

PUBLIC ART

An Economic Driver in Main Street Alabama Communities

Trisha Black • Marketing and Communications Manager • Main Street Alabama

Alabama is experiencing a public art resurgence in communities of all sizes. With art and cultural experiences drawing tourists, these communities are benefiting from the economic impact as tourists stay longer to shop and dine – generating more tax revenue and attracting more investment in the community. In Main Street districts, public art initiatives are often led by volunteers and funded largely by the private sector. These installations create unique spaces for the public to enjoy in a different way; to honor history; and to celebrate local talent.

Athens Main Street – “Athens Amplified”

Athens Main Street, led by Executive Director Tere Richardson, recognized the potential of utilizing a privately owned alley beside the Main Street office to connect an underutilized public parking lot to the downtown district. Richardson pulled together a volunteer committee and, in less than a year, Merchants Alley was complete. This large project totaling over \$200,000 (including \$75,000 of in-kind donations) was 93% privately funded.

Early on the committee wanted the alley to be inclusive and filled with vibrancy. They landed on the “Athens Amplified” theme to focus on the musical heritage of the community. As you enter the alley, you’re greeted by a gateway arch adorned with musical notes that were lifted out of the song “Stars Fell on Alabama.” The donor recognition piece is also a work of art, created by metal artist Micah Gregg, that mimics the staff of a guitar with picks featuring the donors’ names. There’s a large scaled mural by Decatur native Adam Stephenson to the left that pays homage to the Old Time Fiddler’s Convention held annually at Athens State University. Next are doors that, when opened, unveil a work of art created by students from the Alabama Center of the Arts. There’s also a mural board by spray-paint artist ARCY that was created in less than 8 hours as the public watched featuring Brittany Howard, a Grammy award winning singer/songwriter from Athens. Brittany even showed up to surprise spectators as the artist was wrapping the piece and signed the mural. Other works of art are selfie spots selected from Limestone County student submissions.

“It is such a gratifying feeling to see people of all ages visiting and enjoying the alley,” Richardson said. “The squeals of delight from the children as they discover the art behind the doors are music to my ears.”

Merchants Alley was recently awarded the Alabama Mountain, Rivers, and Valleys RC&D Project of the Year. Athens Main Street will also be programming the alley with a music series later this year.

“This spring we will kick off the Merchants Alley Happy Hour Music series,” Richardson said. “Each Friday, beginning April 1st through August 1st, we will feature local musicians. The alley will be a perfect place to begin your weekend downtown.”

Main Street Scottsboro – Honoring Difficult History

In Scottsboro, recent projects have focused on history, including one about a period most don’t want to talk about. Katie Kirkland, Main Street Scottsboro’s Executive Director, said the project wanted to touch all aspects of their community and felt it was important to feature the Scottsboro Boys in some way as the 90th anniversary of the incident was approaching in 2021. Subsequently, a Prayer March was held in June 2020 that started at the museum and ended at the courthouse in honor of the nine young men wrongly accused of raping two women on a train in 1931.

With that showing of community support, it was evident that it was time to dedicate a memorial downtown. Kirkland

