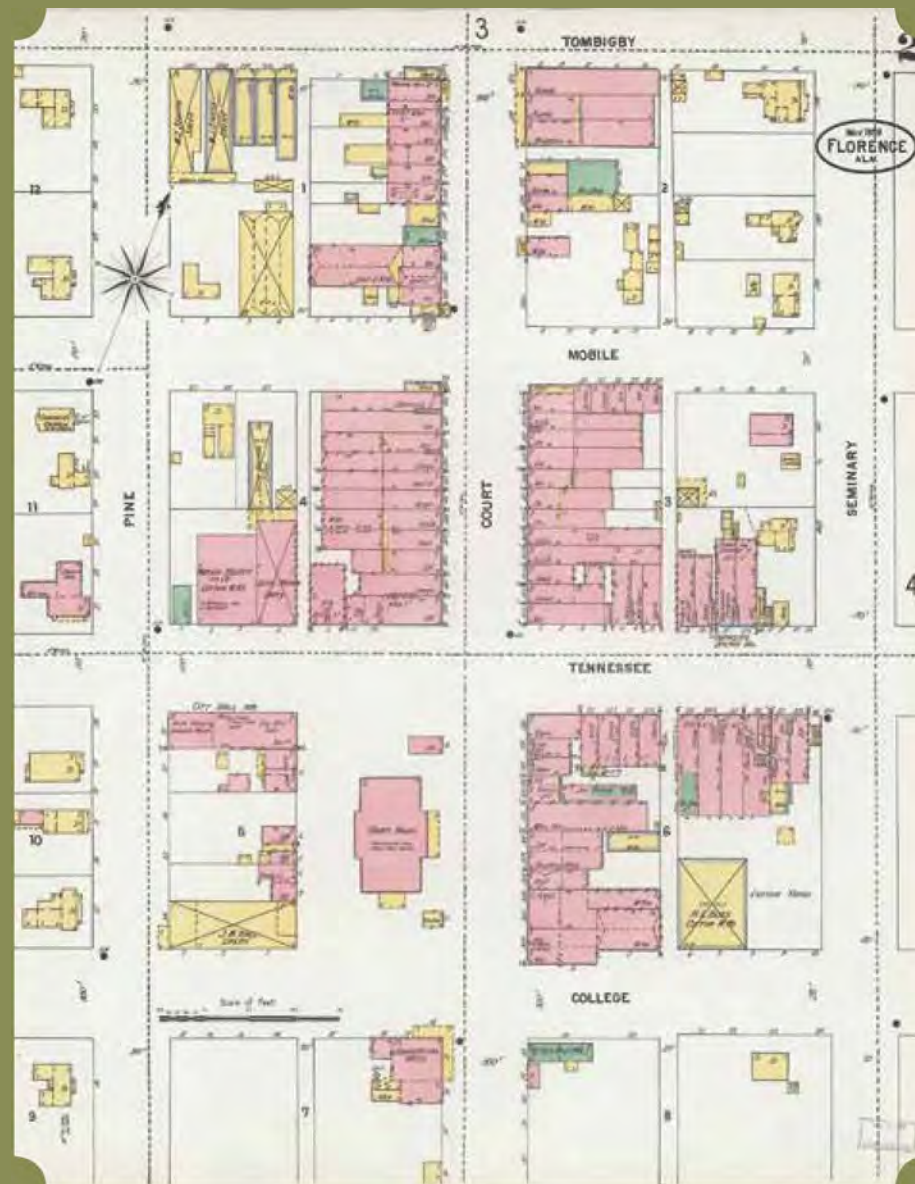


1. COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RESEARCH IN LAUDERDALE COUNTY

In the far reaches of northwest Alabama, bending with the Tennessee River, is the long and narrow county of Lauderdale. The landscape is dotted with several towns so small they are easy to miss while driving along Lee Highway (Highway 72), which travels through the lowlands of the river from Limestone County to the city of Florence. The county seat and largest city, Florence, is part of the Quad-Cities, a northern addition to the Tri-Cities of Sheffield, Tuscumbia, and Muscle Shoals across the river in Colbert County. There are two ways to cross the Tennessee River into Florence: the older route leads directly from Muscle Shoals into downtown Florence via the Jackson Highway, and the second route crosses the Singing River Bridge, a concrete expanse built in 2001 with a marvelous view of Wilson Dam just upriver.

The city of Florence is as old as the state of Alabama. It was established in 1818 by the Cypress Land Company, headed by General John Coffee and soon-to-be U.S. President Andrew Jackson. By 1820, King Cotton was well established, and many of Florence's founding fathers had large plantations. Like the rest of North Alabama, the Civil War had a negative impact on the economy of Florence and the county. The city was targeted for its port on the river, known as North Port because it was the furthest north ships could travel due to the Shoals. Despite being occupied by both the Union and the Confederate armies, many antebellum manor houses have survived into the 21st century.

(Above Right) Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of the Central Portion of Downtown Florence, November 1899 (Library of Congress)



Lauderdale County blossomed in the 1880s. Florence's population exploded to 6,000 people, five times as many as its population in 1865. LaGrange College moved from Colbert County in 1885 and became the University of North Alabama (UNA), the oldest four-year public university in the state. Along with this educational center, Florence attracted cotton mills and other industrial complexes like the Florence Wagon Works, the 2nd largest company in the South. The agriculture of rural Lauderdale and the surrounding area continued to fuel Florence industries until the 20th century. At the onset of the World War I, iron mining and manufacturing took priority as it was needed for the construction of Wilson Dam which would create hydroelectricity for wartime production.

Much of downtown Florence retains its turn-of-the-20th-century feel, with residential and commercial historic districts dating from the late 1880s through to WWII. The central commercial district is lined with old storefronts and ends at the UNA campus. The primary street is Court Street, colloquially referred to as "Mane" Street – a play on words of the typical Main street with reverence for the UNA mascot, the lion, hence "mane." Lauderdale County has no official county archives, but the city boasts the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library (FLPL) built in the early 2000s to replace the 1948 library a block away. A walk to the library passes many historical points of interest, including the location of a blacksmith shop run by former slave Hilton Key in the early 1880s and the Masonic Hall dating prior to 1884 at the intersection of Court and Tombigbee streets. From at least 1899 to 1921, the Masonic Hall housed a restaurant on the bottom floor owned by Ben Thomas, a local businessman of color.



(Above) A View of Court Street in the Early 20th Century with Telegraph Wires and Streetcar Tracks (Florence-Lauderdale Public Library)

Situated on the northeast corner on Tombigbee Street and Wood Avenue, the new library is across from Wilson Park. The block containing the new library has changed over the past 200 years, beginning as land