Sydney Nathans, Professor Emeritus of History at Duke, has written a remarkable book that examines one Alabama plantation but yields valuable insights into an array of critical themes in African American history. *A Mind to Stay: White Plantation, Black Homeland* is not just a study of an antebellum plantation—it examines the people living on those 1,600 acres from 1844, when Paul Cameron bought the land, through the Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights eras and into this century. Nathans discovers surprising stories across this chronology, but the family saga has three essential elements. First, under the control of Cameron, the land was a vehicle for speculation in cotton, as were the African Americans he marched west to farm it. Second, the freed people on the plantation did not become sharecroppers, but instead bought the land during Reconstruction. Third, their descendants did not all migrate North in the twentieth century—many stayed and maintained a rural haven that still exists 175 years after their ancestors arrived in chains.

The archival and oral history research carried out by Nathans to create this micro-history also extended across decades. Nathans first visited Alabama to interview landowners on Cameron land in 1978 and he quotes oral histories he recorded in 2011. He credits Alex Haley’s 1976 book *Roots* with inspiring him to use oral testimony to study African American families. On his initial visit to Alabama forty years ago, he met people like Louie Rainey, born in 1906, raised by a grandmother born into slavery, and able to tell detailed oral histories going back to Paul Cameron walking his slaves overland from North Carolina. Other sources include James Lyles, born in 1896 on Cameron land purchased by his grandparents, and Alice Hargress, born in 1914 and a veteran of 1965 voting rights marches. Nathans skillfully evaluates these rich oral traditions and weaves them together with archival research from the Cameron Family Papers in the University of North Carolina’s Southern Historical Collection. The result is a fascinating analysis of generations of African American families creating and protecting a rural homeland despite great challenges.

The sweeping history that Nathans tells began when Paul Cameron used his father’s money to buy Alabama land that he managed from North Carolina as an absentee owner in an effort to join the cotton boom. Nathans uses letters between Cameron and his overseers to glimpse the enslaved people that Cameron moved between his plantations. This research yields rich insights into the ways that enslaved people experienced what Ira Berlin calls the second of four African American migrations, with the first across the Atlantic Ocean, and the second from Atlantic Coast plantations to interior cotton lands. In his prologue, Nathans shares the surprising way the book evolved from his initial plan.
to “shed light on the black perception of separation from home, the forced migration, and removal to a distant plantation” (6). When he met their descendants, the book evolved from a study of enslaved people leaving home to a broader, richer analysis of freed people creating an Alabama sanctuary that still exists today.

Part I, “Proving Ground,” uses skillful research in the Cameron Family Papers to analyze Paul Cameron’s efforts to establish an Alabama plantation while living in North Carolina. Nathans depicts Cameron as a risk taker hoping to prove his worth to his father by getting rich from cotton. This gamble changed the lives of the enslaved people he sent to Alabama, as well as the lives of those left behind on the plantation near Raleigh. Cameron would deeply regret his decision to buy Alabama land. His field hands were in poor health, with ten dying in two years, he had troubles with overseers, cotton crops were poor, and he believed he was swindled when he bought the land. In 1856, after his father died, Cameron tried a second time to profit from the cotton boom, purchasing Mississippi Delta land. He again broke apart the African American community he controlled by dividing them between distant plantations. Nathans shows that Cameron was deeply disappointed by his Alabama plantation, viewing that land not as a home or haven, but as a failed investment.

Part II, “A Foothold in Freedom,” shifts from Cameron purchasing property to enrich himself to his former slaves buying that same land to gain a secure freedom. During the war, approaching Union troops forced unexpected reunions for Cameron’s slaves, as 111 enslaved workers from Mississippi were evacuated to Alabama in 1862, and then 65 of 180 Alabama slaves were returned to North Carolina in 1864. Paul Hargis, who accompanied his owner on the initial 1844 trip to Alabama, was back in North Carolina for the first time in twenty years. But with emancipation, Hargis could choose where to live and he returned to Alabama, the place he considered home. Hargis would become one of the patriarchs of a community of landowners, remaining on Cameron land until his death in 1918 at age 91. Another key founder was Sandy Cameron, the first freedman to buy land from Paul Cameron in 1873. After the war, the absentee planter continued to detest his disappointing Alabama plantation, trying to find a white buyer until 1873, when he allowed his agent to sell pieces of property to Black families. Their 100–150 acre farms were no more fertile, but oral traditions depict those early landowning years as “hallelujah times” (147).

In Part III, “Beyond a Living,” Nathans examines the generations who persisted on Cameron land despite the mass exodus from the rural South in the early twentieth century. Historians know why millions departed in the Great Migration, but Nathans seeks to understand why some people stayed. He finds the answer in their conception of land ownership, stating, “those who persevered came to view and value the homeland as their safe haven—as a sanctuary held for themselves, as a trust for those who departed” (172). They did not seek riches like Paul Cameron, but instead sought to build a community. They faced grave threats in those Jim Crow decades, including white violence, convict leasing, and floods, but they held onto the land and established Cassimore AME Zion Church in 1899. A key religious leader was Ned Forrest Hargress, born in 1866 to a 14-year-old former slave said to have been raped by Confederate Army general Nathan Bedford Forrest. Ned Hargress married Sandy Cameron’s daughter, cared for aged Paul...
Hargis, and lived to age 99, dying months before the 1965 Voting Rights Act was signed. The people that Nathans met in 1978 were raised within this community, and they honored its leaders and traditions.

In Part IV, “Heir Land,” Nathans examines the lives of those people who shared oral testimony that he placed alongside archival research. Louie Rainey supplied stories stretching all the way back to Paul Cameron’s arrival, but Alice Hargress embodied the vision of African American land ownership at the heart of A Mind to Stay. Nathans introduced Alice Hargress in the prologue as the first person he interviewed in Alabama, and the Hargis/Hargress family is a unifying strand running through the book because Paul Hargis arrived in Alabama with his owner Paul Cameron in 1844. Alice Hargress was the only person in Greensboro, Alabama’s 1978 phonebook that Nathans was able to directly link to the 114 enslaved people brought to Alabama because only her ancestor Paul Hargis was listed with a last name. On their first phone call, she made it clear to Nathans that she already knew the story of Cameron forcing enslaved families from North Carolina to Alabama and would help him understand its significance.

In meetings across three decades, Alice Hargress helped the historian see that she was one link in a chain of families fighting to hold onto land through upheavals like Redemption, the Great Depression, and migration North. She explained they were guardians of “heir land” with a duty to maintain it for future generations, both for those in Alabama and for those who went North but might return. Hargress said of those who left, “They will always have somewhere to stay” (212). During her final 2013 visit with Nathans, 99-year-old Hargress told a group of young people learning about her 1960s activism, “I’m moving on. It’s your turn now,” demonstrating that the struggle is not over and the next generation must take up the work (243). Sydney Nathans delivers equally important messages throughout this beautifully written history. His deep, thoughtful research reveals the achievements of African American families who created a rural homeland in Alabama that persists after over a century. He demonstrates that land ownership was critical to their ability to secure a lasting freedom, and that their vision of “heir land” encompasses both enslaved ancestors and future generations. It took a historian with the wide-ranging skills and decades of experience that Nathans possesses to write a history that delivers deep insights into multiple periods of African American history while also providing readers with a compelling narrative.

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Joe Trapido’s Breaking Rocks: Music, Ideology and Economic Collapse from Paris to Kinshasa undertakes a multi-sited study of musical patronage systems in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and their relationship with its economic collapse. As capitalist