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"ROLLIN' ON THE RIVER": WHAT ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS CAUSED RESTORATION OF SERVICE FOR THE GEE'S BEND PUBLIC FERRY?

Abstract

This article presents a case study on the efforts to reestablish ferry service for an isolated island-type community in Wilcox County, Alabama, known as Gee's Bend formally known as Boykin. Gee's Bend, a community of inhabitants who can trace their ancestry to slaves on the antebellum plantation there, depended on the ferry to provide access to the county seat of Camden, the center for social and economic activity. There was no ferry between 1962 and 2006. For forty-four years the ferry did not operate, having had its' cable deliberately cut so that Gee's Bend residents could not get to Camden to register to vote. It was an attempt to lessen the political power of the African-Americans in the area. This article explains the key economic and political factors that resulted in restoration of service for the Gee's Bend ferry.

Keywords public finance, racism, political corruption, rural economic development, Alabama

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INTRODUCTION

There have been difficulties associated with community development efforts in the Black Belt. Very real racial discord has sometimes impeded progress in moving from an agenda of political progress to a simultaneous agenda of economic stability and sustainability especially in the Black Belt with its' predominance of African American populations.

However, increased economic development often results in increased contact between different racial groups. Why? Because increased economic activity brings with it the need for more people to be employed, people with different skills. Although the return of ferry service took longer than expected to complete, it may ultimately serve as a catalyst for future growth. The point of this case study is not about how this project served to instantaneously change hearts and minds and subsequently diminish racism. It is about moving forward through a focus of addressing economic development conditions that serve the betterment of all and in spite of whatever feelings and values remain from past racial discord.

This article examines these issues in light of a case study. The imposed increased segregation that resulted from the forty-four-year long absence of ferry service provides an example of an insidious phenomenon. There was the high cost to both individuals and to communities of imposed segregation. Eventually there was enough positive influence, via economic and political factors to lessen the amount of racism, brought on by no ferry service. Good did triumph in the case of restoring ferry

service, as we shall see. It is important to note that no racial group, thinks in a complete monolithic way. Therefore, the reader should keep in mind that when this article states that a racial group thought and acted in a particular way, we mean that the great preponderance of a racial group tended to behave and think a certain way, not every single solitary individual of that racial group in Wilcox County.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

The problems of racism in the rural areas of the Southern United States have been documented since the founding of the nation. Both economic development and public finance resources are affected. In the case study within this article, there is first a description of the geographic area, known as the Black Belt in Alabama. Secondly a more localized area is considered, Wilcox county.

1.1. Summary of some key public finance concepts

A strong area of inquiry in this paper concerns the role of public finance. This is the economics of the public sector. The revenues and expenditures of governmental units are traditional areas of inquiry for public finance (Pass et al., 1991; Pearce & Shaw, 1992; Rutherford, 1992). Furthermore, the term, public finance, also concerns the social effects and consequences of governmental fiscal policies (Greenwald, 1983; Pass et al., 1991). Almost all the monies that are involved with the restoration of the ferry service are public monies. The fair distribution of public funds for a project that benefits low income people, is based on a better instinct of humans, to better the lives of less fortunate people (Kolm, 1987). In the case of this ferry restoration project, one can see that many relatively low-income people from Gee's Bend benefit. Yet it is not that simple. There are also high-income landowners that benefit from having quicker access to their land at Gee's Bend, as the reader shall see. And of course, when low income people via the ferry, go to work they benefit their employers. When low income people shop in Camden, via the ferry, businesses benefit. Quigley (1987) explains "local public finance" concerns issues local government revenues and expenditures, and other issues.

1.2. Wilcox county and the Black Belt

In Alabama, from East to West a band of seventeen counties exist, known as the "Black Belt" (Figure 1).

Within the Black Belt, there exist Southern rural communities of large percentage of African American populations, resulting in eleven of the seventeen counties having African Americans, as a majority of the population (Table 1). This provides historical credence to the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, as many people in these communities were intimately involved in organizing and participating in movement activities. Sometimes in the Black Belt, these communities paint a picture of African Americans and Whites together in seemingly peaceful coexistence. However, at the same time, there are persistent strands of segregation. One trait is that the majority of White children attend private schools, as opposed to the majority of African American children that attend public schools, which are typically controlled by majority African American school boards. The Black Belt is a term that traditionally describes both the richness of the soil and the often predominance of African American populations. Gee's Bend is located in Wilcox county, Alabama.

