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David Szoke

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*

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# David Szoke

## Heartland Deluge: Race, Flooding, and the Two Alexander Counties, Illinois

### Life and Loss in the Two Alexander Counties, Illinois

In April 2011, the ordinarily quiet towns of southern Illinois harbored an unusual murmur of discussion and intrigue. The flooding Mississippi River threatened to overflow its banks and breach the massive levees straddling its sides. The Army Corps of Engineers struggled between two options: intentionally breach the levee in Missouri and flood 133,000 acres of farmland to alleviate pressure on the Illinois side or allow the destruction of Cairo's by catastrophic flooding. The threat of such calamity in the nearby heartland kept river levels at the forefront of local gossip in my hometown of Murphysboro, located roughly an hour north of Cairo. Though only twelve years old at the time, I could tell there was more to the story than a utilitarian decision over whether to save an Illinois city or fertile Missouri soil. On a visit to Murphysboro's quaint Cindy B's Café shortly before the levee breach, I overheard a conversation between two white patrons: "Why should the farmers have to suffer? Have you ever been to Cairo? They had their chance." These comments reveal a racial dimension when noted that Cairo is a poor, majority-black city. On May 2, 2011, the Army Corps breached the levee, preserving the city of Cairo and destroying the farming village of Pinhook in southeast Missouri. The devastation of Pinhook, however, still meant that a poor, black community had been destroyed.

It appeared that, after one successful Army Corps operation in 2011, Cairo was "*saved*." A more thorough analysis of the Flood of 2011 reveals that this simplistic narrative serves to highlight one climactic and deceptively victorious moment in a decades-long historical trend of decline for the city of Cairo and Alexander County, Illinois. Nestled at the southernmost tip of Illinois between the mighty Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, Alexander County once constituted a haven for commerce and agriculture connecting the northern and southern United States.<sup>1</sup> Today, the county supports virtually no tax base and continues to suffer from chronic flooding issues.

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1 John Lansden, *The History of the City of Cairo, Illinois* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 137.

Alexander County hosts two demographically distinct areas: the southern majority-black region, constituting the towns of Cairo and Mounds, and the northern majority-white region, composed of Olive Branch, East Cape Girardeau, and Tamms, among other localities. These two distinct portions of the county, though separated along racial lines, together share similar experiences with flooding, failing infrastructure, and depopulation. In Cairo, decades of racial hostility, white flight, and housing crises have left the city with virtually no business sector. In Olive Branch and the nearby Dogtooth Bend peninsula, flooding has caused rapid population loss and farmland damage. Those who remained have struggled to force any governmental effort to fix the breached Len Small Levee. Ultimately, the chronic flooding in Alexander County exacerbates the material and social issues faced by its citizens, but it is not the root cause. The history of racial unrest in Cairo, government negligence, and problematic flood-control plans have all contributed to the terrible deluge that is slowly sweeping away Illinois' southernmost tip.

### The Northernmost City in the South

To understand the collapse of this once prosperous county, one must first understand the history of its county seat, the city of Cairo. The southernmost city in Illinois and the most populated community in Alexander County, Cairo, held an advantageous spot at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, acting as a crucial junction between the Midwest, Northeast, and South, making the city a booming commercial stop. After the establishment of Fort Defiance during the Civil War, Cairo became a strategic military site to keep control of the heartland interior waterways.<sup>2</sup> During the late nineteenth century, the advent of the American railway system led to a decline in the importance of riverboat traffic. Though this posed an initial threat to Cairo's commercial relevance, the city avoided an economic deathblow by fostering heavy railway traffic as well.<sup>3</sup> These early days saw a city with limitless potential; remarking on Cairo's resilience and geographic position, Union general Clark E. Carr once noted, ". . . Chicago will be a great city, but Cairo will be *the* great city. . . It will be the largest city on this continent, and the time is sure to come when Cairo will be the largest city in the world."<sup>4</sup> Though this dream of a mighty Cairo may have been overstated, Cairo was a far cry from a dying town in the first half of the twentieth century. Even after the city lost some population after the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, it remained a vibrant hub for commerce and manufacturing in Southern Illinois until the 1960s.

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2 Lansden, *Cairo*, 128.

