Cooperative Economics and Black Capitalism in Hancock County, Georgia, 1966-1976

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Between 1966 and 1976, there was a great struggle for political and economic power in Hancock County, Georgia. Led by an itinerant civil rights organizer, John McCown, activists swept to power winning a majority on the county commission in the 1968 elections. A black school teacher, Edith Ingram, was elected county ordinary giving the insurgents control of the courthouse. Hancock County became the first black-controlled county in the Deep South since Reconstruction. The national press celebrated the elections as a symbol of a New South that was finally being born and the Johnson Administration hailed the elections as proof that their civil rights policies were bearing fruit.[[1]](#footnote-1) McCown and his supporters quickly moved to consolidate their political control, and began a protracted struggle to desegregate the county school system. They also embarked on an ambitious program of economic development through a community development corporation, the East Central Committee for Opportunity or ECCO, the centerpiece of which was a 360-acre cooperative catfish farm located at Mayfield on the Ogeechee River.

. Initially the structures of white power and control buckled in the face of McCown’s professional political organization. But far from being the transformative political moment that outside observers had hoped it was, Hancock County was soon convulsed in racial turmoil. Within a decade, the political narrative emanating from the county shifted dramatically. Instead of creating a new politics of hope and opportunity for all, McCown and the civil rights activists were accused of criminal activities, and investigated by state and federal authorities. By December 1976, John McCown was dead and five members of his inner circle were under federal indictment. The dream of economic empowerment—the projects that comprised what *Newsweek* called the “Catfish Empire”—was in ruins.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To write about the history of the civil rights movement in Hancock County, Georgia in the 1960s and 1970s requires historians to confront a false narrative. It is a problem familiar to historians of the era, and yet the story of the struggle in Hancock has had a peculiar and stubborn staying power that has obscured—even erased—a long history of resistance by Hancock blacks. In this account, race relations in the county had historically been calm and respectful. Racial conflicts were handled quietly through the intercession of a clique of powerful white landowners. There was no history of lynching or mass violence. Hancock, one observer claimed, was “lynch-proof.” Generations of whites and blacks had lived together peacefully until John McCown, the “outside agitator” and Black Power militant, destroyed that historic comity. McCown, they argued, built a corrupt political machine and used public revenues to enrich himself and his political cronies, and to launch attacks against the county’s white minority. It took years for that particular political narrative to take root and more than forty years after McCown’s death, it remains the most influential interpretation of these events.[[3]](#footnote-3) In and of itself, that version of history is remarkable only for what it excludes. While there are many facets to the story—political economic and social—this essay will focus on the economics of the freedom struggle and the long history of cooperative economic empowerment efforts in Hancock’s African American community that culminated with the construction of the so-called “Catfish Empire” in the 1960s and 70s. Far from being an historical anomaly, the McCown movement’s experiments in “black capitalism” were deeply rooted in an historical experience with cooperative economics and community development. I’ll also offer some preliminary thoughts on why these experiments failed.

John McCown was born in 1934 in Horry County, South Carolina. His father was a teamster; his mother a share-cropper. When his father was killed, McCown and his siblings moved in with their grandmother who was already raising their four cousins. McCown’s mother relocated to Harlem where she worked as a public health nurse and sent what money she could back to South Carolina. McCown’s childhood was marked by hunger and violence. After graduating from high school in 1954, he joined the US Air Force and served for the next nine years. He joined the local NAACP in Colorado Springs when he was stationed at the Air Force Academy and served as a liaison for black airmen who faced near constant discrimination.[[4]](#footnote-4)

