

“William Breeding was the son of Samuel Breeding, and William Breeding lived with a black slave openly. They had, to my knowledge, about four sons together, and he would not marry a white woman. He was ostracized by the community. He was vilified at church revivals, but he would not leave his wife because of the black laws. He was not free to marry because she was a slave. Even if she wasn’t a slave, he was still not free to marry her... The Breedings probably would be the only biracial black family that owned thousands of acres.”

- Dr. Wylheme H. Ragland

and am one of the persons referred to, in said will, as being one of the sons of the deceased, and a legatee therein named, and executor thereof...” He also stated that his mother was a woman of color.

The case went to court in 1900. Judge William E. Skeggs presided over Breeding v. Breeding and informed the all-white, male jury of the three concerns up for dispute. First, was William Breeding’s

will authentic? Second, did he have testamentary capacity? And Third, was the will procured by undue influence? While miscegenation was not uncommon in North Alabama, the inheritance of any property or wealth by the produce of those relationships was unheard of at the time. However, surprisingly the jury found in Millard Breeding’s favor. Something that may not have been possible just a year later, once the Alabama Constitution was rewritten.

The case is discussed in the recent biography, *Black Print with a White Carnation: Mildred Brown and the Omaha Star Newspaper, 1938-1989*. Brown is a granddaughter of William and Sopharina Breeding.

## Robert Murphy

Murphy is considered to some, including local historians Ms. Peggy Allen Towns and Dr. Wylheme H. Ragland, to be an African American founding father of Decatur. Born a slave in 1831, Murphy was the son of an enslaved woman named Mary and her owner. Mary was brought to the Trinity area from Virginia by the Kimble family. The Kimbles intermarried with the nearby Murphy family, and Mary and Robert ended up the property of James Murphy.



**(Left) Robert Murphy (Morgan County Archives, Decatur, Alabama)**

While Robert Murphy never left to join the Union Army at his owner’s request, he did work for the army while it was in Decatur. “The Yankees told me if I would help them put up them shanties they would give me a dollar a day and I helped them put up a good many of them,” Murphy said in the early 20th century. By 1870, he was a landowner with an estimated value of \$400, a 300-acre farm in Morgan County. Much of

the 300 acres of land Murphy owned was the same land he worked as a slave. He also lived in Decatur and was a member of First United Methodist Church. Besides land, he was known to have two houses, horses, mules, cows, and other livestock, buggies, and carriages, and his household good included bedding, china, plates, glass, and silverware. Upon his death, all of this was willed to his wife, Harriett, a former slave from the Athens, Limestone County area.

## The Schaudies-Banks Family

The Schaudies and Banks families are two prominent African American families within the Decatur area and Morgan County. The two families came together in one remarkable citizen of Decatur, Ms. Athelyne Celest Banks. When Dr. Wylheme H. Ragland moved to Morgan County in the 1970s, he became part of Ms. Banks’ god-family, congregation, and confidant. It is Ms. Banks’ incredible life, generosity, and family history that drew Dr. Ragland to research Ms. Banks and her family. He shared her story and his research in an oral history interview in July 2018.

### John Robinson and Martha Roots

Martha Roots and John Robinson were Miss Banks’ maternal great-grandparents. John Robinson was a member of the small community of free people of color living in Madison County, Alabama before the Civil War and Emancipation. According to Dr. Ragland’s research, Robinson came to Alabama in the early 1820s. He was freed from slavery sometime between 1825 and 1827, when the capitol of Alabama was located in Tuscaloosa. From the 1830s onward, you can find Robinson in the Federal Census. John Robinson owned a livery stable and land – though not for farming.

John Robinson was known to be a very prosperous man. During the Civil War, the Union Army confiscated some of his property. He was even held hostage for a time while they mistook him for a Southern sympathizer. After the war, he filed an application with the Southern Claims Commission for everything the Union Army took from him, including hogs and

bacon, etc., which accurately documented his wealth at that time.

Martha Roots was born an enslaved woman, possibly in Louisiana where very light-skinned women were known as “octoroons.” In Huntsville, Martha was owned by a woman named Sarah Donahue in the Twickenham area. What stands out about Sarah Donahue is her practice of only buying slave women who could “pass for white”. These women had fair skin and reddish to blond hair. However, due to laws that bound the status of slavery of the mother to the child, regardless of physical attributes, they were slaves. Donahue’s “nearly-white” women were taught to read, write, and to nurse, among other talents. According to Dr. Ragland, Donahue’s enslaved women were used as companions and nurses to the wealthy white women of Huntsville.

Around 1859, Sarah Donahue became ill in some unclarified way and declared a lunatic. The records of Madison County include an inventory of her property, which was taken away from her. The enslaved women were among the property lists. Dr. Ragland says that these records are how he determined that Martha had a last name, Roots – a rare occurrence for a slave.

John Robinson met Martha Roots when he hired her as a housekeeper and nurse for his dying wife. After his wife’s passing, he married Roots. Together they had several children, including Abbie Robinson. However, Abbie was born in 1859 and unfortunately, retained the status of a slave, which was linked to the status of the mother at that time. Regardless of their initial status, Martha passed her nursing skills onto her daughter. Abbie used this skills often to help the people of her community, particularly in the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Decatur.

### Abbie Robinson (1859-1910) and Samuel Schaudies (1849-1881)

Abbie Robinson and Samuel Schaudies were Miss Banks’ maternal grandparents. Born more than a decade before emancipation, Samuel Schaudies was enslaved by Frederick Otto (F. O.) Schaudies, who