

WINTER 2024

Down the Bay

Oral History Project Update

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Mardi Gras & Down the Bay

Many people remember celebrating Mardi Gras Down the Bay - walking through the neighborhood to get to the parades, standing in the same spot every year playing in the bands, and grilling or making gumbo. Here are some of the memories you've shared with us!

Bishop Antonio Jackson

"Growing up, it was actually safe to walk to Mardi Gras. We would literally walk from Baltimore Street, come all the way down...Walk all the way down Washington Avenue, or we would continue down Broad and go all the way through Down the Bay."

Henry Hobdy

"I actually played in the St. Peter Claver band. We had a little band. So, we marched in the parade there. We looked forward to being in the parades or watching how schools performed in the parades and all that. But the big parades were Mardi Gras."



The Excelsior Band in 1985

Courtesy of Michael Thomason, Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama.

Memories of Mardi Gras

Creola Gibby Ruffin:

"Mardi Gras. Everybody Down the Bay is going to go to the Dragons Ball. It originated Down the Bay; our foreparents belonged to the Dragons Club Mardi Gras Association or club; their children took it on, and they belong to the Dragons; and we continue to go to the Dragons Ball...So, there's a lot of culture. I don't know where it came from, but there was a lot of culture in the Down the Bay community."



Above: Mardi Gras parade on the Avenue in 1946

Courtesy of Blue Light Studio, Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama.

Right: 1896 Mardi Gras Badge found near RV City during excavations for the I-10 Mobile River Bridge Archaeology Project



Down the Bay: Early History

Lillian Thomas De Ampert (1872-1930)

Lillian Thomas was a teacher and missionary from Down the Bay. She lived on Bayou Street between Augusta and Charleston and went to school at Emerson Institute. She attended college in Talladega at an institution run by the American Missionary Association, and after graduating in 1894, she traveled to the Congo as a missionary.

Lillian lived in Africa for over two decades, eventually marrying the Reverend Lucius De Ampert, and they later returned to live in Selma. She brought back a collection of African weapons and artifacts, which she donated to a local museum.



Missionaries Mrs. Lucy G. Sheppard, Miss Lillian M. Thomas, and Miss Maria Fearing

Image courtesy of *The American Missionary*, Vol. LXII, April 1908, No 4.

Strike at Jewett's Mill (1867)

In April 1867, Black workers at John Jewett's sawmill went on strike for higher wages. The sawmill was located at the foot of Palmetto Street along the waterfront. Two men, Wiley Brown and James Watson, were arrested for inciting discontent but both were quickly released.

