

# OUR HISTORY THEN...

Coahoma County has, for over 150 years, been home to vibrant Black communities. These communities have been central to the development of the Delta, farming cotton that drove the economy, and transforming music that began as oral history in Africa and continues to make Clarksdale “ground zero” for the blues.

By 1860, more than three-quarters of the county’s population was Black; it remains so today. Many of the community’s stories have not been publicly told or amplified.

What was once a segregated community has changed due to local heroes’ efforts to win equality and justice for all Mississippians. Many leaders in the civil rights movement were business owners who could not be fired for their activism. Many of them were only teens when they dared to bring down Jim Crow.

Their deep faith in justice and progress paved the way for our continued development. Here we honor and celebrate the past; educate the present; and uplift and inspire the next generation of changemakers.

## 1 Black Business District

*Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd. & Issaquena Ave.*

A thriving shopping and entertainment district extended along 4th St. and up Issaquena Ave. Black-owned businesses and churches lined the streets, alongside businesses owned by Chinese, Jewish, Russian, Polish, Greek, Syrian, Lebanese, and Italian merchants. 4th St. has since been renamed for Martin Luther King Jr.

“The New World District” title derives in part from the name of a saloon near 4th & Issaquena owned by Nelson Jones; it was called “Nelson Jones’s New World.” For many immigrants who now call Clarksdale home, this was once a “New World.”

W.C. Handy, the self-proclaimed “Father of the Blues,” lived in the neighborhood. Blues greats both passed through and made this proverbial “crossroads” a destination, staying at the Green Book-listed Riverside Hotel and playing at juke joints and venues like Wade’s Barber Shop and Lounge, The Casanova, The Blue Den, J.J.’s, Club Champagne, Red Top Lounge (also known as the Pig Trial Inn and Smitty’s), and Dipsy Doodle.

## 2 Train Station (Tourism Office)

*Train Station: 326 Blues Alley*

Running from Vicksburg to Chicago, these tracks created a de facto separation between Black and white Clarksdale residents between 3rd and 4th Streets. It was at this station where Muddy Waters and many more boarded the train to Chicago during the Great Migration in the mid-20th century, taking the blues with them.

On August 23, 1961, Mary Jane Pigeo, Adrian Beard, and Wilma Jones entered the “Whites Only” waiting room attempting to buy a ticket to Memphis. The police were called. Chief Ben Collins arrested them, charging them with intent to disturb the peace. They were 18, 16, and 14 years old. Following their continued protests, the station was desegregated later that year.

The former passenger depot is now the headquarters of Visit Clarksdale and Coahoma County Tourism, and a resource for all who travel here.

*The Christmas shopping boycott: Judge J.W. Wright, Aaron Henry, Vera Mae Pigeo and students at First Baptist Church, 1961*



CLAUDETT WILLIAMS

## MOVEMENT

## 3 Civic Auditorium

*506 East 2nd St.*

A WPA project and community space, in 1955 this auditorium held a membership meeting of the White Citizens’ Council, a white supremacy group founded by Clarksdale local Robert Patterson. In 1961, it became a site for several protests against segregation. These protests brought significant attention to the civil rights movement in Clarksdale.

## 4 Greyhound Bus Terminal

*300 Issaquena Ave.*

In fall of 1961, civil rights activists Vera Mae Pigeo and Idessa Johnson conducted a sit-in at the “Whites Only” area of the bus station. They were met by police and questioned. They came back again and again. On Dec. 27, 1961, Clarksdale police removed the segregation signs. It is now home to a Wingstop, owned by Clarksdale native rapper Rick Ross.

## 5 Paramount Theater

*258 Yazoo Ave.*

Opened as the Marion Theatre in 1918, it became the Paramount in 1931 and closed in 1976. Behind the Paramount, the back alley stairs are still visible. They were the entrance to the segregated balcony. Civil right activists picketed the theater in the 1960’s, and it was desegregated in 1965.