McCown later claimed that the event that changed his life and put him on the path to political organizing was the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and the slaughter of the four little girls there. After that he determined to join the movement. He left the Air Force soon after and moved to San Diego to attend California Western University. While in San Diego he took a position as a community organizer for the Congress of Racial Equality, and, in addition to his university studies, he began a program of intensive reading and self-education at a local Africana Studies Center. He also claimed to have learned the art of grant-writing as an assignment for the California Western debate team—a skill that served him well in his later career. It was during his San Diego years that McCown met Whitney Young, director of the National Urban League. McCown was inspired by Young’s ideas about economic enterprise zones and targeted investment in black communities. After McCown had established himself in Hancock County, one of the first national leaders to visit was Young who established an Urban League office in Sparta.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1965 McCown sent his wife and children to Hilton Head Island to live with her family. He got on a bus and began a long journey through the South. He considered it a fact-finding mission. He spent weeks on the road visiting cooperative economic ventures including catfish farms in Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta. He surfaced in Selma, Alabama where he met Stokely Carmichael and participated in the March from Selma to Montgomery. McCown eventually arrived in Atlanta in the late summer of 1965 where he renewed his acquaintances with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Hosea Williams who offered him a position as a field organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In order to continue his political work and take care of his family, McCown often worked for more than one organization at a time. At the same time he was traveling for SCLC, he also entered the anti-poverty field by taking jobs with ACTION first in Savannah, and then in Athens. McCown had misgivings about SCLC’s organizing strategies. He believed that the large marches and direct action campaigns were useful in the short term, but the use of itinerant organizers such as himself was ineffectual because there was no way they could connect with the community in a way that would bring meaningful long-term structural change. His work with the anti-poverty programs gave him insight into the economic underpinnings of racial oppression. By 1966 he had established connections with Frances Pauley and the Georgia Council for Human Relations (GCHR). In the same year he became the Council’s Executive Director. It was under the auspices of the GCHR that McCown began to apply his ideas. He convinced the group’s Board of Directors to invest all of their resources in Hancock County rather than spreading them thinly around the rest of the state. And now McCown had access to the network of private foundations that had long funded the Council’s work in Georgia and he set to work selling them on his ideas for cooperative economic ventures in rural Hancock.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This biographical sketch demonstrates the breadth of McCown’s political and intellectual influences. He called the complex of ideas that comprised his political, economic, and social vision his “total program.” He believed that you could never have lasting political change without economic empowerment; political and economic transformation were impossible without a social revolution. Given the ideological span of his evolving philosophy, the application of McCown’s ideas was often contradictory and as such the ways the struggle played out on the ground in Hancock County reflected that messiness. There was an activist black church that embraced non-violent direct action and there were those that championed militant Black Power and armed self-defense. Arson, sabotage, and property destruction were tactics employed by both sides in the racial conflict. McCown stayed true to the interracial vision of the Georgia Council. For years he labored to bring poor whites into the movement and build an interracial base of support for his development projects. But with a county population that was 78 percent African American, he knew he had significant political leverage to get what he wanted. McCown publicly expressed his frustration with white intransigence and mused about disengaging from white Hancock and creating an all-black community in the county. He often embraced the militant rhetoric of the Black Power Movement in his dealings with the white community. In word and deed, racial militancy was nestled comfortably within the boundaries of market capitalism. Seemingly, all of the great forces, all of the tactical, strategic, and philosophical threads of movement politics had slammed into this rural backwater.

In a formal sense, the civil rights movement came late to Hancock County. There was, however, a long history of black struggle and resistance and dreams of economic empowerment. There was a failed slave insurrection in 1863, and extensive Union League activity during Reconstruction. There was a black nationalist and separatist impulse that resulted in dozens of Hancock blacks relocating to Liberia in the late 1860s and then again in the 1890s. There was also a long history of mutual aid, economic self-help, and cooperative economics that was often contingent on the one resource that the rural Georgia county had in abundance: land. The dream of land ownership burned brightly in the majority African American community but it was a path to prosperity that was fraught with difficulties. In his classic study black landownership, historian Loren Schweninger has shown that by 1910, 25 percent of black southern farmers owned the land they farmed. In the Upper South, nearly half of black farmers owned land. But in the Deep South, that road to economic independence was more burdensome. The state of Georgia had the lowest levels of black landownership in the region with only 13 percent of the state’s black farmers controlling their own economic resources. Most of their farms were concentrated in areas with the least productive soil. The 1910 Census for Hancock County showed that blacks comprised more than 70 percent of the population but owned only 8 percent of the total acreage of the county.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The lucky few who were able to purchase land tended to congregate in small, predominantly black communities like Devereux and Springfield where families and friends could pool resources to purchase and improve marginal pieces of land and attain a level of self-sufficiency that shielded them from the worst excesses of Jim Crow. The experiences of the Zach Hubert family are instructive here. Hubert, a former slave, received a small gift of cotton from white relatives and joined with his brothers, Floyd and David, to pool resources to purchase and improve undeveloped land for production near Springfield. Their success was, to some degree, contingent on the support of white patrons and achieving a level of self-sufficiency that enabled them to avoid the debt trap that led to economic dependency. Over the course of his long life, Zach Hubert accumulated nearly 1000 acres of land and through crop diversification produced enough food and livestock to maintain his family’s independence. He established a church, an elementary school, and a general store at Springfield.[[8]](#footnote-8) Landownership created the context for independence from white control. It ensured that black farmers like Hubert could purchase supplies on fairer terms than black tenants. They could choose when and where to sell their products at market. Perhaps most importantly they had the freedom to decide when their children should work and when they should attend school. The children of black landowners attained higher levels of education than their poorer peers. All of Zach Hubert’s twelve children were college graduates.

