

1. AFRICAN AMERICANS AT WORK COLBERT COUNTY'S RICH LANDSCAPE

The major highways that carry visitors to Colbert County from the east cut straight through the rural landscape and completely bypass the historic towns. Still, it would be hard to miss the signs that indicate the Tri-City area where Tuscumbia, Sheffield, and Muscle Shoals come together. Two large parallel boulevards run north-south through the Tri-Cities. Woodward Avenue/Lee Highway leads directly through Muscle Shoals' contemporary commercial drag where there are some important historic landmarks within sight of all the newer development like the FAME Recording Studios at the corner of Avalon Avenue.

Three cities, the heart of Colbert County, are set snug along the east side of a bend in the Tennessee River, and have three distinct downtown cores with the veins of railroads and avenues webbed between them. The flat expanse of the valley is evident when driving along the open commercial-lined highways but turn off onto any of the residential streets and the roads between are tree-lined and narrow. Tuscumbia's gridded streets are thronged with bungalows and large manors left over from the 19th century. Most of the old development of Tuscumbia is north and east of downtown and the Big Spring which drew settlers to the first city of what would be Colbert County. The section south of 6th Street and east of Dickson Street is the primarily historically African American community of Tuscumbia. Sheffield is little different with bungalow-covered neighborhoods and gridded streets laid out in six

directions resembling a snow angel on the landscape. The southeast quarter of Sheffield is similarly known as the historically African American neighborhood.

Colbert County has been shaped by the Shoals of the Tennessee River that lend their name to the 20th century city of Muscle Shoals and the surrounding area. The river's energy and minerals enticed the U.S. Army, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and private industry to build a dam, nitrate plants, and aluminum factory in the Shoals. Muscle Shoals wasn't established until 1923 and was intended for industry. The town grew alongside the nitrate plant, then it was part of Henry Ford's failed vision of a 75-mile-long industrial corridor. The majority of the town was

developed in the mid-20th century in neat, gridded lines. In the second half of the 20th century the town began to draw musical producers and artists who sought to develop the Muscle Shoals "Sound."

The rest of saddle-shaped Colbert County is much like all of North Alabama along the Tennessee River – flat, low-lying plains in the north, closest to the river, and gradually giving way to a hillier environment in the southern half. African American history in this county follows agriculture and the majority of African American communities are historically located in the northern, agricultural fields of Colbert County.

(Below) Fishing Boats in Tailrace Below Wilson Dam, July 5, 1948 (National Archives and Records Administration, Atlanta)

