



The Centerpiece **FREE**

Heritage Information Center, PO Box 247, Durant, MS 39063

Volume 1, No. 3, October 2016

Historical Tidbits: The Makings of a Model Community at Mileston, Mississippi⁽¹⁾

So strongly had the Economic Depression of the 1930s hit Negroes⁽²⁾ in Holmes County, Mississippi, by the time President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1932 that, an elderly couple recalled, "whole families went bare-footed all winter because they couldn't afford to buy shoes."⁽³⁾ To relieve depressed economic conditions, President Roosevelt launched an array of "New Deal" programs, among which was the Farm Security Administration (FSA or Agency). The Agency launched a New Deal program that had long-term economic benefits for some in Holmes County.

The FSA purchased five large plantations in 1937, near the Delta-based town of Tchula. The land totaled 9,580 acres. Plantation owners, who succumbed to the devastating effects of the Depression, lost the land through bank foreclosures. As one of 30 such projects nationwide, the FSA established what was called a "model community." Naming the activity the *Mileston Project*, the Agency divided the land into small plots of approximately 50 acres and erected houses on some plots. Each house was equipped with running water, an inside toilet, a barn, livestock quarters, a hen house and poultry facilities, and an orchard. To spur economic growth, the FSA erected a cotton gin, a general store and a cannery for the model community. The Agency leased house-occupied plots, as well as vacant plots to Blacks. The leasees paid rental fees annually with income from crops produced on the plots. With the FSA's help, Mileston's tenants started the Mileston Community Organization. The organization's board of directors comprised local Blacks who, under the watchful eye of FSA officials, oversaw operations in the community. After a few years, the FSA changed the tenant's leases to purchase agreements. In return for promises to pay approximately \$5.00 an acre, the agency issued quick claim deeds to the Negro purchasers, who would pay amounts due plus a low-interest rate with monies made from annual crops. The Agency would later erect and open a "model school" (photo, right) for Blacks at Mileston.

The FSA project at Mileston had an important economic impact for some Blacks in the county. Instead of helping to increase someone else's equity, land ownership positioned this select group of Negro farmers to increase their own equity. An elderly Mileston resident reflected favorably on the opportunity, stating, "This (lease-purchase option) was the best thing that the government could have done for us. It gave us a home and land to live on and a way to pay for them and to make a living"⁽⁴⁾ Though the majority of Blacks in Holmes County remained dependent on meager subsistence meted from white-owned plantations, the Mileston project released a few from the bonds of dependency. It was from within the ranks of these semi-independent Delta farmers at Mileston, along with others Black land owners in the Hills, that the Holmes County Civil Rights Movement found roots during the 1960s. (More about Mileston will appear in future issues of *Centerpiece*.)

Publish your business here card in the next issue. E-mail info@mhtr.us, mail to MHF, PO Box 247, Durant, MS 39063 or text 708-275-7930.



Mileston School, erected in 1940. (Photo: S. Gist Photo Archives.)

If you have photos or other Mileston memorabilia that you would like to donate for display in our Heritage Information Center in Durant, please e-mail us at info@mhtr.us or call 708-275-7930.

(1) Excerpted from Gist, S. (1995) *Educating a Southern Rural Community: A History of Schooling for Blacks in Holmes County, Mississippi, 1870 to 1993*, Productivity Publishers, 1995.

(2) This passage uses the words "Negroes" and "Blacks" interchangeably.

(3) Gist, S. *op. cit.*, John and Laurie Reedy, private interviews, Durant, Mississippi.

(4) Excerpted from a videotaped of interview with Mary Hayes, Tchula (Mileston), Mississippi. Interview done in 1990 by Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center (ROCC) as a part of an oral history project. Tape was available in 1990 at ROCC headquarters in Lexington, Mississippi.

The Centerpiece is a free monthly publication of Migration Heritage Foundation (MHF). The Foundation disseminates local, regional and national heritage-related as well as community information. MHF is a Mississippi-registered nonprofit organization based at 351 SW Depot Street in Durant, Mississippi. For additional information, e-mail us at info@mhtr.us, write us at PO Box 247—Durant, MS 39063, or visit our web site at www.mhtr.us. Items received before the 5th of the month appear in the issue distributed by the 15th of the month. This publication is available at the following locations: Subway's in Durant; Gladys's Restaurant in Lexington; DB Ice Cream Parlor in Durant; and the Office of the Holmes County Chancery Clerk in Lexington.

