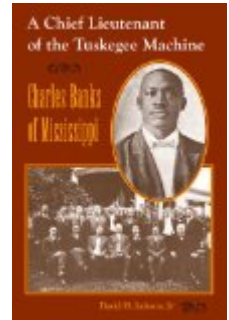


David H. Jackson, Jr.. *A Chief Lieutenant of the Tuskegee Machine: Charles Banks of Mississippi*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xv + 282 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2544-5.



Reviewed by Robert S. Wolff

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David Jackson has written a fascinating account of the African American struggle to prosper in Jim Crow Mississippi. *A Chief Lieutenant* is three interwoven stories, each extraordinarily important for delineating the limits to African American agency in an era characterized by white supremacists's "rage for order."^[1] The biography of Charles Banks (1873-1923)—businessman, banker, and advocate for African American Opportunity—is the first thread. The struggles of African Americans in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, to maintain their autonomy despite monocultural dependence upon cotton and the predatorial behavior of white businessmen and speculators, forms the second. The final tale is the effort of Booker T. Washington's "Tuskegee machine" to support Banks and Mound Bayou despite many setbacks. Together, these stories offer a compelling, lucid picture of black civic leaders eking resources out of the Mound Bayou community, state and federal government, and white philanthropists, all in an effort to define freedom upon their own terms.

It should be noted at the outset that Jackson's stated goals are as follows: first, to offer a "fresh

interpretation and the Tuskegee Machine that mitigates the image of the machine as being conniving, heavy-handed, intolerable, and ruthless;" "an insider's perspective on the workings of the machine;" a discussion of "the benefits received by members of the machine, such as capital, expertise, national exposure, and political power;" and, finally, to demonstrate the ways in which the machine was "mutually beneficial" for all parties concerned (p. xii). What we learn about Booker T. Washington, Emmett Scott, Robert Moton, and Tuskegee, may well be the most significant contribution of Jackson's volume to the wider scholarly readership. Still, it has become commonplace for authors, with some not-so-gentle prodding from manuscript readers and editors, to "market" their volumes by establishing their significance in terms of an intellectual most common denominator. Tuskegee sells. This might even explain why Tuskegee is more prominent than Banks or Mound Bayou in the book's title.

In *A Chief Lieutenant*, Jackson recovers the lived experience of oppression in Mississippi during the early-twentieth century. While cognizant

of the extraordinary brutality that lay beneath the legal apparatus of segregation, he focuses upon the constraints institutionalized racism imposed upon a black middle class that nevertheless strove to make Mound Bayou a haven. His depiction of Charles Banks, an admiring one, confirms historian Robert Kenzer's observation that successful African Americans in the South "were forced to live very public lives in which they faced constant scrutiny not only from other blacks but also from whites." [2] As for Mound Bayou, it is worth remembering that those who fought for African American empowerment saw black enterprise as the foundation of "racial uplift." As Jackson notes, Booker T. Washington wrote extensively about Banks and his labors within the Mississippi Delta. "As I look at it," Washington observed, "Mound Bayou is not merely a town; it is at the same time and in a very real sense of that word, a school. It is not only a place where a Negro may get inspiration, by seeing what other members of his own race have accomplished, but a place, also, where he has an opportunity to learn some of the fundamental duties and responsibilities of social and civic life." [3] Rich in detail, insight, and thoughtful speculation, Jackson's volume insists that Banks and Mound Bayou are worthy subjects in their own right.

