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The cover image is by Harold Fisk, 1944, plate fifteen, sheet one, showing stream courses from *The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River*. The map covers sections of Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee.

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Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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FEATURE

PRINCEVILLE AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL LANDSCAPE OF RACE

By Richard M. Mizelle, Jr.

Traveling east on Interstate 64 from the capital city of Raleigh, North Carolina you will see a sign for a town called Princeville. Like

so many small towns and cities in the South, Princeville has a rich, contested, complicated, and all too forgotten history. There are no Civil War



The muddy deserted streets of flood ravaged Princeville, North Carolina stand in silent testimony to the destruction wrought by the Tar River. Princeville, NC 9/28/99.

Photo By Dave Saville/FEMA News Photo.

battlegrounds to commemorate inside the town limits nor was it particularly visible as a place of protest during the Civil Rights Movement. Nonetheless Princeville is a remarkable symbol of environmental resiliency dating back to the end of the American Civil War. This essay uses Princeville as a window into the long history of environmental racism. Princeville has a unique environmental history, initially situated on land, discarded and unwanted by whites, that was prone to frequent flooding, and surviving back-to-back hurricanes in 1999. Yet this was only half the environmental burden, as residents also dealt with Jim Crow-era vigilante violence directed at a self-sufficient all-black town. While scholars have often defined issues of environmental racism emerging from a post-Civil Rights era momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, Princeville provides an important case study of continuity; it links the disciplining of African Americans into marginal land in the nineteenth century to questions of forced displacement in the late twentieth century.



Originally known as Freedom Hill, Princeville was settled by freed slaves on an unwanted floodplain.

Freedom Hill was the name given in 1865 to a settlement of recently freed slaves near the Tar River in territory occupied by Union troops.[i] Across the South former slaves bolted for Union encampments and protection during the Civil War, many willing to fight in exchange for their freedom. When word arrived that the defiant Confederacy would not prevail, angry and bitter planters evicted former slaves out into the cold, penniless and with only the clothes on their backs.[ii] Facing a harsh winter, ex-slaves often set up encampments along the border spaces of sometimes unsympathetic Union settlements; the wives and children of enlisted men were being promised food and clothes that did not always come. Others died in the snow, suffering from malnutrition, hypothermia, and disease. As historian Jim Downs writes, “Bondspeople who fled from plantation slavery during and after the war, and embraced their freedom with hope and optimism did not expect that it would lead to sickness, disease, suffering, and death. The Civil War, however, produced the largest biological

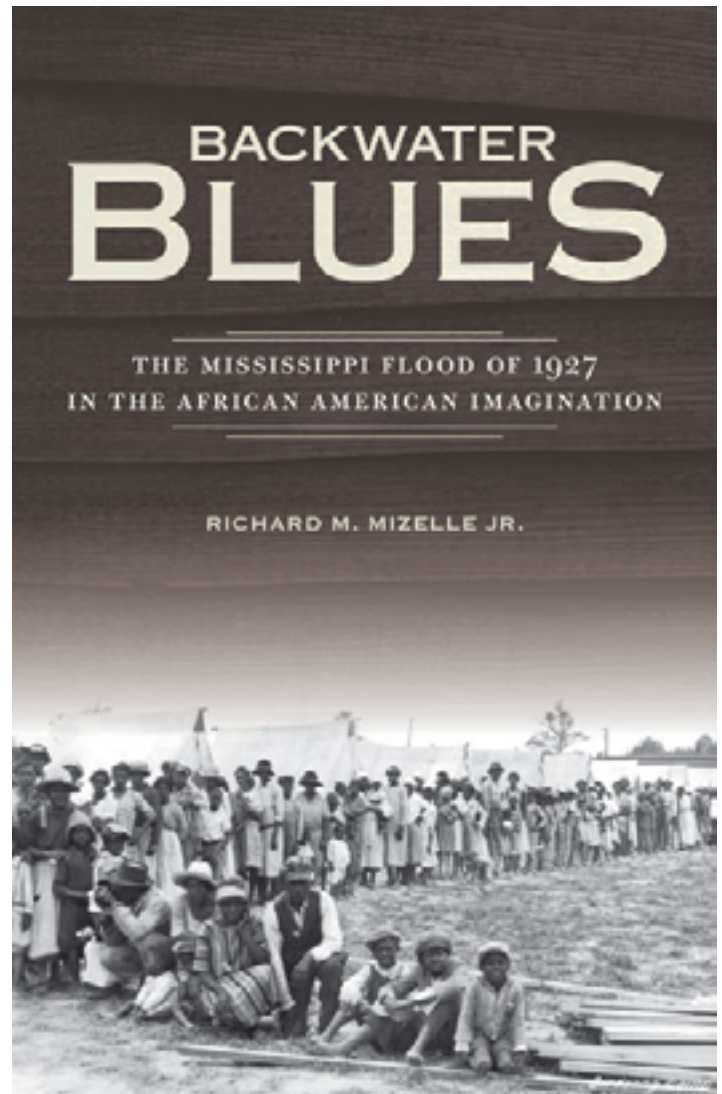
crisis of the nineteenth century...Emancipation liberated bondspeople from slavery, but they often lacked clean clothing, adequate shelter, proper food, and access to medicine in their escape toward Union lines. Even after the war ended, they continually struggled to survive in a region torn apart by disease and destruction.”[iii] Former slaveholders and pro-slavery physicians would argue that African Americans were dying and becoming sick from tuberculosis, cholera, pneumonia, and other diseases because they were biologically unfit for freedom and citizenship. It was a convenient and self-serving scientific argument that hoped to re-inscribe control over former slaves by suggesting that African Americans were inherently and biologically prone to disease, and that the paternalistic plantation economy protected African Americans from illness.[iv] Diseases that ex-slaves suffered were the result of starvation, abject poverty, poor clothing and housing, and lack of resources. [v] The mere survival of African Americans in the years after the Emancipation Proclamation showed resiliency.