Table 1. Traditional Black Belt counties and percentage of African-Americans

Source: Traditional Black Belt (2004), US Places.com (2012)

County	Percentage
Barbour	47%
Bullock	70%
Butler	44%
Choctaw	43%
Crenshaw	24%
Dallas	70%
Greene	80%
Hale	58%
Lowndes	73%
Macon	82%
Marengo	51%
Montgomery	56%
Perry	68%
Pike	37%
Sumter	74%
Russell	42%
Wilcox	72%

Source: Southern Spaces.

Figure 1. Counties in Alabama's Black Belt (grey)

The state of Alabama as a whole is about 25 percent African Americans. The most successful Alabama county, in terms of the most wealth and the most cosmopolitan has to be Jefferson County, with 43 percent African Americans. Leaders from all races in Birmingham intermingle and work together and many of the highest educated people from many racial and ethnic groups live and work in this county. Other similar places include Auburn, Huntsville, Mobile and Tuscaloosa. There are also Alabama counties that have a great percentage of White populations and a very low percentage of African Americans. They are not as wealthy on a per capita basis as much as the main county in the state – Jefferson County (Jefferson County, 2017). Rural areas are often low in per capita income and wealth compared to the higher status urban counties throughout America. The words of the famous urban economist, O'Sullivan explain why, "Cities are where the jobs are". It is natural for many people to leave rural settings in search of a better life in more urban areas (O'Sullivan, 1996).

Part of the setting for this article is Camden, the county seat of Wilcox, which is located 75 miles southwest of Montgomery and 35 miles south of Selma,Gee's Band is in a rural part of Alabama. In Alabama, the rural parts of the state tend to have people with less education and thus greater prejudices.

Communities in the Black Belt of Alabama are perceived as some of the poorest in the nation. In the Black Belt, moderate economic progression is evident and yet there is no clear political agenda for addressing the deep economic disparities that exists, particularly between African Americans and Whites. The only clear revolutionary change that has taken place, which came directly as a result of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Movement, is that today at the Wilcox county level there are now a majority of African Americans serving in political leadership positions (Jett, 2004). The majority came about a significant number of years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a con-

siderable lag (Grafton & Permaloff, 1985). While acknowledging the significance of this political transformation, one can not help but notice that community development, in the form of economic empowerment, remains fleeting. Conditions of poverty that for decades severely affected the African Americans in these Black Belt communities have not substantially improved. Even those who own their own land, such as the Gee's Bend residents have simply sustaining a life of slow economic growth and cultural isolation.

Prior to the 1960's Civil Rights Movement there were deliberate systematic mechanisms put in place to not only keep Black and Whites segregated, but also to permanently consign blacks to a lower-class workforce through limited educational resources and restricted job opportunities. Projects that enhance economic growth often come slowly in the rural parts of the South (Bailey, 1971; Bass, 1977; Goldfields, 1990; Grafton & Permaloff, 1985; Stewart et al. 1995). Though part of the post-Civil Rights Movement emancipation involved the placement of African Americans in key Wilcox county positions, such as sheriff, tax assessor, and county commissioners, affecting economic change has been challenging against a White minority with predominant land-holdings in the county. In contrast, near Birmingham and within Samford University, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) pursues objective research on both state and local government. As the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama has pointed out, the very low level of local support in many rural school districts in Alabama has resulted in too little total support. Indeed, there is a heavy reliance, especially on state government support for K-12 education. Federal support is also important. Landowners in more progressive places, such as Jefferson County, pay a much higher mileage rate for property taxes for local school support, then the mileage rate in rural counties, such as Wilcox County.

