AFTER REDEMPTION

Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta

1875-1915

JOHN M. GIGGIE

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For Marisa

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Abbreviations

ADJ	Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Miss.
AG	*Arkansas Gazette*
AHC	Arkansas Historical Commission
AHQ	*Arkansas Historical Quarterly*
AHR	*American Historical Review*
ADLR	Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock, Ark.
AME	African Methodist Episcopal
Amistad	Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, La.
BV	*Baptist Vanguard*
Cain	Cain Archives, Millsaps College, Jackson, Miss.
CH	*Church History*
CME	*Colored Methodist Episcopal*
CI	*Christian Index*

CR	*Christian Recorder*
DU	Duke University Archives, Perkins Library, Durham, N.C.
Emory	Special Collections, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.
JAH	*Journal of American History*
JFA	Archives of the Josephite Fathers, Baltimore, Md.
JMH	*Journal of Mississippi History*
JNH	*Journal of Negro History*
JSH	*Journal of Southern History*
LSU	Louisiana State University Archives, Baton Rouge
MDAH	Mississippi Department of History and Archives, Jackson
ME	*Methodist Episcopal*
Schomburg	Schomburg Library, New York Public Library, New York City
SWCA	*Southwestern Christian Advocate*
TSLA	Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville
UAK-F	Special Collections, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville
WPA-HRS	Work Project Administration—Historical Records Survey

Prologue
Life and Death in the Delta

I . . . tells my Father all about my trials here below. We are free, but we can't stop praying; we must keep on. . . . We have been let loose, and now we are just marching on to a better land.

—*Octavia V. R. Albert, The House of Bondage, or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, p. 5*

In June 1893, Reverend S. A. Moseley gave one of the most important speeches of his young life to a crowd of several hundred fellow black Baptists, mostly sharecroppers and tenant farmers drawn like him from the Arkansas Delta. Born about the time of the outbreak of the Civil War, Moseley was pastor of St. Paul's Baptist Church in Pine Bluff, a cotton town nestled on the banks of the Arkansas River in the southwestern corner of the state. Tall, thin, mustachioed, and gifted with a silver tongue, he was a rising star in his denomination when he addressed the annual meeting of the Arkansas Sunday School Convention held that year outside of the state capitol. He attemped to make sense of the strange plight of southern African Americans since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation thirty years earlier, drawing upon his life in the Delta for insight.[1]

The preacher opened on a triumphant note, proudly reminding his audience that since slavery "[m]any have been our trials, great our conflicts, and bitter our experiences; but out of them the Lord has brought us safe. . . ." His upbeat tone quickly sunk, however, as he turned his attention to the recent upheavals in local and regional politics and blamed them for unleashing a "sectional, selfish, and partial" pestilence that was "more dreadful than the yellow fever, small pox, cholera or any other ever visited upon human beings." Fast spreading across the South, this

contagion wore a white face and carried an insatiable appetite for black victims. "Its emblems," continued Moseley, "[we]re the Winchester, Smith & Wesson pistols, double action revolvers of other factories, etc." Its name was "mob violence" and it was giving rise to African-American communities composed of "broken-hearted widows, fatherless children, heart sickening friends and relatives, and discouraged citizens who have lost all hope for protection, even for life."[2]

Moseley evoked a crisis afflicting not only freed people from Arkansas and its Delta but all black southerners at the end of the nineteenth century, that of living after "redemption." Despite its rosy gloss and cheerful evocation of their emancipated status, the phrase shone darkly for them. It referred to the period of their lives beginning roughly in the mid-1870s, when Reconstruction collapsed and white Democrats broadened their political campaigns to thwart black freedoms and recent social advances. Ever since then, these self-proclaimed white leaders of the "New South" had slowly but successfully birthed a modern world born of their racist dreams, one that, as they loved to call it, had "redeemed" their beloved homeland from the clutches of Union victory and the political empowerment of former slaves and their descendants. African Americans had labored ceaselessly and, for the most part, futilely to stop them. The southern "redeemers" had steadily and ruthlessly stripped them of the franchise, the right of due process, the chance to attend adequately funded public schools, the ability to travel freely, and, most basically, the daily hope of living without the threat of being scorned, mocked, raped, beaten, or killed because of the color of their skin. They had bequeathed a South that, by 1893, shared much in common with the depredations of slavery and little with the first years of emancipation, when Confederate defeat had unloosed waves of joy and optimism among African Americans about a future as fully fledged citizens. Indeed, they had brought into being a South that left blacks groping for answers about the meaning of freedom won and lost.