A Chief Lieutenant is organized thematically, with the first two chapters covering the early life of Charles Banks and the history of Mound Bayou. Banks, born in 1873, attended Rusk University between 1887 and 1890. After serving as a federal census enumerator, Banks opened a general merchandise store in his hometown of Clarksdale, Mississippi. In 1893, he married Trenna Ophelia Booze and settled in Mound Bayou, where he soon founded the Bank of Mound Bayou. Founded in 1887 as an all-black community with the support of the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad, Mound Bayou was a haven for African Americans as violence against them rose precipitously in the last years of the nineteenth century. By the early-twentieth century, Washington could

look upon Mound Bayou as an exemplar of his famous injunction to "cast down your bucket where you are." [4]

Subsequent chapters explore Banks's activities in Mound Bayou through his connection to the Tuskegee Institute and Booker T. Washington. For the purposes of this review, most may be summarized briefly. Chapters 3 and 4 explicitly describe Banks's connection to the "Tuskegee Machine." Having met Washington at the inaugural meeting of the National Negro Business League (NNBL) in 1900, Banks rapidly became a trusted correspondent. Washington and his secretary, Emmett Scott, relied upon Banks for information about Mississippi affairs. Through his connection to Tuskegee, Banks was able to obtain for Mound Bayou a farm demonstration agent from the Department of Agriculture in 1907. He was also instrumental in planning Washington's 1908 tour through Mississippi. Chapter 5 focuses upon the National Negro Business League (NNBL) as well as the state affiliate established in 1905 by Banks, the Mississippi Negro Business League (MNBL). Banks served as first vice-president of the NNBL from 1907 until 1923. Chapter 6 covers Banks's efforts in support of education, including his financial support of a Tuskegee scholarship and efforts to garner philanthropic support from the General Education Board, John D. Rockefeller, Julius Rosenwald, and the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation through his Tuskegee connections. Although most of these efforts failed, Andrew Carnegie did provide \$4000 for a town library in 1909. Chapter 7 chronicles Banks's political activities within the Republican Party as he sought to control federal patronage positions in Mississippi.

Chapters 8 and 9, building upon previous chapters, explore Banks's most prominent financial endeavors--the Bank of Mound Bayou and the Mound Bayou Oil Mill. Chapter eight explores Banks's financial dealings as the man whom Washington called "the most influential, Negro business man in the United States." [5] Here Jack-

son explores the most intriguing aspects of Banks's career. As a founder and the cashier of the Bank of Mound Bayou, Banks ensured that town residents could invest in their own community by borrowing in a neighborhood bank. Jackson convincingly describes how the 1911 crash in cotton prices crippled day-to-day operations, allowing state regulators to close the bank down in 1914 despite what Banks felt were adequate assets. "We made advances on local securities that in ordinary times were considered good, except that it was taking a longer time to work them out than a small commercial bank could afford to do" (p. 165). Life in Mound Bayou had provided the illusion of autonomy. Once the bank failed, white banks raised interest rates and required black farmers to bring their cotton to gins owned by whites. One year later, Banks helped to incorporate a new Mound Bayou State Bank that met the state regulators's requirements and struggled to pay off investors from its earlier incarnation.

Closely intertwined with the bank was Banks's greatest venture, the Mound Bayou Oil Mill, which is the subject of chapter 9. From its origins in 1907 at a meeting of the MNBL, Banks designed the cotton oil mill as an all-black enterprise that drew upon the modest investments of individual African American families who could purchase shares at one dollar apiece. Although the officers of the new company offered \$100,000 in shares to local investors, by 1910 Banks was seeking philanthropic investment to finance construction. Even after Booker T. Washington gave the keynote address at the mill's dedication in 1912, funds were still lacking. In 1913, Julius Rosenwald agreed to purchase \$25,000 of bonds at 6 percent per annum if Banks and his partners could locate another investor for the remaining \$15,000 worth of shares. The choice of Benjamin Harvey, a white cotton broker in Memphis, later proved disastrous after Harvey—who had agreed to lease the mill and make payments on Rosenwald's bonds—reneged on the agreement. The demise of the mill helped bring down the Bank of

Mound Bayou, which, under Banks's guidance, had purchased roughly \$40,000 of its stock.