1.3. Gee's Bend in Wilcox County

Gee's Bend, the focus of this article lies in Wilcox County, and is among the very poorest counties in per capita terms in the United States. Interestingly, some of the Gee's Bend families still carry the name of one of the slaveholders, Pettaway, in the geographic area of the antebellum community. Eventually, these families, through federal government intervention during the Great Depression came to own the land of Gee's Bend. However, as we will see repeatedly in this case study, positive change is often the product of a mutual economic interests, that surpasses less important racial tensions. Some African Americans became newly landowning, and thus gained a new degree of independence, which, as a result, of this independence the community became a real organizing and participating force during the Civil Rights Movement. It was easier for those residents who owned and farmed their land as a means of economic independence to participate in political protest activities. Other people, who were sharecroppers, rather than independent farmers or businesspersons, risked losing their jobs if they worked for Whites, who were opposed to the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, some of these African Americans risked not only job security but ability to pay for a place to live as well (Rogers et al., 1994).

The primary way for Gee's Bend residents to connect to the Camden community was by way of the old ferry, that they regularly used as a means of transportation to Camden, the county seat of Wilcox. It was here where they shopped, conducted business, socialized in addition and joined other African Americans in Wilcox in participating in civil rights activities. Many Whites in the community, such as Sheriff Lummie Jenkins became fully aware of the significant number of Gee's Bend residents, catching the old ferry to join in civil rights activities and thus the cable line to the ferry was cut to prevent its usage. Today some Whites in Camden state that this was not the case and that the cable simply broke due to poor maintenance. Nevertheless, the line was never repaired, and the old ferryboat was simply moved to a neighboring county. Since this happened in 1962, there was a negative impact on Gee's Bend residents, in regard to access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities. There were some efforts to restore ferry service, yet the simultaneous combined efforts of both Whites and African Americans were necessary for success. Therefore, until ferry service restoration in 2006, the quality of life had decreased for residents of Gee's Bend. They simply had to adjust to all of the constraints, which resulted from the loss of ferry service. During this

time, they also witnessed school closings, a decline in residents and even less community social gatherings. The famous Gee's Bend Quilting Bee, the first African American women's cooperative begun in the 1960's, has even come close to virtually shutting down.

1.4. Importance of the Gee's Bend ferry project

The case of restoring the ferry service to Gee's Bend, illuminates the continuing transition of Black Belt communities to better socioeconomic conditions that had often been lagging, for some African Americans in some parts of rural Alabama. While the goal of many protest activities that took place during the 1960's was for African Americans to seek political empowerment through full participatory resident-ship – particularly voting- and indeed this was achieved as evidenced by the increase in African American political leaders, at the county level, economic empowerment has sometimes been slow in coming.

Ferry service has served as a sustainable bridge of opportunity for both African Americans and Whites. Coinciding with the reinstallation of the ferry is the increase of Whites purchasing land near the Gee's Bend community. This has primarily been to build vacation homes. Sheriff Prince Arnold of Wilcox County stated to this first author of this paper, that he believes that actually a substantial portion of land in the Gee's Bend community is now owned by Whites, sold off by the descendants of Gee's Bend who moved "up North" and no longer maintained sentimental ties to the community. In order to get the most utility from the restored ferry service, the water vessel is large enough to accommodate both trucks with logs and school buses.

Key information regarding the development of the Gee's Bend ferry service restoration was collected while this article's first author worked and lived in Wilcox County for three years, off and on from 1996–1999. Later other visits served to continue efforts to gather information. At least fifteen public county officials, including the previous county engineer when the project was first secured, Glen McCord, were interviewed, as were several Gee's Bend and Alberta (a neighboring community) residents. As stated, the public improvement projects can take a long time to complete in the rural parts of the South (Danbon, 1995; Goldfield, 1990; Grafton & Permaloff, 1985; Soileau, 1990; Zekeri, 1995). Though motives are complex, restoration of Gee's Bend ferry service is an example of collaborative effort between African Americans and Whites.

1.5. Looking back and looking forward

On August 8, 1990 Hollis Curl, the Editor and Publisher of *The Wilcox Progressive Era*, the local weekly and, until recently, solely published newspaper of Wilcox county, wrote an editorial in his "For What It's Worth" article that served as a catalyst for drawing attention to how the ferry affected the basic needs of the Gee's Bend community in Wilcox county. Hollis Curl stated that it was time the Gee's Bend ferry was re-installed for four important reasons: economic development, quality of life (meaning faster access to healthcare), better access to educational opportunities and more real estate development. Some residents of Wilcox County found this reasonable character of Hollis Curl to be in sharp contrast to his strong racist side, during a previous time.