3 Lansden, *Cairo*, 221.

4 Lansden, *Cairo*, 281.

The white population of Cairo met the tides of progressive racial change with resistance in the late 1960s. With a roughly forty percent black population in 1967, the city held an image as the northernmost town in the South. Nearly all facilities were segregated, no black residents held positions in city government, and an unspoken employment caste system existed, which reserved most industrial and manufacturing jobs for white workers.<sup>5</sup> Reverend M. F. Traylor, a prominent black minister in Cairo at that time, spoke to the Illinois State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1966. There, he remarked that black residents had long desired an end to segregation in Cairo but feared retaliation from white supremacists if they organized for integration. Sensing that the situation would soon come to a boiling point, Reverend Traylor made a grave prediction in his speech to the Commission, stating, "We are going to have unemployment, we are going to have riots, we are going to have trouble here in Cairo."<sup>6</sup> One year later, his prediction came true.

In Cairo, tensions reached a critical point late in the night on July 15, 1967, when nineteen-year-old Robert Hunt, a black soldier on unofficial leave, died under mysterious circumstances in police custody after being pulled over allegedly verbally attacking the arresting officer.<sup>7</sup> Three days of civil unrest from the black community followed, firmly asserting that Cairo Police officers murdered Hunt at the station. What began as protests on the 17th of July turned violent that evening as the situation became a riot that lasted until July 19th. In total, six businesses were set on fire, and homes of white residents allegedly were ransacked.<sup>8</sup> Groups of white townspeople responded in-kind with violence as they targeted peaceful protestors and rioters alike. As the Cairo police failed to quell the situation during the first night, Governor Otto Kerner sent in the National Guard, who left three days later as tensions de-escalated. Two months later, the county coroner and the officers who "discovered" Hunt's body resigned.<sup>9</sup>

In the aftermath of three days of unrest, Cairo's reactionary white factions quickly organized themselves into a militant vigilante squad known as "the Committee of Ten Million," headed by local attorney Peyton Berbling.<sup>10</sup> The Committee was more commonly known as the White Hats in reference to the

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5 Paul Good, *Cairo, Illinois: Racism at Floodtide* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1973), 5.

6 Good, *Floodtide*, 13.

7 Kerry L. Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 96.

8 Good, *Floodtide*, 16; "Alert Guard After Racial Riots in Cairo: Fire Bombs Thrown, Windows Broken," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 1967, 11.

9 Good, *Floodtide*, 15.

10 Good, *Floodtide*, 17.

helmets that members donned while on patrol. Though the group allegedly allowed black membership, all of the roughly 600 members were white Alexander County residents, including many prominent business owners and church figures.<sup>11</sup> The White Hats took justice upon themselves from late 1967 to early 1969, intimidating and harassing Cairo's black population while the city government promised to create plans for the slow integration and reform. The White Hats brought an end to the widespread black demonstrations in 1967, but they did not end violence in the city. Throughout 1968 and 1969, it was common for white instigators to target black residents with gunfire, with at least 86 shooting incidents recorded between March and December of 1969.<sup>12</sup> Most of these shootings occurred at or around the all-black Pyramid Court housing projects, where at least one person, Floyd Parker, was shot dead. Residents of Pyramid Court became accustomed to sleeping in their bathtubs during nights of frequent gunfire. The violence was not, however, limited to gunfighting. In July of 1968, white reverend Larry Potts used a baseball bat to murder a black septuagenarian who, he claimed, attempted to rape his wife.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the abatement of widespread rioting in 1968, the White Hats' terror did not stop black Cairo residents from organizing themselves, especially within religious circles. Reverend Charles Koen's United Front, with its operating base in Cairo, was a movement for racial equality with recognition from civil rights leaders nationwide. Because religion played a crucial role in Cairo's movement for racial liberation, Reverend Coen and other black clergymen used the Scripture as a point of focus to support their arguments. In contrast to the radical Marxist theories adopted by some prominent black leaders such as Huey P. Newton, which denounced religion as a means of social reform, Reverend Coen saw the tight-knit myriad of Protestant churches to be the most significant unifying force within the black community.<sup>14</sup> In April of 1969, the United Front began a boycott of white businesses in Cairo, citing the city's half-hearted attempts at integration and continued lawlessness from the White Hats, of whom an estimated 450 had been formally deputized by Cairo or Alexander County law enforcement.<sup>15</sup> Yet, by June, under pressure from Illinois State Attorney General William Scott, the White Hats disbanded. This maneuver by the state was every bit as economical as it was political. Attorney General Scott, now feeling as though the situation could be resolved quietly, stated shortly afterward that Cairo's

11 Good, *Floodtide*, 15.

12 United Front of Cairo, "The History of State Police Activity in Cairo, Illinois from March, 1969," *National Institutes of Health* (1969): 2, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/forallthepeople/img/872.pdf>.

