner more fatalistically puts it in his 1942 novel *Go Down Moses*, the “yankee dollars arriving between sheets and even in drawing rooms to open the wilderness” created a “mad and pointless merry-go-round” of “timber that which had to be logged and sold in order to deforest the land in order to convert the soil to raising cotton in order to sell the cotton in order to make the land valuable enough to be worth spending money raising dykes to keep the River off of it” (165-166). Indeed, the Delta that Faulkner saw had been transformed from a flooded jungle to a flat, treeless expanse of sky and cotton in only a few decades.

The mechanics of structural flood control began simply, and will be covered in more detail in Chapters IV through VI. But basically, engineers and levee board members used two main approaches to control high water during this time period. First and foremost, they hired earthwork contractors and labor crews to pile soil into levees, closing off sloughs and bayous. Ideally, the levees would sit far enough from the riverbanks to escape erosion or shifts in the river’s main channel (Dabney 1901). Engineers then tried to control the river’s meanders and course changes through bank revetment. Workers lined existing river margins with woven willow mats (Barry 1997; Dabney 1901), and later concrete, to try and prevent bank erosion. This helped stabilize the riverbanks and speed waters to the Gulf.
Figure 3: Early twentieth century levee construction with mules (YMDL Archives Photography Collection, undated photograph).

Figure 4: Early twentieth century levee construction with draglines (YMDL Archives Photography Collection, undated photograph).
However, levees and revetments require constant attention and maintenance. High water and the natural conductivity of soil exposes levees to under-seepage, which can develop into a destructive sand boil on the land side of the levee. Left unmended, a sand boil undermines a levee and eventually allows water to flow freely onto the floodplain. If trees take root, they can honeycomb the compacted soil and allow water to seep through. High-water wave wash can knock the top off of a levee, and general subsidence and erosion weaken them over time. To watch for these and other threats, officials, engineers, and work crews tirelessly inspected and repaired their levees (Dabney 1901), and still do today.

Figure 5: Late nineteenth / early twentieth century engineers inspecting a sand boil that has been ringed with sandbags to prevent its spreading (YMDL archives’ photography collection, undated photograph).
Figure 6: The flooding Mississippi River overtopping a levee during the early twentieth century (YMDL Archives Photography Collection, undated photograph).

Figure 7: A levee crevass during the early twentieth century (YMDL Archives Photography Collection, undated photograph).
Nineteenth-century scientists and engineers did propose other means for controlling the river, such as leaving un-levee’d overflow outlets as safety valves, building dammed reservoirs along the Mississippi’s tributaries to hold high water back from the river, or relying on forested swamps to slow run-off and act as natural reservoirs during high river stages (Barry 1997). Some also proposed shortening the main Mississippi River channel by cutting off its bends and meanders. This would allow water to travel to the Gulf faster, giving it less time to collect in the channel and overflow (Barry 1997). However, despite the wisdom of some of these tactics, turn-of-the-century levee engineers and officials felt they were too expensive and impractical (Dabney 1901).

Instead, they kept enclosed more and more of the lower Mississippi channel within levees. But a confined Mississippi can be dangerous. As levees closed off the overflow swamps and squeezed the Mississippi’s water into higher and higher narrows, regions along its lower reaches engaged in a dangerous gamble against their neighbors. They worked to make their levees as strong as possible, hoping that a break would occur somewhere else to relieve the pressure (Dabney 1901).

Despite its obvious dangers, this system of federal spending, private investment, timbering and cotton farming functioned more or less as planned in the decades around the turn of the century. Farms multiplied and the population grew behind the shadow of new, stronger, faithfully maintained levees (Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005). But the Great 1927 Flood changed everything. In March of that year, a massive flood crashed through the government-funded levees in the lower Delta, Arkansas, and Louisiana, exposing the grave precariousness of its confines. The flood received widespread national attention, and significant new legislation followed in its aftermath.
The federal government, acting through the United States Army Corps of Engineers, took over all responsibility for controlling the Mississippi. The Delta’s two levee boards’ only duties became acquiring rights of way and coordinating routine maintenance (Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005).

After 1927, the United States Army Corps of Engineers’ flood control mechanisms became much more sophisticated. The 1927 Flood had vindicated those who proposed means of flood control other than “levese only” (Barry 1997) and the Corps now worked to incorporate more comprehensive safety features into its flood control infrastructure. The Corps built emergency spillways at Bird’s Point in Missouri, and Morganza and Bonnet Carre in Louisiana, and acquired flowage easements across the lands in the spillway paths. They straightened the river through the curving Greenville Bends and elsewhere, shortening the river’s overall length significantly (Barry 1997; Mississippi River Commission 2011; Saikku 2005). They also began constructing reservoirs on the Yazoo Delta’s four principal tributary rivers — the Coldwater, Tallahatchie, Yochna, and Yalobusha—to control run-off (Smith 1988).

The Corps dubbed their grand design “The Mississippi River and Tributaries Project,” or MR&T. The main component of the design is a plan entitled “Project Flood.” Project Flood sets a safety standard for their flood control infrastructure on the unlikely scenario that all of the Lower Mississippi’s tributaries reach flood stage at the same time (Mississippi River Commission 2011). This is the standard in use today, and the Corps works with local levee boards to maintain levees and flood control structures to ensure that it is met (Rogers 2011).
On one hand, the 1927 Flood summoned the kind of complete federal flood control takeover that could effectively stop all destructive flooding on the Mississippi. On the other hand, it hastened the impoverishing effects of agribusiness and environmental decimation. Coincidentally or not, the flood also marked the beginning of the Delta’s
overall economic decline. Soon after, black sharecroppers left the Delta in droves and post-WWII agricultural mechanization concentrated land into larger and fewer holdings. Shelby Foote considered the Delta such a fascinating study because “one could see a hundred years of history in 20 years” (quoted in Cobb 1994, 310). Faulkner writes of its “land so rich and strong that, as those who live in it and by it say, it exhausts the life of a dog in one year, a mule in five and a man in twenty” (Faulkner 1942, 200). For a while, the Delta’s fertility whipped its inhabitants into a frenzied cycle of greed and exploitation. But they moved on as mechanization and corporatized agriculture assumed their former struggles (Cobb 1994; Smith 1988).
Environmental Legacies

A forest surveyor travelling the Yazoo bottomlands in 1884 described a forest containing “cypress creeks...sassafras large enough to furnish canoes of great size,” sweet gum, hornbeans, wahoo elms, shell-bark and mocker-nut hickories, yellow poplar, Spanish oak, various haws, crab apples, wild grapes, buckthorns, bitter-nut, elms, white ash, box-elder, and “red-maples of enormous size” (Walker 1884, 535). However, based on the progress of agriculture in the region, he believes, “the next quarter of the century will probably see the entire destruction of the vast quantities of timber stored in the whole of this great territory” (Walker 1884, 535).

He was right. A 1928 forest inventory found that only 40 percent of the Yazoo Delta was forested, and old growth forests covered a mere 5 percent of the total land area (Saikku 2005). Moreover, levees had altered the hydrology of the Delta to the point that most of its land could no longer support the diverse forests that once grew in its hydric soils (Gardiner and Oliver 2005). The few remaining wild places lay in isolated low patches and on the lands between the river and the levee. Authorized by the 1936 Flood Control Act, the United States Army Corps of Engineers further transformed the hydrology of the Delta and parts of the adjacent Hill Country with flood control reservoirs and spillways. The result has been the virtual end to widespread flooding in the region. But each flood or weather-related disaster here, or somewhere in the world, raises new questions.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers’ MR&T Project withstood record floods along the lower Mississippi in 1973 and in 2011. In 1973, hydrologists began to document a disturbing trend. Levees and flood control had not forced the river to carve
itself a deeper channel as nineteenth century engineers had hoped. Instead, they found that the constrained Mississippi has deposited some of its increased sediment load into its own bed. The 1973 flood showed that the Mississippi’s bed was now higher than pre-1927 levels, meaning that it now takes less water volume to create high river stages (Rogers 2011). The Mississippi is clearly making its own adjustments within the system designed to tame it.

In late April 2011, John Barry commented on the record high water in the *Wall Street Journal* by reminding us that though this flood was indeed historic, the volume of water was far below the gigantic floods of 1927 and 1937. Yet in early May the river still reached the record stages experienced during those historic floods (Mississippi River Commission 2011). Even with 2011’s lower volumes, the Corps had to utilize every emergency spillway to safely convey the floodwaters to the Gulf. Fortunately, their MR&T system worked as designed, but the 2011 flood tested it to its very limits.

Despite protection from the main river, some Mississippi Valley residents must still contend with localized backwater flooding. Backwater areas form when the Mississippi reaches flood stage. Between mainline levees, its waters pile higher than the elevation of its tributaries’ mouths. This temporarily plugs the tributaries, and backwater collects on low-lying areas farther inland. In recent decades, areas such as the Yazoo Backwater near Vicksburg have become lightning rods for conflict between farmers and environmentalists (McDonald 2010).

Over decades of flooding, backwater areas have reverted to something akin to the original flooded ecosystems, and are havens for wildlife as well as the naturalists and sportsmen who enjoy it. Moreover, these areas store excess water that would otherwise
fill the Mississippi’s channel and strain mainline levees even more (Hancock and Reuter 2011; Meager 2007). Backwater swamps also help filter some of the increased agricultural pollution, slowing the poisoning of the Gulf of Mexico (Saikku 2005). Of course on the other hand, backwater areas also become impossible to farm or develop.

While local residents and farmers rally to clear these spaces for agricultural and economic development, environmentalists argue that they do more economic good as ecotourism havens and free flood control. The 2011 flood proved the necessity of spillways and backwater reservoirs in relieving pressure and averting a disastrous mainline levee breech (Hancock and Reuter 2011). So with current budget constraints, the federal government now feels less pressure to help drain and protect backwater areas from flooding (Sturdivant 2011).
Figure 9: Map of the Lower Mississippi’s emergency spillways and backwater areas (Mississippi River Commission 2011).
While such debates occur at the national level, local levee boards still have an impact on the direction of future flood control efforts (O’Neill 2006). From the mid-1930s through the 1970s, the Delta’s levee boards quietly showed up at elections and routinely fulfilled their local duties. But with the advent of the environmental movement, a growing unease surrounding artificial controls of nature, and new state economies, their roles are beginning to change. The southern board, the Mississippi Levee Board, still serves largely agricultural interests. It is currently engaged in a fight with the EPA over a controversial flood control project in a flood-prone section of lowlands near the mouth of the Yazoo (EPA Kills Water Project in the Delta 2008).

The northern board, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta Levee Board, is now flush with cash from leasing levee rights of way to Mississippi’s new riverboat gambling industry. The YMDL is seeking to broaden its traditional role of flood control, but locals fear its growing power and influence in non-flood control areas (Kalich 2005). And, at least some of this fear is rooted in racial tensions, as for the first time in Mississippi history, the majority of the YMDL board’s elected members are black.

While the northern board seeks to carve out a niche in a new economy based on neoliberal environmental concepts like tourism and recreation, the southern board still clings to the Delta’s tradition of heavily subsidized commodity farming. How they choose to control the river will ultimately guide the future of the Delta region.
CHAPTER IV: ALCORN AND THE ANTEBELLUM LANDSCAPE ERA

Introduction: Special Improvement, special powers

Axes, plows, dikes, and ditches physically altered the Delta floodplain, but even so, conditions in backwater swamps show that forests can be re-established and wetlands can be restored. Political tools, on the other hand, can create more systemic and lasting change. Such is the case with the special improvement districts that Delta landowners, politicians, and business interests began to develop in the mid-nineteenth century to address flooding. These Delta leaders realized they were living literally in the bed of the Mississippi and their settlement efforts were in vain unless they organized a coordinated political system for permanently restraining its seasonal high water.

Thus they began to pool their resources to create local government-sanctioned ‘special improvement districts’ devoted to levee construction and maintenance. Levee boards oversaw these districts and could legally issue bonds, collect taxes, disburse funds to contractors, condemn property, elect officers and pay them salaries — all in order to control the Mississippi. By the 1920s, the result was a uniform system of levees that

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5 Drainage districts were a big part of this effort as well (Pisani 2000; Harrison 1951) but will not be addressed specifically here.
protected the Delta from overflow during most floods, but also a set of quasi-
governmental entities with disproportionate political influence.

Special improvement districts are not unique to the Delta, or even to flood
control. Our legal system authorizes citizens to form them in response to all sorts of
specialized local needs. They can provide utilities; build roads, ports, or other
improvements; or encourage economic development within a city or neighborhood
(Mørčöl, Hoyt and Meek 2008). However, their critics contend that such pursuits are
often handled more efficiently within general city, county, or state governments. They
note that once established, special improvement districts have a tendency to take on a life
of their own (Mørčöl et al. 2008). Furthermore, special improvement districts devoted to
controlling water via levees, drainage, or reclamation in the South and West have a
special history of political privilege (Pisani 2000). Sometimes, they fight to operate even
when their water projects become no longer important, economical, or even ethical
(Reisner 1993).

Public policy scholars contend that analogous federal agencies, like the US Army
Corps of Engineers or the Bureau of Reclamations, function in more or the less the same
manner; that is, like self-interested businesses. These types of administrative agencies are
conceived to serve as specialists in vital flood control and water management activities,
but as such can control information, make deals with local interests, and implement
projects through obscured and sometimes undemocratic processes (Ellison and Newmark
2010). In the modern Mississippi Delta, federal river authorities and local levee districts
exercise power together, making the region’s flood control policy very murky indeed.
The intertwined political history of federal Mississippi River agencies and the local levee special improvement districts begins as early as 1850 (Pabis 1998). This chapter unravels their conjoined roots by specifically following the thread of local flood control activities in the Yazoo Mississippi Delta. In a place with little economic development other than cotton cultivation, the levee boards could give work to lawyers, engineers, laborers, and earthwork contractors. Therefore, throughout the history of the Delta, the region’s elites used them as a springboard for influencing elections, appointments, appropriations and policies at the local, state, and even federal levels (Cobb 1994, 95).

Typically, local special improvement districts are held liable to their state government. But the Delta’s two levee special improvement districts, or levee boards, were able to develop considerable autonomy from the state of Mississippi (Mississippi Constitution 1890; Friedman 1988). Special improvement districts gain legitimacy from assumptions that their public-spirited aims will attract capable, disinterested leadership (Morçöl et al. 2008). The Delta levee district leaders of the nineteenth century, such as James Lusk Alcorn, Colonel W.A. Percy and his son Leroy, blue-blood engineer Charles Dabney and their friends and business associates worked hard to uphold their image as like-minded, impartial patriarchs. But levee boards were, in fact, made up of people—who admittedly or not—carried their own fears and ambitions, prejudices and preferences. Difference of opinion, and even competition, was inevitable.

If there had been only one levee board for the entire basin, such conflicts might have remained forever behind closed boardroom doors. But the fact that there are two gives the researcher the opportunity to identify points of agreement and disagreement in
their separate laws and official proceedings. These are important for showing how Delta elites understood their relationship to their environment, to blacks, to their government and to each other. Moreover, they establish a persistent pattern of spatial competition for flood protection among the ever-multiplying number of stakeholders along the lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley.

*Antebellum Levees: The County System*

The first point of disagreement was over whether the Delta even needed an organized system of flood control. Before the Civil War, the Delta was a formidable wilderness frontier. And like most American frontiers, its early exploration hinged on extractive pursuits. Though the settlers who began to clear plantations on the river’s natural levees realized the soil’s cotton producing potential, the Delta’s real goldmine was timber. But the only way to, from, and through its jungle expanses was on water. Roughshod raftsmen depended on yearly floods to carry them and their felled trees through the swamps down to sawmills in Natchez and New Orleans (Moore 1967). They were often hostile toward the planters’ early attempts at levees and flood control. In some cases, raftsmen were suspected of sabotaging the planters’ homemade levees to release more water (Moore 1967; Saikku 2005).

But even after a cotton-based economy assumed dominance in the Delta, flooding was really just a temporary nuisance for the first farms confined along high natural levees. Antebellum critics of a formalized levee program argued that flooding posed no great risk to agriculture, at least in the settled areas. One of their pamphlets claimed that “since 1828, we have had only six floods of much magnitude,” and that those floods damaged “not more than one-tenth of the lands in cultivation” (Levee Commissioners of
Bolivar County 1860). Breaks, bayous and sloughs along the river’s edges diverted high water into backcountry swamps and then south through the Yazoo River, so widespread overtopping along elevated riverbanks was minimal and short lived (Alcorn 1858; Starling 1901). Prior to the 1850s, planters augmented this natural drainage pattern by building small private levees\(^6\) as close to the main river channel as possible (Harrison 1950), in order to farm every inch of its richest alluvial deposits. No one could yet conceive of trying to farm in swampy backcountry; it remained the timberman’s domain (Alcorn 1858).

But as the Delta land began to fill back from river with levee’d cotton farms, there was less unoccupied space to sacrifice to flood waters. Landowners who did not immediately adjoin the river were completely dependent upon riverfront planters’ levees for flood protection. The more settled areas recognized that they needed greater coordination among landowners to secure mutual, widespread protection from overflow. Harrison (1950) finds the first reference to government flood control intervention in an 1819 Mississippi statute. It authorizes a board of five freeholders to assess and collect property taxes in Warren County\(^7\) in order to construct higher and stronger levees.

