Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................... 1

Project Background ................................................................................................................ 2

Project Methodology .............................................................................................................. 3

Colbert County .................................................................................................................... 4

Franklin County ................................................................................................................... 16

Lauderdale County ............................................................................................................... 25

Lawrence County ............................................................................................................... 45

Limestone County .............................................................................................................. 59

Morgan County .................................................................................................................. 69

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 85
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Project Background

The Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area was designated by Congress and created in March of 2009 when President Obama signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act. The Heritage Area includes six counties in the northwest corner of Alabama: Colbert, Franklin, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, and Morgan counties, all of which fall along a portion of the Tennessee River defined by the Muscle Shoals.¹

In 2002, the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Feasibility Study was authorized by Public Law 107-348 to serve as a guide for the Secretary of the Interior and Congress in the designation of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area. The study was conducted by the Muscle Shoals Regional Center at the University of North Alabama, in consultation with the National Park Service, following several community meetings.

The study served the purpose of defining conceptual boundaries of the area and defining the area’s primary themes to include “Mounds and Mussels: The Muscle Shoals Prehistory and Settlement,” “Harnessing the River: The Muscle Shoals in Times of War and Peace,” and “Music and Modern Times: The Muscle Shoals and the River that Sings.” The study also provided a succinct history of the area. It lastly recommended that upon designation the Muscle Shoals Regional Center become the Heritage Area’s management entity.

The feasibility study successfully identified the area’s many known resources, including properties on the National Register of Historic Places as well as the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage and was submitted in 2006. This survey project developed out of a partnership between the newly designated Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area and the neighboring Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area. Its purpose is to expand the region’s existing resource inventory by focusing on some of the unknown or undocumented resources, specifically the region’s African American historic and cultural resources. Overall, the purpose of this survey is to include more about the African American experience within the overall history of the region.

¹ Although not on the Tennessee River, Franklin County is included because it once included all that is Franklin and Colbert County presently. In 1867, political disagreements following the Civil War caused a split to occur and Colbert County formed out of Franklin County. Therefore, one cannot fully understand the area’s history without inclusion of Franklin County.
Project Methodology

The Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area African-American Resource Survey was conducted in the summer of 2010 under the direction of the Center’s Dr. Carroll Van West and by historic preservation graduate assistant Katie Randall. In compiling the survey, several members of the region’s African-American community were consulted and many of the counties’ public-access roads were driven to identify additional resources. However, several roads in these counties remain either unpaved, making them difficult to drive, or simply inaccessible. In such cases, the surveyors used their professional judgment to determine the potential for historic resources along these roads. In addition, county archives and local historians were also consulted on this project.

Another factor affecting the survey is that it is based on what is visible from the public right-of-way. The surveyors did not enter any of the properties, except for properties such as cemeteries and house museums that are open to the public. Nor did they conduct any additional research on the individual properties. For instance, much of the surveyor’s knowledge of specific properties came from historical markers on site. Therefore, secure addresses for all properties were not determined. Some properties had visible addresses on mailboxes or dwellings, but several addresses were not visible or were no longer occupied by a resident or receiving mail service.

One other factor affecting the survey is the high concentration of churches, schools, and cemeteries included as historic resources. Although such sites are not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places simply for being historic churches, schools, and cemeteries, their significance can be developed within the broader context of such sites as anchors within African American communities.¹

Due to limitations of time and feasibility, this survey does not represent all of the small towns and rural areas found throughout this region. It instead offers several examples of the types of resources that are present in some places and are assumed present throughout the rest of the region. Further research is necessary in all six counties to include additional rural resources and provide a more complete inventory.

¹ More information on the development of early African American communities can be found in Powerful Artifacts: A Guide to Surveying and Documenting Rural African-American Churches published by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University in July 2000.
Leighton
Christian Home Church of Christ

Ricks Cemetery Road

The Christian Home Church of Christ was first established as a congregation in 1832 as the county’s oldest African American congregation. The current concrete block building was likely constructed early to mid-twentieth century.

Further research is necessary to establish an exact construction date.
Muscle Shoals
FAME Recording Studios

603 East Avalon Avenue

FAME Recording Studios, original home to the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, was founded in 1959 by Rick Hall, Billy Sherill, and Tom Stafford. The original location was in Florence, Lauderdale County, Alabama just above the City Drug Store. In early 1960, Hall split from Sherill and Stafford, and the facility was temporarily moved to a vacant tobacco warehouse on Wilson Dam Road in Muscle Shoals. There, Hall recorded the studio’s first hit, Arthur Alexander’s “You Better Move On,” and used the proceeds to construct the current facility in 1961. In 1963, Hall recorded the first hit at the new facility, rhythm and blues singer Jimmy Hughes’ “Steal Away.” Like Alexander and Hughes, countless African American artists would record at FAME throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. Artists such as Aretha Franklin, Little Richard, Etta James, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, rhythm and blues group The Tams, and Joe Tex all recorded chart topping hits here. Also a publishing house, FAME Publishing has worked with various African American artists, most notably the King of the Blues B.B. King. FAME Recording Studios and all of its African American artists helped shape and define the region’s diverse and well respected music history. The studio is still in use today and is owned and operated by Rick Hall.¹

This property is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places for its significance to the music history of the area.

¹ Much of this information was gathered during a visit with studio owner Rick Hall.
Sheffield
**First Missionary Baptist Church**

**1103 Sterling Boulevard**

Historically an African American congregation, further research is necessary to positively determine the First Missionary Baptist Church’s organization date. The extant building appears to have been constructed in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Additionally, First Missionary Baptist Church is located near the Sterling High School site in a historically African American neighborhood.

