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Tennessee official plans conveniently timed takeover of majority-Black town

The GOP-led effort to take control of the economy in Mason, Tennessee, looks a lot like the racist, exploitative sharecropping that followed the Civil War.



March 17, 2022, 1:39 PM CDT

By **Ja'han Jones**

The white, conservative embrace of "[Redemption](#)" era politics remains the most important story in the United States, and new reports out of [Tennessee](#) drive home the urgency of the issue.

Mason, Tennessee – a [majority Black](#), majority Democratic town – is fighting to protect its sovereignty from white conservatives looking to take control of its economy.

The dispute bears a worrying resemblance to the exploitative sharecropping arrangements from the post-Civil War era, when white power brokers ensnared [Black planters](#) in deals that funneled most of the profits into white hands.

Tennessee's state comptroller, Jason Mumpower, a Republican, [sent a letter](#) to Mason residents this month calling on the town to relinquish its charter. If the town agrees, Mason will be placed under the control of Republican-dominated Tipton County. If the town refuses, [Mumpower's office said](#) it will take control.

The ultimatum comes as [Mason is preparing to welcome a Ford Motor Co. plant](#) to the area, which [Tennessee Lookout](#), a local news outlet, says could be one of the "largest manufacturing investments in the state's history." Mason's board of aldermen [voted](#) Monday not to relinquish

the town's 153-year-charter, setting the stage for Mumpower to try to take over – [potentially as early as this week](#).



— Screengrab via WREG

Mason's vice mayor, Virginia Rivers, told Lookout that the comptroller is "trying to conquer and divide us. It's akin to a hostile takeover, and it's not hard to figure out why here, why now."

Rivers didn't mince words when discussing what she believes is Mumpower's motivation: "It's because of the Black people that are in office" in Mason. She said the town is sure to "prosper and grow" with the opening of the new Ford plant.

"And now they want to take it away from us," she added.

Mumpower dismissed Rivers' accusation that race played a role in his decision, telling the Lookout it's "offensive and difficult to respond to such a short-sighted comment."

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of the Black people involved.

In his letter to residents, Mumpower conveniently claimed that a history of financial mismanagement and fraud required county or state officials to take over Mason's economy, and he mentioned the Ford plant specifically.

"The new Ford plant offers a major opportunity to West Tennessee, but Mason will be left out if it continues to be judged by its poorly run government," he claimed.

His ultimatum didn't mention what benefits Mason would gain from losing local control over its own finances.

But the history is clear: When white authority figures control largely Black labor – especially through force – it's rarely, if ever (?), to the benefit of the Black people involved. Sharecropping agreements forced onto free Black people after the Civil War made white wealth out of Black work, leading to generations of economic inequality that persist today.

Tennessee, led by its Republican comptroller, is showing how to recreate that racist power dynamic in the present.

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