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, acts of local legislation show how each Delta riverfront county\(^8\) began to charge their boards of police (now called supervisors) to oversee levee building on private lands (Harrison 1950). Landowners either had to pay or offer their slaves for ongoing levee work. If they failed to do so, designated authorities

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\(^6\) It is generally assumed that levees along the Mississippi migrated north from New Orleans. The word levee is French in origin, and some of the state of Mississippi’s earliest appeared near Vicksburg in 1803 (Harrison 1951).

\(^7\) The county seat of Warren County is Vicksburg, one of the earliest settlements in the Delta region. Vicksburg is technically not part of the alluvial plain, as it sits on the bluff, but remained an important commercial center for the region.

\(^8\) Issaquena, Washington, Bolivar, Coahoma, Tunica, Desoto
could fine them or confiscate property (Harrison 1950). Then in 1838, each river county created its own “Board of Levee Supervisors,” which by 1842 could tax the backcountry as well and impose uniform standards on levees (Harrison 1951). Though landowners continued to finance and direct levee building in many ways, these county levee boards represented the first, faltering steps toward political flood control entities in the Delta.

Figure 10: Counties of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta (McDonald 2010, 66).
Meanwhile, outside the Delta, the rest of the country had begun to take note of the Mississippi and its rich margins. The Mississippi River had great potential as a profitable inter-state commercial highway, but also contained natural hindrances to steamboat navigation via shifting channels, snags and inconstant volume (Pabis 1998). Engineering experts believed that man-made structures like levees and bank revetments, designed to confine and channelize water flow, could remove these obstacles (Pabis 1998). Of course, levees and revetments could also help hem in floods, so landside enterprises joined the push to convince the federal government to finance and build them (Alcorn 1858; O’Neill 2006; Pabis 1998).

Planters, politicians, and rail and steamboat interests organized big statewide conferences all along the river to lobby for federal investment in the Mississippi, such as an 1845 meeting in Memphis featuring prominent Southern Whig leaders John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay (Harrison 1950; O’Neill 2006). Here, Calhoun declared the Mississippi an “inland sea,” as deserving of federal attention as the nation’s boundary waters (Harrison 1950). Though it hardly seemed conceivable at the time, Delta advocates and promoters hoped to ride the coat tails of federal navigation fervor to secure a strong line of levees stretching from the Chickasaw Bluffs in Memphis all the way down to Vicksburg (Harrison 1950).

In 1849 and 1850, their dream drew closer to reality, or so they thought. Stirred to action by the river conventions and the outcries after notable floods during the decade,
Congress passed the two successive Swamp Land Acts. The 1849 and 1850 bills authorized the federal government to turn over all of its wilderness wetland holdings to their respective states. States would then auction these lands to private owners and use the revenue to pay for flood control activities like levee building (Harrison 1951; O’Neill 2006; Pabis 1998; Saikku 2005). Mississippi received 3,290,285 acres under the act (Harrison, 1950). Abuse and speculation were rampant (Pabis 1998), but one main problem was that in order to entice anyone to purchase useless swamp land, the state had to ensure some degree of flood protection for it. In turn, flood protection hinged on the land sale. The result was a system of purchase agreements, or IOUs, which Mississippi monetized as land “script” (Alcorn 1858; Harrison 1950).

Instead of taking this opportunity to develop a stronger state system of flood control, as Arkansas and Louisiana did, Mississippi divided the land script among Delta’s fledgling country levee commissions (Harrison 1950) and washed their hands of the matter. The county levee boards then used the script to begin enclosing their fronts behind levees. However, they also squandered most of their resources through wasteful concessions to local landowners and unscrupulous contractors who often pocketed the money and skipped town (Alcorn 1858; Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860).

Though public officials and private citizens grumbled over the lack of coordination, unethical deals and missing public money (Alcorn 1858; Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860), no one at the time had the authority to reign in the individual boards. Harrison explains that “local and even individual interests had become so dominant in the county levee programs that they could hardly be described as
country programs; they had rather become neighborhood or community affairs” (Harrison 1950, 152).

Throughout the 1850s, landowners along the Mississippi fought hard to preserve these fragmented levee command centers. The Delta’s riverside plantations, especially on the south end of the Delta, were the oldest and most prosperous. Their owners enjoyed both superior soil and easy access to the region’s only transportation source (Brandfon 1967). As a result, these “front planters” often rose to prominence in the developing Delta (Cobb 1994). It seems natural that such men would seek to steer aspects of local governance like levee boards in the their own self interest, especially when appropriations and tax revenue could be distributed in lucrative contracts. But besides the potential abuse of power that haunts all such political creations, the front planters had a
spatial stake in controlling flooding. They were very concerned about exactly where new publically funded levees would be built.

Because the Delta’s elevation falls inland, or east, from the river, front planters had the least to lose in floods. Their land was the highest, most fertile, with the best natural drainage (Starling 1901). But they realized that they had two major spatial disadvantages when the landowners behind them sought to erect a stronger, more permanent line of flood control levees.

Front planters’ old homemade levees were too close to the river. The Mississippi is notoriously changeable, and before twentieth century modifications and channel stabilization, its bends constantly shifted, devouring fertile farms and stranding lands delineated as Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas on opposite shores. Caving banks could bring down a well-built levee in few days, or even hours (Dabney1901; Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860). So to ensure a lasting, effective line of defense, engineers would need to straighten and move levees back from the curving main channel. This would give the river more room to meander, but would also involve condemning some of the front planters’ most fertile property.

Second, as front planters’ land had the highest elevations, it also made the driest, most practical location for publically funded levees. Though the risk of caving banks rendered the land directly on the river impractical, moving the levees too far back would give them a lower base elevation and thus require more dirt and more money to build to a sufficient height. So in many cases, levees would have to go through the middle of a planter’s fields.
Front planters worried that engineers would put the new levees “across splendid plantations, cutting off to the merciless ravages of the water, one half, three fourths, or four fifths” of their land (Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860). Of course, the landowner could continue to maintain his own private levees, but his risk of flooding would be greater as the line of protective levees behind him extended and closed off natural outlets.

Speeches and pamphlets from the era show that by 1850, most prominent men understood the natural behavior of the Mississippi River, and the basic mechanics of levees and flood control (Alcorn 1858; Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860). But when the State disbursed the swampland script, county levee commissions still proceeded to build shoddy levees located to favor front planters’ land. They sited new levees along the river’s sinuous curves, sparing front planters’ land but risking them to calving or shifting riverbanks. Levee contractors worked quickly, neglecting to properly clear the land around the levee so that enclosed stumps and trees would later rot and create destabilizing cavities (Alcorn 1858; Harrison 1951).

In their defense, their task was formidable. Ex-levee commissioners in Bolivar County (1860), for example, rationalized their 1850 mistakes ten years later when they explained how “not thirty miles” of front in the entire county “that ran through cleared land”(8). They “had to cut through cane and brush and vines and swamp” (8), and “of course they were affected by ‘local influences’ because if they didn’t listen, they would have to abandon their work.” Their favoritism was logical because “in the name of common sense, who were in the country in 1850 but front or river men” (6)? Wealthy riverfront landowners dominated local politics during those frontier times, and even
though the most progressive among them understood the need for better levees based on solid engineering principals, “river men” would not always give up their best land willingly.

However, the Delta changed a great deal in the decade following the 1850 swampland grants. Country tax assessment roles show that property values tripled in the Delta’s riverfront counties between 1853 and 1857. The most dramatic growth centered in the Delta’s southern end, in Issaquena, Washington, and Bolivar Counties. The collective property values of Bolivar County alone went from $1,015,973 to $6,465,839 in these five years (Harrison 1950).

Table 1: County Property Tax Assessment for Mississippi Delta Counties between 1853 and 1857 (Harrison, 1950, 152).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>1853</th>
<th>1857</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>803,304.00</td>
<td>1,987,101.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>708,551.06</td>
<td>3,344,455.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>1,015,973.67</td>
<td>6,465,838.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>3,498,351.00</td>
<td>7,416,162.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaquena</td>
<td>1,766,690.00</td>
<td>4,259,558.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$7,792,869.73</strong></td>
<td><strong>$23,473,115.52</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Delta’s future prosperity however, hinged on competent flood control for the backcountry. The 1850 levee building activities had generated speculation and enthusiasm, but secured little, if any, lasting flood protection. Instead, county commissions became hopelessly mired in conflict and debt with little to show besides newly flush contractors and shoddy, vulnerable levees (Alcorn 1858).

Perhaps as a result of these problems, and the general confusion and ineffectiveness of the Swamp Land Acts elsewhere, the federal government did not
hazard another specific flood control bill for 67 years. Similarly, the state of Mississippi indicated its lack of interest in the Delta when it handed over federal swampland script to river counties with no oversight, stipulations, or plans for a coordinated state-run system. This disconnect between the Delta region and its home state persists today.

But more importantly for local flood control development, the 1850 levee building activities exposed the spatial conflict between the prominent front planters and those wishing to develop the Delta’s interior. The front planters felt that they had “made this country what it is,” having “leveed, reclaimed, and appreciated the lands of this bottom” (Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860, 5). They were clearly going to try to hinder any sort of unified levee organization aimed at creating a straight, unbroken line of levees, especially if that meant they would have to sacrifice their land. Unfortunately, their meddling would hinder levee activities for years. Moreover, they had wrested an especially strong foothold in the Delta’s southern counties.

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9 Levee funds did come via appropriations for navigation improvements. The 1917 Randalls Humphreys Act, though, provided appropriations specifically for flood control.
James Lusk Alcorn: Father of the Levees

In the 1850s, there was one major threat to the hegemony of the front planters, and it came from among their own. James Lusk Alcorn grew up poor and ambitious near the Illinois-Kentucky border during the 1820s and 1830s. Though he earned a law degree and began a political career as a young man, the Middle West proved a meager backdrop for his grand aspirations. So in 1843, he floated down the Mississippi and managed to acquire some rich land near Clarksdale in the wild north Delta (Pereya 1966). He soon rose to be one of the richest, most prominent men in the whole state (Cobb 1994; Pereya 1966). But Alcorn was not content to keep the river’s alluvial largess to himself, and this separated him from the more established front planters farther south. His ambitions extended to the whole Delta, swampy backcountry and all.

In more ways than this, Alcorn is a fascinating anomaly in the mythology of the Civil War era Mississippi. He was a stalwart Whig, and though he owned slaves and a big plantation, he believed that secession would be an unmitigated disaster for the Delta. He knew that they needed the federal government. Without it, there would be no way to build the roads, schools, railroads — and most importantly — the levees he envisioned for his adopted homeland (Pereya 1966). Though he eventually conceded and fought for Confederacy, after the war, he forged opportunistic alliances with the Reconstruction era government. He later became a Republican so that he could serve as Mississippi’s first Reconstruction governor, and did the unthinkable by supporting new black officials and freeholders. And unlike many of his destitute fellow planters, he had maintained his wealth throughout the war by trading cotton on the black market with foreign and northern merchants (Cobb 1994).
In a society that outwardly honored gentlemanly integrity, Alcorn was a “scallywag,” switching political parties and positions for his own gain (Pereya 1966). He was a pragmatist, neither an unflinching crusader for black emancipation and equality nor a loyal Southern son, and thus popular Mississippi history has all but buried him. In fact, the only public entities that bear his name are a hilly hardscrabble county in the eastern part of the State, and a land grant college he helped found for blacks in Natchez. Neither is in the Delta, and both are far from the main seat of his historical influence. But during his day, Alcorn was a tremendous force in Delta and state affairs. He understood the potential wealth submerged in the Delta’s swamps. And one foe with whom he absolutely would not compromise was the river itself.

In 1851, he first confronted the river’s potential power over him when his steamer caught fire and threatened to sink in the middle of the channel (Pereya 1966). He was with his new young wife Amelia, daughter to a wealthy planter family in Alabama and a famous beauty. She was eager to pair her pedigree with her charismatic husband’s adventures in the wild bottomlands (Cobb 1994; Pereya 1966). But this pretty plantation bride could not swim, so during the fire, Alcorn had to hurl her into the Mississippi’s threatening waters. He dove in after, and grabbed hold of her long hair to pull her to safety in a clump of reeds (Pereya 1966, 23). Alcorn did not fear the river then, nor did he have any plans to let it encroach on his future happiness and prosperity.

After amassing his own fortune on the alluvial banks of Coahoma County, Alcorn turned toward the rest of the Delta. He realized that even though money could always be made on riverfront land, the region would never fully develop and prosper until levees adequately protected the backcountry from the Mississippi. Alcorn harshly criticized the
work of the individual county levee boards, and believed the inefficient system of “each county for itself (Alcorn 1858, 24),” was crippled by competing special interests. So throughout the 1850s, he sounded the loudest calls for a single, consolidated levee district, vested with the plenary power to control troublesome factions and the engineering expertise to subdue the river (Alcorn 1858; Harrison 1951; Pereya 1966).

Even though Alcorn was a front planter, his personal wealth gave him the freedom to crusade for what he considered the greater good. Or maybe his Whig sympathies imbued in him the sense that governments’ job was to pave the way for development and industry. Perhaps he saw the levee issue as a springboard for his own political ambitions. No doubt the ever-shrewd Alcorn acknowledged all of these influences. But whatever his private leanings, Alcorn publically cast his fate with that of the Delta. He was not content to merely accept the slivers the river relinquished, he wanted the whole floodplain. “For where,” he asks, “is the man of intelligence who is willing to make the home of his family in a swamp, made wretched by the overflows of a great river” (Alcorn 1858, 12)?

Indeed, many of the Delta’s “men of intelligence” did not live there. Out-of-state speculators, timber interests, and planters gobbled up the land turned over in the 1850 swamp land grants, eager to broaden the holdings or turn a quick profit. The Delta was no democratic frontier; it took significant capital to finance private levees or to buy enough slaves for clearing cane and timber. Of course, the land’s cotton profits could be obscene, but only the moneyed could afford the initial investments. And as 1850s consensus held the Delta to be a generally unwholesome place, property owners avoided spending too much time there. They took their gains back to bustling cities or to breezy mansions in
the hills of the old South. They rarely re-invested in making the Delta more fit for
permanent settlement and social progress (Cobb 1994; Brandfon 1967; Harrison 1950).

Alcorn however, was an exception. He had prospered despite his humble
beginnings and had made the Delta his home, building one of the Delta’s few truly grand
plantation houses and filling it with elaborate furnishings, including a rather immodest
bust of himself (Cobb 1994). In an 1858 speech promoting a consolidated levee district,
Alcorn voiced his fears for Coahoma County’s future if levees remain unimproved. In it,
he acknowledged, “the man of wealth, who lives abroad, may continue his plantation
stocked with negroes, with an overseer at their head; but society will be disorganized,
churches and school houses will fall into disuse, and the county thrown back on the dial
of progress” (Alcorn 1858, 12).

He saw danger in the Delta becoming a tropical ‘colony’ for absentee landowners.
If it did, the only permanent inhabitants in the interior would be “characterized by their
swarthy complexion,” while their children would form a “dwarfish race of cunning
assassins…. wholly incapable of respectable intellectual attainment” (Alcorn 1858, 12).
On the other hand, he argued that “with a levee the county is in every way pleasant.” Its
landowners could have “the finest roads at the least expense, the most lovely plantations,
interlaced with the most beautiful bayous of clear water.” This levee’d Delta would bear
“the evidences of a richness and freshness, cheering to the heart of the man who loves
money, and soothing to the feelings of the one who lives for pleasure” (Alcorn 1858, 23).
In other words, levees would make the Delta a place where a talented, ambitious man like
himself could lead the life of a gentleman.
In 1858, a record summer flood pulverized the flimsy county levees, and his arguments began to gain real traction. Momentum for a unified levee district had been building in the years prior, but the encroaching floodwaters made it clear that the 1850 levee system had been hopelessly ineffective (Alcorn 1858; Harrison 1951). The Delta needed stronger defenses. So at the end of that year, the state legislature ordered the country levee commissions to disband, and authorized one board to assume their debts, assets, and responsibilities (Wade 1941). The new “1858 Levee District” commissioners immediately elected Alcorn as their first president, and offered him a yearly salary of $6,000, higher than any comparable public officer of the day (Harrison 1951).

Alcorn dove in to levee work with the same unflinching boldness with which he rescued his drowning wife. Unlike the 1850 commissioners, he had only district tax revenues to spend; the federal appropriations he sought never materialized. But through the sheer force of his personality, he dissipated the opposition of the front planters, condemned the land he needed, moved back and straightened the line of levees, and standardized heights from three and four feet to six or more (Harrison 1951).

Alcorn planned to reform the ineffectual old practices and dispel the notion that the levees were best left to private interests. He believed that “the contract system, conducted upon credit, would bankrupt [the Delta]” (Alcorn 1858, 27). Instead, he wanted to directly involve every district taxpayer in the process either by conscripting his slaves or requiring him to personally labor on the levees. He believed that this system of home labor “identifies every man with the levee,” and “gives work to the county at its prime cost” (Alcorn 1858 26).
But while Alcorn’s accomplishments are quite extraordinary, his plans were also perhaps too bold for their time. He had trouble raising money and planters balked at the small sums given in exchange for condemned land. He had to turn to private citizens, and his own deep pockets (Alcorn 1858; Harrison 1951), to finance some of the work. The Delta’s large number of absentee landowners also made it more difficult for him to obtain legal right-of-way for levees. And the challenging natural environment with its snakes, insects, and hot, malarial atmosphere proved fatal for levee workers. Planters refused to risk valuable slaves to do hazardous clearing and earthwork, so Alcorn eventually had to revert back to levee contractors, a system he detested. Many of these outfits hired recent Irish immigrants, who they believed to be cheaper and more expendable than enslaved Africans (Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005).