In his address, Moseley offered no immediate solution to the problem of living after redemption. Instead, this reverend framed the tragic turn of history as part of a necessary if heartbreaking stage in a slow African American passage toward freedom. Not surprisingly, he turned for inspiration to the familiar story of the ancient Hebrews recorded in the book of Exodus in the Bible. Like generations of black Americans slave and free before him, he saw in the journey of the Israelites from the Egypt of bondage to the Canaan Land of liberty a historical model for his own people to follow.[3] "We have left the borders of Egypt, and are now between the [Red] Sea and the Jordan. We have quite a long way to reach Canaan. We are not without a Moses nor a Joshua . . . [and] the Walls of Jericho will be made to bow before us. We are only to be strong and courageous and the victory is sure." Like their predecessors in the Old Testament who wandered in the desert for forty years

after being manumitted, blacks in the Delta also dwelled in a time of transition between slavery and freedom, only they were battling whites over their claims to unobstructed citizenship and physical safety. In this modern struggle, Moseley counseled that they were far from helpless. They had their new and growing networks of churches, religious schools, and presses to turn to for support and guidance. In comparison to any other point in black history, the minister asserted, "[w]e are much better organized. . . . We can touch more people and secure prompter responses from a larger number of persons. . . ."[4]

What follows is a story about the spiritual lives of African Americans living after redemption in the violent and uncertain world of the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta. It is a story about how blacks found in their sacred beliefs and practices a mediating space through which to respond to the ambiguities, horrors, and hopes of life in the New South. It is about a reinvention of southern black religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, about newly formed independent black churches confronting white supremacy and sweeping changes in technology and the consumer market, and about the spiritual dimensions of the Great Migration. It is about the development of African American religious ideologies and movements at the local level, about how they assumed a popular and institutional expression, and about how they changed communities. It is about coercion and freedom, racial intimidation and attempts to minimize it, and disillusionment with the democratic promise of America and resilient devotion to it. It is, to no small degree, a story about the tragedies and triumphs of Southern culture. For when Reverend Moseley strained to make sense of his earthly fate and that of his people's, he implicitly raised a question that affected all black southerners—namely, how would they negotiate their place in the modern era and what role would their faith play in it.

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After Redemption

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Introduction
African American Religion in the Age of Segregation in the Delta

Against this landscape, variable, heat-tortured, shifting; amid swamps dark and mysterious and lost; in the presence of the mighty river rolling onward to the Mexican Gulf, under sudden suns and swarming stars, never far from the Negro speech and the Negro singing; within American and yet withdrawn from it, whites and Negroes, in the strangest mass relationship of men on this continent, painfully tried to work out their singular destiny together

—*David L.Cohn in The Mississippi Delta and the World: The Memoirs of David L. Cohn, ed. James C. Cobb, p. 5*

This is a book about religious transformation in the lives of ex-slaves and their descendants living in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta between the end of Reconstruction and the start of the Great Migration. My interest in this subject first took shape when I came across an interview with a former bondsman recorded by graduate students at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, as part of that institution's broad effort from 1927 to 1929 to chronicle the history of black Americans' lives during and after slavery. When asked to reflect on the trials of his religious life, this poor elderly sharecropper, never named in the surviving interview, pointed to a moment shortly after his eighteenth birthday when he "began to think seriously about the salvation of my soul." Likely harkening back to the mid-1870s, he recalled an image of a railroad station, where he stood nervously next to Jesus. Suddenly, he remembered, "my knees got weak, and I knelt to pray. As I knelt Jesus handed me a ticket. It was all signed with my name. I arose to my feet and handed it in at the window and was told to take my place with the three men standing on the

platform and wait."[1] The symbolic meaning of receiving a ticket from Jesus and waiting at the railroad station was immediately plain to this black Christian: he was saved.

What caught my attention in the ex-slave's account was his staging of spiritual transformation as a train journey. He subtly incorporated images of and experiences with contemporary technology and travel into his sacred life to fashion a distinctly modern narrative of conversion. By reimagining a vehicle of segregated transportation as an agent of spiritual deliverance, he also integrated current politics into his conversion experience and muted their racist overtones, at least temporarily. I found that the interviewer had captured dimensions of an African American religious culture deeply enmeshed in the sights, sounds, and signs of everyday life and one thick with implications about how we tell the history of the New South. This striking account pointed to the presence of black sacred ideas and institutions that confounded older popular and scholarly assumptions that this was an era when African American southerners acceded, reluctantly, to the overwhelming power of segregation. It invited new questions about historical categorization. Given the racial cruelty and terror of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, how could we explain the development of this type of vision and the spiritual organizations that obviously supported it without dismissing them as interesting but ultimately aberrant to the study of southern culture and its religious facets? And how would such an explanation affect our conception of African American life after Reconstruction?

