



Freedom to Dream: Black Owenites and Co-operation in America

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Robert Owen's vision of a co-operative society inspired two centuries of utopian experimentation among African Americans. In the nineteenth century white planter Joseph Davis and Scottish reformer Fanny Wright attempted to apply Owenite principles to their management of slave plantations. After emancipation freed people founded Black towns, such as Mound Bayou, Mississippi, pooling their resources to protect themselves against white supremacist violence. During the Great Migration in the 1910s and 1920s W. E. B. DuBois and other Black activists and intellectuals promoted co-operatives in urban centres. And the Great Depression of the 1930s inspired significant experiments in co-operation, most notably the prosperous utopian community of Father Divine's Peace Mission. While the post-war period saw a decline in co-operation, in more recent decades there has been a resurgence in interest in the movement. From co-operative grocery stores to large-scale utopian communities, African Americans drew on Owenite ideas of co-operation to assert their independence and self-sufficiency.

Freedom to Dream

I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any misery, and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundredfold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment except ignorance to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal. (Owen, 1816/2014, p. 27).

Individuals will be born in cooperative health centers, will live in cooperative houses, will meet their needs from cooperative stores, will be protected by cooperative law, and, in the end, will be buried by cooperative burial associations. (Myers, 1942, p. 3).

In 1933 the African American intellectual W. E. B. DuBois wrote, "Going back to the preaching of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, we can by consumers and producers co-operation, by phalanstères and garden cities, establish a progressively self-supporting economy that will weld the majority of our people into an impregnable, economic phalanx" (1933, p. 93). DuBois's vision of an interlocking network of Black-run co-operatives drew from a century of Owenite experiments in co-operation among African Americans. These co-operative organisations, like the visions offered by Robert Owen and Samuel Lloyd Myers, draw from a legacy of utopian experimentation in the Black community. That experimentation was based on western ideals of a perfect society, what Lyman Tower Sargent calls social dreaming, an opportunity to both envision and enact an alternative model of society (Sargent, 1994). But for African Americans

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utopian thought and practice came out of struggle and survival. Thus, Robin D. G. Kelley's concept of freedom dreams better describes Black Owenite practices: "I have come to realise" says Kelley, "that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter" (Kelley, 2002, p. 12).

Robert Owen, the white industrialist and reformer, and Samuel Lloyd Myers, the Black economist and educator, both embraced an expansive co-operative vision. For African Americans in slavery and freedom, this vision inspired utopian experiments in communalism, small-scale capitalism, and consumer and producer co-operatives. But central to all these groups was the idea of the co-operative, both the broad concept of co-operation propagated by Robert Owen and the practical application of co-operative economics. Black co-operators tilled fields, opened co-operative stores, fought segregation, and brought their dreams from the world of imagination to the reality of racial struggle.

Robert Owen established his New Harmony utopian community in 1825; the community survived for only two short years, but its experiments in progressive education, communalism, and co-operation would live on and shape the utopian experimentation of African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It also inspired two white reformers to apply Owenite practices to the system of slavery. Frances "Fanny" Wright, who visited New Harmony and was inspired by Owen's philosophy, established Nashoba in 1825, a utopian community in Tennessee that sought to allow enslaved people to work co-operatively and buy their freedom (Bederman, 2005; Morris, 1992; Wright, 1825). Nashoba failed after only two years, but another admirer of Owen, plantation owner Joseph Davis, had more success. Davis, the older brother of the Confederate president Jefferson Davis, first encountered Robert Owen in a stagecoach while traveling across Pennsylvania in 1825. The next summer Davis travelled to New Harmony to learn more about Owen's cooperative utopia (Hermann, 1990; Rosen, 2011). Davis returned to his plantation along the Mississippi south of Vicksburg, known as Davis Bend, determined to apply Owenite principles to his enslaved workforce in ways that paralleled Owen's treatment of the New Lanark mill workers. Central to these ideas was co-operation in the broadest sense, as workers labouring in harmony for the good of the community. But for Owen and Davis it was also about control, of morality, family life, and in the case of those enslaved, freedom itself. Owen, in fact, referred to his workers as "living machines," which is also an apt description of white planters' perception of enslaved workers on a southern plantation (Rosen, 2011, p. 58).