Zach Hubert and his wife Camilla instilled in their children an intense religious faith, a commitment to their community, and a belief that they should be stewards of the land. Nothing illustrates this better than the life and work Hubert’s youngest son, Benjamin. Benjamin Franklin Hubert built on the agrarian ideas of men like Booker T. Washington, Robert R. Moton, and rural sociologist Kenyon Butterfield to become the foremost black spokesperson for black agrarian ideals in the period between the world wars. Benjamin Hubert’s economic vision had a lasting impact on the history of Hancock County; an impact that was largely erased from the historical narrative that emerged during the years of the McCown movement. Born and raised in the Springfield community (later known as the Log Cabin Community), Hubert maintained a commitment to the success of his father’s dream of self-sufficiency as he sought to transform Springfield into a model black farming community; a model that could be replicated across the South.[[9]](#footnote-9)

After graduating from Atlanta Baptist College (now Morehouse) in 1909, Hubert completed his graduate studies under the tutelage of the rural sociologist, Kenyon Butterfield, at Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst. Butterfield had been a member of Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission. His goal was to stem the outmigration from the countryside to the cities through the spread of the principles of scientific agriculture by way of agricultural extension services, the creation of cooperative economic institutions that would make it easier for rural Americans to compete in the marketplace, and the improvement of rural social institutions to improve the quality of rural life. Hubert embraced Butterfield’s ideas and hoped to apply his program at Springfield. He accepted a position at South Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical College at Orangeburg where he taught agricultural science, directed the college’s extension service, and supervised the vocational teacher’s training. In 1919, he was named the Director of the Department of Agriculture at Tuskegee Institute under the direction of Robert R. Moton. Again he supervised vocational teacher’s training, and also directed the Negro Division of the Alabama Extension Service. Moton quickly recognized Hubert’s talents and began grooming him to assume the presidency of Tuskegee when he retired. But in 1926, when offered the position, Hubert shocked the Tuskegee board by declining. Instead he accepted the presidency at Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth—later known as Savannah State College.[[10]](#footnote-10) The institution was nearly bankrupt but it gave Hubert the opportunity to build a program from the ground up. It also put him in closer geographical proximity to Springfield and the chance to transform the community into a laboratory to test his ideas about rural economic development. He would bring public and private resources together to fund the enterprise. His goal was to teach the virtues of rural living and slow the movement of African Americans out of Hancock County to the cities where they were likely to fall into the trap of poverty and despair. “[W]hen a man owns a farm, and knows how to operate it,” Hubert declared, “he is a little king in his own domain.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In Hubert’s estimation, the economic crises of the 1920s and 30s that began with the boll weevil infestation and collapse of the cotton economy provided an opportunity for black communities to take advantage of falling land prices and expand their acreage at a time when many were selling out and looking to the cities for opportunity. He sent Georgia State agricultural extension agents to Springfield to host workshops and teacher training courses. Hubert also tapped the network of private philanthropists who had long supported African American education efforts for additional support. In 1928, Hubert founded the Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life. The members of the Association’s Board of Directors included Robert Moton, Mary McLeod Bethune, John Hope, Julius Rosenwald and George Foster Peabody. To begin implementing his program, Hubert reached out to some of the poorest tenant farmers around Springfield. He paid to renovate their substandard housing and then offered them a contract. Hubert would support them financially for one year if they agreed follow his reforms. These included shrinking the cotton acreage under cultivation and diversifying into foodstuffs and livestock to increase self-sufficiency. They would apply heavy manuring and other fertilizers to increase yields. The techniques worked so well, the tenants recorded a surplus at the end of the year and they deposited the profits at the local bank in Sparta. Other farmers around the Springfield community rallied to Hubert’s effort.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As the reforms took effect and agricultural production increased, the community had to confront the problems of capital formation and a lack of access to credit. Hubert preached the gospel of economic cooperation. The farmers pooled their surpluses of cream, eggs, chickens, and other agricultural products. The community purchased two creamery wagons for sales to Sparta restaurants. They shipped fruits and vegetables to colleges and restaurants in Atlanta, Macon, and Augusta and then reinvested the profits in cooperative business ventures. They established a gas station, grocery store, recreation center, and health clinic. They shared chicken houses, a corn mill, saw mill, and sweet potato curing plant. They built a canning plant, and shared a wheat thresher, and eventually purchased two tractors that were used on a cooperative basis. Hubert established a land bank that offered low interest loans to farmers looking to increase their holdings. Between 1930 and 1950, black landownership declined precipitously across the South. But in Hancock County in the same period black-owned farm land increased from 25,000 acres to 35,000 acres.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In assessing the successes of his program at Springfield, Hubert boasted that 80 percent of the students graduating from the local high school attended college. And therein lay the problem. Hubert’s model community, as historian Mark Shultz has noted, was the victim of its own success.[[14]](#footnote-14) The true beneficiaries of the experiments at the Log Cabin Community were the next generation who went away to college and earned the skills necessary to survive in a rapidly modernizing economy. They grew less and less likely to return home to the agrarian life championed by their parents. The population of the Springfield community shrank dramatically in the 1940s. When Benjamin Hubert died in 1958, the Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life had ceased operations. By the time John McCown arrived in 1966, the work at Springfield was a distant memory soon to be swept from the historical consciousness by the upheavals of the civil rights era. It demonstrates the political power of the outsider narrative that for too long has characterized the history of the McCown movement. John McCown wasn’t reinventing the wheel when he arrived in the Hancock county seat of Sparta in 1966. Instead he was building on the energies, innovations, and experimentation of an earlier generation that had prepared the soil (literally) for his own program of black capitalism. History is contingent. Hubert and the Springfield community achieved a modicum of economic uplift but they lacked political and social power. McCown’s campaign began at the ballot box with electoral success and proceeded to the implementation of an ambitious economic program. But both men faced similar problems; in particular the problems of capital formation and access to credit markets. They both deployed public resources and private foundation money to finance their projects. Both struggled to train a workforce in the technical skills necessary to succeed in the modern market economy, and both sought to level the economic playing field by embracing cooperative organization. The failure to see the connections between the Log Cabin Community at Springfield and the “Catfish Empire” does significant damage to the historical record.

