

# 1. SO CLOSE, AND YET SO FAR: SEARCHING FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IN DEKALB, JACKSON, AND MARSHALL COUNTIES

The borders of DeKalb County are positioned so that long, narrow valleys and ridges traverse the length of it from the northeast border with Georgia to the southern border with Etowah County. Several of the first towns in DeKalb County were settled in these valleys. The Little Wills Valley, sometimes labeled Railroad Valley, contains Valley Head, Fort Payne, and Collinsville, which were connected by rail in the late 1890s. The rest of the county is fairly mountainous with roads that twist and turn on switchbacks leading into the greater Tennessee River Valley. The terrain of DeKalb County surely sets it apart from the rest of North Alabama.

The landscape of Jackson County is lush and rural like most of North Alabama. The highway runs a path from Chattanooga along the north side of the Tennessee River passing by Bridgeport, Stevenson, and Scottsboro before curving west to Huntsville, Madison County. The old towns all started because of the lure of the Tennessee River and its verdant floodplain. In the early 19th century, this area was covered in an Alabama “summer snow” from the cotton fields. Despite this, Jackson County and its towns were constantly vying for a piece of that Southern

economic pie with more prosperous cities like Huntsville and Florence. When the railroad started west of the Appalachians, Jackson County and its river towns were the first to benefit. Now the county highway follows the length between the river and the railroad as it bypasses the towns whose good fortune of river and rail brought about destruction during the Civil War. When the troops cleared out, the area was slow to recover, but eventually managed to carry on like the rest of the valley.

Marshall County contains more of the Tennessee River and its valley than most counties because the river dips and bends in this area. Since the Tennessee Valley Authority constructed the Guntersville Dam and Reservoir, the county is even more impacted by the river. What parts are not underwater are gently rolling hills that fan out to flat, low-lying floodplain from east to west. The hills are the last remnants of the Appalachian Mountains that reach through Eastern Tennessee and into north Georgia and Alabama. While DeKalb’s terrain may differ from the rest of the region, Jackson and Marshall counties, however, have similar landscapes and agricultural history yet, these three counties practically lack present-day African American communities.

When compared with the other counties, cities, and towns across the Tennessee River Valley, only small pockets of communities of color remain in northeast Alabama. As of 2010, only 2% of the total population within DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall counties considered themselves to be African American. When compared with other North Alabama counties, the difference becomes apparent. Madison County has an overall 25% African American or mixed population. Its largest city, Huntsville is comprised of over 30% African Americans or people of mixed heritage. The same is true for some of Madison County’s rural towns as well, such as Harvest. Colbert, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, and Morgan counties all have a 12-14% African American population. The county seats and largest cities all have substantial populations of people of color - Moulton has 13% African Americans; Muscle Shoals, Athens, and Florence all have 15-19% African Americans; Decatur, Sheffield, and Tusculumbia have nearly a quarter of the population or more denoted as African American; and there are many cities and towns where one-third to one-half of the population is people of color, such as Town Creek

(34%), Courtland (40%), and Leighton (55%); and finally, Hillsboro (82%) and North Courtland (98%) are majority African American.

In contrast, the largest cities in Jackson County have a smaller population than expected for a landscape that mirrors much of North Alabama. Stevenson has the largest African American population with 17% in 2010. However, Bridgeport and Scottsboro only have 9% and less than 5% respectively. Similarly, only one of DeKalb County’s largest cities, Collinsville, has a population of 16% African American. Fort Payne, the county seat, has 5% people of color, but there are two other cities which have no African Americans - Henagar and Rainsville. Marshall County’s largest cities have an even smaller population of African Americans - Guntersville has 8%, Albertville has 2%, Boaz has 1%, and Arab has 0.1% people of color. The majority of the African American population in this area reside not on rural farms, but in city neighborhoods. These statistics may be from the 21st century, but the cause of this difference lies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The 21st century population statistics illustrate the diverse communities of North Alabama and are meaningful for the present-day communities as much as for the historical ones. As demonstrated in other chapters, the communities of color in North Alabama have deep roots which often reach to the founding of the state, counties, cities, and towns in which these communities are a part. The lack of present-day communities in some areas in northeast Alabama appear to be the result of deliberate choices either on the part of the white community of DeKalb, Marshall, and Jackson counties or the community of color in this area. It is true that the hills of Appalachia spread across the three counties and made much of the area unsuitable for large plantations, however, there were still numerous slave owners and slaves enumerated in 1860 for DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall counties. DeKalb County had approximately 193 slave owners in 1860 and a total of 993 slaves; Jackson County had 2,364 slaves owned by 352 individuals; and Marshall County listed about 1,663 slaves and 222 slave owners. While these numbers do not compare with adjacent counties such as Madison, which enumerated 14,573 slaves in 1860, there was still a sizable community of slaves in the tri-counties. The average slave owner had 5-7 slaves with a few owners listed with