Joseph Davis's application of Owenite ideas did improve the daily lives of his growing enslaved population. They were provided with spacious cabins and encouraged to grow their own food and livestock, leading to better-than-average diets and the ability to sell or barter surplus produce. At least some of the enslaved children received enough education to become literate, although when Davis briefly opened an interracial school on the plantation his white neighbours insisted it be closed. Enslaved men and women had the opportunity to learn skills such as smithing and running a cotton gin. Most remarkably Davis set up a plantation court system run by the enslaved, meaning that the white overseers, a figure of terror on most plantations, had little power to punish the workers. But the co-operation that Davis tried to instill in his community was a means to an end, and that end was profit (Foner, 1988; Hermann, 1990; Rosen, 2011).

Into this community came a remarkable African American man, Benjamin Montgomery, who would be instrumental in developing Black Owenite ideas into the twentieth century. Montgomery was born enslaved in Virginia in 1819 and was purchased by Davis in 1836. Noting he was literate and highly intelligent Davis gave him a leadership role on the plantation. In 1842 Montgomery began operation of a mercantile store at Davis Bend that served both Black and white consumers, keeping the profits to benefit his family. His son, Isaiah Montgomery, became Joseph Davis's personal secretary, exposing him to Owenite ideals as he transcribed correspondence and read in Davis's vast library. But the grimmest reality of enslavement remained even in this model Owenite plantation. Davis Bend's enslaved families lived with the fear of being sold away when Joseph Davis died and with the knowledge that there was little opportunity for escape in the Mississippi Delta (Hermann, 1990; Rosen, 2011).

The best evidence for their discontent came with the outbreak of the Civil War, when the enslaved population of Davis Bend refused to follow Joseph Davis as he fled the plantation, despite his pleas. In his absence the enslaved families ransacked his mansion, carrying his linens, clothing, and cookware to their own cabins (Hahn, 2003). During the war the union general Ulysses S. Grant was eager to use Davis Bend, now occupied by union troops, as a model Black colony, calling it a “Negro Paradise” (Foner, 1988, p. 59). Remarkably, in 1866 Davis sold the plantation to Benjamin Montgomery for \$300,000 to be paid off over ten years with yearly interest payments. Montgomery, now fully in charge of the plantation without the supervision of his former master or the Freedmen’s Bureau, printed leaflets advertising Davis Bend as a Black colony where freedpeople could live independently. For much of the next decade the plantation flourished, becoming the third largest cotton producer in Mississippi by the early 1870s (Foner, 1988; Rosen, 2011). But the extended Davis family, including disgraced Confederate president Jefferson Davis, constantly threatened Montgomery with foreclosure, particularly after Joseph Davis’s death in 1870. After a series of devastating floods, plummeting cotton prices, and infestations of boll weevils and army worms the Montgomery family finally foreclosed in 1881. By this point Benjamin Montgomery, the family’s patriarch, had died.

After his father’s death, Isaiah Montgomery travelled to Kansas to explore the Black towns that had developed in the 1870s. Trained under Davis and his father, Isaiah was envisioning another Owenite community, but one entirely separate from white control (Crockett, 2021; Love, 1982). Influenced by the Kansas settlements, Isaiah Montgomery purchased undeveloped land at a low price along the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad. He named the new town Mound Bayou, after the large Indian mound at the centre of the property. Joining Montgomery were numerous Davis Bend freedpeople who spent the early years of the settlement clearing land and building makeshift homes. Thanks in part to plentiful lumber and a profitable mill, by 1907 Mound Bayou housed 800 Black families (Hamilton, 1991; Hood, 1909). In the early twentieth century Mound Bayou became a symbol of the potential of Black capitalism to uplift the race. The educator and Black leader Booker T. Washington often held Mound Bayou and other Black towns up as a model of Black capitalism and self-sufficiency. He argued in 1909, “Isolated from whites ... the black town acted as a laboratory, proving that under the correct circumstances the race was hard working, law abiding, and capable of self-government” (Washington, 1909, p. 547). Mound Bayou was his premier example of this philosophy.