When John McCown arrived in Hancock County, he entered a world that had been in an economic freefall for generations. In the antebellum period, Hancock County was a jewel in King Cotton’s crown. According to the 1860 Census, Hancock was one of the top three wealthiest counties in the United States. One observer called the county seat of Sparta a “modern Mecca.”[[15]](#footnote-15) But postbellum generations faced changes and fluctuations in the international cotton market and proved shockingly inept at finding ways to diversify the economy and slow the collapse. After World War II, the decline picked up momentum. Between 1950 and 1960, Hancock lost 21 percent of its population to outmigration. In 1970, the population of Hancock County was 78 percent African American. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) estimated that out of the nearly 2000 families residing there, 67 percent were living on an income of less than $3000 per year ($15,000 in today’s dollars) making Hancock County one of the poorest in the nation. According to the OEO, 63 percent of the adult population had less than an eighth-grade education. There were almost no recreation facilities. The one movie theatre closed when it was forced to desegregate. Only 18 percent of the county’s housing had indoor plumbing.[[16]](#footnote-16)

McCown called his vision for Hancock County a “total program”—it was political, economic, and social. From the beginning of his time in Hancock, McCown blurred the lines between political and economic empowerment. He almost always had one institutional foot in the world of civil rights organization, and the other in the world of anti-poverty programs. The economic projects that ECCO undertook had powerful symbolic meaning to the black community of Hancock County and were meant to change the psychology of the oppressed. One of his first challenges was to win the trust of Hancock’s black population. He found that some of the loudest voices for change came from black high school students frustrated by their parents’ perceived reticence to become politically involved. McCown reached out to this nascent organization by preaching and teaching self-sufficiency. One of his first projects was to purchase an old silk screen so that the students could produce and sell their own t-shirts. Proceeds from the t-shirt sales were used to finance everything from political activities to cultural events. The students loved it and their numbers swelled.[[17]](#footnote-17) McCown responded with a second project. He invoked Biblical scripture, the Book of Exodus: “You shall no longer give the people straw to make brick as before. Let them go and gather straw by themselves. And you shall lay on them the quota of bricks which they made before. You shall not diminish it.” He told the students that there was a long history of black artisans and skilled craftsmanship in Hancock County, but that not one black contractor or licensed plumber or carpenter had ever won a contract from the City of Sparta or the County. They were hired only as laborers. McCown then demonstrated to the students how to use water, red clay and straw to make simple mudbricks. They made hundreds of them and then set about building a small house. City officials inspected the structure and declared it unsafe. But years later one of the students proudly remembered that the building stood at the site for years before it was finally bulldozed.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In 1968, when John McCown became director of the Georgia Council, he set about transforming the organization from its traditional role as a civil rights group into a broad-based economic development organization. In November 1968, his political organization swept to power in county elections. McCown was elected County Commissioner as a Democrat. At the same time the Georgia Council, with assistance from the Southern Regional Council and Office of Economic Opportunity, established a community development corporation, the East Central Committee for Opportunity (ECCO) to invest the federal and private monies that were beginning to flow into the community. Almost overnight, the black community had access to the levers of political power and the beginnings of the necessary infrastructure for capital formation and investment. On the political front, they launched a major campaign to desegregate the county schools. McCown characterized the desegregation fight, not as political, but as an integral part of the economic struggle. The county school system was Hancock’s largest employer.[[19]](#footnote-19)