A Town's Namesake

Richard Turner Prince was among the roughly 10,000 slaves around Edgecombe County on the eve of the Civil War laboring on tobacco and cotton farms, and as brick masons and blacksmiths. Born in 1843 under slavery, Prince joined other former slaves in the early settlement of Freedom Hill. Though not much is currently known about this portion of Prince's life, by 1873 he worked as a carpenter and purchased a plot of land to build a house for his wife Sarah and children Ephraim, Sarah, and Cora. Prince was instrumental in the early history of Freedom Hill, spearheading the construction of buildings and living spaces for residents. When Freedom Hill was officially incorporated in 1885, residents paid homage to the area's strongest and earliest advocate by calling the new town, Princeville.[vi]

The area known as Freedom Hill, and later Princeville, was initially situated on marshy and swampy land along the Tar River, south of Tarboro, North Carolina.[vii] African Americans have often been forced into the most degraded and treacherous environmental spaces to live and work, the early history of Princeville providing an important example. Princeville represents an important case of historical environmental injustice because of the ways in which early Princeville settlers were forced to occupy the most vulnerable riparian landscape in the nineteenth century.

As I argue in my book, *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination*, too often scholars narrowly frame questions of environmental injustice as emerging from two moments. Beginning in 1978, mostly poor white and African Americans residents in upstate New York demanded answers regarding the toxic materials and carcinogens that began percolating from sealed underground containers causing nausea, deformity, birth defects, and other sickness. Known as the Love



Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination.

Canal disaster, the events that unfolded in this Niagara Falls community have long been regarded as helping to shift the consciousness of environmental activism.[viii] Secondly, scholars point to the protest over the dumping of polychlorinated biphenyls in a predominately working-class African American community in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982.[ix] An interracial coalition of activists spearheaded the non-violent protests and demonstrations that mirrored strategies of the Civil Rights Movement. In what would become a powerful image of environmental activism, demonstrators attempted to

prevent dump trucks carrying the toxic materials from entering the community by lying in the street.[x] On the heels of the Modern Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Era of the 1960s and 1970s, the environmental injustice era certainly gained momentum with the national attention and protests these two episodes of environmental racism generated. However, by placing too much of a focus on environmentalism and race in the 1970s and 1980s, we can miss earlier moments of environmental racism that in part help inform later movements and ideologies.

In his classic 1937 text, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, sociologist John Dollard uses a lens of mostly class, power, and occasionally race to highlight a historical connection between spatial vulnerability and environmental landscapes. [xi] Most likely Dollard was describing the Yazoo Mississippi Delta town of Indianola, Mississippi (MS) in Sunflower County, approximately 90 miles north of Jackson, MS. According to Dollard, Indianola “is a small town, just about large enough to qualify under the census as an urban area. It is flat as a tennis court but with a bit of a tilt, the white people living on the upper half. Should floods come, the Negro quarter would be first under water. Southerntown is bisected by a railroad, and its tracks divide people according to color, the whites living on one side and the Negroes on the other.”[xii] Dollard’s text provides a framework for thinking about the early history of Princeville and environmental injustice, in particular how African Americans and people without power have often been relegated to the most dangerous, marginal, and vulnerable spaces.

