



African American History in the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area

Africans arrived in Alabama well before it became a state. In 1527, Pánfilo de Narvaez and six hundred men, including an unknown number of Christian African slaves (though at least two), left Spain on five ships with the intention of forming a permanent settlement in Florida. After a series of unfortunate events, the men landed in Mobile Bay, where one of the African slaves went to locate water for the crew. The man never returned to the ship and he inadvertently became the first black man to set foot in Alabama.

Over the next three hundred years, more people of African descent traveled through and lived in what would become the state of Alabama. Some came of their own volition, however most arrived as slaves. The rich soil of the Tennessee River Valley attracted planters and farmers from Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia. Because of poor field management practices, the soil in these eastern seaboard states had become worn out. Planters and farmers arrived in northwest Alabama, eager to grow crops, especially cotton. Many of them traveled to the region with slaves. While slavery in northwest Alabama did not reach the magnitude of slavery in the Black Belt region to the south, a significant portion of the population was enslaved. In 1818, when Alabama was still a territory, slaves made up 16 percent of the population of Franklin County and 13.6 percent of the population of Lauderdale County. By the eve of the Civil War, there were twenty three plantations in Lauderdale County with over fifty slaves. The largest slave holder in Franklin County was Abraham Ricks, who owned three hundred slaves. Not all slaves lived on plantations. Many worked to construct roads, homes, canals, and bridges throughout northwest Alabama. Slaves built the State Bank in Decatur and worked on the first Muscle Shoals Canal. Life for these men, women, and children was extremely difficult, whatever the type of labor they performed.



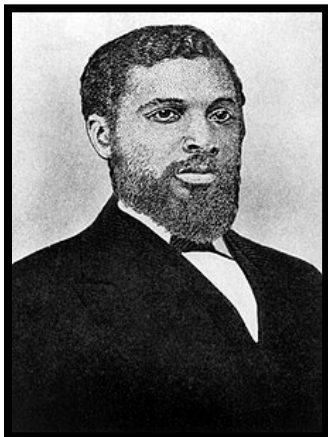
Before the Civil War, the people of North Alabama held diverse opinions on slavery. In the Tennessee River Valley, where agriculture was more successful, slavery was more prominent than in the hilly regions where farming was not as common. About 15 percent of Alabama's white adult population were loyalists to the federal government and did not support Southern secession. However, this did not always mean people believed in racial equality for African Americans. Many people did not support the institution of slavery because they saw it as undercutting the value of white labor. The difference in communities' dependence on slave labor and their attitudes towards slavery caused large rifts during the Civil War. Just south of the MSNHA, the county of Winston argued they could secede from the state of Alabama, just as the state of Alabama had seceded from the Union because they did not support the pro-slavery stance of the state. While they never went so far, Winston became known as a Unionist stronghold during the war.

The Civil War was well underway before the federal government allowed African Americans to join the ranks of the [Union Army](#). The African American troops who had enlisted were either freemen, slaves from border states, or runaway slaves. By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 African Americans served in the United States Army, which accounts for approximately 10 percent of the total army. In North Alabama, many of the Union soldiers who were African American were likely escaped slaves fighting to achieve their own manumission. Some enslaved African Americans also traveled with the Confederate Army as laborers and servants.

Conditions in the army for African American soldiers were not ideal. Racial discrimination was prevalent throughout the northern United States as well and that behavior permeated into the army. Prior to 1864, black soldiers made about half of what white soldiers earned.

North Alabama was home to five African American Colored Regiments:

- 11th U.S. Colored Infantry
- 55th U.S. Colored Infantry
- 106th U.S. Colored Infantry
- 110th U.S. Colored Infantry
- 111th U.S. Colored Infantry



Most of the regiment of the 111th U.S. Colored Infantry was captured during the [Sack of Athens](#) in Limestone County. The 110th U.S. Colored Infantry fought in the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle, which was a loss for the Union Army.

Following the Civil War and the passing of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, which granted African American men the rights to vote and run for political office, many prominent African American politicians came from the North Alabama region. One of the most influential of these men was [James T. Rapier](#) (pictured left). Rapier served as the Florence representative during Alabama's Constitutional Convention of 1867, when Alabama became the first state to begin the Constitutional

reconstruction process. He later served as a U.S. representative, and was instrumental in passing the Civil Rights Bill of 1875, which guaranteed equal access to public accommodations for all individuals.

Other notable African American politicians from the area include Jeremiah Harrison (congressman from 1875-1877), Sandy Bynum (registrar for Lawrence County), George Garth (registrar for Limestone and Morgan Counties), Sandy Osbourne (registrar for Colbert and Franklin Counties), and [Oscar Stanton De Priest](#) (pictured right). De Priest was born to former slaves in Florence but later moved to Chicago during the Great Migration, which saw many African American families leave the South to pursue jobs as industrial workers in the North. De Priest became the first African American elected to Congress in the twentieth century, ending a 28-year absence of black representatives.



One of the major problems rural African Americans faced in the first half of the twentieth-century was the lack of available opportunities for education. Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears Roebuck and Co. and an admirer of Booker T. Washington, established a fund to create Southern schools for African American children as well as homes for their teachers. In Alabama alone, there were nearly 400 [Rosenwald Schools](#). Tuskegee served as the center for the fund's operations as the program spread throughout the South.



