# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Page 3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 4</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 5</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 9</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 13</td>
<td>Work/Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 17</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 18</td>
<td>Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 25</td>
<td>People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 29</td>
<td>Sports and Recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 33</td>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 37</td>
<td>Word Bank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This packet is the result of the Shoals Black History Project, a collaborative effort between Project Say Something, the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, and the University of North Alabama’s Public History Program. The Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area funded the project through their Community Grants Program. In the autumn of 2017, Project Say Something, in conjunction with the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library and students in the Public History program at UNA, hosted three history digitization events. At these events, community members brought photographs, pamphlets, newspaper articles, documents, yearbooks, and other historical artifacts that were scanned and added to the public library’s online database. Volunteers also recorded oral histories at these events, and these recordings, along with typed transcripts, were added to the library’s database as well. This database can be accessed at: shoalsblackhistory.omeka.net.

This effort seeks to incorporate African American history and life into the narrative of the Shoals area. In order for this history to be shared, it must first be gathered and organized; it can then be contextualized within national and regional trends and transformed into educational resources that make sense of our common heritage and help us to better understand our present moment.

This resource packet combines regional and national history with the local history gathered and compiled during the course of the Shoals Black History Project. These histories are sorted into categories that provide a focused but comprehensive picture of the past. The collection is ongoing, and we hope that future generations continue to grow this foundational effort.
Background on the Shoals

The federal government obtained the land around what is now Florence, Alabama through a series of treaties with the Native American tribes who lived here. The government then sold this land to a group of investors known as the Cypress Land Company. This company established the city of Florence in 1818 on the banks of the Tennessee River. They divided up the land they had purchased and sold it to settlers.

The settlers who purchased the land around Florence came primarily from Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. They were seeking fertile soil in which to establish cotton farms. Cotton was quickly becoming America’s most important crop, and enslavers moved into Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to take advantage of newly-opened fertile lands. As they moved into these lands, they brought enslaved people with them.

Although the importation of enslaved people to the United States ended in 1808, a new type of slave trade, the Domestic Slave Trade (or the Second Middle Passage), emerged to provide southern cotton planters with the labor they needed to make large profits. The Domestic Slave Trade saw nearly 1 million enslaved people from the eastern states sold to enslavers in the deep South. These sales often broke up families, with mothers and fathers sold away from sons and daughters.
In 1832, the state of Alabama passed a law that made it illegal for African Americans to learn how to read or write. Even free people of color such as James Rapier—who would later become a United States Representative—had to go elsewhere in order to receive an education.

After the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau created many schools across the state to help African Americans to gain literacy. Schools were segregated, and school districts gave more money to white schools than to black schools.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many Black schools in Alabama were tuition-based, and not every family could afford to send their children to school. During the 1920s, nearly 400 Rosenwald Schools were built in Alabama. More than 40% of Black children in the entire U.S. South attended a Rosenwald school.
Some schools were set up by the Freedmen’s Bureau in Florence. In 1903, the Burrell Normal School was started by the American Missionary Association for Black children from grades 1 through 12. The Slater School (grades 1 through 7) was free of charge for students living in Florence. In 1937, the city took over the Burrell Normal School and made it a high school for African Americans in the city.

In rural areas, there were not many schools for African Americans. Often-times, school was held in a church, a home, or a Rosenwald school. Many of the schools that did exist had only one or two rooms, with several grades sharing a single room. Some people recalled that by the time they got to 3rd grade, they already knew the material because they had overheard it in previous years.
Mt. Zion was a Rosenwald School in western Lauderdale County. It was built on land donated by Mr. John Turnley in 1917. Community members constructed the building, which had a room for grades 1-3 and a room for grades 4-6. The teachers boarded with local families during the week and returned to their home on the weekends. Students who completed the 6th grade had to go into the city of Florence if they wanted to attend high school.

In Florence, schools remained racially segregated until 1969. At this time, the city closed the schools that African Americans had attended in West Florence, and students entered schools that had previously been all-white.
Reflective Questions

- Why did enslavers prevent enslaved people from learning to read and write?

- Why were schools racially segregated?

- Why were the African American schools closed after segregation ended?