## 6 Woolworth’s

*207 Yazoo Ave.*

On the National Register of Historic Places, this anchor for downtown business boasted a classic 27-stool lunch counter. Irene Lloyd and Myra Jones planned a demonstration here in 1960. Rather than integrate, the store closed its lunch counter in 1963. Now Yazoo Pass, a restaurant and coffee shop, the Woolworth’s tile is still visible at its entrances today.



CLARKSDALE CARNEGIE PUBLIC LIBRARY



CLARKSDALE CARNEGIE PUBLIC LIBRARY

## 7 Sunflower River between 1st St. & 2nd St.

This river has seen the best and worst of us.

The river was used by Black church-goers for baptisms in both the 19th and 20th centuries.

On Sept. 19, 1919, L. B. Reed, a returning Black Army veteran from the American Expeditionary Forces, was hanged here for allegedly dating a white woman. This followed “The Red Summer” of 1919, when thousands of Black people were beaten and murdered throughout the United States. Black veterans had just returned from War World I and begun organizing for equal rights after serving their country.

The bridge has since been replaced by other bridges built in the 1930’s as part of the WPA.

## LEADERSHIP

## 8 Vera Mae Pigeo’s Beauty Salon

*407 Ashton St.*

Vera Mae Pigeo’s salon was more than a successful business. It was a safe space for civil rights activities, organizing, and shelter. Mrs. Pigeo, along with members of SNCC and NAACP, met and taught literacy classes to local residents in an effort to increase African American voter registration. Here, she sorts donations at a food and clothing drive.



MARY JANE PIGEEO / FRANCOISE N. HANLIN

## 9 Wade Walton’s Barbershop

*324 Issaquena Ave.*

Wade Walton’s Barbershop was both a barbershop and a lounge. In addition to being a business owner, barber, and well-known bluesman, Wade Walton was also a charter member of Clarksdale’s branch of the NAACP. Pictured here is the original Big Six barbershop which no longer stands on 4th St.; he moved to this location in 1990.



NATHAN BENN

## 10 Aaron Henry’s 4th St. Drug Store

*213 Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd.*

Dr. Aaron E. Henry was a prominent NAACP leader and national political figure. His pharmacy was a hub of civil rights activities including voter registration and boycotts of downtown merchants. But being in the movement had its costs. His wife was fired from her job as a teacher, and both their home and his store were firebombed.



HAZELTON COLLECTION / UNIV. OF SOUTHERN MISS.

## 11 SNCC Freedom House

*459 Yazoo Ave.*

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee focused on local voter registration efforts from their headquarters at a “Freedom House” here in the early 1960’s. By empowering Black people to exercise their voting rights, SNCC aimed to help them gain political power and increase Black representation in elected offices.

## John Milton Brown

The first Black sheriff of Coahoma County was elected during Reconstruction in 1873. He was driven from town by powerful white leaders in 1877. Read his full story in Friars Point and online.



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CLARKSDALE VISIT COAHOMA COUNTY MISSISSIPPI

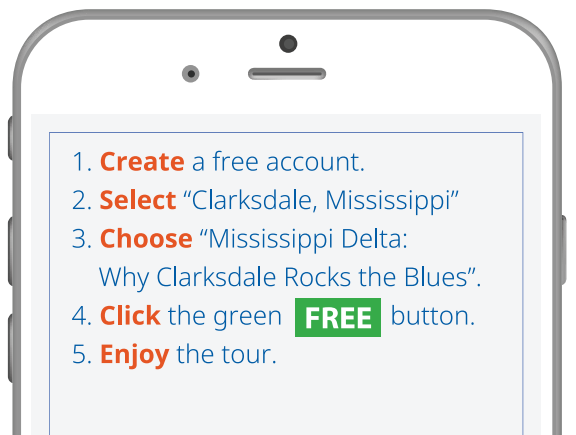
RIVERSIDE HOTEL Home Of the Delta Blues

AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE MAP

## Free Audio Walking Tour

Mississippi Delta: Why Clarksdale Rocks the Blues

SCAN  or FIND “VoiceMap” on the App Store





# ...OUR HERITAGE NOW

## FAITH

Black churches have long been home to worship, community, and the civil rights movement.