Perhaps no space represents the periphery of human existence as do swamps. Not fully land and not fully water, swamps were dreaded spaces in the nineteenth century, a place of unknown danger where “miasmas” and “effluvias” arose from enigmatic and ghostly landscapes that

caused sickness and death in pre-germ theory consciousness.[xiii] Nineteenth-century perceptions of swamps were that these places were inherently diseased and dangerous. Swamps were places that foreign “beasts” or alligators inhabited; animals that did not reside fully in water or fully on land were particularly feared in swamplands. Historian Conevery Bolton Valencius describes these places as “alien and threatening, the animals inhabiting swamps were symbolic of their pervasive and clinging dangers.”[xiv] Both the animals that inhabited swamps and the terrain itself were dangerous. Yet, swamplands have a more complicated history and narrative. During slavery, swamplands, though dangerous and a place where it seemed like a multitudinous number of animals converged and evoked strange and frightening noises, provided a route for escape from slavery for runaways. Runaway slaves were safer fleeing near swamplands and escaping through these spaces as dogs might lose their scent and planters attempting to track them down might fear entering into these dreaded places.[xv] The Great Dismal Swamp between North Carolina and Virginia was the home of maroons, runaway slaves who defied plantation slave economies throughout the New World by living in mountains, swamps, and forests within territories of slavery.[xvi]

Early Princeville residents had to endure harsh swampland to survive. Their existence in this space was not a matter of chance or choice, but instead the discarded and unwanted space was what former slaveholders allowed them to occupy. Historian Sylvia Washington Hood describes this as the environmental “others,” or those “forced to live in geographical spaces (communities) within the society that are or are becoming environmentally compromised because of their ‘otherness’...they are the proper place for everything deemed to be undesirable (people and waste).”[xvii]

The Environmental Landscape of Race

The early years of Freedom Hill and Princeville were extremely difficult because of the landscape of place and the landscape of race. The Tar-Pamlico River's headwaters begin in the Piedmont region of the state and the river slowly meanders through the eastern coastal part of the state, ultimately spilling into the Atlantic Ocean. Approximately 180 miles long, The Tar River-Pamlico basin is the fourth largest in the state,

and one of only four rivers whose boundaries are located completely inside the state of North Carolina. The Tar River is a slow-moving body of water, low-lying, marshy, and swamp-like in certain places, historically susceptible to flooding and overflows.[xviii] Documented floods of the Tar-Pamlico River basin occurred in 1800, 1865, 1889, 1919, 1924, 1940, and 1958.



*Tar River water level elevated almost to reach the bridge. Date from negative sleeve.
Daily Reflector (Greenville, N.C.), January 26, 1954.*

Like other towns in the river basin, Princeville's legacy is one of perseverance and endurance against the constant threat of seasonal flooding in a very difficult landscape. But Princeville had more to persevere against than seasonal flooding. The mere presence and economic self-sufficiency and stability of an all-black town during the segregated Jim Crow south were an affront to racial segregationists. Put in more stark terms, Princeville infuriated segregationists who opposed any type of self-sufficiency and power among African Americans. Predominately African American and self-sufficient towns as well as black business districts in places like Tulsa, Oklahoma or Durham, North Carolina experienced violent opposition from segregationists in the early twentieth century.[xix] Historian Rayford Logan coined the term Nadir to describe the heightened racial violence and lynching experienced by African Americans between the 1880s and 1930s when roughly 3,800 people were lynched in the United States.[xx] African

Americans were lynched for any of a number of transgressions against white society in Jim Crow America, including entrepreneurship and being self-sufficient. Well known is the story of Ida B. Wells-Barnett's friend lynched in Memphis, Tennessee for owning a successful store, an experience that would lead her into the anti-lynching crusade.[xxi] Throughout the twentieth century, Princeville residents constantly dealt with racial attacks and intimidation, as well as economic social isolation from the state. Infrastructural neglect from state officials was consistent during the era of segregation and beyond. Princeville's story is, therefore, representative of an argument that I make in other contexts, particularly that African Americans have often dealt with a double burden of environment that includes human and non-human factors.[xxii] The frequent flooding of the Tar River can only be understood alongside the high tide of violence Princeville residents evoked by the mere audacity of their existence.

