

4. PLANNED COMMUNITIES

Cedar Lake Colony

Cedar Lake was a planned African American community in Morgan County, just three and a half miles south of downtown Decatur. It was dubbed the “Cedar Lake Colony” when it was chartered and platted in November of 1897. The community was centered around farming, self-sufficiency, and sustainability. The plan was to have at least 140 houses, a post office, a train station, a church, a school, and some industry – all supported by over 360 acres of good soil. The location chosen was near a small pond, which would provide water, and the farmland was planted with wheat, potatoes, and tobacco.

The community was first proposed by an Englishwoman named Lilian Ray Nelson (mostly referred to as Mrs. Ray), a writer and philanthropist, who helped to bring it to fruition. The opening ceremony in November 1897 recorded by the *Birmingham Age-Herald* and the *New York Times*, included Mrs. Ray’s speech. In the speech, she stressed that the creation of the “colony [was] not a business speculation in any sense of the term.” Instead, it was meant to be purely a humanitarian project for the betterment of the African American people to experience a chance to stand on their own and exhibit self-sufficiency as a community.

A few years after the settlement was officially begun, Ray restates her intentions in a 1903 newspaper article as follows:

“My intention in founding the town of Cedar Lake as a colored man’s town was to encourage the building of homes, and the training of young negroes in agriculture and trades by which they could be supported; and my experience has been that an honest home training,



(Above) Photographs of Cedar Lake philanthropists George A. and Lilian Ray Nelson (*New Decatur Advertiser*, New Decatur, Alabama, Thursday, June 27, 1912) (Right) Original Plat Map of the Town of Cedar Lake, 1897

