

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN HERITAGE IN OLD TOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT DECATUR, ALABAMA

## OLD TOWN HISTORIC CHURCHES



### King's Memorial United Methodist Church

The oldest African American congregation in Decatur. The Reverend Richard "Dick" Rather, Pastor. In 1850, bi-racial and black members, of Decatur First Methodist Episcopal Church, South began meeting for afternoon worship. In 1854, the people of color, with their own money, built their sanctuary on Lafayette Street between Bank Street and Railroad Street.



### Garner Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Formerly Bailey Temple Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, organized in the late 1800's, with ten members. The name changed to Garner Memorial in 1945.



### First Missionary Baptist Church

Founded in 1866, a year after emancipation. The Reverend Alfred Peters, Pastor. The present church building was designed by prominent African American architect W.A. Rayfield in 1921 and constructed for \$1,250.



### Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church

The Rev. Elijah J. Lincoln organized church in 1878.



### St. Stephen Primitive Baptist Church

Founded by Elder George Franklin, Pastor - 1875.



### Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church

The Reverend T.W. Coffee was assigned to Decatur Mission in 1877. The mission had six members.

Information researched by

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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION PLEASE VISIT  
MORGAN COUNTY ARCHIVES  
624 Bank St NE, Decatur, AL 35601-1608; 256/351-4726



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# FREEDOM PIONEERS

## AFRICAN-AMERICAN HERITAGE IN OLD TOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT DECATUR, ALABAMA



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Hidden in the pages of Decatur, Alabama's history are the unmentioned and noteworthy African Americans, who made countless contributions to our city. The River City was built on the backs of slaves and their descendants. The Old State Bank, which opened its doors July 29, 1833; is an example of their labor and craftsmanship. James Fennell, first Bank president, used slaves in the erection of the building. The slaves cut large stone pillars and hauled them from Trinity, Alabama to Decatur on ox drawn wagons. Many slaves worked on plantations, while others were hired out as blacksmiths, plasterers and laborers. The spirit and work of these pioneers continue to enrich and inspire past and future generations.

### Civil War Soldiers

*African Americans served both Union and Confederate Armies during the Civil War.*

The 106th United States Colored Infantry (USCI), organized in Decatur, is the first of only two black units raised in the State. Later the bravery of the 14th USCI was exhibited in Decatur, on October 28, 1864 when they saw combat with General John Bell Hood, resulting in a Union victory. The regiment first saw action on August 14-15, 1864, when it engaged in heavy skirmishing with raiding parties from General Joseph Wheeler's cavalry at Dalton, Georgia. On August, 2009, a military grave marker was dedicated for 1st Alabama Cavalry, Union Civil War Soldier, Amos McKinney, who is buried at Magnolia-Sykes Cemetery in Decatur. Members of the 13th US Colored Troop and the 1st Alabama Cavalry reenactors (pictured at grave) took part in the ceremony. McKinney, who died Aug. 24, 1910 in Moulton, had been in an unmarked grave since his death. James J. Sykes purchased land for the Magnolia-Sykes Cemetery in 1901.



## OLD TOWN EARLY BUSINESSES

Reconstruction to Early 1900s

- Robert Bridgeforth, *Restaurant, 219 Bank Street; Livery Stable, 120 Market Street*
- Robert Chardovoyne, *Boot and Shoemaker*
- J. W. Coleman, *Grocer, Madison Street*
- S. D. Elliott, *Cleaning, Dyeing, 124 Lafayette Street*
- A. G. Garth, *Grocer, 602 Vine Street*
- Lafayette Garth, *Coal, 303 Bank Street*
- Charles Grizzard, *Grocer, 401 Wells Street*
- Matilda Hall, *Druggist and Notary Public*
- Burrell W. Lemmons, *Boarding House, Blacksmith and Grocer, Vine Street*



Photo courtesy NY digital library. Circa 1895.

