The Majesty of the MISSISSIPPI DELTA

Text by Jim Fraiser
Photography by West Freeman
Foreword by John C. Willis

PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
Gretna 2002

For my mother, Adelyn Gerald Stokes;
my mother-in-law, Terry Draughn Sullivan;
and their beautiful granddaughters, Lucy
and Mary Adelyn—J. F.

For my wonderful wife, Aimee Adatto Freeman
and my fabulous children,
Alexandra, Andrew, Ella, and Scott—W. F.

Text copyright © 2002
By Jim Fraiser

Photographs copyright © 2002
By West Freeman
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freeman, West.
The majesty of the Mississippi Delta / photography by West Freeman ; text by Jim Fraiser ; foreword by John C. Willis.
p. cm.
ISBN 1-56554-869-8 (alk. paper)
1. Architecture—Mississippi—Delta (Region)—19th century. 2. Architecture—Mississippi—Delta (Region)—20th century. I. Frasier, Jim, 1954- II. Title.

NA730.M72 D454 2002
728'.37'09763309034—dc21

2001052075

Printed in Korea
Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

Contents

Landmarks of a Bygone Age 5
Acknowledgments 7
The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta 9
Gateway to the Delta 11
Port Gibson 11
Windsor 12
First Presbyterian Church 13
Vicksburg 14
Annabelle 15
Cedar Grove (Klein House) 18
The Corners 20
Balfour House 22
Willis-Cowan Home (Pemberton's Headquarters) 24
Warren County Courthouse 26
Floweree 27
Vicksburg National Military Park 30
The Bobb House (McRaven) 31
Anchuca 34
Rolling Fork and Vicinity 36
Mount Helena 37
Yazoo City and Vicinity 39
No Mistake Plantation 40
The P-Line House 42
The Heart of the Mississippi Delta 44
LAKE WASHINGTON VICINITY 44
Ruins of St. John's Episcopal Church 45
Junius B. Ward House (Erwin House) 46
Mount Holly 47
Linden 48
GREENVILLE 49
The First National Bank Building 50
St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church 51
Hebrew Union Temple 52
Griffin-Spragins House (Refuge Plantation) 53

Belmont 54
GREENWOOD 56
Historic Cotton Row District 57
Lusco's 58
Leflore County Courthouse 59
River Oaks 60
Bridgewater Inn 62
Revelee (The Gwin House) 64
Carter House 66
Provine House 68
Grand Boulevard Historic District 70
Bellashon 71
Bledsoe House 74
Rosemary 76
Jones House 78
CLEVELAND AND VICINITY 81
Isaiah T. Montgomery House 82
CLARKSDALE 83
The Clark Mansion 84
The Cutrer Mansion 85
Wildberger House 86
Madidi Restaurant 87
ENDURING DELTA INFLUENCE 88
Ole Miss (The University of Mississippi) 88
Lyceum Building 89
Barnard Observatory 90
Rowan Oak (William Faulkner's Home) 91
Ventress Hall 92
HOLLY SPRINGS 93
Walter Place 94

Landmarks of a Bygone Age

John C. Willis

Water and soil, soil and water—these elements have played crucial roles in the development of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. It was water that carved out the alluvial plain, water that carried rich silt down the course of the Mississippi River with every flood over a millennium, and water that retreated to leave behind a rich topsoil. That soil—thick, stone-free, and fecund—drew a steady influx of immigrants to the region in the nineteenth century, hopeful thousands from Asia, South America, Europe, and North America, as well as involuntary settlers brought from Africa in chains. Overcoming challenges from flood, war, epidemics, and the boll weevil, these settlers remained in the region and transformed it from wilderness into a prosperous farming area. Indeed, the Delta became King Cotton's prize domain. By the 1880s, U.S. government reports publicized what many agriculturists had suspected for decades—that the Delta contained the world's highest proportion of plant food in its soil. Upon this soil, and despite the flood-prone Father of Waters' propensity to take away as much as he gave, a plantation empire dedicated to cotton production emerged and prospered.