This book is an attempt to answer these inquiries and explore more broadly the meaning of W. E. B. Du Bois' 1903 insight, offered in *Souls of Black Folk,* that "the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but . . . of American history."[2] I hope to suggest the need to reperiodicize African American religious history after slavery. Similar to Steven Hahn's recent call to notice the development of a sophisticated political culture among rural black Southerners that originated during bondage and extended up to the start of World War I, I seek to establish the post-Reconstruction era as a moment of far-reaching novelty in southern black spiritual life and refigure its traditional historical chronology. In the normal temporal schema, there are two watershed periods: Reconstruction, when freed people built independent denominations and established their churches as vibrant centers of black education, politics, and racial pride; and, nearly four decades later, World War I, when southern migrants flooded northern cities and introduced new styles of music and worship to black urban congregations, formed Holiness-Pentecostal "store-front" churches, and tested ideas about racial self-help made famous through the philosophy of Marcus Garvey. The years in between have been commonly portrayed as a time when southern blacks struggled with scant success to contain the damage wrought by burgeoning racism and made only

marginal advances in their religion, politics, and social life. In contrast, I argue that African Americans developed a surprisingly rich and complex sacred culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a time of intense religious transformation, when blacks experimented with new symbols of freedom and racial respectability, forms of organizational culture, regional networks of communication, and popular notions of commodification and consumption that enabled them to survive, make progress, and at times resist white supremacy. These innovations, in turn, shaped the arc of black culture during and after the Great War.

After Redemption also seeks to introduce new theoretical perspectives to three overlapping academic disciplines: American religious history, African American history, and southern history. First, the book adopts a conceptual point of view that blurs traditional analytical boundaries within the study of American religion in order to craft a history that reflects the full range of meanings and experiences ascribed to it by Delta blacks. It employs an expanded definition of what many scholars normally consider "religious" because African Americans from the Delta possessed a popular sense of the divine and the supernatural that was not easily contained by creed or doctrine; it threaded its way into the tapestry of everyday life.[3] They based their religious beliefs and practices as much on visions and dreams as they did on any report published by a denominational conference or edict announced by a bishop or local preacher. They were as likely to pray, experience conversion, or gain a sense of religious calling while riding a train as standing in a pew or at a pulpit. And they frequently imparted spiritual significance to the purchase of a new suit of clothes for themselves or a new set of lights for their churches.

Relatedly, I blend different historical models and methodologies to bring to light the array of human stories and personalities embedded in the records left behind by Delta blacks. I do not closely adhere to any formal theory of religion and dutifully follow its diagnostic cues and interpretive prescriptions, even though my topic is religious history. Like traditional church historians, I devote substantial consideration to the evolution of black denominations and the leadership of important religious figures. Official church rules and regulations embody beliefs about the nature of divinity, sacred polity, and the definition of religious authority, while the writings of major preachers offer a bird's eye view of institutional controversies, successes, and debacles. Similar to students of theology and the more expansive category of myth and ritual, I study the birth of new ideas about God and spiritual experiences that mark one as "being saved." I also dedicate extensive attention to the development of new rites of consumption, decoration, and personal dress as a way of illuminating how the home and the individual body became sites for registering religious conviction. Most regularly, though, I mix these analytical approaches and concentrate on the interplay of sacred belief and practice in the daily lives of

individual men and women. Delta blacks expressed their spiritual tensions, convictions, doubts, and fantasies most readily and consistently when they cooked, cleaned, farmed, played, read, wrote, argued, fought, and cared for families and themselves. Tracking and decoding individual behavior and action offers the best way of understanding how African American religion operated in the Delta. This is not to say that church was unimportant as a focal point of their spiritual lives, for of course it was, but rather that Delta blacks, like most southerners, also articulated and manifested their faith in many other settings.[4]

By offering a working definition of religious history that finds the divine in prosaic locations and focuses on individual experience as the key site for analysis, I seek an approach to the study of African American history that refines—rather than discards or disproves—earlier ones. In this field, students traditionally tend to examine black religion by assuming the presence of "the black church," a general term that refers to a collective institutional expression of black faith. It is an idea that stretches back at least to the nineteenth-century black philosopher and abolitionist Martin Delany, who, in an 1849 account of black religion, wrote that, "[a]mong our people generally, the church is the Alpha and Omega of all things. It is their only source of information-their only acknowledged public body—their state legislature. . . ."[5] The notion of the "black church" as the center of black life arguably received its fullest scholarly expression in 1963 in the work of the black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier. In *The Negro Church in America,* Frazier pronounced that the black church was a "nation within a nation" and the crucial source for the maturation not only of black sacred culture but also black literature, education, social life, and politics.[6] Yet Delany and Frazier, followed by generations of intellectuals, conceptualized "the black church" in ways that simplified the conflicts and complexities that lay at the heart of African American religion and generally based their conclusions on the words and deeds of male ministers. As a result, their portrayals were often incomplete. It is certainly possible to speak of theologies, social goals, and political interests shared by black churches, but not without acknowledging and probing the equally important themes of dissent, disagreement, and the leadership of women.[7]

