



(Above) An Aerial View of the New Florence-Lauderdale Public Library from the East with Wilson Park and the Regions Bank (Forks of Cypress Look-a-Like) in the Background (Florence-Lauderdale Public Library)

for large homes before becoming what appears to be a church and finally, the library today. Remarkably, the block containing Wilson Park has been a public space since the original planning of the city.

Florence is a city that fiercely loves its history, going as far as recreating the Forks of Cypress, an 1830s plantation manor that burned down, on the opposite side of Wilson Park. The building now houses Regions Bank. Without an official county archives, much of the local history is relayed by Lee Freeman, head of history and genealogy at FLPL. A local and graduate of UNA, Mr. Freeman actively researches the history of Florence, particularly the local African American community. He has noticed that there is a longstanding history of African American businessmen and women in Florence. Additional research resources

for the area include the University of North Alabama and its Archives & Special Collections at Collier Library, the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, and other locally based history projects such as Shoals Black History or Project Say Something.

Lauderdale County is within the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area (MSNHA). Part of the National Park system, a National Heritage Area is a place “where historic, cultural, and natural resources combine to form cohesive, nationally important landscapes.” In contrast to the largely uninhabited national parks, National Heritage Areas are lived-in parts of the country that contribute special historic and cultural significance to their communities. The communities within the heritage areas help to conserve and develop these national treasures. The goal of a National Heritage Area is to combine heritage conservation, recreation, education, and economic development. The MSNHA is the only one in Alabama; it covers Colbert, Franklin, Lauderdale, Limestone, Lawrence,

and Morgan counties. UNA hosts the MSNHA since it was approved by Congress in 2009. The heritage area focuses on three main themes deemed important to the region: music, Native American heritage, and the Tennessee River. However, within these themes there are several categories of heritage that are explored and promoted by the MSNHA including African American, architectural, Civil War, Natchez Trace, and transportation heritages.

Made possible by a grant from the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, Shoals Black History is the culmination of several local groups coming together to celebrate the contributions that communities of color have had to the history of the Shoals. These organizations include Project Say Something, the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, and the University of North Alabama Public History Program. Project Say Something is a social justice organization that has hosted “history harvests” to collect personal history materials from the public as well as oral history interviews of local Florence residents. The Shoals Black History website connects to all the other projects and encourages public input and learning while sharing stories and images.

(Below) Postcard of Downtown Florence, Circa 1919 (Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, Courtesy Robert Whitten)

