From

Enslavement to

EMPOWERMENT

HARMONY & HERITAGE

An Initiative of Sandpiper Advisory Group

Black History from West End to the World: The Timeline Awaits Your Contribution

Harmony & Heritage Virtual Black History Tour Arlington Historic House

Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather—now known as Birmingham, Alabama—is the ancestral homeland of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, along with other Indigenous peoples who stewarded this land long before colonial settlement and forced removal.

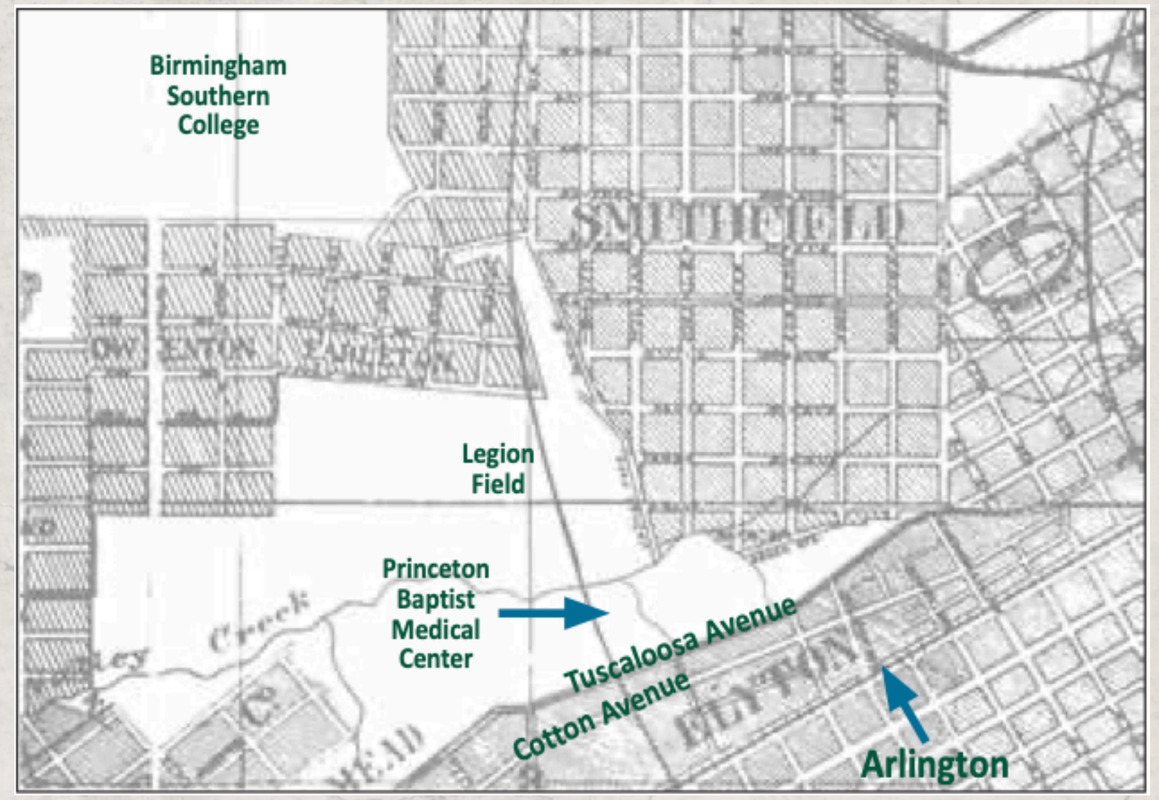
We honor the enduring legacy of the Muscogee people, whose relationship to this land was built on reciprocity, respect, and deep cultural knowledge. We also recognize the violence of dispossession, removal, and erasure inflicted upon Indigenous communities by settler colonialism—a legacy that continues to impact Native peoples today.

As we reflect on the history of enslavement and resistance in Birmingham, we also commit to uplifting the intertwined histories of Indigenous and African American communities, both of whom have resisted displacement, dehumanization, and erasure.

This acknowledgment is not a substitute for justice—it is a step toward truth-telling, repair, and solidarity.

Did You Know?

Elyton, known as Birmingham's first neighborhood, holds a complex but essential place in the city's Black history. Named after William Ely, a white settler who deeded part of his land grant to Jefferson County Commissioners for a courthouse and jail, Elyton became the county's second seat in 1820. While its founding reflects early governance and development, it also marks the roots of systems that would later shape the lives of Black residents—through enslavement, segregation, and struggle. As we walk these streets today, we recognize not just the land's colonial beginnings, but also the generations of Black labor, resistance, and brilliance that built Birmingham from the ground up.



O'Brien's Map of Birmingham, 1887, showing subdivisions of Elyton, Smithfield, and Earleton. Agee Map Collection, Birmingham Public Library. Note that the early subdivisions hug the higher ground above Valley Creek.