I hope to modify the most current and widely held scholarly formulations of "the black church." The term still persists today, but largely as shorthand for organized forms of black religion, especially its Protestant dimensions. Recently, scholars have defined it by stressing its different sociological purposes for African Americans, such as liberating, prophetic, and "dialectical" (as in moving between a series of opposite functions over time, such as a worldly and otherworldly focus). The most sophisticated model of the black church, though, avoids any rigid classification. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her work on black Baptist women from 1880 to 1920, has argued that the black church was an intermediary between the government and the

black community and a type of black public "sphere." It simultaneously structured contact between blacks and the outside world and provided a physical place for worship, civic conversation, and political activity. The black church lacked any one major function but instead was a "dialogic" arena in which congregants, often through heated conflict and debate, created new notions, policies, and regulations about religion, race, gender, and politics.[8]

Higginbotham's model, while helpful in capturing the historical role of doctrinal controversy and especially black women in African American religion, pays little attention to supernatural items of faith that so strongly informed common belief and both connected and disconnected church and everyday life among Delta blacks. By focusing nearly exclusively on the most successful African Americans, it also leaves open the question of how their less fortunate brethren imagined religion. To portray the extensive scope of sacred life and different dimensions to the "black church" in the Delta, among a population overwhelmingly poor, rural, and lacking a formal education, I investigate multiple forms of religious expression. They include dreams, nightmares, disembodied voices, and phantasmagoric visions but also the bits and pieces of material culture that Delta blacks stamped with spiritual significance, such as pencils sold by their ministers, sketches of African American leaders published in their denominational newspapers and hung inside their homes, articles of clothing, and pieces of furniture.

Reconceptualizing the analytical definition of the black church to include dimensions of popular religion ultimately makes it easier to see how Delta blacks developed a supply of religious resources that enabled them to blunt—but never completely banish—the prescriptive power of white supremacy. Such an observation, at first glance, might seem to be already a part of the recent literature in southern history that deals with the rise of Jim Crow and segregation. Much of it has successfully destabilized older beliefs about the immutable and suffocating nature of white supremacy as it evolved during the late nineteenth century. It has done so primarily by illuminating how blacks worked the edges of segregation to their maximum advantage and at times shaped its very character.[9] Yet much of this literature has generally centered on the lives of well-off African Americans who lived in larger towns and cities—those who, not coincidentally, left the densest supply of personal diaries, letters, autobiographies, and printed books and articles. The world of rural blacks is mostly uninvestigated.

New South historians certainly have tackled the topic of black religion as well. They have correctly pointed out that African American preachers and churches historically minimized the debilitating effect of racism by identifying blacks as God's chosen people, financing schools and presses, teaching literacy, providing job skills, organizing protests, and steadfastly demanding racial equality and justice.

But they usually study black religion by focusing on "the black church" as it has been traditionally defined and do not explore the rich connections between religion and technology, commerce, or consumer culture.[10]

Largely unexplored, then, is the topic of the religious culture of rural blacks. Yet it is one that promises fresh insights into the historical relationship between segregation and southern society. Delta blacks mediated the construction of social hierarchy based on skin color during the years of Jim Crow by drawing on their sacred beliefs and practices in often-unanticipated ways. For example, black Baptists and Methodists incorporated their experiences with the color line into revelations, prophecies, visions, ditties, hymns, and early blues music, reenvisioning them as something other than deadly or debasing. Combining the social and psychological resources of fraternal orders with those of their churches, they created a new institutional culture of black religion that better responded to the popular need for jobs, insurances, and articulations of racial pride. Church leaders took advantage of the expanding railroad infrastructure to evangelize, build new houses of worship, and distribute religious literature. They also tapped the growth of the commercial economy to raise money and public enthusiasm for their emerging local networks of churches, schools, and newspapers and to fashion new aesthetics of dress and decoration.

