Mitigating for the other criterion required a little more creativity. On a national level, historians have long recognized the significance of landownership to African Americans in the South. After centuries of forced servitude, owning land provided newly freed African Americans a means for self-determination. If they owned land, they could produce food, raise crops, and enjoy relative freedom within the confines of their property. Even before emancipation, a surprising number of free people of color acquired real estate wherever it was not specifically outlawed. Several became quite economically successful, through farming or establishing businesses such as blacksmith shops and livery stables.

Life in Pond Beat and Mullins Flat

The rural communities that were displaced by the establishment of Redstone Arsenal in the early 1940s were an interesting microcosm of the black experience in the Middle Tennessee Valley. When the U.S. Government began acquiring the land in 1941, 47% of the landowners were African American, but their properties made up only 24% of the total land area purchased by the U.S. Government. Most of the remainder including many of the largest parcels was owned by white absentee landowners, many of whom lived in Huntsville and other urban centers and were descended from the wealthy planter families that owned the cotton plantations there throughout the 19th century.

Despite the high rate of African American landownership in this part of Madison County, the numbers belie deeply entrenched racial inequalities. The distribution of black-owned land is one example. The northern half of what is now the Arsenal is well-drained level uplands known historically as Mullins Flat. This land was historically prime agricultural land, particularly suitable for growing cotton, and became the domain of several of the largest plantations in Madison County. By 1941, the vast majority of this land was still held by descendants of the early 19th century planters, who by this time lived elsewhere off cash rent and crop shares from the various tenants and sharecroppers who farmed their land. Most of the black-owned land on the other hand, was on the southern half in the low swampy lands along Huntsville Spring Branch. The biggest concentration of black-owned land was between the Spring Branch and the Tennessee River in a district historically known as Pond Beat, a name that evokes the low swampy character of the landscape.

Black-owned parcels also tended to be much smaller than those owned by whites. The average African American owned parcel was a little over 58 acres, while the average white-owned parcel was nearly three times as big.

Interestingly, black landowners were compensated for their land at slightly better rates than their white neighbors. The U.S. Government compensated black landowners $83.50 per acre on average (the equivalent of about $1,430 per acre in today's dollars), while white landowners received an average of $82.83 per acre (the modern equivalent of $1,420). This was probably due, however, to the fact that more black landowners actually lived on their land and thus tended to add more improvements to their properties than the absentee white landowners. Only 8% of the black landowners were absentee owners, and most of those had recently inherited their land from parents who had lived on the property. That is contrasted with 74% of the white landowners who lived elsewhere.

One of the most striking indicators of historical inequalities, however, is the difference in how the land was acquired. Between September of 1941 and July of 1942, the government filed 14 declarations of taking to condemn land that the owners would not sell to the government outright. In all, 110 parcels out of a total of 335 were seized by imminent domain. The majority of these parcels were owned by white owners. In fact, white owners were almost 50% more likely to refuse the Government's initial offers and end up having their land condemned. On average, this was to their financial benefit as the average compensation in the declarations of taking was $17.04 more per acre than the average compensation for land sold outright. The hesitance of black landowners to refuse the Government's offer and hold out for a higher compensation is almost certainly the product of historic power inequalities. While their white neighbors could feel empowered to push back against governmental authority and assert their rights as landowners, 246 years of slavery followed by six decades of Jim Crow had provided the black population with innumerable historic examples of the dangers of resisting the white establishment.

These inequalities aside, many in the black communities of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat enjoyed a solidly middle class lifestyle. While schools and other public facilities were strictly segregated, the rural black communities invested heavily in their communities establishing local schools, donating land for churches and community cemeteries, and running successful businesses. A few in the community could even be considered affluent. Some acquired extensive farms and built some of the finest homes in the area. Frank and Addie Jacobs, for example, who with various business partners owned nearly 600 acres in Pond Beat lived in a large two story house with a full concrete basement. The Barley family owned 345 acres in Pond Beat by 1941, and those who grew up on the farm remember a tidy manicured homestead with white-trimmed buildings and flower beds with acres of rich farmland, forests for hunting, and a large pond for swimming and fishing. In addition to income from crops and rent, David Barley operated a sorghum mill where many in the community brought their cane for processing. Yancy Horton owned 380 acres. He was known as one of the wealthiest men in Pond Beat and donated the land for the Horton School with matched funding from the Rosenwald Foundation.