13 Good, *Floodtide*, 17.

14 Pimblott, *Faith*, 116.

15 Good, *Floodtide*, 18.

black community should “show their good faith by lifting the boycott.”<sup>16</sup> This request was met with insult by the United Front, who declared the boycott would continue until substantive integration was seen in Cairo’s businesses and city government.<sup>17</sup> By 1972, community enthusiasm for the United Front’s boycott had significantly waned, and the organization shifted its focus from direct-action tactics to local politics.

Cairo’s population had taken a massive blow in the aftermath of the racial unrest. The city lost nearly one-third of its population by 1972, where over sixty percent of the migrants were white residents.<sup>18</sup> Many businesses that had refused to integrate their staff closed due to the United Front boycott, damaging the town’s small business sector and further population loss. From the 1970s onward, the positive-feedback loop between white flight and job loss led to a dwindling population of 2,188 residents in 2018.<sup>19</sup> Cairo’s perceived radicalization and its reputation as a “black town” provided no opportunity for an economic rebound, and the once-busy riverside streets faded to Rust Belt ruins. To many in the socially conservative heartland, Cairo collapsed into a city in the same esteem as East Saint Louis or Detroit, becoming an abandoned community of “others” surrounded by predominantly white communities. Streets once lined with businesses and quaint homes became inhabited by dilapidated buildings, broken sidewalks, and faded signs. Since the 1990s, the economic downturn has been compounded with frequent flooding events, which have exacerbated Cairo’s financial problems. Each flood, in turn, led to another exodus of migrants leaving the city.

The plight of Cairo continued after the 1960s, though mostly outside the public eye. As businesses began to leave town, demographics shifted to reveal two district groups of residents: older, predominantly white homeowners, and black residents who did not have income available to find housing elsewhere. A large portion of the town’s black population relied upon the Alexander County Housing Authority (ACHA) to provide housing via the World War II-era McBride (formerly Pyramid Court) and Elmwood complexes. Former Cairo mayor James Wilson, in office from 1989 to 2013, accepted hefty grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the county housing authority. During Wilson’s tenure as executive director of the ACHA, virtually no renovations were made to the city dwellings, which suffered from pest infestations, plumbing issues, electrical issues, and unsafe

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16 Good, *Floodtide*, 20.

17 Good, *Floodtide*, 20.

18 Pimblott, *Faith*, 29.

19 United States Census Bureau, “American FactFinder,” accessed March 12, 2020, [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk).

infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the federal funds appropriated to ACHA supported Wilson's fraudulent spending, paying for trips, gifts, alcohol, and other pleasantries. In 2018, Wilson reached a settlement with HUD to pay \$500,000 for his crimes.<sup>21</sup> The Elmwood and McBride complexes under Wilson's administration were deemed beyond repair with an estimated \$7,500,000 renovation cost in the aftermath. HUD eventually demolished the dwellings in 2019. The demolition of the complexes displaced 185 Cairo families, fifteen percent of the city's population.<sup>22</sup> HUD offered the displaced residents tenant protection vouchers for public housing outside Cairo as the only solution to their housing nightmare.<sup>23</sup> Today, Cairo's population has likely dipped below 2,000 residents, marking a grim milestone in a now six-decade-long migration trend.