It is, to be sure, a bit curious to postulate that blacks living in the Delta reinvented their religious lives during the post-Reconstruction era in ways that helped them neutralize the corrosive effects of segregation. Indeed, at first glance such an assertion seems difficult even to sustain, especially given that the era has long been dubbed "the nadir" of modern black cultural achievement and civil rights and witnessed a level of state-backed violence against African Americans realistically unmatched during the previous century.[11] Adding to the challenge of credibility is that, during this time of intense racial conflict in the South, the Delta ranked as one of the bloodiest areas. Indeed, the promise of full citizenship that accompanied the Confederacy's defeat was shorter lived here than in most other places. Arkansas Democrats wrestled control of the legislature and governorship from Republicans in October 1874. Through violence, voter intimidation, electioneering, and skillful manipulation of their party's factions, many of the white politicians who had run the state before and during the Civil War recaptured power. As officeholders, they repudiated much of the state's debt, cut property taxes, slashed appropriations for public institutions like schools, and dismantled blacks' right to vote and enjoy due process.[12] The tale was much the same in Mississippi. In 1875, white Democrats began a bid to regain political dominance over the state by implementing the "Mississippi Plan," which was a systematic campaign of election fraud and racial intimidation designed to disfranchise African Americans. Predictably, black

Mississippians were outraged when white Democrats physically tried to prevent them from casting ballots. Some fought back and race riots broke out. Black and white Republicans pleaded with Governor Adelbert Ames to deploy the state militia and restore order but Ames refused, fearful that the sight of African-American troops training their guns on white citizens would only make matters worse. Instead he begged President Ulysses Grant to send federal soldiers, but his appeal fell on deaf ears. Facing only local opposition, champions of the Mississippi Plan soon got their wish. White Democrats seized most statewide offices and, like their political brethren in Arkansas, quickly reduced taxes, lowered public expenditures, and openly sanctioned racial violence as a means of restricting African American liberties.[13]

In both Arkansas and Mississippi, the clearest sign of the new political regimes' disregard for blacks—and the main reason for why the era as a whole has been labeled the nadir for so long—was the steep rise of extralegal violence visited upon African Americans daring to violate any aspect of the complex codes governing segregation. Like all black southerners, Delta blacks risked being spit upon, beat, knifed, shot, or raped when they, for example, failed to address white adults by their formal titles or as "Mr." and "Mrs.," to enter white homes or stores through a rear door, to doff their hats in the presence of a white person, or to step aside and let a white person pass by in the street. Worse still, they faced the strong possibility of being lynched if their transgression involved accusations of sexual contact with or physical harm of a white person, particularly of a white woman. The matter of lynching in the Delta was especially severe: the area hosted more lynchings than almost any other in the nation. From 1889 to 1917, eighty-six blacks were lynched in the Arkansas Delta; during roughly the same period, eighty-eight blacks were lynched in the Mississippi Delta.[14] Mississippi itself was first among all states in the nation in the overall number of lynchings during the decades after Reconstruction and, in the 1880s alone, recorded twice as many as any other state.[15]

While statistics limn the magnitude of the problem of racial violence in the Delta, they only hint at how its savagery and randomness poisoned interactions between blacks and whites. The account of a lynching in Doddsvilles, in Sunflower County, Mississippi, is instructive on this point. In 1904 Luther Holbert was the prime suspect in the killing of James Eastland, a prominent white planter, and a black man. Holbert had worked as a sharecropper on Eastland's 2,300-acre plantation and apparently committed the murders in response to threats against him and his wife. Aided by friends and members of a local black fraternal organization, the couple escaped to a nearby swamp. They hid for four days until discovered by a 200-man posse, which dragged them back to Doddsville and lynched them in the shadow of their church. Before fastening the noose, and much to the delight of a boisterous

crowd that numbered about 1000, vigilantes forced the Holberts to hold out their hands, chopped their fingers off, and distributed the severed digits to the audience. According to an account published by the Vicksburg *Evening Post,* they then sliced off the Holberts' ears and repeatedly bore a large corkscrew into their arms, legs, and torsos, "tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh every time it was withdrawn." It was a story that haunted Delta blacks for decades.[16]

Significantly, by claiming that the recovery of black religious history for this violent time reveals the need to rethink the accuracy of its longstanding historical moniker, I am not seeking to substitute a new monolithic narrative of black cultural triumph for an older one that stressed its absence. It is certainly not my intention to craft a history that obscures the cruelty, frustrations, and failures that blacks confronted when building their communities; nor is my goal to minimize the bitter intra-racial tensions over spiritual authority, politics, and gender roles that divided African Americans. For along with the advances blacks made, their struggles are also central to the warp and woof of their spiritual life. That said, one of my main objectives is to demonstrate how Delta blacks constantly remade their sense of the sacred as they came into intimate and sustained contact with the shifting constraints upon their citizenship and, in turn, show how this reality reframes our understanding of the complexity of black religion and its role in confronting segregation. By doing so, I hope to draw a portrait of the period as one of severely constrained freedom for blacks, but one in which they also made strides toward building a world of their own design.

