

The 19th century history of Colbert County revolves around agriculture. Similar to most of the Middle Tennessee Valley, it was covered in large cotton plantations that took advantage of the river as an easy means of transporting goods to the Mississippi River and beyond. After Emancipation and the Civil War, the large plantations were reduced to smaller plots maintained by sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The dependency on agriculture led to a depletion of the soil; by the early 20th century much of the rich farmland along the river valley had been exhausted of its nutrients.

During World War I, the federal government began construction of the Wilson Dam across the Tennessee River to generate electrical power. The dam then provided power to the two nitrate plants built in Colbert County to supply materials for explosives used in the war. America's involvement in the First World War, however, was relatively short and by the end of 1918, the war was over and the need for explosives deferred. But the mineral-rich deposits along the Tennessee River were not to be wasted. While the Nitrate Plants No. 1 and No. 2 stood dormant for over a decade, their use was eventually switched to the production of fertilizers. By 1933, the TVA had taken over the plants and the dam and instituted programs to revive the topsoil and aid farmers by conducting social studies on health and finances among other things. Later, fueled by the onset of World War II, another large industrial complex joined the nitrate plants and dam – Reynolds Metal. This aluminum factory was one of five in the country that produced the crucial metal needed for military aircraft.

The TVA's actions in the 1930s and 1940s could not have come soon enough. The Great Depression coupled with decreased agricultural production meant great hardships for farmers across the country. While African American landownership in Colbert County may have risen from 1900 to 1920, many who owned their land would be forced to rent



**(Above) Men Working at Reynolds Metal Company, Sheffield, Colbert County, Alabama, August 1942 (Library of Congress)**

or mortgage their farm by 1930. At the same time, the Tri-Cities grew larger, changing farmland into gridded subdivisions and reducing the acres of open land left in the area. Colbert County farmers increasingly turned toward industry as their economic salvation. Even if a family owned their farm, they might have younger children and/or hired hands work on the farm while the head of house and owner of the land would also work at Nitrate Plant No. 2 or Reynolds Metal.

While there are abundant resources about Wilson Dam, the nitrate plants, the TVA, and Reynolds Metal, information identifying who lived, worked, and contributed to these large projects and factories are not specific enough to learn much about the African American community's involvement without deeper research. Yet, documentary photography

was liberally used during the same time period and it provides some insight into who made up the workforce. Although there were relatively few men of color who were able to join the work crews, they were definitely present and their inclusion speaks to the changes that occurred in the early 20th century.

For example, brothers Paul E. and Lincoln C. Johnson are featured in a photograph taken sometime in the late 1930s. The brothers were both foremen for the TVA, but their father, Clements Johnson, owned a farm on 6th Street in Tusculumbia from at least 1910 to 1940. However, most likely due to a combination of the economy, land prices, and the profitability of a farm whose soil needed an infusion of nitrogen and other nutrients, the Johnsons, like so many other families, decided their faith was better placed in industrial work rather than the farm.

The involvement of African Americans – many of whom were rural residents and farmers – in the industry surrounding the Shoals had as much to do

with economic depression as it did with the industrial connection to the war effort, particularly of World War II. The participation of African American men in the war effort was in part a conscious act intended to combat prejudice and racism. Known as the “Double ‘V’” of victory over fascism abroad and over racism in America, African Americans hoped that their hard work and support would be rewarded with equal rights and eased racial tensions. In the U.S. and across the Jim Crow South, everything was racially segregated, even the military and other organized war efforts. The construction villages for the Wilson Dam and the nitrate plants were segregated by race. The TVA designated picnic grounds, schools, housing, and other facilities by race. The crews at the nitrate plants and Reynolds Metal were divided by race. Despite this fact, in the imagery distributed by the U.S. government and documentary photography, African Americans were depicted as equal members in the war efforts and racial tensions non-existent.