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## My Yellow Ribbon Town

### A meditation on my country and my home

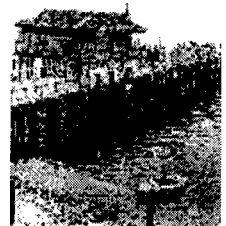
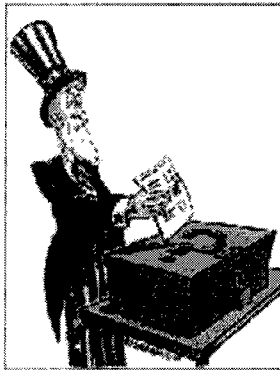
By Paul Gaston '52



Paul Gaston  
(Photo by Steve '67)

Editor's Note: *This essay is abridged, with permission, from Where We Stand: Voices of Southern Dissent (NewSouth Books, 2004). The book, with a foreword by former President Jimmy Carter, features a dozen essays by Southern historians, legal scholars, civil rights advocates, writers, and activists. Paul Gaston is professor emeritus of Southern and civil rights history at the University of Virginia and a lifelong activist for social and economic justice. In 2002, Gaston received the College's Arabella Carter Award, which honors alumni who have made significant contributions as volunteers in their community or on a regional or national level.*

#### COVER



The wharf at Fairhope (1930), on the shore of Mobile Bay, was a central place for members of the experimental colony which followed the "single tax" ideas of sociologist Henry George. (From the Overbey/Mobile Bay Library Collection of South Alabama Photographic Archives)

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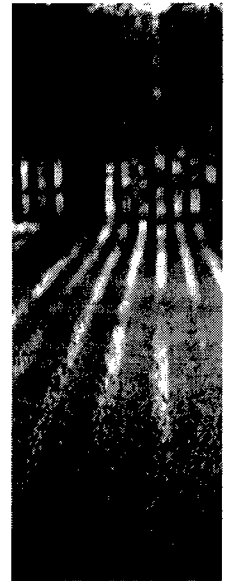
As I drove down the black ribbon of highway [through southern Alabama], knifing through familiar red-clay banks edging pine forests, my imagination ran back to fall 1894 when my grandfather and grandmother, along with their four children, the youngest still in diapers, traveled through the forebears of these same woods, passengers on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad, headed for what they had come to call their "promised land." Their fair hopes for creating a city on a hill must have been tried as they neared their destination, which they would find to be a desolate, thickly wooded site high on a bluff on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. Nothing on the route they were traveling could have been familiar to them. How could they not have experienced at least a little anxiety? Family lore, however, has it that my grandfather, just turned 33, was unshakably optimistic,

filled with confidence in his ability to create a model community free from the gross exploitation, inequality, and manifold injustices of Gilded Age America. He thought they were realistic when they named their soon-to-be-founded community Fairhope.

Now, I was driving toward the town he had created and directed for 40 years and which my father had led for 36 more after him. Fairhope was my spiritual home, the place where my values were shaped and my moral compass established. I looked forward to roaming the bluffs above the bay and the beaches along the shore—and to reflecting, once again, on the dreams that had been woven into the place of my birth and rearing. I longed for a time machine to transport me to that train, carrying my grandfather along to his destination. We would talk about what he really expected to accomplish and why he had risked so much against such formidable odds.

As I reflected on what he had written about the imperfections and injustices of his America and on the better world he hoped to create, the dark thoughts I had about my country, now more than a century later, kept intruding. I remembered a passage from one of his early writings in which he lamented that it was impossible to live in his America without becoming enmeshed in one form or another of exploitation or injustice and the abandonment of principle. The pressure merely to exist, he wrote, moved “even a good man to turn his back on what he knows to be his true self and higher convictions [and] to pursue with the utmost concentration of his energies the prize of material gain.” It was a world he could no longer abide.

For a little boy growing up in the Fairhope of the 1930s and 1940s, as I did, the fair hopes of 1894 seemed everywhere to have been fulfilled. What such a youngster experienced most immediately in those years was a sense of freedom and security in an environment of harmony and sensuous beauty. In retrospect, I think of it as a nurturing communal park. There were no private homes or commercial structures monopolizing either views or access to the bay. In addition to the bay, the sandy beaches, and the wooded bluffs, there were ravines with red-clay banks and white-sand bottoms that cut through the town; and, not far away, a deep, clear, cold, fresh-water creek, overhung with oak limbs festooned with Spanish moss. These natural treasures were our Shangri-la. Nowhere did we see “private property” or “keep-out”



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signs. Nor was there a big house on a hill or a rich planter or banker to stand over us. The community's special treasures belonged to us all, shielded against the ravages of wealth, power, and privilege.