## BIRTH AND GROWTH OF OLD TOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT *Rise from Slavery*

- Sol Martin, *Grocer, 426 W. Lafayette Street*
- D. L. Miller, *Barber, 602 Bank Street*
- H. L. Murphy, *Grocer, 505 Madison*
- Madam Winnie Parker, *Boarding House, Church Street*
- Charles Ross, *Barber, 307 Bank Street*
- Samuel Schaudies, *Boot and Shoemaker*
- Willis E. Sterrs, M.D., *Cottage Home Infirmary, Vine Street; Magnolia Drug Store and the People's Dry Goods Store, Bank Street*
- Solomon S. Sykes, *Furniture, 225 Bank Street*
- James J. Sykes, *Grocer, Coal, Saloon, Tailor, Bank Street*

## OLD TOWN POLITICS Constable

John Mills - 1877

Notary and Justice of the Peace

Charles P. Sykes - 1892

Decatur City Council

- Burrell W. Lemons - elected 1880, former slave was sworn in as Decatur's first black Alderman
- Matthew Hewlett Banks - elected 1884 Alderman and Mayor Pro Tem
- Charles P. Sykes - elected 1888
- Hershel V. Cashin - elected 1892
- James J. Sykes - elected 1894
- Russell Priest - July 1986, appointed to Decatur City Council
- Collis Stevenson - elected 1988
- William "Butch" Matthews - elected 1991
- William "Billy" Jackson - elected 1996 to present. Served as Decatur City Council President 2004-2008

Decatur City School Board

Collis Stevenson, Tommy Sykes, and Michelle Gray King

## OLD TOWN MEDICAL & DENTAL

Early 1900s

Willis E. Sterrs, M.D., State Board 1888 - Decatur's first African American Physician. Noted surgeon, founder of Cottage Home Infirmary and School of Nursing (Decatur's first hospital)  
J.W. Aldridge, M.D., State Board 1902  
Newlyn E. Cashin, M.D., State Board 1908  
Deo V. Darden, M.D., State Board 1914  
L.P. Jacobs, D.D.S., 1905 City Directory  
Willis J. Wood, D.D.S., 1920 Census  
Winston H. Sherard, M.D.

## OLD TOWN JOURNALISM

Mrs. Eva Adelaide Sterrs

Guardian Newspaper,

Founder & Editor, 1910-1917

Eva Sterrs, Boys Club Benefactor



## OLD TOWN ATTORNEYS

Hershel V. Cashin, State Bar 1878

John A. Fountain, 1895

## OLDTOWN EDUCATION

**Freedmen's School** - Operated by the Methodist Freedmen's Aid Society, from 1867 -1874. This information reveals that education for children of color began directly after the Civil War when the Northern Methodist officially returned to Alabama and Decatur.

**First Private School** - The first private school set up in the St. Stephen Primitive Baptist Church in 1875. After a fire, the school moved to St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church (now known as King's Memorial United Methodist Church).

**Decatur Negro High - June 2, 1935**

Dr. George Washington Carver, renowned Tuskegee Institute scientist, Tuskegee, Alabama, delivered the Baccalaureate address to the graduating class at the Princess Theatre. An integrated audience of over 1,000 people attended. Clifford Joel Hurston (brother of writer Zora Neale Hurston) was principal at the High School. During Dr. Carver's visit the East End School's name changed to Carver Elementary, in his honor. The principal was William J. Wilson.



Photo taken at Decatur Negro High School.

**Other African-American Schools were:**

Cherry Street School      East End (later named Carver  
Westlawn Elementary School      Elementary School)  
Lakeside High School

## OLDTOWN SCHAUDIES-BANKS COTTAGE

During the 1870s, Samuel Schaudies and Abbie Robinson Schaudies moved to this site from Huntsville and purchased this five-room cottage in 1881 for \$800. The deed lists this site as part of Lot 84, "Old Town" Decatur. In 1875, their daughter, Tulie Ophelia, was born and, in 1898, she married H. J. Banks in the parlor. He was a descendant of a pioneer Decatur family, notary public, businessman, and son of a city alderman. Their daughter, Athelyne Celest, was born and lived in this cottage for 98 years. She was a tireless church worker, educator, and philanthropist. An academy, city park, and elementary school were named in her honor.



## OLDTOWN TOMMY LEE HINES TRIAL

Tommy Lee Hines, a 25 year old black man with an IQ of 35 and the mental capacity of a six year old was arrested for loitering. Within minutes, he was accused of raping three white women and robbing one of them. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a Civil Rights organization sent representatives to Decatur, Alabama. Numerous rallies and demonstrations were held in support of Hines' innocence. Tensions were high and racial turbulence exploded when the Ku Klux Klan clashed with protestors. A change of venue moved the case to Cullman County. Hines was found guilty by an all-white jury and sentenced to 30 years in prison. Later, an appeal in Jefferson County found him incompetent to stand trial. The impact of the case produced improvements in employment and better relations within the City.

