

The Sew Their Names Quilt Project, Lowndes County, Alabama

Susan Walker

The tiny settlement of Mt. Willing is in rural Lowndes County, Alabama, around fifteen miles south of US Route 80, the route of the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery March. If you drive there on Alabama State Route 21, you will wind through rolling countryside of pine, red cedar, and live oak draped with Spanish moss to the county seat of Hayneville, population 830. Some ten miles farther along, you may briefly glimpse two white church buildings on the left as you pass and, just opposite, a larger white frame structure on the right amid the pines.

Throw on your brakes and back up, because you just missed most of Mt. Willing. It is easy to overshoot. There is not even a traffic signal; indeed, since you crossed into majority-Black Lowndes County, you have not seen a single stop light. Only one exists in the entire county of more than ten thousand people. Mt. Willing is, as lifetime resident Mercedes Braxton puts it, “not even incorporated, and don’t want to be. We love it in the rural. We know how to get along with people—how to get strength from each other, how to encourage each other.”¹

A good measure of that encouragement takes place at the second church on the left—formerly the Mt. Willing Christian Church, a graceful wood-frame structure built for an all-white congregation during Reconstruction. If you look closely, you may notice a faded sign designating this today as the Lowndes County Community Life Center (LCCLC). If you stop by on a Thursday, you likely will hear voices, mostly older and female, engaged in the lovely, meditative singing of Black gospel

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Figure 1. Quilting on Thursdays at the old Mt. Willing Christian Church building in Lowndes County, Alabama. Photograph by Jon Cook for the Sew Their Names Quilt Project.

hymns. And if you go inside, you will see that many of the singers are stitching by hand in a rainbow of light cast by pastel stained-glass windows—gathered around quilting frames or at folding tables set up on worn heart pine floors (fig. 1).

On some days, you also might observe something else in the former church: two magnificent quilts on the walls. These are dramatically different from those of the Mt. Willing Quilters, who typically piece donated fabric into traditional patterns, which they craft into warm quilts for themselves, family, or friends, or for veterans, foster children, and others in need. The two larger works, called the Sew Their Names quilts, are narrative or story quilts made by the Mt. Willing Quilters and other volunteers with the help of two extraordinary quilt artists in 2021 and 2022. Narrative quilts combine imagery and sometimes text to tell stories—often of great importance or difficulty—using fabric, paint, and other collaged materials. Together, these quilts constitute one of the most powerful counter-monuments existing in the state today.

Alabama's memorial landscape is copiously inscribed with the names of Confederate soldiers—on courthouse squares and capitol grounds, public streets, and state schools. The monument closest to Mt. Willing is a 1929 stone arch in Lowndesboro; another in nearby Hayneville was taken down in defiance of state law in 2022. While the Confederate dead still are honored in many public spaces in Alabama, the enslaved are largely uncommemorated. We traditionally memorialize individuals

who toil, overcome challenges, and endure against tremendous odds, but enslaved persons—who did all these things—are almost completely erased from public recollection.

The Sew Their Names quilts—which hail from a county that at one time had the fifth largest enslaved population in Alabama and the twelfth largest nationwide—have begun to remedy that appalling deficit in this state. How did they come about, and what do they represent? That story starts with an unusual partnership that began in 2018 between a Black descendant of enslaved persons—the Reverend Dale Braxton, the longtime pastor of Mt. Willing’s Snow Hill Christian Church and director of the LCCLC—and the author of this article, a white descendant of enslavers in Mt. Willing and recently retired federal judge in Montgomery. Rev. Braxton and I met after I looked up the name of my great-great-grandfather from Lowndes County online and learned that Rev. David Lee’s church—a tall, gabled, ca. 1843 white frame structure called the Hopewell Baptist Church—was still standing. Years before, I had stopped by the church, which I now know is almost directly opposite the LCCLC, and found it in rough shape. But when I googled Rev. Lee, I learned to my surprise that not only was the building still around, but someone had recently nominated it for listing on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.

That someone turned out to be Rev. Braxton, assisted by Dr. Carroll West, an architectural historian who, I later learned, had noticed the church on a road trip and stopped to tell Rev. Braxton that it was a rare antebellum survival—a “jewel,” as he called it. I also learned from the application that Rev. Lee had been one of fourteen delegates representing Alabama at the 1845 Augusta, Georgia, convention where northern and southern Baptists split over slavery, and that Hopewell once had a slave gallery built to segregate enslaved members. And I discovered that Rev. Braxton was the pastor of a Black church nearby—Snow Hill, which now owned the Hopewell building.

This information presented me with a dilemma. Should I get in touch with Rev. Braxton? It seemed fitting that a Black church now owned this historic structure, which apparently once had operated, under my own ancestor’s direction, as a powerful instrument of injustice. Maybe it was incumbent on me at least to acknowledge the wrong. But there was no handbook for this. Would Rev. Braxton welcome such a contact? And if I did try to get in touch, what would I say?

After several days of indecision, I resolved to take the leap. My email to Rev. Braxton asked whether I could meet him and see the church, and added, in part:

I have tried to understand what my own responsibility should be today toward Lowndes County and the descendants of the persons formerly enslaved by my family. I don’t know that I have come up with any brilliant answers but, at a minimum, I think it is important to acknowledge the debt of my family to enslaved persons, to talk openly about the sins of my fathers, and to recognize that the legacy of their acts still lives on today.

I cringe today at these words; they now seem painfully smug and self-righteous. And I did not have the sensitivity to recognize the burden they might impose. But Rev. Braxton responded graciously. One day later, he wrote that he would be delighted to talk with me.

Years afterward, I learned his real reaction to that first email. “To be honest, I didn’t even want to go down that road of talking about slavery,” he says. “It angers me how our people were treated. I had just returned from Ghana and South Africa. I had basically not unpacked from the trip. I had experienced the Door of No Return at the slave castle. Tears were still in my eyes from the fact that my people were treated like animals. I just didn’t want to deal with it.” But, he adds, “I believe when you entertain a stranger, you might be entertaining an angel unaware. So, I said yes.”

Although a poor excuse for an angel, and totally unaware of Rev. Braxton’s reservations, I drove to Mt. Willing soon thereafter and met him at the church. He showed me around and sized me up carefully. Then he told me he would like to restore the building—which had a leaking roof, broken windows, and peeling paint—and use it to offer cultural activities to an underserved county that has no playhouse, art gallery, concert venue, museum, or movie theater. I took a deep breath, and said that I would like to help.