Athens

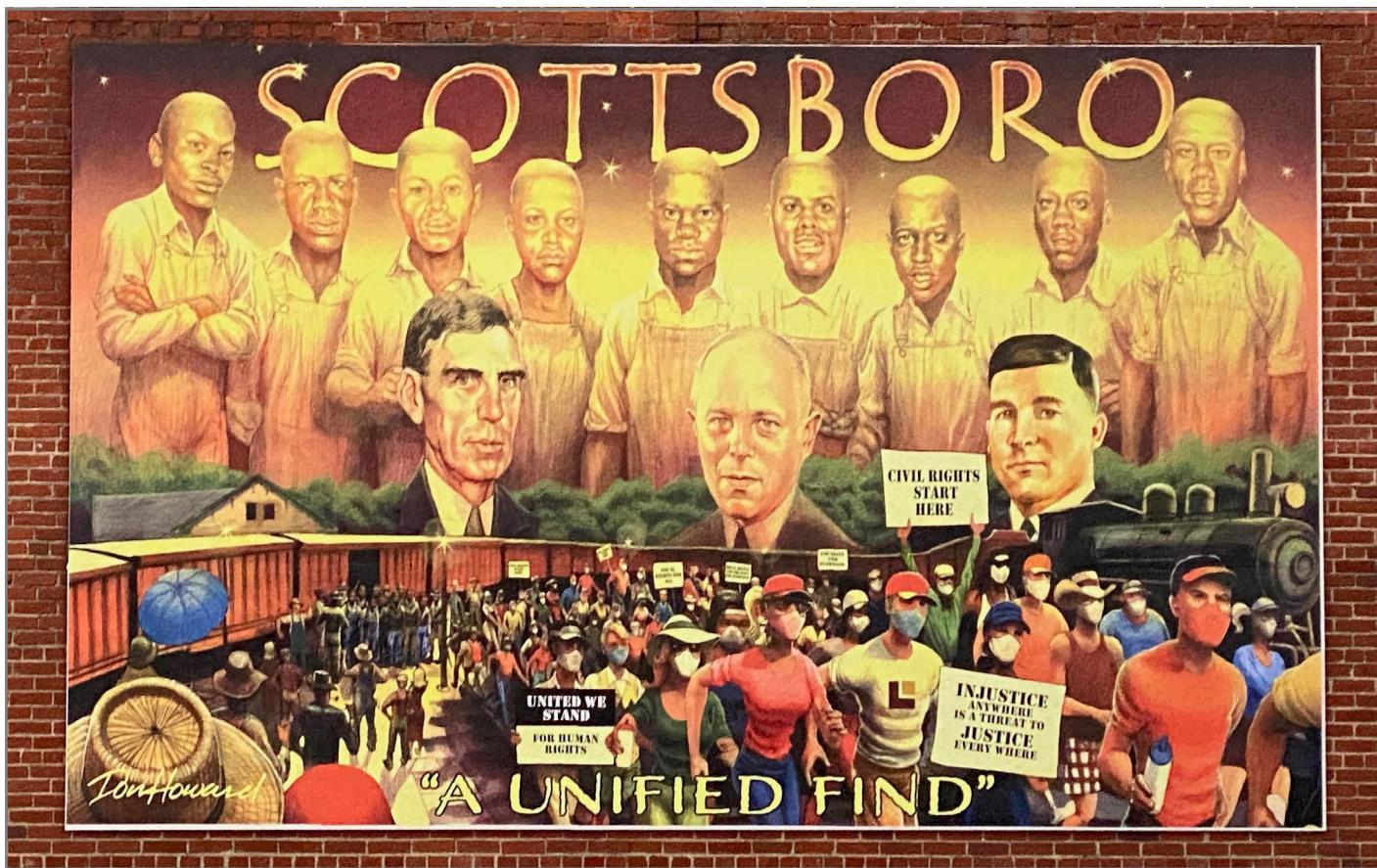
Scottsboro

Monroeville

Fort Payne



Merchants Alley before



reached out to Sheila Washington, then chairperson of the Scottsboro Boys Museum, to collaborate on the project. Don Howard, the first African American cartoonist to be hired at Disney and who lives in the Huntsville area, was commissioned to create a mural design.

The final design features the Scottsboro Boys, Sheriff Matt Wann, Judge James Horton and Labor Defense Attorney Samuel Leibowitz. Sheriff Wann stood outside the jail door in Scottsboro to hold off the lynch mob of more than 100 men who wanted to take the boys when they first arrived. He put himself in harm's way to protect them. Judge Horton was courageous in that he was the one who set aside the verdict and death sentence of Haywood Patterson, one of the nine. Samuel Leibowitz declined payment to represent the boys and was completely selfless in defending them, especially in a situation where everyone wanted them convicted. Also depicted on the mural is the angry mob that met the train back in 1931 that then turns into the group in the 2020 prayer walk.

At the dedication Howard said: "What happened to the Scottsboro Boys is one of the pivotal stories in the history of racial injustice in the United States. This mural encapsulates the power of public art to confront the traumas of the past and generate new dialogues, respectfully and meaningfully, regarding racial inequality and violence, which is so prevalent today."

The original drawing was printed on a 20' x 12' vinyl that is hung on Peachtree Street and was funded by Main Street Scottsboro. Sadly, Sheila Washington passed away before the dedication.

In addition to the mural, Main Street Scottsboro also created the Scottsboro Photo Trail. Forty historical photos are printed on metal signs and are placed throughout the downtown district. Kirkland said tourists are often seen walking the entire square and enjoying the glimpses back in time. "Downtown Scottsboro is filled with history," she said. "Our goal with these projects has been to highlight our history and teach residents and visitors about Scottsboro, hoping that they'll learn something new. By embracing and learning from the history of our town, we hope that our downtown melds into a place where the past meets present and is somewhere that residents and visitors of all ages can enjoy."

Monroeville Main Street – Downtown Art Trails

Monroeville Main Street Executive Director Anne Marie Bryan said they wanted to encourage visitors to get out of their cars and walk the district. The smART Moves Mural Trail does just that. With a one-way street circling the square, art installations are placed in a way that they cannot be viewed traveling in the direction of the street. The Trail, a collaborative project between Monroeville Main Street and the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, was funded with an AL ProHealth grant

through the Monroe County Extension office. This allowed the organizations to commission local artists with a \$500 stipend for small scale murals and selfie spots. The trail features 15 small selfie-style murals in downtown Monroeville with an additional 11 murals throughout Monroe County.

