

Blacks and building: Legacy portends future

By Harry C. Alford
Special to Sentinel-Voice

One of the richest legacies of African descendants is construction. From the pyramids of Egypt to the building of America, Blacks have been involved in this industry that will survive the times. We will always build. Even when we demolish existing structures it is because we are about to build something new to replace it.

Yes, construction has a certain future. It is a producer of many jobs and can provide not only a living for the laborers in the business but wealth for entrepreneurs to be handed down generation by generation.

African slaves were brought to this continent in the early 1500s to build New York (New Amsterdam at the time), Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and the entire southeastern territories.

The craftsmanship that was learned through this action gave freed slaves an advantage as we slowly approached the Industrial Revolution. America relied on the crafts learned by Blacks during slavery and passed along to offspring from generation to generation.

Even "Chicken George's" son in the "Roots" documentary owned a lumber yard to sell supplies to the local Black craftsmen who were the builders of the community.

As I grew up in Ventura County, Calif., it was marvelous to admire the parents of my

friends. The Gaston's, from eastern Texas, were masters at drywall. The Drayton's, from Louisiana, could lay masonry like no one else. The Gordon's, from Georgia, were expert hod carriers. No one could build a spiral staircase like Frank Williams from Louisiana.

Williams was so good that the wealthy would fly him to Australia, Japan, etc. to build spiral staircases for custom designed mansions. He spent most of his local time doing it for homes in Hollywood and Beverly Hills. He raised 18 children from the profits of his craft. There were many more transplanted craftsmen in my Southern California home, and they were barely literate and uneducated but they mastered their crafts.

Due to the Jim Crow laws of the South, there were many Black Southern craftsmen who would travel to perform their skills. Many would go to places like New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, etc. and would out compete local White contractors who could not perform as well as they did and could not settle for their affordable pricing. It was because of this, that construction unions in the North were formed to block out Black crews from coming into communities and providing a better service for a cheaper price.



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Soon after the unions were formed, they set in motion the Davis-Bacon Act (named for two New York congressmen). This act set up arbitrary labor wage scales so that Black craftsmen could no longer under price their White counterparts. They all had to pay a certain price, prevailing wage, at a minimum, and competition became no more.

With the price competition out of the way, the Whites moved in through political favor and blatant racism. This would be followed with Project Labor Agreements, which meant some projects would be declared "Union Only." With the construction unions discriminating against Blacks, PLO's would also mean "Whites Only."

Construction unions have made it rough for Black laborers and downright lethal for Black-owned construction companies. However, some of the best have made it through the years. Almost all of the longstanding Black construction companies have southern roots.

Let's look at three of the largest.

Powers & Sons, SR Smoot and Russell began their businesses in Mississippi, West Virginia and Georgia, respectively. The founders stressed education of their children. Today, the second generation is bearing the

fruits of that education (Purdue, Michigan State and Tuskegee, respectively) and yielding great dividends. The third generation is settling in and they aren't just getting college degrees in engineering; the degrees are coupled with Construction Management, Architecture, Law, MBAs, etc.

It is not just craftsmanship any longer. It is construction management, program management, urban development, design and build to order, etc. The construction industry demands political clout, and the arrival of Black political power is right on time as city councils, school boards and mayoral offices have courageous leaders who happen to be of the same background as our Black contractors. The new generation in construction is something we can all be proud of. A new and better era is about to fully evolve.

Of course, racism still exists, as well as conspiring unions and anti-affirmative action zealots who believe it is the destiny of Blacks to fail at business and not be considered a part of this economy. We will defeat them. In fact, we love to fight them at every corner as we have a rising inventory of great entrepreneurs who have derived from the craftsmanship that actually built this nation and empires from Timbuktu to Ramses II. A family tradition continues!

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Mayo case highlights problems in Georgia law

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

William Mayo has been wrongfully imprisoned in Georgia for 15 years now, having received two life sentences plus 40 years. (I guess that was just in case he is reincarnated.)

Mayo is in prison for a crime he did not commit, a crime committed by two young men who have since told the courts that William had nothing to do with the crime.

One of the two has been released, having done the "short" time he was given for committing the crime of — hold on to your hat — robbery! That's right, robbery. No one was hurt, stolen articles were recovered, and Mayo, implicated through intimidation of the two young men by the prosecutor, is paying dearly for it. As Ray Charles said, "Georgia, Oh Georgia!"

