

Sunday was a big day with the colored Baptist in Decatur. It was the culmination of a protracted meeting that has been conducted in the church of that denomination for several weeks, during which many have made a profession of religion. Sunday evening at 8 o'clock about 1,000 negroes repaired to the Tennessee river at Bank street landing to witness the ceremony of baptism performed by Elder Robinson, the pastor. Among those baptized were Solomon S. Sykes, Chas. T. Sykes and J. J. Sykes. The former was born a slave, the property of the late Dr. F. W. Sykes, at one time United States senator elect, but never took his seat. S. S. Sykes remained on the farm until about fifteen years ago. He then came to town and has accumulated property rapidly, owning a large block of land in which he has been conducting a saloon. He is also an undertaker. Since joining the church he will quit the saloon business. J. J. Sykes is also proprietor of a saloon. Both men are reliable, influential and have the confidence of both the white and colored race.

Several months ago the little 3-year old child of Mr. and Mrs. Minor Walden, of Trinity, swallowed an eight-penny wire nail. A few days afterwards the child began to cough and bleed and grew very weak. The parents took the little fellow to a surgeon in Mississippi, who located the nail in the child's side, near the heart, with the aid of an X-ray, but said that he would not attempt to remove the nail, for fear of fatal consequences. The parents returned home and a few days ago took the little fellow to a surgeon in Virginia, who told them that a mucus coating might form over the nail and the child might live for a few years, but that the nail would eventually kill him. This surgeon also said that he could perform an operation, but that it might kill the boy, on account of his weak condition. The parents decided to take the chances, and the operation was successfully performed Saturday, by removing three ribs in the left side. A letter from Mr. Walden stated that the little fellow looks fair to recover. If the child gets well surgeons say the operation will be one of the most remarkable of the age.—Ex.

(Left) Snippet from *The Decatur Weekly News*, Decatur, Alabama. Friday, October 5, 1900, Page 5 (Newspaper.com) **(Right)** S.S. Syke's Undertaker and Furniture Store in Decatur, Alabama, 1902 (The New York Public Library Digital Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture)



property to the Vine Street Boy's Club, and money to Lakeside High School and the First Missionary Baptist Church. An apparently lost piece of the will allocated money for a "Negro Boys' Club," which is today the Eva Sterrs Boys & Girls Club – named in her honor.

The Sykes Family

The Sykes Family was one of the most prominent families of color within the Decatur area. While their ancestry began in slavery, by the turn of the 20th century, several members were successful businessmen, politicians, homeowners, doctors, and more.

General Jesse Winston Garth was one of the men who directed the Decatur Land Company in the early 19th century. The company was responsible for laying out the city's streets and the men are considered the founding fathers of Decatur. Unlike his partners, Garth put down roots just southwest of the city – his plantation house is one of the only properties marked

on an 1837 survey map of Alabama. His 1,500-acre plantation was home to 189 slaves in 1850.

Garth's daughter, Susan Elizabeth Garth, married Dr. Francis W. Sykes and subsequently took over the Sykes-Garth Plantation outside of Decatur. Along with the property came the ownership of an enslaved woman named Laura – who was actually General Garth's granddaughter. Sykes and Laura had several children together, including Solomon Sharper Sykes – known simply as S.S. Sykes.

S.S. Sykes (1856-1925) was born into slavery on the Sykes-Garth Plantation, yet by the end of his life, he had become a respectable and prominent businessman and landowner in Decatur. His many children carried on this legacy as well.

In 1924, S.S. Sykes owned no less than 15 lots within Decatur, Old Town – more than any other person of color at the time. S.S. also owned a lot in the Decatur Land Improvement & Furnace Company's Addition #1 in West Decatur on the southwest corner of 5th Street and North Avenue. The lot is empty today, but the 1936 topographic map shows a house on that corner. While perhaps not a farmer, S.S. Sykes also owned land that was once part of the Sykes-Garth Plantation.

S.S. was well known as an undertaker and owned a furniture store at 225 Bank Street. S.S. Sykes, Dr. Sterrs, and G.F. Oliver helped to secure a loan of \$1,460 to purchase property from St. Ann's Catholic Church to build the First Missionary Baptist Church under the direction of African American architect W. A. Rayfield in 1921. S.S. continued to be a trustee of the church until his death.

S.S. Sykes married Ada Garth (1862-1938) and had six children: Newman (1885-1954), Leo (1890-1943), Frank Jehoy (1892-1986), Mammie Estelle Ragland (1896-1928), Melvin Elijah (1901-1984), and Ada Eunicetine Adam (1907-1983). All of the Sykes were well educated, successful, and well-respected within and outside of the African American community.

Dr. Newman M. Sykes received a medical degree from the University of Illinois and worked a practice there for nine years before returning to Decatur. Once back in Morgan County he served as the medical director for the Liberty Bell Insurance Company. Dr. Newman Sykes was one of several men who testified to the fact that there were several African American men in Morgan County who qualified for jury duty during what became known as the Scottsboro Boys trial.

Dr. Frank Jehoy "Doc" Sykes is known for two things. From 1914-1924, he played for several teams in the Negro Baseball League, including the New York Lincoln Giants, Hilldale Club, and the Baltimore Black Sox. He returned to Decatur in 1927 as a dentist and set up a practice. In 1936, Dr. Sykes took the stand in

the Scottsboro Boys trial. He was one of the four men who provided a list of eligible jurors. Unfortunately, Dr. Sykes and his family left Decatur the following year after a cross was burned on their front lawn.

Frank and Laura had two other sons who were quite successful as well. Justice Charles P. Sykes was a judge in Decatur in 1895 and James J. Sykes, known as J.J., was businessman that at one time or another was a grocer, a coal dealer, a saloon owner, a tailor, and an undertaker. J.J. owned businesses and property mostly along Bank Street but also out towards Moulton Heights. After the new 1901 Alabama State Constitution forbid white and black people to be buried in the same cemetery, J.J. helped to fill a need by purchasing property in Moulton Heights and creating Magnolia Cemetery, now known as Sykes or Magnolia-Sykes Cemetery in his honor.

(Below) The Sykes Family, Circa 1911. Seated (Left to Right): Melvin, Solomon (S.S.), Eunicetine, Wife Ada (Garth) Sykes. Standing: Carl, Leo, Estella, Newman, Frank, Grandson Alonzo Thayer Jr., Rebecca (Sykes) Thayer. (Morgan County Archives, Decatur, Alabama)