Further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Colbert County’s history.
Muscle Shoals Sound Studio

3614 Jackson Highway

In 1969, the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio was established by the Muscle Shoals Sound Rhythm Section, also known as The Swampers, when they left nearby FAME Recording Studios. The Swampers included keyboard player Barry Beckett, drummer Roger Hawkins, guitarist Jimmy Johnson, and bass player David Hood. They became the first rhythm section to own their own studio, and eventually, their own publishing and production companies. The Swampers’ distinctive and soulful sounds have been heard on a number of African American artists’ recordings such as Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, and the Staple Singers. In the entry to the Alabama Encyclopedia, Mississippi State University professor Peter B. Olson says, “The ‘Sound’ associated with Muscle Shoals, because of its rhythm and blues roots, is racially ambiguous and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section often collaborated with black artists and producers in ways that defied typical assumptions about race relations in the South.”

The original Muscle Shoals Sound Studio is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was purchased by another recording studio in recent years. A new facility was constructed for the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio on Alabama Avenue in Sheffield in 1978.

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Gaston Chapel Primitive Baptist Church

1206 Sterling Boulevard

The Gaston Chapel Primitive Baptist Church was first organized in 1914 under Reverend W.M. Gaston. The current building was erected in 1945.

Additionally, Gaston Chapel is located near the Sterling High School site in a historically African American neighborhood.

Further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Colbert County’s history.
Sterling High School site

Sterling Boulevard

Once the site of Sheffield’s only school for African Americans, this now nearly empty lot is interpreted through a state historical marker, sponsored by the city of Sheffield, Sterling Alumni, and the Colbert County Historical Landmarks Foundation. Public education for Sheffield’s African American children began as early as 1889 in a frame building at East 20th and Atlanta Avenue. The school became known as Sheffield Colored High School in 1920. Land was donated on East 19th Street, now known as Sterling Boulevard, for a new school building in 1923. A modern brick building was built on this lot to house all twelve grades. The school was renamed Sterling High School in 1942 in memory of Benjamin Sterling, a formerly enslaved African American who served as principal and teacher at the school from 1896 to 1936. Land for an athletic field and playground was acquired in 1946, and additions were made in 1950 to include a gymnasium and lunch room. The entire building was renovated in 1959. The Sterling High School band performed for President John F. Kennedy when he came to the area to visit Tennessee Valley Authority reserve in 1963. Sterling closed in 1968 due to integration, and the building was razed in 1978.
Tuscumbia
Cook’s Cabin at Ivy Green

300 North Commons Street (West Tuscumbia)

The cook’s cabin at Ivy Green, Helen Keller’s birthplace, is a two-room, board and batten structure that once housed the Keller’s kitchen, cook, and the cook’s family. Sophia Napier Watkins (1854-1917), wife of Reverend Fred W. Watkins who pastored Bethel Lauderdale Missionary Baptist Church in Florence from 1901 to 1911, was the Keller’s cook. Watkins’ service to the Keller family is just one example of what life was like for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. African American women in particular were relegated to domestic work only. The extant cabin on the Keller property is representative of that period in southern history.

It is important to note that the property was at one time, under the ownership of Keller’s grandfather, a sizeable plantation. In fact, a small cottage near the cook’s cabin once housed the plantation office. This cottage was later home to Helen’s parents and became her birthplace. In addition, Anne Sullivan occupied the cottage during her years at Ivy Green.

Ivy Green was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. At the time of the nomination, the cook’s cabin was listed as a noncontributing structure. The property’s period of significance is listed as 1880-1888, including only the years Helen Keller resided at Ivy Green as a child. Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan, however, returned to Ivy Green countless times throughout their years together. Without additional research, it remains unclear as to why the cabin was not listed as a contributing structure. Further research is necessary to determine construction dates and the cabin’s significance within the broader context of the property’s history.
Russellville
Chucky Mullins Center

428 Hamilton Street

Roy Lee “Chucky” Mullins was born in Russellville in 1969 and later was a football player at University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in Oxford, MS. During Mississippi’s homecoming game against Vanderbilt University in 1989, Mullins plunged head first into a tackle and was injured and left quadriplegic. The tragic accident was so widely known, Mullins even received President George H.W. Bush as a visitor during his hospital stay in Memphis. Soon after returning to Oxford to complete his degree, Mullins suffered a pulmonary embolism and died May 6, 1991. Those in Oxford and Russellville have honored Mullins’ memory in a variety of ways. The Chucky Mullins Center of Russellville was constructed in honor of Mullins and provides after-school care, access to computers, and a gymnasium for Russellville’s children and young adults. It sits adjacent to the Reedtown School property. Although not a historic resource, the Center serves as an excellent tribute to Mullins’ legacy and is an acceptable place to interpret his courageous life story.

Additionally, the Chucky Mullins Center is next to Reedtown School, a historic African American school (see p. 21).
College Avenue First Baptist Church

521 College Avenue NW

The current building was erected in the years 1977 to 1978.

Further research is necessary to determine when the congregation first organized and to determine further significance within the broader context of Franklin County’s history.
Luketown Cemetery

Co. J. Hatton Circle

Luketown Cemetery is one of Russellville’s oldest African American cemeteries with burials dating to 1890. Several World War I and World War II veterans are buried here, and Roy Lee “Chucky” Mullins, football player for the University of Mississippi who was paralyzed during a game and later died of a pulmonary embolism while completing his degree, is also buried here. He died in May of 1991.

The oldest burials marked in the cemetery are seen along both sides of the access road that runs through the cemetery. More recent burials can be found on the periphery.
Reedtown School
Winfield Street and Hamilton Street

Reedtown School was likely constructed c. 1960 and served as Russellville’s African American school until integration caused the school to close most likely in the late 1960s. Possibly the site of the earliest African American school in Russellville, further research is necessary to understand the site’s significance within the broader context of Franklin County’s history and to better understand its significance in African American education. After the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, African American schools were built throughout the South in an attempt to stave off integration by providing what were supposedly “separate but equal” facilities for black students. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision overturned that ruling, making state-sponsored segregation illegal. Although not widely accepted at first, this landmark decision paved the way for racial integration across the nation.