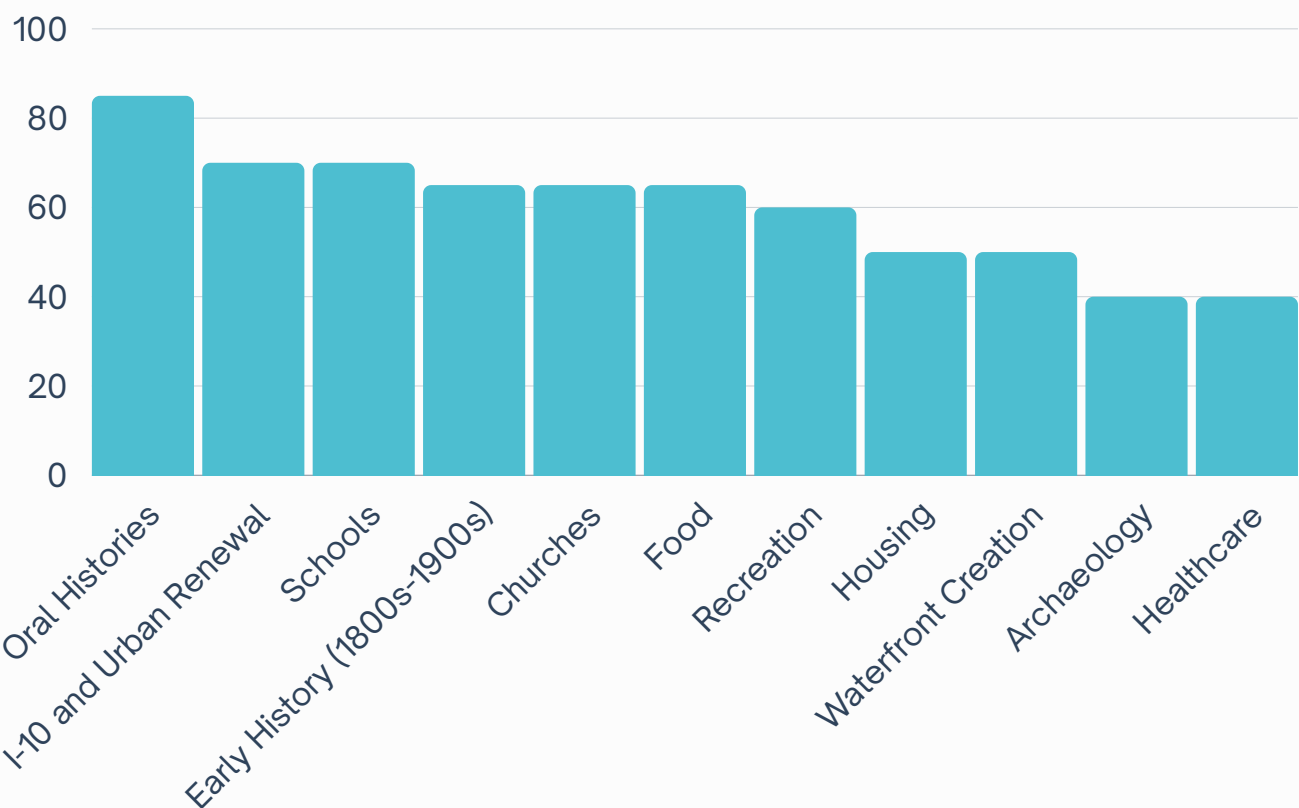
The events culminated in a public meeting on April 19, where Creole leaders T.U. Barnard, a tinner, and John Trenier, a cigar maker, gave speeches promoting racial harmony and reconstruction. Though it is unclear if they won higher wages, these events demonstrate that Black workers were organizing Down the Bay as early as 1867, a tradition that has continued throughout the history of the neighborhood.

Future of the Project

We want your input regarding the future directions for the Down the Bay Oral History Project. At Down the Bay History Day on November 4, we asked attendees to fill out a survey about the future of the project. We also sent it out to project participants by email.

We received 20 responses to the survey. If you'd like to add your voice, [click here](#) to take the survey digitally. Here's what we've heard so far.

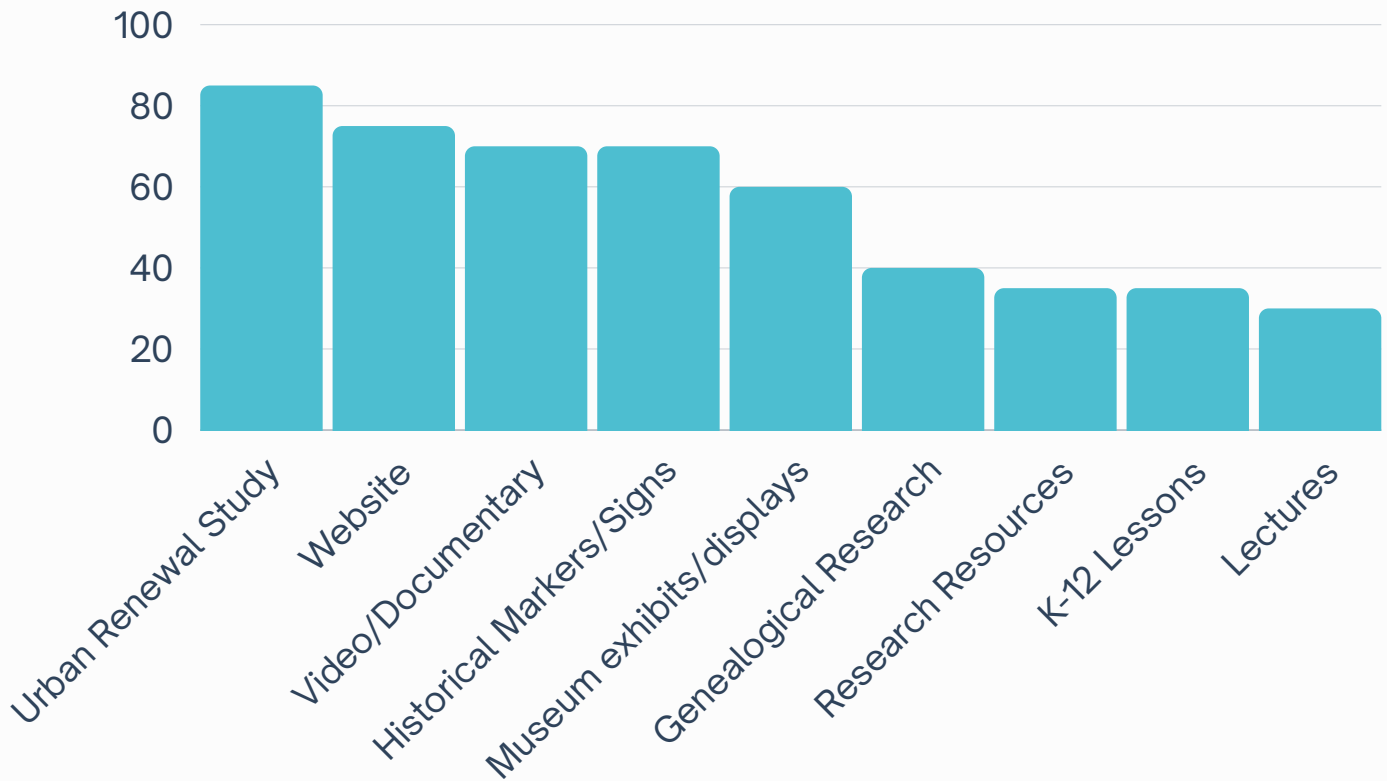
What topics would you like to see featured in the free booklet about the project?