Happenings

Mentoring for Girls in Holmes and Grenada Counties: Congratulations to Holmes County’s own Aisha Saffold for her October 4 appearance on WLBT’s Midday Mississippi TV news. Aisha did a stellar job promoting P.E.A.R.L.S. Mentoring for Girls, Inc., an organization she founded for girls age 13 to 18. Let’s support P.E.A.R.L.S.’ Mother and Daughter High Tea on November 5 (see table below) and help Aisha change girls’ lives in Holmes and Grenada counties, *One Pearl at A Time*.

October is Stop Domestic Violence Month and Nollie Jenkins Family Center, Inc. (NJFC) is hosting several fundraising events to help prevent domestic violence, a crime that unevenly impacts women and children. Donations will support an upcoming Domestic Violence Rally and Brunch. Donate when you see the purple-decorated domestic violence donation jars at businesses throughout the area. For donation jar location or additional information call 662-653-0122

The Early Years Network (EYN) Center is perhaps the best kept secret in Holmes County. EYN is an early childhood and parent education program sponsored by the City of Durant in partnership with Mississippi State University Extension Services. The EYN Center, located at 515 Northwest Avenue in Durant, is open weekdays starting at 8 a.m. In addition to games, toys and other manipulatives for young children that can be used onsite or checked out, the Center offers free workshops, laminating and die-cut machines for community use, CEU and contact hour credit, and much more for parents. Phone 662-639-2419 for additional information.

Coming Events

Date/Time	Event	Location	Contact
October 8	Durant City Octoberfest	Downtown Durant	City of Durant/662-653-3314
October 13	Breast Cancer Awareness Celebration	Downtown Durant—Gazebo in Park	Mattie Coleman/662-562-2860
November 5/ 12 noon to 3 pm	P.E.A.R.L. S. Mother Daughter High Tea	350 Magnolia Street, Durant, MS	Aisha Saffold/662-466-2270

Did You Know?

The Holmes County Supervisor Board meets the 1st and 3rd Monday of each month at 9 a.m. in the Board Room, 408 Court Square, in Lexington. The Board holds a workshop in the Board Room each Thursday before the 3rd Monday at 9 a.m. During the workshop, supervisors hear community input and establish the agenda for upcoming meetings. Attend the meetings and voice your concern as a community resident. These are dates for meetings throughout 2016: **Oct. 17 at 6 p.m.; Nov. 7 at 9 a.m.; Nov. 21 at 9 a.m.; Dec. 5 at 9 a.m.; and Dec. 19 at 9 a.m.**

The Durant School Board meets the second Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. at 5 West Madison Street in Durant. Call 662-653-3175 to verify time and location.

The Holmes County School Board meets the first Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m. at 313 Olive Street in Lexington. Call 662-834-2175 to verify time and location.

The Durant City Council meets the first and third Tuesday of each month at 6:30 p.m. at 106 W. Mulberry Street in Durant. Call 662-653-3314 to verify time and location.

Let us know when the Cruger, Goodman, Lexington, Pickens, Tchula and West elected officials meet, so we can publish the information in the next issue.

Questions, Questions

Lexington Sale Barn Dilemma—Are there reasons the dilapidated sale barn should remain intact? Miss Zep has spent hours on WXTN/WAGR Radio apprising the community, and our elected officials as well, of the need to demolish the building. The structure, which straddles City of Lexington and County of Holmes boundaries, is in a sad state of disrepair. In addition to posing health and safety threats, the building adds to the many abandoned structures that are eyesores in cities and rural areas throughout the County. Could this be one of the reasons Holmes County has problems attracting businesses and industries that contribute to economic development? Your thoughts?

Durant Depot Building—In the August and September 2016 issues of *Centerpiece*, we asked, What’s happening with restoring the Depot in Durant? The building was designated a historic site approximately five years ago. We saw a bit of restoration a while ago, but not much since. With the impending reopening of the adjoining freight line in early 2017, Durant should position itself to be a major player in bids to reinstate the passenger line. In this October issue, we *repeat* the question posed in the August and September issues. What’s happening with restoration of the Depot in Durant?

Critical Road Repairs—Will our County Supervisors, County School Board and Lexington Aldermen ever get together and make permanent repairs on roads leading from Highway 12 to the County School District Central Office, Bus Repair Garage, Career-Technical Center and Central Holmes Christian School (Swinney Lane, Olive Street and Kickernick-Elm Street and Robert E. Lee Drive)? The deep potholes in these frequently-traveled, highly visible-public roads are an eyesore and embarrassment. Does anyone care? We asked these questions in the August and September 2016 issues of *Centerpiece*, and no visible improvements have been made. What gives?

We Welcome Your Input—If you have answers to these questions or have other questions, e-mail info@mhtr.us or mail P.O Box 247, Durant, MS 39063.