

# The Power of the Port, Mississippi

As told by Freedom Fellows Jamya Payne and Nyreeal Edwards  
Rosedale, Mississippi



## Story Narrative:

During the summer of 2018, Rosedale Freedom Project Fellows Jamya Payne (9th grade) and Nyreeal Edwards (8th grade) produced this story about the Port of Rosedale in Mississippi. They explore the impact of the port in the every day lives of locals in the Mississippi Delta, including interviews with Niha Singh, Roderick Funches, and Robert Matthews. They highlight the significance of the Port's creation of jobs in contrast to making a living from farming which has diminished over the years. This project was made possible through *Stories: YES*, part of the Smithsonian's Youth Access Grants Program, and a Racial Equity Grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council.

**Robert Matthews:** History of the port... The Bolivar County, which is the county we're located in, decided that they needed to have a port. We did not have one in the past. They selected a site along the river. It's called the Log Loader. This used to be a shoot off the river where they loaded logs for the lumber companies. They decided to develop it into a port. They petitioned the federal government for money. The federal government, this was during the Ronald Reagan years, said yes they would give them the money if they could find

a plant that would, or a facility, that would locate in the port. Once they found a facility, so they knew the port had a future, they would release the money for the port.

**Robert Matthews:** (0:57) Cives Steel Company was looking for a place to locate along the river at that time, and was looking for a place between Vicksburg and Memphis. NPPL had a development team who knew about the port's problem about needing to have a tenant before they could get the money. And they knew about Cives' need to find a location along the river. So, they hooked us up, along with the Mississippi Development Authority at that time, and Cives came, the Bolivar County officials took them out, showed them along the levee where the port was going to be, and asked us if we would locate here. And we decided, yes. So, with our agreement to locate a port here, the federal government turned their money loose and the port was constructed.

**Niha Singh:** (1:46) Rosedale, within the U.S., is in the bottom 10% of towns economically, so there is definitely a certain set of struggles that folks in Rosedale face. And there are a number of reasons for that. But, it could be doing a lot better.

**Robert Matthews:** (2:15) At the time that we came here, most of the steel was manufactured. And what we did was we fabricate structural steel for large projects, like high rises, sports arenas, things of that nature, and chemical plants. The steel at that time, when we were looking to locate here, was mostly manufactured up North. Bethlehem Steel, U.S. Steel, those kinds of places. And we wanted to be located on the port so we would be able to get cheaper freight to get the steel delivered to us, maybe in bulk and by barge at the time. Also, we were looking at it as maybe we may have a project that's big one day that we need to send out by water. So, by locating on the water, we can hopefully do both of those, get material in and get material out.

**Roderick Funches:** (3:06) We feed people. We grow soybeans, and we'd use a lot for soybeans for a lot of different things for a great purpose. If you would look around to grow, harvest, [inaudible 00:00:03:22]. That's what we do. We grow crops. That's how they handle their business, through them, through selling their grains. It goes to the port. For the road there, right? [crosstalk 00:03:41] Yeah. It goes to the port road. They're all asking me all the... You got [inaudible 00:03:46], but we're closer. And that's where they do their business. It says it's right across the levee.

**Niha Singh:** (3:54) Farmers are using it for their grains. Ports typically have been used to ship all sorts of things from our electronics that we see to more mundane goods.

**Roderick Funches:** (4:09) Farming's not really for younger people. I would like to say that. It's just things we have to do around here. It's all that's left to do. [inaudible 00:04:19] I would say.

**Robert Matthews:** (inaudible 00:04:21) used to get hired here. They didn't know anything about structural steel, so we had to train them from scratch. That's what these books are

for. The state of Mississippi and Mississippi State helped us come up with these books. They're orientation, fabrication tools because people worked on the farm and never worked in the factory. So, we had to train them from scratch here.

**Roderick Funches:** (4:43) We ain't got many jobs around here, and then the vacancy we do have people just hurry and jump on them. Prosper...

**Niha Singh:** (4:52) I think, at present, some things we can think about are just a lack of businesses in the area. So, not enough, which leads to not enough jobs, which means people don't really have money to spend. So, that means that services that people might purchase don't really exist in the area. So, you'll have a limited number of companies moving in on both sides of the market.

**Robert Matthews:** (5:25) This company is owned by its employees. We have an ESOP program, where it means Employee Stock Ownership Plan. So, the money that this facility makes after all the bills are paid, any profits that are leftover are returned to the employees. Therefore, our employees, we've had a real good run, so they have been able to pocket a lot of money. And that money doesn't stay in their pocket. It goes to the grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, keeps that going. It goes... Well, we have those 100 people who work here, they have to go to Double Quick and buy lunches. They go to the sporting events here. They sponsor their kids who are playing on sports teams. They buy cars. There's a new car lot here in Rosedale, probably because Cives is here. There's a lot of different things that they can do with their money. It's not to help just Rosedale, but it also helps Bolivar County altogether because they get their paycheck, usually go to Walmart and buy groceries, or Kroger, or wherever. What we pay our employees doesn't stay in their pockets. It gets distributed out over the community here and over the county.

**Speaker 4:** (6:40) Machines replaced people, which led to unemployment, meaning less jobs for the community. But, the port and the Mississippi River have provided jobs for the people in Rosedale.