The property’s eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places needs to be determined.
Saint Paul’s Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

406 Hamilton Street

Once a frame structure, Saint Paul’s Christian Methodist Episcopal’s extant facility is bricked and at least sixty-five years old according to member’s of the current congregation. The church is located near Reedtown School within a historically African American neighborhood.

Further research is necessary to date the existing structure and determine significance within the broader context of Franklin County’s history.
Sylvester Cemetery

Highway 24 E and County Road 87

Sylvester Cemetery is one of Russellville’s early African American cemeteries and sits unmarked on a small plot with several marked graves dating as early as 1911. There are at least two World War I veterans buried at Sylvester, with Bean, Hamilton, and Reynolds being the predominant surnames present. The cemetery features several depressions in and around those graves, denoting the possibility of additional unmarked graves there.

Further research is necessary to determine the cemetery’s significance within the broader context of Franklin County’s history.
Winston-Tiggs Cemetery

Highway 63

Located on private property, the Winston-Tiggs Cemetery is marked with a sign on Highway 63 and is fenced in. Historically an African American family cemetery, Winston-Tiggs cemetery is still in use.

Further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Franklin County’s history.
Florence
**Burrell Normal School**

**110 West College Street**

Burrell Normal School, also known as Burrell High School and Burrell-Slater High School, was given to the city of Florence in 1903 by the American Missionary Association. It served African American students grades 1-12 until 1937 when it was assumed by the Florence Board of Education and operated as the city’s African American high school. In 1951, it was moved to the Slater Elementary School building on South Court Street and remained there until 1958 when a fire destroyed the building. In 1960, the current building was constructed on the school’s original site and again served African American high school students until integration and the school’s closing in 1969.

This property is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in African American education. After the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, African American schools were built throughout the South in an attempt to stave off integration by providing what were supposedly “separate but equal” facilities for black students. The Burrell Normal School is an example of such a facility. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision overturned that ruling, making state-sponsored segregation illegal. Although not widely accepted at first, this landmark decision paved the way for racial integration across the nation.

The school is currently interpreted by a city historical marker on the corner of the school lot.
A city historical marker stands at the site where the Peter Blow Inn once stood on Pine Street. Unable to succeed as a cotton farmer, Peter Blow moved to Florence from nearby Madison County in 1821 and became an innkeeper. With him, Blow brought many of his slaves, one being Dred Scott. Scott became the inn’s hostler, the person responsible for the care of travellers’ horses, and he lived as a slave at the inn until the Blows relocated to St. Louis, Missouri in 1830. Scott was then sold to Dr. John Emerson, the man who owned Scott when he made a case for his own legal right to freedom resulting in the Dred Scott Decision of 1857.¹

First Congregational Church

119 North Pine Street

It is not known when the congregation first organized, but the First Congregational Church, now the Tennessee Valley Community Church and Center, had organized by the 1913 R.L. Polk and Company’s Tri-Cities Directory of the Florence, Sheffield, and Tuscumbia areas. The extant structure appears to have been erected sometime in the twentieth century.

Further research is necessary to establish definitive construction dates and to determine the significance within the broader context of Lauderdale County’s history.
Florence Bethel Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America

408 East Alabama Street

Organized as Cumberland Colored Presbyterian Church in 1898, the Florence Bethel Cumberland Presbyterian Church originally met at property deeded by the city. In 1918, the congregation bought property and built a frame structure no longer extant on Alabama Street. The current structure was erected in 1920 under Reverend O.R. Stephen, and in 1948, additions were made under Revered Earl McDonald. This site has historically been associated with Colored Masons in the area.

The site is currently interpreted through a city historical marker.
**Florence Wagon Works site and Company Housing**

**Richards Street and Veterans Drive**

The largest wagon factory in the South, Florence Wagon Works moved its business from Atlanta to Florence in 1889. U.S. Army wagons used in World War I were crafted here and sent all over the United States and France. Growing popularity and production of the automobile caused gradual reduction in the company’s business, and the firm liquidated in the 1930s. The factory itself is no longer extant. Company housing was located near the site and would have been segregated due to Jim Crow laws throughout the company’s duration. Proximity to the wagon works site, the architectural styles represented, and the proximity of these houses to one another suggest this as a possible location of the workers’ housing.

Further research, including deed research, needs to be executed to verify that the housing extant around the original Florence Wagon Works site was at one time company housing. Additionally, further research is necessary to determine significance of the New Testament Missionary Baptist Church within the broader context of this neighborhood.

The Florence Wagon Works site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. The property boundary does not at this time include any surrounding company housing. If it is determined through additional research that this was the site of company housing, the site would be potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

The sits is currently interpreted through a city historical marker.
Possible management housing
(face the Tennessee River)

New Testament Missionary Baptist Church

Possible black worker’s housing
Forks of Cypress/ Jackson Cemetery/ Slave Cemetery

4900 Jackson Road

The Forks of Cypress, or the Jackson plantation, was one of the largest in Lauderdale County. It once featured a Greek Revival home designed by architect William Nichols that was constructed in 1830 by James Jackson, cousin to General Andrew Jackson.  The house was the only in the state of Alabama to feature a two-story colonnade supported by twenty-four Ionic columns. The house and grounds were used by Union forces as a base camp during the Civil War. The house was used as an early house museum until it was struck by lightning in 1966 and burned to the ground, leaving behind only the columns and the chimney of a nearby cabin, most likely a kitchen and slave quarters. Both the house and nearby cabin are documented in the Library of Congress’s 1930s Historic American Building Survey (HABS). Comparing the extant chimney with images in the HABS file, it is quite possible that the extant chimney belonged to the slave cabin.