But his biggest hindrances, by far, were the influential front planters and local levee interests, especially in the wealthier, more settled southern end of the region. They questioned the expense of Alcorn’s exorbitant salary, holding that local levee oversight would be cheaper. They resented Alcorn’s bold and aggressive manner, and his board’s near dictatorial powers of condemnation and labor conscription. Front planters in Bolivar country fumed, “we are told that the scepter is about passing from Judea—that is, from the river men into the hands of the back settlers, and if the untamed might of a majority are to exercise the right of locating levees, the river men may well tremble” (Levee Commissioners of Bolivar County 1860, 6). They even compared the levee board’s “unholy and tyrannous arm” (5) to northern Republican abolitionism, which was quite a potent insult in 1860. Farther south in Issaquena country, Alcorn encountered an even
more entrenched opposition and had to halt work for a time (Levee Commissioners of Bolivar Country 1860).

Eventually, Mississippi became so focused on the war that in 1861, they voted to suspend all levee activities (Harrison 1951). Alcorn reported in his resignation speech to the state legislature that he had completed 1600 miles of survey, cleared 722 acres of land, built 142.3 miles of new levees, and disbursed $1,296,377.33. Unfortunately, his board was also $865,000 in debt (Harrison 1951, 25). He had tried mightily, but had not been able to fully surmount the divisive powers of the county’s individual interests.

After the war, Alcorn went on to assume larger roles as governor, and then U.S. Senator. Though he continued to fight for levees amid his other responsibilities, his favored methodologies never became reality until the 1928 federal take-over of the Delta’s flood control system. Alcorn’s vision that the Delta advance from a colony-like, plantation outpost to a more democratic and socially progressive territory (for whites at least), arguably never happened (Brandfon 1967, Cobb 1994). His legacy, nonetheless, becomes a critical component in course of political flood control through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Delta.

His levee philosophy contained several key components. First, he believed that flood control was not a private but a public enterprise, one to which Delta counties, the state, and the federal government should contribute. Second, he recommended that both backcountry and riverfront citizens assume responsibility for levees, since flooding hindered the progress of the entire region. Third, he did not want levee boards to approach land condemnation and right-of-way acquisition timidly. And finally, he had
learned that only a very powerful organization could keep the special interests of individual landowners from undermining the levee system.

In the decades following the Civil War and Reconstruction, Delta leaders choose to restructure the once unified 1858 levee system into the two separate entities still in operation today. I discuss the reasons and future implications for this split in the following chapters. Both entities grew to be very powerful political organizations. However, the northern district, seated in Alcorn’s own Coahoma County, managed to preserve some of his ideology. The southern levee district, on the other hand, continued many of the tactics of the opposing front planters. But in both districts, the same difficulties Alcorn encountered in this first, ambitious attempt to cow the river still lurk at the base of the Delta’s levees today.
CHAPTER V: THE PERCYS’ LANDSCAPE ERA OF INCREASING FEDERAL AID

During the Civil War, the Delta’s vast, impenetrable swamps garrisoned its small settlements against the Union forces’ worst onslaughts. But General Grant realized that he could harness the river itself to swiftly subdue entrenched rebels. In 1863, his troops mimicked the early raftsmen by blowing the large levee at Yazoo Pass and riding the river’s spring swell south into the unmanned interior. He hoped to take Vicksburg via the undefended Yazoo rather than the heavily fortified Mississippi riverfront (Cobb 1994). Though this strategy was unsuccessful, its spirit struck at the heart of the Delta’s true vulnerability. The river possessed more destructive, disordering capabilities than any enemy could hope to muster.

The Union army destroyed additional levees in tactical missions; a bad 1865 flood overtopped others while the war commanded their caretakers’ attention (Baker 1983; Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951). So Delta dwellers main challenge after the South’s surrender was not to rebuild houses, towns and farms like their upland counterparts, but to reclaim land from the river’s wet, rank forces. Alcorn had removed to the Jackson State House and then to Washington, so the task fell to another formidable Delta planter: Colonel William Alexander Percy.

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10 Vicksburg repelled Grant’s first attacks from Yazoo gun boats, but he did eventually take the city.
W.A. Percy had arrived in the Delta in the early 1840s, around the same time as Alcorn. But he was only around age ten and under the care of his well-heeled Percy family. Decades before, W.A.’s father Thomas invested in land on Deer Creek in the South Delta’s Washington County. Instead of relocating his family though, he dispatched a group of slaves to clear it and ready it for cotton production. But when Thomas suffered an untimely and fatal illness, his widow, children, and several extended family members decided to move to his land and personally oversee the plantation (Wyatt-Brown 1996).

Despite the wild frontier environs, W.A. Percy enjoyed a genteel and comfortable upbringing in the Delta. Generations of family wealth allowed him to travel, attend college at Princeton, and study law at The University of Virginia (Baker 1983; Wyatt-Brown 1996). But unlike his father, W.A. intended to make the Delta his permanent home.

W.A. Percy was in his late twenties at the outbreak of the Civil War (Baker 1983). Similar to many Delta planters, his Whigish sensibilities made him fear secession (Wyatt-Brown 1996), but he eventually capitulated and joined the Confederate effort. Whereas the decade-older Alcorn purportedly hated military life (Cobb 1994; Pereya 1966) Percy found it gallant, romantic and exciting, at least at first. He distinguished himself in the Army of Mississippi, earning him the rank of Colonel (Baker 1983; Wyatt-Brown 1996). But it was his fight for levees after the war that truly made him a hero to his homeland.

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11 Percy family biographers contain conflicting accounts of Percy’s actual Confederate Army rank. Baker (1983) claims he only became a captain, and that “colonel” was an honorary title bestowed by his community for his public leadership. Wyatt-Brown (1996) suggests he earned the rank from his actual military service.
Almost as soon as he returned to Washington County, Colonel Percy began organizing a new levee district. He wanted to repair the Delta’s damaged flood control infrastructure in order to rekindle cotton production. However, Percy’s end of the Delta had been home to the planters who voiced the most vehement opposition to Alcorn’s consolidated district before the war. In order to avoid conflict and move forward, he decided not to revive the old 1858 Levee District with its associated financial and political baggage (Baker 1983; Wade 1941).

Instead, he and other local leaders organized a new district for only the southern, or lower riverfront counties of Bolivar, Issaquena, and Washington in 1865 (Harrison 1951). They later incorporated two more south-end counties into the district in 1877, and called themselves the Board of Mississippi Levee Commissioners. This board is the direct predecessor of the Delta’s present day Mississippi Levee Board, headquartered in Greenville.

Colonel Percy, and his son LeRoy, used the levee board to steer the economic, political, and spatial formation of the Delta after the Civil War. Through their administration of the levee board, the Percys amassed a considerable degree of wealth for themselves, railroads, and other cotton planters. And through the levee board, they also regained political hegemony for Southern Democrats after Reconstruction, and effectively disenfranchised blacks.

Southern historians have thoroughly chronicled the Percys’ role in regional history (Baker 1983; Cobb 1994; Wyatt-Brown 1996), and in the 1927 Mississippi Flood (Barry 1997), but these scholars often overlook the centrality of the local levee board to their legacy. The levee board became the hammer by which the Percys pounded all of their
post war problems, and bluntly forged an alluvial fiefdom that rivaled the inequities of the earlier slave system (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994).

However, Colonel Percy’s decision to cordon off his district from the upper counties in 1865 had unintended consequences for the region’s future flood control politics. In the years after the war, separating from the north gave lower Delta elites the nimbleness and flexibility they needed to steer levee building in their local interests and build a strong base of regional power. Chapter V follows the fate of the upper counties, but it is important to note here that by wresting autonomy at this critical juncture, Colonel Percy and his colleagues inadvertently missed the opportunity to ever again unite the Delta in flood fighting efforts. In the latter twentieth century, this helped undermine the economic and political infrastructure the Percys had erected.

Rebuilding the Delta’s economic base: 1865 – 1890s

The South’s Civil War defeat caused serious financial woes for Colonel Percy and many of the Delta’s formerly wealthy planters (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994; Willis 2000; Wade 1941). Without levees, the Delta’s public financial infrastructure lay ruined under the murky swamp water. In the years after the war, planters often owed more in back taxes than their holdings were worth (Harrison 1951; Wade 1941), and there were few buyers with the cash to relieve them of their encumbered land. This was the situation in much of the South, but flooding especially crippled the Delta counties (Baker 1983; Cobb 1994; Willis 2000; Wyatt-Brown 1996).

Hundreds of former landowners simply left the Delta in frustration (Harrison 1951; Baker 1983). Others continued farming their land where they could, even though they had forfeited legal title to the state or county for failing to pay taxes. Though former
owners might still live and make a crop on the land, they no longer held any property on paper with which taxes could be assessed. And since planters did not feel any obligation to pay property taxes to their new Reconstruction government, this situation suited them just fine. Massive acres of land reverted back into the public domain, accruing no value and contributing nothing to local governments’ tax roles (Gates 1940; Wade 1941).

Levees were necessary to appreciate land, but without tax revenues, public authorities had no money to build and maintain them (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994; Baker 1983; Wyatt-Brown 1996).

To further complicate matters, both the state and creditors of the old 1858 levee board seized title to the same piece of property for taxes owed to both (Wade 1941). Neither could legally resell land to a willing buyer without clear indication of which entity actually now owned it. This complex legal situation spawned decades of confusing litigation (Wade 1941), while huge swaths of the Delta’s once appreciable, privately owned land sat useless and unsalable in the swamp (Gates 1940; Wade 1941). The old floodplain forest began to take root, and the Delta became just as much a jungle as it was in 1840.

Remaining holdouts desperately wanted a leader who could dispel the confusion and restore the Delta’s pre-war flurry of progress and potential. For some, Alcorn had gone too far in becoming a Republican, but Colonel Percy — regal, educated, silver-haired and seemingly un-ambitious for grandeur beyond the stability of his home and family (Baker 1983) — emerged as their choice. Colonel Percy, however, had no suitable platform from which he could rev the Delta’s sputtering economic engine. His blocked avenues for raising public funds would thwart any attempts at land reclamation and
reinstatement of the old cotton economy. Therefore, Colonel Percy cleverly looked to levees—both their physical structure and their managing board—to form the foundation for the Delta’s rebirth.

In the summer and fall of 1865, Colonel Percy managed to begin building levees by personally appealing to anyone in the Delta who still had the cash to buy bonds (Baker 1983). He chartered the new levee district, and stipulated that it would be administered by a board of gubernatorial appointees representing Washington, Bolivar, and Issaquena counties. He would not sit on the board, but would serve as its attorney. At the same time, he shrewdly began shopping for a reliable means of repaying these first bonds once they eventually matured. He found one in the country’s burgeoning railroad empires (Baker 1983; Cobb 1994; Wyatt-Brown 1996).

Delta historians credit Colonel Percy with using his social and business connections to entice northern railroad interests to the region (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994; Baker 1983; Wyatt-Brown 1996). Steamboat travel was waning (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994), and rail companies hoped to profit from the Delta’s cotton and timber potential. They also wanted to speculate on its vast stretches of cheap land, newly available through tax sales (Cobb 1994; Gates, 1940; Saikku 2005). Percy negotiated land deals and corporate concessions to secure their presence. At the same time, he entreated them to help finance levees, which would ultimately hasten commerce and add value to their investments.

In fact, the Delta was so successful in courting railroad companies that the rest of the state began to resent the region and its rapid post-war recovery (Brandfon 1967). In retaliation, the state of Mississippi offered nothing to help the Delta with flood control. This left Colonel Percy, and later his son LeRoy, to lean even more heavily on private
interests for levee funding (Cobb 1994). And since the state viewed the sparsely populated Delta with disdain or disinterest, the governor’s office idly allowed the Percys to stack the levee board with friends and allies.

These activities gave a personal financial boost to Colonel Percy as well. While Percy was far from poor after the war, his wealth was not as great as someone like Alcorn. Union soldiers had spared his home, and his wife had heroically maintained some cotton production, but his personal holdings were still in disarray (Wyatt-Brown 1996). Moreover, Colonel Percy had relatives to support and sons to bring up and properly educate. One clue to his financial worries was his decision to send his son LeRoy to the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, for college, because he claimed he could not afford his alma mater Princeton (Wyatt-Brown 1996).

While organizing the new levee board, Colonel Percy moved his household off of his Deer Creek plantation and into Greenville, where he could concentrate on his law practice and his new public life (Wyatt-Brown 1996). Though he and others in his circle assumed the agrarian, romantic and sought-after station of ‘planter’ (Brandfon 1967), he knew that no matter how good his land, it would take more than cotton fields to finance his family. He realized that his work as an attorney, not his plantation, would best open inroads for deepening and diversifying his family’s economic interests.

As John Barry (1997) explains, Colonel Percy used the levee board not only to secure flood protection and economic development, but also to seize wealth for his family in the raw, untamed and largely ungoverned late nineteenth century Delta. At a time when the larger southern agricultural economy suffered, the levee board, “spent more money than any other enterprise in the area on everything from attorney fees, bond
commissions, and printing contracts,” and “kept its deposit in favored banks—especially the one on whose board Percy sat” (Barry 1997, 99). Moreover, the levee board continued to retain Percy’s law firm while Percy and his partner simultaneously collected an increasingly lucrative railroad clientele.

Even though railroads readily bought levee board bonds and helped finance some of their improvements, the levee district still needed ongoing tax revenue to operate. Tax revenues were directly linked to cotton production. With floods ravaging the region every few years, farmers could not reliably produce good crops. Consequently, neither land values nor taxable assets would increase. Colonel Percy knew he needed more reliable support to minimize the risks of failed crops for both planters and railroads. So just as his Whig predecessors had done in 1850, he began appealing to the federal government for help12 (The Memorial of Field and Strother 1870; The Washington Post 1886; The New Mississippian, 1882).

An 1870 memorial advocating federal levee aid claimed that appropriations would not only boost economic development, but also help heal North-South relations. Delta levee board delegates stressed the region’s cotton potential, “double that of the best lands in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina” (The Memorial of Field and Strother 1870), and the impact this cotton could have in places like St. Louis, Cincinnati, New York, and Lowell, Massachusetts (The Memorial of Field and Strother 1870).

They referred to Alcorn’s pre-War levee building when they claim that “much has been done to bring the country into cultivation and to protect it from inundation, and, but for the interruption of hostilities, the growing wealth and prosperity of the district would

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12 Several newspaper articles and printed materials from the time mention the Percys or other Levee board members attending river conferences in New York and Washington to lobby for funds (The Memorial of Field and Strother 1870; The Washington Post 1886; The New Mississippian 1882).
have enabled us to complete the work.” Now though, the planters lacked the “money, credit, or labor to repair the levees,” and have not been able to make a crop. Therefore four million dollars of federal aid and the resulting “commercial intercourse” from the reestablished cotton trade would help in “cementing kindly relations between the people of the different portions of the country” (The Memorial of Field and Strother 1870).

However earnest such entreaties might have sounded, northerners and Republicans did not budge. The Delta received zero federal aid for levee building and repair before 1882 (Harrison 1951). One Chicago Daily Tribune editorial from 1876 was particularly illustrative of the distrust that Republicans held for Colonel Percy and levee movement leaders. In it, the author decries the “deplorable state of the levees” and the board’s growing debt burden despite having obtained bonds at steep discounts.” He expresses that “the maintenance of a private enterprise such as this is…clearly outside of the province of Congress” (Chicago Daily Tribune 1876).

Furthermore, he goes on to question the aid-worthiness of Percy’s own Washington County. He condemns its newspaper as “the most unmeaningly secession sheet published in the South,” and its readership as “of the most extreme Southern views.” The editorialist claims that Washington County citizens have threatened to take up arms against the government, and have persecuted or driven out the Republicans in their midst. He asks “are the tax payers of the North ready to fork over to keep up this institution” (Chicago Daily Tribune 1876)”

The author explains that the “bogus” state legislature had “made Colonel W.A. Percy Chairman of the Committee on Levees, and it is in part their duty to petition Congress.” And so, “should they present their doleful ditty to the Senate,” members
should “question the treatment of Republicans….. particularly the old boys who wore the blue…..in their levee districts” (Chicago Daily Tribune 1876). Though Colonel Percy was, according to his biographers, more moderate in his southern Democratic allegiances than many of his peers (Baker 1983; Cobb 1994; Wyatt-Brown 1996), he was clearly going to face challenges securing Congressional aid for his region while the nation continued to heal.

But as Colonel Percy worked to win allies and strengthen his relationships in Washington, the Mississippi continued to rise every spring and threaten young cotton plants. The Delta needed protection, but the only immediate source of revenue for levees remained local taxation. Until federal aid was more forthcoming, Percy and other local leaders had to make the best with what was available.

