

“All Our Names Were Freedom”

Oral History Project Now Available Online

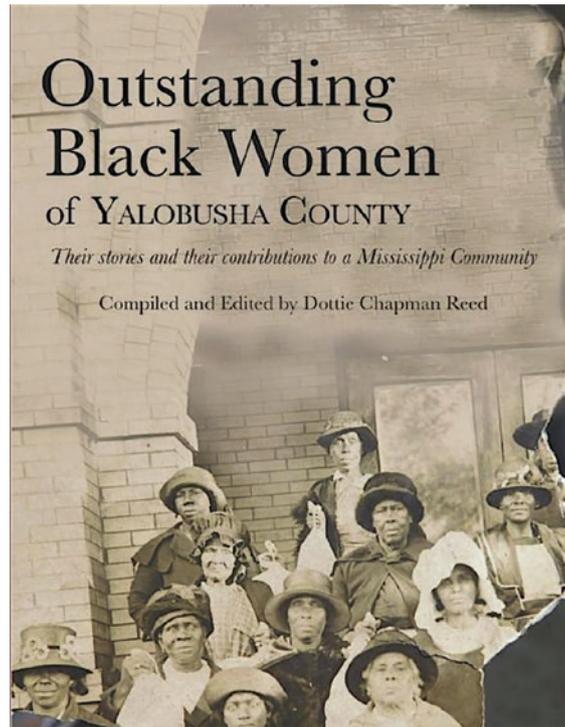
In the fall of 2019, Water Valley native Dottie Reed and former graduate director for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture Jessica Wilkerson began discussing ways of sharing the untold struggles, triumphs, and legacies of local Black families. Their desire soon sparked an oral history project that documented the stories of elder African American men and women in Yalobusha County.

During the spring semester of 2020, Brian Foster, former assistant professor of sociology and Southern Studies, took over as director of the project and collaborated with Reed and students from his Oral History of Southern Social Movements class to keep the project moving forward. The students who collected the oral histories

included Colton Babbitt, Michelle Bright, Brittany Brown, Keon Burns, Rhondalyn Peairs, and Jasmine Stansberry.

The students conducted original research and recorded first-person accounts with eight narrators, all of whom grew up in and had strong family ties to Yalobusha County: Lillie Roberts, Emma Faye Gooch, Dorothy Kee, Marjorie Moore, Katherine Roland Pollard, Luther Folson Jr., Luther Folson Sr., and James Wright. The stories they collected were testimonials surrounding African Americans’ involvement in buying land, building churches and schools, and participating in civil rights protests. Other stories included conversations about equality, the right to vote, and the daily hardships of being African American in the US South.

After several listening sessions of stories they collected, the students created a multivocal and multi-layered history, which they entitled “All Our Names Were Freedom”: Agency, Resiliency, and Community in Yalobusha County.” On December 7, 2019, they presented the collected narratives in a staged reading at Spring Hill M.B. Church. Additionally, in the spring semester of 2020, the students collaborated with Reed for a performance of “All Our Names Were Freedom” as part of the Center’s SouthTalks series.



Recently, Reed released a book entitled *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: Their Stories and Their Contributions to a Mississippi Community*. Within her work, Reed shares stories of the resilience, perseverance, and determination of Black women in Yalobusha County. Several of Reed’s books’ participants are also participants of the Black Families of Yalobusha County project. PhD candidate Jasmine Stansberry is also using the stories she collected in the Black Families of Yalobusha County project in her dissertation. Within her work, she highlights stories of Black college-student activism during the 1960s and early 1970s. Her dissertation also examines the Black Power movement and its

connections with Black residents of Mississippi.

The Black Families of Yalobusha County project is currently on hiatus; however, those who have participated in the project are eager to continue sharing the dynamic stories of those of Yalobusha County. The Center for the Study of Southern Culture director, Katie McKee, said, “We celebrate the voices of those we were able to hear. We’re grateful to Ms. Reed for her partnership in navigating the dynamics of the community of Water Valley, and we look forward to finding ways to continue to work with Ms. Reed and the community in Yalobusha County.”

Black Families of Yalobusha County has been supported by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History, and the UM Diversity Incentive Fund. With the support of a \$3,000 donation from the Sylarn Foundation, students will soon be able to continue collecting stories. The oral history interviews of Black Families of Yalobusha County are now available on the University of Mississippi’s eGrove website at egrove.olemiss.edu/blkfam_yalo/.

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