The careful reconstruction of Banks's financial dealings, and his desperate efforts to keep both bank and mill solvent, explain much about the fragility of black business enterprise in the Jim Crow era and the ultimate weakness of Tuskegee's support. Although generally convincing, Jackson's argument in these chapters—and overall—could be sharper still. To be sure, the paucity of documentary perspectives on these events limits what any scholar could do. The volume's unusual title—*A Chief Lieutenant of the Tuskegee Machine*—is nonetheless apt given that most of the documentary sources come from the papers of Tuskegee superintendents Booker T. Washington and his successor, Robert R. Moton. As Jackson notes, without the papers of Banks or his primary correspondent at Tuskegee, Emmett Scott, the scope of the project is limited. But the narrow scope matters less than one might surmise. It is not simply that Jackson is limited, as he notes, to Banks's "association with Bookerites and Tuskegee" (p. xiii). By illuminating the day-to-day relationship between Banks and Tuskegee, Jackson has enriched our understanding of that institution's efforts. The histories of Charles Banks and Mound Bayou, offer rare glimpses into the daily struggles of the black middle class. Indeed, Jackson is to be commended for pressing onward in the face of documentary limitations, for if he had not, these tales would simply be untold.

The peril, into which Jackson falls like so many other biographers, is that his affinity for Banks overrides a measure of scholarly caution. For example, Jackson writes that, "Banks realized he had made mistakes in running the affairs of the bank and the oil mill" (p. 184). It is equally possible that Banks knew he was risking the bank's solvency by investing so heavily in the cotton oil mill. In hindsight, what Jackson describes as Banks's "firm commitment to preserving the all-black legacy of Mound Bayou" (p. 181) was in

part prestidigitation. Booker T. Washington could celebrate the opening of the mill as a triumph of the race, but much of its financial support came from Julius Rosenwald and Benjamin Harvey. An equal amount came not from new investment within the black community, but from existing deposits in the Bank of Mound Bayou. Was Banks the con man his detractors accused him of being, or was he an impassioned advocate for black economic opportunity and uplift? In a similar vein, as it became clear that the Carnegie library was little more than an office for the Masonic Benefit Association, and that the town's financial obligation to the library had been neglected, should readers infer that Banks's intentions had been honorable or that he had the savvy to prise philanthropic investment from Carnegie that he could then put to best use? A richer story may lie here, one in which Banks consciously manipulated philanthropic investors, and perhaps Washington himself, in an effort to secure his own prosperity and that of Mound Bayou.

That said, Jackson makes good use of the limited documentary record to present an engaging interpretation of Banks, Mound Bayou, and the Tuskegee Institute. *A Chief Lieutenant* depicts the wider public sphere in which Booker T. Washington hoped Tuskegee would be influential. It further suggests that the appellation, "Tuskegee machine," may well be misplaced because the relationship between Banks and Washington was reciprocal. Far from being a political machine that dispensed patronage, Tuskegee depended upon the successes of Banks and others to maintain its image. Filled with detail and insight, *A Chief Lieutenant* is a worthwhile volume for scholars interested in African American or southern history. Scholars in the history of education as well as those in business history will find the book rewarding.

Banks died at age fifty in 1923, the same year as the Rosewood massacre in Florida. Just before his death, the precipitous crash in the price of cot-

ton, from eight-five to eleven cents per pound, brought foreclosure to many black enterprises in Mound Bayou. Even the reincarnated Mound Bayou State Bank closed in 1922. Following Booker T. Washington's death in 1915, the Tuskegee Institute never regained the voice in national affairs it once had. In *A Chief Lieutenant*, David Jackson provides an invaluable snapshot of a time just before strategies of accommodation proved desperately inadequate.

Notes

[1]. Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[2]. Robert C. Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 128.

[3]. Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education: Being Chapters from My Experience* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1911), p. 209.

[4]. "'Cast Your Bucket Down Where You Are': Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise Speech," History Matters, American Social History Productions, Inc., n.d., <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/88/> (3 October 2003). This site contains a 1903 audio recording of Washington reading an excerpt of his famous address in 1895 to the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta.

[5]. Twice in his volume, Jackson reproduces this quote as "the most influential businessman in the United States" (see pp. 53, 154), although this, I believe, reflects a typographic error in his copy of Washington's *My Larger Education*. Jackson surmises this to be the case in an endnote (see p. 248 n. 2).

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