Soon after, we found some funding and slowly began to whittle away at the most critical repairs. We agreed that the church should also be a site for exploring the history of the Southern church’s support for slavery. As nonhistorians, neither of us could quite understand how such a thing as “proslavery Christianity” came to be. As Rev. Braxton put it, “How can you claim to be a child of the most-high king, and mistreat your brothers and your sisters?” I offered to research the church’s connection with the Christian proslavery movement, and was fortunate to find support from the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University.

Rev. Braxton and I learned from this research that Hopewell was a member of the antebellum Alabama Baptist Association (ABA), which included some forty churches in the heart of Alabama’s Black Belt. This group “dominated state Baptist life.”² Rev. David Lee served as the ABA’s moderator for forty years (1845–85) and “exerted a commanding influence in that large and powerful association.”³ He also was a “crack farmer” who enslaved as many as twenty-five individuals to work eleven hundred acres of land just a few miles from the Hopewell church.⁴

Our research made it clear that the white pastors and members of the ABA churches became some of the strongest apologists for slavery in the state. They included not only the most famous preachers but also governors, Alabama Supreme Court justices, and university presidents, many of whom played important roles in the Confederacy. In fact, historians have argued that “from 1830 to the end of the Civil War, the most vigorous defense of slavery issued from Southern pulpits.”⁵

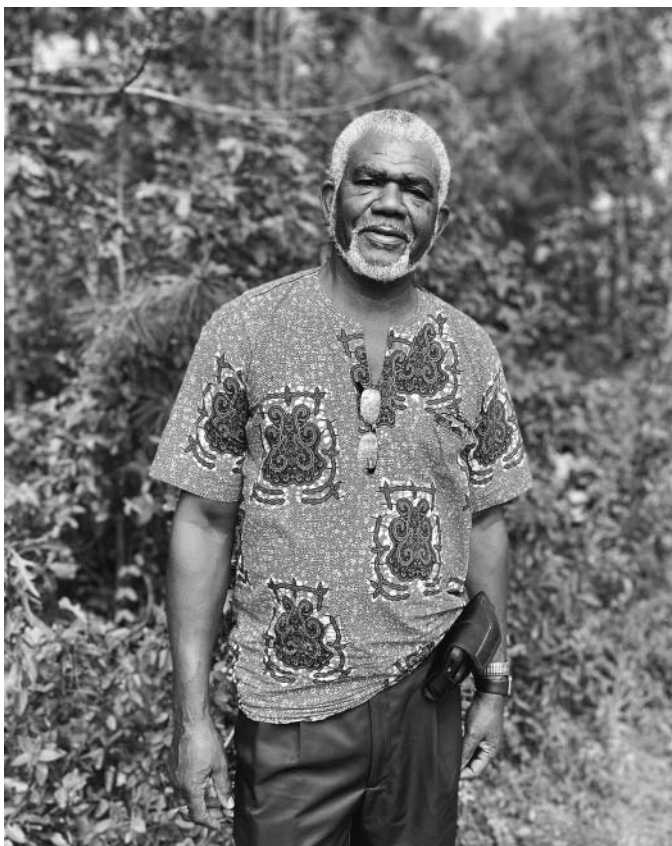
The [South's] white Christians penned compelling defenses of slavery for the secular and denominational presses, guarded against insurrection by policing worship meetings in the quarters, gave regional apologists grounds for boasting by converting thousands of slaves to their faith, and enabled those skeptical of slavery's justice to subvert their concerns through mission work among the enslaved. . . . They contributed decisive ideological support to an evil institution.⁶

Most notably, in doing this research—some of it at Samford University's special collection in Birmingham, which holds the state's Baptist archives—I stumbled on records containing hundreds of names of enslaved people from churches throughout the ABA, although no rolls from Hopewell itself. Antebellum Baptist churches in Alabama kept "church books," and those that survive—largely available now only on un-transcribed microfilm—meticulously recorded conferences, disciplinary actions, and membership lists. These are known to some scholars, but the descendant community is largely unaware of them.

Names of the enslaved are in fact quite scarce, rarely found in substantial numbers in the scattered documents surviving from the late antebellum era, such as wills and plantation inventories. The "slave schedules"—the census data for 1850 and 1860—show no names for these individuals, listing them only by number, age, gender, and color. The names we found in the church archives are typically just first names—most enslaved persons did not have legal surnames until after emancipation—but they are at least tied to specific churches and towns, such as Winney, from New Bethel Baptist in Braggs, or Lavender, from Bethany Baptist in Collirene. Enslaved persons usually are identified by owner—for example, "Dempsey, servant of A. M. Calhoun." The names of Black people appear separately from white people, just as Black people worshipped separately in church. Segregation prevailed in the membership rolls and minutes, not just in the sanctuary.

When I began copying out these names from faded mid-nineteenth-century script, the country was gripped by a racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd's murder. "Saying their names" was gaining traction as a way to build collective memory for modern victims of racial violence. I shared the records with my then career law clerk Mallory Morgan, a volunteer who herself was descended from slaveholders, and we could not help feeling that these lost names deserved some kind of commemoration. We knew that the LCCLC had a quilting project, that quilts had great historical importance in the Black community, and that they had been used in other contexts to memorialize names, such as those of persons who had died of AIDS. We also read that so-called memory, signature, album, presentation, and friendship quilts often feature signatures or embroidered names. Perhaps the time had come to say the names of enslaved persons using this deeply traditional and powerful medium. So we arranged a meeting with Rev. Braxton to propose what Morgan aptly termed "Sew Their Names" quilts (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Rev. Dale Braxton, pastor of the Snow Hill Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Mt. Willing, Alabama. Photograph by the author.



Rev. Braxton was gracious, as ever. “Let’s do it,” he said, after a moment’s thought. But I learned later that again he had unspoken qualms: “Do I really want to know who they are? Do I really want to dig into this thing called slavery again?”

Later, I learned more about what was behind his reluctance. Rev. Braxton, a pastor for most of his life, told me he was angry “at how preachers had used scripture to enslave”—to preach submission to the master—“rather than to bring us together as one.” In his view, the Southern church did nothing about the trauma to which his ancestors were subjected. It was painful for him to revisit that history.