Other responses: What made it unique and special, Black-owned businesses, Emerson Institute and Council Elementary, current status of the neighborhood

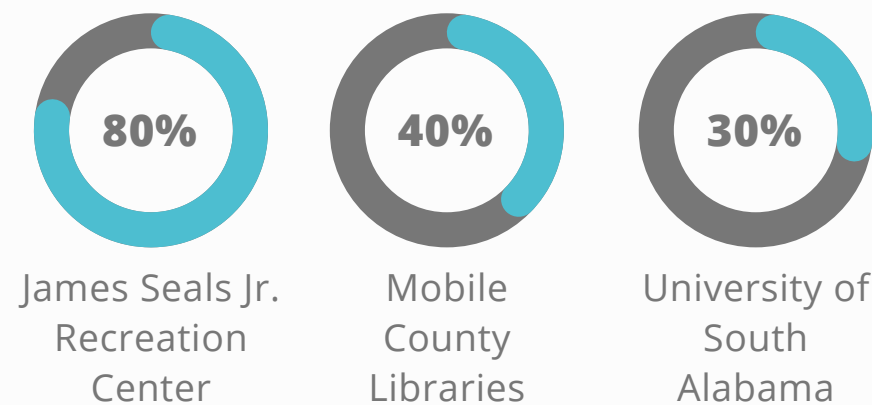
Future of the Project: Survey Results

What would you like to see come from the project?



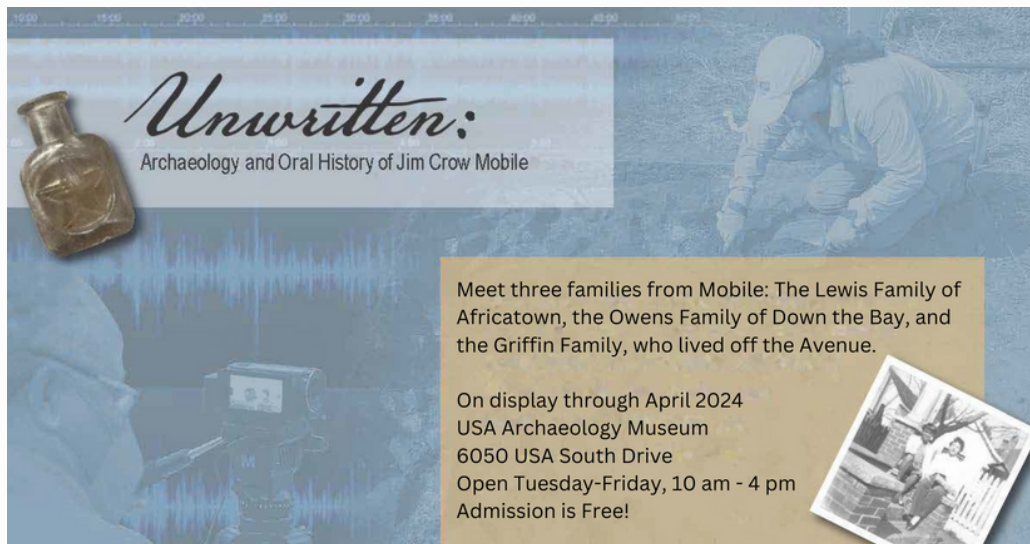
Other responses: Detailed map of the area during the early 1900-1960, physical museum about Down the Bay, book/document about Down the Bay History, playwrights creating stories about Down the Bay

Where would you go to visit an exhibit?