Inspired by Henry George's belief in land as our common inheritance and his tempered version of the cooperative commonwealth, the Fairhoppers joined to their radical economic and social practices equally radical educational ideas. In our "organic" school, as we called it—attending to the whole person, body, mind, and spirit—we found another place of security and freedom. With our broad academic curriculum joined with art, crafts, dance, drama, and music classes, we grew up feeling the school was for us, not that we were to fit into some preconceived notion of what we ought to be or become. We came to learn because we wanted to.

Somewhere along the way, still a young boy, I learned that all of these blessings were neither accidental nor the natural order of things in the United States, much less in the American South. I have strong memories of my father reading to me the constitution of our community, written by his father, declaring that Fairhope was to be "a model community . . . free from all forms of private monopoly," where its citizens would have "equality of opportunity, the full reward of individual effort, and the benefits of co-operation in matters of general concern." Our lives seemed to be lived with high purpose.

As I turned off the interstate onto the commercially blighted last stretch of highway into Fairhope, dark broodings crowded out my reverie. Musings on the colony's idealistic origins and inspiring early history gave way to melancholy. I felt a sharp sense of loss over the faded sense of a life once lived with high purpose; the subversion of a reformist mission; and the end of free land that had been Fairhope's *raison d'être*.

Quite apart from all of Fairhope's many charms and attractions—the beauty of the bay, gulleys, pine forests, and tree-lined streets; the vitality of its writers and artists; the visits of the John Deweys, Clarence Darrows, and Upton Sinclairs; the uniqueness and fame of the school; the binding experience of democratic communalism—the colony's fundamental distinguishing feature, the one from which all else derived, was its land policy. Modifying Henry George's single-tax theory, the colony owned and made freely available to its lessees land that it

rented for homes, businesses, and farms. In exchange for the rental payment, the colony paid all taxes levied on the land and improvement of its lessees—a simulated version of George's single tax on land values. Two generations and more of settlers, most of them men and women of modest means, attributed their material security and sense of personal worth to the free land that gave them their start, all in a culture where land speculation and exploitation were shared anathema.

A spirited woman who cut my hair [at the town's barbershop] almost immediately began dissecting contemporary Fairhope. Fairhope, she informed me, "has become a place for rich people." With a sardonic edge in her voice, she told me how the previous mayor had gone on a visit to Carmel, Calif., to come back with a scheme for turning Fairhope into the Carmel of the Bay. Now, she said, it was filled with all those silly boutiques. She didn't mention it, but I couldn't help thinking of one of the new shops for upscale ladies apparel I had seen on my early-morning walk. It was called, without irony, Utopia.

Having no idea who I was (or who my father and grandfather had been), my haircutter's mood expanded. It was plain wrong, she said, for people to be spending all that money, tearing down houses and buildings all over the town to replace them with huge expensive ones; it was plain wrong to be spending all that money "when there are people homeless, people in the streets, people in poverty." Then, turning mellow for a moment, she told me she had once seen a picture-book history of Fairhope. It seemed to her that not only had life been simpler then; it had been better. People got along, enjoyed what they had, lived a good life without "all this showing off, this pretension, this looking down on you." Then, her coup de grâce: "People like me had a chance back then."

After my haircut, I took a long walk through my old neighborhood, the area now called "the historic district." A block up from the bay, in front of the home where my mother and her family first lived and across the street from the park where my father had proposed to her, I exchanged the morning greeting with a fashionably dressed young woman out on a stroll with her dog. We fell into pleasant conversation. Her face lit up with pleasure when I asked her if she liked living in Fairhope. "Oh, yes, indeed," she replied, explaining that she and

her husband had moved there just a few years ago, choosing it because, well, because of its beauty, its charming boutiques, and good restaurants. The people were all friendly, and, well, she gave a sigh of satisfaction, “it is safe.”

Unspoken in this encounter or in Fairhope booster literature is the enforced whiteness of the town. Almost immediately on their arrival, the founders made a fateful decision to restrict their model community to white people, but they did so in the full knowledge that they were violating the fundamental principle they had set out to demonstrate. When a supporter of the colony raised questions about the exclusion policy, there was no evasion in my grand-father’s reply. “The criticism of our friend,” he wrote, “illustrates anew the difficulties and differences of opinion arising in the effort to determine how far we can practically go in the ‘application of correct theories’ within a general condition of applied incorrect ones over which we have no control.” Racial discrimination, he agreed, was wrong: “We believe in ‘universal equality’—equality of rights”; no man had “more moral or natural right to any particular portion of the earth, the common heritage of mankind, than any other of his fellow men.” But when he asked if the colony should “follow the naked principle of equality unreservedly, regardless of existing conditions” he could not advise it. To do so, he believed, would stir the wrath of the neighboring white Southerners and bring to a cruel end the infant experiment.

In the decades that followed, the “existing conditions” that had occasioned the exclusion policy in the first place did not ease. Both my grandfather and my father spoke and wrote against the white supremacy culture but could not lead the colony or the town government to abandon its commitment to segregation. In fact, as the years wore on and new generations were born into and grew up in a world of segregation, many of the single taxers came to believe that there was no conflict between the principles of their demonstration and the continuation of a whites-only policy. By the 1960s, one of the most prominent among them was a George Wallace ally, and others fell easily in line behind Alabama’s most influential white supremacist.

