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## "WE HAD A TRIAL WE DIDN'T ASK FOR..."

### The Story of The Scottsboro Boys Trial in Decatur, Morgan County, Alabama

There have been many renditions of the history revolving the Scottsboro Boys trial. Despite the books, articles, documentaries, and a musical, the history is not well-known by the general public. It's a story swept under the rug, forgotten, and not often sought out. While there are many sources on what happened in the 1930s in North Alabama, one local resident, Ms. Peggy Allen Towns, has done some digging of her own. The results of her research goes beyond Scottsboro to focus on the city of Decatur, Morgan County, Alabama and the impact the trial had on the African American middle-class.

**(Below)** The Scottsboro Boys during a Visit from Juanita E. Jackson (Fourth from Left) of the NAACP, January 1937 (National Archives and Records Administration)

Growing up in Decatur's historically African American neighborhood of Old Town, her mother, Mrs. Mrytle Lyle Allen, instilled in her "the value of knowing our history." Required reading in the Allen household included Dan T. Carter's *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*. Originally published nearly 40 years after the alleged crime, the book brought renewed interest to injustice in the South. After retiring from decades of service for a U.S. Congressman, Ms. Towns began researching the trial in a more personal and local way. Her book, *Scottsboro Unmasked: Decatur's Story*, brings the citizens of Decatur front and center. She has subsequently put together an exhibit in the Morgan County Archives complete with photographs and some original artifacts from the Decatur trials. In an interview, Ms. Town's succinctly sums up the story of the Scottsboro Boys trial:

*"The Scottsboro Boys trial was in 1931. Some hobos jumped a train coming from Chattanooga. Just as they crossed the state lines, a fight broke out between the white and black hobos. The white hobos jumped off the train, reported the fight to a station master, who called ahead to the sheriff's office to stop the train. At Paint Rock [Alabama] the train came to a screeching halt and nine black youth were pulled off the train. Also, on the*

*train were three whites. Two of them were women disguised as men.*

*They pulled the blacks off the train, hauled them to the Scottsboro jail. In 12 days, they were accused, falsely accused, of raping two white women. At the trials, eight of the young boys were sentenced to life in prison. One, the youngest, who was 12 years old, Roy Wright, was not sentenced to life. They went to Kilby prison [outside*



**(Above)** The Scottsboro Boys Conferring with Their Lawyer under Guard (Morgan County Archives)

*of Montgomery] after they had an appeal in late 1932, the trials were transferred to Decatur, Alabama in 1933, because of a supreme court ruling [that deemed their lawyers incompetent,] their attorneys, one was a drunk and one was a senile. The supreme court ruling stated that anyone coming up for a criminal trial should have competent attorneys. Then the attorney asked for a change of venue. That brought the trials here to Decatur, Alabama. All the trials were held here in Decatur except the first. It was held in Scottsboro. That's where they get their name, the 'Scottsboro Boys.' As they were definitely boys, the oldest was only 19 years old. The trials named for them are the longest in history, from 1931 to 1937. All the trials were held in Decatur from 1933 to 1937."*