The Plantation & its Owners

Judge William Swearingen Mudd, the first owner of Arlington, was a prominent Jefferson County figure whose wealth and status were built upon the labor of enslaved Black people on his plantation. Arlington had several owners throughout the years before being purchased by the City of Birmingham in 1953:

Stephen Hall
Samuel Hall
William Swearingen Mudd
Henry Fairchild Debardelaben
Franklin Huntington Whitney
Robert Sylvester Munger
Ruby Munger & Alex C. Montgomery

The first house built on the land was completed by 36 enslaved africans under the ownership of Stephen Hall. It consisted of two rooms downstairs and two rooms above facing east toward Elyton. His son, Samuel Hall inherited the house after his parents passed.

The Enslaved at Arlington

Johnson's Georgia and Alabama Map, 1861, showing all county roads crossing at Elyton. Birmingham Public Library, Agee Map Collection.

These roads included the Huntsville, Georgia, and Montevallo Roads, roads called Tuscaloosa Avenue, S.W. (U.S. 11), Cotton Avenue, S.W., and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in today's Elyton community.

Jefferson County Population

	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870
White	5,121	5,486	6,714	9,078	9,839
Free Colored	19	9	8	19	2,506
Slave	1,715	1,636	2,267	2,649	
TOTAL	6,855	7,131	8,989	11,746	12,345

Source: Table III. *Population of Civil Divisions Less Than Counties in Totals, and as Native and Foreign, White and Colored, at the Census of 1870; and as White and Colored at the Censuses of 1860 and 1850.*

Elyton Population

	1830	1850	1860	1870
White		446	603	661
Free Colored		8	10	394
Slave		433	709	
Foreign				12
TOTAL	300	887	1322	1067

Sources: Table III. *Population of Civil Divisions Less Than Counties in Totals, and as Native and Foreign, White and Colored, at the Census of 1870.* The 1850 and 1860 censuses for free inhabitants include persons whom BHS researchers determined to be free colored.

Several plantations have existed throughout Alabama, with Arlington being listed as the oldest remaining. We honor the contributions of the enslaved at Arlington whose forced labor under Judge Mudd produced crops across approximately 320 acres. Mudd owned 14 slaves and two slave cabins on the land.

https://birminghamhistoricalsociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/bhs_newsletter_2105_web.pdf

Honoring the Enslaved at Arlington

We take this moment to honor the lives and labor of the enslaved at Arlington. By saying their names, we affirm their humanity and acknowledge that it was their forced contributions that laid the physical and economic foundations of Birmingham and its surrounding communities. We honor those we know, and those whose names we may never know. Ase.

Old Tempey	**Reuben**	**Dave**	**Mary**	**Caroline**	**Sam**
Old Marie	**Anna**	**James**	**Lucinde**	**Betsey**	
Jack	**Flora**	**John**	**Finetta**	**Lewis**	
Peter	**Riley**	**Rachel**	**Ensley**	**Patsey**	
Littleton	**Robert**	**Burrell (Blacksmith)**	**Nancy**	**George**	

Aṣẹ (pronounced "ah-shay"). In a Black history or cultural context, saying "Aṣẹ" honors the ancestors, affirms resistance, and celebrates the ongoing presence of African heritage and wisdom.

If you say my name, I will live forever

The Civil War

In 1865, Union Army General James Wilson led a calvary known as “Wilson’s Raiders” to Arlington during the Civil War. Wilson set up headquarters at Arlington and sent men to burn the University of Alabama. Notably, Wilson also recruited nearly 3,000 formerly enslaved across the south to join the Union Army.

A Legacy of Resistance and Contribution

Though emancipation legally ended slavery, except as a form of criminal punishment, the struggle for freedom and dignity continued. In the face of Reconstruction-era backlash, Jim Crow laws, and ongoing racial violence, Black Americans turned pain into power.

By the early 1900s and into the 1920s, formerly enslaved people and their descendants began building thriving communities, opening businesses, founding churches and schools, and shaping culture. From becoming educators, running businesses to leading movements and making music heard around the world, Black residents of Birmingham and across the country redefined what was possible.

This next chapter of the timeline honors those who carried the weight of history and still found ways to build, contribute, and lead—not in spite of oppression, but in direct defiance of it.

The Magic City

Birmingham's explosive growth earned it the nickname "The Magic City." Birmingham had the three essential ingredients for making steel (coal, iron, limestone), making it an ideal location for the steel industry. Also called other nicknames such as "Pittsburgh of the South" and "Iron City," Birmingham's steel industry depended heavily on Black laborers. Sloss Furnaces stood at the heart of Birmingham's steel industry, where the city's growth as the "Magic City" was fueled not only by natural resources but also by the exploitation of convict leasing—an oppressive system that disproportionately targeted Black men and subjected them to brutal labor.