Princeville and Contested Meanings of Water

The story of Princeville is also about the historical misuses of water. Leisure, for instance, has been defined through the politics of difference. During the Jim Crow era, public beaches, resorts and parks, from California to Florida, excluded African Americans from being able to swim and enjoy nature.[xxiii] African Americans and other minorities were often locked out of access to water in the form of leisure. Battles to desegregate access to beaches could be as vitriolic as those to desegregate lunch counters in Alabama, the desegregation of housing in Chicago, and schools in Topeka, Kansas. The large and sparkling municipal swimming pools built in southern cities were mostly off limits to black swimmers, who instead had to swim in creeks, lakes, and rivers

that could be dangerous. Powerful undertows, water moccasins, and alligators were just some of what black swimmers had to contend with in these uncontrollable bodies of water. African Americans entering a southern municipal pool would have been perceived as a profound transgression of racial norms that could easily provoke violence, particularly when scantily clad white women and black men were in the same space. [xxiv]

The color line of segregation extended beyond pools and into other bodies of water. When the 1919 Chicago race riot began because of a black boy crossing an imaginary racial line while swimming, it reflected what was widely considered a

commentary of race, but rarely considered an issue of race and nature, even though the key to the moment was access to nature and access to water.[xxv] For most scholars of African American history and environmental history, this key component of one of the most violent race wars in American history is subsumed under the ensuing conflict. The important role of water is lost, and particularly the idea that white access to this public water was somehow natural; African Americans must always know their “place” even when that place is in water.

On yet another level, water infuses the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. Swimming pools were not only a site of segregation in terms of swimming, but as I argue in my earlier work, water was harshly employed by cities and municipalities as a way of attempting to discipline black bodies away from activism. When civil rights activists attempted to bring segregation to an end in places like Birmingham, Alabama, the police and firefighters turned water hoses on them with such force that it knocked some protestors down and literally ripped the skin off others. A natural and life sustaining resource to all human beings, in this instance water was transformed into a weapon of racial violence.[xxvi]

By 1965 Princeville was successful in initiating some modern environmental improvements that allowed the town to continue to prosper and grow, including the construction by the United States Army Corps of Engineers of a dike for the protection of Princeville against flooding. [xxvii] While Princeville’s population remained small, there was an upsurge of population and business interest in the town during the decades after 1965. By the end of the twentieth century, Princeville and the region continued to face many economic problems, however. The eastern part of North Carolina is the poorest region in the state. The median family income for Edgecombe County, where Princeville is located, is just \$34,000 per year. The rate of individuals living below the poverty line in the county of over 55,000 residents is almost 23 percent, roughly 8 percent higher than the state-wide average. The 41 counties that make up the eastern portion of the state have a higher rate of almost every disease than the rest of the state. Morbidity and mortality rates from diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and stroke are high in the region, as are rates of obesity that are directly related to questions of poverty. African Americans and Hispanics in the region suffer disproportionately from these diseases and illnesses, mirroring state-wide and national trends.[xxviii]

Princeville and the 1999 Hurricanes

This was the backdrop in 1999 when back-to-back hurricanes occurred. In early September 1999, Hurricane Dennis struck the coast of North Carolina, bringing winds of just over 70 mph. Just 10 days later another hurricane, Floyd, would hit the coast bringing significantly higher winds of 130 mph. Floyd was a broad storm with a wing-span of some 580 miles that liberally spread rainfall and high winds up the east coast and Atlantic states. Still reeling from the saturated landscape and 6 to 8 inches of rain brought by Hurricane Dennis, North Carolinians nervously

anticipated the arrival of Floyd which came ashore in the early morning hours of September 16th on the Cape Fear coast. The storm quickly brought an additional 12 to 15 inches of rain on the eastern part of the state during the first day, and altogether more than thirty North Carolina counties were impacted by the storm. The Tar River, Pamlico River, Neuse River, Roanoke River, and other smaller creeks and streams began flooding from the rainfall of Floyd, pushing floodwaters onto the farmland of eastern North Carolina. Officially there were 51 recorded deaths

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from Hurricane Floyd, though the accurate recording of deaths from environmental disasters has always been an inexact science. More than 17,000 homes were destroyed and another 56,000 partially damaged by wind force or flood waters that kept Princeville under water for 11 days. Still, thousands of eastern North Carolinians lived for years in what were called “FEMA-villes.” This compilation of make-shift trailers, nicknamed “Camp Depression” by some residents, was located outside of Rocky Mount near a landfill. Using the lens of Princeville’s founding and the history of environmental activism against toxic materials and the unwanted placement of a dump in Warren County just under two decades earlier, Princeville residents found themselves once again in a continuum of

poor people and minorities being forced into degraded spaces.