But his hesitation also stemmed from his own experience growing up in Lowndes County at the height of the civil rights movement. At that time, Lowndes was infamous, widely known as one of the worst counties in the nation for racial violence and discrimination. Black citizens there suffered poor working conditions, inadequate schools, disenfranchisement, threats, whippings, beatings, and even lynchings. But Lowndes County also became the center of southern Black resistance in the mid-1960s, a major focus of grassroots organizing led by local activists working along with the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It was the source of the Black Panther symbol and the birthplace of the Black Power movement.

Rev. Braxton's mother tried to shield him and his siblings from the worst of the struggle, but he still grew up well aware that his family could not stay at the same hotels or eat at the same restaurants as white people. He learned his lessons from old, tattered books and had to bring his lunch to school, while white students had fine new texts and school lunches, which, Rev. Braxton still vividly recalls, included delicacies, like pimento cheese and apple crisp, that he could only dream of. He watched mass meetings at the Baptist church in Hayneville from his porch, and he knew that soon after his neighbor filled out one of the first ballots cast in the modern era by a Black voter, her father's store was burned to the ground.

Most memorably, on August 20, 1965, Dale Braxton had just left Varner's Cash Store in Hayneville—where he worked as a young boy putting up groceries, raking the yard, and planting flowers—when the seminarian and civil rights activist Jonathan Daniels was shot and killed there by a white supremacist. He has never forgotten how that felt.

To Rev. Braxton's mind, not nearly enough had changed since then. The past was not even past; racism and oppression still plagued his county and the nation. "You keep waiting for it to get better . . . and you get really tired," Saidiya Hartman has said. "You're tired of loving a country that doesn't love you."⁷ It is hard to summon the psychic energy to revisit the worst that humanity can do.

Still, Rev. Braxton chose to go forward with the Sew Their Names quilts. "I thought of my great-great-grandmother, Grandma Bessie, who lived to be 105 and was a slave," he says. She died when I was very young, but I do remember her—with her hair split down in the middle and two long ponytails on the side. She always said to us we were somebody. So why not remember them by sewing their names, because they, too, were somebody?" He adds, "I know of a few who thought we should not open the can of worms, or wake up sleeping dogs. But we're not going to stop. We're going to see it to fruition."

Mallory Morgan also admitted later to uncertainty. "In the American South, engaging in any sort of project involving race is complicated. It's easy to look at projects like this and think it's too fraught—I will never get this right; I will say the wrong thing because I don't understand. There are way more reasons not to do it than to do it." But "nothing good, nothing meaningful, and nothing that actually causes change is easy, and I think you just have to do it. And you have to be open to someone telling you, 'No, you got this wrong; this is my experience, let me tell you about it.' If you have that open dialogue and let yourself be vulnerable, so they can be vulnerable, too, people can come together and create something beautiful."

Thus the idea for the Sew Their Names project was born. But the logistics still needed fleshing out. This was not the kind of project the quilters were accustomed to. They do not regard themselves as activists, for one thing, and the most

common message their quilts convey is simply warmth, comfort, and care—for example, they make quilts for college students “so they will know that their church loves them.” And the quilters do not usually publicize, show, or sell their work.

The Mt. Willing Quilters began in 2005; they seek out participants—whether church members or not—who are lonely or unengaged, “especially the elderly sitting at home trying to find something to do.” Rev. Braxton soon realized that the quilters, many of whom live on low fixed incomes, would benefit from a hot meal. “I can’t quilt,” he thought, “but I can cook.” So, he and his wife began getting up early to prepare lunch every week. Some quilters also brought a dish. Leftovers went home with anyone who needed them.

The program established itself at the Mt. Willing Christian Church when the last white members vacated that building and gave it to Snow Hill, which had gained a reputation in the community for its charitable work and willingness to welcome everyone. Mercedes Braxton reflects, “You know, it is so ironic. The church that we’re in now—the only way we would get in it before, we would be cleaning it up. And now it belongs to us.” Not long before, other white neighbors also had given Snow Hill the nearby antebellum Hopewell building, where once their ancestors could only worship in segregated seating.

The Mt. Willing Quilters today range in age from sixty to ninety. Most are retired from jobs that vary from picking up eggs in a chicken house to teaching school. All are Black, although a few white quilters have previously joined them, and they welcome any race or ethnicity. Some are disabled, and many have health issues. One quilter, Gloria Reed, is legally blind; the others thread her needle, help her choose fabric, and hem the final product. “I quilt by feeling as I go along,” Gloria says. “I stick my finger different times but I hold the quilt and just sew as I feel it. I can tell if I make a mistake.” “Gloria gives us a lot of strength,” Mercedes Braxton says.

When the group began, quilting seemed at risk of dying out in the community. But many older residents remember when it was a necessity. “Whatever we had, jeans or burlap sacks or flour sacks or old material that was worn and you could no longer use,” Rev. Braxton says, “they would cut it up and make a quilt to keep warm in the wintertime. Because many of our houses were like shacks.” Rev. Braxton, one of nine children, had no electricity in his two-room home until 1970. He learned to read by the light of a kerosene lamp. In winter, “we would put cardboard and magazines on the walls to keep the wind from blowing in the house,” he said. “At night, the fire would go out. You would always wrap that quilt around you to stay warm.”

Like many of the quilters, Mattie Bell Robinson, one of eighteen children, learned quilting from her mother. Their house was heated by a single fireplace. “It was a lot of us,” Robinson says, “and my mother had to do things to keep us warm. So, she and the neighbors, they’d quilt together.” The women moved from house to house. Each home had a quilting frame suspended by ropes that allowed them to pull the frame up to the ceiling when space was needed. For batting, they sometimes

used cotton from the fields. “I had to pick the seeds out and everything,” quilter Rebecca McMeans says.

When the women let the frames down to quilt, Rev. Braxton remembers, they “would be singing and feet would be going.” “Those old ladies, they sang around those quilts,” Mattie Bell Robinson says. “Hearing the older people sing, that taught me just don’t give up.” “You can think back over your life when things were so bad,” she adds, “and those songs tell you, God brought me through it.” The Mt. Willing Quilters continue this singing tradition. To Vera Shanks, “singing just relieves a lot of pressure. Sometimes when I come, I be all down and depressed like. And once I hear all that singing, I’m good to go, I’m a new person.” Rebecca McMeans adds, “Singing just uplift you. That’s what singing do to you.”

