

The town of Tuscumbia was first settled by European Americans about 1780 – like Sheffield, it was originally a French settlement. The town was later laid out in 1820 and named Big Spring in 1821 for the large fresh water spring just south of downtown. By 1822, the town was called Tuscumbia in honor of a local Chickasaw chief. Before the Civil War, Tuscumbia thrived on the cotton economy and the Tuscumbia Railroad Company. It was well-connected to the Tennessee River and the rest of North Alabama. During the Civil War, the town was occupied by Union troops and some skirmishes were fought in the area. After the war, Colbert County was created from the northern half of Franklin County, and Tuscumbia became the seat of the new county.

(Below) Aerial Photograph of Southeast Tuscumbia in 1949 (University of Alabama, Historical Map Collection, Online)

Tuscumbia's Historical Neighborhood of Color

Despite having seen some fighting during the Civil War, Tuscumbia is well intact. There are numerous historic buildings, homes, and churches – at least a hundred of them are from the antebellum period – and the town boasts a National Register-listed historic district. Within Tuscumbia’s long history, the southeast portion of the town became the home of the African American community. From Reconstruction to well into the 20th century, this area has housed churches, schools, and homes that form the heart of a community. The earliest known African American church in the area is the First Missionary Baptist Church of Tuscumbia. The congregation formed at the end of the Civil War under the leadership of Rev. Wilson Northcross. By 1900, it was the county’s largest congregation with an estimated 900 members. Another early church was the

Tuscumbia Shed Church – so named because it had its beginnings in a cotton gin shed near downtown in about 1870. It was a non-denominational church as many of the African American Christian community did not yet have permanent places to worship. The church was located somewhere near present-day South Dickson and East 8th streets.

Lesley Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was another 19th century church, established about 1880. Its current church still stands at the corner of High and 10th streets. Originally located elsewhere in the vicinity of Tuscumbia, the church moved to the southeast quarter in the 1920s. Other historically significant landmarks in the southeastern Tuscumbia community, while perhaps having roots in the 19th century, were established in this area in the early 20th century. By the 1920s, Tuscumbia Colored School (Trenholm High School) was established on High and 11th streets, the High Street Church of Christ had formed from the “Mother Church” in the Ricks Community, and Mount Carmel Baptist Church had erected a building off 11th Street. Also, during this time, Dr. A. W. Davis’s home, Shady Dell, on 8th Street was built nearby what would become the Thompson & Son Funeral Home.