### The Flood of 2011 and Rural Blackness

After decades of relatively little media attention, Cairo came into the national spotlight, again, during the catastrophic Mississippi River Flood of 2011. Controversy surrounded the town as gradually rising waters forced the Army Corps of Engineers to weigh two options: allow the water levels to overtop the levees in Cairo and flood the city, or breach the levees on the Missouri side of the river and utterly inundate over one hundred thousand acres of fertile farmland in the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway. Based on the sheer number of residents at risk, the obvious solution was to breach the Missouri floodway levees at the expense of crop and property losses. The Army Corps' announcement to follow through with the floodway plan ignited immense racially charged criticism from local white communities. When asked what lands should be flooded if a decision must be made, former Republican Speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives Steven Tilley said, "Cairo, I've been there. Trust me [...] Have you been to Cairo? Okay, then you know what I'm saying."<sup>24</sup> Though Speaker Tilley soon after apologized for the comments, his words surmised the general standpoint of the white rural heartland: Cairo's crumbling infrastructure, poor population, and history of black resistance had rendered the city unworthy of salvation.

20 "The Public Housing Crisis Could be the End for Cairo, Illinois," *VICE News*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7sqiFjE8hA>.

21 James Long, "Former ACHA Exec. Director Admits to Misusing Funds, Ordered to Pay \$500k," *KFVS 12 News*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.kfvs12.com/2018/11/28/former-alexander-co-il-housing-authority-executive-director-ordered-pay-k/>.

22 "Public Housing Crisis," *VICE News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7sqiFjE8hA>.

23 "Public Housing Crisis," *VICE News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7sqiFjE8hA>.

24 Lisa Song and Patrick Michels, "There Was a Plan to Save This City from Flooding. But When the Rains Came, So Did Hesitance," *ProPublica*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/cairo-there-was-a-plan-to-save-this-city-from-flooding>.

By mid-April, water levels began rising to a concerning degree. Late snowmelt from the Missouri and Upper Mississippi watersheds caused the Middle Mississippi to swell and back up tributaries across the basin. By April 21, the Army Corps estimated that the river would overtop the levee at Cairo by May if water levels were not reduced.<sup>25</sup> The protocol of the Army Corps in such a potentially damaging flooding situation was to “activate” (i.e., partially destroy with explosives) the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway across the river from Cairo. The Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway, designed in the 1928 Flood Control Act after the disastrous Mississippi River Flood of 1927, had only been activated once before 2011 during the Flood of 1937.<sup>26</sup> With Cairo’s security specifically in mind, allowing the Missouri farmland to flood, the pressure kept off nearby levees. Due to the land’s potentially dangerous position in the floodway, its property values were low. Such cheap land, combined with black landownership restrictions in nearby Missouri towns, made the area a haven for black farmers who eventually formed Pinhook’s village in the 1920s.<sup>27</sup>

On April 26, 2011, the State of Missouri quickly launched a lawsuit to stop the Army Corps from breaching the floodway levee.<sup>28</sup> Since the operational function of the Floodway was reserved in case of a major emergency, the state’s only available arguments were centered around procedural mismanagement and potential violations of the Missouri Clean Water Act, both of which were shot down by U.S. District Judge Steven Limbaugh.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of Judge Limbaugh’s decision, all sides looked to the President of the Army Corps’ Mississippi River Commission Major General Michael Walsh, who would personally decide whether to utilize the floodway detonation protocol. On April 25, the Army Corps began preparations to activate the river’s Missouri side’s floodway protocol. By April 29, the legal question behind the operation concluded, and the levees in Cairo began to develop sand boils from the immense pressures of the Mississippi and Ohio, signaling impending levee failure.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, Walsh still hesitated to blow the levee. At 10:00 pm on May 2, Walsh gave the order to activate the Floodway, though he acknowledged that this decision would inevitably “. . . create a stir with the public, the press, and politicians.”<sup>31</sup> These comments reflected a hesitance to

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25 Song and Michels, “There Was a Plan.”

26 Michael Grunwald, “Who Controls the Mighty River?” *Time International*, May 12, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2071109,00.html>.

27 David Todd Lawrence and Elaine J. Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics, and Community in Pinhook, Missouri* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 25.

