

4. BUSINESS AS USUAL IN LAUDERDALE COUNTY

The first business owners and landowners of North Alabama were the wealthy plantation owners, usually the sons of profitable plantation owners from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, as well as war veterans from the early battles of the fledgling nation. The face of skill, talent, and profit was rarely one of color; however, that was not always necessarily the case. The enslaved were often valued not simply for their physical strength, but often for the skilled knowledge they had acquired in blacksmithing, shoemaking, horse grooming, cooking, etc. These skills were always valued, often appreciated, and sometimes compensated – either with small sums of money, emancipation, or land.

Local historian and Head of the Department of Local History and Genealogy at the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, Mr. Lee Freeman, has compiled an impressive list of local African American professionals who have worked in Florence throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. A diligent search through the archives of local newspapers reveals that there have been dozens of professional people of color living and operating businesses and providing services in Lauderdale County, mostly in Florence; since before the Civil War. For the majority of these remarkable individuals, little is known about them besides a brief mention or ad taken out in the newspapers. The census records of the 19th century may assist in determining the race and occupation of someone living in Florence, however, the earlier censuses do not record whether someone was the owner or proprietor of their business or shop. The census records between 1900 and 1940 collected the person's occupation as well as industry.

Florence was home to a variety of African American professionals. Despite the majority of people of color living in Seven Points and the predominately African American suburb called Canaan in West Florence, most of the African American-owned business were in downtown Florence alongside the rest of the commercial properties. This continued to be the case until the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some of them were skilled in occupations that became obsolete over time, such as drayman (driver of a wagon for delivery of goods), hackman (driver of a wagon for the taxiing of people), and bootblacks (shoe shiners). Other professions remain important, such as physician, dentist, barber, and restaurateur. Although some individuals were known for a particular profession, it was not uncommon for someone to have multiple

(Below) Excerpt of 1913 Florence City Directory for Barbers and Blacksmiths – People of Color are Denoted by * (Ancestry.com, U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995)

BARBERS

Brown A M, 105 S Court
 Copous Nute, 517½ Royal av
 Heupel J H, 109 E Tennessee
 Holland R V, 110 E Tennessee
 *Hood Lee, 215 E Tennessee
 *Jordan W E, 115 S Court
 *Pierson Albert, 112 Mobile
 Thomason D H, 513 Royal av

BICYCLE DEALERS

UNION BUGGY MANUFACTURING CO, 222 N Court

***BICYCLE REPAIRS**

UNION BUGGY MANUFACTURING CO, 222 N Court

BLACKSMITHS

Boston George H, 313 E College
 Freeman A J, n s Huntsville rd 1 w of Sweetwater
 *Key Charles, 121 S Seminary
 *Simpson L V, 119 W Mobile
 UNION BUGGY MANUFACTURING CO, 222 N Court
 Weaver J W, 109 W Tuscaloosa
 Weaver & Son, Seven Points

The Tri-Cities Garage Sheffield, Ala.
 Automobile Repairs of All Kinds. Supplies of All Kinds on Hand
 AUTOMOBILES FOR HIRE
 CALL US, NIGHT OR DAY TELEPHONE 647 and 145

professions over their lifetime. Some of these professions required a higher education and money to construct, rent, or buy a property from which to operate. Others might have been professions of opportunity or necessity. Considering that any form of education for people of color in Alabama was illegal prior to Emancipation, that freedmen were often starting a new life with little to nothing, and that non-white property owners and business operators were charged higher tax rates, it is even more impressive how many people of color were successful in their endeavors. However, certain professions such as barber, restaurant owner, undertaker, certainly physician and dentist, afforded a person of color a foothold into the middle class – a rare opportunity at the turn of the 20th century in the South.

Barbers

One of the more prolific professions among men of color in both the 19th and 20th centuries was barbering. A very old profession, barbers performed a wide range of personal grooming services beyond cutting hair. In a time before indoor plumbing, electricity, and the abundance of commercial grooming products, a barber was indispensable. By the 1880s, the barbershop was a Main Street fixture, and in the South, a barber was often a person of color. Service positions such as barber and laundress were often performed by slaves before Emancipation and were useful skills known by freedmen and considered acceptable positions for people of color. It cost relatively little to buy the supplies needed to start a profession in barbering and the returns in profit were great because the majority of an African American barber's clientele were wealthy white men.

By the early 20th century, the social dynamics of the barber shop began to change. The Gillette Safety razor was introduced in 1903, reducing the demand for a barber's shave. By the 1920s, many states required barbers to get a license to operate, and there were no schools for African Americans in this field until the late 1930s. These and other changes shifted the primary purpose of black barber shops from servicing wealthy white men to providing a center for the community of color.