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"GOIN' NORTH"

by Victoria Sandwick Schmitt





Above: Alice Branson Mathis lived in Sanford, Florida before moving to Rochester. It was built on Lake Monroe, a port on the St. John's River. Photograph from the Vincent Collection, Henry Shelton Sanford Memorial Library and Museum.

Cover: Alice Mathis as a young woman. Photograph from the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

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Alice Mathis worked as a seasonal agricultural worker, sometimes harvesting celery with a "mule train" on farms such as this in Seminole County, Florida, once the nation's "celery capital." Photograph from the Vincent Collection, Henry Shelton Sanford Memorial Library and Museum.

"GOIN' NORTH"

"People have to learn to, whether they want to or not, they have to learn to live together. And if this will help more people to understand better it is perfectly fine—whatever you decide to do with my things."¹

With these words, Alice Branson Mathis of Sanford, Florida and Rochester, New York stated her personal philosophy of life. And she entrusted two hundred personal objects accumulated throughout her long life to the Rochester Museum & Science Center's permanent collections.

Mrs. Mathis' collection reveals that she is connected, both in her life's work and in her artistic output, with the broader African American population and its roots in Africa.² It also illustrates one of the newer cultural influences coming into Rochester.

In the spirit of Alice Mathis' forthright willingness to share the outward manifestations of her life history, staff members of the Rochester Museum & Science Center began to study her

legacy to the community. Working closely with Mathis' Rochester friends and family, an exhibition entitled "Goin' North" was organized. "Goin' North" offers a retrospective of the life of an African American woman who earned her living as an agricultural and domestic worker in the deep South and in western New York.³

In essence Alice Mathis "acted as the curator of her own life," and the objects that she carefully saved reflect the multi-faceted dimensions of her life. Her handmade quilts reveal her artistry, her patched clothing portrays her ingenuity and craftsmanship, her usher's dress shows her status in church, her evening gown discloses her youthful sensuality, her handmade doll clothes represent her maternal feelings, her business correspondence tells of her enterprising approach to work, her photographs document the chronological changes in her life, and her work clothes recall the jobs that she did to earn her living. Above all, Mrs. Mathis tenaciously carried on the cultural expressions of the traditional, rural African American community from which she came.⁴

Alice Mathis was among the more than 40,000 African Americans who moved to Rochester from 1950 to 1970.⁵ More of them came to Rochester from Sanford, Florida than any other single location.⁶ First, the Sanfordites worked on area farms during the harvesting season, returning to Florida at the end of each season. Eventually, they "settled out" of the "migrant stream,"⁷ and moved to Rochester, seeking a less disruptive lifestyle, year-round employment, and better opportunities for themselves and their children. Mrs. Mathis' objects offer insights not only into her life, but also into the lives of her friends and neighbors. Her story is one of hard work, flexibility and endurance.⁸

Memories of Sanford

"Sanford is a wonderful place."⁹

Sanford, Florida, near Orlando on the St. John's River, is part of Seminole County where agriculture is the major industry. It is a region of citrus and vegetable farms, once known as the nation's celery capital.

Sanford is also home to Georgetown, an historic African American community that was established in the nineteenth

century by city founder General Henry Shelton Sanford. General Sanford was a lawyer and diplomat from Connecticut who in 1870 purchased the land that would become Sanford and began to plan what he called "The Gate City of South Florida."¹⁰

In a letter written to his son, February 18, 1890, H. S. Sanford recounted the events that led to his establishment of an African American subdivision.

in 1870...I brought 60 colored laborers from Madison to work at St. Gertrude; they were driven off and some slain with shot guns; and; to that very act, the 'Georgetown' suburb of Sanford owes its existence; for when I was strong enough to defy the shotgun policy men, I offered & secured a home and protection there to peaceful, laborious, worthy colored people — they have fulfilled my expectations to become, many of them, prosperous citizens....¹¹

The first African Americans whom General Sanford hired, cleared land and planted orange groves. Over the next fifty years, many of Sanford's African American residents went on to establish their own businesses, from stores to blacksmiths shops, real estate and insurance agencies, restaurants and barber shops.¹²

The vast majority of African Americans in Sanford worked as wage laborers in the agricultural industry.¹³ Farm work was a family affair, with fathers, mothers and children all contributing to the family income. School attendance declined among African American children when they were needed in the fields.