Perhaps no area of the nation during the post-Reconstruction era saw greater change in the religious culture of its black residents than the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta. Much of the reason stemmed from its historical status as a focal point of African American and southern life. During slavery, the Delta's counties contained some of the highest concentrations of slaves and largest plantations in the country; during the Civil War, they were military and cultural strongholds of the Confederacy. Throughout Reconstruction and up until World War I, blacks steadily moved to the area in massive numbers, chasing the dream of land ownership and the seductive promises wafted by unscrupulous labor agents. These agents, employed by white Delta landowners and speculators desperate for a new and bigger workforce after slavery, rode by horse and rail to every state that once flew the Confederate flag and dangled wondrous tales of cheap plentiful land and high wages to any black person who would come and work. Thousands did, and sowed their ambitions in the soil of the Delta. From 1870 to 1910, when 90 percent of all black Americans lived in the South, the Delta had an overall population that was about 75 percent black.[17] It ranked first nationally in the total number of black-majority counties, some of which possessed a ratio of blacks-to-whites that ran as high as 15:1.[18]

The migration account of John J. Morant was typical. In the 1870s, he moved from Alabama to the Delta with his family after speaking with a labor recruiter. Though only a young boy at the time, this future minister recalled being deeply "impressed by the migration agents, who circulated fantastic stories about the richness of the Delta. It was said that cotton grew so tall that one could pick it from the back of a horse, while riding, and that money could be gathered from the trees." Morant, however, soon discovered that the reality of life in the Delta was far from its advertised version. His family joined the ranks of black sharecroppers, men and women too poor to buy or rent land and who instead pledged to "share" a portion of their crop to a landowner in exchange for farm acreage, tools, and seed. "[M]y father was soon disillusioned. While the land was fertile, the money went into the coffers of the white[s]. . . ."[19] Other black migrants to the Delta in the 1870s and 1880s also cut trees, built levees and roads, and laid railroad tracks as part of a massive effort to transform the Delta, much of which was boggy marshland and dense forests in 1860, into an area suitable for farming.[20]

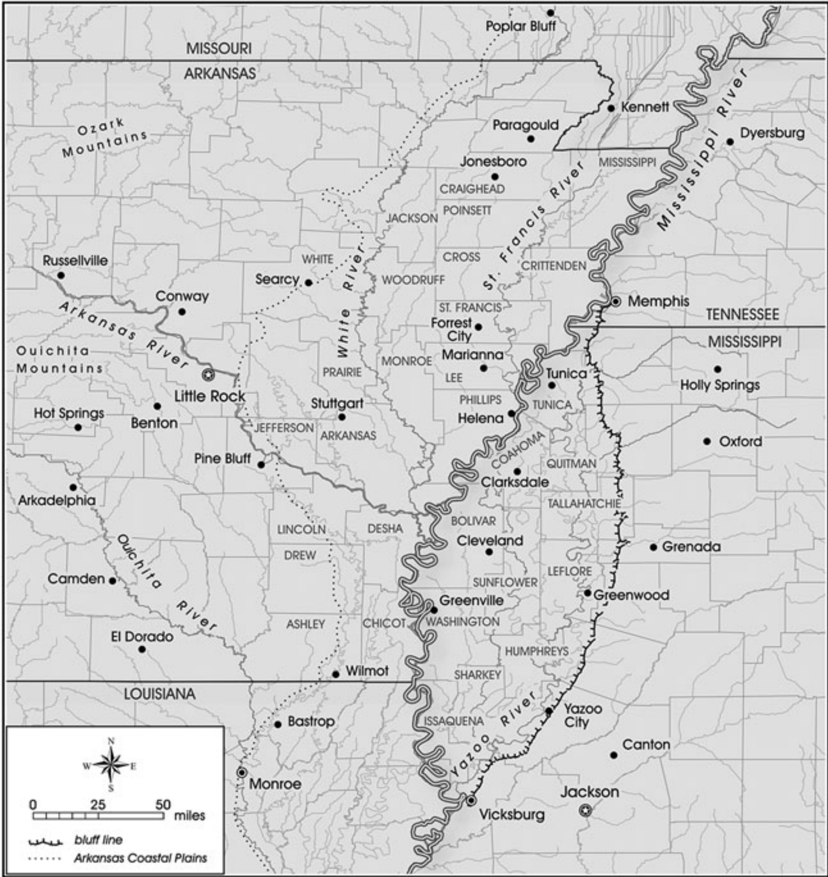
The blackness of the Delta made it a topic of intense interest for a nation hungry for details and stories about the aftermath of slavery. Travelers, adventure-seekers, humanitarians, reporters, writers, and others thronged to the area in the hope of catching sight of a slice of the "authentic" South. A columnist for the *New York Evening Post,* Clarence Deming, visited in the early 1880s ostensibly to investigate southern planters and their politics. He dutifully catalogued the "obstacles in the work of upbuilding the South," singling out the "havoc of war, the loss of slave-property, the transition to a system of free labor, and the carpet-bag era." Yet for Deming, as for his fellow chroniclers, the real journalistic promise of the Delta lay in the thrilling chance to glimpse the world of former bonds people and their descendants. Deming eventually got his voyeuristic wish and, peering through the race-tinged spectacles worn by most of his ilk, breathlessly reported that "[t]he Negroes here . . . are probably the purest types of their race to be found this side of Africa. . . . Huddled together on their plantation settlements, rarely leaving home, and working out for themselves the simple problems of their lowly lot, they form a class whose life and habits reveal the lower phases of the Negro character most faithfully, most amusingly, and in certain aspects, most sadly."[21]

