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New Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal Church, Cemetery, and School*

The New Pisgah AME Church is located at the intersection of Cloverdale Road and Lauderdale County Road 6, about eight miles north of Florence. This location was previously used for a church and cemetery for the white community, but sometime in the late 19th century, the communities traded the land. According to the Alabama Historical Atlas, the church was organized about 1878, when many AME churches were organized in Northwest Alabama. The church has a cemetery and has had a school in the past. An unlabeled school appears in the location of New Pisgah School on the 1914 USGS topographic map. The 1936 topographic map labels Pisgah School next to a cemetery, suggesting that the school was held in the church. The school is no longer indicated on maps by the 1950s.



(Above) 1952 USGS Topographic Map of Pisgah Cemetery and Cemetery, Blackburn, Alabama Quadrangle

The cemetery has only 14 marked graves and an unknown number of unmarked graves. The surnames here include: Gresham, Littleton, McVay, Powers, Westmoreland, Wood, Woods. The earliest marked burial is that of Ida Powers (1855-1889). Among those interred here are Alex Gresham (1883-1970) and wife, Julia (1878-1964), who owned a farm off of Cloverdale Road in 1940.



(Above) 1936 USGS Topographic Map of Pisgah School and Cemetery, Blackburn, Alabama Quadrangle

(Below) Excerpt of 1940 Census Record Showing Alex Gresham Owning a Farm (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com)

66	850	6	ya	Bohman, Albin	husb	W	May	10	44	2	Alabama	landowner	154	farmer	farmer	52	0	44	66
67				Julia	wife	F	May	10	44	6	Alabama	landowner				0	0	44	67
68				William	son	M	May	10	44	6	Alabama	landowner				0	0	44	68

KEY

- COMMUNITIES
- CEMETERIES
- CHURCHES
- PLANTATIONS
- SCHOOLS

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Oakland

Oakland is known as a historically African American community, like much of the “Bend in the River” of western Lauderdale County. Located a little further inland from the river, Oakland fared better than the communities of Woodland and Smithsonia to the south. Oakland had a relatively high population of African American households and landowning farmers in the early 20th century: the community was 60% African American in 1900, with 39 African American landowning farmers. Several families owned more than one farm, including the Armsteads, who owned four farms; Simpsons and Peters, who owned three farms; and the Andersons, Jones, Weems, Vaughans, Jacksons, Kernachans, Andrews, and Duncans, who each owned two farms. The Anderson family had the most farms in Oakland with six members owning farms.

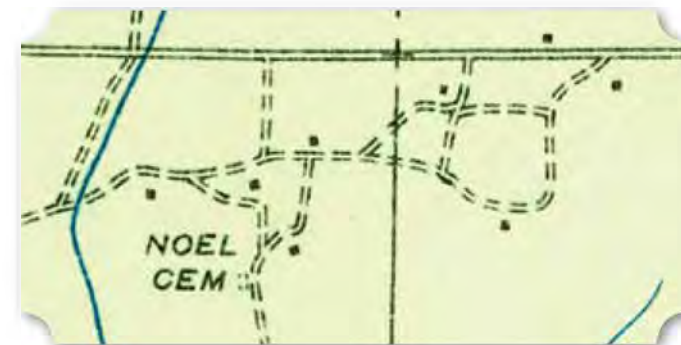
Over the early 20th century, Oakland displays a trend of high retention of farm ownership, with many of the farms owned by the same person through each decade. In 1910, more than half of the 24 African American-owned farms were owned by the same person the previous decade. Over a third of the African American-owned farms in 1920 were under the same ownership in 1910, and seven of those had been owned by the same person since 1900. The 1930 census displays a similar trend: nearly half of the farms were previously owned, eight of which were owned since 1910 and three since 1900.

As the overall population of Oakland grew, the African American population dropped to 46% in 1910, where it remained through 1930. The community began to decline by 1940 when many families moved into the city, particularly the Canaan neighborhood of

John Westley Turnley (1861-1919) is among those few buried here. He was the great-grandfather of Ms. Anita Cobb, who gave an oral history of her family and the Mt. Zion AME Church to the Florence African American Heritage Project in 2017. Ms. Anita identified Mr. Turnley as one of the five founders of the Mt. Zion AME Church. Turnley had been born a slave in 1861 but was known to be very light skinned. John Turnley owned land in the Bend of the River and donated some for the Mt. Zion Church. He also helped build the church itself. In 1900, he was living with his brother-in-law, Joseph B. Thompson. He is probably the “J.B. Thompson” who wrote Turnley’s obituary published in the Florence Times.

“When people see pictures of him [John Turnley]... they ask, ‘who’s the white man?’ and when I say ‘that’s my great-grandfather,’ they look at me like ‘what?’”

– Ms. Anita Cobb



(Above) 1936 USGS Topographic Map of Noel Cemetery, Sinking Creek, Alabama Quadrangle