28 Lawrence, *Levee*, 126.

29 Lawrence, *Levee*, 127.

30 Lawrence, *Levee*, 129.

31 Song and Michels, “There Was a Plan.”



upset powerful Missouri lawmakers who had already brought the Floodway project into the national spotlight.<sup>32</sup> Walsh finally acted five hours after Army Corps officers warned that further delay could cause excessive hazards for the workers handling the explosives. Army Corps leadership's aversion to swift action has been blamed for over \$1,000,000 structural damages to Cairo's levees and buildings. These damages were later paid for by the Army Corps.<sup>33</sup>

The story of Pinhook strongly mirrors that of Cairo upstream. Both communities are predominantly black, existing outside the American perception of black culture being inherently "urban." During the 2011 controversy, the loudest voices in the struggle to stop the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway flood were wealthy white landowners such as R. D. James, the current Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works who owned over 800 acres of Floodway farmland.<sup>34</sup> However, the Floodway's primary population—the aged, predominantly black residents of Pinhook—remained outside the public narrative. Those wealthy landowners who received the most media attention, such as R.D. James, had only property in mind when expressing dissatisfaction with the flooding protocol; the citizens of Pinhook, however, never received attention from the press nor vocal legislators. By April 25, the Army Corps was prepping the Birds Point Levee for breaching, yet no one in Pinhook received official notification to evacuate to safety. By April 26, flooding of low-lying areas already blocked off the town's main road.<sup>35</sup> The flooding alongside evacuation alerts on local television and radio stations prompted community leader Debra Robinson-Tarver to spearhead the evacuation process herself, rallying local truck owners to assist in evacuating residents. On April 29, official word came from the county sheriff to evacuate the village – two full days after it became inaccessible due to floodwaters.<sup>36</sup> When the Army Corps breached the Birds Point Levee on May 2, one-fourth of the Mississippi River's water flow tore through Pinhook and flooded the surrounding 133,000 acres of farmland. All residents self-evacuated to East Prairie, Cape Girardeau, Sikeston, or other local towns. All structures in Pinhook were total losses when the water subsided a month later.<sup>37</sup>

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32 Claire McCaskill, Roy Blunt, and Jo Ann Emerson, "Missouri Congressional Leaders to Obama: Don't Activate Severe Alternative in the Bootheel," *Office of Roy Blunt, United States Senator for Missouri*, June 17, 2011, <https://www.blunt.senate.gov/news/press-releases/missouri-congressional-leaders-to-obama-dont-activate-severe-alternative-in-bootheel>.

33 Song and Michels, "There Was a Plan."

34 Ibid.

35 Lawrence, *Levee*, 135.

36 Ibid.

37 Lawrence, David Todd, "The Rural Black Nowhere: Invisibility, Urbannormativity, and the Geography of Indifference," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 48 no. 1 (2015), 227; Lawrence, *When They Blew the Levee*, 135.

The Flood of 2011 perfectly illustrated the effects of government mismanagement and negligence for black communities in Alexander County and downriver in the Missouri Bootheel. For Cairo, the hesitance of Army Corps leadership to enact their protocols led to immense damage to the city's already subpar drainage and levee infrastructure. For Pinhook, government inaction left former residents with no time to gather belongings or form an evacuation plan. Not once was Pinhook mentioned in Army Corps plans regarding the floodway operation, the proceedings of Missouri's legal battle to stop the breach, or the Army Corps' lively Twitter feed in the days surrounding the operation – the only record pointing to the existence of Pinhook was hidden on one single map within the hundreds of pages of court documents.<sup>38</sup> Overall, the Army Corps' operations in the Flood of 2011 failed black populations on both sides of the river. In Alexander County, Cairo suffered infrastructure damage due to Major General Walsh's hesitance to act; in Missouri's Floodway region, the residents of Pinhook were entirely forgotten and left to evacuate themselves.

These failures on the part of the Army Corps of Engineers reflect an overarching culture of racism and urbannormativity. Sociologists have described urbannormativity as the idea that urban cities are the default geography of human habitation while subconsciously deeming the importance of rural areas as lesser because of their lower populations.<sup>39</sup> An urbannormative view renders rural culture as technologically backward, entirely dependent upon agriculture, and entirely white within the American context.<sup>40</sup> Black populations, such as Cairo and Pinhook, have been systemically erased from rural America's history and kept outside of public narratives regarding rural issues. Folklorist David Todd Lawrence has suggested that blackness in America has become synonymous with the inner-city "urban," marginalizing black populations that fall outside this perception.<sup>41</sup> This perception extends to the Army Corps' methodology of distributing funding for flood-prevention infrastructure solely based on the protected lands' economic value—placing poorer rural black communities at a disadvantage.<sup>42</sup> From the physical threat of the river to the cultural invisibility faced by rural black populations, the Flood of 2011 exposed the natural and sociological phenomena driving migration out of the county.