Alex Haley, author of *Roots*, can trace his ancestry to slaves at the Jackson plantation. His great-grandmother, “Queen” Ester, is believed to be buried in the Jackson slave cemetery. It is believed that James Jackson Jr. had a child by Ester who became the Jackson’s cook. Her name was Queen, and she is the subject of Haley’s unfinished book *Queenie*.

Further research is necessary on the “Ghost Bridge” located somewhere on the property. According to oral tradition, this bridge was the site of several slave hangings.

Upon the time of this survey, both the Jackson family cemetery and the slave cemetery were not accessible due to an overgrown farm road. The Jackson cemetery was documented in HABS, and the slave cemetery was documented by a Lauderdale County Boy Scouts of America troop in the 1990s. This survey is located at the Florence-Lauderdale County Public Library in the Local History room. The family cemetery is enclosed by a stone wall. It is believed that African American horse jockeys were buried within the walls of the family cemetery. Depressions in the family plot denote possible unmarked graves within the stone wall, offering evidence to support that assertion. Just behind the stone wall lies one of the largest identified African American slave cemeteries in northern Alabama with more than 250 unmarked graves. Although unmarked, it is believed that the cemetery reveals a hierarchy of slave labor with favored house slaves and domestic servants buried nearest the family cemetery. In roughly the center of the slave cemetery, there is a stone headstone/footstone pairing marking one of the graves. It is not known who this person was or what his or her significance to the Jackson’s might have been, possibly an overseer or evidence of a later burial, post emancipation. Also, due to the depth and regularity of the depressions in the ground, it is also believed that the Jackson slaves were interred in

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2 William Nichols was a prominent southern architect. He designed the Alabama statehouse in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (c.1830) and most of the University of Alabama’s campus (1831). Nichols later became the state architect for Mississippi.
coffins. The cemetery continued to be used by descendants of Jackson slaves throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.\(^3\)

This site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

\(^3\) Much of this information was taken from the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Forks of Cypress.
Handy’s Hill

442 North Cherokee Street

This historically African American West Florence neighborhood was first named Handy’s Hill after William Wise Handy, a formerly enslaved African American. Handy purchased land here, becoming the first African American to own property in West Florence in 1867. W.W. Handy was also a revered local minister to the now-freed blacks in this area. He preached to Florence’s first post-Civil War congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and organized what is now the Greater St. Paul AME Church of Florence. His congregation played an important role in the violent history of Reconstruction. On November 16, 1873, his grandson, William Christopher Handy, was born here in a two-room log cabin. W.C. Handy would go on to become the “Father of the Blues.” In 1954, all structures on this site were either razed or relocated for a housing project called Handy Homes. W.C. Handy received $20,000 for the property and returned it to the city to have his boyhood home moved and restored. In 1970, the cabin was restored and reopened as part of the Handy Home and Museum on West College Street.4

A city historical marker now sits on a corner lot within the housing project marking the site where Handy’s boyhood home once stood.

Wilson Dam Company Housing (possible)

Highway 133 and Huntsville Road

Wilson Lock and Dam separates Lauderdale and Colbert counties on the Tennessee River. Construction of the dam began in 1918 under the Woodrow Wilson Administration and was completed in 1924 under Calvin Coolidge. While Wilson Dam predates the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), it was later placed under the authority of TVA and remains under their maintenance today.

At its peak, building of the dam provided employment for more than 18,000 workers. There were 185 permanent residences, a school built for 850 students, a hospital with 85 beds, three barber shops, and twenty-three mess halls built to house and serve workers.5

Due to the size of the houses, architectural styles represented, and proximity to Wilson Dam, it is possible that the houses located nearest the intersection of Highway 133 (Wilson Dam Road) and County Road 32 (Huntsville Road) are the structures that were built to house workers. Further research, including deed research, is necessary to determine whether or not this site was the site of Wilson Dam company housing.

If this site proves to be the site of Wilson Dam company housing, it would be potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Wilson Dam is not currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places but is potentially eligible.

St. James Missionary Baptist Church

325 Wallace Street

St. James Missionary Baptist Church is located in West Florence, a historically African American neighborhood. It was first organized as an African American congregation in 1902. The extant building was erected in 1960 as the congregation’s third building and is still in use by the congregation.

Further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Lauderdale County’s history.
St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church

195 North Cherokee Street

W.W. Handy was a revered local minister to the now-freed blacks in this area. He preached to Florence’s first post-Civil War congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and organized the Greater St. Paul AME Church of Florence. His congregation played an important role in the violent history of Reconstruction. In a biography on Reverend Handy’s grandson, W.C. Handy, author David Robertson says:

On the evening of April 24, 1867, the first political meeting of Lauderdale County’s black freedmen was held at the AME chapel built by Handy’s grandfather. By the light of oil lamps, James T. Rapier, a prosperous local black farmer who had obtained his education before the Civil War and who would later become this Alabama district’s first black congressman, explained to the gathering of one hundred and fifty freedmen the proposed Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would grant them full civil liberties.\(^6\)

Robertson continues by relaying the consequences of the meeting that evening. He says an African American school seven miles outside of Florence was burned to the ground and more than a hundred and twenty-five hooded Klansmen rode through Florence lynching at least three African American residents and shooting at least one man. Robertson says that W.C. Handy said his father hid Rapier from the Klansmen that night on an island in the Tennessee River.

The congregation’s extant facility was erected in 1968.

The site is currently interpreted through a city historical marker.

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Greater Mount Moriah Primitive Baptist Church and Mount Calvary Cemetery

820 West Irvine Avenue

First organized in 1896, the current facility for the Greater Mount Moriah Primitive Baptist Church was erected in 1924 and remodeled in 1964. Additions were also made at that time. The adjoining cemetery dates to burials as early as the 1950s. There are several World War I and World War II veterans buried at Mount Calvary Cemetery.

Further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Lauderdale County’s history.