When Deming described black life in the Delta, however, he confined his observations to the Mississippi Delta and ignored its Arkansas complement. Historians of the Delta typically analyze either its Mississippi or its Arkansas section, but I look at both to draw conclusions about African American religion. My decision to do so reflects the reality that, during the post-Reconstruction era, blacks from each part of the Delta shared an overlapping network of religious education, communication, literature, and beliefs. They frequently heard the same itinerant preachers,

attended the same revivals, and, most significantly, read the same religious newspapers, books, and tracts. In 1894, L. A. Rankin of the Mississippi Delta penned a short note to the editors of the *Arkansas Vanguard,* the weekly newspaper of the Arkansas Baptists, thanking them for their hard work. "I love to read letters from good thinking men and active workers in the Baptist cause. It seems to me like the Baptists of Mississippi are sleeping away our time, while the Baptists of Arkansas are going about their Father's business." He closed by promising to send a donation to Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock.[22]

United by the common cultural activities of their black residents, the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas also share a geologic history, topography, and climate that further make it possible to conceptualize and study them as a whole. The Delta was formed about fifteen thousand years ago during the last phase of the Ice Age, when the Mississippi River and its major tributaries, the St. Francis, White, Arkansas, and Red Rivers, sliced deep vales and gorges into the Lower Gulf Coastal Plain. When the glaciers melted and flooded the waterways, the rivers overflowed their boundaries and covered the area with a dense alluvium of fine sand, clay, silt, and organic material that ran hundreds of feet deep.[23] Over the course of thousands of years, the regular flooding of the Mississippi River and its tributaries created a thick, deep, loamy soil that was as fertile as any in the world. The river and the soil it created became literary and environmental symbols for the region, evoked most passionately and famously by William Alexander Percy, a native son of the Mississippi Delta and member of a prominent family of white landowners from Greenville, in the opening lines from his classic memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee,* published in 1941.[24] "Every few years it rises like a monster from its bed and pushed over its banks to vex and sweeten the land it has made. For our soil, very dark brown, creamy and sweet-smelling, without substrata of rock or shale, was built up slowly, century after century, by sediment gathered by the river in its solemn task of cleansing the continent and depositing in annual layers of silt."[25] Percy' soil was the perfect setting for raising crops, especially in the Delta's subtropical climate. And blacks, first as slaves and then as freed people, provided the agricultural muscle that eventually made the Delta a national center for cotton production.

The map of the Delta that I use reflects the full scope of its cultural and physical history and so includes both its Mississippi and Arkansas regions (map I.1). The Delta is divided by the Mississippi River. Its westerly section consists of the Arkansas Delta and its smaller easterly segment is composed of the Mississippi Delta.[26] The foothills of the Ouachita and Ozark mountains, which slope from the northeastern corner of Arkansas to Little Rock, form the northern boundary of the Arkansas Delta. From Little Rock, the boundary extends south-southeast to Wilmot, just north of the Louisiana border, reflecting a natural landscape division between the alluvial Delta



Map I.1. The Delta

soil and the piney woods of the Arkansas Coastal Plains.[27] A steep line of bluffs that reaches heights of two hundred feet defines the Mississippi Delta. It begins below Memphis, Tennessee, bulges eastward and follows the meandering path of the Yazoo River to its confluence with the Mississippi River at Vicksburg.[28] The total area of the Delta is about one and one-half million acres and encompasses twenty-seven counties in whole.[29] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was a rural region but not an isolated one because on or near its perimeter sat major towns and small cities, including Little Rock and Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; and Jackson, Mississippi. This book will concentrate on the Delta counties with black-majority populations, which includes the entire Mississippi Delta and most of the Arkansas Delta, except for a few parts of its northeastern and central areas.[30]

