Book tells what it took for Blacks to get and keep land

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BOOK REVIEW

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Long after the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished, Paul and Jim Hargis continued to work on the plantation near Greensboro, Alabama owned by Paul Cameron, their former master.

Remarkably, in 1875 Cameron sold plots of land to Black farmers. The Hargis brothers bought 100 acres for $800, with Cameron agreeing to be paid over five years. Members of the Hargis extended family (including the son of Confederate General and Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest) have remained on what they continue to call "Cameron Place" for over a hundred years.

One family's account
In "A Mind to Stay," Sydney Nathans, an emeritus professor of history at Duke University, draws on plantation records, Cameron family correspondence, and interviews with descendants to tell the story of one African-American family who opted not to join The Great Migration – and against all odds made a go of it in the segregated South.

Nathans does not challenge the conventional wisdom among professional historians about slavery and Reconstruction in the United States.

His up-close and personal account, however, illuminates the experiences of Blacks and southern Whites and "the contrasting views of freedom that played out on the Cameron place."

Plantation life
Nathans documents the brutality of "the peculiar institution."

After a fight in which Zack attacked William Lamb, wounding the plantation overseer with an axe, and Ned joined the fray, Cameron hired the best lawyer in the region to represent the slaves, who had been accused of attempted murder. And he got one of them off.

"For some," Nathans writes, the episode demonstrated that Cameron cared about his slaves.

"For others," Zack’s hanging, the subsequent sale of Ned, Cameron’s zeal to protect his property, and "the presence of an overseer whose demands and whip could fall on anyone else who got behind confirmed their worst fears" about what plantation life held in store.

The ‘home place’
Most of all, however, "A Mind to Stay" is about the indomitable will, ingenuity and courage of African-Americans, who never wavered from their goal: "hold on to the soil and sustain family members on it."

Throughout his long life, Nathans reveals, Paul Hargis made his living in his "home place" in Alabama. Along with other small farmers, he occasionally accepted "advances" from merchants, pledging his corn and cotton crop, two cows (named Rose and Strawberry), a mule named Buck, a horse named Bill, farm wagons, plows and other tools as collateral.

But he never defaulted.

‘Hallelujah times’
For this reason, Nathans speculates, Hargis referred to the late 19th century, a nadir for race relations in the United States, as "hallelujah times."

In 1912, with taxes to pay and supplies to purchase, the old man, now widowed, childless, and an amputee, deeded portions of his land to nine blood kin on the condition that they pay him $10 a year.

The arrangement, Nathans points out, allowed Paul to secure an income and his beneficiaries "to gain a home
According to Nathans, Paul's kin also tried to cope with the forces arrayed against them by avoiding either acceptance or open resistance.

**Resisting change**

Because "whites have the power," Alice Hargress (the name was changed, for reasons no one remembers) advised Black kids to keep their distance, with "no big mouth," and "be better than them."

That said, Alice did participate in the voter rights drive in Greensboro in the mid-1960s, when she saw Alabama registrars toss the applications of Blacks into the trash and heard 99 year-old Forrest Hargress say he had never thought about voting because, "you know, black people was brought up inferior, they don't deserve what the next man have."

Nathan Hargress died two months before President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. But Alice's mother cast her first ballot.

And, along with millions of other African-Americans, Alice Hargress, who spent most of her life on land made free by her ancestors, came to recognize that the vote was just the beginning.

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