The basis for his Gee's Bend editorial was a letter Curl sent to several Alabama politicians, specifically then Governor Guy Hunt, US Senator Howell Heflin, US Senator Richard Shelby, US Representative. Sonny Callahan, State Representative James Thomas, State Senator Hank Sanders, the Wilcox County Commission, the Wilcox Development Council and the Camden City Council. In this letter, Curl summarized that in his view, the Gee's Bend ferry service was shut down, in 1962; this was to supposedly lessen racial tensions. (Of course, the African Americans were simply exercising their right in seeking equality). In Wilcox County, Gee's Bend and Camden represent the top two population centers. So, Curl thought the two localities needed to be connected again, by means of ferry service. Curl pointed out the economic development benefits, possible when African Americans and Whites work together on such projects as implementing the restoration of ferry service.

It is ironic that the catalyst for change for a very isolated and seemingly helpless African American

community comes from this controversial community figure who reported having an epiphany about his own public racist identity. It is true that Hollis Curl and other leaders of whatever caliber can be credited to a certain extent with setting in motion the steps necessary to re-establish ferry service. Economic incentives sometimes are stronger and longer lasting than individual personalities.

In response to Curl's editorial, a group of individuals, specifically Circuit Clerk Willie Powell, Wilcox Commissioner Charles Hayes and Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission Executive Director George Alford, took the lead in looking into the idea of ferry service restoration. None of these individuals are in those official positions today. Curl cited four significant reasons why it was necessary to seriously address the transportation needs of the Gee's Bend community, and that more importantly it was necessary for all of the political leaders to which he addressed his letter to offer full assistance to seeing this project to completion. Curl often pointed out that it was easier for Gee's Bend residents to travel by car to Selma in neighboring Dallas County to shop rather than spend their money in Wilcox County. This highlights the clearly economic motives for restoration which points to one of the many economic effects of not having the ferry operational. Other political figures, including the previous county engineer, Glen McCord, suggested that the ferry could ultimately additionally be used as an attraction for tourists, especially African Americans seeking to rediscover their Southern heritage. Also, a benefit of the restoration of ferry service has been the elimination of an approximate fifty-mile drive that was often required for Gee's Bend residents to get to Camden, the county seat, where the best health care was available. Curl appeared as a guest on a 1996 program about institutional racism hosted by Phil Donahue. Donahue wondered aloud about how many people might have died in Gee's Bend because they could not get to timely medical care. Curl admitted that that had been a problem, sometimes. Being on the hospital board, Curl had some knowledge of this.

In his letter to the political figures, Curl suggested that the ferry would benefit the public-school system, as it would save on the cost of transporting the children to the only public high school that exists and which is also located in Camden. Furthermore, the educational system to this day is totally segregated with African American children attending the public county high schools and White children attending one of the private academies. Wilcox County public educational system was integrated in 1971 and this lasted for a total of one year, until Whites had established private academies, known for a better education, than what is received in the public, county system (Zekeri, 1995).

Real estate development, as it relates to both cultural tourism and ultimately attracting retirees to seek out Wilcox as a place of permanent residence is another reason that has been suggested to justify the return of the ferry service. Many African American leaders suggested that this was Hollis Curl's primary reason for supporting the ferry, as he is a property owner on the Gee's Bend side of the river. Hollis Curl has publicly stated that real estate development on this waterfront property would serve as a mechanism to generate an influx of retirees and that was the key to Wilcox County's economic future. Curl wrote that land values for lakefront property could increase with ad valorem tax revenues increasing, as well.