Haven United Methodist was one of the earliest churches in Clarksdale to host voter registration drives as early as 1953. On April 3, 1963, while over 800 people attended a civil rights rally in the church, a poisonous gas bomb was thrown through a window into the church. It did not detonate. The church still strongly supports nonprofits and work in the community.



MARY JANE PIGEE / FRANCOISE N. HAMILIN  
Vera Mae Pige at a NAACP meeting in First Baptist Church, 1960

The following congregations hosted meetings, programs, and events including visits from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and are still open for worship today. This is only a sample – many churches were and remain active across Clarksdale.

- 1 Haven United Methodist Church (404 Yazoo Ave.)
- 2 Greater Centennial Missionary Baptist Church (200 5th St.)
- 3 First Baptist Church (115 Martin Luther King Blvd.)

Though related, gospel and blues music diverged even within families. Rev. Willie Morganfield of Bell Grove Baptist Church (831 Garfield) became a popular gospel musician as his cousin, Muddy Waters, went on to become a founding father of Chicago blues.

### Three Sisters Cafe

(on MLK at Yazoo)

Three Sisters played blues during the week and was oft-frequented by hungry crowds after church on weekends. It donated heavily to local churches and causes – another example of local navigation of a careful dance between the “devil’s music” and the church community.



The blue bottle tree is a spiritual tradition carried here by enslaved West Africans. Cobalt-dyed bottles were held upside down to trap evil spirits, who were then destroyed by the sun each morning. Bottle trees now decorate homes across the South.

With thanks to Dr. Bernard Demczuk, Brenda Luckett, Aallyah Wright, and the community that shared their knowledge and experiences. Understanding our history is a work in progress; to contribute, connect at [SharedExperiencesUSA.com/contact](http://SharedExperiencesUSA.com/contact).

## 1 Carnegie Public Library

114 Delta Ave. 📶

Built in 1911, the library was segregated until 1929 when Black citizens of Clarksdale petitioned the city to allow Black people entry. Rather than integrate, the city opened The Myrtle Hall Library for Negroes in 1930 (on present-day State Street). The library was integrated 40 years later, and now preserves local history in its Mississippi Room.



CLARKSDALE CARNEGIE PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Myrtle Hall Library for Negroes, 1930

## 2 Delta Blues Museum

1 Blues Alley

The oldest music museum in Mississippi, it was opened in a room of Myrtle Hall in 1979. Now in a former railroad freight depot, it houses remnants of Muddy Waters' original home and preserves Delta blues history. Its nationally award-winning blues education program also carries tradition to the next generation of local musicians raised here, including Anthony “Big A” Sherrod, Lee Williams, Jacqueline “Jaxx” Nassar, and Christone “Kingfish” Ingram.

## 3 Griot Arts

278 Sunflower Ave.

Named for the West African tradition of “griot” storytellers, Griot Arts is a nonprofit youth program teaching music and the arts – in the same space that once housed Sarah’s Kitchen, a beloved cafe and performance space for young musicians. Its Meraki Roasting Company is also a job training program.

## 4 Crossroads Cultural Arts Center

332 Delta Ave.

Crossroads Cultural Arts Center is a performance venue and community center which celebrates, preserves and promotes African American history, heritage and culture in the Mississippi Delta with a focus on African origins of the blues.

For additional resources and information:

[VisitClarksdale.com/BlackHeritage](http://VisitClarksdale.com/BlackHeritage)  
or download the Visit Clarksdale app.



## BUSINESS, ARTS & CULTURE

## 5 Red’s Lounge

395 Sunflower Ave.

Located in the former LaVene Music Center building, Red’s is internationally celebrated as one of the oldest juke joints still in operation. Owner Red Paden has booked acts like Big Jack Johnson, Bilbo Walker, T-Model Ford and Kingfish Ingram for decades.