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38 Lawrence, *Levee*, 138.

39 Lawrence, "The Rural Black Nowhere," 231.

40 Lawrence, "The Rural Black Nowhere," 222.

41 Lawrence, "The Rural Black Nowhere," 220.

42 116th United States Congress, *Levee Rehabilitation Improvements Act*, H.R.3898, introduced in House July 23, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/3898/text?r=4&s=1>.

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### The Land of Broken Levees

Ultimately, the Flood of 2011 did not spell doom for Cairo. However, other communities in Alexander County – the “white” towns of Olive Branch, Thebes, East Cape Girardeau, McClure, and Tamms – began to suffer from repeated epic flooding, exacerbated by faulty levees. May 2, 2011, was a fateful day for homeowners in the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway and for residents of western Alexander County, who suffered the failure of the Len Small Levee. The Len Small breached just a few hours before the Army Corp’s intentional breaching of the Birds Point Levee downriver, completely inundating the Dogtooth Bend peninsula near Olive Branch floodwaters. Soil scientists Dr. Kenneth Olson and Dr. Lois Wright Morton, who jointly published extensive research regarding Alexander County flooding, argued that breaching the Birds Point Levee two or three days earlier could have saved the Len Small Levee from collapse by releasing much of the pressure from the backed-up Mississippi.<sup>43</sup> To the residents of the Dogtooth Bend area and nearby Olive Branch, the Army Corps’ botched attempt at saving Cairo meant evacuation and widespread crop loss.

The frailty of the situation in western Alexander County has been compounded by over a century of ill-conceived land management practices. Before the 1880s, the Mississippi-Ohio confluence region had four major natural floodwater storage areas when it overtopped its banks. The largest of these, Big Swamp in southeastern Missouri, once held massive runoff water stores from the Ozarks; after 1905, these waters were diverted straight to the Mississippi, and Big Swamp was cleared for agricultural use.<sup>44</sup> The other three bottomland areas saw similar developments, all of which were drained and lined with levees. The practice of cutting the river off from low-lying areas with levees left the Mississippi without space to store excess water during flooding, leading to a deepening river channel with less bank erosion, swifter currents, and increased pressure bankside levees during flooding events.<sup>45</sup> The river, trapped by an extensive network of levees, struggles to meander as streams often do during times of changing deposition, flooding, and tectonic activity. The excess stress on the Len Small Levee resulted from the Mississippi’s attempt to change its course to flow through the low-lying Dogtooth Bend region. In the 1940s, local farmers built the Len Small Levee to

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43 Kenneth R. Olson and Lois Wright Morton, “Impacts of 2011 Len Small Levee Breach on Private and Public Illinois Lands,” *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 68, 4 (2013), 95A.

44 Kenneth R. Olson and David R. Speidel, “Why Does the Repaired Len Small Levee, Alexander County, Illinois, US Continue to Breach during Major Flooding Events?” *Open Journal of Soil Science* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jan. 2020), 17.

45 Olson, “Why Does the Repaired?”, 33.

protect Dogtooth Bend's fertile farms. The levee operated well until it breached in the Great Flood of 1993.<sup>46</sup> Western Alexander County residents remembered the 1993 breach as a solitary accident until the Len Small breached again in 2011. Once again, Len Small levee was repaired to tragically breach a third time in the New Years' Flood of 2015-2016. The issue of chronic breaches has yet to be resolved. According to the Army Corps, a repair operation would not be "viable." The viability of a project relies on the economic importance assessment of the Army Corps. These assessments only consider the value of the land at risk of flooding, totally excluding the value of commercial traffic moving through a particular section of the river. Mike Bost, the House representative for Illinois' 12<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, introduced legislation to change the Army Corps' viability metric to include commercial traffic value in 2019, though to date, neither has passed his bill.<sup>47</sup> The federal government has offered to pay eighty percent of the \$16,600,000 repair cost so long as the local levee district covers the remaining \$3,320,000. As of 2020, there are no plans to repair the levee.<sup>48</sup>

