

1. LIVING HISTORY IN LAWRENCE COUNTY

Positioned between Decatur and the Tri-Cities, Lawrence County sits unassumingly. Crossing through the northern part of the county, U.S. 72 weaves over Hillsboro and under Courtland, one of the oldest towns in the state with a 200-year-old cemetery and an old airfield. U.S. 72 is also known as Joe Wheeler Highway, named for Joseph “Fighting Joe” Wheeler, a Confederate general who was the owner of Pond Springs, a large plantation. In the middle of the county, State Route 24 cuts through Moulton, the county seat that was once much larger than it is today yet remains full of history. Several antebellum houses and plantation homes have survived the passage of time since the end of the Civil War. Oakville, in the southeastern part of the county, is home to the Jesse Owens Birthplace and Museum, memorializing the town’s famed Olympic athlete.

About halfway between Decatur and the Tri-Cities is the town of Courtland. Many of the roads are named for early U.S. presidents or founding fathers, and a turn down Jefferson Street reveals a quiet piece the past, with trees shading historic manors along the gridded streets. Van Buren Street dead ends at one of the oldest cemeteries in Alabama: Courtland City Cemetery, established in 1819 following statehood. Its African American section dates to 1865, although the earliest marked graves are from the early 1900s. The cemetery is a manifestation of segregation and inequality among the two communities of Courtland: the white section is gated and picturesque, while the African American section is sparse. Courtland’s African American population has historically been high, and the African American community was so large that the town of North Courtland was incorporated in 1981. In 2010, its population was 97.5% African American.



(Left) The African American Section of Courtland Cemetery (Photograph by Jenna Tran)

Further south, nearly in the center of Lawrence County, is Moulton, the county seat. Though all the major highways bypass the city, making it more difficult to reach, Moulton is actually the most populous city in Lawrence County. It is a quintessential Southern town with a town square lined with commercial buildings from the 1910s and 1920s and a 1938 courthouse in the center. To the southeast, on the corner of Main and Lawrence streets is a late 1930s bank building that matches the courthouse. Originally the Bank of Moulton, the building now houses the Lawrence County Historical Society and the County Archives. Ms. Wendy Hazel, a Lawrence County local, serves as the county archivist. When the archives are open, she is much sought after and appears to buzz around the edges, if not the center, of social and political life in Moulton.

The archives include donated books, binders of collected research, and filing cabinets of research topics. School records are tucked in a side room, and the land books and tax records are locked in the old bank vault. There are more records in the basement and in the attic, and one wall is covered in old photographs and newspaper articles.

While most of the information on African American communities in Lawrence County is still very much in its raw form, waiting to be culled out from old, handwritten books, there are many people excited to talk about their home and history. Local historian Mr. Butch Walker frequents not only the Moulton archives, but other North Alabama county archives and libraries. Mr. Walker has researched the plantations in the Shoals to learn about their locations and acreage, as well as how many slaves were owned by whom, and what happened to those enslaved people later in life. On occasion he is known to conduct oral history interviews and share his archival findings with descendants. Some of his research has been posted to a blog, and he hopes to write a book about the history of Lawrence County. For information on Moulton’s African American community, both Mr. Walker and Ms. Hazel recommended Ms. Pearl Jackson Green as an expert.