Year-round work in Sanford was scarce because agriculture functioned on a seasonal basis. There were slack times each year, and there were times when intensive labor was required. Former Sanford residents report that some men found year round work in the groves, or pruning, while for women, housekeeping jobs offered the major source of semi-permanent employment. The scarcity of year-round work, coupled with the increased mechanization of farm work, led many people to go north to work on farms in the spring and summer and sometimes in the fall.¹⁴

Some of the Sanford residents who came north “on the season” earned enough money to own homes and cars in Florida. Most, however, were tenants. Like most Americans, they worked hard to raise their standard of living, both for themselves and for their children.

The connection between Sanford, Florida and Wayne County, New York began in 1931. In that year, the Fish brothers of Sodus hired John Gibson of Sanford to bring a crew of 25 people north to work in their packing house in July when the Sanford harvest season was over. Gibson had first met Hal and George F. Fish in 1929, when they hired him to work on a farm they had rented in Sanford. By the late 1930s, Gibson was bringing two crews to Sodus, totaling about 75 people, to work in both the packing house and in the fields.¹⁵

As in Seminole County, Wayne County’s primary industry is agriculture, with both fruits and vegetables grown in the area. Each summer, the demand for seasonal agricultural workers grew. Labor shortages during World War II intensified the efforts of area farmers to recruit workers from Sanford, and a lasting relationship between that city and western New York was born.

Until the 1960s, Sanford’s public facilities, including schools, were segregated. The Euro-American and African American communities operated in largely separate spheres. African American high school students in Seminole County all attended one school. One African American doctor and one dentist served much of the African American community.¹⁶ As a result, the African American community was closeknit. Interdependent networks provided support for individuals. Children were instructed to check on elderly neighbors and neighbors often looked after young people while their parents worked. Family ties were extremely important.

Alice Branson Mathis was not a native of Sanford. She was born in Monticello in the Florida panhandle near the Georgia border, July 2, 1898. Her parents died when she was very young, and older siblings raised her. She had at least one brother and two sisters. At age 12, she ran away from home and found employment with a white family for whom she cooked and cleaned.¹⁷

Most of the details of Mrs. Mathis' personal life are unknown to us. She was married (possibly twice), but never had children. She lived and worked in several locations in the state of Florida, supporting herself as an agricultural and domestic worker.

Correspondence and ephemera that Alice Mathis saved showed that she was living in Jacksonville, Florida in the 1940s. She shared an address there with family members Gracie Lee Mathis and B. W. Mathis. Surviving records indicate that she worked in a laundry in 1943 and for a fertilizer company in 1945. She also spent time during this decade, as she would periodically through the 1970s, with another sister, Gertrude Jones, in Hobe Sound, near Palm Beach.

By 1954, Mrs. Mathis was living in Sanford, her home for the next two decades. She owned two homes during this period, the first a three room plank house without plumbing. Mrs. Mathis worked hard, saved her money and purchased a second home at 804 Bay Avenue, Sanford. This seven room house was made of stone, and was equipped with up-to-date utilities. Alice Mathis and her sister Lucendie Scurry lived together in Sanford.

When we first started coming into this area [Wayne County]...we didn't have running water inside the house and we did not have bathrooms and the furniture that they used was apple crates to sit on as chairs. But after staying there two or three years, the boss man and his wife—because the people kept telling them what they were used to—decided to come to Florida and see where the people were living. And they came down and they find out that most everybody, especially a family migrant, had nice homes, nice furniture and everything.¹⁸

The low wages paid to agricultural workers meant that money was tight in most homes. The furnishings from Mrs. Mathis' Florida home are a combination of store-bought objects and home-made decorations. Mrs. Mathis had the skill and ability to live on very little and she was recycling ahead of her time. By sewing things that she needed and desired, she beautified and shaped her home the way she wanted it.

For example, Mrs. Mathis pieced together a decorative blue table cover from remnants. She recovered her upholstered



Alice Mathis in 1949. She was the only member of her family to do farm work in New York State. Photograph from the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

rocking chair herself. She crafted tie-backs for her straight-backed chairs, embroidering bright wool flowers on one, appliquéing a monogrammed "M" on another. Pink doilies, similar in shape to the antimacassars (small covers for the backs and arms of chairs) of Victorian homes, adorned her furniture. She crocheted the round doilies and then stiffened them with a home-made flour and water starch so that they would stand up. Mrs. Mathis' doilies were not meant to lie flat, but were placed around a lamp or a candy dish on a table.