Save the Date!

January-April 2024: Unwritten: Archaeology and Oral History of Jim Crow Mobile is an ongoing exhibit at the University of South Alabama [Archaeology Museum](#) that features oral history interviews from the [Down the Bay Project](#) and artifacts from the [I-10 Mobile River Bridge Archaeology Project](#).



February 8: Down the Bay Oral History Project talk at Kathryn Tucker Windham Museum (12:30 pm). Located at the Coastal Alabama Community College campus in Thomasville, AL

April 2: Down the Bay Archaeology and Oral History talk at the University of South Alabama Archaeology Museum (2 pm). Presented by Dr. Phil Carr, Dr. Ryan Morini, and Rachel Hines.

April 26: Archaeology of Down the Bay exhibit opens at the Ben May Library. It will be on display until early June 2024 and will feature artifacts from the I-10 archaeology project and oral history interviews from Down the Bay. The exhibit will be created by South Alabama undergraduate students in the Museum Methods in Archaeology course this spring.

May 9: Listening Session at Ben May Library Meeting Room (2 pm - 4 pm) Come listen to interviews from the Down the Bay Oral History Project, share your own memories, and connect with other oral history participants.

May 16: Down the Bay Archaeology and Oral History talk (6 pm) Archaeologists from the I-10 project and oral historians from the Down the Bay project will share the latest updates at Bernheim Hall at the Ben May Library.

Upcoming Opportunities

This semester, students from the University of South Alabama are learning about the history of Down the Bay through your oral history interviews!

Students in the [Museum Methods in Archaeology](#) class will be creating an exhibit about the Archaeology of Down the Bay for the Ben May Library as part of their course. If you would like to be involved with the exhibit or the class, contact Rachel Hines at (612) 986-4021 or rhines@southalabama.edu.

Students in the [Oral History](#) class will be listening to the interviews from the project, recording some new interviews to add to the collections, and working on ways to help get this history circulating out of the university and into the community. If you would like to be involved with the class or have suggestions on who the students should interview, please reach out to Ryan Morini at rmorini@southalabama.edu.

Oral History Collections Available Online

Several oral history collections have been transcribed and made available online through [JagWorks](#), the University of South Alabama digital platform. Physical copies are also available at the McCall Library on campus.

- [Excelsior Band Collection](#): Includes 14 interviews from 2022-2023 that address the history of the Excelsior Band, which started Down the Bay. The interviews explore Excelsior members' experiences in the band and include some personal reflections on the role of music in their lives.
- [John LeFlore Collection](#): Includes 7 interviews with lifelong Mobile civil rights activist John L. LeFlore and several of his associates and collaborators. They were recorded by former South history professor Dr. Melton McLaurin and graduate student Margaret Laverne.
- [John LeFlore Tapes](#): Includes 10 interviews conducted by Sheila Flanagan and John Beebee in 1996 with relatives, friends, and colleagues about Mobile activist John LeFlore.

The interviews in the [Down the Bay collection](#) will be uploaded to the same platform on a rolling basis after transcripts have been finalized and reviewed by their narrators. The first 50 interviews should be online by early February.

What is the Down the Bay Oral History Project?

The McCall Library at the University of South Alabama is creating a public archive of memories of Down the Bay through oral history interviews with community members. These interviews will be publicly available to preserve the history of Down the Bay, the neighborhood south of Government Street in Mobile.

Interviews are available at the McCall Library on the third floor of the University of South Alabama Marx Library (5901 USA North Drive) and will be online soon via [JagWorks](#).



Down the Bay Photo Sharing Day at James Seals Jr. Recreation Center on October 29, 2022

If you have any questions, would like physical copies of the newsletter, or would like to give an interview about Down the Bay, please get in touch with the McCall Library at (251) 341-3900 or oralhistory@southalabama.edu