In 1877, Colonel Percy helped expand the lower levee district to include Sharkey and Warren counties. He also invited the Delta’s upper counties to join (Harrison 1951). However, citizens in the upper Delta had already formed their own fledgling levee district in 1871. This ill-fated political creation was called Levee District Number 1, and little information about its activities exists other than references to its gross mismanagement and eventual bankruptcy (Dabney 1901; Wade 1941).13

Many in the upper Delta, however, did not wish to fall in line behind Colonel Percy and his south Delta planter cohorts, regardless of their board’s ineffectiveness. They refused his invitation to join forces. Local, personal, and political animosities stemming from Alcorn’s era certainly played a role,14 but spatially, the upper district was also better

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13 There are insinuations that the board was made up of blacks, radical republicans or both- and that seemed explanation enough for its failure (Dabney 1901; Wade 1941).
14 Subtle references to Levee District Number 1’s Republican political affiliation exist (Dabney 1901; Wade 1941).
The lower levee district contains 163 miles of river, the flood-prone mouth of the Yazoo River, and only five counties. The upper district contains ten counties covering a much greater interior land area, but only 98 miles of river frontage (Starling 1901). Flood protection in the lower Delta district was always going to be more expensive, but it had a smaller area from which to draw revenue.

Figure 12: Map comparison showing the counties of the Delta (right) and the dividing line between the two levee districts (left) (www.leveeboard.org; McDonald 2010).

Also, since the lower Delta is lower in elevation, it is more susceptible to flooding from both the Mississippi River and the Delta’s southward-flowing streams. Colonel Percy delineated his 1865 levee district because it was his home and it demanded the
greatest immediate attention. But he and the lower board later realized that in future years, they would have to fight the Mississippi as well as every drop of rainwater that fell within the Yazoo watershed — without support or tax contributions from the counties upstream. They had inadvertently left the upper region with 30 percent less riverfront and a much greater potential tax base.

So Percy and other prominent Deltans began to promote the idea of a unified levee district in the late 1870s as a way to increase and solidify the tax base for levee building. Many citizens in the upper counties protested. They found no reason why they should send their tax dollars south to staunch the lower Delta’s floods, or to help pad the pockets of the increasingly wealthy and well-connected Percy faction (Mississippi River Floods 1898). The same fight for control between the interior settlers and front planters from Alcorn’s days had now resurfaced as a standoff between the upper and lower Delta districts.

Then the Mississippi flooded in the spring of 1882, inundating large portions of the upper delta as well as the lower (Harrison 1951). Colonel Percy saw his chance. He and other levee board leaders called a Delta-wide convention to Greenville that June to deal with the resulting mess (Col. Percy and Ex-Gov. Alcorn 1882). He aimed to push prominent men in the northern counties to forsake the obviously incompetent Levee District Number 1 and join his board, and then together formulate a better local taxation scheme.

However, true to form, ex-Governor Alcorn arrived to delivery a blustery, two-hour rebuttal to Colonel Percy and his planter allies. A reporter covering the event describes how Alcorn “insinuated that the call for the convention was a job by the contractors,
lawyers, and front planters,” and that attendees might as well “abjure Democracy” if they put such men in charge of local levee taxes. Alcorn held that the Delta’s crippled economy was “unable to afford itself protection,” and that instead, it “should proceed to elect a proper man, on the levee issue solely, to Congress” (Col. Percy and Ex-Gov. Alcorn, 1882).

The reporter conceded that Alcorn’s speech was “aggravating, entertaining, and instructive,” but the former governor was to be no match for Percy. The Colonel stood to respond to Alcorn’s allegations, soft-handedly “regretting that politics had been thrust upon such a meeting.” He explained that of course they would continue to seek Congressional appropriations, but that the levees needed money now. Local taxation would work because the Delta prized “honest local government,” and that “the white citizens would not subordinate for anything” (Col. Percy and Ex-Gov. Alcorn 1882). But while Percy’s assuring, paternalistic eloquence may have charmed the convention, the two districts nonetheless remained separate.

One of Alcorn’s main objections to the lower board’s taxation scheme concerned cotton. After the Civil War, the Republican Congress sought to punish the South by imposing a federal tax on cotton sales. Southerners abhorred the tax, as they felt it a malicious extra kick to their already defeated economy. Alcorn fought hard to help finally repeal the tax in his years in the Senate (Pereya 1966).

However, in the Delta, cotton was the only commodity that had any significant value. Land was virtually worthless, and many formerly wealthy Confederates had lost all their other assets. So in addition to a ten cent per acre property tax, the lower levee board collected one cent per pound of cotton produced and sold (Harrison 1951). The cotton tax
seemed logical. A memorial to the state legislature promoting the tax claims “cotton raising is the sole business of the Yazoo Delta. Upon it all other avocations are based, but it all other industries supported. To secure its protection levees are built…Cotton is always equivalent to money” (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886).

But like many taxation schemes, the cotton tax produced winners and losers. The railroad and timber companies liked it because they owned large swaths of land on which they would not have to pay high property taxes. Large planters like Colonel Percy liked the cotton tax for similar reasons. Moreover, planters usually profited by leasing most of their land to renters and sharecroppers. The renters and sharecroppers then assumed the cotton tax burden when they made their yearly sale.

The cotton tax losers were obviously traders like Alcorn. However, it also hurt the small farmers and sharecroppers who would not otherwise have had the property tax liability of a big landowner. Ten pounds of cotton had the same tax burden as an acre of land, and a good Delta acre produced 480 pounds (1 bale) of cotton. Alcorn vehemently condemned the lower board’s cotton tax because he felt it shifted the responsibility for flood control to the laborer and exempted the landowner (Harrison 1951). And though laborers and small producers paid a greater proportion of the cotton tax, they still had little or no representation on the levee board.

However, levee board members and their allies in Washington skillfully leveraged the cotton tax to convince Congress of their aid-worthiness. They argued that northern financiers and investors understood the potential for future cotton tax revenues and readily bought their bonds (Catchings 1887). If these northern men of commerce had such faith in the levee district’s ability to raise money, the federal government should too.
The perceived inequities of the cotton tax later caused problems for the Percys back home, and remained a point of contention between the levee districts’ boards and their constituents as the modern flood control movement took shape. Both upper and lower boards eventually phased out the cotton tax in the early twentieth century. Fortunately for the Percys though, the levee districts did start receiving federal aid in the mid-1880s (Harrison 1951).

In 1879, Congressed authorized the creation of the Mississippi River Commission (MRC), a group of civilian and military engineers who would work to advise Congress on navigation issues. Many MRC engineers suspected that levees would confine the river during high water and force it to carve deeper, straighter channels. Eventually, they believed the modified riverbed would convey water to the sea so quickly that flooding would be a problem of the past (Barry 1997).

They based this idea on the recent success of the MRC’s lead engineer, James Buchanan Eads, in creating a navigable channel through the Mississippi’s shallow Head of Passes south of New Orleans. Eads accomplished this by placing large artificial jetties in the river to confine its flow. To the dismay of Eads’ doubters and detractors, the river responded by carving itself a channel deep enough for ocean going vessels.15

However, jetties and levees are very different river control mechanisms. Jetties extend into the main channel of a river, constantly squeezing its flow through a narrowed passage. Levees, on the other hand, sit back from the main channel and only confine the river’s flow during flood events. Levees simply give the river a smaller floodplain, so when it does spread beyond its main channel, it drops its suspended sediment over a

15 John Barry (1997) recounts Eads triumphant success at the Head of Passes, and how this personal victory propelled the creation of the MRC despite opposition from the Army Corps of Engineers’ General Andrew Humphreys.
constricted area. Over time, the river does not carve a deeper channel within the levees; it actually builds its bed higher.

But engineers in the 1880s did not yet know, or acknowledge this. Barry (1997) argues that the MRC, even though it had scientific clout, was ultimately a political organization. Building jetties along the length of the Mississippi seemed impractical, so they officially recommended levees, along with channel revetments and bank stabilization, as the best was to deal with the Mississippi’s shifting snags and shallows. Levees also had the backing of an increasingly powerful national network of planters, investors, and railroads—all betting on cotton’s success along the reclaimed lower Mississippi. So even though levees were, and are, purely a flood control mechanism, there was a politically expedient reason to link them to navigation improvements.

Thus in 1881, the MRC-sponsored River and Harbor Act first approved the use of federal aid to help local levee districts build and maintain levees (Harrison 1951). The act stipulated that its aim was merely to make the river safer for interstate steamboat and barge traffic; Congress did not want to appear to be subsidizing flood control and land reclamation for wealthy ex-Confederate planters (Marvin 1915; O’Neill 2006). But from the mid-1880s through the early twentieth century, federal money meant for “navigation” increasingly benefited Delta landowners like Colonel Percy.

By the 1880s, the Delta’s economy began to revive. Its population started increasing again, as did its acres under cultivation. Lawmakers had finally made some headway resolving disputed land titles (Wade 1941). Railroads opened up more areas for timber companies, who advertised their cleared land as suitable for farming in newspapers throughout the Northeast and Upper Midwest (Gates 1940; Saikku 2005).
And even though the river routinely overtopped levees, a federally-supported means for flood control seemed just on the horizon. While the rest of the South continued to suffer from boll weevil infestations and widespread poverty, the Delta had managed to rise out of Reconstruction to create a new, booming post-bellum economy—at least for its elites.

Table 2: Acres under cultivation in the Mississippi Delta (Saikku 2005, 116).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>16,973</td>
<td>85,188</td>
<td>39,629</td>
<td>74,072</td>
<td>161,337</td>
<td>185,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>11,478</td>
<td>39,139</td>
<td>28,959</td>
<td>52,490</td>
<td>95,019</td>
<td>121,905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaqueena</td>
<td>27,631</td>
<td>56,596</td>
<td>35,286</td>
<td>32,928</td>
<td>68,837</td>
<td>55,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leflore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40,981</td>
<td>80,182</td>
<td>117,013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5,714</td>
<td>15,827</td>
<td>23,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24,824</td>
<td>44,994</td>
<td>61,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>5,966</td>
<td></td>
<td>30,264</td>
<td>14,170</td>
<td>35,587</td>
<td>73,696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>6,015</td>
<td>29,341</td>
<td>14,141</td>
<td>39,558</td>
<td>58,796</td>
<td>93,438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>59,126</td>
<td></td>
<td>70,119</td>
<td>99,887</td>
<td>199,001</td>
<td>197,896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>127,189</td>
<td>210,264</td>
<td>218,398</td>
<td>384,624</td>
<td>759,580</td>
<td>929,224</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1925</th>
<th>1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>251,595</td>
<td>291,324</td>
<td>289,117</td>
<td>342,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>172,389</td>
<td>185,614</td>
<td>200,329</td>
<td>214,596</td>
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<td>Humphreys</td>
<td></td>
<td>97,452</td>
<td>81,031</td>
<td>111,707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaqueena</td>
<td>54,154</td>
<td>54,697</td>
<td>43,845</td>
<td>49,538</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leflore</td>
<td>173,595</td>
<td>166,733</td>
<td>168,198</td>
<td>221,207</td>
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<tr>
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<td>58,982</td>
<td>102,128</td>
<td>95,523</td>
<td>122,535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkey</td>
<td>82,573</td>
<td>68,724</td>
<td>67,795</td>
<td>76,552</td>
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<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>156,906</td>
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<td>334,722</td>
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<tr>
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<td>111,963</td>
<td>117,239</td>
<td>112,595</td>
<td>125,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>192,882</td>
<td>230,317</td>
<td>188,035</td>
<td>218,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,255,039</td>
<td>1,534,725</td>
<td>1,484,066</td>
<td>1,816,725</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Though Colonel Percy was not the only shrewd Southerner who helped improve the Delta’s—and his own—economic situation after the war, he was their leader. Of course, his ability to create a bustling center of cotton commerce in the Mississippi’s floodplain depended on levees. He faced the same challenges as Alcorn, but his ultimate vision for the Delta was very different. Where Alcorn saw the rising Mississippi as a foe that must be defeated, and an obstacle to overcome, Percy saw it as an ongoing opportunity.

He used his new, improved levee board and the promise of reclamation to draw northern capital into his homeland. With such capitalists as allies, he found a way entice the federal government to help pay for flood control, essentially subsidizing the Delta’s cotton production. He exempted himself and other land-owning elites from paying high local levee taxes by passing the burden to poor laborers and sharecroppers via the cotton tax. He then dominated local business by dispensing levee board funds to chosen contractors.

Through the levee board, Percy removed all the risks of farming in the swampy Delta from his fellow planters and hoisted it onto the backs of American taxpayers, small cotton farmers and laborers. Then, he profited more as a lawyer for the rail and timber interests that came to join him at the government trough. By controlling the river, Percy clearly controlled the region.
Levees & Local Politics: 1890-1927

The levee board not only became a tool for economic control, but for local political control as well. Social elites like the Percys learned to use the levee board to wield political power apart from and beyond what they could accomplish within the bounds of local government. From its beginnings in 1865, the levee board used flood threats to invoke wartime powers. During high water, it could conscript all men age 16 and over to work on the levee for one dollar a day (Harrison 1951). Colonel Percy also organized his fellow planters into armed guard units who routinely inspected the levees for any meddling timber men, disgruntled workers, or Arkansans (Barry 1997; Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951; Percy 1941) suspected of dynamiting levee sections. If they saw any foul play, they could shoot — no questions asked.

This local board, as a state chartered ‘special improvement district,’ had an enormous amount of local authority. The Percys considered the levee board so essential to the Delta that only they could be trusted to manage it, and were loathe to let those who they considered ‘lesser’ access its power. If it fell into the wrong hands, their entire livelihood was at stake. So they harnessed Deltans’ very real fear of the wild, chaotic Mississippi and used it to protect their interests. Part of this included repressing the regions’ newly freed blacks, as well as their own political rivals.

Colonel Percy had faced a radically reorganized political landscape when he established the lower levee board in 1865. The newly enfranchised black majority and their transplanted Republican backers dominated political offices throughout the Delta (Willis 2000; Cobb 1994). Though the family reputedly treated blacks with a more kindly condescension than the region’s violent race-bating rabble-rousers (Baker 1983;
Barry 1997; Wyatt-Brown 1996), they certainly did not believe that blacks should have
equal rights or serve as public leaders. Yet during Reconstruction years, blacks enjoyed
both (Willis 2000). Ex-Confederate Democrats like Colonel Percy found they could no
longer elect and appoint their allies as they had before the war (Baker 1983; Cobb, 1996).
Therefore, Colonel Percy chose the levee board—not the county commission, the
sheriff’s or mayor’s office, the congressional district, the state legislature or any other
traditional local government unit—to serve as his seat of influence.

Despite their considerable power, Colonel and LeRoy Percy had two major fears
for their levee board. The first mostly concerned the elder Colonel Percy; he worried that
blacks and Republicans would gain control of the levee district via political appointment
and grossly mismanage it. A levee board engineer insinuates that this is what happened to
the failed Levee District Number 1 when he writes, after the fact, that the board “ha[d]
been characterized by all the extravagance, waste, and inefficiency incident to public
organizations during the ‘reconstruction era’” (Dabney 1901). A local legal historian
explains the district’s bankruptcy by reminding his readers “the extravagant rule of
ignorant negroes and ignominious carpetbaggers during the period of reconstruction
would have bankrupted the richest people on earth” (Wade 1941, 287).

So while they he was not busy selling bonds, fighting floods, or lobbying
Washington, Colonel Percy had his eye on restoring like-minded southern whites to
elected office. He and his fellow planters worked behind the scenes to successfully oust
the Republican, reconstruction government from the statehouse in the 1870s. Later, the
Colonel and his son became skilled at both placating the occasional violence of irate
Southern Democrats, and bribing, cajoling, tricking or intimidating black public officials
into serving their ends (Cobb 1994). But their main concern was “first, last, and always, their search for means to protect the country from overflow which involved….inducing the governor to appoint able me to the levee board” (W.A. Percy 1941, 68).

Many of these “able men” were also Percy friends and relatives (Black 2006), and the Percys wanted to keep it this way. Their second main fear was that following Reconstruction, they would not always have a friendly governor in the state capital who would grant them their choice of levee board appointments, or stand by while they ran the levee board as they saw fit. As things improved for the Delta through the 1880s and 90s, a faction of poor white hill farmers—who hated blacks, promoted temperance, and resented exclusion from the wood paneled, mint julep-spiked backroom dealings of the planters—also gained power in the state government.

Colonel W.A. Percy died in 1888 (Barry 1997), but his able son LeRoy rose to take his place in public life. LeRoy had the same prematurely gray hair, noble bearing, and inherited sense of paternalistic superiority as his father. But LeRoy had come of age after the war, and while he may have lacked the steely, frontier know-how of his father, he was educated, sophisticated and well connected within nation’s engines of commerce (Barry 1997). He was fully prepared to lead his planter class into the next century.

Mississippi too was making plans. In 1890, the state called a constitutional convention to approve policies for governing its population and industries in a post-slavery America. The 1890 Mississippi Constitution instituted the system of Jim Crow, and effectively disenfranchised blacks in Mississippi. LeRoy Percy and other “Bourbon

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16 William Alexander Percy (1941) lushly describes such gatherings taking place in his childhood home in his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*. 
Democrats”\(^{17}\) had a role in pushing this legislation (Halsel 1945), which ultimately placated their fear of blacks ever serving on the levee board or any other important public office.

However, since the majority of the Delta’s population was black, their disenfranchisement meant that the sparsely populated region no longer had the numbers to influence statewide elections. LeRoy Percy certainly realized that this made him especially vulnerable to his second fear for the levee board, of possibly having to square levee board affairs with an unfriendly governor. So, he and a group of similarly prominent, educated and savvy Deltans worked hard to ensure that the levee board received adequate legal autonomy from the state within the new constitution.