Fisk Jubilee Singers, Malone at far right

After the war, the Trinity School was established by Mary Fletcher Wells for freedmen in Athens. For most of the school's history, until court ordered desegregation in 1970, Trinity School would be the only high school for African American students in Limestone County. Notable alumni include [Patti Malone](#), a member of the famed Fisk Jubilee Singers as well as a renowned opera singer who once performed for German Emperor Wilhelm I, and C. Eric Lincoln, a nationally celebrated author, poet, scholar, and theologian.

In the late 1800s a new distinct music emerged from the African American community—the blues. The blues blended traditional gospel songs with more secular influences, often dealing with personal adversity. This highly emotional musical genre was shaped by Florence-born musician, [W.C. Handy](#) (pictured left). William Christopher Handy, born in 1873, was the first musician to popularize the genre across the country. Handy and his band moved the

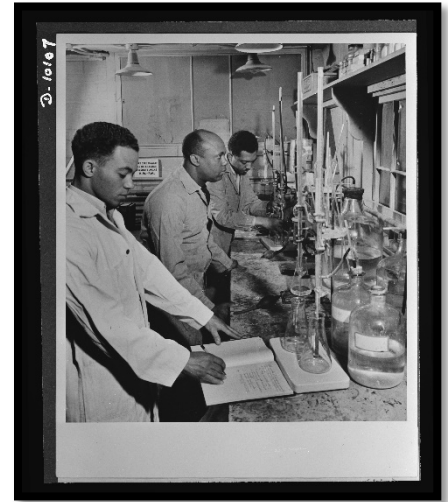


center of blues music to Memphis, Tennessee, making Beale Street to this day a mecca for blues lovers. Click [here](#) to hear one of Handy's most famous songs, "St. Louis Blues".



*African American laborers on the Nitrate
Two facility farm*

African American workers helped to construct the second Muscle Shoals Canal, Wilson Dam, the Nitrate Facilities and villages, and during the 1930s, they worked on TVA construction projects and then in the management and upkeep of TVA facilities after their completion. They also worked in the fertilizer operations. While black workers on TVA

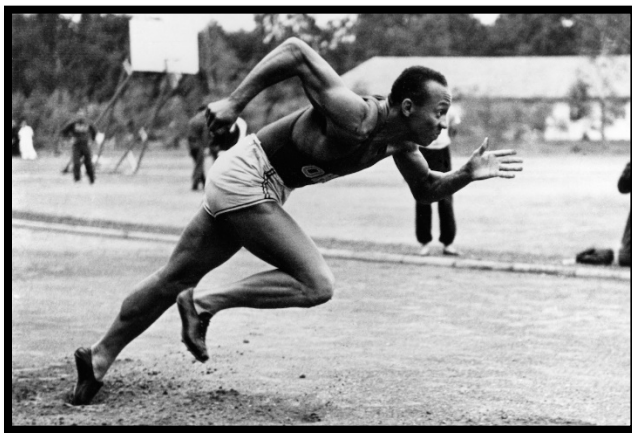


*Paul L. Imes, Samuel C. Watkins, and
George W. Richardson, all lab technicians
for TVA*

projects often made up the same proportion of workers as they did in the general population in the region, they were often relegated to lower paying and more dangerous work, though not always. TVA facilities remained segregated into the 1960s.

Percy Sledge, singer of the well-known hit "[When a Man Loves a Woman](#)," was also born in North Alabama. Sledge was born in Leighton located in Colbert County in 1940. Sledge's recording hit number one *Billboard* Hot 100 and R&B Singles lists.

During the turbulent years of the 1930s, leading up to the second World War, one man from North Alabama broke barriers as he competed on the greatest stage in the world— the Olympics. Alabama



native Jesse Owens was born in Oakville in 1913, the ninth of ten children. He and his family left the South for Ohio when he was nine years old. Owens first came to national attention when he equaled the world record in the 100-yard dash and also showed exceptional skill at the long jump during the 1933 National High School Championship in Chicago. He caused a sensation as a student at Ohio State University by setting many world records in track and field. In the summer of 1936, the Olympic Games were to be held in

the Nazi capital of Berlin. Many people urged Owens to boycott the games to protest the harsh injustices inflicted on minorities by Hitler's government, but Owens refused. He dominated his events,

winning gold medals in the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, and the 4x100- meter relay. Owens' accomplishment remained unequaled until fellow Alabamian Carl Lewis' Olympic achievement in 1984. Owens' success singlehandedly helped bring down Hitler's myth of white superiority. Upon returning to America, Owens was hailed as a national hero and many parades were held in his honor. Today, Oakville is home to the [Jesse Owens Museum and Park](#), where visitors can learn more about his life and legacy and even see if they can beat his historic long jump in the long-jump pit.



Even the final frontier— outer-space— has been conquered by a North Alabamian. Mae Carol Jemison, a native of Decatur, became the first African American woman to travel into space when she flew aboard the Endeavor in 1992.