

# A Self-guided Interpretive Exhibit of the ACES Graham Farm and Nature Center

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**A Self-Guided Interpretive Exhibit of the Graham Farm**, attempts to provide visitors to the ACES-operated Graham Farm and Nature Center in Jackson County, Alabama with an engaging narrative about the social history of the Graham Farm and surrounding community while touching on the natural history of the Paint Rock River Valley region. Graphic Design students in Professor Robert Finkel's course, "GDES 4970: Special Topics, Environmental Graphic Design" developed an interpretive exhibit design that expands on initial field research conducted by students previously enrolled in Professor Rob Holmes course, "LAND 7330-001: Alabama Lab," and builds upon MTSU graduate student Jay Bradley Eatherly's thesis paper, "Forgotten Appalachia: The Graham Farm Of Alabama's Paint Rock Valley".

The site of The Graham Farm and Nature Center (GFNC) is the ancestral property of Nita (Graham) Head. The property had been in the family for 81 years. Nita and husband, Bob Head, are educators who formerly lived in Estillfork, AL.

As lifelong educators, the goals of the Heads are to give back to the community through their ancestral property. They donated this 486-acre farm to the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) via the Jackson County Extension Office to leave a legacy of community outreach and education for the North Alabama region.

The Grahams intended the farm would be used to teach youth and adults of natural resources conservation, animal science education, ecology, historical preservation, youth development, oral history, wildlife management, ornithology, aquatics, and fruit and vegetable production. The property is currently administered by Jackson County Extension Coordinator, Themika Sims and Extension Agent Assistant, Donna Sands.

## The Deliverables

The project is divided into four main subject areas correlating to different physical structures and landscape sections within the property.

**THE MAIN HOUSE** which tells the story of the Graham Family, life on the farm, the social history of the Paint Rock River Valley, and a chronology of the farm up to the present-day role of ACES.

**THE EXTERIOR BUILDINGS** (Smokehouse, Chicken Coop, Barn, Farrowing House) which link the architecture of each building to its function within the context of a working farm. Emphasis will be placed on farming practices and activities released to each building.

**TRAIL OVERLOOKS** where signage is installed at unique natural features among the property such as the confluence of Larkin Fork and Paint Rock River, and the sinkholes atop Maxwell Mountain.

**FLORA & FAUNA IDENTIFICATION SIGNAGE** that includes citations about the major wildlife and plants found on the property. These signs will be installed intermittently along the trails.



Newly installed interpretive signs located around the Graham Farm.

## The Process

**SPRING 2019:** MLA students arrived at Graham Farm for the first of three multi-day fieldwork sessions conducted as part of Studio VI (*Alabama Lab*). The studio presents final work to Graham Farm staff. This work includes design proposals and detailed studies of the farm's history and geography.

**FALL 2019:** GDES students arrive at Graham Farm for an overnight visit and work sessions conducted as part of the course GDES 4970. Themika Sims and Donna Sands visit Auburn to attend GDES student's mid-progress and final design critiques.

**SPRING 2020:** Prof. Holmes and Prof. Finkel work to review and edit student's design work with guidance from Mr. Sims and Ms. Sands. After the completion of design revisions, the signage package was presented to Anniston-based exhibit fabricators, Southern Custom Exhibits (SCE). Schematics and project estimates produced by SCE are approved for fabrication by ACES-Jackson County. Print-ready artwork is prepared and released for pre-production. Prof Finkel, Mr. Sims, and Ms. Sands convene at SCE for press-check and proof review of all signs before final production.

**SUMMER 2020:** All signs arrive at the Graham Farm. Prof Holmes and Prof Finkel consult with Mr. Sims and Ms. Sands onsite for final installation locations throughout the Graham Farm property.



GDES Students with Themika Sims during site visit to the Graham Farm.

## The Outcome

The signs were produced by Southern Custom Exhibits in Anniston, Alabama, and both Holmes and Finkel assisted Graham Farm staff in their placement.

"GFNC has faced many delays in other necessary projects," said Sands. "However thanks to Robert's persistence and dedication, Phase I is complete!" Finkel hopes to have a future class design signage for Phase II, which includes the interior exhibits on the property.

Both ACES and CADC faculty and students benefitted from this unique partnership. Themika Sims, County Extension Coordinator at GFNC, said, "We are excited about the relationship that we have developed with Rob Holmes and Robert Finkel. Words cannot my appreciation for the both of them. The Graham Farm is in a better place due to their time and efforts."



GDES Students work on layout drafts of sign designs.



Donna Sands and Themika Sims at Southern Custom Exhibits during press check.