Fairhope’s population swelled with newcomers in the last decades of the 20th century. Few of them knew of or identified with the founding mission. At the same time,

the Single Tax Corp. played an ever-diminishing role in the life of the town. Its landholdings had not increased significantly for decades, the town government owned and maintained the public utilities once identified with the colony, and the rising popularity of the entire eastern shore drove land values up sharply. The corporation, unable to diminish land speculation, acquiesced in the transfers of its most desirable lands for huge sums of money. In the midst of all these boom times, the town annexed areas to the north, where well-to-do white people lived but firmly resisted vigorous demands from black leaders to annex contiguous areas to the south, where they lived. The “existing conditions” of the 1890s and 1960s had vanished, but racial mores were now too deeply entrenched—and too little challenged—to permit a reckoning with history and a righting of wrongs. Fairhope became, almost as never before, an enclave of white people and, increasingly, well-to-do white people.

I continued my walk in silence. Everywhere, there was evidence of my haircutter’s complaint. Charming homes, authentic reminders of the egalitarian roots of the model community, were crumbling before the bulldozer, making way for the mansions of the rich that so aroused the ire of the few remaining Fairhoppers.

Then, there were the yellow ribbons. Hardly a yard was without one, tied to a post box, fixed to a tree, laced in a doorway, all shown off by the manicured lawns they graced. Their message was reinforced along the way by “Support our troops” signs. “Stand up for peace” placards were nowhere to be seen. Yellow ribbons, manicured lawns, and giant new homes—this was the Fair-hope of the 21st century.

This lockstep display of ribbons and signs, as I was to learn later, came, in part, at the request of the mayor. Fairhope, he apparently believed, should have its patriotism mobilized and on display. I had once been one of “our troops”—a squad leader in a mortar section of a weapon’s platoon of an Army infantry company. I wore my uniform proudly and felt admired in it, both at home and overseas. But the thought that I and my comrades were being used for a cause that was less than noble never crossed the minds of anyone I knew or had ever heard of.

I was joined for lunch that day by one of the old Fairhoppers, a woman absorbed with organizing a tour of

“historic” homes (“see them before they are torn down”), writing vignettes of Fairhope’s golden days, and still struggling to bring the Organic School back to its founding principles. As we reflected on the yellow ribbons and the disappearing homes, she recounted the story of a Single Tax stalwart who had told an Elderhostel class that if E.B. Gaston were to walk the streets of Fairhope today, he would know that the model community of his dreams had become a reality. We both shook our heads in disbelief, not needing to say that it would be my grandfather’s nightmare, not his dream, that he would encounter.

I left Fairhope unsure of what my days there had taught me about the state of our union. Three out of four Fairhope voters opted for George W. Bush in 2000. By the 21st century, the South had become the engine driving the Republican Party. The story of how this had come about is complicated, but we know it was anchored in the race-based “southern strategy” Nixon launched at the end of the 1960s and the “social issues” strategy his successors added a quarter-century later. The first brought well-to-do whites into the party; the second wooed those at the lower end of the income scale. But Fairhope? Even in conservative Alabama, its 75 percent vote for Bush was 19 points higher than the state total of 56 percent.

What seemed to stand out most clearly for me in Fairhope’s history was the gradual erosion of the options open to the colony leaders, the inevitable declining significance of its land policy, and then the dissipation of the idealism and vision of most of its remaining members and leaders. All of this made it easy for the molders of the new Fairhope to appropriate the luster and beauty of the historic community and to convert it into a fortified jewel of contented conservatism. We historians write about unintended consequences. I cannot imagine a better example than what I saw in the walks I took through my hometown in spring 2003. I know my father and grandfather would have felt the same way.

Fortified jewels of contented conservatism exist all over America, of course, more of them in the South than ever before. Flying their yellow ribbons, they have cut themselves off from the historic roots of American idealism and are the backbone of the Bush regime. They will mobilize to thwart regime change in 2004. We who

will strive to prevail against them need to keep alive our fair hopes that the call for a revival of America's "rich tradition of resistance" will be answered. It will be a resistance faithful to the dream of a more worthy America, perhaps with the power of recapturing those who have abandoned it.

For Fairhope, it is probably too late to change significantly the voting percentages in 2004, but it is not too late for a once-energizing tradition of resistance to be revitalized. I have written in this essay about the spirit of the woman who cut my hair but not of the band of writers, artists, and free thinkers that still distinguishes Fairhope from other non-university southern communities. They once set the tone of the model community; they are now an embattled minority. On my last visit, one of them showed me a book my grandfather had inscribed to her. "Yours for justice," he had written in his bold hand. "Why don't we stand up for justice again?" my friend asked me. It was a good question.

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