Modern legal scholars highlight how ludicrous it now seems that a state would establish such specific powers for a special improvement district that concerns a very small part of the state (Friedman 1988, Winkle 1993). For example, Friedman (1988) points out the ridiculousness of a state even naming a levee board in its constitution, moreover, authorizing the governor to “appoint a stockholder in the Louisville, New Orleans and Texas Railway Company as an additional commissioner.” However, both Percy’s lower board and the new upper board,\(^{18}\) boldly occupy a healthy chunk of a document otherwise devoted to establishing how the governor, representatives, and the state supreme court are chosen, how bills are passed, and other matters of statewide import.

\(^{17}\) Category of landed, wealthy Democrats who basically dominated Mississippi’s and other southern states’ political arena between 1875 and 1895 (Halsel, 1945)

\(^{18}\) The upper board, The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta Levee Board, was established in 1884 and will be discussed in detail in Chapter V.
The levee boards’ inclusion speaks volumes to how influential the Percy’s were at the time, and how important the levee board was to their political universe. Their work at the 1890 constitutional convention set a course for the Delta’s levee boards that remains strong and viable today. The state has challenged the rights of the levee boards several times in the twentieth century, and each time, Mississippi courts upheld the levee boards’ authority using the legal legitimacy of the 1890 Constitution (Black, 2006).\(^{19}\)

During the 1890 Constitutional Convention, Percy and his allies believed it best to have the governor appoint the levee board commissioners. Very soon though, they would change their stance on the issue. In late November of 1895, local newspapers began to report that some influential lower Deltans wanted to try electing their own levee board members rather than relying on the governor’s appointments. But others, like the Issaquena County Democrats for example, disagreed.\(^ {20}\)

The source of the controversy sprang from an important election in early November. In the fall of 1895, Mississippians cast their ballots for their first governor under the new constitution. Anselm Joseph McLaurin won, and though he had not yet taken office, LeRoy Percy was worried. Percy and “Old Anse,” a Confederate veteran from the Mississippi hills, disagreed on free silver. Percy followed the trend of many Northern, Republican capitalists in supporting the gold standard, while McLaurin upheld the populist —and more popular in Mississippi— preference for free silver (Baker 1983).

\(^{19}\) These cases will be discussed in Chapter V.

\(^{20}\) The Commercial Appeal (November 22, 1895, Issue 326, pg. 2, col A) reports that “it has been decided that MBLC will no longer be appointed, but elected”. The Commercial Appeal (Friday, November 29, 1895, Issue 333, pg. 2, col A) mentions how the Issaquena democratic party is opposed to levee board elections and thinks Gov. McLaurin should appoint commissioners.
This was only to be the first of many political disagreements between Percy’s Delta Bourbons and McLaurin’s factions. McLaurin represented the new force in Southern politics, one that fed off of poor whites’ resentments and frustrations and split the Southern Democrats along class lines. McLaurin also had friends in the Delta, especially in the Issaquena County Democratic Party (Baker 1983). Percy knew that McLaurin was going to balk at his and his fellow Delta Bourbons’ accustomed hold over the local and state government. However, relinquishing control of the levee board to McLaurin positively terrified Percy.

Moreover, Percy had been having trouble with his levee board. It was the kind of trouble that he could not handle quietly, privately, or with his class’ gentlemanly discretion. Both the elder and younger Percy had officially stayed off the levee board, serving instead as retained attorneys. However, that never stopped them from maneuvering their relatives, friends and allies into coveted—and salaried—levee board appointments.

In 1876, Colonel Percy did a favor for one of his cousins by giving her husband a seat on the levee board. His name was Ferguson, and was not known as a particularly astute or careful businessman (Black 2006). He lived a lavish lifestyle, yet always seemed plagued with money problems. However, in 1884, he became the Secretary/Treasurer for the board. In this role, he had oversight over the board’s unpopular cotton tax collections (Baker 1983).

In 1894, an accountant noticed that a large sum of that year’s cotton tax revenues seemed to be missing. The discrepancy soon became public knowledge, and the cotton

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21 One Percy biographer points out Percy’s willingness to work with the Populist faction of the Democratic Party, and even compromise on free silver. He claims that “Percy would have traded votes with the Devil to protect the levee system” (Baker 1983, 36).
taxpayers immediately implicated Ferguson. However, LeRoy Percy maintained his relation’s innocence. He placated the public by initiating a thorough audit into the levee board finances, fully expecting to find evidence that cleared Ferguson of dishonesty. Of course, Percy himself headed the audit committee, disregarding any cries of obvious conflict of interest (Baker 1983; Black 2006).

Before the audit concluded, however, Ferguson and his wife were discovered making a hasty, furtive departure for South America—not to be seen or heard from again for many years (Baker 1983; Black 2006). Ferguson was clearly guilty and the taxpayers were furious. Many thought the cotton tax unfair in the first place, and believed it particularly vulnerable to theft by levee board tax collectors. Not only did they resent Percy for automatically assuming his relation’s innocence, they soon found he had mistakenly neglected to renew the board’s insurance that year (Baker 1983). To Percy’s chagrin, the cotton producer’s hard-earned money was gone forever.

Yet even amid this public relations nightmare, the Percys continued to hold that despite the occasional lapse in judgment, only the honor-bound, disinterested aristocracy could squarely subdue the river. Memoirist W.A. Percy would later justify his father’s continued faith in the Delta’s paternalistic code by claiming that the levee board disgrace drove Ferguson mad. He explains, “people steal public funds now, but the public is cynical, no one is horrified, and the accused, guilty or innocent, seldom goes mad. Going mad for honor’s sake presupposes honor” (Percy 1941, 72).

During Reconstruction, aristocratic lineage and values may have buffered the planter class against censure in a region hungry for any vestigial graces of the old slave-
holding gentry (Percy 1941). But such abstract claims to superiority were lost on the newly empowered poor whites of the turning century.

Given Mississippi’s growing Populist sentiments, the Ferguson incident played right into McLaurin’s hands. After his election, he promptly exploited the resulting public outrage to stack the levee board with his men; men whom the Percys felt were too grasping, small-minded and self-interested to be trusted with the weighty responsibility of levees. Percy worried that these resentful parties would try to influence the location of levees to benefit their lands, and the lands of their friends, as well as misuse and misappropriate public money (which of course, a gentleman of the Percy’s class has already done). Percy and McLaurin’s rivalry was solidified.

When McLaurin began campaigning for a U.S. Senate run, he explains away all of his negative press as the revenge-seeking meddlings of prominent Delta attorneys, angry with him for refusing to appoint their suggested men to the levee board (The Commercial Appeal 1898). By invoking the well-known incident, and playing both challenger and victim to the region’s entrenched power structure, McLaurin skillfully won widespread populist support. From that point forward, Percy would spend the rest of his life battling McLaurin and his successors — Andrew Longino, James Vardaman, Theodore Bilbo and others — to regain the symbolic ground he lost in the levee board debacle.

Meanwhile, however, Percy was busy summoning another potent ally to help him maintain a hold over the local levee board. Unlike many of his rivals in state politics, Percy had built ties to the rest of the country, and the federal government, over the course
of his career. Now, with the local levee board slipping away into the hands of “ignorant” and “lesser” men, he realized that he needed federal help more than ever.

Lobbying the federal government for Congressional appropriations had always been part of Deltans flood control strategy. But after 1895, Percy seemed to increase the intensity. In 1898, Percy and his law partner Yerger appeared before Congress to ask for aid. However, they not only sought funding, they also asked that the federal government take over all levee building and maintenance. Percy argued, “it is the earnest wish, hope, and prayer of every man, woman, and child in the delta country that the Government take control of it; we not only are not opposed to it, but that is believed to be the only relief from the situation” (Mississippi River Floods 1898).

Percy’s official questioner asked him to qualify this “situation,” confirming, “I presume it is not only the financial aspect of the case, but it is the feeling that the Government would be more independent and less subject to be swayed by local prejudices and local interests in the location of the levees and would proceed on a more systematic plan in the work?” Percy simply responded “Yes, sir” (Mississippi River Floods 1898).

Percy had now found himself in the same situation as Alcorn before the War. Unable to corral squabbling local interests, he hoped to solve levee board conflicts and infighting by relinquishing responsibility to the federal government. But while Alcorn wanted the federal government to pay for levees, Percy was now asking them to site and manage levees as well. And Percy would have been very willing to concede the board’s locally legislated autonomy, because through his friends and allies in the federal
government, he knew he could always circumvent the state of Mississippi’s interference and continue to orchestrate the Delta’s flood control affairs.

His advantageous relationship with the federal government became abundantly clear in 1903, when Percy received an invitation to join a bear hunt with none other than the President of the United States. Then governor Andrew Longino had first invited President Roosevelt to enjoy the sport available in his state’s wild and verdant bottomlands. However, as the logistics of coordinating all the official invitees mounted, Stuyvesant Fish, the president of the Illinois Central Railroad, suggested a more informal alternative (Denison 1903).

Fish was a personal friend of both Percy and Theodore Roosevelt’s, and most likely knew that the two well-bred hunters would enjoy meeting each other (Baker 1983; Denison 1903). Moreover, their future friendship could only help prospects for his railroad. So he suggested that the hunt would be much more enjoyable with only a handful of men, rather than a host of political dignitaries. His new guest list included Percy and several other favored planters and businessmen, but not Governor Longino. Roosevelt agreed, and the hunting party made preparations to spend several days camping the wild bottomlands of Washington County. They hired Holt Collier, a famed former slave and master tracker, as their guide (Baker 1983; Denison 1903).

The Delta, and the whole state, knew of the president’s visit, and newspapermen stood on call to cover the excitement. However, as they speculated on what this meant for Mississippi, they noticed the glaring and obvious omission of Governor Andrew Longino. The governor knew of the hunt, but apparently no one had informed him of the exact date and location of the new pared-down outing (Baker 1983). Longino was
McLaurin’s political successor, and though he was very popular in Mississippi, he and Percy clashed along similar lines. Fish was disgruntled with Longino for increasing taxes on his railroad holdings (Baker 1983). The oversight at the hunt was no doubt intentional.

By all accounts, the men thoroughly enjoyed themselves drinking whiskey by the campfire and eating wild game in the big woods, though they had little luck killing bear. To satisfy the president, Holt wounded a young bear and presented it to Roosevelt to kill as a trophy on their final day. But when Roosevelt caught up to him and saw that the animal was near death and pitifully bound to a tree, he knew he could not in good conscience count this as a hunting victory. Neither could he bring himself to kill the bear before the expectant onlookers. Instead, he had one of the other hunters quickly and quietly put it out of its misery (Baker 1983; Denison 1903).

Most historians recount this bear hunt to explain the origin of Roosevelt’s namesake stuffed animal, the Teddy Bear, from a political cartoonist’s interpretation of the President’s experience (Barry 1997). However, the hunt was also a potent symbol of Percy’s skillfully reworked power structure for the Delta. With a network containing the President, capitalists like Fish, and loyal, subservient blacks like Holt Collier, Percy could circumvent the state and local political rivals and continue to build the Delta he wanted.

Despite Percy’s pleas to Congress in 1898 however, the federal government did not immediately step in and take over the levee board. National sentiments still disapproved of a direct flood control subsidy for the Delta (Catchings 1887). But aid for levee building continued to appear via navigation appropriations through the Rivers and Harbors Act. But when two consecutive and monstrous floods inundated large parts of
the lower Delta in 1913 and 1914, flood control advocates again aggressively lobbied for more aid.

This time however, their arguments deviated from older appeals to heal North-South relations, or to quell the chaos of local politics. Deltans now believed that the country owed them their aid, given that the Mississippi was the nation’s “drainage ditch.” Why should the Delta have to pay for collecting the rest of the country’s excess water (Mississippi River Levee Association 1913)?

The argument worked, probably helped by railroad interests and Percy and his cohorts’ backroom influences in Washington.22 In 1917, Congress passed the Ransdell-Humpreys Flood Control Act, which provided funds directly for flood control for the first time since 1850. The act stipulated a two-thirds federal, one-third local cost-sharing scheme for levees, provided that the local levee boards secured and held the necessary rights of way (Barry 1997; Cobb 1994; Harrison 1951; Saikku 2005).

Percy had gotten what he asked for: a near federal takeover of levee building that left him a niche he could still control. As a result of the act, the Delta began tackling levees with a renewed fervor to build the highest, strongest bulwarks yet. When the lower levees withstood a major flood in 1922, flood control experts relaxed into thinking that levees were the only needed means of flood control (Barry 1997; Pabis 1998).

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22 T.C. Catchings was one such Washington ally of Percy’s. He served as the Delta’s Congressman and occupied an influential seat on the Rivers and Harbors Committee (Baker 1983). Though he was not a great speaker, campaigner, or particularly charming person (Percy 1941), he was very intelligent and effective at securing appropriations for levee work (Baker 1983). Despite Catchings’ laconic nature, Percy managed to drum up enough local support in his district to keep reelecting him ((Baker 1983, Percy 1941). Also, increasing pressure from Western statesmen interested in securing federal support for water projects may have also sped along a flood control bill (O’Neill 2006).
But unknowingly, in its sole reliance on closing the entire Mississippi behind earthen levees, without allowing for natural outlets, the act also laid the foundation for one of the greatest floods in American history (Barry 1997). As W.A. Percy later explains, “the levee at Camp Cousens, which father’s guard protected in 1893, was about four feet high, had been built by Irishmen with wheelbarrows and paid for by local taxation; it always broke. The levee of today is forty feet high, has been built by caterpillars and draglines and paid for by the US government; it sometimes breaks” (Percy, 1941, 242).

And during the near-Biblical high water of March 1927, a large, government-funded levee broke catastrophically above Greeneville at Mound’s Landing. The swollen river threw aside its man-made constraints, violently crashing through the levee in an angry, scouring torrent rather than its old unimpeded slow rise. The subsequent death and destruction of the 1927 Flood thrust the Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana Deltas to the forefront of the nation, changed flood control policies for the entire Mississippi River Valley, and reshaped American ideals of federal obligations during natural disasters. The flood’s media coverage also exposed the harsh treatment of black sharecroppers and levee workers, which, when handled poorly by a Republican president Hoover, turned national black political sympathies away from the Republican party of Lincoln to the Democrats for the first time (Barry 1998).

23 Barry (1997) discusses how the MRC, along with local forces, managed to discount other engineer’s calls for designated spillways and reservoirs along tributary rivers as too impractical and expensive. The “levees only” policy in the 1917 Ransdell-Humphreys act won out over an alternative flood control bill, put forward by Senator Newlands of California, that made provisions for these secondary flood control structures. After the catastrophic levee crevasses of 1927 however, politicians and engineers realized the dangerous folly of “levees only.” The 1928 and 1936 Flood Control bills did begin to implement reservoirs and spillways in TVA’s new comprehensive flood control management plan for the Lower Mississippi, dubbed the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, or MR&T.
In his 1998 *Rising Tide*, John Barry tells this vivid and multi-layered story of the 1927 Flood and its significance in American history and politics. However, his national story of the flood, the MRC’s erroneous “levees only” policy that helped cause it, its influence on national racial debates, and its impacts on national flood control policy does not reveal all of the complexity of the Delta’s history of flood control. While national reactions to the flood certainly impacted the Delta, Percy had also set other forces in motion in the 1890 and 1900s that have had a serious, and previously unexamined, influence on local flood control today.

First, Percy realized that attempting to control the natural environment via the traditional political system was risky. Ferguson’s fall from grace, and the resulting backlash of petty politicians showed him the folly of making levee board appointments for personal reasons. Therefore, sometime in the 1920s, the levee boards finally stopped relying on gubernatorial appointments and began holding elections. However, in the lower Delta, Percy took great pains to ensure that the elections did not become needlessly political (Harrison 1951).

While the upper board elected its members in the general election, the lower board started holding its own special elections. As a result, the lower board’s candidates did not have to affiliate with a political party and voters had to make a specific trip to the polls to choose their levee board representatives. This difference in election protocol for the upper and lower boards probably had little effect on their make-up during Percy’s lifetime and much of the twentieth century. However, it had huge implications after the Civil Rights Era when blacks regained the right to vote in Mississippi elections.²⁴

²⁴ The manner in which the boards’ different election protocols influenced who ran and who won seats in the early 1990s will be discussed in Chapter V.
Second, Percy contributed to making the Delta increasingly reliant on the federal government, because he needed it to help him squelch the local influence of the poorer white “hill country” faction. He did not want to such men on the levee board. He also feared that if his rivals gained a stronghold in the Delta, their vitriolic racism would drive out its largely black labor force.

Percy might not have wanted blacks to vote, as he helped ensure with the 1890 Constitution, but he knew he needed them. Delta flood control in the early twentieth century depended on a battalion of labor. Only cotton production rivaled it in the sheer bodies it took to shore up earthen defenses with mules, wheelbarrows, sandbags, and the occasional primitive dragline. As lower Mississippi residents from Cairo to New Orleans enclosed more and more of the river between levees, the Delta had to continue strengthening its levees to prevent a violent break, or crevasse. The danger of weak levees was real, and the levee board exercised dictatorial authority in flood control matters.

Percy’s political forays had showed him that he lacked that kind of power over poor whites, but under the old, paternalistic plantation system he could still use it the Delta’s marginalized black population. During the first part of the twentieth century, levee contractors leased black convicts in order to complete backbreaking earthwork. Use of this system began to wane as the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) took on greater responsibility for levees after 1917. But the USACE still engaged local white-owned contracting companies to strengthen and repair levees, and these relied

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25 Percy tried to recruit immigrants to work the lands and levees to replace blacks, whose presence promised to provoke future flare-ups with the Klan and vehement race-baiting politicians from the Mississippi Hills. His most famous attempt involving recruiting Italian immigrants to work his Sunnyside plantation, but this famously failed (Barry 1997; Baker, 1983; Cobb 1994 ).
primarily on hired black labor. Workers lived in temporary levee camps, which soon acquired an “evil” reputation for their punishing conditions, low pay, and unsanitary environment (Cowley 1991).

