(Left) 1936 USGS/TVA Topographic Map of Spring Valley, Tuscumbia and Leighton, Alabama Quadrangles (Lower Left) 1971 USGS/TVA Topographic Map of Spring Valley, Tuscumbia and Leighton, Alabama Quadrangles

location is logically equidistant from the other two closest African American schoolhouses – St. Pauls and Ricks schools.

36

Sterling High School*

According to the Alabama Historical Commission's marker for Sterling High School, public education for African American children in Sheffield began in 1889. The first school was located in southeast Sheffield at the corner of 20th Street and Atlanta Avenue – perhaps in the same location shown on the 1921 Sanborn Fire Insurance map as "Graded Colored School." The first teacher at this school was Mr. Henry Hopkins and the school only had five students. In 1896, a former slave named Benjamin J. Sterling (1847-1941) became principal of the school. This first school was reported burned and the students moved into one of the nearby churches.

The Sheffield Colored School was built in 1918, most likely in the same location as the first school. Sheffield Colored School first served as an elementary school and then as a high school sometime between 1920 and 1922. When the school became Sheffield Colored High School, it had 13 students. The first high school graduates were Ms. Marion C. McDaniel and Mr. P. B. Swoopes – who would go on to graduate from Tuskegee Institute and become a successful Sheffield businessman. Shortly thereafter, the school building was crowded and in ill-repair. The community came together to donate land on 19th Street for the

Sheffield Board of Education to build a larger, modern, brick building for African American children in 1923.
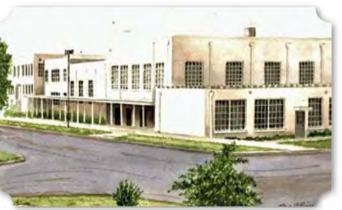
This new building was designed by architect Dallas Lafayette (D. L.) Sigmon, a white craftsman from North Carolina, who owned a shop in Sheffield at the time, and constructed by the Florence Lumber Company. The school cost over $20,000 and contained all 12 grades. In 1942, the school was renamed in honor of Professor Sterling, who continued to teach until 1936. Sterling High School's Board of Trustees and the community worked tirelessly to find and keep quality teachers and become an accredited institution. Rev. Richard A. Stewart served as principal from 1944 to 1968.

The school also established a competitive athletics program, including basketball, track, and football – teams that would play against Trenholm High School. In 1946, land for an athletic field and playground was added to the property. By 1950, the school had a gymnasium and dining room – rare amenities for an African American school. The entire building was renovated in 1959 and the first six grades were moved to a new school. The school band was renowned and had the privilege to greet President John F. Kennedy in 1963 when he was visiting the TVA.

Sterling High School was closed in 1968 due to integration, and its 225 students and one dozen teachers were sent to Sheffield Junior and Senior High Schools. The building and its grounds sat vacant for another decade before the school was razed in 1978. Now all that remains on this spot is an empty lot and a historical marker reminding the public about what was once the heart of a community.

(Below) 1930 Federal Census Excerpt Showing Ben J. Sterling as a "Public School Teacher" (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com)

(Top) Photograph of Sterling High School Allison (via Times Daily, August 29, 2018) (Above) Painting of Sterling High School by Clay Allison (via Times Daily, August 29, 2018)