- Are schools still segregated today?

Think about the importance of school for those that were not allowed to attend. What does education mean to you?
Many African American slaves went to church because it was one of the few activities that enslavers allowed. Often-times, they would go to church with white people and sit in the back or in a balcony.

In Florence, fourteen members of the First Methodist Church formed their own church for African Americans in 1840. Their services were held in a brick cow shed on South Court Street at a location known as church spring. A historic marker commemorates the site.

In 1879, the congregation built a church and called it the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. In 1895, the congregation held a supper to raise funds to build a new building on the corner of Court and Alabama Streets. This building stood until 1968, when a new building was built on Cherokee Street in West Florence, and the church was renamed Greater St. Paul A.M.E.
After slavery, many African Americans still lived in rural areas and worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. They often lived on the land of former plantation owners. The church was at the center of many of rural Black communities.

In 1886, Columbus Barnett, Isaac Duckett, William Duckett, Randolph Irons, and Jerry Turnley, all former slaves, formed the Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church near Rhodesville. Rhodesville is in the “Bend of the River” area—fertile land west of Florence where the Tennessee River forms a bend.

The church at Mount Zion was built in 1912, and by 1918, the congregation started a tradition of having 4th of July picnics, where the community would prepare food and have a baseball game against teams from other communities. The congregation still worships at the church.
Churches in the Black community were sites for civil rights advocacy. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) started in 1957 as African American clergymen brought awareness of racial discrimination in the south to the attention of people throughout the country. SCLC, of which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a founding member, organized non-violent protests. In Alabama, the SCLC helped to organize protests surrounding segregated schools and public facilities and arranged Black voter registration efforts. SCLC also helped to organize the Children’s Crusade in Birmingham in 1963 in which Black children marched in the streets for desegregation of the city’s schools.

In Florence, clergymen formed committees to make sure that unrest during the civil rights period did not affect the city. While these clergymen likely worked with white elected officials to bring about changes (such as the end of segregation in public spaces), the dramatic confrontations in places like Birmingham and Selma did not occur in the Shoals area.
Reflective Questions

- Why did enslavers allow enslaved people to attend church but not school?

- What was the importance of the church to African Americans after slavery?

- How and why did the church also become a site for political advocacy?
Enslaved people performed a variety of tasks on antebellum plantation. In addition to laboring in cotton fields, they took care of horses, constructed buildings, made bricks, worked as blacksmiths, cooked, and performed domestic tasks.

After slavery, few African Americans had the resources to open businesses, and many worked as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. When factories opened in the South following the Civil War, African Americans found work performing menial tasks, usually outdoors. Often, they were used as strike breakers when white factory workers struck for better working conditions and pay.

African Americans did own and operate their own businesses in the Shoals area. Dr. Leonard J. Hicks was a prominent doctor, and his home is still standing today. Dr. Hicks Boulevard in Florence is named for him. Thompson and Son Funeral Home was established in 1922, and is the oldest, continually family-owned and operated business in Northwest Alabama.
The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was a federally funded program that brought many jobs to the Shoals area. Many businesses in the U.S. South discriminated based on race, but the TVA was required to hire African Americans because it was regulated by the federal government. However, TVA often hired white people for skilled jobs, while hiring African Americans to work menial or difficult jobs.

African Americans found work at TVA and the other factories that moved to the area during the 1930s and 40s. Over time, they gained greater equality in the workplace. African American women, who were often employed as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy white people, played a major role in education and health by becoming teachers and nurses, while many African American men from the Shoals area became doctors and preachers.
Many African Americans from the Shoals left the area and had successful careers elsewhere. Black-owned businesses in Florence were located in West Florence and on the Eastside, where Dr. Hicks Blvd is today. In many cases, these were the only places where Black people could own or rent buildings.

**Urban renewal** uprooted some businesses in Florence, such as Dick Howell’s BBQ, which opened in 1947. The restaurant relocated to Pine Street and remains an area landmark.

Ms. Bettie Hooks opened the Vogue House of Beauty in 1985, one of the only Black-owned businesses on Court Street in downtown Florence. According to Ms. Hooks, when she decided to open her own salon, she wanted it to be in the downtown area where she had always dreamed of having a business.
Reflective Questions

- What jobs were available to African Americans after slavery, and why?