African American retirees who had moved to the Northern USA, to work as young adults, in particular for the auto industry, and are now returning, as older people, to their "roots" in Wilcox due to the low cost of living and the slower pace of life. Sheriff Prince Arnold states, that waterfront property has surged in value and has been purchased rapidly and primarily, by wealthy, White landowners desiring a seasonal recreational home on the Alabama River. While the majority of land is still owned by African Americans on the Gee's Bend side, much of it has been sold by Antebellum Pettaway-era descendants who have long since moved North and do not feel a particular necessity or sentiment in regard to holding onto the land.

The Wilcox Development Council, a figurative "chamber of commerce" made up entirely of White businesspersons in the Wilcox community created a video that is used in various mediums to attract retirees to relocate to the county. Many political leaders of rural communities have recognized the modest appeal of their lifestyle and at-

tempted to capitalize on their low crime, low taxes and isolated havens, marketing their communities as retirement or recreation/tourist centers. However, this type of economic strategy is simply not a sufficient approach to the high unemployment rate of these areas. Tourism and retirement will not replace the jobs lost in the basic sectors of rural economies. Nevertheless, all opportunities for economic development can be helpful in some ways. Furthermore, the effect that retirees have on public services is not necessarily minimal. Blakely (1994) states, "Although efforts to revitalize rural areas by making small towns cute or quaint are appealing. In the last analysis, much more is required to strengthen the economic vitality and job potential of the nation's heartland".

Some of the African American county officials expressed the view that an influx of retirees, particularly White retirees, whom they suspect constitute Curl's primary audience, will change the racial balance and dilute the voting strength of African Americans in some districts. Most public leaders have determined that the needs of Wilcox County should be based around economic agendas that are both service-oriented and entrepreneurial. They stressed the need for recruitment and/or development of small to medium-sized businesses and recognize the dangers of a small, rural community, such as Wilcox County, becoming too dependent on any one particular corporation or one economic sector.

An initial Wilcox County Ferry Commission included Curl, Pettaway and McCord, the newly hired county engineer. McCord was previously employed by the State of Alabama and was very well known to the Wilcox community having grown up there. In 2006, the ferry opened for operation.

Advocacy of ferry service restoration was important for Curl and some other relatively high-income earning Whites, who own real estate in key places. Of course, many people are part of the operation now. The terminals, parking lots, the ferry itself all require personnel and substitute personnel. The ferry schedule has to be maintained. Good economic development benefits everyone. John Kennedy said in 1963, "A rising tide lifts all boats" (Kennedy, 2017). Although some individuals may benefit more than others, bringing back to ferry definitely helped the overall economic welfare of everyone. Most Wilcox County Whites do not have the wealth to own a vacation home, but the ferry benefited them, and to some degree, the African-Americans benefited. No doubt, the construction and maintenance of the vacation homes created jobs. There is also hope from many of the African American county leaders that in the end this ferry will serve as an economic boost that goes beyond fulfilling a need for transportation for Gee's Bend residents.

2. RESULTS

2.1. Public finance issues

Gee's Bend was the original name of the area and Boykin, was a formal name adopted in 1949, by the first U.S. Post Office established there (Stephens, 2017). In 2006, the Federal Highway Administration provided a permanent ferry to help the local transportation needs of the local community of Gee's Bend or Boykin, Alabama. According to the 2010 Census, the community is composed of 275 residents, (Boykin, 2017). Please note that the financial data in this article was only obtained after numerous phone calls and emails to Alabama Department of Transportation. Attempts to get more data, through the Congressional Offices of Terri Sewell, were unsuccessful. Sewell's office commented that it would be best to seek any help for this, through the Alabama Transportation, on our own. In this paper, both authors did their best possible task in obtaining data through 2017, spending many hours on this. Obtaining U.S. federal data on the entire federal budget and macroeconomic variable is a far easier task, as evidenced by Gentle et al. 2005 and some of the other macroeconomic articles, having Gentle as an author or coauthor. Yes, data may be public record but pulling federal data up on one's computer is so much less difficult than getting highway engineers to gather data on individual public improvements projects. The Alabama Dapartment of Transportation professionals worked very hard to get some information together for the co-authors of this article. Getting more data beyond that was not feasible for the Alabama Dapartment of Transportation.

