

(Preface Images) Various Examples of Local Research Resources Used in this Atlas."

PREFACE

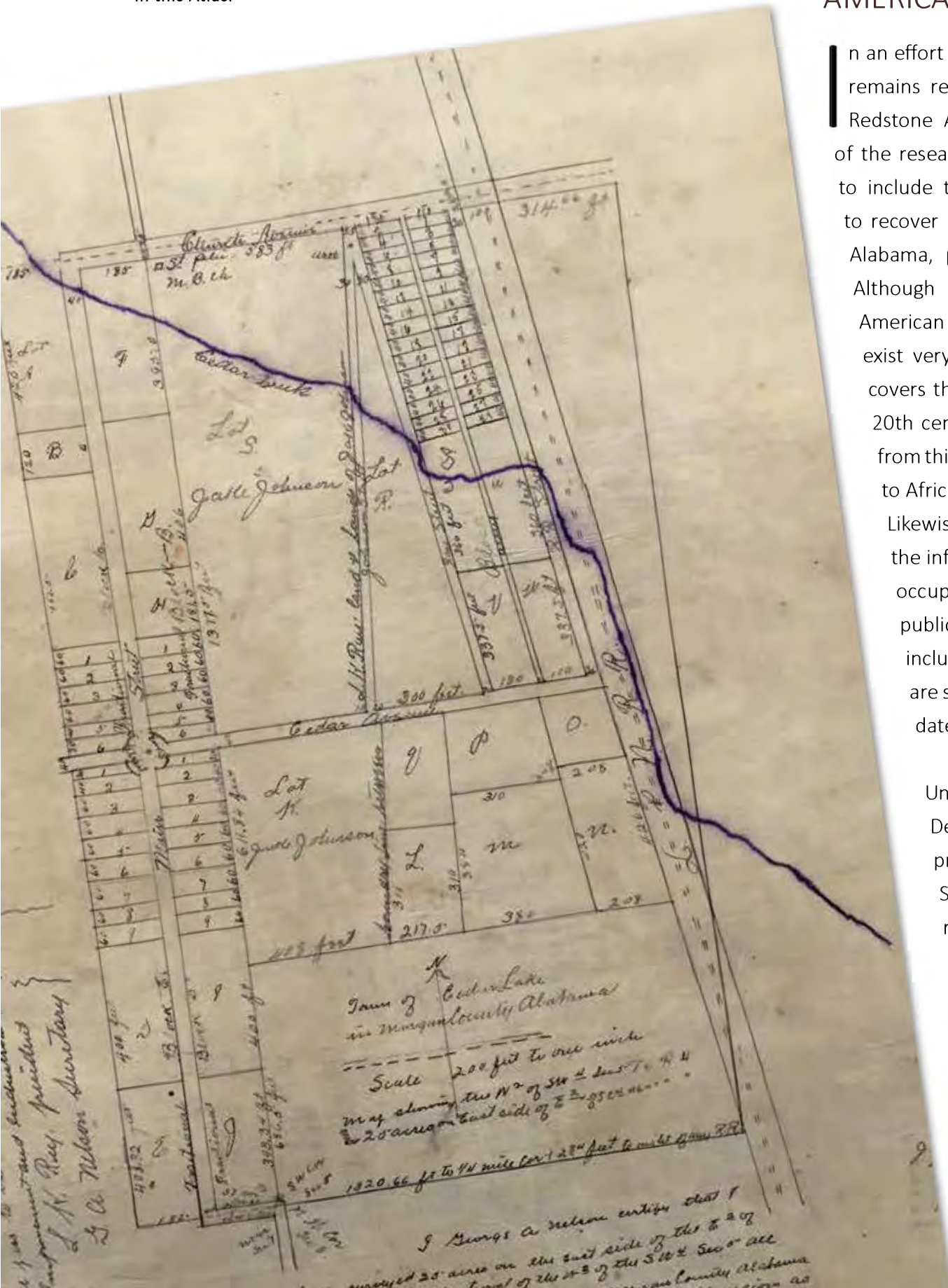
RESEARCHING AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

In an effort to uncover information to accompany the archaeological remains recovered from African American yeomen farm sites on Redstone Arsenal, historical research was conducted. The scope of the research was expanded beyond the boundary of the Arsenal to include the entire Middle Tennessee Valley. The objective was to recover historical information about African Americans in North Alabama, particularly in regards to landownership and farming. Although there is an abundance of information about African American communities and individuals in North Alabama, there exist very few comprehensive studies on the subject. This atlas covers the century from 1860 to 1960 with a focus on the early 20th century (1900-1940) due to the abundance of information from this period. Written records from the 19th century pertaining to African Americans farming landowners is a scarce commodity. Likewise, the U.S. census records prior to 1900 do not include all the information needed to determine race, landownership, and occupation. By the 20th century, the census is a more robust public document that can be used in tandem with other sources including oral histories. Because many people 80 years or older are still with us today, the last publicly available census records date from 1940, for privacy reasons.

Until the mid-20th century, most Southerners were farmers. Despite urbanization and other changes in our society, property ownership remains a status marker in America. Since before Emancipation the African American community regarded landownership with reverence and considered it a high priority and mark of citizenship. Successful farmers may have been able to achieve landownership and subsequently shared their wealth and opportunity with their community. When researching African American communities and landownership it becomes clear that landmarks such as churches, schools, and cemeteries

– the places and buildings that make up a community – indicate where people have invested in their cultural and physical landscape. African American communities were often self-sufficient due to segregation and discrimination. People of color were frequently left to their own means, prompting landowners to be responsible for donating or purchasing land for the creation of these landmarks. In North Alabama, there are several examples of African American farming landowners renting out or selling land to other people of color who were perhaps denied these opportunities by the white community. Oftentimes these landowners donated the necessary funds and/or land for the application of a Rosenwald school grant.

Landownership has always been a core value of the community of color. As Booker T. Washington outlined in a 1912 article, African American tenant farmers did not make a community, landowners made a community. After Emancipation, a major portion of former slaves and their descendants were still tied to the old plantation fields. "As might be expected there [was] a good deal of moving about of tenants on these big plantations. In the early days a Negro tenant felt he must move about more or less, merely in order to assure himself that he was actually free." Overall, communities of tenant farmers are not permanent.



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