- Why was it so important for Ms. Bettie Hooks to open a store in downtown Florence?

- Think about jobs that Black people and white people have in your community today. Do you think there is still inequality based on race? Why or why not?
African Americans came to the Shoals area as slaves from plantations in the eastern states. During what historians call the **internal slave trade** nearly a million African Americans were brought to the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to work on sugar and cotton plantations.

The **internal slave trade** was devastating to Black families: they were often broken up and sold to separate enslavers. After slavery, African Americans searched the country for lost relatives, hoping to reunite their families.

Black communities in the Shoals area were located around former large plantations. The Bend of the River area in western Lauderdale County and south into Colbert County had a large concentration of Black families which formed communities and built schools and churches. Most community members labored as sharecroppers or tenant farmers.
In the 1880s and 1890s, factories were built in the Shoals area. African Americans relocated to cities to seek work in these factories, finding homes in segregated neighborhoods. In Florence, African Americans lived on the west side, west of Locust Street, the south side, south of Tennessee Street, and in a small community in East Florence known as Pine Ridge.

These neighborhoods were the only places where Black people were permitted to live. Over time, these neighborhoods developed their own businesses and institutions such as restaurants, grocery markets, churches, and schools. In West Florence, cafes like Bunyan’s BBQ and the former Hollywood Inn were gathering places for the community alongside churches and the Handy Recreation Center.

Houses were usually built in “shotgun” form. Examples include the Hollywood Inn and cabins such as the birthplace of W.C. Handy.

**Community**

W.C. Handy's Cabin

The Hollywood Inn
During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the city of Florence took on many urban renewal projects. One of these projects was the addition of **public housing**. In Florence, Tuscumbia, and Sheffield, segregated **public housing** units were built for white people and African Americans. At the time they were built, some Black residents were suspicious that the government was trying to keep them in one place.

Other urban renewal projects cleared old houses and built new ones. The Handy Heights project in West Florence cleared 85 houses and built 78 new modern brick homes in 1958. The city also decided to run water and sewage lines to the homes in West Florence.

In the 1970s, the city bought the property of many African American residents living south of Tennessee Street. Many buildings were destroyed to make room for the new Dr. Hicks Blvd.
Reflective Questions

- Why were African Americans forced to live in segregated neighborhoods?

- What was “urban renewal”? What were its downsides?

- What is segregation like in the Shoals today?
After emancipation, African Americans in Alabama were active in politics throughout the state. This was largely enforced by the presence of the U.S. Army, which made sure that Black people were allowed to vote during the period known as Reconstruction (1865-1877).

Throughout the U.S. South, Black Americans were elected to Congress for the first time. James T. Rapier, who was born in Florence and educated in Canada, was elected to the House of Representatives in 1872. Rapier advocated for more money for public education, and greater civil rights protection for African Americans.

James Rapier lost his re-election in 1874. Violence from the Ku Klux Klan and voter fraud led to the election of white representatives who opposed racial equality. As threats from the Klan increased and the U.S. Army withdrew in 1877, African Americans became disenfranchised in the state. After 1877, no African American was elected to Congress from Alabama until 1993.
Social inequality was reinforced by public policy. Though African American men were guaranteed the right to vote with the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, Alabama rewrote its constitution in 1901 to include literacy tests and poll taxes, which further disenfranchised eligible Black voters.

In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that separation along racial lines was lawful in public spaces such as schools, buildings, and trains. Although the law stated that facilities for white and Black people had to be “separate but equal,” they were rarely equal. For example, in 1930, white school children received 64% of the money the state set aside for schools, while Black school children received just 36%. As the 20th century progressed, African Americans became more assertive in their demands for equality.

Klan rally in Montgomery, with participants from Florence
African Americans individually and collectively fought for their rights before, during, and after what we now call the Civil Rights Movement. In 1909, the NAACP was formed to challenge laws that discriminated against black people. During the mid-1900s, a series of court cases helped African Americans to gain greater equality. *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), the Voting Rights Act (1965), and the Fair Housing Act (1968) all helped Black Americans to move closer to equality.