A city historical marker interprets the history of the church at its present location.
W.C. Handy Birthplace

620 West College Street

“Father of the Blues” W.C. Handy was born November 16, 1873 in a two-room log building atop what is known as Handy’s Hill in Florence, named for Handy’s grandfather who was the first African American to own property in West Florence. The W.C. Handy Home, Museum, and Library features this reconstructed two-room log cabin. The structure was taken down at its original location in 1954 to make way for a housing project named Handy Homes. W.C. Handy gave the $20,000 received for his family’s property to the city of Florence to move and preserve his boyhood home. The cabin was stored for several years and was reconstructed at its present location in 1970.

In addition to the house, the museum houses a collection of original sheet music, Handy’s trumpet, and other personal papers and memorabilia. The library located within the museum features many works on W.C. Handy as well as several works on African American history and studies.
W.C. Handy School

955 Beale Street

Located in West Florence, the W.C. Handy School was named for the famed “Father of the Blues” and was built in 1951 in Handy’s boyhood neighborhood to serve students grades 1-6. The facility now serves as the W.C. Handy Head Start School for the City of Florence. The school’s first principal, Welton Reynolds, was instrumental in preservation efforts concerning the reconstruction of Handy’s birthplace on West College Street.

This property is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in African American education. After the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, African American schools were built throughout the South in an attempt to stave off integration by providing what were supposedly “separate but equal” facilities for black students. The W.C. Handy School is an example of such a facility. In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision overturned that ruling, making state-sponsored segregation illegal. Although not widely accepted at first, this landmark decision paved the way for racial integration across the nation.
Ante-Bellum Cotton Mills site
Intersection of Appleby Boulevard and Cypress Mill Road

The Globe Cotton Factory was built in 1840 near this site. By 1857, its operation included three cotton mills, a flour mill, and two corn mills. Text on the city historical marker says, “By 1860, the factory employed 310 people, including a large number of women and children, at average salaries of $2.50 per week.” The sign does not note however whether or not these people were enslaved African Americans, but it is not likely that enslaved persons would have been paid. It is possible that these were poor whites, but further research is necessary to determine the site’s history.⁷

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Tom Clark site

E. Tennessee Street (located directly in front of Florence Cemetery)

“Mountain” Tom Clark of Clifton, Tennessee was a bushwhacker during the Civil War and was well-known for terrorizing people of northern Alabama. Oral tradition says Tom Clark and fellow bushwhackers raided the Wilson Plantation, located on what is now the town of St. Florian, in May of 1865. They wanted Wilson to tell them where he had hidden a sum of money on the property. When Wilson refused, the group of outlaws shot and killed Wilson’s grandson. They also shot the plantation overseer, Wilson’s nephew, and W.C. Handy’s maternal grandfather Christopher Brewer, a slave of John Wilson’s wife. These three men all survived. The account says that once freed Brewer travelled to Nashville, Tennessee to share with a Wilson descendant and heir where the money was hidden on the property. Additionally, following emancipation, Wilson offered forty acres and $1,000 to his slaves willing to stay and work the land, and Brewer chose to stay.

Tom Clark and most of his companions were hung at the site of the Florence Cemetery on September 4, 1872. The account of the hangings says that although a grave had been dug for Tom Clark’s body, he was buried underneath Tennessee Street, because he had famously said, “No one will ever run over Tom Clark.”

Further research is necessary to confirm details of this account.
Courtland
Courtland Town Square

Bordered by Tennessee Street, Alabama Street, College Street, and Water Street

The Courtland town square was set aside in 1818 for a courthouse that was never built. Courtland’s founders had initially hoped Courtland would be chosen as the county seat, but this never materialized. The square now features a central fountain, gazebo, and four state historical markers. The markers interpret Courtland’s history as a railroad town since 1834 and as a “Cotton Kingdom” with more than a dozen large plantations nearby that conducted business in Courtland. The Courtland city website refers to Courtland in those days as a “local trade center rooted in the surrounding plantation economy.”

Furthermore, the city website says, “Courtland’s location was chosen by planters in Virginia and the Carolinas who saw great potential in the fertile cotton land combined with market access to New Orleans by way of the Tennessee River.”

Another marker in the square interprets the African American experience in this region and says that African Americans initially came to Courtland as slaves and worked the land composed of rich soil, excellent for growing cotton. The marker also states that skilled enslaved craftsmen were used to construct many of the town’s original buildings, many of which were frame and no longer extant. The city still counts approximately twenty buildings that pre-date the Civil War. Further research needs to be done to determine which of those buildings if any were built by enslaved African American labor.

The marker continues that following emancipation, many formerly enslaved African Americans stayed in the area and worked as tenant farmers. The reverse side of the marker continues and tells of the area’s rich political history. Prior to the state constitution of 1901, which denied African Americans political participation, “Courtland’s African American community produced the most successful local Republican party organization in North Alabama, on occasion uniting with area whites to create a bi-racial government.” The marker concludes that much of Courtland’s African American community migrated northward and westward during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century.

Located on the northeast corner of the square are four identical, stone structures. The brick sidewalk has been laid around them, leaving all four fully intact. One of the historical markers in the square references these structures as “four 19th century stone mounting blocks placed for the convenience of horseback riders,” but oral tradition provides another possibility. Many believe these structures are slave auction blocks. After comparing these structures to images of slave auction blocks and due to the height of the structures, their proximity to one another and to the railroad located less than a block away, and because Courtland was known as a place of business for several large plantations, it is plausible that these four structures were once slave auction blocks. It is also quite possible that they

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2 Ibid.
were used as both, mounting blocks and slave auction blocks, serving different purposes at different times in the town’s history.

More research is necessary to verify a definitive use.

The Courtland town square was listed on the National Register of Historic Places within the Courtland Historic District in 1991. The boundaries of the district were expanded in 1998.

