

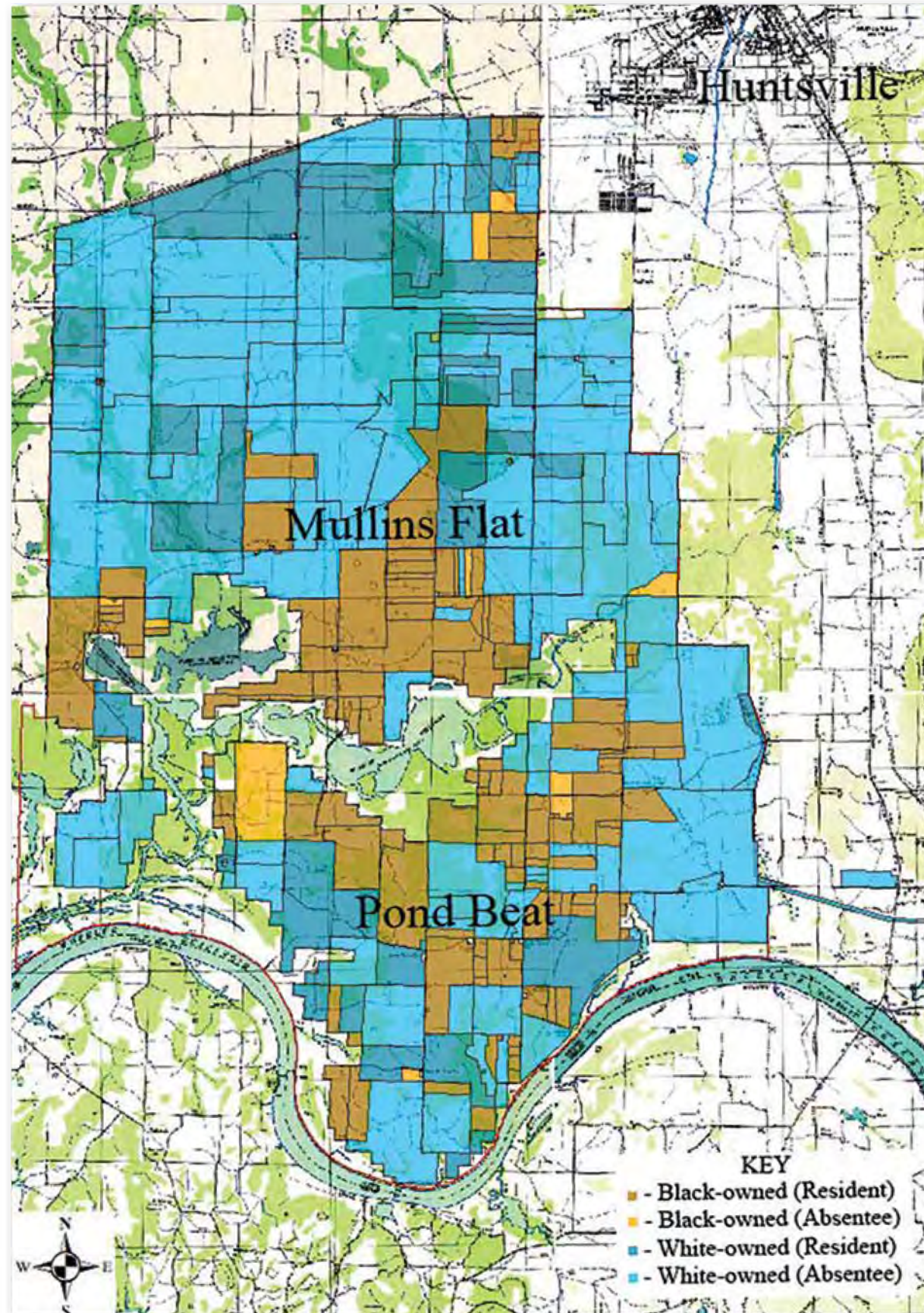
FOREWORD

Mitigation

This project had its origins in efforts by the U.S. Army Garrison at Redstone Arsenal and the FBI to comply with the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The NHPA, which is best known for establishing the National Register of Historic Places, requires federal agencies to take into account the effects of their actions on historic sites. In this case, it was the effects of leasing and constructing the FBI's Terrorist Explosive Devices Analytical Center (TEDAC) on Redstone Arsenal near Huntsville, Alabama. This proposed 453-acre facility would destroy the archaeological remains of three homesteads, all owned by African Americans in the early decades of the 20th century.

The NHPA lays out various criteria for determining if a historic site is significant or not. Some criteria are pretty straight forward, like being associated with a significant historical figure (Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, for example) or a famous architect (Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater), but others require a little more research and thought. In this case, all three homesteads were determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register because of two things – 1) their potential to tell us more about life in the early 20th century rural Middle Tennessee Valley based on their archaeological remains, and 2) their association with a significant but under-studied aspect of American history – namely, African American landownership in the era of Jim Crow.

(Right) Property Ownership prior to Redstone Arsenal Acquisition, by Race and Residence (Redstone Arsenal)



Mitigation measures for the loss of these three sites was easy to come up with for the first criterion – we set about excavating the three sites to capture as much archaeological data as possible before the sites were destroyed. The results were a treasure trove of artifacts and archaeological data that revealed just how industrious and affluent the historical occupants were. The artifacts they left behind indicated a high degree of economic engagement. The farming families that lived at these sites bought name-brand clothes, foodstuffs, toys, and even vehicles. At a time when most people in rural Alabama still relied on horses and mules for transportation, these people drove Fords and Chevrolets. They ate well and built for themselves small but sturdy homes. It was clear, that for these rural African Americans, even though they undoubtedly dealt with the injustices of segregation and bigotry of the Jim Crow South, owning land brought them a degree of independence, wealth, and social mobility that was denied many of their contemporaries.

(Artifacts) Items Found at the Home Sites of African American Landowners Provide a Glimpse into the Lives of Rural African Americans during the Era of Jim Crow in the Middle Tennessee Valley. (Courtesy Alexander Archaeological Consultants)