Individual and collective acts of resistance also helped to raise awareness about discrimination against African Americans. The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), the Freedom Riders campaign (1963), and the Children’s Crusade (1963) are three examples of this resistance to racial inequality in Alabama.

In the Shoals, the NAACP became the voice for raising awareness about racial discrimination. The local chapter raised concerns about unfair policing tactics and employment discrimination. In 1984, they helped to bring Presidential candidate Jesse Jackson to speak at UNA.
Politics

Reflective Questions

- Why were African Americans denied the right to vote in the late 1800s?

- Why is James Rapier’s election to Congress important?

- What organizations fight for racial equality today?
There are many famous Black people who came from or lived in the Shoals area. **Henry Goings** was enslaved on a plantation near Florence before escaping to Canada and writing a book about his life. **Dred Scott** was enslaved in Florence before moving west and eventually challenging the Supreme Court for his freedom, awakening an **abolitionist** movement in the North.

During **Reconstruction**, civil rights advocate James T. Rapier held office in the United States Congress, representing the state of Alabama. Oscar Stanton De Priest, who was born in Florence but moved away, held political office in the 1920s.

De Priest was the son of formerly enslaved people. His family, who was politically active, fled the area in 1878 after U.S. troops left the South. Oscar became a United States Representative from Illinois in 1928 and served three terms as the only African American member of the U.S. Congress. While there, De Priest tried to get several anti-discrimination bills passed.
Some important African Americans from Alabama include civil rights activists Fred Shuttlesworth, Rosa Parks, and John Lewis; athletes Hank Aaron and Jesse Owens; scientist George Washington Carver; and engineer, physician, and astronaut Mae Jemison.

In the Shoals area, W.C. Handy, the father of the Blues and Florence’s most famous resident, was born in Florence in 1873. Bessie Foster was one of the first African American businesswomen in the area, operating a hair salon and a billiard hall. Dr. Leonard Jerry Hicks, who was a Florence doctor from the 1930s through the 1970s, was the first African American to be admitted to the Alabama Medical Association. W.H. Lewis, who inspired many students at Burrell-Slater over his 47-year career as a teacher and principal, is another important figure in Black history.
Many people in the Shoals area who attended Burrell-Slater High School in Florence and Trenholm High School in Tuscumbia credit the teachers and principals in those schools with having a positive impact on their lives. Some of the people who graduated from those schools went on to become successful professionals with celebrated careers.

Clyde A. Young, from Florence, became an optometrist in Chicago. Ozzie Newsome, from Leighton, played football for the Cleveland Browns and later became the first Black general manager. Dorothy Green Jemison graduated Burrell-Slater High School in 1946 and became an educator in Chicago. Her daughter, Dr. Mae Jemison, became the first African American woman to travel in space. Jimmy Hughes, Arthur Anderson, Percy Sledge, and Willie Ruff are all distinguished musicians from the Shoals area. Reverend Bennett Walker Smith was a civil rights activist who marched alongside Martin Luther Kings and others from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.
Reflective Questions

- What challenges did Henry Goings and Dred Scott overcome during slavery?

- What challenges did James T. Rapier overcome during Reconstruction?

- Who are some of the area’s most famous and celebrated professionals? What did they achieve?

- What role did education play in the achievements of these professionals?
Sports and Recreation

Recreation under slavery was difficult and sometimes coerced. Enslavers, for example, forced enslaved people into boxing and wrestling matches for their own enjoyment. Still, African Americans fished and hunted when they had time away from the forced labor of the plantation.

African Americans also participated in horse racing, and many jockeys in the early 1800s were enslaved. In fact, at the first Kentucky Derby in 1875, 13 of the 14 jockeys were African American, as was the winner, Oliver Lewis. But as white supremacy surged in the late 1800s, Black people were forced out of many of the activities in which they had previously participated, including voting and holding political office. White jockeys eventually forced Black jockeys out of the sport altogether by banning Black people from holding membership in clubs and organizations.