A big problem for planters for like Percy was that, starting in the early nineteenth century, blacks were starting to leave the Delta as part of a Great Migration northward. Percy and his fellow planters implicitly believed that “all, in fact, that makes the life behind these earthen ramparts, - is but the negro’s daily toil” (Stone 1902). Their life on the Mississippi’s floodplain would be impossible without a large and easily coerced population of workers. But the frightening, violent, hate-laden politics of the hill country whites hastened the outmigration of the Delta’s black workforce, and threatened planters’ livelihood just as surely as the river. Percy fended off the Klu Klux Klan in part to protect
black laborers, but he also opposed the creation of a technical college in the Delta because he feared it would attract working-class white students (Barry 1997).

Thus in their dependence on a black underclass, and their disdain of upwardly mobile whites (Stone 1902), Percy and other elites redrew the political geography of the Delta region from the 1890s through 1927. With the levee board as their base, they attempted to create a colonial-like enclosure around their cotton producing lands that connected them to the federal government but excluded the State of Mississippi (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1994).

Figure 14: Sandbag crew working to heighten the levee to withstand a flood in the early twentieth century (YMDL Archives Photography Collection, undated photograph).
In the 1880s, some believed that the Delta’s untapped fertility was “the great hope of the county,” where “capital should be directed” (Ballou 1890). It represented an agricultural frontier, where astonishingly fertile land could give any poor farmer the wealth and social standing of a “planter” (Cobb 1994; Dattel 2009). However, one local editorialist warned against the coming cotton monopoly. He cries, “turn your cotton convention into a grass growing and corn planting assembly,” instead of allowing the “poor, ill feed, ill clothed, ill housed and ignorant classes” to produce cotton that only makes “rich the railroads, the steamships, the manufacturers, the speculators, and the money lenders.” Such entities, he argues, profit “just as do the dealers in precious stone dug out of the mines of Siberia” (Friar’s Point Gazette 1885).

This editorialist expressed the tangible fear that an undiversified cotton economy would create gaping wealth disparities. And despite cultural associations with the Delta’s wealth and opulence during the 1880-1930 period, economic historian Gene Dattel argues that few “planters” really made fortunes, and even fewer managed to hold on to those fortunes. Most of the cotton money indeed left the Delta; and today there is little legacy of schools, libraries, or social institutions that typically accompany real and lasting prosperity (Dattel 2009). Alcorn would have been mightily disappointed.

For in the 1850s, Alcorn had believed that strong levees would hasten commerce, education, and other hallmarks of a prosperous, progressive society for the Delta. A hundred years later, the Delta had its tall, federally coordinated and seemingly impregnable levees, but otherwise became “a miserable landscape dotted only by a few rich enclaves that cast little or no light on the poverty surrounding them” (Brandfon 1967 viii). While Alcorn thought levees were a step towards a new, more inclusive future,
Colonel Percy saw them as a salve against his classes’ growing irrelevance. The levee board had given the Delta a unique and important political mechanism for perpetuating Old South agrarian ideals and mythologies, even into the present.

Ultimately, the geographic reality of the Delta underpins its gross wealth and power inequities. In his book, *What Nature Suffers to Groe*, environmental historian Mark Stewart (2002) explains how early settlers in Georgia forged the southern plantation model though constant dealings with “disordering forces generated within it and acting upon it from without.” Highly organized, intensive monocultures are hard to grow, and in the chaotic world of the coastal swamp, “the environment — especially the flow of water — then became and instrument to control the slaves. Slaves on the plantation became subject not only to the authority of the master and his hired managers, but also to the demands of the artificial ecosystem they had labored to establish” (Stewart 2002).

The Percys and other Delta leaders had to contend with similarly chaotic natural forces in the post-Civil War Mississippi Delta. Environmental control, especially of the Mississippi River, became tightly tied to control over people and resources. As a result, they not only maneuvered the levee board to tame the Delta’s environment, but also its economy, political system, and people. The Colonel and LeRoy Percy were visionary leaders in some ways, bringing capital, commerce, and sound flood control to a region that others might willingly have abandoned. But by concentrating wealth and power in their fight against the Mississippi, they also hastened the Delta’s eventual ecological and social impoverishment.
CHAPTER VI: T.G. DABNEY AND TRANSITIONS TO A MODERN LEVEE BOARD

Major Dabney and a modern levee board

The Percys and other elites in the region steered the Delta through its brief and frenzied economic ascendency, and their sentiments helped create some of its current problems. However, their influence was not always applied evenly. In 1884, after the dissolution of the unsuccessful Levee District Number 1, the northern and interior counties formed their own separate levee board in Clarksdale, named the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee Board (YMDL). The Colonel and LeRoy played a role in its incorporation, and early organizers planned for upper and lower boards to operate in total cooperation. But some of the ways, accidental or intentional, that this upper board began to diverge from the lower board, led to conflicts in the late twentieth century.

This chapter employs archival materials to explore several explanations for the upper board’s divergence, and the historical sources for its current conflicts with the lower board. As early as the late 1880s, the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee Boards’ began to reveal signs of subtle breaks with the attitudes promulgated by the Percys. I

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26 Percy’s law firm served as legal council for this board as well, and Chief Engineer Charles Dabney’s letters contains routine correspondence from Yeager and Percy (Dabney letters, YMDL archives).
argue that these minor aberrations, through time and circumstance, strengthened the YMDL’s flood-fighting ability and gave it a greater sense of territorial self-sufficiency.

An analysis of such self-sufficiency certainly starts with the YMDL’s resolute leader, civil engineer Thomas Gregory Dabney. T.G. Dabney was born near Jackson, Mississippi in 1844. Like the Percys, Dabney could claim long standing Southern aristocratic roots, though his severe, attorney father only seemed to make enough money to provide a very modest lifestyle for his large family. When he was a young boy, Dabney’s family sent him to live part of the time with his more prosperous relatives on a nearby plantation. While he enjoyed the trappings of wealth, he also began to relish hunting and long jaunts in the southern woods more than “playing in the streets with the town boys” (Dabney [1922]?).

When T.G.’s wealthy uncle agreed to fund his education in his chosen field, the young Dabney had no trouble declaring a vocation. When T.G. was fourteen, his older brother, a civil engineer, led a railroad survey through southern Mississippi. He hired T.G. as a “stake marker,” and brought him on the expedition. Dabney describes “life on survey” as “hard and rough; that is, we had a great deal of hard walking to do, and suffered much at times from heat and thirst.” However, he continued “this camping experience, and the tramping through the virgin pine forests, with my vigorous appetite and a zest for all adventure, stands in my memory as a bright picture of my boyhood days, with a glamour of romantic interest investing it” (Dabney [1922]?). Dabney had fallen in love with civil engineering.
He apparently volunteered to fight for the Confederacy in 1861 at age 16, but spent most of the war in a POW camp. After the war, he returned to Mississippi to begin life anew, complete his education and gain professional experience. He worked for various railroad companies in the Deep South and became involved in levee building in Louisiana (University of Southern Mississippi Libraries Special Collections 2004) And, like many of his contemporaries, he kept his military title of “Major” in his civilian life.

Major Dabney must have made quite a name for himself in the decades after the war, because he was clearly present when the upper Delta leaders met in 1884 to form a new levee district (YMDL 1884). He became the new district’s Chief Engineer, and he served unchallenged in that role for over forty years. His letters, engineering reports, speeches, and publications are available at the YMDL headquarters in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and they resound with his wholehearted confidence that good science and sound engineering could surmount any obstacle man or nature presented.

Moreover, unlike the Percys, Dabney steered clear of outward political affiliations. His life’s great triumphs sprang from his levee work; he showed no obvious ambition for wealth and acquisition. He did not own a plantation that stood to gain from governmental flood control, and though he seemed to relish time spent fighting the north Delta’s woods and high waters, he kept his family’s primary residence in Memphis (University of Southern Mississippi Libraries Special Collections 2004). The YMDL no doubt had its share of political conflict over the years\textsuperscript{28}, but Dabney seemed to set a

\textsuperscript{28} Dabney’s archived correspondence in Clarksdale contains a letter from Colonel Stovall, a prominent planter and levee board member, asking him not to publish or discuss his use of levee funds for some levee work done near his land. The matter seemed mild, but Stovall was obviously worried about how this action on his part might appear to the public (Stovall, Dabney letters).
professional tone for the upper levee district that impressed engineers and elected
officials alike.

When Dabney neared end of his life, a nationally prominent civil engineer paid
him homage as a man of “good intelligence, a dominant personality, excellent political
sense, and above all absolute integrity.” This engineer explained, “in other levee districts
the elected officials of the district employed the chief engineer. In the Upper Yazoo
District Major Dabney was held in such complete confidence by the public that he ruled
like an autocrat. No elected official who thwarted his purposes could long hold office”
(Morgan 1928).

Furthermore, this engineer goes on to praise Dabney’s board as modern and fair.
He claims that “money raised by taxes in the Upper Yazoo Levee District was spent for
building levees, and not to pay political debts….An influential planter might insist that
the levee be built near the river edge where it would protect his field, but if that would
put the levee near a caving bank, the planter's influence would count for nothing (Morgan
1928).” Dabney’s colleagues clearly thought he was above the insider dealings
commonly associated with levee boards.

Dabney’s personal leadership characteristics no doubt set a strong and steady
course for the upper levee board, sidestepping some of the problems of the Percys
through his persuasive faith in sound engineering. The upper levee board also enjoyed
obvious and immediate advantages in the geographic layout of its district and its sources
or local revenue. But under Dabney, they also made decisions about the board’s
management that arguably gave them an edge in the latter twentieth century. This edge
created a rift between the upper and lower levee boards beginning in the early 1990s, and
the two boards’ subsequent arguments and actions symbolize the Delta’s struggles to move past its blighted history and into the future.

*The Upper YMDL: The beginnings of an independent levee district*

Colonel Percy missed his chance to create a unified levee district in 1865 when he organized his district around Issaquena, Washington, and Bolivar counties. He, LeRoy, and their railroad backers spent decades trying to correct their mistake, but to no avail. After the 1882 flood control convention where Percy and Alcorn had their standoff, the north continued to remain separate, with their potential flood-fighting tax contributions untapped. But as the Reconstruction-era Levee District Number 1 had folded in bankruptcy, perhaps Percy and his allies felt that if they could not consolidate, they could promote a new, unencumbered levee board for the upper and interior Delta counties. Then they could at least influence such an entity to cooperate with them.

Though the Percys had failed in convincing upper Deltans to join them, the 1879 founding of the MRC, promise of future federal aid, and disastrous Delta-wide floods in the early 1880s all prompted upper Delta leaders to finally deal with their flood control infrastructure. Prominent Deltans met in 1884 to charter the new Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee District for the upper and interior counties left outside the lower district’s perimeter. The state authorized this board to issue $500,000 in bonds to begin levee work (YMDL1884). So in the spring of 1884, a group including Colonel Stovall, planter and owner of the now famous Stovall Plantation,29 and Colonel White, another notable upper Deltan, met to lay the groundwork for disposing the bonds and managing the new levee board (Dabney 1901).

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29 Birth place of famous bluesman Muddy Waters and a well-known Delta tourist attraction
They hoped to raise enough money to complete preliminary surveys in time for a July meeting of the Mississippi River Commission, where they could make their case for federal aid. However, by October of that year, the planters had not been able to sell the bonds they needed to finance even this initial work. They reported that in the still stagnant local economy, they could find no willing buyers, no one with the capital to invest in the region’s infrastructure (Yazoo Mississippi Delta Levee Board 1884). The men gave up (Dabney 1901).

However, they soon received word that a Mr. R.T. Wilson, a large shareholder in the Illinois Central Railroad from New York City, was willing to help. His interests clearly lay in the ongoing development of the north Delta, so he agreed to sell the bonds in New York and elsewhere, charging the board a two and a half percent commission (YMDL1884; Dabney 1901). Moreover, he stipulated that the new board use his favored contractor, the Mississippi Valley Construction Company, for the required earthwork. The fledging board willingly accepted; R.T. Wilson had given the YMDL the jumpstart it needed, even if came with some dubious terms. The board hired Dabney as their engineer, and by the March high water season of 1885, Dabney and the contractors had completed initial levee building to a satisfactory degree (Dabney 1901).

In its beginnings, the YMDL seemed as though it would function as Percy likely hoped. Railroad cash provided flood control infrastructure for the entire Delta; and Percy helped ensure that the 1890 Constitution adequately protected both upper and lower boards from interference from resentful state officials. Railroad financing was so important to the Delta that the 1890 State Constitution also stipulated that railroad

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30 Dabney (1901) explains that this contracting outfit was based in New Jersey, and that R.T. Wilson also had an economic interest in the company.
company shareholders should always occupy a seat on elected levee boards (Constitution of the State of Mississippi 1891).

While the new YMDL no doubt shared the Percys’ and the Mississippi Levee Board’s advantage of close ties to the railroads and federal agencies, it also experienced the same level of voter censure. A journalist writing about the YMDL in 1915 explained that “any body of political origin, with power to spend an income of several hundred thousands of dollars a year in contracts, is bound to be regarded with suspicion in times when the presumption of graft is automatically saddled on to public works of large scale (Marvin 1915, 236).” He also suggests that “some of the non-leveed communities are disposed to look askance at the close affiliation of several of the levee boards with the railroads running through their districts” (Marvin 1915, 236).

But whether they viewed the Delta levee boards as a success or with suspicion, most believed that the upper and lower levee boards were functionally the same, or ought to be. Even historians covering the region and time period assume their complicity (Cobb, 1995; Harrison 1951; O’Neill 2006; Saikku 2005). However, the two boards definitely became distinct political entities.

When Congress (Mississippi River Floods 1898), railroads (YMDL 1884), or the state questioned the wisdom or necessity of the Mississippi Levee Board and the YMDL’s dual administrations, levee board representatives always mentioned local taxes. William Starling, the engineer for the Mississippi Levee Board sums up the split in that “attempts have been made to consolidate the whole administration in the hands of one board, but serious obstacles have been found to exist in the different rates and manners of taxation of the two districts, their debts and a diversity of local interests” (Starling 1901,
LeRoy Percy gave a similar explanation to Congress in 1898 (Mississippi River Floods 1898). But they reassured investors by adding that “so far, very little practical inconvenience has been found in the division of territory, the two organizations having worked together very harmoniously” (Starling 1901, 89).

Back home though, voters in the upper district could be a bit more contentious. After the YMDL’s initial founding and first successful year, R. T. Wilson placed further stipulations upon his continued financial support. First, he specified that the new YMDL must join the lower district, and operate with them as one board. Second, he required that the board lobby the state to enact a cotton tax for raising local revenue (YMDL 1884; Dabney 1901).

The initial YMDL knew that honoring Wilson’s first condition would be impossible (Starling 1901). As discussed in Chapter IV, the upper district had a distinct geographical advantage in funding levee work (Starling 1901). Its ratio of land area to river frontage is nearly a third of the in the lower Mississippi Levee Board. Though backwater flooding could be troublesome, the upper district’s interior counties were for the most part, already protected behind the Mississippi Levee Board mainline Mississippi levees, and did not want to pay extra for the privilege. If they had to make an offering at all, they would rather pay fewer taxes for the less expensive work of securing the riverfront in Coahoma, Tunica, and Desoto Counties.
Moreover, in 1885, the Delta was still dealing with the changes of Reconstruction. Alcorn was from Clarksdale, the headquarters of the new YMDL, and his influence may have manifested into a general distrust of the Percys and the lower levee board. Black Deltans could still vote as well, and they were largely loyal to Alcorn’s Republican faction. Perhaps this explains why the northern counties again refused to join the Mississippi Levee Board, though no direct account exists in the YMDL minutes and reports.
However, the YMDL district’s reaction to the cotton tax proposal provides additional clarification. By 1884, the lower Mississippi Levee Board was charging its constituents a tax of half a cent on every pound of cotton, and an *ad valorem*, or property tax, of five mills on the dollar (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886). When the YMDL incorporated in 1884, they charged no tax on cotton but collected an *ad valorem* tax of thirteen mills from the riverfront counties and nine mills for the interior counties (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886).

Just like R.T. Wilson, the powerful planters and railroad magnates of the new YMDL wanted cotton tax revenues. Their financiers had more confidence in cotton than in land, and offered lower interest rates on borrowing backed by cotton (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886). Landholders also saw that a cotton tax would benefit them by shifting their property tax burden onto landless cotton producers and sharecroppers. The boards’ wealthy members complained that “laborers and cotton raisers of our district constitute about eight-tenths of the population. They own most of the cotton, yet pay no property or other taxes. Yet they suck up most of the revenue in maintaining law and order and schools” (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886).

However, they knew that the cotton tax was generally unpopular with the majority of voters in the district. To placate R.T. Wilson, they proposed to only ask for a dollar and a half for each bale of cotton in the front counties and one dollar per bale in the back counties (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886). In comparison with the half cent per pound tax of the Mississippi Levee Board district, riverfront YMDL
counties would pay about three tenths of a cent per pound of cotton and interior counties would pay two-tenths of a cent.