Historical markers referenced
Possible slave auction blocks

Four structures on one street corner
Hillsboro
Pond Spring/General Joseph Wheeler’s Home

12280 AL Highway 20

Located near Courtland, Pond Spring was the home of C.S.A. General and U.S. Congressman Joseph Wheeler. Wheeler also served as Major General during the Spanish-American War.

There are three houses on the site. The earliest being a double or dogtrot log cabin built in 1818 by John P. Hickman, an early settler of Lawrence County. The second house built on the property was completed in the 1830s by Benjamin Sherrod, the property’s second owner. The third and final house on the property was constructed under Joseph Wheeler in the 1870s adjacent to the Sherrod home.

Several of the outbuildings at Pond Spring reflect the legacy of many enslaved African Americans living on the property. The first house on the property, the double log cabin, was used under Sherrod and Wheeler as a kitchen and living quarters for house slaves. Additionally, one of the barns on the property, although since reconstructed, was originally constructed by enslaved African American labor.

Located behind the three houses, down a stone path, lies the family cemetery of the Hickman, Sherrod, and Wheeler families. Directly behind the family plot, lies the slave cemetery. At the time of the surveyor’s visit, the slave cemetery was inaccessible and only visible from the rear of the family plot. Most African American slave graves are unmarked and only recognizable by depressions in the ground. Three slave graves at Pond Spring are said to be marked with hand carved markers, something rarely seen in a slave cemetery. Further research is necessary to determine the identity of these three individuals.

The Pond Spring property was documented in the 1930s through the Library of Congress’s Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and is available online.

The site is currently undergoing restoration under the administration of the Alabama Historical Commission.

The site is currently interpreted by a state historical marker.

Pond Spring was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Joseph Wheeler Plantation in 1977.
House slave quarters

Slave cemetery

Wheeler barn built by slave labor
Moulton
Freeman Tabernacle Church

2871 Byler Road

The Freeman Tabernacle Church was organized in 1874 and the extant building was erected in 1929 in this eclectic vernacular style that features a unique brick pattern. Grouped arches on the front façade reveal an Italian influence, while the curved wall on the building’s side elevation reveals a Richardsonian Romanesque influence. A county historical marker has been placed in the front of the property and reads:

On January 3, 1874, former slaves and Deacons King Crayton, George Pruitt, Tandy Crayton, and Ben Warren paid fifty dollars for land to construct the Colored Baptist Church, which was one of the earliest in the Muscle Shoals Colored Baptist Association, an organization that helped black communities construct churches and schools. After his death in 1933, the congregation renamed the church to honor longtime pastor John Harrison Freeman.
Moulton Negro High School

915 Rosenwald Street

In the 1920s, a school for African American children was constructed of funds and labor from the local African American community and funds donated by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. This school was called the Moulton Rosenwald School. In the 1950s, the school’s frame structures were replaced with brick structures, and again, much of the funds and labor came from members of the local African American community. In 1970, the school closed due to integration and is now being used by Lawrence County Board of Education as a Head Start Program and Family Education Campus.

The original Moulton Rosenwald school, although not pictured, is documented on the Fisk University Rosenwald Database.

The site is currently interpreted by a county historical marker.

Moulton Negro High School is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in African American education. After the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, African American schools were built throughout the South in an attempt to stave off integration by providing what were supposedly “separate but equal” facilities for black students. Moulton Negro High is an example of such a facility. In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision overturned that ruling, making state-sponsored segregation illegal. Although not widely accepted at first, this landmark decision paved the way for racial integration across the nation.
Smith Chapel Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church

2735 Byler Road

The Smith Chapel Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church’s history dates to 1871 when formerly enslaved African Americans established one of the first churches and schools for African Americans in Moulton. Colored Methodists purchased most of the materials used in the construction of the first building, and Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Nabors Owen donated the land for both the Colored Baptist and Colored Methodist. Both congregations worshipped together until 1874. The church is now named in honor of Reverend Andrew Smith, a former pastor. The extant building was erected in 1925 and features hand carving above the entrance.

This site is currently interpreted by a county historical marker.
Smith Chapel Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church Cemetery

2735 Byler Road

Adjacent to the Smith Chapel CME church building is a cemetery, in use since the establishment of the church in 1871. The earliest burials appear to be c.1910, but there are several unmarked graves and many headstones now unreadable due to weathering of the stone.
Judge Thomas M. Peters (1810-1888)

14030 Market Street

A scientist and pioneer of botany in Alabama, Judge Thomas M. Peters was also an early civil rights activist for African Americans and women's suffrage. A county historical marker has been placed in front of the Lawrence County Board of Education building to interpret his story and life in Moulton.
Athens
Hine Hobbs Cemetery

Hine Street and Hobbs Street

One of the oldest African American cemeteries in Athens, Hine Hobbs Cemetery is the burial place of some of Athens’ most prominent African American citizens. Famous opera singer and Fisk Jubilee singer Patti Malone is buried here as well as Julius T. Malone, 1917 Carnegie Hero Medal recipient. More research is necessary to determine the cemetery’s significance to the local African American community.
Trinity High School/ Fort Henderson site

800 Brownsferry Street (County Road 29)

Fort Henderson was a five-sided earthen fort constructed on this site by Federal forces occupying Athens in 1863. There were a few frame structures built as well as a fifteen-foot deep perimeter ditch, part of which is still visible. On September 24, 1864, C.S.A. General Nathan Bedford Forrest led an attack on the fort and its nine hundred man garrison, mostly made up of the 110th United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.), forcing their surrender. After moving prisoners and raiding supplies, Forrest continued his campaign north. Federal forces soon reoccupied Athens.