The constant flooding and lack of government aid have left many residents feeling hopeless in western Alexander County. After the Flood of 2011, many residents of Olive Branch – an all-white town a few miles north of Dogtooth Bend – pushed to relocate the community uphill, mimicking the relocation of Valmeyer, Illinois after the 1993 flood; this plan was eventually abandoned as negotiations with nearby landowners fell through.<sup>49</sup> Others sought FEMA grants to fix property damage or buy out their homes, though many waited several years after the flooding for allocated funds.<sup>50</sup> The chaos surrounding the flooding led to an exodus from Olive Branch, losing an estimated 300 residents between 2010 and 2017. Other Alexander County villages have been affected by the recurring flooding as well: much of Thebes and East Cape Girardeau were flooded in the New Years' Day flood of 2015-2016, and East Cape Girardeau flooded again in 2019. To this day, many Alexander County farmers, especially at Dogtooth Bend, now have massive deposits of sand covering their land, rendering the soil impossible to farm without its removal.<sup>51</sup> Alexander County's rapid depopulation has siphoned

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46 Olson, "Why Does the Repaired", 35.

47 116th United States Congress, *Levee Rehabilitation Improvements Act*, H.R. 3898.

48 Patrick M. O'Connell, "Barges Stranded, Levees Breached and a Town in Danger: How the Mississippi River is Dividing a Community – Literally – in Southern Illinois," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Nov. 2019, <https://www.arcamax.com/currentnews/newsheadlines/s/2299122?mob=0>.

49 Dr. John Remo in personal interview with author, February 12, 2020; O'Connell, "Barges Stranded, Levees Breached."

50 Dr. John Remo in personal interview with author, February 12, 2020.

51 Olson, "Why Does the Repaired," 18.

funds from the tax base, which could help repair the levee or fix the county's flood-battered roadways.

### Rural America in Microscale

Although the downfall of Alexander County, Illinois, is inseparably tied to its peculiar geography, it is, in many ways, a perfect illustration of the social and economic struggles faced in rural America. The only "city" in the county – Cairo, the remnant of what was once a commercial nexus of the Mississippi watershed – exemplifies the process of urban collapse. Once marred with racial violence, militant vigilantism, and segregation, those who remained in Cairo faced collapsing local infrastructure and a defunct business sector. Throughout the late 1960s, Cairo's United Front courageously resisted the harassment of the White Hats; despite their efforts, the violence and subsequent white flight trapped the city with a mark of "blackness." In this regard, Cairo faced the same struggle as metropolitan Detroit, Columbus, and Baltimore, as white workers and their capital migrated from racial tension areas, leaving behind dilapidation and economic hardship. Cairo existed outside the binary of American urbannormative society: considered "urban" in its blackness yet "rural" in its geographic location.

Table 1: Population Loss in Alexander County, Illinois Since 2010 <sup>52</sup>

City / Town / Village	2010 Population	2018 Population Estimate
Cairo	2,831	2,188
Olive Branch	864	506
Thebes	436	337
Tamms	632	494
East Cape Girardeau	385	300

After repeated flooding from the Mississippi River in 1993, 2008, 2011, 2016, 2018, and 2019, Olive Branch, East Cape Girardeau, Thebes, and Tamms have faced rapid depopulation, each losing over twenty percent of its residents in the last decade (see Table 1). This migration illustrates the flight from rural pressures as agricultural communities struggle to combat the river's unceasing ebb and flow. The two Alexander Counties – Cairo in the south and the smaller white towns to the north – represent two different responses to the hardships of the modern rural Midwest. Today, flooding remains the most significant shared factor in the decline of the two Alexander Counties. Neither community has had the infrastructure nor the funds to fix their dire situation. Alexander County exemplifies rural America in microscale,

<sup>52</sup> United States Census Bureau, "American FactFinder," accessed March 12, 2020.

[https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml?src=bkmmk](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmmk)

illustrating the racial tensions and isolation felt by black communities and the abandonment felt by struggling farmers facing submerged fields, lacking the political capital to sway the legislators who could fix their housing and flooding crises. The rivers straddling the county's borders, once providing commerce and agricultural abundance, now act as the greatest threat to the livelihoods of those who remain. However, the Ohio and Mississippi are not responsible for the manmade decline of Alexander County; they may be the force which depopulates the humble lowlands for good.

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