## 6 New Roxy

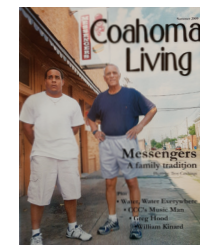
363 Issaquena Ave.

Built by Syrian immigrant A. N. Rossie, Sr., the New Roxy Theater opened in 1949 and was a popular Black movie theatre until 1981. It was known for showing Westerns, dramas and Blaxploitation film. The New Roxy is now being restored as an open-air venue for live music, film and community events and is open seasonally.

## 7 Messengers

133 Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd.

Founded in 1907 by Edward Messenger, this is the oldest Black-owned business in Clarksdale. Now operated by its fourth generation, the beloved pool hall, bar, and cafe is still adorned with clippings of Clarksdale’s history and family photos on the wall.



CLARKSDALE PRESS-REGISTER  
George Messenger with son Duane

## 8 Higher Purpose Co.

238 Issaquena Ave.

Established in 2016 by local Black residents, Higher Purpose Co. is an economic justice nonprofit building community wealth by supporting Black entrepreneurs, farmers, and artists. Work across Mississippi is headquartered at its Regional Community Wealth Hub here.

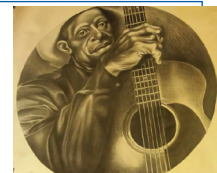
## 9 The Riverside Hotel

615 Sunflower Ave.

Previously the G.T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital where Bessie Smith died in 1937, it was transformed into a hotel by Mrs. Z. L. Ratliff in 1944. Ike Turner was living here when he and fellow Clarksdalian Jackie Brenston recorded the first rock ‘n roll song, “Rocket 88” in 1951. It was a safe space for traveling musicians and became a community hub and the most blues-historic hotel in the world. Cover photo (opposite): “Zee” Ratliff with her mother Joyce.

## 1 Thomas Eloby (1944-2001)

was a renowned Clarksdale artist who painted realistic Black personalities and historic events. His donated works can be found in the Carnegie Library.



COURTESY BRENDA LUCKETT



SCOTT NIKSICH



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Kingfish juking at Red’s now...and locals jitterbugging then.

## MUSIC

From the cotton fields and plantations to juke joints, museums and festivals, the rich culture and tradition of blues music remains at the heart of Clarksdale’s identity, and continues to bring people here today. We are “keeping the blues alive” by playing live music, all 7 days a week, and honoring our history here.

Look for markers & more music history at:

- 1 The Crossroads marker (Desoto & State St.)
- 2 W.C. Handy’s Home (324 Issaquena Ave.)
- 3 Sam Cooke at the New Roxy (363 Issaquena Ave.)
- 4 Ike Turner at the Alcazar Hotel (127 3rd St.)
- 5 Big Jack Johnson at Red’s (395 Sunflower Ave.)
- 6 Melville Charles Tillis, Sr. Delta Blues Stage (1 Blues Alley)

Not Pictured:

- 7 Hopson Plantation (Hopson Commissary)
- 8 Muddy Waters’ marker (Oakhurst-Stovall Road)



## Early Wright

Early Wright was the first black disc jockey in the state of Mississippi, and was known to have one of the longest continuously-running radio shows in America from 1947-1998. He never mixed blues and gospel music: when he played blues music he was always the “Soul Man,” and when he played gospel he was “Brother Early.” He was known for creative advertising patter, and public service messages telling kids to stay in school and encouraging citizens to vote.

- 9 257 Delta Ave. WROX marker & location where Early Wright first broadcast



PANNY FLAHTY MARFIELD

- 10 127 3rd St.

The best known WROX location, inside the Alcazar Hotel, where Wright broadcast most shows.

- 11 334 Issaquena Ave.

The remote studio where Black gospel groups performed live over the air, and his broadcasts could be seen through the window. It became an epicenter for gospel groups.