Even this reduced cotton tax proposal met with serious opposition in the upper Delta. An 1885 letter from Joseph Carson, Colonel Stovall’s manager, advises Dabney that, “there is evidently a strong reaction growing out against the cotton tax and the idea is gaining ground that enough money can be raised without it— it is most likely the negro vote will defeat any candidate for the legislation who does not declare against the cotton tax” (Carson 1885).

Nevertheless, the YMDL prepared to lobby hard to pass the cotton tax. Carson continued privately to Dabney, “I feel that the tax is very necessary and hope enough tax-paying interests can be excited to secure it regardless of the voting (Carson 1885).” Then in 1886, levee board members sent an earnest memorial to the state legislature describing how crucial the cotton tax was for securing investment (Memorial of Board of Levee Commissioners 1886). The argument must have convinced them. In 1886 Mississippi passed an amendment to the YMDL’s original charter to include the new cotton tax (An Act to Incorporate 1886).

The voter outcry against the cotton tax did influence the state to place serious restrictions on the measure. In 1888, the legislature passed another amendment that limited the use of the cotton tax to situations where there “has been an actual destruction in whole or in part of a portion of the line of levee by high water or caving banks, and there are no other resources available to said board under existing laws with which to construct said levees” (An Act to Incorporate 1888). So despite the wishes of R.T.
Wilson and the wealthy levee board members, cotton tax money rarely materialized in the upper Delta. The board eventually phased it out entirely in the 1920s.

To supplement their established *ad valorem* tax income and make up for the defeated cotton tax, the YMDL turned instead to an elaborate system of “privilege” taxes on local businesses. The board collected revenue in established amounts from a wide variety of businesses operating in the district (An Act to Incorporate 1884, 32-34.) This helped lessen the upper board’s sole dependence on cotton. The Mississippi Levee Board had privilege taxes too, but YMDL’s were much more detailed and extensive. For example, besides utility companies, stores, law firms, and cotton merchants, the YMDL taxed each billiard table, each “peddler on foot,” each person “selling vinous or spirituous liquors”, each ferry, real estate agent, barber, soda fountain, and dozens of other businesses and services (An Act to Incorporate 1884, 32-34).

Their system hearkened back to Alcorn’s desire to “identify each man with the levee” (Alcorn 1868), and more equitably spread the responsibility for flood control among all those who benefited. Even though the YMDL’s initial board were wealthy planters and business owners — no doubt peers of the Percys — their district began to plot a distinct, and perhaps more democratic, trajectory for itself right from its earliest years. In the decades to come, the YMDL’s refusal to join forces with the south certainly impacted their means for raising revenue, but also their ability to fight floods, their legal authority, and their overall attitudes toward class, race, and the environment over the twentieth century.

Geography obviously worked in the upper YMDL district’s favor too. Not only did it have less riverfront to garrison and a larger tax base to levy, it also lay along higher
elevations. The entire Delta flooded under the Mississippi’s natural regime and the YMDL certainly remained critically vulnerable to inundation, but its drainage pattern simply made it easier to levee than the flood-prone lower Delta (Starling 1901).

Dabney’s levees held every flood in the Delta from 1884 through the federal takeover in 1928, save one. The flood of 1897 broke through a levee in Tunica County to create Flower Lake (Dabney 1901, Marvin 1915), but the YMDL triumphed when its levees contained the epic 1927 Flood. By contrast, the lower Mississippi Levee Board’s levees suffered breakages in floods every few years, in addition to the 1927 levee crevasse at Mound’s Landing (Harrison 1951).

Figure 16: Photograph of refugees from the Flood of 1897 (YMDL Archives’ Photography Collection).
A combination of good geographical fortune and Dabney’s expertise (Morgan 1928) kept the YMDL dry and less dependent on the federal government as well. Dabney was able to efficiently use the revenues available to him to develop admirable standards for levees in his district (Marvin 1915; Morgan 1928). After he created an initial line of defense following the board’s incorporation, he relentlessly traveled his district to fight floods and shore up defenses. He describes flood fights lasting seventeen days or more, and feet so swollen he could not walk for the week following. He mentions having to jump with his horse into a raging river and swim to safety aboard a steam ship when a landing gave way (Dabney 1901). But in all his reports, his pride in the levee system shines through.

Figure 17: A Delta steamboat navigating the Mississippi during high water (YMDL Archives Photography Collection, undated photograph).
Since Dabney did not suffer the losses of other districts during floods, he usually had funds available to continue strengthening his existing levees, rather than rebuild destroyed ones (Marvin 1915). When Congress agreed to provide direct flood control appropriation to levee districts in 1917 to standardize levee heights, the YMDL needed no aid. Their levees already met or exceeded the federal standard (Harrison 1951).

Once he was satisfied with the general condition of the levees by 1920, Dabney divided his entire line into eight mile sections. At each section break, he built a guardhouse, and kept each outpost manned during high water. Guards could easily monitor their assigned sections, and communicate danger quickly with guardhouse telephones he installed. This system was far more sophisticated than the Mississippi Levee Board’s and Dabney’s colleagues greatly admired his work, even if voters and taxpayers did not fully appreciate the necessity of such precautions (Dabney 1922).

If Dabney could not use geography to his advantage, he reworked it in his district’s favor. He increasingly looked with worry at the levees rising on the Arkansas shore, for flooding often spared the upper Delta and instead overflowed onto its poorly levee’d neighbors. However, the levee board for Arkansas’ White River basin started to receive federal aid too, and its levees began to stretch laterally to plug outlets, and vertically to withstand higher stages.

Dabney claimed to uphold the hypothesis attributed to Captain Eads, that levees would force the river to carve a deeper channel and result in lower river stages. Though he publically maintained that Eads’ “assertion is based upon very ingenious and plausible arguments” (Dabney 1901, 39), in practice he took no chances. Dabney later equivocates

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31 Via the 1917 Randsdell-Humphreys Act.
that “however we may attempt to theorize on the subject of high-water effects, there is only one solid ground of safety, and that is to build our levees abundantly high and strong” (Dabney 1901, 127).

Thus Dabney created his “superstandard” (Marvin 1915) that the YMDL’s levees always rise three feet above Arkansas’s levees. He explains that “in an ethical sense this seems an ungenerous sentiment; but for us it resolves itself into a matter of cold business necessity (Dabney 1901, 263).” Since the Arkansas side had to constantly spend their revenues repairing flood-damaged levees, they could never amass the resources to challenge the YMDL. Dabney assured upper Deltans that “the means at the disposal of our neighbors across the river are much more scant than our own, and in the inevitable contest for supremacy in the present stage of levee development, we still hold largely the vantage ground over them” (Dabney 1901, 203).

Such competition between levee districts helped prompt the federal government to step in after the 1927 flood, but the districts’ spirit of competitive self-interest survived. Throughout its history, the YMDL proved itself especially skilled at protecting its own levees, even to the detriment of other districts. In the 2000s, the Mississippi Levee Board solicited the YMDL’s aid in pushing the federal government to drain its flooded Yazoo backwater area. The YMDL refused. Its current president claimed that besides the fact that they felt the backwater project was impractical, the YMDL could not risk alienating powerful environmental groups — on whose approval they depended to complete their own projects (Sturdivant 2011).

The Percys, their railroad friends, and wealthy upper Delta planters may have hoped that the YMDL’s separate administration would be an insignificant detail in their
quest to consolidate regional power via flood fighting near the turn of the century. But the YMDL district’s geography and the mobilization of its voters led to a distinctly more democratic taxation policy. Then, Major Dabney, a highly professional engineer, became its figurehead rather than politicians and planters. Unlike the Percys, Dabney positioned his district’s success on well-engineered earthworks rather than political maneuvering. Finally, the YMDL used its resources to its utmost advantage, allowing it to modernize faster—and sometimes at the expense—of other levee districts. All of these historical elements lend the YMDL a spirit of self-sufficiency that help it better meet and adapt to present day challenges.

*Historic Decisions, Modern Repercussions*

Besides taxation, there were other legal decisions stemming from the YMDL’s separate incorporation that—whether accidental or intentional—helped the YMDL take advantage of future economic opportunities. But in doing so, the YMDL invited the same ire from the voting public that historically plagued levee boards. Even though levees are a necessity in the Delta, many residents still believe and fear that levee boards enjoy a degree of power disproportionate to their actual function. The YMDL’s history paved the way for it to develop a strikingly unique trajectory in the modern Delta. In turn, the Delta’s reactions to this trajectory highlight the region’s latent power struggles over the environment and race.

When attorneys drafted the upper and lower levee boards’ incorporating statues in 1865 and 1884, they were unknowingly guided by the Delta’s historical geography. Even though the lower Delta experienced greater and longer lasting flooding, this regime no doubt built richer deeper topsoil—especially near the Percy’s Deer Creek homestead.
Perhaps because of its rich deep soils, or also because settlement patterns first swept settlers upriver from New Orleans to Natchez, Vicksburg, and then to the Delta’s southern end, the lower Delta had a much larger population in the nineteenth century than the upper Delta (Cobb 1994; Harrison, 1950; Saikku 2005). Therefore, when negotiating levee rights of way, the Percys had to head off contentious landowners with the cobbled-together policies forged during the confusion of Reconstruction. As a result, the lower board’s legal authority was more vulnerable to twentieth century challenges.

By contrast, most of the upper and interior Delta was still a wilderness when local leaders formed the new upper levee board in 1884 (Saikku 2005; Wade 1941). Timbermen continued to roam the backcountry, waiting for small localized spring floods to float their logs to a river, and carving out small agricultural plots of corn and cotton to sustain them in the meantime. The north and interior retained much of their antebellum frontier character well into the 1880s and 90s, so the new upper district had the advantage of a more or less clean slate when drafting its incorporating articles.

Section 3 of the YMDL’s incorporating act contains wording that gives the board the right to acquire “full title” to land needed for levee work (An Act to Incorporate 1884). This means that the levee board owns the deed to the levee and the land on which it sits. For years, everyone in the Delta assumed that when either board built a levee, they owned it, and could use it as they saw fit (Tindall 2011). They typically planted grass on their earthen levees to prevent erosion, and over the years, started leasing the grazing rights to private citizens to raise revenue.

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32 An account from an unpublished diary describes this phenomenon. The author was the semi-literate frontiersman Johnnie Parrot, who recorded his daily activities as a timberman and small farmer in and around Panola and Quitman counties in the late nineteenth century.

33 Starling (1901), chief engineer of the lower district, explains that the new levee board “does not and should not inherit the evil reputation of the unpaid obligation” of the defunct Levee District Number 1.
In 1948, a landowner adjacent to the Mississippi Levee Board’s mainline levee tried to obtain grazing rights on the levee for his cattle. The Mississippi Levee Board refused, as they had already offered the rights to someone else. The landowner contested the decision in court, and eventually brought the case before the Mississippi Supreme Court. In Nicholson v. Board of Mississippi Levee Commissioners, the judges reviewed the statutes establishing both boards. They decided that because the YMDL statute clearly used the words “full title,” they did indeed legally own their levees. Unfortunately, they could find no similarly explicit wording in the Mississippi Levee Board’s 1865 incorporating statute. Thus they ruled that in fact, the Mississippi Levee Board did not own their levees, and could only claim an easement, or right of way (Tindall 2011). The landowner had won his case.

Therefore, the YMDL retained the full privileges of ownership on all of their land and levees, while the Mississippi Levee Board could only access its holdings for flood control activities. For years, this distinction did not make a huge difference, as both boards and the Army Corps of Engineers had full authority to maintain the levees as needed, whether eased or owned. However, in the early 1990s, a new unexpected economic force arrived in a rural corner of the upper Delta. The Mississippi Gaming Commission approved floating, or riverboat, gambling in Tunica County, where casinos must locate adjacent to the Mississippi (Sayle 2010).

This meant that the casinos had to build between the Mississippi and the levees. One of the first casino companies to arrive located an ideal site near the northern Tunica county line, as close to the city of Memphis as legally possible. The YMDL happened to own the desired tract, and though divided on the issue of legalized gambling, negotiated
to lease it for an millions of dollars annually (Sturdivant 2011). As more casinos descended upon the Delta, they found they needed to build auto access roads across the levees to connect to the existing highway infrastructure. Since the YMDL owned their levees, they could negotiate lucrative leases with the casinos for each levee crossing (Sturdivant 2011).

Nearly overnight, the YMDL transformed from a ragtag rural agency to a rich organization bringing in over four million additional dollars a year (Staley 2004). They suspended all local levee taxes, and expanded their employee ranks from six to over seventy (Sayle 2010). They began education programs, hired lobbyists, launched expensive public relations campaigns, bought equipment, and created a round-the-clock emergency rescue squad (Staley 2004; Sturdivant 2011). Interestingly, the board also leveraged its new resources to exploit Mississippi’s emerging environmental economies. It holds “fishing rodeos” and hunting expeditions, funded a riverfront nature trail and museum in Tunica, and even purchased some riverfront property to try raising revenues via wetland mitigation banking (Staley 2004; Sturdivant 2011).

The lower board continued to operate on meager local taxation, though their flood control responsibilities remained the same. Even though the Corps ensured that each district’s levees stayed safe and up to standards, such a drastic distinction between the boards’ budgets caused obvious resentment (Sayle 2010; Sturdivant 2011).

Amid its success, The YMDL has received criticism from surprising corners. Clarksdale, MS editorials have flared, condemning the YMDL as a wasteful, rogue entity swelling their ranks with unnecessary staff and squandering public money in useless endeavors. According to one local editorial, “many of the Levee Board
expenditures come under the definition of flood control and drainage only by the wildest stretch of the imagination…the levee board believes it is operating on "self-generated" funds and thus not accountable for how the funds are used" (Mooney 2004).

When the YMDL voted to raise compensation for its board members in 2002, it invited a public outcry. A YMDL critic interviewed for an article in the Clarksdale Press Register claimed that the compensation upgrade “is just one more example of an organization that has more money than it knows what to do with” (Kalich 2005). Another invokes the levee boards’ aristocratic lineage by adding, “for most of the past 140 years, being a member of a levee board in the Mississippi Delta was considered a public service in its highest sense —something board members did not to make money but to keep the region habitable” (Kalich 2005). The interviewees all seem to express a fear that “the greater the check, the more questions raised about the recipient's motivation” (Kalich 2005).

On one hand, the recent suspicion directed at the YMDL is nothing new. Elites historically chartered levee boards, imbued them with often over-reaching authority and, in many ways, used them to help expand their property and political power. The perception that the levee boards are full of “fat cats” and “cheats” certainly existed in Percy’s day, and the association never totally disappeared.

Taxpayers had even criticized Dabney for the extreme lengths he took to fortify his district and the sums he paid some contractors (Dabney 1922). Dabney used levee funds to buy mules for the levee board, which he fattened on the levee-side grass and then dispatched for earthwork projects. He argued that this lessened the levee board’s dependence on contractors and saved the board money, but his detractors felt that his
mules were not a necessary flood-fighting expenditure (Dabney 1922). Now, present day Deltans are simply unearthing similar suspicions and arguments as they witness the YMDL disburse large sums of money for tangential flood control projects in this otherwise poor region.

Reactions to some of the YMDL’s new activities, such as funding a museum and nature trail, or operating a wetlands mitigation bank, reflect many Deltans’ reluctance to embrace more neoliberal environmental philosophies (McDonald 2010). In recent decades, federal policies have promoted programs like the Wetlands Reserve (WRP) as part of the Farm Bill, wherein farmers are compensated for maintaining or restoring wetlands (McDonald 2010). Similarly, environmentalists stress the importance of assigning and deriving economic benefits from Delta lowlands in the form of hunting, ecotourism, sustainable forestry, and ecosystem services like carbon sequestration and excess nitrogen filtration (Jenkins et al. 2010). The YMDL is trying to navigate this new world, but opposing agricultural interests cling to the paradigm of governmental subsidized cotton and land development that the Percys helped indelibly establish.
Race and the YMDL

The “full title” wording was not the only historical accident that plotted a divergent course for the YMDL. In the 1920s, Percy and his allies had pushed to establish special, non-partisan levee board elections after struggling to keep their rivals’ political favoritism from corrupting the selection process (Tillman 2011). However, as was its custom, the upper board continued to hold elections that coincided with the general elections. Candidates in the north had to affiliate with a political party to appear on the ballot, whereas in the south they did not. This administrative detail had little impact on the nature of those elected for most of the twentieth century; but everything changed when blacks regained the right to vote in Mississippi.

In the mid-1960s, blacks began running in, and winning, local political elections in the South. Even though Mississippi had been the site of some of the South’s most bitter racism and hate, elections in its small towns and rural districts throughout the 1970s soon made it one the best examples of black local political participation (Kincaid 1986). But as the levee boards were obscure, little known, entities during those years, its officials remained all white.

However, in the early 1990s, Mississippi Governor Ray Mabus asked the Rev. David Cotton, mayor of Tchula, Mississippi to serve on a task force examining the environmental implications of dredging the upper Yazoo River. Reverend Cotton represented the new force of black public officials struggling to manage poor Delta towns amid outright hostility from white citizens (Morrison 1987). Before serving on the task force, he had not known much about the local and federal organizations coordinating the region’s flood control, but he soon learned how important they were to
the Delta and his constituents (Cotton 2011). His community, like many other historical black areas in the Delta, was especially prone to flooding. Yet blacks had never had any representation on the levee boards.