“It lifts your burdens,” Rev. Braxton agrees. “You learn how to sing your troubles over. You learn how to give it to God. And, you might have some crying before the day is over. Some may do a holy dance or a shout. It gives them a peace.” Those troubles and burdens may be about poor health or poverty, or about long years of intimidation and discrimination. As noted above, “the county had a well-deserved reputation for brutality and entrenched racism. Although the population was roughly 80 percent African American, no Black resident had successfully registered to vote in more than sixty years, as the county was controlled by eighty-six white families who owned 90 percent of the land.”⁸ The county was justly known as “Bloody Lowndes.” “We knew that you could find yourself in a river, in a creek, on a tree limb,” said JoAnn Mants, the widow of SNCC organizer and Lowndes County activist Bob Mants. “You could find yourself dead in every one of the places, but here in particular because of the nature of the plantation ownership and how the law was pretty much within the hands of owners of plantations in Lowndes County.”⁹

The quilter and Snow Hill assistant pastor Mary Godfrey’s father grew up in Lowndes, but she lived elsewhere until she moved in her late fifties. “When I began to hear the stories about this area,” she says, “my heart just became so sad. Though they’ve made great strides, I still feel like it’s a county that’s put on the back burner of the state because it’s majority African American.” However, Godfrey says,

I love it here because I don’t see a depressed area. I see potential. We had a rough start, but look where we are now. Black people are resilient. No matter what we’ve gone through, we still come out of it. Maybe not like we want to, but we come out with a story. We come out with songs around the quilt that encourage and lift, about how God has sustained us through all the horrors that have happened to our people just because of the color of our skin.

Still, Godfrey says, when she sits at the quilting rack, “I just hear stories and laugh to myself and think, Lord, I thank you I wasn’t born then, I’d probably be hanging from a tree.” She can only shake her head at “the things they endured, the silence they had to ensure for the safety of their children.”



Figure 3. Assistant Snow Hill pastor Mary Godfrey (*left*) with Mt. Willing Quilters member Fannie Ingram (*right*). Photograph by Jon Cook for the Sew Their Names Quilt Project.

Quilting is one way Godfrey deals with the pain and trauma she sees around her. “I quilt because it gives me joy, because it gives me peace. It takes me away from the things that I’ve seen on the news, the things that break my heart. It makes my life purposeful.” The meditative practice of stitching can be deep therapy; as Tiya Miles has pointed out, “the inward and outward motion, the bringing together of loose ends, the making of something new in the process, heals” (fig. 3).¹⁰

Their resilience, and their faith in the process of healing, would guide the Mt. Willing Quilters in undertaking the Sew Their Names quilts. The plan they evolved was that the quilters would embroider names of enslaved people on 3” × 5” fabric squares of any color or pattern they chose, and teach volunteers to do the same. Rev. Braxton would seek out well-known Black quilt artists who could interpret those names in narrative quilts. The LCCLC applied for funding to commission these artists and promote and document the project; it received generous support from the Alabama Humanities Alliance, the Black Belt Community Foundation, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, and the Central Alabama Community Foundation. It asked Gail Andrews, Director Emerita of the Birmingham Museum of Art and a textile historian and quilt expert, to help identify quilt artists for Rev. Braxton to choose from. With enough funding to commission two narrative quilts, Rev. Braxton selected Yvonne Wells for the first quilt and Wini McQueen for the second one.

Yvonne Wells (born 1939) is a self-taught quilt artist in Tuscaloosa. She is known for her story quilts, which often focus on Biblical, civil rights, and sports subjects and include a wide range of found fabrics and unconventional materials. Wini McQueen (born 1943) is a quilt artist in Macon, Georgia. Her work includes narrative quilts and hand-dyed items that often employ image transfer. Both artists have shown their work in national and regional museums. Ms. Wells and Ms. McQueen graciously agreed to the commissions.

By the fall of 2021, the Mt. Willing Quilters were ready to host the first phase of the Sew Their Names project—a gathering at the outdoor pavilion at Snow Hill to embroider names and hear about the history of Hopewell. Participants, both Black and white, were invited to sew the names of enslaved persons associated with their own families or to choose from the names found in the records of nearby ABA churches. They also were encouraged to bring fabric meaningful to them. The quilters, who turned out in force, were astonished when visitors came from as far away as Birmingham.

Mary Godfrey showed participants how to embroider names using a simple backstitch. She also spoke of her own visit to the Door of No Return at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. She told the group, “Every time your needle goes in, think about it being a key to unlock the shackles of your ancestor’s history; think about the water being drained, and all those that drowned are surfaced and rise; think about the noose that was around their neck, that you’re fraying that noose loose to set them free. This is about freedom. It’s about celebrating the diaspora’s life. It’s about our ancestors.” Black participants who drove from Montgomery to sew names said afterward, “We felt pride in being able to share in this experience. We’re not just whispering those names. These quilts are roaring.”

Godfrey says that the quilters “were excited to bring other people, white people—whoever came who was interested in what they did—into their circle of expertise. And they were excited to immortalize their relatives.” A number of the quilters researched family history and found the names of enslaved ancestors to sew. Others already knew those names. For example, Vera Shanks embroidered the names of her enslaved cousin Jim and Aunt Carrie. She says, “That was real fun, sewing that. I just felt really good about it.” Shanks remembers these relatives’ talking about “the hard times coming up—how they had to pick the cotton and go outside to get water and walk to church,” and “how poor they was, and had to borrow stuff from somebody else, and lived in that little small shack.”

Maxine Similton used fabric from one of her late mother’s dresses to embroider “Alec,” her grandfather’s name, and also sewed “Molly,” her husband’s grandmother’s name, on a swatch from her husband’s overalls. Mercedes Braxton and her sisters embroidered their great-grandparents’ names, and Rev. Braxton asked David Lee Sellers to sew his great-great-grandmother Bessie Gray’s name, while Sellers also stitched Roland Moor’s name. “It was painful for them,” Rev. Braxton says.

“But it brought joy to be able to sew these.” Godfrey sewed so many family names, plus names from the church records—many of which she finished after the event—that she sat still for nine hours, “locked her neck down,” and had to get an injection. “If this was a way for these folks to be remembered, I don’t mind putting myself through the torture to get it done,” she says. In researching family history, some of the quilters learned they actually were related to each other. They also “just had a good time laughing and singing and sewing,” Godfrey says.