Mound Bayou’s economic strength began to decline after 1915, as the result of a failed cotton seed oil venture and declining crop prices. However, it remained a source of pride for African Americans in Mississippi and served as a haven for civil rights activists during the height of the movement in the early 1960s (Love, 1982; Rosen, 2011). But the Mound Bayou story is more about the triumph of Black capitalism than Black communalism. The Davis Bend and Mound Bayou experiments were not egalitarian co-operatives or interracial utopias. Rather they were paternalistic capitalist endeavours that reflected Robert Owen’s successes and limitations in his original New Lanark experiment. But the idealism of a self-governed and prosperous Black community should not be overlooked. The labour of cutting the dense brush, growing and milling cotton, and building community institutions was done with common goals and outside the purview of white Mississippians. It was co-operative in the sense of having a common purpose.

Robert Owen’s utopian plans also impacted northern communities in the antebellum period, where white abolitionists set up communes to aid free Black families. In New York the progressive white real estate baron, Gerrit Smith, teamed up with the radical abolitionist John Brown to create a community that provided land ownership for African American families. The discriminatory 1821 New York state constitution required African American men to own property of at least \$250 in value in order to vote. In response, Smith purchased 120,000 acres of land in the Adirondacks that he divided into forty-acre plots and distributed to three thousand African Americans. John Brown purchased land near the settlement and named the community Timbuctoo. The experiment lasted only a decade. Like so many agricultural utopias, such as Nashoba, the land proved difficult to clear and farm, and the Black settlers were largely from cities without the necessary agricultural experience (Svenson, 2017). A more successful

northern endeavour was the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Western Massachusetts, an abolitionist community in existence between 1842 and 1846. Northampton more resembled communal utopias like Oneida and New Harmony, with families living, eating, and working together. Ten families, both Black and white, joined Northampton, including two of the most prominent Black abolitionists of the antebellum period, Sojourner Truth and David Ruggles. The residents ran a silk mill as a workers' co-operative, providing an alternative to southern cotton. Although the communal aspect of Northampton lasted only four years, the radical politics and interracialism survived much longer (Bestor, 1940; Clark, 1995; Holloway, 1966).

While Nashoba, Timbuctoo, and Northampton were developed by white philanthropists, in the twentieth century African Americans built co-operative communities where they could flourish outside white control. The most significant proponent of Black co-operatives in the early twentieth century was W. E. B. DuBois. In 1907 he published a study on "Economic Cooperation Among Negro Americans," which was compiled at Atlanta University's "Conference for the Study of the Negro's Problems." This study defined co-operation broadly, much as Robert Owen did, and included Davis Bend and Mound Bayou as examples because community members worked together to build Black economic wealth (DuBois, 1907). In 1918 DuBois founded the Negro Cooperative Guild and travelled the country promoting co-operatives as a solution to economic marginalisation (Cohen, 2003; Nembhard, 2014). For the next two decades DuBois continued to champion co-operatives. In 1940, for example, in his 1940 book *Dusk to Dawn* DuBois reflected on the possibility of building "a co-operative commonwealth" that would begin in African American neighbourhoods and, when economically secure, would seek alliances with white co-operatives (DuBois, 1940, p. 108).

As Black urban communities grew in the Great Migration era following World War I, they began to form co-operatives that, in many cases, flourished into the 1950s. In Buffalo, New York, for example, two prominent African Americans, Jesse Taylor and E. E. Nelson, formed the Citizens Cooperative Society in 1928. Their goal was to "revolutionise the living and working conditions among the working classes" (Fordham, 1975, p. 1). By 1931 they opened their first store, a co-operative grocery, and worked to educate Black Buffalonians that co-operatives could both elevate racial pride and provide economic security. In 1939 the newly renamed Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society opened another grocery store and a federal credit union. With the proceeds they were able to purchase a building in 1944 that, along with the store, housed two apartments and a recreation centre (Fordham, 1975; Nembhard, 2014). Similar African American co-operatives promoting self-sufficiency emerged in Gary, Indiana; Kansas City, Missouri; New Haven, Connecticut; and Chicago, Illinois (Hope, 1940; Reddix, 1936). In Washington, D.C. a group of Black women, led by the educator Nannie Helen Burroughs, organised the "Cooperative Industries," a producer and consumer co-operative designed to provide employment for "unemployed workers and home-makers" (Hope, 1940, p. 46). These urban co-operatives offered a form of resistance more potent than isolated Black capitalist strategies, which emphasised private profit rather than community co-operation. This was a utopian vision of a new society that reached beyond economic nationalism to community transformation. And the most successful African American utopian movement in the twentieth century, Father Divine's Peace Mission, built a co-operative empire.