African Americans were also banned from boxing and baseball. Black baseball players formed their own league with their own teams, such as the Birmingham Black Barons. Segregation in professional sports lasted until 1947, when Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major League Baseball.
Sports and Recreation

African Americans developed their own recreational activities in Alabama. Churches formed baseball teams that played games against other churches. Neighborhoods had basketball, baseball, and football teams that competed against teams from other neighborhoods.

Schools throughout the Shoals remained racially segregated until the late 1960s, and their sports teams played against teams from other Black schools. Florence State University (which later became UNA) integrated in 1963, but it wasn’t until 1967 that African Americans played on the football team.
Golf was a popular sport for African American boys who grew up in West Florence in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the children had worked summer jobs as golf caddies, and when they left to go to college, others would take their place. Although African Americans were not allowed to play at the golf courses until much later, Black people found ways to develop their golfing skills. Oftentimes, they would get to the golf course at 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning to play before the course opened to the public and their work as caddies began.

In West Florence, caddies built several golf “courses” on which to practice—one behind Mt. Moriah church and another behind the Handy Recreation Center. Later, they created the Muscle Shoals Golf Association (MSGA), which is still active today. In addition to a golf course, neighborhood boys set up a basketball court in West Florence in the 1950s.

Tony Epie, MSGA member
Reflective Questions

- What happened to African Americans in the years after Reconstruction? Why were they allowed to participate in horse racing before and during Reconstruction but banned in 1894?

- Why were sports teams segregated?

- Why were African Americans allowed to work at golf courses but not allowed to play at them?
Early African American music consisted of chants, field hollers, and work songs, the roots of which can be traced back to traditional styles of music from Africa. After slavery and as the U.S. South industrialized, Black workers developed new forms of songs as they labored in coal mines, at the Mobile docks, on the railroads, and in the Birmingham steel mills. Black railroad workers developed a call-and-response chant that was in rhythm with the timing of their own manual labor.

Black steel workers started protest songs sung by quartets. Convict leasing, by which Black prisoners were leased to private companies for manual labor, included chain gangs, where workers were physically chained together while working. Men working on chain gangs also developed their own work songs. The songs of these laborers reflected the hardships of difficult and repetitive manual labor.
The “spiritual” song form was a Christian expression of hope and sorrow during slavery. The spiritual combined different influences from African music with the religious expressions of Christianity.

Gospel music is the 20th century version of the spiritual, and it developed into two different forms. As a form of worship, it developed from congregational singing with call-and-response musical patterns into performances by choirs. The other form was the gospel quartet, an ensemble style featuring a capella singing, close harmony, and precision arrangements. Gospel choir singing is performed in both religious and non-religious settings.

The end of the 19th century also saw the development of the blues, which combined African musical styles with European instruments such as guitar and piano. Blues music was performed in small clubs called juke joints. In the 1920s, commercial record companies began to popularize the blues and performances by Black artists.
As blues and rock ‘n roll music became popular in the 1950s and 1960s, the Shoals area became a major music recording center of the country. Artists such as Arthur Alexander, Percy Sledge, and Willie Ruff emerged from the Shoals area as very talented and successful musicians.

Arthur Alexander was born in 1940 and lived in East Florence before his family relocated to the Baptist Bottom area of Sheffield, a segregated community for African Americans. Alexander picked cotton and worked at the Sheffield Hotel before entering the music industry. His 1962 hit “You Better Move On” was the first chart hit for FAME Studios. Alexander worked, recorded, and was good friends with white musicians in the Shoals during the 1960s, a period of racial segregation and civil rights struggles. Their integrated work remains an important part of the Muscle Shoals musical legacy.
Reflective Questions

- Why were field hollers and work songs the first forms of music sung by African Americans?
  - What role did the church play in Black music?
- What contributions did Black musicians make to the musical legacy of the Shoals region?
Abolition
Civil Rights Movement
Convict Leasing
Discriminate
Disenfranchised
Dred Scott
Equality
Freedmen’s Bureau
Henry Goings
Internal Slave Trade
Ku Klux Klan
Literacy Tests
NAACP
Poll Taxes
Public Housing
Reconstruction
Urban Renewal
W.C. Handy