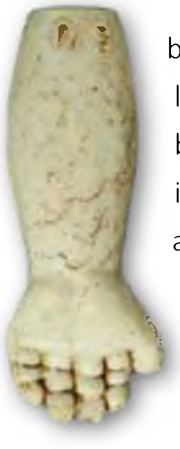
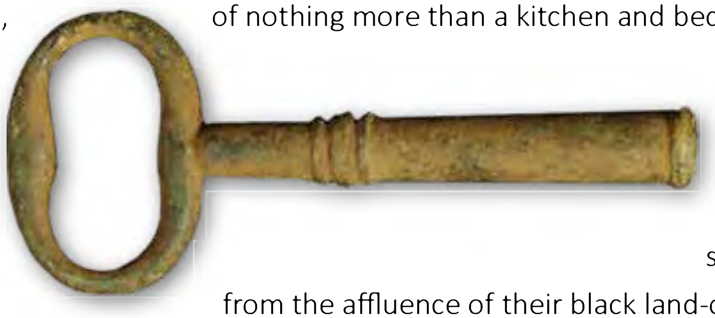
Archaeological excavations of the remains of rural homesteads on Redstone Arsenal support this picture of relative economic success. At homesteads once occupied by white and black owners alike, among the kitchen refuse, architectural debris, and other residues of mundane daily life are found fragments of jewelry, cosmetics, commercially-manufactured toys, pieces of musical instruments, Delco generator parts, car parts, farm machinery, pet collars, and many other items that would have been signs of a middle class lifestyle, particularly in the hard times of the 1930s.



Much of this success was tied directly to the land. Landownership permitted rent-free habitation. It allowed for subsistence food production from crops, gardening, livestock, hunting, and fishing. It created capital from rent and cash crops. It provided a stake in the success of the community which encouraged investment in infrastructure, education, and commercial enterprises.



For many residents of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat, however, this level of affluence and economic engagement remained a distant aspiration. In 1940, only one out of every five black households in this part of Madison County owned their home. The majority owned no land. Many of these rented from black landlords, often members of their own family, and in these cases, their socio-economic status differed little from their land-owning neighbors. Others, however, were tenants or sharecroppers on large absentee farms, and for these families, there was little chance for social mobility.

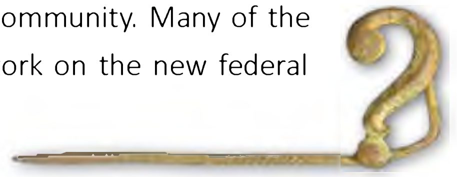
Based on data from the 1940 U.S. federal census, around 70% of the families residing in Route 4 of Precinct 1 of Huntsville, the area encompassing Mullins Flat, rented their homes. A little over half of these were black. The disparity was even starker in Precinct 6 of Whitesburg west of Highway 38 which included the communities of Farley and Pond Beat, where 84% of the households rented their homes. Of these renters, 80% were black. Particularly in Pond Beat, the family names of many of the tenants were the same as those of landowners in the community and they were probably related. Often, the lines seem to have been blurred as far as which family members actually held title to the land. In fact, in many cases, people who are known landowners based on deeds are listed in the census as being renters, possibly implying that while they owned farms, they rented their homes, although more likely, this is a reflection of bias on the part of the enumerator against the likelihood of African Americans owning land.

As with elsewhere in the post-bellum plantation South, sharecroppers in Pond Beat and Mullins Flat often found themselves indebted to their landlords. They had few legal rights. Landlords could evict them at will, and regularly did so just before the cotton crop was harvested, leaving them with little to show for their labor. Sharecropper accommodations were typically humble with two room houses consisting of nothing more than a kitchen and bedroom.

Despite their more modest means, however, even the tenants and sharecroppers benefitted from the affluence of their black land-owning neighbors. Tenants and landowners alike attended the same churches, and their children benefitted from the same schools that their more affluent neighbors helped establish. The archaeological evidence suggests there was little difference in the material culture between cash tenants and some of the more modest landowners, and without documentary evidence showing whether the occupants were owners or renters, it has been nearly impossible to distinguish a yeoman house from a tenant house based on the artifacts and archeological ruins alone. In general, both acquired the same commercial goods from the same sources, both ate the same types of food, both lived in similar houses, and both made a point of beautifying their homes with ornamental plants and perennial flowers, many of which still bloom every spring in carefully laid out beds.

While racial segregation marked African Americans for prejudice and discrimination and prevented them from accessing many of the services that were available to their white neighbors, it also seems to have created solidarity among the black population. In general, black sharecroppers could expect better treatment if their landlords were also black. Former residents of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat describe very close-knit communities, and while they differentiate among the residents based on whether they were landowners or tenants, the lines are often blurred, and any memories of mistreatment are invariably at the hands of white landlords.

After the U.S. Government bought them out, many of the black landowners were able to acquire new farms in the surrounding area, and some went on to expand their economic success. The War Department allowed them to harvest that years' crops and salvage what they could of their buildings, and most were able to rebuild elsewhere. Although displaced, they were able to reestablish elements of their community – congregations built new churches, businesses were rebuilt, social ties were maintained. Much of the black community was able to establish new farms north and west of Huntsville along what is now Jordan Lane. Methodist congregants displaced from Mullins Flat and Pond Beat rebuilt the Center Grove Methodist Church north of the Arsenal which still boasts a thriving membership. Many of these former residents were ultimately buried in the Center Grove and Northside Cemeteries near the center of the transplanted community. Many of the former residents were able to find work on the new federal installation.



Tenants and sharecroppers, on the other hand, received no compensation, and were less likely to be reintegrated into the transplanted communities. The congregation of the Union Hill Church of Mullins Flat, for example, with its high proportion of tenants, found itself split between a reestablished Union Hill Church in Huntsville, and the St. Elizabeth Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Madison. For many, the displacement in the early 1940s was the catalyst that set them on the road to join the black diaspora from the rural South to urban centers around the country.