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THE DEEP and TANGLED ROOTS of MADISON COUNTY

Two of the larger communities of color that used to live on what is now Redstone Arsenal were Pond Beat and Mullins Flat. These communities consisted mostly of farmers, many of them landowners. Together, they established churches, school, stores, and cemeteries. When studying the history of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat, the same family names come up time and time again. By 1940, these communities were considered "colored" communities of poor farmers, but their history traces back more than 100 years to the first plantations of south Madison County. A unique component of the history of these communities lies in a complex family tree consisting of white slave owners, Native Americans, African-descended slaves, and the "mulatto" or mixed progeny of all three.

Unlike other areas of the South before the Civil War through the era of Reconstruction, there were areas in North Alabama, such as south Madison County, that witnessed numerous relationships between white men and women of color. While such relationships were not unheard before and elsewhere, one important difference for this area is that many of the white, slave-owning men acknowledged not just their relationship with enslaved or formerly enslaved women, but also recognized the children by these women as their own. Several families of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat have the surname of former slave owners not just because the formerly surname-less slaves took on their former master's name, but because the former master is an ancestor.

While the people of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat have previously been referred to as "Colored," "Negro," "Black," and "African American" throughout the past decades, a conversation with any of the descendants of these communities makes it immediately and abundantly clear that the best descriptive would be "people of color." For the descendants of Pond Beat and Mullins Flat, every ancestor is a source of pride and a piece of the family story that makes up who they are today. Whether the ancestors are William Timmons and his lawfully married wife, Louisa, or Frank Jacobs, a free man of color prior to the Civil War who most likely had a white father, the remarkable individuals of the past 150 years contributed to the people who made a home in south Madison County.

(Right) The Various Plantations that Once Covered the Area that is Now Redstone Arsenal (Redstone Arsenal, Courtesy Ben Hoksbergen)

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