ECCO hit the ground running. The cooperative purchased the local movie theatre. It had operated for years as a segregated space and the owners shuttered the operation after being ordered to desegregate. ECCO’s purchase of the building had a deep symbolic resonance as well. Located in the center of Sparta’s downtown business district, the ECCO Theatre was the first black-owned business in the history of the downtown area. It employed six people and made a profit for years. ECCO joined with the OEO, and the Economic Development Administration to construct a cement block plant to produce masonry products for market. The venture was immediately profitable. An audit in 1971 showed that the project had created fifty jobs plus it supported thirty temporary workers and earned a net profit of $215,000. It is a measure of the political vitriol in this period that the plant was eventually moved to Mayfield because the city of Sparta refused to expand its water-line by 100 feet to meet the needs of the operation.[[20]](#footnote-20)

One of ECCO’s most successful projects was the construction of a 150-unit low income housing project in Mayfield. The corporation had won millions in housing assistance to build 250 units in Sparta but the project was blocked by the white city council. As racial conflict worsened, the city government was determined to manage the influx of black residents into the white majority town. Politics—as we hear so often—makes for strange bedfellows. The Mayfield housing project had a powerful patron in the person of the arch-segregationist US Senator Herman Talmadge. Talmadge’s last major piece of legislation was the Rural Development Act passed in 1971 and he publicly supported McCown’s economic development projects interceding on ECCO’s behalf with government agencies.[[21]](#footnote-21) McCown and the Senator developed an easy rapport. Both men appreciated good whiskey and when they had the opportunity, they enjoyed smoking cigars and swapping stories. Talmadge was the guest of honor at the ribbon-cutting for the opening of the complex.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The centerpiece of the Hancock economic development project was the catfish farm. With seed money provided by the OEO and the Ford Foundation, ECCO financed the construction of a massive 358 acre farm on the Ogeechee River. At the time the media touted it as the largest such operation in the world. McCown, who always planned long-term, spared no expense. The technology employed was state-of-the-art and the operation included a processing plant where the fish could be flash frozen and shipped to market. The entire operation was community owned. For five dollars, any resident could purchase a share of stock in the corporation. Black farmers could for free avail themselves of the farm’s resources and technical advice to construct their own catfish ponds. Any fish produced would be processed and marketed by ECCO. Within two years the catfish farm had created 200 new jobs, produced 60 million fingerlings, and grossed a profit of $250,000.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This is just a broad sketch of the major economic projects undertaken by ECCO. The community development corporation was involved in myriad other business efforts across the county. But from the beginning the cooperative confronted an array of structural impediments that hindered growth. These economic projects were undertaken against the backdrop of significant white resistance. The political turmoil in the early 1970s bordered on chaos and provoked two major interventions by state authorities. But in the context of Hancock’s economic history which is the subject of this essay, there was no cure-all for the crushing poverty of the area. Before McCown and ECCO, the barriers to capital formation were extreme. There was no access to the banking system, and no access to credit in the county. Federal housing loan programs were weaponized against black residents. The few who availed themselves of low interest loans were victimized by the predatory practices of state and local entities overseeing the loans. Black-owned homes and land were often seized in foreclosure.[[24]](#footnote-24) McCown brought millions of development dollars into the county, but even then the local financial system remained closed. The local Hancock County Savings Bank refused to accept ECCO deposits, a situation that forced the CDC to deposit their money in the black-owned Atlanta bank, Citizen’s Trust. Regardless, the nearly $11 million in federal and private foundation capital had an immediate effect on the community. But access to money proved long-term to be a hollow achievement in the face of other structural problems.[[25]](#footnote-25)