But the region's story is not a linear tale of ever-increasing achievement. There have been times when the course of Delta history was unpredictable, even retrograde. Although anthropologist, folklorists, historians, and travel writers frequently employ the Delta as a symbol for the larger South, the subregion's experiences have often been at odds with the region it is forced to represent.

Many times, the Delta has been portrayed as something it wasn't: vital to the Old South. For example, *The Majesty of Mississippi Delta* reveals that much of northwest Mississippi possessed only the slimmest antebellum tradition. The alluvial plain north of Vicksburg was still ninety percent wilderness when the Civil War broke out. Most of the improved land and settlements stood along the Mississippi River, beside its major tributaries, or upon the broad natural ridges raised a few feet above flood level. The Delta's vast interior stood unchanged by the hand of man. Myriad varieties of oak, gum, cypress, and cottonwood rose up out of the fertile soil, and thick canebrakes choked its "open" places. And by 1865, even the tenuous outpost of settlements beside rivers or upon ridges were threatened by inundation or the creeping expansion of the forest. The depredations of rival armies and the depletion of the labor force made it difficult to keep levees, fields, ditches, fences, barns, and homes in good repair. In sum, the Delta remained in the shadows of the Old South, and was more obliterated by the Civil War than many better-known areas.

Too, the region has often been ignored or forgotten for what it truly was, especially in the period after the Civil War. Looking back, the twentieth century, when the Delta attracted many writers and photographers eager to chronicle and assess its business plantations, the region's past seemed dominated by broad fields and big houses. Its African-American majority, comprising up to eighty percent of the population, seemed consistently shackled by poverty and limited horizons, even decades after emancipation. Not realizing how close

Delta landowners came to bankruptcy in the wake of the Civil War, these observers could not guess how far the region's planters had stretched to gain freed laborers and land buyers. Realizing they might lose all their holdings, white landowners of the late nineteenth century offered surprisingly lenient rental terms to former slaves who would move to the thick-forested interior and clear and cultivate those acres in cotton. Rental fees from these tenants—and it was renters, not sharecroppers, who dominated the ranks of non-owning Delta farmers until 1910—helped landlords save, maintain, and expand their riverside holdings.

Thus, at the close of the nineteenth century the Delta presented two faces: along the major ridges and rivers a plantation district thrived, while in the interior, black farmers elected black officials and traded with black merchants. By 1900, African Americans comprised two-thirds of the Delta's farm owners, and the region was a promised land for small farmers across the South. But this era of balanced prosperity and divergent opportunity was overturned by improvements in the cotton market and the arrival of the boll weevil. By 1920, large plantations had spread into the region's interior. Landlords expressed a strong preference for sharecropping laborers instead of renters and the African Americans' climb up the agricultural ladders was haulted, then reversed.

Those who use the region as only a symbol of the South have largely overlooked the Delta's era as a land of opportunity. Its successful black farmers inhabit a forgotten time. Except for Mound Bayou, the generations of aspirant African Americans left few physical monuments to their efforts. By contrast, rising planters and merchants created numerous structures along the riversides, some in heroic styles and exotic stones, others in shapes and materials more reflective of the region's climate and resources. Their influence spread into the interior, along with their homes, businesses, and architectural preferences. Now, apart from the expansive fields, there is little architectural difference between the old-time plantation districts and the once wild interior.