In many ways Princeville was a powerful, yet unacknowledged precursor to Hurricane Katrina six years later. Many of the frustrations with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were registered by both Princeville and Katrina survivors, particular in terms of how long it took the organization to provide relief. In a 2014 report on Princeville, current and former residents of Princeville believed that relief from FEMA after the hurricane was slow, echoing similar criticisms of FEMA after Katrina.[xxix] The report also acknowledged the strong historical ties of place that both Princeville and New Orleans residents voiced after being displaced from their homes. “Like New Orleans, the natives



*Aerial photograph of inland flooding caused by Hurricane Floyd.
Photographer J. Jordan of the US Army Corps of Engineers.*

of Princeville exhibited a strong connection to the community.”[xxx] At stake was the legacy and memory of Freedom Hill.

By 1999 Princeville was still a relatively small town with just over 2,000 residents, many of whom were direct descendants of the original settlers. There were roughly 850 single-family homes, approximately 40 businesses, and 3 churches, one of which, Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church, was constructed in 1876. Flooding from Hurricane Floyd submerged the entire residential and business area of Princeville for almost two weeks with 15 to 20 foot high floodwaters. For this historic town, Hurricane Floyd was nothing short of devastating. For residents of Princeville, the hurricanes might have seemed fortuitous to those interested in their demise. Though Princeville’s first settlers were initially forced into environmentally degraded land, by the mid-twentieth century their waterfront location had been re-defined by local and state officials as prime real estate property. The result is that Princeville has often dealt with both real and imagined pressure to cease existing as an all-black community, and to allow their property to be annexed by surrounding towns.

In the weeks after the storm hit the North Carolina coast, rumors began circulating that perhaps the suffering of Princeville was not completely the result of Hurricane Floyd. Soon the rumors were confirmed. The city of Rocky Mount, located roughly sixteen miles to the west of Princeville along highway 64, had opened the floodgates to the Tar River Reservoir Dam during the first days of the storm in the hopes of averting disaster. The Tar River Reservoir was completed in 1971 as a drinking water conservation project primarily for the city of Rocky Mount which had been suffering through severe droughts in recent years. The decision and actions of Rocky Mount seemed to have occurred very quickly during the first 48 hours of Hurricane Floyd as the Tar Reservoir, like other natural and unnatural water systems in the region, was threatening to

flood. In an interview with UNC-TV that aired December 6, 1999, Peter Varney, the assistant city manager for Rocky Mount, suggested that the city was “wrapped up in an unbelievable flood of decisions, problems, and issues. We just went ahead and dropped that...gate. It appeared to us that what would come by lowering the gate by two feet would not be noticeable.”[xxxii]

By “dropping that gate” Rocky Mount became part of a long and contested narrative of self-preservation and folklore around flood control. During the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, the City of New Orleans deliberately destroyed the levee around Plaquemines Parish; their hope was that if a neighboring area flooded, New Orleans would remain safe from the harshest elements of the flood. Neighbors up and down the Mississippi River and tributaries placed armed guards on levees to prevent sabotage by neighbors.[xxxiii] There were rumors that levees were deliberately blown in black neighborhoods during Hurricane Betsey in 1965 that nearly destroyed New Orleans, and again in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina. Because of what occurred in New Orleans during the 1927 flood, such rumors were never without some merit of concern as historical rumors and memory might hold grains of truth and reality.[xxxiiii] Importantly, the use of water technology in the creation of suffering is crucial to the story as well. In his classic work *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, social theorist Langdon Winner asks whether “artifacts have politics” and how we might imagine culture, politics, class dynamics, and race within the theoretical and practical development of technological systems. “At issue is the claim that the machines, structures, and systems of modern material culture can be accurately judged not only for their contributions to efficiency and productivity and their positive and negative environmental side effects, but also for the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority.”[xxxv] Technological systems have politics precisely because technology does not and cannot exist outside of human

intervention, therefore people make choices about levees and dams, and when to “drop that gate” or not.

