

“Where the Tennessee River, like a silver snake, winds her way through the clay hills of Alabama, sits high on these hills, my home town, Florence.”

– W.C. Handy in His Autobiography
“Father of the Blues”

instruments, and pieces of his personal life. The City of Florence has held the W.C. Handy Festival in his honor since 1982.

The Turnley Family

In late 2017, Ms. Anita Cobb of west Lauderdale County gave an oral history interview to the Florence African American Heritage Project. She told the intertwined history of the Mt. Zion AME Church and her family, the Turnleys. Ms. Anita’s great-great-grandfather was Jerry Turnley, a former slave of a plantation in west Lauderdale County. He was one of five former slaves that established the Mt. Zion AME Church in 1886. Jerry and his wife, Julia, who was also enslaved but on another plantation, had six children.

John W. Turnley (1861-1919) was Julia’s son. She had at least three children by her white master, and due to John’s very light skin, he may have been one of these sons. However, Jerry was considered his father. When Mt. Zion AME Church needed a new building and location, John W. Turnley donated some of the land he owned off County Road 189. The church was built on this land in 1912 and John Turnley helped with the construction.

John W. Turnley may have had more than one wife; records show he married Louise Parker (born 1877) in 1893. They had at least one child, Annie Lustre Turnley (1894-1966). By 1900, the two were divorced. In 1910, John was living with his brother-in-law, Joe B. Thompson, and sister Beulah. By 1930, Louise was living in her daughter’s house. Ms. Annie married

Leslie Bryant Pride (1888-1962) in 1913. Their daughter, Hattie Mae (1913-2002), was Ms. Anita Cobb’s mother.

Like the rest of her family, Hattie attended Mt. Zion school and church. She then went to Burrell High School in Florence before going to Alabama A&M

(Top) Jerry Turnley on the 1867 Voter Registration for Lauderdale County (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com)
(Middle) Excerpt from the 1910 Census Showing John W. Turnley in the House of Joe B. Thompson (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com) (Bottom) Excerpt from the 1930 Census Showing Louise M. Parker Living with Leslie and Annie Pride (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com)

No.	Name	Date	Other	Other	Other	Other	Other
282	Turnley John S	July 26 1867	2	187	50	50	50
283	Turnley Jerry	July 26 1867	3	34	50	50	50
284	Turnley Richmond B	July 29 1867	3	7	50	50	50

LOCATION.	NAME	RELATION.	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION.	NATIVITY.	CITIZENSHIP.	OCCUPATION.	EDUCATION.	RENDERED OF AGE.
1	Thompson Joe B	Head	W 40	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	Farmer General farm	W 8 1	1
2	Turnley John	Wife	W 31	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	Farmer General farm	W 8 1	2
3	Blanchet B	Wife	W 25	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	None	W 8 1	3
4	Julia A	Wife	W 13	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	Cook Private family	W 8 1	4
5	Pride Hattie	Wife	W 11	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	Retiree	W 8 1	5

No.	Name	Relation	Personal Description	Nativity	Citizenship	Occupation	Education
25	Pride Leslie B	Head	W 41	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	Farmer General Farming	W 8 1
26	Annie M	Wife	W 32	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	None	W 8 1
27	Hattie M	Daughter	W 16	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	None	W 8 1
28	Mathie M	Daughter	W 15	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	None	W 8 1
29	Julie M	Daughter	W 12	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	None	W 8 1
30	Parham Laura M	Daughter	W 5	Alabama Alabama Alabama	English	None	W 8 1