The quilt artist Yvonne Wells initially declined the invitation to make the first commissioned quilt, as she normally does not work on commission. But she “decided to go ahead because the project means a lot to me, means a lot for Lowndes County, and means a lot to Alabama.” She attended the 2021 Sew Their Names sewing event. “I never found such a wonderful group of people in my life to work with,” she says. “I felt elated because I was asked—that someone thought enough of me to do a piece that I think is very big.” But she also felt “sadness because of the subject.” When she returned home and began to work, “I cried because it was hard. It was hard for me to put this down so that others could see it. But that is the idea, so that others can see and then try to transform into doing something else,” she says.

However, although Wells wanted to make use of the embroidered names, “it didn’t work out for me,” she says. “It didn’t fit my narrative of what I was seeing. I was seeing more than names.” At the sewing event, she had walked around the antebellum church building and asked herself, “How am I going to put these people in the church? It took a lot of brainstorming.” What she settled on is powerful imagery of a divided congregation. The quilt took her four months—normally, she finishes in a month and a half—but she found herself unable to work on it every day. The subject matter became deeply personal to her. One gospel hymn—which she heard the quilters sing in Mt. Willing—helped her through the difficult experience: “One day at a time, sweet Jesus. That’s all I’m asking from you. Give me the strength to do everything that I have to do.”

In Wells’s finished quilt, *Worshippers at Mt. Willing Church* (2022), a country church stands amid the ghostly trees of a rural landscape. Three birds fly through the branches of a tree, the white birds deliberately placed ahead of a lone black bird. A “haint”—a figure that Wells says “sometimes meant good luck and sometimes meant bad luck”—looks on. Nearby, a lynching noose, a Klansman, and a burning cross foreshadow the coming racial violence of Reconstruction and the civil rights era.

Above the church is a white preacher, arms grotesquely outstretched. In Wells’s telling, he owns a large amount of property, including many people. He says, “Come all ye to the house of the Lord,” but he is a hypocrite; his welcome is not the same for Black people and white people. The white members’ path to church is paved with neatly stitched white buttons, but the Black churchgoers tread on broken pavement made of black buttons, mingled with snaps representing briars, on

their way to the slave gallery. The scene inverts the welcoming gesture of Christ Pantocrator—and also invokes classical images of Christ in Judgment—as the preacher extends a Bible to the white churchgoers with one hand, while “giving the finger to the Blacks” with the other, consigning the former to Heaven and the latter to Hell.

In the top right corner of the quilt Wells has placed the “all-seeing Eye of God.” The triangles near the Eye, above the church cross, and elsewhere in the quilt represent the Trinity, always present in Wells’s work. The black-and-white checkered blocks in the upper right corner evoke “the group of people who have always wanted to separate Black and white.” But the intense yellow sun, tempered by a few white clouds, suggests that “one day it will be brighter than it is now.” Rather than incorporating name blocks embroidered by Sew Their Names participants, Wells instead uses narrative imagery to tell the story of people “lost in history.”

However, her quilt does depict the erasure of the enslaved persons’ names in a different way, by distilling their identities into a single generic name, “Boy,” memorialized in a small fabric block on the right margin of the quilt, and to the nonspecific label “Negroes” on the stairs to the slave gallery. And it presents another name by omission, this time one that the viewer may infer and—if it is inferred—must confront. On the left side of the quilt, Wells shows a white sheriff telling someone she says might be “Boy” to pull the wagon. “When I put the word ‘Pull’ there,” Wells says, “I asked somebody, ‘Should I put the other word there?’ And they said, ‘No. They understand what you’re saying.’ So, I left it alone. It was a negative word. People know what the word is, but I left it to be implied.” The viewer must also note Wells’s choice to omit this word. And names do appear in another form: Wells invited the quilters to add their signatures to the Alabama flag sewn at the bottom right. These signatures “say the names” of living persons, who are both descendants of the survivors who are the subject of this work, and survivors themselves. “It was part of my thinking for these to be the freedom names as opposed to the forgotten names,” Wells says (fig. 4).

When Wells unveiled her work to the Mt. Willing Quilters, some were initially surprised that none of the names they had embroidered were included. However, as Wells discussed the quilt, they began to talk about the memories it evoked. Mercedes Braxton said, “When I look at this quilt it brings tears to my eyes.” She said her late mother told her that enslaved members had to sit in the balcony of the Hopewell church “so the owners could see them, and if they had to go to the restroom they would have to raise their finger so the owner would recognize them and they could go outside.” Maxine Similton noticed that the trees in the quilt had “no leaves, no fruit.” That “took her back” to her grandfather’s story of a white man’s confiscating his remaining crop of fruit “just because he could,” even though all debt was fully paid. Similton added, amid tears, “But she has the eye of God up there.” David Lee Sellers said, “It kind of bring back a whole lot of memory of how things



Figure 4. Yvonne Wells, *Worshippers at Mt. Willing Church* (2022). Photograph by the author.

would go. My great-grandfather, he was born in slavery. Just across the road there used to be a great big black stump. He remembered that when he was just about nine, his mother was traded there from one slave master to another one. And it burst the family up, and he was just left to struggle on through life."

The commissioned quilter Wini McQueen, also a descendant of enslaved persons, did not find her task any easier than Wells did. "I ran from it," McQueen

says. “This was a painful experience.” She became “very obsessive about the project, because it’s so important. It’s important to me. It’s important to millions of people who were kidnapped and forced here and had their names stolen. A name stays with you for your life. But we didn’t have it. We know that there’s a lot of missing pieces. We feel it.” As Toni Morrison put it, “If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That’s a huge psychological scar.”¹¹

To McQueen, “this kind of loss is really difficult to come to grips with. This is about the negation of a people. This was a way of destroying people and trying to turn people into beasts of burden, so that they could work and know nothing else.” She says,

I lived with this quilt all day every day, and it reached my dreams. And I had to back up and say, “OK, this is the world we’re in.” I couldn’t do anything about that, but I could bring my best skills as a painter and a dyer to the experience. I just took a deep breath and a long hard swallow. I felt like I was in a place of honor to leave whatever records and memories we had for the future. The experience was grueling for me and an honor as well.

In *Somebody’s Calling My Name* (2022), McQueen encloses 160 of the name blocks within “something precious”: an elaborate frame made of heavy felt painted with gold acrylic and studded with found objects, some of which might have been used at an African burial site. McQueen chose to embed “our memory of their experience” in the frame to tell stories about the lives of enslaved persons. The objects she chose include the hard burs that make cotton-picking painful; burlap used to package cotton bales; bits of broken pottery, smashed peanut shells, dried okra, and fishhooks; hand-dyed fabric rosettes called “YoYos”; a lone cowrie shell symbolic of Africa; and Confederate currency that McQueen calls an “advertisement for slavery.” She notes that the currency would have been made from cotton picked by enslaved persons, but it never would have benefited them.