From Labor to Learning

While the steel industry and places like Sloss Furnaces powered Birmingham's growth, they also exposed the deep injustices Black laborers and prisoners endured, including the cruel system of convict leasing. Against this backdrop of hardship and exploitation, the fight for education became a vital path toward freedom and equality.
One of the most inspiring figures in this struggle was Carrie A. Tuggle, born into slavery but determined to change the future. In 1903, she founded a free school for Black orphans and juveniles in Birmingham, known as the Tuggle Institute. Through her tireless work, she helped shape leaders like Erskine Hawkins, A.G. Gaston, and Angela Davis—each carrying forward the legacy of education as a tool for empowerment and justice.

From Labor to Learning Continued

Another pioneer of education in Birmingham is Dr. Arthur Harold Parker. In 1900, the Birmingham Board of Education decided to open a school for African-American students and chose Parker as the sole teacher of Negro High School. The following year, Parker became the principal. During his tenure, the school's name was known as Industrial High School. Upon Dr. Parker's retirement, the school was named in his honor. It's enrollment of 3,761 students in 1946 made it the largest school for Black children in the world.

Education Fueled Empowerment

As education laid the foundation for leadership and self-determination, Black communities began to build systems of support outside white-dominated spaces. During the Jim Crow Era and into the Civil Rights Era, African-Americans were excluded from many parts of life, especially in Birmingham. Due to this exclusion, Black businesses sprung up around 4th Avenue North, allowing Black patrons to shop without hassle or discrimination. Several prominent businesses existed on this block including the Alabama Penny Savings Bank which was started by William Reuben Pettiford.

Black Excellence: On and Off the Field

As the Black community in Birmingham built businesses and community institutions along 4th Avenue North, pride and excellence thrived in every arena—including sports. Just a few miles away, Rickwood Field, the oldest professional baseball park in the nation, became the stage for athletic greatness as the Birmingham Black Barons rose to national prominence in the Negro Leagues.

Established in 1920, the organization helped launch the careers of Major League Baseball Hall of Famers, Mule Suttles, Satchel Paige and Willie Mays--all Alabama natives. Mays is regarded as one of the greatest players of all time.

From Stadium Cheers to Soulful Sounds

While Black Birmingham shined in business, education, and sports, another kind of brilliance rang out across the city—music. Do you recognize any of these influential artists?

Eddie Kendricks

"The Temptations"

Sun Ra

"Space is the Place"

Eddie Levert

"The Ojays"

Erskine Hawkins

"Tuxedo Junction"

Soundtrack of a Movement

In a city where voices were often silenced, song became a form of protest. The Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham was led not only by speeches and marches, but by the powerful unity of freedom songs echoing through churches and streets. Birmingham was critical to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s to 1970s. Many important leaders like Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used the city as a strategic hub for organizing protests and campaigns. The 1963 Children's March captured the world's attention, exposing the brutal reality of segregation as young demonstrators faced police dogs and fire hoses in their fight for justice.

The Civil Rights Movement

Birmingham was a central battleground of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, symbolizing both the harsh realities of segregation and the unyielding fight for justice. Known for its strict enforcement of Jim Crow laws and violent opposition to desegregation, the city became a focal point for activists determined to dismantle institutional racism. Key events like the Birmingham Campaign drew national attention through courageous protests, marches, and acts of civil disobedience. The tragic 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which claimed the lives of four young girls—Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley—shocked the nation and became a symbol of the brutality of racism. Birmingham's struggle highlighted the urgent need for change and helped galvanize support for landmark civil rights legislation. The city's legacy remains a powerful testament to the courage, sacrifice, and resilience of those who challenged inequality.

Historic Firsts

Contributions from Alabama's Black citizens are numerous. Check out this list of some historic firsts:

- Oscar Adams Jr. becomes the first African American to join the Birmingham Bar Association.
- Arthur Shores appointed to the Birmingham City Council, making him the first African-American to serve as a councilman.
- Oscar Adams Jr. appointed to the Alabama Supreme Court, making him the first African-American justice to hold that office.
- Carole Smitherman becomes Birmingham's first African-American female circuit court judge and mayor.
- Richard Arrington Jr. elected as the first African-American mayor of Birmingham.

Arlington Today

Today, Arlington doubles as a museum and community space available for tours, field trips, events, education and art programs. The installation of a community resource garden and Black Heritage Programs are in development as a part of the Harmony & Heritage initiative created by Sandpiper Advisory Group.

What's Next?

Curious as to how you can further contribute to this timeline?
Click the logo below to get started

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