McCown and ECCO had to demonstrate to the government and private foundations how they were spending their money. It required them to constantly push for new ventures, new investments, and new businesses that justified federal and foundation support. But one of the most intractable problems ECCO faced was the dearth of skilled workers necessary to manage and operate their far-flung business enterprises. Generations of underfunding black education in the county and the lack of an educated workforce, and the continual brain drain of outmigration siphoned off the best and brightest to urban areas where there was more opportunity. The closest vocational school to Hancock County was in Macon. There were no adult education programs in the County. To put it simply, ECCO could start as many businesses as it wanted but it didn’t have the workforce in place to run them. They were missing key middle level managers. They had difficulties attracting local residents to training programs offered by Georgia Tech and Atlanta University. Job training often had to begin with remediation in reading, writing, and mathematics. This problem plagued ECCO’s operations for the duration of its existence.[[26]](#footnote-26) One of the criticisms of ECCO was administrative bloat. Critics claimed that McCown was paying his cronies to maintain personal power. The criticism was true only insomuch as there were very few in the community that McCown could trust to have the skills required to keep the development projects afloat. His staff was asked to perform multiple jobs and they got paid for their labor. At the same time, ECCO spent tens of thousands of dollars hiring consultants and technical support staff to keep their businesses running and hopefully train the necessary managers. It was a constant uphill struggle.

Another problem that hastened the collapse of the McCown movement was the treacherous political terrain that had to be negotiated at the state and national levels. John McCown’s personal brand of politics was intensely pragmatic. Despite his election in 1968, he evinced few partisan loyalties. Political parties were vehicles for achieving his economic goals. His first priority was to keep the money flowing into Hancock County. Likewise, his political enemies’ goal was always to stop it. In 1968, one of Richard Nixon’s campaign promises was to end Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and abolish the OEO. Nixon also famously expropriated the phrase black power and reduced it to an economic calculus—what was termed black capitalism. Historians have tended to see Nixonian black capitalism as a Trojan horse; a cynical political ploy that seemed to satisfy many constituencies without any substantive costs, political or economic. By most measures, those critics are correct. But McCown recognized something else. Whatever rhetorical strategy was in play, there was still real money in the pipeline if one was savvy enough to get hold of it. Hancock’s black community came to power in the Democratic Party. In the summer of 1972, McCown shocked even his closest associates by becoming a member of the county’s moribund Republican Party. Taking advantage of a loophole in the state party’s by-laws, McCown had himself elected chair of the Republican county apparatus. With a Republican administration in power in Washington, he hoped he would now have easier access to federal money. He knew he could guarantee one thing that mattered to Nixon—votes. McCown told his supporters in 1972 that they should vote for whoever they wanted at the state and local levels, but for President, vote Nixon. In November, Richard Nixon carried Hancock County—the first time a Republican carried the County since Reconstruction.[[27]](#footnote-27)

These machinations set McCown on a collision course with the nominal leader of the state’s Democratic Party, Governor Jimmy Carter. McCown and Carter already had a strained personal relationship. By early 1974, Carter was already gearing up for a White House run. An explosion of racial violence in May of that year embarrassed Carter and he was forced to personally intervene in the crisis. Carter sympathized with ECCO’s economic program, but John McCown was a potential political problem that needed to be eliminated. The intricacies of this part of the story are beyond the purview of this essay. What followed were audits, media investigations, and federal intervention and indictments. When McCown and five coworkers were indicted, the federal government and private foundations froze grant payments to ECCO projects and the economic development initiatives in Hancock County ground to a halt. On January 31st, 1976, John McCown was killed in a plane crash near Mayfield. Although ECCO crept along for a few years after his death, for all intents and purposes McCown’s dream died with him.