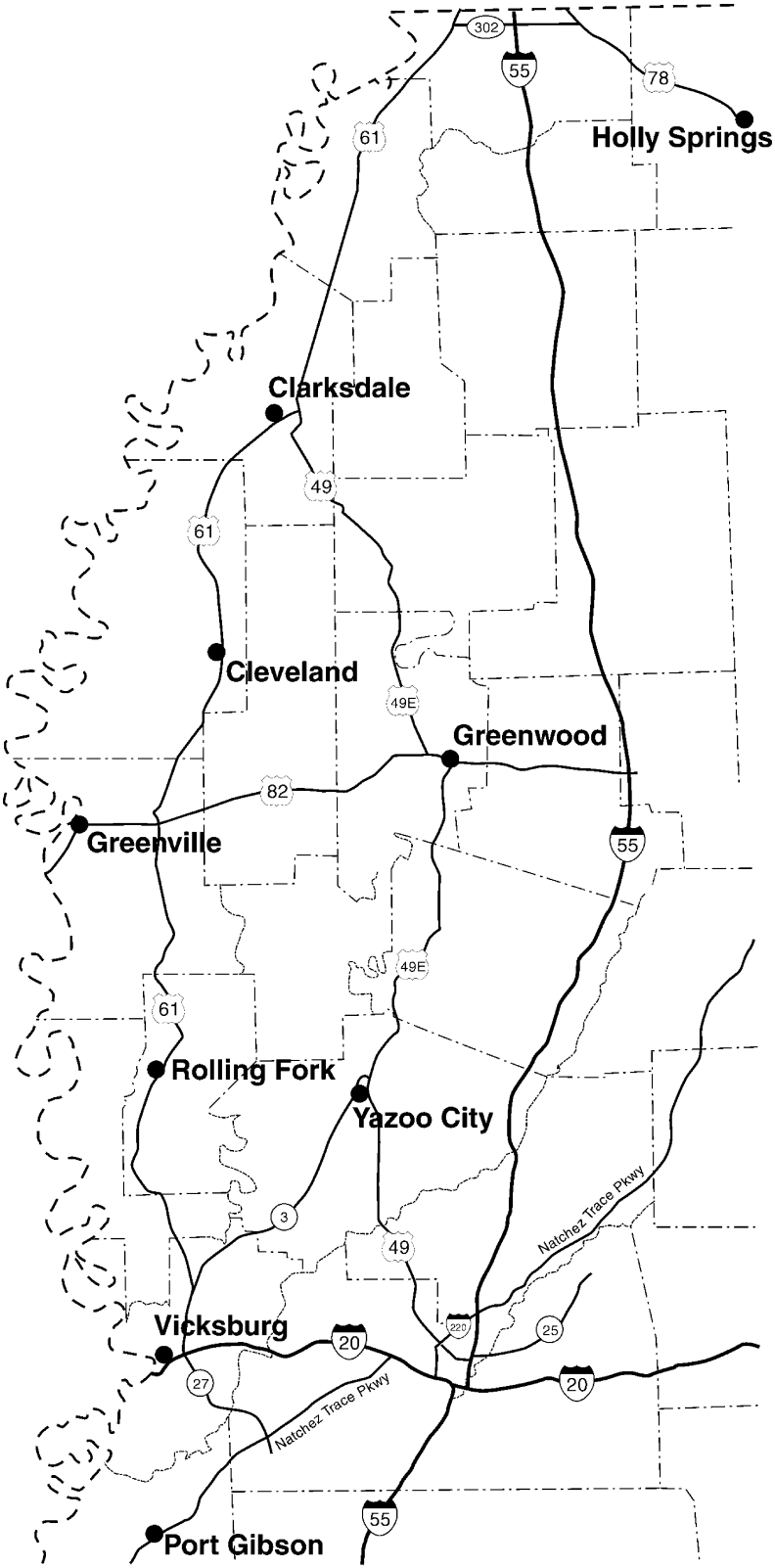
Nor are there many tangible reminders of the region's tumultuous nineteenth-century history, save the houses, commercial buildings, and the monuments considered in this volume. Jim Fraiser and West Freeman deserve our thanks and appreciation for their work in representing these landmarks of a bygone age. For the structures considered in these pages have stood against the water, laid claim to the soil, and sheltered and inspired the men and women whose ambitions and disappointments at which we can only guess.

—John C. Willis

Acknowledgments

We are most grateful to Richard Cawthorn, Chief Architectural Historian for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, whose assistance to the authors and dedication to the preservation and documentation of historic Mississippi sites and structures has been invaluable to this project.

