

**(Right)** Morgan County Extension Agency Photograph, Circa 1930s. (Morgan County Archives, Decatur, Alabama)

Introducing this research and inquiring about the African American history of Morgan County at first did not seem to produce much beyond the Scottsboro Boys trial and the impeccable life of Ms. Athelyne Celeste Banks – two displays on African Americans in Decatur. Of course, these stories were noted for further research, but the best lead came from the introduction to two local historians – Dr. Wylheme H. Ragland and Ms. Peggy Allen Towns – who surprisingly came immediately down to the archives for an impromptu meeting to share their knowledge about the local African American history.

Dr. Wylheme H. Ragland is a tall man with an encyclopedic mind, a bubbling wealth of information. A minister of the United Methodist Church, and friend and confidant to many in the community, he has taken on the immense task of record keeper and historian for the North Alabama African American community at large, the Methodist Church specifically, and the Schaudies-Banks family. When shown a map of Morgan County and asked to identify African American communities, churches, and cemeteries, Dr. Ragland rattled off a list without hesitation. An unfamiliar researcher might find it difficult to keep up with the names of people, families, and plantations, mixed in with bits of interesting information, skipping from county to county, century to century, and interspersed with suggestions of records to look at and places to visit. In a quick 20 minutes or so, you will be regaled with stories about a widow slaveowner who only purchased “nearly-white” women who she trained as nurses, the school named after Ms. Banks, a white man who left hundreds of acres to his mixed children, the Decatur Tourism Department’s online video called “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and more.

Ms. Peggy Allen Towns still has the air of a woman in politics several years after retiring from U.S. Congressional service. Beyond serving on several local, county, and regional boards, societies, and committees, Ms. Towns



has indulged her love of history – instilled by her mother – by studying local African American history and making sure it is preserved. Her mother, Ms. Myrtle Allen, often said, “if you don’t know where you’ve been, you’ll never know where you’re going.” It may be this sentiment that has driven Ms. Towns to her expansive research which has led to the addition of a number of sites to the Alabama Historical Commission’s register of landmarks, historical sites, and “Places in Peril” watch list. Ms. Towns is the author of *Duty Driven: The Plight of North Alabama’s African Americans During the Civil War* and the researcher behind the Morgan County Scottsboro Boys exhibit based on her book, *Scottsboro Unmasked: Decatur’s Story*. Greeting her listeners with a warm smile, Ms. Towns immediately delves into the reasons that the Scottsboro Boys trial is truly a story about Decatur’s African American community. The story of the Scottsboro Boys straddles a couple counties in North Alabama. While the story begins in Jackson County, there’s no denying its impact on Morgan County. Using the research of Ms. Towns, Morgan County land records, and the U.S. census, a section in this chapter attempts to tie the importance of landownership, community leadership, and the outstandingly brave individuals of the trial together in a personalized story of the African American community in the mid-1930s.

When solicited for information about communities outside of downtown Decatur, Ms. Towns points to a map and calls out the location of Nebo – a community once located where today there is a large 3M plant – along with names of families, towns, and the recollection of interesting bits of research she has come across in her own studies.

One topic brought up by Mr. Allison, Dr. Ragland, and Ms. Towns is the once-called “Colony” of Cedar Lake. A fascinating piece of local history, Cedar Lake was a planned community for African Americans at the very end of the 19th century. While the name is still on the map today, the archival folder for Cedar Lake is regrettably thin – though not for lack of interest, particularly from these three local historians. The folder contains a few old newspaper

clippings, a mention in a more recent article, summary research by Dr. Ragland, and a piece by Ms. Towns in an issue of the Morgan County Historical Society newsletter. The history of Cedar Lake and the efforts of those who made it happen to the extent that it did deserves a deeper look. Thus, with the help of the information already laid out in the folder, some sleuthing about old land records at the archives and the U.S. census, a little more information about the Cedar Lake Colony is explored in this chapter.