2.2. Federal highway administration's ferry program

During the civil rights era, in 1962, residents of Gee's Bend a.k.a. Boykin began taking the ferry to the county seat, Camden, in order to register to vote. The ferry traversed the Alabama River (Pinkston, 2006; Boykin, 2017). The response by the local authorities was to discontinue the ferry service. As a result, Boykin residents had to take about an hour by motor vehicle to traverse the road route between Boykin and Camden. In 2006, a new and capable ferry was placed in the Alabama River (Pinkston, 2006; Boykin, 2017). Federal funding for ferries and ferry terminals can provide the majority of the expenses. States also may make a contribution. Operating costs for the ferry, such as personnel costs, routine maintenance and fuel, cannot be paid for by the federal funding component for the purchase of a ferry and the construction of terminals (Federal Funding, 2012). However, a federal grant of USD 2 mln was made to Wilcox county, specifically to help pay for operating costs of the ferry (Bean, 2012). Also, ticket sales revenue for ferry operating costs, may also collected from the ferry service. (Local fees, 2018).

Earl F. Hillard, Arturt G. Davis and Terrycina A. "Terri" Sewell were Congressional representatives, over the district that included the town of Boykin and the Gee's Bend ferry. All the abovementioned Congressional Representatives have been in office at times when some Federal High Administration grants have been approved to aid in the construction of terminal facilities, purchase of the ferry and upgrading of items associated with the ferry. The last item the Alabama Depatrtment of Transportation gave to us was in 2017, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Estimated Federal grants for the Gee's Bend Ferry

Source: DOT public information Officer Joshua Phillips.

Fiscal Year	Grant Purpose
1996	USD 456,000 from FHWA (included in DOT budget)
2001	USD 879,000 from FHWA (included in DOT budget)
2009	USD 1,419,000 from FHWA (to upgrade ferry lines and build new terminal in Camden) (included in DOT budget)_
2011	USD 583,000 from FHWA (to construct new dock and expand terminal on Camden side) (included in DOT budget)
2017	USD 1.09 mln from EPA (via Diesel Emissions Reduction Act) to replace diesel powered engines with 100% electric/battery powered engines (included in DOT budget)

Note: FHWA – Federal Highway Administration; EPA – US Environmental Protection Agency; DOT – Alabama Department of Transportation.

As for the 2017 grant from the Protection Agency (EPA), which was a major pollution abatement goal, in switching from diesel to electricity, as a source of power for the ferry (EPA, 2017). One should keep in mind that just the Federal Highway Administration amounts are listed in Table 2. The State of Alabama also makes contributions of money in addition to the federal amounts listed. Of course, the Alabama Transportation Department implements the federal and state funding for the ferry, its terminals and possibly other matters associated with providing this service to residents in the area of Winston County. As with any implemented and operating federal highway project, including public ferries, further federal grants can be expected in the future.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this case, an economic self-interest can sometimes dovetail nicely with the economic self-interest of other groups. Using a prime and basic model, supply and demand graphs operate upon this principle. Theoretically the equilibrium price and equilibrium quantity are arrived at mutually through the effective demand of demanders of a product, good or service. And effective supply is given by suppliers. Of course, rich people have more influence in this regard, when there is a high disparity in wealth. In short, when people are busy bettering themselves economically, there is far less time available for animosity between groups. Thus, economic development that benefits all, can sometimes bring on a somewhat better situation. The reestablishment of ferry service brought more timely availability to care, legal services, more products, potential human resources, and job opportunities. Adequate, fair trade between peoples make for a somewhat real chance at peace and better human relations. Bringing back

ferry service at Gee's Bend is an important step in the right direction for all people involved. Literally billions of dollars in public monies became available for the restoration of ferry service, once all benefitting parties worked together. This public finance article has outlined a truly successful endeavor.

The restoration of ferry service called for the involvement of many officials, at the local, state and federal level. Only then could access to possible funding be achieved. When there are more opportunities for economic betterment, people of different backgrounds, including different racial characteristics, tend to get along better. If economic opportunities in Wilcox County improve, this will certainly have a positive effect on relationships between all groups of people. The restoration of Gee's Bend Ferry service in Wilcox County provides a significant contribution in helping solve the complex struggles of more economic development for many Black Belt communities continue to face.

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