State officials argued that Rocky Mount’s actions were acceptable under the circumstances, and made the point that opening the flood gate likely did not increase the level of downstream flooding

to a significant degree. However it has never been confirmed how much water was actually sent downstream by Rocky Mount’s actions. The moral and ethical tension of the situation also revolved around whether Rocky Mount was required to, or should have informed their downstream neighbors of their impending action.

Who Controls Water?

The fundamental question of the Princeville disaster was who controlled the water? Questions of water control, riparian laws, and the rights of upstream and downstream neighbors have been part of legal case studies since at least the early nineteenth century. Legal cases, dealing mostly with upstream actions on downstream neighbors, including but not limited to mill operations and dam use, leaned heavily upon precedent cases of ancient water use laws or “reasonable use.”[xxxv] While this history of water use law is fairly extensive, the literature around more emergency uses of water in the context of environmental disasters is less developed. This is the particular niche where the Princeville disaster comes to light. To be sure, water rights laws remain complex in the twenty first century and it remains unclear if Rocky Mount city officials actually did anything wrong when they opened the floodgates that perhaps increased floodwaters toward their downstream neighbors. The optimal word here is uncertainty. Water and particularly flooding can be a difficult concept to measure in this context, and perhaps we can never fully know whether the actions of Rocky Mount contributed significantly to the downstream flooding of Princeville. Perhaps the town of Princeville would have endured a similar fate regardless of the actions of Rocky Mount. However, I would make the case this is beside the point. The perception, whether real or imagined, that Princeville was sacrificed by their upstream neighbor goes a long way into tapping into the frustrations of not simply race

and class, but the two century long struggle of downstream neighbors to fend off and demand equality from the seemingly sacrificial actions of those more pristinely situated up-river. In this particular case, it also represents Princeville’s century long struggle for survival against both environmental and human threat.

The story provides an important case study for historians and others to think about water usage and law during environmental disasters and the ways in which decisions of water rights reflect long-standing legal narratives of the control of water. In a certain sense, history is just as much about what we can “prove” as what we think. The perception of African Americans in the eastern part of the state was that the water-front property of Princeville and the lives of Princeville residents were much less valuable than those of Rocky Mount. Interestingly enough, this was the argument made by riparian plaintiffs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[xxxvi] But Princeville also fits into the conversation of power and advantage. Decisions are not made within a vacuum, but importantly can be linked through history to questions of worthy and unworthy sufferers. Freedom Hill survived an environmentally difficult landscape in the immediate period after the Civil War. Princeville residents have been fighting all kinds of environments along the Tar River ever since.

Conclusion

Princeville is a story of resiliency in the face of harsh environments. Though it never generated the headlines of Hurricane Katrina or Superstorm Sandy, Princeville represents an important narrative of disaster and survival. In ways similar to New Orleans, Princeville has struggled to rebuild its community fabric and infrastructure in

the more than a decade since the hurricanes. Yet, traveling on highway 64 the sign for Princeville is still there, signaling the presence of a resilient community located on space that was as contested in the nineteenth century as it remains today.

Footnotes

[i] Victor E. Blue, "Reclaiming Sacred Ground: How Princeville is Recovering from the Flood of 1999," *North Carolina Crossroads*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (November/December 2000).

[ii] Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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[xii] John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 2.

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- [xvi] Richard Price ed. *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973).
- [xvii] Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 22-44.
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- [xxi] Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).
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- [xxiii] Gilbert Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).
- [xxiv] Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
- [xxv] William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
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- [xxvii] "Princeville, North Carolina Flood Risk Management Integrated Feasibility Report and Environmental Assessment: Other Social Effects (OSE) Appendix F (March 2014).
- [xxviii] Statistics come from the East Carolina University Center for Health Disparities.
- [xxix] "Princeville, NC Flood Risk Management Report.
- [xxx] "Princeville, NC Flood Risk Management Report, p. 5.
- [xxxi] UNC-TV Broadcast (December 6, 1999).

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[xxxv] See Carol M. Rose, *Property and Persuasion: Essays on the History, Theory, and Rhetoric of Ownership* (New York: Westview Press, 1994).

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About the Author

Richard M. Mizelle, Jr. is an associate professor of history at the University of Houston and author of *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and co-editor of *Resilience and Opportunity: Lessons from the U.S. Gulf Coast after Katrina and Rita* (Brookings Institution Press, 2012). Trained as an historian of medicine, race, environment, and technology, Mizelle pushes the boundaries of these fields through his research and teaching.