He decided that it was time for someone to look out for the interests of poor, low-lying communities in the dealings of the levee board. So, he ran for his county’s seat on the YMDL board and won in 1992. By that time, citizens in the Delta were much more aware of the YMDL given its windfall of casino cash (Staley 2004). Other black Deltans decided to try for levee board seats in the upper Delta, and because blacks constitute a majority of the population, they easily won. Even if they were relatively unknown, they usually had a good shot simply by running on the democratic ticket (Sayle 2010). At present, the levee board is made up entirely of black board members save two, the president, Sykes Sturdivant, and Desoto County representative Robert Sayle.\(^{34}\)

The lower Delta’s election rules stipulate that voters have to make a special turnout to elect its officials, who do not affiliate with a political party (Tindall 2011). As a result, fewer blacks have sought seats and the board has remained majority white. By the mid 1990s, not only had the two levee boards evolved different attitudes and approaches over the years, one was white and one was black.

Colonel Percy had worked hard to keep levee leadership out of black hands during Reconstruction. His successors in the both the upper and lower Delta had shared his sentiments and historically concentrated flood control administration within the white, largely elite community. And unfortunately, modern conflicts arising from the

\(^{34}\) Desoto County only has a small section of land in the geographic Delta and is otherwise made up of suburban communities of Memphis. Unlike the Delta, its population is largely white and Republican. This is why Sayle (2010), a white farmer with a long family history of involvement on the levee board, says he is continually re-elected.
boards’ current racial difference prove that Mississippi can still be a place of race-based conflict.

Latent racial undertones came more sharply into contrast in a 2004 squabble between the YMDL and the state of Mississippi. Projecting a budget shortfall, Mississippi governor Haley Barbour’s administration proposed to confiscate 5 million dollars of the YMDL’s new surplus casino funds for the state’s general coffers (Staley 2004). The YMDL, however, feared that this seizure would set a dangerous precedent, and turned to the levee boards’ ironclad constitutional protection to successfully prevent it. But YMDL president Sykes Sturdivant explains that the state’s attempt against the majority-black YMDL was the worst case of “pure racism” he’s seen in recent years (Sturdivant 2011).

Black officials overseeing so much wealth undoubtedly made many Deltans nervous. Even the YMDL’s retired former chief engineer stated publically that though he did not like the idea of the state taking the money, he believed the YMDL should instead divide it among the district’s taxpayers (Mooney 2004). It is difficult to document explicit evidence of racism in today’s speeches and editorials; white Deltans have developed very coded means for publically discussing race (McDonald 2010). But both black and white YMDL board members expressed that racism definitely fuels much of the recent backlash against them (Cotton 2011; Sayle 2010, Sturdivant 2011).

The YMDL’s evolving characteristics of wealth, openness to change, and racial make-up play a significant role in flood control debates today. In the next section I detail the ongoing controversy over the Yazoo Pumps in the south Delta, where the YMDL and the Mississippi Levee Board face each other on opposing sides. Neither Alcorn nor
Percy would have imagined that upper and lower districts, charged with similar responsibilities over a region with fairly uniform physical and demographic characteristics, could react so differently. But as their history shows, the best way for the Delta to deal with the Mississippi River can be a matter of opinion.

*The Yazoo Pumps Controversy*

After the Great 1927 Flood, the federal government agreed to take over the responsibility for controlling the lower Mississippi. Levee boards were no longer responsible for siting and building levees, hiring contractors, or designing comprehensive flood control plans as they had been in the past. The boards’ roles diminished and they faded into the backdrop behind large federal agencies and projects (Barry 1997). They continued to hold rights of way, inspect and maintain levees, and lobby for the federal appropriations for United States Army Corps of Engineer projects. But otherwise, the USACE itself made most of the visible changes to the Delta physical and political flood control landscape.

But even though local levee boards became rather unimportant (at least on paper), they still retained much of the local power and legal authority given them in Alcorn’s, the Percys’, and Dabney’s day. Working behind the scenes, they continued to have a marked influence on how federal flood control projects manifested at the local level (O’Neill 2006). O’Neill contends that such competing local influences kept the Corps from instituting true top-down coordinated environmental management schemes like those of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Now that the Corps is weakening with lack of funding and assaults from environmental agencies (O’Neill 2006;
McDonald 2010), the Delta’s levee boards are trying to reassert some of their old dominance.

The Flood Control Act of 1936 charged the US Army Corps of Engineers, in partnership with the two levee boards, to implement two large-scale structural flood control projects in the Yazoo Delta to further guard against high water. The first project, the Yazoo Headwater Project, authorized the Corps to create the four flood control reservoirs on Yazoo tributaries with one hundred percent federal financing (McDonald 2010, Saikku 2005). The reservoirs certainly have aided flood control efforts, but with some serious geomorphic consequences over the years. Below the reservoirs, stream channels have adapted to the lower flows and are now incapable of handling pre-reservoir discharge rates. If a flood ever overtops the reservoirs’ emergency spillways, the high-volume flow would completely overwhelm the collapsed and debris-filled channels (Smith and Winkley 1996).

Therefore, the Yazoo Headwater Project necessitates constant clearing, dredging, and monitoring of these streams, most of which fall in the upper YMDL district. The Yazoo Headwater Project has been the source of much environmental controversy (McDonald 2010), but the YMDL seems to have placated environmental groups by modifying some of their dredging methods (McDonald 2010; Sturdivant 2011).

The second, dubbed the “Yazoo Backwater Project,” was begun but never completed. Because the Yazoo serves as the Delta’s only outflow channel, it often chokes with swollen run-off and sediment from its tributaries as it moves towards its V-shaped confluence with the Mississippi. Moreover, the Mississippi River can push
against its confining levees during high flood stages and flow back into the mouth of the Yazoo, causing serious back flooding.

In the original 1936 MR&T plan, The Corps intended to leave backwater areas along the lower Mississippi as natural reservoirs. But later they agreed to help local farmers who wished to clear and plant crops in these regions (McDonald 2010). The Flood Control Act of 1941 authorized the Corp to build a series of floodgates, culverts, and pumps in the Yazoo backwater area to stop flooding and clear the way for farming (Saikku 2005).

The Corp began the project by installing a set of massive gates along the Mississippi at a point called Steel Bayou. These gates close during high water, effectively sealing off the Mississippi River and preventing its backflow into the Yazoo. Of course, closing the gates also plugs the mouth of the Yazoo, which also creates flooding. And some landowners felt it was even worse than what occurred under natural conditions (Mosby 1998). Landowners in the region pushed the Corps to finish the project by installing massive pumps to move water from the Yazoo into the channel of the Mississippi when the gates close. However, the promised pumps never materialized.
Figure 18: Yazoo Backwater Area (Dahl, Swords and Bergeson 2009 6-9).
The project lay mysteriously in the limbo of the Senate Appropriations Committee for sixty years, even while Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran sat on that committee (Sayle 2010). In those intervening years, Congress passed landmark environmental legislation, like the Environmental Protection Act of and the Clean Water Act, which required a thorough review of projects that would destroy wetlands such as the Yazoo backwater area (McDonald 2010). Moreover, since so much of the Delta’s pre-settlement ecosystem had been irrevocably lost (Saikku 2005), the Yazoo backwater area served as a hopeful symbol of ecological restoration. Environmental organizations, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and even some local residents rushed to defend it (E.P.A. Kills Water Project in Delta 2008; Death of a Boondoggle 2008).

Then in the 1980s, environmentalists’ disapproval of large Corps projects converged with Reagan-era efforts to reign in government spending. The Reagan administration sought to halt wasteful projects by requiring greater local cost sharing for federal projects (McDonald 2010). The rural Delta region could never even partially pay for the 200 million dollar plus Yazoo pumps, so they remained mired in the appropriations committee.

These conditions mobilized the Mississippi Levee Board, under whose jurisdiction the pump project fell. Robbed of its old sources of funding and clout, and unable to do much of anything (Sturdivant 2011), it rallied around the issue of the Yazoo Pumps. In 1996, they asked Senator Cochran to intercede and eliminate the new cost-sharing provision from the Yazoo Pumps Project in an effort to make it more feasible (Laws 2008). But the project remained highly undesirable within the EPA because of the wetlands it would destroy (Brandon 2011). The Mississippi Levee Board continued to
push, maintaining an agriculture vs. environment point of view and arguing that the pumps would create economic opportunity for this struggling, impoverished area.

Soon the powerful agricultural lobbying organization, The Delta Council, also joined the fray. The Delta Council has long upheld the old-order interests of moneyed agriculture in Mississippi, and they lent funding and influence in the levee board’s fight (McDonald 2010). The pro-pump faction held that the project would improve quality of life and increase agricultural productivity (Laws 2008; Brandon 2011).

Conversely, a *New York Times* editorial declared the project a “crazy but seemingly indestructible scheme… kept alive by a succession of Mississippi legislators and other members of Congress eager to protect their own deals with the Corps” (Meager 2007). Local conservationist T. Logan Russell claims that “too much wetland and woodland was sacrificed to agriculture four decades ago and the pumps would only protect land that should never have been cleared” (*The New York Times* 2008). Similarly, John Meager (2007), former director of the EPA Wetlands Division, writes in an editorial, “wetlands reduce flood peaks. Draining them to prevent floods is like binging on ice cream to lose weight. The Yazoo pumps would be an endless burden on American taxpayers: nearly $200 million to build and millions more every year thereafter for operation and maintenance, energy costs and crop support payments.”

The Mississippi Levee Board was ultimately unsuccessful in securing its pumps. EPA head Stephen Johnson, using section 404(c) of the Clean Water Act of 1979, killed the project on September 3, 2008 (*The New York Times* 2008). However, the lower levee board and Delta Council have not accepted the EPA’s veto gracefully. After the decision, the Mississippi Levee Board enlisted the aid of the Pacific Legal Foundation to
launch a lawsuit against the EPA. They claimed that the decision was unfair, and cited legal protocols that the EPA failed to follow when reviewing the project (Brandon 2011). Sturdivant (2011) explains that if the Mississippi Levee Board truly wanted to lessen flooding, they could easily install a less expensive diversion and spur levee to protect against some of the backwater. Yet he believes that the Mississippi Levee Board fails to mention this alternative solution and keeps fighting out of pride, frustration at their diminished influence in Washington, and an unwillingness to recognize that times have changed.

An environmental attorney advising the pump’s opponents claims “the fact that the EPA chose to exercise its veto power for only the twelfth time in its history reflects how potentially damaging it believes this notorious, ill-conceived project to be” (Brandon 2011). But the chief engineer of the Mississippi Levee Board complains that “the residents of the Mississippi south Delta just want what was promised to them 70 years ago” (Brandon 2011).

In fact, the Mississippi Levee Board claims that it is federal failure to provide adequate flood control that oppresses the Delta’s largely poor, black population, not its agricultural legacy of sharecropping and political disenfranchisement (McDonald 2010). Sturdivant (2011) sees no merit in this argument. The Yazoo Pumps would predominantly benefit white landowners who want to farm in the backwater area (McDonald 2010). Instead, Sturdivant and Cotton (2011) claim that education, racial equality, and more diversified economic development will ultimately improve the lives of black inhabitants. They hold that it is the backward thinking of the Delta Council and the
Mississippi Levee Board that must to change in order for the Delta to embrace progress (Cotton 2011; Sturdivant 2011).

Figure 19: Mississippi Levee Board Print advertisement advocating the Yazoo Pumps Project.

Regardless, the Mississippi Levee Board has used its EPA lawsuit to lash out at the YMDL. Initially, the YMDL supported the lower board in their fight for the Yazoo pumps, as flood control is a common goal throughout the Delta. But when the Mississippi Levee Board decided to sue the federal government over the decision, they informed the newly flush YMDL that not only must it show public support for the EPA lawsuit, it must pay the bulk of the legal fees or else risk discontinued political support for their own levee maintenance and flood control activities (Sayle 2010). The Mississippi Levee
Board invoked the old argument that since run-off from the upper Delta flows down to their district, the YMDL should help pay to control it (Mosby 1998).

Understandably, the YMDL balked. The YMDL could willingly support the project, but not the lawsuit. Its members argue that the reason the pump project never cleared Congress had more to do with inept political maneuvering than unlawful persecution from environmentalists (Sayle 2010; Sturdivant 2011). Sayle remarked that if the lower board failed to pass the project with two Republican senators, (one on the Appropriations Committee), a Republican governor and a Republican administration, then the EPA decision is probably unassailable. Similarly, Sturdivant (2011) expressed fear that by joining the lawsuit, he risks alienating powerful environmental groups whose support he needs for the upper Delta’s Yazoo Headwater Project.

In March 2011, U.S. District Judge Sharion Aycock ruled against the Mississippi Levee Board’s lawsuit without granting oral arguments. Yet the board plans to appeal and is still fighting for the pumps (Brandon 2011). The historic May 2011 Mississippi flood highlighted the utility of backwater swamps and overflow outlets in keeping crests within controllable limits (Hancock and Reuter 2011), so outside support for the Yazoo Pumps seems even less likely now.

On the local level, the Yazoo Pumps debate cast the Delta’s feelings toward the environment and race in sharp relief. The YMDL has been fortunate in their upstream location and recent financial windfall, and it is difficult to imagine how they might react if the backwater area lay in their district. However, in their current situation, they seem much more willing to try sustaining themselves in news ways, some of which involve embracing neoliberal environmental economies. The lower district, on the other hand,
clings to the idea that highly subsidized agriculture and federal aid are their unquestionable birthright.

The two boards’ racial differentiation is something no nineteenth century Deltan would have expected. Yet subtle differences in the way the two boards did business over the years helped make the distinction possible. While the lower board claims to be helping blacks in their flight for flood control, the upper board suggests they are simply using such arguments as a ruse. In fact, the current standoff between the upper and lower boards over the Yazoo Pumps project most likely stems from long standing racial—not necessarily environmental—bitterness.

The separate history of the YMDL created a district that, aided by luck, became somewhat more modern, self-sufficient, and able to adapt to shifting circumstances. However, in many ways, little has changed in the Delta since Alcorn began trying to create a system of state-led flood control in the 1850s and Colonel Percy revived levee building after the Civil War. The federal government is still a major player in the region, and at least in the upper Delta, casino money has replaced the railroad investment in the region’s flood control infrastructure. Voters still grumble about levee boards’ abuse of power, both actual and perceived, and every few years, a big flood comes down the Mississippi to stir debate and action.

Such is the political landscape created by settling in the floodplain of one of the world’s biggest rivers. When vast resources are required to manipulate the environment, those who oversee such resources hold all of the power. The Delta’s history of flood control becomes a microcosmic reproduction of American efforts to forge a society, culture, and government in its struggles with a wild continent. Times and attitudes are
changing in the Delta, but the river will always be there. Whoever can best control it will surely control the region.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS

If the political ecology of a region should be defined by its history of interactions with its natural environment (Neumann 2009), then the Delta’s regional distinctiveness stems from its history of interaction with the Mississippi River. In this thesis, I use the Delta’s different landscape eras to investigate the spatial and temporal application of flood control on the region’s geography.

Such applications have tangible impacts on the natural, political and societal forces that the Delta has experienced within, and directed without, its regional demarcations. First, the Delta’s development of a unique system of levee governance shaped its dependence on the federal government for flood control aid. This, in turn changed its relationship with its home state of Mississippi. The result has been a region unbound by the more typical local to state relationship that characterizes most areas of the United States.

Second, the extreme effort required to manage levees has contributed to more rigid and stratified articulations of class and race in the Delta. Since the risk of flooding was so grave, and the resources dedicated to prevent it so carefully guarded, the Delta’s
prevailing culture has remained reluctant to embrace black political participation or white middle class empowerment. Its current poverty stands as a depressing reminder of the racial and economic inequities fostered in its otherwise fertile soils.

Finally, the Delta’s historic, uncompromising stance against river flooding has made it difficult for the region to accept the country’s growing sense of environmental awareness. The Mississippi Levee Board especially has a long tradition of fighting the river with structural control mechanisms and large amounts of federal aid. The more modern notion that it let nature take its course seems ludicrous to its members. The YMDL seems more willing to embrace new environmental sensitivities and programs; yet unlike the Mississippi Levee Board, it has ample resources to minimize flooding within its district.

I did not intend to use this thesis to delve into the rich social science scholarship on the south’s economic, racial, and environmental movements. However, my aim was simply to show how physical geography, represented here by the Delta’s alluvial basin and period flooding, can shape each of these movements locally. This research is by no means comprehensive or complete; but can hopefully begin to highlight the Delta’s place in forming national attitudes towards our rivers and waterways.
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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

May Bartlett Leinhart grew up on a cotton farm in Como, Mississippi, not far from the Yazoo Mississippi Delta region. She completed high school in June of 1999 at the Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. The following fall, she began her undergraduate degree at the University of South in Sewanee, Tennessee, where she graduated in 2003 with a major in English and a minor in environmental studies.

Following college, May worked for The Land Trust for Tennessee, a non-profit land conservation organization based in Nashville, Tennessee. At the Land Trust, she helped landowners legally preserve their farm and forest lands through conservation easements, and worked to help secure legal protection for scenic and historic lands along the Natchez Trace Parkway in Tennessee.

In August 2009, she began work toward a Master of Arts in Geography at Appalachian State University, and will be awarded the degree in August 2012. She has been living in Johnson City, Tennessee for the past four years but will be moving to Albuquerque, NM in June 2012. She lives with her husband, James Leinhart, a medical resident training to become an emergency medicine physician.