## OLDTOWN SCOTTSBORO BOYS TRIAL

The Scottsboro Boys trials of the 1930's, most of which took place in Decatur, Alabama, rank among the most significant cases in American legal history. Two precedent-setting United States Supreme Court cases came out of the trials. Worldwide media coverage laid bare the racial inequities of the American judicial system, especially within the racially segregated South.

On March 25, 1931, nine young black men ranging from 13 to 19 were riding a freight train from Chattanooga to Memphis when a fight broke out between them and some young whites on the same train. The whites lost the fight and were forced from the train, they later filed a complaint with authorities who contacted the Jackson County Sheriff Department. A posse of armed men pulled the young black riders off the train at Paint Rock. They also discovered two young white women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price leaving the train. The women said they had been raped, and as a result the nine men were taken into custody and brought to the jail at Scottsboro. Although a doctor's exam of the accusers determined the story to be false, the District Attorney quickly brought charges against the nine defendants.

In a volatile atmosphere with the threat of violence, eight were quickly tried and sentenced to death. The jury could not reach a verdict for the ninth defendant, who was 13 years old. The NAACP raised money for the filing of appeals for the original verdicts, and these efforts were successful. The decision in *Powell v. Alabama* ruled that the defendants were entitled to adequate defense in a capital case.

The change of venue for the remaining trials was to Decatur, Alabama. Decatur was a city of about 16,000 at the time, whose population had recently been swelled by former farmers looking for work in the depths of the Great Depression. Decatur was not prepared for the drama and strife that would accompany the trials.

The first trial in Decatur was that of Haywood Patterson, presided over by Circuit Judge James E. Horton. The case was prosecuted by Alabama Attorney General Thomas Knight, who sought publicity in the high-profile case. Patterson and the other defendants were defended by a team of attorneys led by prominent trial lawyer Samuel Leibowitz of New York. Controversially, the defense was funded by the International Labor Defense, an arm of the American Communist Party.

Leibowitz attempted to quash the indictments by arguing that the defendants could not receive a fair trial by a jury of their peers because no blacks were allowed on juries. He called prominent qualified black men from Jackson and Morgan Counties to testify that they had never been summoned for jury duty. Although Horton did not allow the motion, the argument set the precedent for the later U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Norris v. Alabama*, which guaranteed the inclusion of blacks in jury rolls.

The Patterson trial gathered international media attention. Leibowitz mounted a masterful defense refuting the prosecution's case, capped by the production of Ruby Bates, who refuted her previous testimony and denied any rape had occurred. The defense was not enough to convince the all-white jury, who convicted Patterson anyway. As worldwide outrage mounted, Judge Horton bravely set aside the verdict. Several more trials occurred, but the defendants all eventually went free, some had their cases dropped and some were paroled after serving time. None were executed.



Boarding House on Sycamore St. where Victoria Price or Ruby Bates lived.



### Scottsboro Boys Tour

1. Morgan County Courthouse, 302 Lee Street NE
2. Dr. Frank J. Sykes, 812 Well Street NE
3. Judge William W. Callahan, 814 Ferry Street NE
4. Old State Bank and Black Business District 925 Bank Street NE
5. Historic Union Depot, 701 Railroad Street NW
6. Boarding House, 815 Sycamore Street NW
7. Galileo N. Sykes, 111 Church Street NW
8. Dr. Willis J. Wood, 129 Wilson Street NW
9. Hewlett J. Banks, 1004 Sycamore Street NW
10. First Missionary Baptist Church 233 Vine Street NW and Vine Street Commercial District
11. Decatur Morgan County Archives 624 Bank Street NE

### Tommy Lee Hines Tour

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|---|--|
| A. Decatur City Hall<br>402 Lee Street NE                 | G. Hines Home site<br>504 Madison Street NW  |
| B. United States Post Office<br>400 Well Street NE        | H. Old Cherry Street School<br>Site and Marker, Corner<br>Davis Street and Davis<br>Court NW |
| C. Morgan County<br>Courthouse<br>302 Lee Street NE       | I. Newcomb Street Church of<br>Christ, 726 Newcomb<br>Street NW                              |
| D. Confrontation Blacks and<br>Klan, 212 Lee Street NE    | J. Wayman Chapel AME<br>Church, 412 Church<br>Street NW                                      |
| E. Morgan County Archives                                 |  |
| F. First Missionary Baptist<br>Church, 233 Vine Street NW |  |