

# 1. MAKING ALABAMA: MADISON COUNTY'S DEEP HISTORY OF COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Though not the largest city in the South, Huntsville is a distinguished city in North Alabama and the county seat. It lacks the tall skyscrapers of Atlanta and the large industrial complexes of Birmingham, but the city is a nucleus of dense urban development, surrounded by suburban subdivisions. Several U.S. highways lead to Huntsville: I-565, a relatively new interstate spur that connects U.S. 72 to I-65, cuts through the city north of downtown. Though the city has grown in the 20th century, most of the neighborhoods close to downtown were well established by the 1930s.

Founded in 1805, Huntsville was one of the first places settled in the Mississippi Territory and predates the state of Alabama by 13 years. Remnants of Huntsville's history dot the city's landscape: old plantation houses, the railroad parallel to the highways, and historic churches, schools, and cemeteries. Huntsville was once bordered by the large plantations of wealthy planters from Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Written into Alabama's constitution of 1819, slave owners were granted the right to emancipate slaves by deed, will, or petition of the courts. While only a fraction of a percent of slaves in Alabama were freed before the Civil War, Madison County and the city of Huntsville were among the few places that free people of color gathered. This led to a rich history as Madison County's African American communities developed



churches, schools, and institutions such as Alabama A&M and Oakwood universities.

Much of this history can be found at the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library located just southwest of the original town of Twickenham. Known as "Fort Book" for its fortress-like architecture, the building that houses the library and the county archives was constructed in 1987.



(Left) Dudley Barley of Pond Beat on a Tractor (Courtesy of Marion Hall via Alexander Archaeological Consultants) (Above) Huntsville-Madison County Public Library Building, 2010 (Photographer: Chris Pruitt; Wikicommons)

However, the library as an institution is as old as the state itself, making it the oldest continuing library in Alabama. On the third level is the much-used Heritage Room dedicated to Madison County and Alabama history, where the county archives with some of the region's most precious historical documents, maps, and books are housed. The county deed and probate records are also housed at the Huntsville-Madison County Library.

While Huntsville may be the fourth largest city in Alabama, another feature of Madison County is ever-present and hard to miss – Redstone Arsenal. The arsenal's approximately 40,000 acres are bordered by I-565 on the north, Memorial Parkway and dense subdivisions on the east, a distinct bend in the Tennessee River to the south, and suburbs of Triana to the west. The arsenal is home to the United States Army Material Command and NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center. Though not accessible to the public, the Arsenal is easy to find via highway signage and enormous spaceships.

Before the arsenal and the damming of the river by the TVA, the land in south Madison was an unpredictable floodplain reserved for the poorest of farmers. The TVA moved some families back from the river