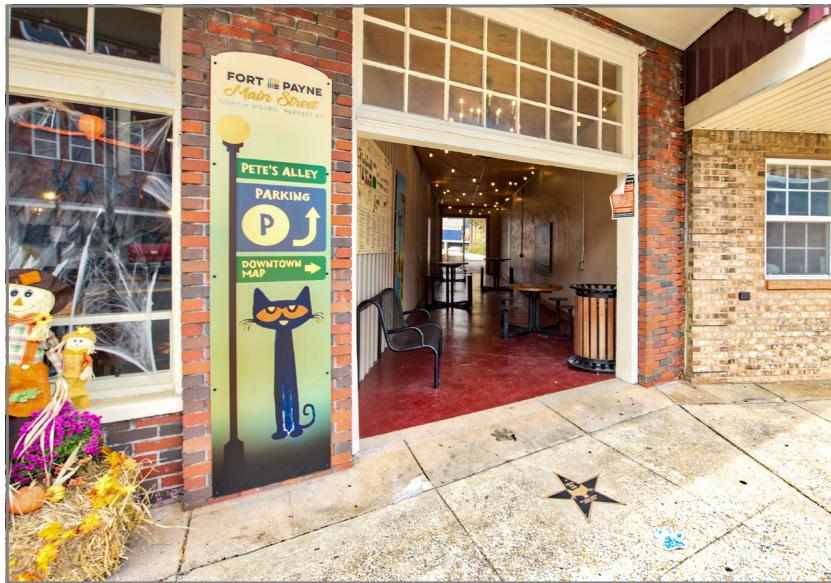
Another downtown art trail is the Literary Capital Sculpture Trail that consists of 14 bronze miniature sculptures inspired by the 10 writers credited with making Monroeville/Monroe County the Literary Capital of Alabama – one to represent the Pulitzer Prize won by three Monroeville writers as well as sculptures for Harper Lee, Truman Capote and Cynthia Tucker. The sculptures are also strategically placed near a storefront to entice tourists to visit one of the many retail options in downtown Monroeville.

Bryan said she sees tourists all times of the day exploring the downtown and enjoying the sculptures and murals.



Fort Payne Main Street – A Different Spin on Public Art

Fort Payne has taken a different spin on public art by immortalizing a fictional character and turning a tree into a work of art. A covered walkway had the potential to drive foot traffic from a parking lot to Main Street but was under-utilized because it



was dark and uninviting. To address the issue, Fort Payne Main Street placed a donated chandelier and the city installed string lights. Soon after, the Main Street program decided the placement of art would increase the use of the walkway even more. An obvious choice was to feature the work of Fort Payne native James Dean, creator and illustrator of Pete the Cat. Dean provided the artwork that is now hanging in the "Pete the Cat Alley." Tables were donated in 2017 and it is now not only a walkway, but a place to linger longer in the district. Fort Payne also hosts a Pete the Cat Day. During the event, businesses attract foot traffic by hosting activities and offering a blue cat discount. There's also Storytime and an opportunity to purchase original artwork that can be signed by Dean.

Fort Payne Main Street Board Member and Design Chair, Mary Reed, came up with another creative idea – to have a "Chandelier Tree" in the

district. The community stepped up and donated chandeliers that now adorn the tree and are lit year-round. For very little cost, this has become a draw for locals as well as visitors.

Conclusion

Public art doesn't have to have a hefty price to make a big impact for the local economy while also creating spaces for residents to create memories. And public art continually impacts tourism – encouraging tourists to stay longer and spend more in the community. ■



Trisha Black joined the Main Street Alabama staff as the Field Services Specialist in February 2016 after working as a local Main Street Director for over seven years in Athens, AL. In 2020, she transitioned into the role of Marketing and Communications Manager. During Black's tenure, Spirit of Athens became a state-designated and nationally accredited Main Street program. Along with dedicated volunteers, Black was the driving force behind several projects emulated both state-wide and nationally including the Athens Saturday Market, a state-certified farmers market, the Athens Grease Festival, an annual community event and fundraiser; and High Cotton Arts, a shared working space for up to 10 artists. Black received the 2014 Main Street Alabama Leadership Award, recognizing her for frequently sharing her knowledge of the Four Point Approach with both communities interested in downtown revitalization and other Main Street programs. In 2020, she earned her Main Street America Revitalization Professional certification from the National Main Street Center. She is a 1993 graduate of Troy University with a bachelor's degree in political science and journalism.