It didn't matter that Mayo had never been in trouble before. It didn't matter that he was just a few hours from getting his degree from Morehouse. It didn't matter that William Mayo was a positive role model and mentor for young men, in the act of helping the two young men who did the crime. And it didn't matter that he was a church-going, law-abiding citizen prior to being dragged into the abyss in which he now finds himself.

In June 2005, I attended Mayo's court

hearing — at least that's what they called it. And I wrote an article titled "New Jack Slavery," after watching a racist judge make very short work of Mayo's attempt to present evidence to prove his innocence. He was not even allowed to speak at his own hearing. Talk about a travesty of justice, that Georgia Judge displayed it that day.

So, Georgia has been on my mind lately, not only because of William Mayo, but also because of other cases I have seen. The vegan parents whose child died of malnutrition were given life sentences for murder. LIFE? C'mon, Georgia.

Sure they should be punished, but a life sentence? What kind of state do you Georgians live in? Or is this the kind of punishment reserved strictly for Black folks, like the seven years given to teenage student Shaquanda Cotton in Paris, Texas, for shoving a hall monitor?

Georgia is on my mind because of its lack of fairness and its blatant disregard for even a modicum of compassion for William Mayo and the parents, Jade Sanders and Lamont Thomas. Even if William did commit robbery, don't you think 15 years is enough? He



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can't even get a fair hearing to review his case. Sanders and Thomas loved their child, I am sure, and although they were misguided and uninformed in the diet they fed the child, I don't believe they intended to murder the baby.

Someone ought to get their sentence reduced. Is there no common sense in Georgia courtrooms?

The state, which boasts the likes of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Maynard Jackson, Cynthia McKinney, John Lewis, Joseph Lowery, and many more strong Black folks, cannot seem to get it right and fair when it comes to its Black population, the first or second largest Black population of all the states.

Two life sentences for robbery, and life for the unintentional death of a baby by his parents. That's why Georgia is on my mind.

Here are the questions: If a Black man can get double-life plus 40 years for robbery and a couple can get life for the unintentional death of their baby, what is the penalty for premeditated murder? What's the penalty for shooting a 92 year-old Black woman, the way law enforcement officers did in a botched raid on the wrong home? What's the penalty for a cop murdering Kenneth Walker? What's the penalty for beating Paul Johnson to death in a police holding cell? What's the penalty for mass murder in Georgia? Triple-life plus fifty years?

Yes, Georgia is definitely on my mind, and so much so that I would love to find out why a state with so many Black political figures and influential "leaders" such as Andrew Young, who defends Paul Wolfowitz but utters not a word on behalf of William Mayo, can not effect change in Georgia's ridiculous criminal "injustice system."

What good does it do for Black folks to

occupy high political offices in Georgia, especially in its capital, Atlanta, and have such glowing historical claim to being "civil rights" fighters and change agents? What good is it if these folks do not assert themselves to bring justice and fairness to a court system under which they and their children must live?

There is no way anyone can look objectively at the Georgia system of punishment and say it is equitable. That's not to say the same issues do not exist in most other cities across this country, but right now, I have Georgia on my mind.

About 45 years ago, Georgia was a place where only those Blacks who were from there would travel. I didn't make my first trip to Georgia until 1970, scared of what I would encounter as I stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of town.

It was the only time in my entire life that I carried a firearm (borrowed) with me on a trip — or anywhere else for that matter. I was pleasantly surprised when I pulled up to the gas pump and the White attendant said, "May I help you, sir?" I exhaled at that point and have been to Georgia too many times to count since then.

But even today, despite some Black people referring to Atlanta as the Black "Mecca" and despite the positive changes in other parts of the state, the criminal justice system imposed in Georgia is straight out of the Dark Age, and Black folks must stand up against it and demand real justice — for the innocent, as well as for the guilty. Meanwhile, I pray I never get accused of anything in Georgia. With my editorial reputation, they would probably give me quadruple-life for speeding.

Free William Mayo, Georgia. Somebody do something for this young man, please!

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port for war spending, a broad group of Democrats beyond the CBC, including those in the "Out of Iraq" Caucus but many of their more moderate colleagues, felt free enough to vote against the bill. In doing so, they understood that the domestic spending measures would pass which they favored because the socioeconomic status of many Whites has likewise been threatened by the diversion of badly needed spending for domestic priori-

ties, combined with the decline in jobs due to competition from low-wage immigration and foreign competition in the American auto industry. We are likely to see this strategy used again and again. Democrats use Republican votes for the war to fund domestic priorities. Sad but true.

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