McQueen positions her original photo blueprints, or cyanotypes, among the names, and adds hand-dyed fabric representing the sky and natural world as seen by people working outside “from sun to sun.” She uses excerpts from antebellum wills, census documents, and photos to meditate on the systematic effacing of slave identities. An X is a repeated motif that McQueen says represents “the scarring and the pain” of slavery; a nameless slave signing with an X because she could not learn to read or write; and “me and my people obliterated from what humanity deserved.” McQueen adds “private names”—names used only in the slave quarters, many of them African—but covers them with an organdy panel because “we don’t know about them.” She uses mirrored glass pieces—“bright, shiny objects” appropriate

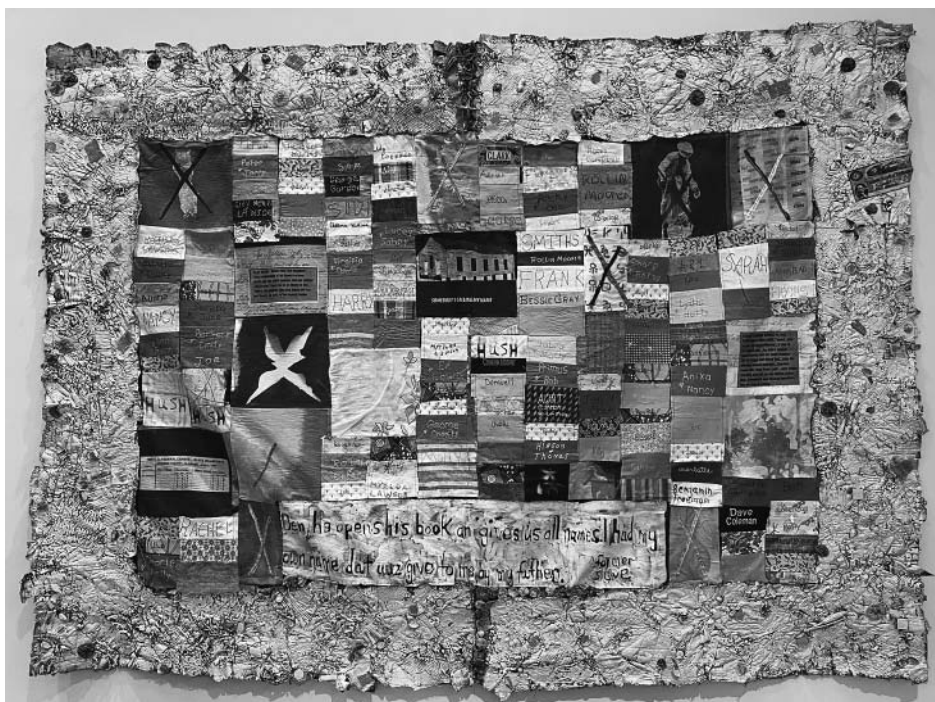


Figure 5. Wini McQueen, *Somebody's Calling My Name* (2022). Photograph by the author.

to an African burial site—to invite viewers to reflect on “who they are, the roles their ancestors played in the past and how they can be a part of this story in the future.” She also includes a quotation from a 1938 narrative in which an ex-slave relates that, after a Texas slaveholder told him his people were free after the war, “he opens his book and gives us all names. I had my own name dat was give to me by my father.”¹²

The title of McQueen’s quilt refers to a gospel hymn that includes these words: “Hush, hush. Somebody’s callin’ my name. Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do?” and “I’m so glad trouble won’t last always. Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do?” McQueen explains that this hymn “settled within” her and “spirited her on” as she made the piece. She calls her quilt “the story of every Black person who came to this country by way of wherever we were stopped and broken so we would be working machines.” She adds, about herself, “I’ll never know my name, and I have to move on. That’s what I know” (fig. 5).

“I just thought it was a beautiful quilt,” Rebecca McMeans says of McQueen’s work. Rev. Braxton adds that he feels “the joy that finally my people are being recognized. I can call their name and make them come alive once again. They were lost somewhere in some microfilm, in an archive. Now the connection is there. They’re no longer bound, they’re out for the world to see.” He appreciates that the quilters “are not a token in somebody else’s agenda. It’s about your own life, about your own

people. It gives you a sense of power to say this is happening because of us. This is about things that mean something to me. It's a way of empowerment. This has given our quilters a new lease on life."

Godfrey similarly believes that the quilters have a new "sense of agency" that is significant "because so many have been under the rule of others, whether it was their jobs or being mistreated. But in these latter years of their life, now somebody hears their name, too; they become instrumental in the history now, not just their ancestors, by putting their hand to the needle and thread and sewing names." And it has meant something that white people have joined them. As McQueen says,

I think the most wonderful and amazing thing is that people who benefited as white people have come forward to say, "We did it, it's a part of our heritage. And we want to own up to it, so we brought forth the names of people who our families enslaved." I thought it was remarkable that white people would do that in America, and it needs to happen more often so that our children learn with honesty what their past is about.

Mallory Morgan also has the next generation in mind. She thinks it important to engage in projects like this "not because I'm trying to distance myself from guilt, or atone for something that members of my community did. It's because I want to be a part of creating a different reality for generations to come. We're going to call it what it was. We are going to honor those who were the victims; we're not going to forget them. But we are going to create a different world." She adds, "I like to think many people in my generation won't settle" for anything less. "And it's important to me that that my children don't either. I want them to be able to hear difficult history, and have no question be off limits. And I want myself and others to have the tools to give them the right answers. We don't have the right answers if we don't have the truth."

This brings us finally to the question of what kind of counter-monument or anti-memorial the Sew Their Names quilts represent. First, there is no doubt that these works contest the Lost Cause narrative in Alabama—which still has a powerful presence in some parts of the state—and its valorization of mythical Confederate heroes who selflessly civilized and Christianized grateful, happy slaves. The project brings marginalized persons directly into the public conversation about who deserves remembrance and who can be heard to speak on that subject. It showcases the work of an unrepresented, often disregarded, and largely rural and Black constituency, in contrast to that of the elites who declare the public observances, erect the memorials, and name the parks, schools, and roads of the state.