John McCown’s approach to race relations was animated by the idea that American racism had deep economic roots. The perpetuation of white supremacy was tied directly to economic inequality. Give African Americans equal access to that system and you could weaken, even begin to dismantle, the infrastructure of white power and oppression. In 1970, a British interviewer asked McCown if he believed in Black Power. He responded: “It depends on how you define that. If you define Black Power as a black sense of superiority where by one race becomes subservient to the other, no. But in that same sense, I don’t believe in white power either. I do believe in Green Power, though, I think the whole problem is an economic one.” We should not conclude that “Green Power” advocate John McCown failed to grasp the complexity of the political and economic situation in Hancock County. In almost the very next breath he expressed a cold, hard reality. “These people [referring to whites] would rather die and go to hell, than be pulled to prosperity by a black man.” In the end, he was right.[[28]](#footnote-28)

What these stories of cooperative economics and experiments with black capitalism demonstrate is the wealth of creative responses that the oppressed have deployed to carve out a space of survival and a quality of life that would enable members of the community to live with dignity. By taking the long view, and reclaiming the ways in which earlier generations responded to the political economy of the Jim Crow South, we find a new lens through which to view the tumultuous events of the 1960s and 70s. In that context the story of the McCown movement isn’t an anomalous historical moment but a part of a broader, richer tableau. In a system that excluded them, the African American community in Hancock County joined together as they had since the time of slavery to pool resources, and aid one another through an array of cooperative ventures. All boats should rise. They took advantage of public and private resources for the betterment of the entire community. That these efforts failed explains much about the ways in which the structures of power that shape our politics and economics adapt and replicate themselves over time. The fact that the story of John McCown has for so long been seen as aberrational rather than as a part of a long history of resistance demonstrates the power of our historical and political narratives and the ways in which they too buttress and shape race in America.

