

**(Opposite) Map of Cedar Lake Plat Overlaid on Modern Aerial with African American Landowners' Parcels Highlighted**

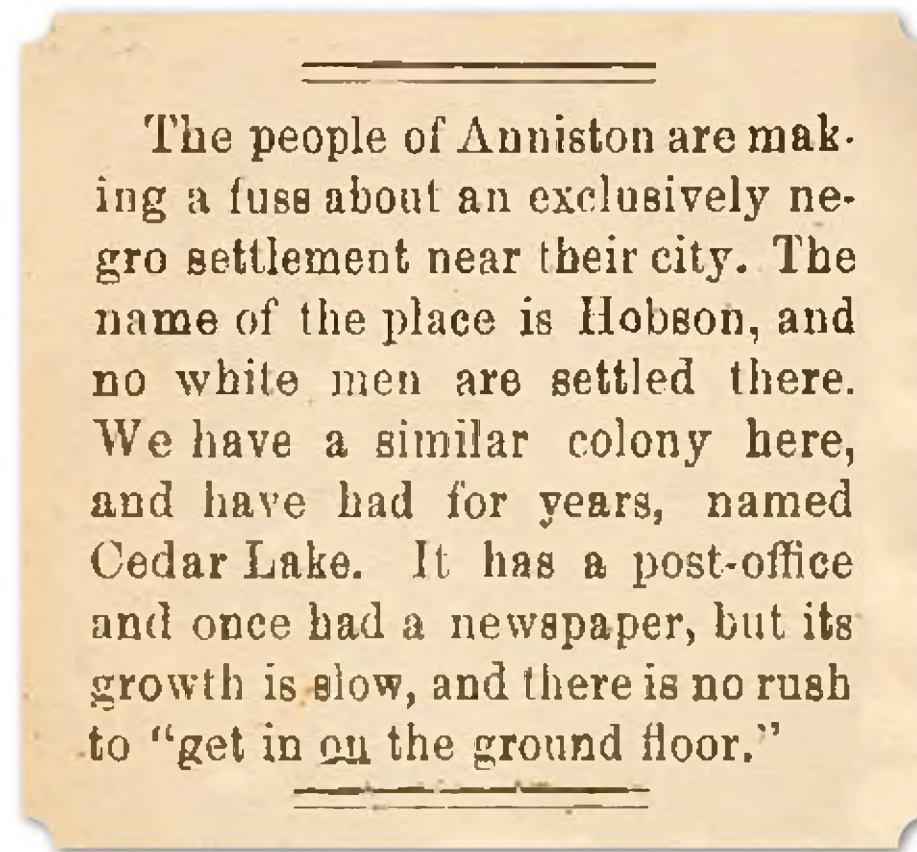
about 100 acres total. The platted city was situated along the west side of the L&N railroad and had six roads crisscrossing and dividing the 83 formally drawn up land lots. The city was laid out with avenues running east-west and streets going north-south.

The plat map has four certified declarations written and signed around the drawing of Cedar Lake. Each one verifies the map's accuracy and details the land owned or donated by the parties. Much of the land was owned by Mrs. Lilian Ray, who was president of the Moulton Heights Land Improvement & Industrial Company and her husband, George Asa Nelson, the company's secretary. The third party to sign the plat (or at least "make his mark") was Jake Johnson, a local African American farmer and landowner. Jake and his brother John owned large pieces of farmland in the area. It appears that about half of the platted land was Johnson's. While land records show that George and Lilian Nelson continued to own approximately half of the lots within Cedar Lake until 1939, the Nelsons themselves lived in Moulton Heights. They rented their lots to African American tenants ensuring that the entire community was African American – as noted in the 1930 census.

## A Legitimate Community

Lilian Ray had many plans to legitimize the colony as a community. General Joe Wheeler assisted Ray in obtaining a post office for the colony, naming it in her honor. The president of the L&N railroad wrote to Ray promising his cooperation in supplying Cedar Lake with "a station, side tracks, and all the necessary shipping facilities." Furthermore, a firm from Rhode Island agreed to build a very large cotton mill as well as a cigar and tobacco factory. Mrs. Ray, herself, donated \$10,000 (quite a sizeable fund for the turn of the century) for the building of 140 houses. Once these were full of residents, then Cedar Lake would fulfill its charter and become a city, electing its own mayor and city officials. Governor Johnston promised to "appoint a Notary Public, an ex-officio

Justice and a Police Constable, all to be colored men, thus giving the colony local self-government."



**(Above) Announcement in the *New Decatur Advertiser* on September 8, 1899 (Newspapers.com)**

In an October 30, 1903 article in the *New Decatur Advertiser*, Mrs. Ray wrote about the rumor of a college in Cedar Lake. While she dismissed these plans and quelled the public's upset over the notion, she also updated the actual plans and progress of Cedar Lake. Between 1897 and 1903, a brick yard was opened, and a skilled brick maker from Tuskegee was scheduled to come to Cedar Lake and instruct the locals in the art and technology of brickmaking. She also reported that "there are many families who own their homes, and are happy and contented; there is a good common school, and two churches, a post office and general store, a good building has just been erected as a lodge room and a place for a general meeting room, a planning mill is now being planned" and the brick yard has opened. Beyond the homes and fields owned by the

African American community, Ray mentioned the more than 400 acres of prime farmland that she rented out to African American families she deemed worthy.

Mrs. Ray also stated the plans for an electric car line from Decatur to Cedar Lake, like the line she advocated for from Decatur to Moulton Heights. However, while the Moulton Heights line was built, it does not appear that the Cedar Lake line ever came to fruition. Similarly, if the train station was never built, that left Flint City to the south and Decatur to the north as the nearest train depots and easiest mode of transportation for citizens of Cedar Lake to connect with the larger urban area.

The only evidence that a train station was ever located at Cedar Lake is in a front-page article in the *New Decatur Advertiser* on June 27, 1912 by George A. Nelson. He wrote about minerals, oil, and gas in North Alabama's rich natural landscape, but he mentions that "just outside the city limits of New Decatur, on the L. & N. R.R., at a station known as Cedar Lake, is a great bed of blue plastic clay which can be manufactured into high grade fire-brick." This may also be the clay deposit that prompted the brick yard that opened a decade previous.

Cedar Lake was home to an on-again-off-again newspaper. In 1903, it was called the *Enterprise* and was edited by William Butler, an African American. Butler also intended to put together the Cedar Lake Co-Operative and Industrial School that would provide courses in agricultural, mechanical training, building, and manufacturing of goods. This cooperative would be completely owned and operated by the African American community, amassing funds by selling shares as well as proceeds from a chicken farm. A Christmas evening of entertainment with concerts, dinner, and speeches by prominent African Americans was organized as a fundraiser to initiate the industrial school. As there was definitely no station at Cedar Lake at the time, the L&N Railroad agreed to stop trains traveling both ways at the town on Christmas day.

According to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, another similar meeting was held in February 1905. It was attended by people from as far away as New