The Sew Their Names project also contests the dominant materials and iconography of Alabama's monuments: the stone, bronze, and zinc surfaces; the cast or carved inscriptions; and the rigid forms of the arch, the obelisk, the broken and

draped column, the silent sentinel or man on a horse, the saber and musket, and the carved wreath. There is nothing new about using quilts to memorialize individuals, but these humble, domestic products of skilled craft, often sewn by anonymous people, are particularly meaningful in this context. “Quilts bring us to a subject in a different way,” says the textile historian Gail Andrews. “People know quilts; they’re not put off by them. Maybe a hard subject in a soft material makes it more approachable and easier for people to digest a horrific history.” “It’s to me better than a cold monument or something that you’re going to walk by,” one participant says. “There’s so much inclusiveness, so many different people taking a part in” the sewing, versus “some entity having a contract to erect something.”

The massive National Monument to Freedom in Montgomery—a 2024 addition to the Equal Justice Initiative’s Freedom Monument Sculpture Park—takes a markedly different approach. It embraces traditional monumental scale and materials, even while celebrating often-ignored subjects. The 43-foot-tall, 155-foot-long memorial, built in the form of an open book from concrete clad in a bronze-gold metal facade, lists 122,000 surnames of formerly enslaved persons derived from the 1870 Census. This enormous structure, accompanied by several other large-scale pieces in the sculpture park, surpasses most other monuments. Its strategy is to demarginalize and make visible the formerly enslaved in the most commanding way possible. And this is a worthy approach. The park represents a thoughtful and moving tribute; its scale and materials are entirely appropriate to its seventeen-acre outdoor setting and perhaps necessary to respond with sufficient force to Montgomery’s deeply entrenched Confederate memorials nearby.

But the monument’s recent appearance in the same commemorative space as the far lesser-known *Sew Their Names* quilts also highlights important differences between the two. Unlike the Equal Justice Initiative, the Mt. Willing Quilters and the fabric artists they work with do not have multi-million-dollar balance sheets, extensive land holdings, or national prominence. No kiosks, QR codes, or apps introduce or interpret their quilts, which as yet have no permanent exhibition space. Their work remains modest and unassuming, crafted from quotidian materials at merely human scale. Yet the quilts are full of meaning. They are singular objects, essentially “unicorns”—the products of a rare collaboration between members of two descendant communities that otherwise interact infrequently at more than a superficial level. They represent the work of many hands. And their medium is a major part of their message. Compared with bronze or marble, the quilts are fragile and transient. They draw from the deep history of enslaved persons who lived daily with punishing scarcity and still made art from ephemeral rags and scraps. And they carry on an ancient textile tradition that powerfully sustains memory and fills archival voids. Fabric can be frayed but also darned, rent but also mended. It is, as Tiya Miles has said, a “metaphor for tying, weaving, knotting, and binding people together,” for “the connectedness of many threads that together create a whole cloth.”¹³

Most important, quilts embody love and share strength. It is no accident that Rosa Parks, a seamstress by trade and a quiltmaker by avocation, said of her famous refusal to give up her place on the bus in the county next door to Lowndes, “When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night.”¹⁴

The Sew Their Names quilts also respond to a specific community church and other churches it represents. Buildings can act as enduring memorials to particular historical moments or movements. The Hopewell Baptist Church—described in the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage nomination as a longtime “vernacular architecture landmark along Highway 21 in Lowndes County”—enacted, and still memorializes, a religious elite’s determination of who was worthy of honor in its communal space. The church was built in the simple meetinghouse style that was favored by the mid-eighteenth-century New Light or Separate Baptists, which was designed to foster a democratic, egalitarian Christian community. But it held a contradiction embedded in its very architecture: a slave gallery.

Yvonne Wells’s quilt calls this contradiction out. Her congregation is visibly divided in hierarchical space, in direct tension with Christian values of kindness and brotherly love. The physical behaviors forced on the enslaved members by the gallery—processing to the entrance in an organized row; climbing to an elevated position to permit panoptical observation; and (we imagine) disappearing into a bounded, marginal space and enduring restraint behind gates, rails, and bars—evoke more sinister forms: the slave ship, the pen, the coffle, and the block, strategies to marginalize and control Black people in racialized space. And the scene dramatically invokes the view of some slaveholders that Black people were barred from heaven—the ultimate segregation. Wini McQueen’s quilt also includes an image of the Hopewell church, but this receives the same unfavorable treatment as the slave schedule and the human figure negated with an X; they are not celebrated but drained of all color other than the harsh chemical blue of the cyanotype. And no Christian symbols appear in the “glorious gold border” that cradles the names. Both Sew Their Names quilts contest the built heritage of the segregated church.

While the Sew Their Names quilts interrogate conventional monuments, they also implicitly resist the “negative form” or “vanishing” anti-memorials that have gained currency elsewhere. Examples include Horst Hoheisel’s 1985 Aschrott Fountain in Kassel (the hollow concrete shell of a fountain inverted and buried in a public square); Jochen Gerz’s and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s 1986 “Disappearing Monument” in Harburg (a lead column with public inscriptions that was lowered gradually into the ground); Jochen Gerz’s 1990 “2146 Stones; Monument Against Racism” in Saarbrücken (cobblestones engraved with the names of Jewish cemeteries and installed face down); Jan Wolkers’s 1993 Auschwitz Monument (Spiegelmonument) in Amsterdam (shattered panels of mirrored glass laid flat to reflect a broken sky);

Nicholas Galanin's 2020 *Shadow on the Land* in Sydney (an excavation in the form of the shadow of another nearby monument); and Do Ho Suh's 1998 to 2023 *Public Figures* in Washington, DC (an empty plinth held up by dozens of small anonymous figures).

In this respect, the quilts are perhaps anti-anti-memorials or counter-counter-monuments. It is hard to imagine the Mt. Willing Quilters embracing a memorial that is inverted, sunken, hollow, incomplete, ambivalent, unfinished, dematerialized, or eroding in order to invoke a wound or absence, no matter how cleverly conceived. The vacuum and the void hold little attraction for them. "Our grandparents endured a lot of lack," Godfrey says. And that lack abides: roofs in Lowndes County still leak, many people go without medicine or food, some homes do not have working septic systems, and too many lives have been lost to COVID. Even the Hopewell church building, where the quilters hope to display the two existing Sew Their Names quilts permanently someday along with additional quilts now underway, still does not even have a restroom. The quilters are too intimate with lack to be charmed by it; an ironic vanishing quilt would mean little more than a cold night to them. They memorialize an absence by filling it, not by reproducing it.