1. Paul W. Valentine, “Negro Takeover Jars Georgia County,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 1968; David Nordan, “Hancock Resigned to Negro Leadership,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 22, 1968; Thomas A. Johnson, Blacks in Georgia Share Power With White Minority,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Georgia: The Catfish Empire,” *Newsweek* (October 19, 1970): 48-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Surprisingly little has been written the events in Hancock County. There is one published monograph written by journalist and Emory University Public Information Officer, John Rozier. Rozier was born and raised in Sparta, members of his family participated in the white resistance to McCown, and although he postured as a neutral observer, evidence in the John Rozier Papers at Emory show that he too was working actively to undermine the McCown insurgency. His efforts included hiring a private investigator to unearth compromising information on McCown and feeding his contacts in the news media damaging information that was meant to shift the story coming out of Hancock and draw the attention of state and federal investigators. The resulting book, *Black Boss: Political Revolution in a Georgia County*, is a problematic work that describes the McCown movement as a criminal enterprise. Black Boss is still in print and it remains the only book describing these events. See John Rozier, *Black Boss: Political Revolution in a Georgia County* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982). For a more balanced and insightful interpretation see Jesse Bolden, “A Study of the Rise and Fall of the John McCown Liberation Movement in Hancock County, Georgia from 1870-1976,” PhD Dissertation University of Virginia, 2005. Bolden was a local high school teacher who represented the Mayfield community on the Hancock County Commission for many years. His dissertation is an essential source for biographical information on McCown and an excellent source on the social history of Hancock County. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Biographical information on McCown is culled from multiple sources. See Interview with Annie Mae McCown (wife) by John Rozier, October 4, 1978, Box 5, Folder 8, John Rozier Papers, 1967-1987, Stuart A Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University; Interview with Covell Moore by John Rozier, December 2, 1978, Box 5, Folder 8, JAP; Rozier, *Black Boss*, 20-25; Bolden, “Rise and Fall of the McCown Liberation Movement,” 14-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bolden, “Rise and Fall of the McCown Liberation Movement,” 40-46 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with Annie Mae McCown by John Rozier, October 4, 1978, Box 5, Folder 8, JRP. On McCown’s ascension to the directorship of the Georgia Council see Photocopy, “Georgia Council on Human Relations, Executive Committee Minutes, November 2, 1967, Box 2 Folder 1, JRP; Rozier, *Black Boss*, 34-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). For material on the early history of African Americans in Hancock County see Forrest Shivers, The Land Between: Hancock County, Georgia to 1940 (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, Publishers, 1990). For information on black landownership in Hancock County between 1880 and 1940, the work of historian Mark Shultz is essential. See Shultz, “The Dream Realized?: African American Landownership in Central Georgia Between Reconstruction and World War Two,” *Agricultural History* 72 (Spring 1998): 301-302; and Shultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 44-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For information on the Hubert family, especially the life and work of Zach Hubert, see Lester F. Russell, *Profile of a Black Heritage* (self-published, 1977), 16-87. Russell was a historian and the grandson of Zach Hubert. His book contains a wealth of information about Zach and his descendants. Also see Shultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*, 46-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Russell, *Profile of a Black Heritage*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 104; Schultz, “Benjamin Hubert and the Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life,” in Debra A. Reid and Evan P. Bennett, eds., *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: Black Landowning Families Since Reconstruction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 83-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hubert quoted in the *Savannah Morning News*, March 29, 1939. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schultz, “Benjamin Hubert,” 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 95-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 97-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For the finest work on the agricultural history of Hancock County (sans slavery), see James C. Bonner, “Genesis of Agricultural Reform in the Cotton Belt,” *Journal of Southern History* 9 (November 1943): 475-500; and Bonner, “Profile of a Late Ante-Bellum Community,” *American Historical Review* 49 (July 1944): 663-680. Also see Shivers, *The Land Between*, 66-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For the data from the Office of Economic Opportunity see Richard F. Long, “From Cotton to Catfish: Black Enterprise Thrives in Georgia,” *Opportunity: Magazine of the Office of Economic Opportunity* 1 (1971): 10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Information on McCown’s early organizing efforts is found in Bolden, “Rise and Fall of the McCown Liberation Movement,” 62-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 72-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On the school desegregation campaign see Interview with W. M. “Red” Andrews by John Rozier, Box 5, Folder 5, JRP. Andrews was the superintendent of the county school system when McCown arrived. He oversaw the transaction that sold a Sparta school building to a group of white citizens who were attempting to avoid sending their children to integrated schools. Also see Rozier, *Black Boss*, 51-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ronald Parker, “A Demonstration and Action Program for Economic Development to Research, Promote, and Improve or Establish Cooperatives and Other Businesses in Hancock County, Georgia,” (Sparta, GA: Hancock Committee for Social and Economic Development), 11-12, and “Appendix 4: A Preliminary Study for a Concrete Black Plant in Sparta, Georgia,” 60-76. This document, prepared by Harvey Diamond of the Industrial Development Division at the Georgia Institute of Technology under the auspices of the US Economic Development Administration and Department of Commerce, contains employment and cash flow statistics for the plant. Also see Bolden, “Rise and Fall of the McCown Liberation Movement,” 132-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Parker, “A Demonstration and Action Program for Economic Development,” 4, 6-7, 24, 28; “Appendix 1: Letter from Robert T. Grey to James Smith, Hancock County Commission,” 32-37. The letter contains a feasibility study for the housing project. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bolden, “Rise and Fall of the McCown Liberation Movement,” 149-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Parker, “A Demonstration and Action Program for Economic Development,” 151-185. This document details the connections between the Georgia Council, ECCO, and the catfish farm as well as the budgets, employment figures, and financial data from 1969 to 1971. Also see Peter Range, “Boss Man,” *Esquire* (January 1973): 26, 170; and “Hancock County,” *New Republic* (March 6, 1971): 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Bolden, “Rise and Fall of the McCown Liberation Movement,” 149-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Range, “Boss Man,” *Esquire*, 26; “Hancock County,” *New Republic*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Parker, “A Demonstration and Action Program for Economic Development,” 4-5, 10-11, 15, 18-20, 23-24, 28-30. This document also contains proposals to create a vocational/adult education center in Hancock County, as well as a model for leadership training that could be replicated in other parts of the South. See “Appendix 8: Leadership Training Model,” 122-150; and “Appendix 10: Preliminary Data Skills Center,” 187-199. This plan never had sufficient funding to be brought to fruition. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Rozier, *Black Boss*, 99-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Thames Television, “This Week: Georgia’s Return of the Native,” YouTube Video, 23:12, Originally broadcast November 26, 1970 (Accessed July 11, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)