More than forty years later, in 1907, this site became home to Trinity School, originally located east of the railroad. Trinity School was first established by the American Missionary Association of New York in 1865 to educate formerly enslaved African Americans. The school was re-built several times, at least twice due to fire, and the extant structure was likely constructed c.1950-1960 as Trinity High School. This structure is in poor condition. The colonial revival concrete block structure adjacent to the school was built in 1957 as the school’s agricultural building and is in better overall condition. This building also housed the seventh and eighth grades at one time. Trinity School was the first school in North Alabama to offer kindergarten to African American students and continued educating African American students until its close in 1970, most likely due to integration.

Prominent Trinity High School graduates include: Patti Malone, Fisk Jubilee singer and world-renowned opera singer; George Ruffin Bridgeforth, Director of Agriculture at Tuskegee Institute; James Watkins, an artist whose work was included in the White House collection and the Shigaraki Institute of Ceramic Studies in Japan; R. Eugene Pincham, judge and Chicago politician; and C. Eric Lincoln, editor or author of more than twenty-two books as well as a professor at the University of Ghana.

The site is interpreted currently through a county historical marker. A museum is currently under development to interpret the site’s multi-layered history.

If restored, Trinity High School would be potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in African American education. The site itself is potentially eligible as a historic site for the significance of Fort Henderson and Trinity High School.
Trinity Congregational Church

810 Brownsferry Street (County Road 29)

Established in 1871, Trinity Congregational Church sits adjacent to the Trinity High School site and was always considered a strong supporter and partner of the school. At the time of its organization, the congregation consisted of both black and white parishioners. For this and their relationship to the school, the church is known for its long history of nondiscriminatory religious, educational, and social service practice. The extant classical revival brick structure was most likely erected sometime in the early twentieth century.

Further research is necessary to determine construction date.
Tanner
Alabama Blue Ridge Academy/ Tanner School

11999 Stewart Road

In 1917, a school for African American students was erected on this site on two acres of land purchased by Mrs. Sophie Redus with funds raised by the local community. The first building burned in 1919 and in 1920 another was erected with funds from the Rosenwald foundation. It was called the Alabama Blue Ridge Academy. This structure was built in the first years of the Rosenwald program while it was still managed by the Tuskegee Institute. In fact, Tuskegee was involved in numerous programs for the advancement of African Americans across Limestone County at this time.¹

It is believed that a third school was constructed on this site to replace the Alabama Blue Ridge Academy in the years 1929-1930, also financed by the Rosenwald fund. This school is referred to in Rosenwald files as “Tanner School” although the community continued to use the Alabama Blue Ridge Academy name.

In 1947, a survey was conducted entitled Retrospective Glances of Limestone County Negro Education that included the school and called it “Blue Ridge.” A “Tanner School” is not included, so it is again evident that while listed as two separate schools in Rosenwald files for purposes of differentiation, it is believed that the “Tanner School” simply replaced the “Alabama Blue Ridge Academy.”²

Furthermore, the building still extant follows a two-teacher type plan that was used in the 1920s and 1930s. The Alabama Blue Ridge Academy would have followed an earlier plan.³

This school is listed on the Fisk University Rosenwald Database as “Tanner School” in Limestone County.

Further research is necessary to establish more definitive information. The Clinton Calloway Papers housed at the Tuskegee Institute should be consulted. Deed research could also be conducted to confirm that the property in question was the site of both Rosenwald schools in Tanner.

This property is privately owned and currently in use as a private residence, therefore it is only accessible from the road. Better images are necessary to accurately document this structure.

The Alabama Blue Ridge Academy/Tanner School is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance as a Rosenwald school and its overall significance in African American education.

¹ Gray, Emma Kate, Retrospective Glances of Limestone County Negro Education, Limestone County: Limestone County Negro Teachers Association, 1947.
² Ibid.
Images taken from the roadside
Decatur
Southern Railway Depot

701 Railroad Street Northwest

The Scottsboro Boys’ trial was transferred to Decatur in March of 1933. Based on oral tradition, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) burned crosses each day in front of the depot throughout the duration of the trial to intimidate African Americans and keep them from getting off the train in support of the Scottsboro boys. There is one account of an African American young man who stayed an entire night in the depot waiting for a chance to escape past Klan members. He finally escaped in the early morning hours the next day. Several residents’ homes throughout Decatur were designated “safe houses” for African Americans staying in town for the trial.

Further research, including conducting oral histories, is necessary to establish which houses might have been designated safe houses and to confirm details of this account.

The Southern Railway Depot was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.
Decatur Negro High School/Horizon High School/Carver School

889 Church Street Northeast

Decatur Negro High School was the African American high school in Decatur until integration. Dr. George Washington Carver of Tuskegee, Alabama delivered the Baccalaureate address to graduates at Decatur’s Princess Theatre on June 2, 1935. A biracial crowd of more than a thousand people attended. The extant facility was likely constructed c. 1950. The structure has been in use by the Decatur public school system since 1991 as Horizon High School, a school meant to assist high school students who are considered “at risk” of not completing high school.

This property is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in African American education. After the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, African American schools were built throughout the South in an attempt to stave off integration by providing what were supposedly “separate but equal” facilities for black students. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision overturned that ruling, making state-sponsored segregation illegal. Although not widely accepted at first, this landmark decision paved the way for racial integration across the nation.

Further research is necessary to determine the school’s broader significance within the history of Morgan County.
First Missionary Baptist Church

233 Vine Street Northwest

The First Missionary Baptist Church of Decatur was first organized in 1866. The extant Richardsonian Romanesque revival style building was erected in 1921 and was designed by prominent African American architect W.M. Rayfield. Renovations were done in 1984 and an education wing added in 1989.

A state historical marker currently interprets the site.

The First Missionary Baptist Church is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in architecture.
King’s Memorial United Methodist Church

702 McCartney Street Northwest

The King’s Memorial United Methodist Church was first organized as the First Methodist Episcopal Church in 1854. The original building was frame and is no longer extant. The existing building on the property was erected in 1987. The cornerstone from a 1908 building is set in the church’s current sign, and a 1924 building cornerstone is set into a wall of the current building.