Although this is a book about black religion in the Delta after Reconstruction, it really begins during the Civil War, when blacks suddenly controlled the shape and style of their spiritual lives to a hitherto unprecedented degree and established goals and priorities, as well as tensions and controversies, that would persist for decades.[31] A few independent black churches existed during the antebellum era, but most slaves worshipped under the watchful eye of the master and white preacher or, more privately, by themselves in hush harbors and secret meeting places. They widely interpreted the defeat of the Confederacy as a providential event in which God, through the act of battle and the brute force of the Union Army, cleansed the nation of its original sin of human bondage, punished slaveholders, and freed his chosen people. "When the war was over," recounted O. W. Green, a former bondsman from Arkansas, "de people just' shout for joy. De Men and women jus shouted for joy. Twas' only because of the prayers of the culled people, dey was freed, and de Lawd worked through Lincoln."[32] After the war, blacks forged a religious culture that, above all, reflected their desire for autonomy. To be sure, some initially joined the church of their former masters and experimented with biracial worship, but they usually abandoned their efforts because white southern denominations generally balked at incorporating ex-slaves as members on equal footing with whites.[33] Instead, most became a member of one of the new black denominations, such as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (later the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) and the National Baptist Convention, Inc. Others joined southern branches of established northern black denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or northern white denominations with sizeable southern black populations, such as the Methodist Episcopal Church. Few became Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, or Episcopalian.[34] As they built their churches and communities, blacks stressed five overlapping aims: managing their own ecclesiastical affairs with little or no involvement from former masters; worshipping in their own churches; being led by black preachers; building schools; and soliciting and welcoming the advice and financial aid of northern white and black denominations, so long as they controlled their own budget.[35]

The construction of this new landscape of African American religion during the first years of freedom, however, occurred in fits and starts as blacks responded to changes in politics, the economy, race relations, and their own communities. They struggled to drum up money and sustain high levels of public support for their fledgling schools and newspapers. Churches found it difficult to meet the many spiritual and social needs of their congregants, especially providing money during times of financial hardship and illness. Preachers were few and far in between in the most rural stretches of the Delta, compelling residents to set aside denominational differences on Sundays and simply

worship with whatever minister happened to be hosting services nearby. Among Baptists in particular, congregations quarreled over the best ways to balance their desire to control worship and liturgy within their local churches against the need to create denominational structures of authority and discipline. The end of Reconstruction only exacerbated many of these challenges and disagreements and added new ones, such as disfranchisement and the dramatic rise in racial violence.

Picking up the telling of this history in the mid-1870s, I focus only on a select group of religious bodies that, while distinguishable by dogma and doctrine, collectively embodied the major social tensions and internal divisions driving the evolution of African American spiritual life in the Delta and the South more generally. First, I study the four most popular and powerful black religious bodies in the Delta. They are, in descending order of membership totals: the black Baptist churches, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, and the black conferences of the Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church. Statistics on African American religious affiliation during this era are difficult to come by and not always reliable, but it is still possible to gain a rough sense of the size of churches. In 1919, the US Census Bureau published the best set of statistics based on data culled from the 1910 Census and research undertaken during the mid-1910s as part of a comprehensive study of religion in the United States. Relying in part on this body of research, William Harris calculated that among blacks living in the Mississippi Delta, 101,792 identified themselves as members of the National Baptist Convention, Inc., which was formally organized in 1905 and served as the principal denomination for black Baptists; 13,788 the AME Church; 5,394 the CME Church; and 5,830 the ME Church. The Census Bureau itself revealed that among blacks living in the Arkansas Delta, 89,184 identified themselves as members of the National Baptist Convention; 11,451 the AME Church; 7,232 the CME Church; and 3,061 with ME Church.[36]

These black denominations represent a diverse historical sample of African American Protestantism. Two were headquartered in the North. The AME Church held its first General Conference at Bethel Church in Philadelphia in 1816. The ME Church convened its first General Conference in Baltimore in 1784, though it traced its North American origins to the 1730s and John and Charles Wesley's successful effort to import Methodism from England to the colonies. White bishops directed the ME Church, but they successfully recruited black congregants after the Civil War with invitations to join a church without racial boundaries. They never built such a community, though, and instead organized segregated conferences. The other two Delta churches were southern based. The CME Church originated in 1870 as an all-black offshoot of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The black Baptist churches were loosely modeled, both theologically and organizationally, on white Baptist