We would also like to thank Bill and Mary Jayne Whittington, Suzy Gordon, Tim Kalich, Wyatt Emmerich, George and Carolyn Mayer, S. J. Tuminello, Hugh McCormick, Drick Rogers, Mr. and Mrs. Jim Rushing, Hayes and Carolyn Dent, Allen Spragins, Virginia O'Neal, Meredith McBee, Carol Ann Adams, Hal Fiser, Jorja Lynn, Judge John Fraiser, Martha Fraiser Bryant, Mr. and Mrs. John Sullivan, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Montgomery, Bobby and Juanita Baker, John C. Willis, Chief Phillip Martin, Carole Fraiser, Aimee Freeman, Richard and Sandra Freeman, Tina Freeman, Be-Be and Ken Adatto, and Professional Color Service (who did all of the E-6 processing for West's film). Also we thank all the homeowners who allowed us to photograph their lovely homes and gave us the pleasure of their company because without them this book would have never happened, and also Nina Kooij, Cynthia Williams, and Dr. Milburn Calhoun for their much-needed aid and support.


302
55
78
Holly Springs
61
Clarksdale
49
61
Cleveland
49E
Greenwood
82
Greenville
55
49E
61
Rolling Fork
Yazoo City
3
49
Natchez Trace Pkwy
Vicksburg
20
220
25
27
20
Natchez Trace Pkwy
55
Port Gibson

The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

The region commonly referred to as the "Mississippi Delta" is a fifty-two-mile-wide, two-hundred-mile-long, flat, alluvial plain formed by millennia of silt deposits from the flooding of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. It is bounded by the Mississippi River on the west, the Loess Bluffs to the east, Memphis to the north, and Vicksburg to the south.

Technically speaking, however, this region is actually the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, since the actual Mississippi Delta is where the Mississippi pours into the Gulf of Mexico, south of New Orleans. But then, why should anyone expect the "Mississippi Delta" to lend itself to any precise title or explanation, when the region itself is so many things to so many people?

For the more historically minded, it's the setting for several key Civil War battles and the locale where President Theodore Roosevelt turned down a chance to shoot a helpless bear cub, an act that led to the invention of the world-famous child's toy, the teddy bear.

To others, the Delta is all about agriculture, from the ubiquitous cotton plantations to other agrarian experiments such as rice paddies, corn and soybean fields, and the most recent development, catfish farms. For still others, the Delta brings to mind Las Vegas-style casinos, abundant fish and game, or the white-columned mansions made famous by Hollywood filmmakers.

For our purposes, though, there is yet another aspect of the Delta that warrants consideration. This is the region's architecture, which—like its history, land, and people—helps to explain what the Delta is all about. And perhaps more so than in any other American region, the Delta's architecture has been forged by the region itself.

For example, the Delta's constant flooding encouraged the construction of raised houses and cottages, not only so the inhabitants could stay high and dry during inundation, but also so home owners could slip logs under their houses and roll them away from the river's deadly encroachment. The oppressive summertime heat and humidity led to higher ceilings with taller windows, dogtrot hallways and second-floor galleries, all of which gave access to mercifully cool breezes. The balconies also served a second purpose of shading first-floor windows, doors, and walls. The near-tropical rains gave rise to the use of steep-hip roofs for drainage, and gutters and cisterns for essential water

Delta mansion overlooking plantation fields.

collection. And when King Cotton raised his scepter of prosperity in the early twentieth century, the people erected mansions with majestic Greek columns, gigantic triangular pediments, intricately-designed windows, fancy cornices and doorways, and such other displays of wealth and ostentation as architecture could devise.

Ingrained in the Delta's architecture are history, devotion, pretension, honor, and avarice. And it is there that we find a lasting testimonial to man's ingenuity in the face of nature's constant attempts to dislodge, discomfort, or destroy him.

Newly planted Delta cotton field viewed from atop a levee.