Further research is necessary to determine the property’s significance within the broader context of Morgan County’s history.
Magnolia-Sykes Cemetery

Old Moulton Road Southwest (County Road 61) and 2nd Street Southwest

Magnolia-Sykes Cemetery is one of the oldest African American cemeteries in Decatur and is still in use. The property was purchased in 1901 by J.J. Sykes for Sykes Cemetery. Federal Civil War soldier Amos McKinney is buried here. McKinney served in the 14th regiment of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) and died August 24, 1910 in Moulton. McKinney’s military grave marker was dedicated in August of 2009.1

1 Much of this information was taken from a tourism brochure distributed through the Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau entitled Decatur, Alabama’s African American Pioneers. Research for the brochure was conducted by Peggy Allen Towns and Wylheme H. Ragland of Decatur.
**Morgan County Courthouse**

302 Lee Street Northeast

In 1892, the first Morgan County Courthouse was erected on this site. The courthouse was remodeled in 1918 and was replaced by the current structure sometime in the second half of the twentieth century. The cornerstone from the original courthouse building has been preserved and is displayed on a monument in the courthouse square.

The Morgan County Courthouse was the site of a major civil rights battle in March of 1933 when the Scottsboro Boys’ trial was transferred from Scottsboro, Jackson County to Decatur. The defendants were housed at the nearby county jail for the duration of the trial, a facility county officials had deemed “unfit” for white prisoners by that time. Throughout the trial, the defendants were surrounded by National Guardsmen for their own protection. Decatur is located only fifty miles from the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and Klan activity had been high surrounding this case. Although not resolved in Decatur, the Morgan County Courthouse played a vital role in this notorious case.
Old State Bank

925 Bank Street

The Branch Bank of the State of Alabama at Decatur was first chartered in 1832 by state legislature under Andrew Jackson’s bank ideal and was erected in 1833. After the abandonment of the State Banking system by the national government, the top floor apartment, once used by the bank’s president, was used as a private residence from 1842 to 1901. During those years, it was also used as a Union Army supply depot and hospital during the Civil War. From 1881 to 1902, the bank was used as the First National Bank of Decatur.

A Classical Revival building, the bank is made of brick and limestone. The five limestone columns on the bank’s façade were quarried at Trinity Mountain, eight miles away, by enslaved African American labor. The same slaves were responsible for the bank’s craftsmanship and construction and were owned by bank president James Fennel.²

The Old State Bank was documented in the 1930s Library of Congress Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). The site is currently interpreted by a state historical marker.

The Old State Bank was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 as the State Bank Building, Decatur Branch.

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Princess Theatre

112 Second Avenue Northeast

The Princess Theatre has been a landmark in downtown Decatur and most of north Alabama since it was first erected as a livery stable in 1887. It was transformed into a silent playhouse and vaudeville theatre in 1919 and underwent a remodel in 1941 that updated the structure to the art deco style seen today. The neon lit marquee dates to 1941 as well. The theatre was renovated in 1978 by the City of Decatur and reopened as the city’s performing arts center. ³

Decatur Negro High School’s graduation was held at the Princess Theatre on June 2, 1935. Dr. George Washington Carver of Tuskegee, Alabama delivered the Baccalaureate address to graduates. A biracial crowd of more than a thousand were in attendance. ⁴

The Princess Theatre was listed on the National Register of Historic Places within the New Decatur/Albany Historic District in 1995. The district’s boundaries were expanded once in 1999 and again in 2004.


⁴ Much of this information was taken from a tourism brochure distributed through the Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau entitled Decatur, Alabama’s African American Pioneers. Research for the brochure was conducted by Peggy Allen Towns and Wylheme H. Ragland of Decatur.
Schaudies-Banks Cottage

Sycamore Street Northwest and Wilson Street Northeast

This five room cottage dates to 1881 and became home to a prominent African American resident of Decatur. Athelyne Celest Banks was born here and was a church worker, educator, and philanthropist. Community buildings and a local park have been named in her honor. 5

This site is currently interpreted by a state historical marker.

5 Much of this information was taken from a tourism brochure distributed through the Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau entitled Decatur, Alabama’s African American Pioneers. Research for the brochure was conducted by Peggy Allen Towns and Wylheme H. Ragland of Decatur.
Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church

524 Lafayette Street Northeast

Further research is necessary to date the organization of this congregation. The extant building appears to have been constructed in the mid-twentieth century.

Additionally, further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Morgan County’s history.
Saint Stephen’s Primitive Baptist Church

210 Seventh Avenue Southwest

Saint Stephen’s Primitive Baptist Church was first organized in 1875. The congregation relocated to this site in 1985. The current building was erected at that time.

Further research is necessary to determine significance within the broader context of Morgan County’s history.
Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church

525 Wilson Street Northwest

The Wayman Chapel American Methodist Episcopal Church was erected in 1938 and remodeled in 1943. The extant structure is in fair to poor condition.

Further research is necessary to determine further significance within the broader context of Morgan County’s history.
Hillsboro
Murphey Home

Highway 20

One of the oldest frame structures still extant in the state, the Murphey home was built c.1800 by the slaves of George Murphey, a cotton planter. George Murphey died in 1846 and his son Dr. William E. Murphey inherited the house and 800-acre plantation. Dr. Murphey was married and had two children, but both died at a very young age. Deangelo McDaniel of The Decatur Daily newspaper published an article on the property on September 22, 2007. He says, “[Murphey] was opposed to secession, and there is some evidence that Dr. Murphey hid runaway slaves on the plantation as they tried to get to Decatur to join the Union army.” Further research is necessary to confirm this account.

The structure was partially stabilized and restored by the Nucor Steel Corporation that now owns the property with help from the Alabama Historical Commission who manages the house.

The Murphey Home was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988 as the Dr. William E. Murphey House. The site is not currently interpreted.

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