And the primary way they fill "lack" is with community. The quilting room is "a holy place," a "place of peace and serenity," Rev. Braxton says. "When we're here together we can sing, we can pray, we can tease, we can criticize in a good way." And "it's just our day when we're together," according to Maxine Singleton. Mary Godfrey agrees. "Our job is to care for one another. They're my family. That's the body of Christ. And we can't do anything without each other." "[We] look after each other just like we're family," Rev. Braxton says. "If one down, we all are, when one rejoice, we all rejoice."

This kind of community does not come about instantly. It evolves over decades as a hard-won, powerful response to privation and suffering, and it has deep roots. Yvonne Wells remembers seeing women quilting during her childhood, "talking and seeming to have the best time in the world," she says. "This was a way to get away from the horrors and the hurts of the day. The communion of the spirits would come together, and they could talk, they could relax, and they could expand," she says. "A lot of them were responding to not having, being overlooked, being talked to harsh, and maybe physical things that happened to them. These were the only days they could come and exhale." In the quilting room, Rev. Braxton agrees, the quilters "at least can forget about those things that ail them. It's at least one day when they can be loose and free without being bound by the troubles of the world."

While in one sense the quilters are unbound, in another they are stitched together. It is no surprise that they often invoke metaphors of needlework. Mercedes Braxton says the group is about "more than just sewing—it's the whole fabric of who we are." Godfrey believes that "a whole community stitching means transformation." And the "communion of saints," in Yvonne Wells's term, includes their

ancestors. Mercedes Braxton says, “I know this may sound weird, but I can sometimes visualize a great cloud of witnesses who has gone on before, and who’s looking down on us.” Mattie Bell Robinson unites the significance of ancestry, quilting, and singing in a single description. “The stitching goes on and on, knitted together,” she says.

It’s just like when the old peoples used to be singing. This person will start off, and maybe from over in the field another person will pick it up, and then another, and they all would have a different tone. It was like a train just rolling along, and everybody would put their part to it. And before you know it, all is singing. Everybody has to come in on one chord knowing where the other one has been and where they are now. You understanding me, my ways are your ways, we all knitted together in some way from down history, we all knitted together as one. And God hears us.

Perhaps this richly layered, resilient, and enduring community is itself the real counter-monument, even more powerful than the quilts. This community was not supposed to exist. In the mid-1860s, Black members began departing en masse from churches such as Hopewell to establish their own churches. Isaac Tichenor, the white pastor of First Baptist Church Montgomery, predicted in 1865 that “any attempt to build up and support separate churches among blacks”—whom he believed disposed to idleness, wanting in foresight, and subject to animal passions—was destined to fail.¹⁵ Of course, he was wrong. Autonomous Black churches “immediately became the central institution within the Black community. Pastors emerged not only as religious leaders but also as social and civic leaders.”¹⁶ Today, many of the white-dominated ABA churches like Hopewell no longer exist, or have dwindled to a vanishingly small membership. But the Black churches that split off after the Civil War—such as Mt. Willing’s Antioch Baptist next door to the LCCLC, or Mt. Moriah Nos. 1 and 2 in nearby Gordonville and Mosses—still flourish. These are the church homes of many of the quilters, and they, along with Snow Hill and other such institutions, endure as the foundation of the quilters’ living Christian community.

This thriving, welcoming, loving community is a profound rebuke to the slave gallery, to Hopewell, and to every Confederate monument in the state. It is a living memorial. And, quite wonderfully, it travels with the Sew Their Names quilts. Every time these are exhibited, at least some of the quilters go with them—most often to sew and sing, sometimes just to talk about their experience. The quilters represent the best sort of interactive “monument”—not the kind that requires you to scan a QR code or select a path in a video experience, but the kind you can sing, sew, or have a conversation with. They travel in an aging church van driven by Rev. Braxton. They worry about what to wear, enjoy seeing themselves on video, find it amusing when men try to sew, and are particularly focused on lunch. “With such a long history of being marginalized,” Mary Godfrey says, the quilters are especially astonished that people want to “sit with us and hear our stories. We laugh about it.” They are not accustomed to anyone being “so interested in your life as a



Figure 6. A member of Mt. Willing Quilters sewing by hand. Photograph by Jon Cook for the Sew Their Names Quilt Project.

Black person.” Still, “it means something—something they can talk about to their children and their grandchildren.”

As Rev. Braxton says, “Now we can see the small pieces coming together, the remnants of the quilt, the pieces of fabric. And once you put it all together you have a story to tell. I wonder what the story will be for those persons who come after us and see that here is the great-granddaughter of a slave master working with the descendant of slaves—and realize what they’ve accomplished when our Lord has put them together, and they follow through on the plan” (fig. 6).

Susan Walker, a retired federal judge, is a descendant of slaveholders from Mt. Willing, the rural community in Lowndes County, Alabama, that created the Sew Their Names quilt project. Judge Walker earned a BA in literature from Eckerd College; BA and MA degrees in English language and literature from Oxford University, where she studied as a Rhodes Scholar; and a JD from the Yale Law School.

Notes

1. All interviews were conducted by the author, the assistant project manager Mallory Morgan, or Emily Blejwas, executive director of the Alabama Folklife Association, and are used by permission. Quotations have been edited for length and clarity.
2. Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 11.
3. Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*, 681.

4. Crumpton, *Book of Memories*, 325.
5. Chesebrough, "Use of Sermons as Historical Documents," 26.
6. Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 1.
7. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 198.
8. Woodham, "Lowndes County Freedom Organization."
9. Hammontree, transcript of "'Bloody Lowndes.'"
10. Miles, *All That She Carried*, 233.
11. Le Clair, "Interview with Toni Morrison," 259.
12. "Narrative of James Green," in Stein, "Slave Narratives of Colorado County," 12.
13. Miles, *All That She Carried*, 234, 271.
14. Williams and Greenhaw, *Thunder of Angels*, 48.
15. Report of the Committee of the Alabama Association upon the Relation of the Colored Members to the Churches, with the Speech of I. T. Tichenor, D.D., Pastor of First Baptist Church, Montgomery, upon the Adoption of the Report, Montgomery: Barrett and Brown's Book and Job Office: 1865, 14, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Alabama Textual Materials Collection, <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/1703>.
16. Fallin, "Black Baptists in Alabama."

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