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Cedar Lake School (Rosenwald)*

The Cedar Lake School was one of only two Rosenwald schools built in Morgan County. It was a two-room schoolhouse erected in 1921-1922. The official Rosenwald Fund records puts the total cost of the Cedar Lake School at \$2,700 – approximately \$40,500 in today’s money. A total of \$1,000 came from the African American community, another \$900 came from the “public,” which might include the Nelsons, and \$800 was supplied by the Fund.

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Dancy-Garth Cemetery

Also known simply as the Garth Cemetery, this small family cemetery is all that remains of the Sykes-Garth Plantation. Located southwest of Decatur near Moulton Heights, the overgrown cemetery of 19 graves is just south of the much larger Roselawn Cemetery. Despite many of the stones having been destroyed, the earliest known grave is that of E.G. Mailler, who died in 1840. This is the resting place for General Jesse Winston Garth (1788-1867) and his wife, Unity Spotswood Dandridge Garth (1799-1833).

General Garth was one of the first landowners in Morgan County, his plantation passed to his son-in-law, Dr. Francis M. Sykes (1819-1883), becoming the Sykes-Garth Plantation. Sykes fathered a child with one of Garth’s slaves, named Laura. That child was Solomon Sharper (S.S.) Sykes, who began life as a slave on the Sykes-Garth plantation but grew to be the patriarch of the successful Sykes family of Decatur – producing many African American businessmen, politicians, dentists, and well respected citizens.

Another interesting burial in the Garth Cemetery is that of a slave named Charlotte. On her monument is the inscription, “To the memory of Charlotte, a faithful slave, a sincere friend. She was born upon the estate of Nathaniel W. Dandridge, Hanover City,

Virginia, and died April 5, 1859, at age 50. Cheerfully, affectionately, faithfully she discharged the various duties of life.”

The cemetery and the surrounding 20 acres are in trust to the Garth descendants, though the historically-minded citizens of Decatur have taken a keen interest in helping to preserve such a significant cemetery. The Dancy-Garth Cemetery was listed in the Alabama Historic Cemetery Register on November 21, 2007.

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Danville

Danville is an unincorporated community on the western border of Morgan County, southwest of Hartselle. From 1900-1940, the community of Danville was predominately farmers and farm laborers. Between 1900 and 1920, Danville was a community of just over 200 households, 23% of which were African American. However, there was a sharp decline over

(Below) 1936 USGS Topographic Map, Stroups Crossroads and McKendry Quadrangles, of the Community of Danville.



(Above) David Albritton and Jesse Owens, at the 1936 Olympic Games (National Underground Railroad Freedom Center)

the next two decades and by 1940, only 43 of 260 households were African American.

Nearly everyone in Danville, regardless of race, was either a farmer or worked as a farm laborer. During the first four decades of the 20th century, there were 22 African American landowning farmers in Danville. On average, there were six African American landowning farmers in any given census year (2-3% of households). The predominating family was the Sharpleys – 10 of the 22 landowners were Sharpleys – followed by five households of the Orr family.

One of the landowners was Peter A. Albritton. Born sometime around the Civil War in the vicinity of Montgomery, Peter and his large family moved to Danville. By 1930, they owned their farm there, where Albritton grew mostly cotton. David Albritton was Peter’s youngest son who made his way to Ohio State University where he excelled in track and field. Born just five months apart and miles away in Oakville, Lawrence County, Alabama, both David Albritton and Jesse Owens ended up at the same university on the same track team. In 1936, they were both overseas to compete in the historic Olympic Games in Berlin. One of 18 African American athletes, David won the silver medal as a high jumper.

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Decatur

Also known as the River City, Decatur is the seat of Morgan County, located in the northwest corner of the county along the Tennessee River. Named for naval hero of the War of 1812, Stephen Decatur, the city was founded in 1820 and incorporated in 1826. A decade later, the city was the terminus for the first railroad west of the Appalachian Mountains, greatly increasing its economic importance along the river. During the Civil War, the city was a battlefield from October 26-29, 1864 in what is known as the Battle of Decatur.

Like many Southern cities, Decatur really began to grow in the 1880s when the Decatur Land, Improvement, and Furnace Company bought land in southeast Decatur and began promoting a new city, inventively called “New Decatur” – later known as Albany. The original portion of downtown Decatur became predominately African American as white residents moved to the newly developed New Decatur. Old Town, as it was known, became the home of numerous African American-owned businesses, homes, and community centers into the 1930s. By the Great Depression, racial tension and a stifling economy drove many African American southerners north as part of the Great Migration. For Decatur in particular, the Scottsboro Boys’ trial helped to drive away some of the most notable local families.

While the history of Decatur is mostly as a city, an urban area of gridded streets lined with shops and townhouses, much of the area that is now part of the city was once farmed plantations. Just south of downtown was one of the largest and first of the plantations, the Sykes-Garth Plantation, while to the east was the thousands of acres known as the Wilder Place. By the turn of the 20th century, these plantations were divided up into plots for sharecroppers and a few rare yeoman farmers. As the city continued to grow, the profitable land was turned to residential subdivisions, and all agriculture was pushed further out from the city core.