Father Divine, arguably the most successful Black Owenite, established hundreds of co-operative businesses from gas stations and restaurants to boarding houses and retail stores in Harlem and elsewhere during the 1930s and 1940s (Watts, 1992; Weisbrot, 1983; Wolcott, 2022). By the mid-1930s Father Divine's Peace mission was the largest realty holder in Harlem with 3 apartment houses, 9 private houses, 15-20 apartments and meeting halls, 25 restaurants, 6 groceries, 10 barber shops, 10 cleaning stores, 24 wagons and a coal business, all run as co-operatives. By the end of the Depression the Peace Mission was handling millions of dollars annually and, reportedly, had savings of more than \$15 million (Weisbrot, 1983). This economic success suggests that tying co-operatives to a utopian vision better fulfilled the Owenite dream of a new society than urban co-operatives alone. The Father Divine movement is the premier

example of the economic efficiency of utopian communalism. In the nineteenth century, Owenite communities such as New Harmony, Economy, and Amana had success as farmers and small-scale industrialists. But at its height the Peace Mission boasted thousands of properties and supplied low-cost housing and food for hundreds of thousands.

In the postwar period co-operative communities of all kinds experienced significant decline. The Buffalo Cooperative Society's businesses flourished during the 1940s; however, by 1961 they had gone bankrupt. Massive urban renewal projects in the city displaced the African American community and chain supermarkets challenged the viability of the co-operatives (Fordham, 1975). Father Divine's Peace Mission also failed to flourish after World War II. Wartime employment largely ended the Great Depression, which also lessened the movement's appeal. Fewer people needed the low-cost co-operative housing, restaurants, and resorts (Maybee, 2008). And in the broader society many intellectuals and activists during the Cold War era became disenchanted with utopianism, linking it to the horrors of totalitarianism in the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (Arendt, 1958; Bell, 1960; Shklar, 1957; Talmon, 1960).

But the dream of Black Owenites did not die with the Cold War. At the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s Mississippi again became a hotbed of co-operative experimentation. Civil rights activists such as Fannie Lou Hamer and John Lewis organised rural co-operatives throughout the state (Dittmer, 1994; Nembhard, 2014; White, 2018). Black Nationalists also embraced co-operatives as a means of creating separate self-sufficient communities, similar to Isaiah Montgomery's nationalist vision for Mound Bayou. The Republic of New Afrika moved to Mississippi in 1970 and established the "Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika", which they envisioned as a "a new society built with no color, class, gender and physical ability discrimination" (Onaci, 2020). And the Black activist Floyd B. McKissick founded Soul City in North Carolina as a Black Nationalist utopia (Healy, 2021; Strain, 2004).

In recent decades there has been something of a resurgence of utopian thought along the lines of Robert Owen's vision. For example, in the wake of George Floyd's murder a group of African American women founded "The Freedom Georgia Initiative", an intentional community in rural Georgia (Freedom Georgia, n.d). The freedpeople of Davis Bend sought a similar safe haven when they founded Mound Bayou. In Buffalo the newly formed Cooperation Buffalo (www.cooperationbuffalo.org) promotes and supports the creation of worker-owned co-operatives in the city, explicitly building on the legacy of mid-century Black co-operatives. Black Owenite experiments in co-operation ranged in their durability and commitment to a radically new society. But from co-operative grocery stores to large-scale utopian communities, Owenite ideas of co-operation were central to African Americans' freedom dreams.

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