Always reusing material, Alice Mathis made a pillow cover from a striped mattress ticking. She hand sewed a zipper into one end. She also made small bags from the ticking that were used to hold various items from important mail to snuff.

Bleached feed and flour sacking became a variety of useful objects from underwear to bedding. The large 25 or 50 pound sacks that contained flour used for home baking provided her with fabric for pillow cases, table scarves, laundry bags, and even a flounced petticoat. Sacks were also pieced together to become backing for quilts and sometimes became patches for quilt tops.¹⁹

Mrs. Mathis never had children of her own, but she loved children and lived with several families as a live-in babysitter. She often told the story of her only pregnancy and miscarriage. She kept several dolls throughout her life and sewed many elaborate doll dresses for her baby doll.

In her handmade quilts, made “just for herself” but sometimes given away to others,²⁰ Alice Mathis honored her African American heritage and demonstrated her own unique abilities. Wearing her eyeglasses and using two small home-made pincushions, Mrs. Mathis pieced together patchwork “strip” quilts. The connected, rectangular patches, or “strips,” of Alice Mathis’ quilts are reminiscent of the African art aesthetic and connect her to a long, strong and extremely vibrant world art tradition.²¹

African American strip quilts, like those made by Alice Mathis, relate to the patterns of West African textiles and stand as living evidence that African Americans retain aspects of their African culture.²² For centuries Asante men wove narrow strips of silk in brilliant colors that were subsequently edge-sewn into the *kente* cloths which were worn by kings and other high-ranking leaders. The Ewe people also made *kente* cloth, but worked in cotton and in a subtler palette to which Mrs. Mathis’ quilts bear some resemblance.²³

Examples of quilts made by enslaved African American women on their own time include appliqué, patchwork and strip quilts.²⁴ Each new generation of quilters learned and remembered the textile traditions established by the older women around them. Traditions became established and continued. Alice Mathis and her contemporaries are African American quilters who “reflect (consciously or unconsciously) the aesthetic values of their cultures and cultural traditions.”²⁵

Working in the African American tradition, Alice Mathis was free to express her creativity in an innovative manner. In some cases, her quilts incorporate large, geometric design elements;

in others, she modifies Euro-American design motifs such as “log cabin” and “nine-patch” and inserts strip motifs in the overall pattern.

Several of the Mrs. Mathis’ quilts incorporate her work clothes, khaki and denim pants, and flannel and chambray shirts. One quilt top features the grease stained pant legs thought to have been worn by a husband who was a mechanic.

Working on large, handsewn canvases, Alice Mathis built quilt tops (just as she hand built her life) that are the result of deliberate, aesthetic choices. However, not only are her quilts aesthetic statements, they are also precious historical documents that describe the intimate history of Mrs. Mathis’ family. The quilts contain a kind of language that is known only to the core members of her family.²⁶

Like other matriarchs in traditional southern African American communities, Mrs. Mathis stockpiled quilts and kept them in a wardrobe in her bedroom. She finished them (adding batting and backing) individually and gave them as gifts to family members to mark important events such as baptisms, weddings or a young person’s departure for college. Mrs. Mathis’ quilts would not only “keep her loved ones warm, but also wrap them in family history.”²⁷

Mrs. Mathis’ quilts are interesting from a quilting standpoint because the quilting patterns turn in varying angles and curves and are clearly visible. Mrs. Mathis, her hands calloused from agricultural work, used large needles and made large stitches, working freehand. African American quilters from the rural South often do not pride themselves on making tiny stitches; in some cases quilts are simply tacked together.

In business matters, Alice Mathis handled her affairs on both uncomplicated and sophisticated levels. Because of her limited reading ability, she kept important mail together in a small handmade bag until someone could read it to her. A money sack, probably originally a handkerchief, served as her wallet. She hid her money in it and wore it tied to her bra and under her arm, or kept it locked away. However, she also carefully arranged for insurance on her home and possessions and modernized and expanded her Sanford house. She purchased her own health insurance and made efforts to maintain a record

of her cash earnings for Social Security. Although she did not drive, Mrs. Mathis did own a car, and she obtained a driver's license for identification and for cashing checks.

Alice Mathis is remembered as a beautiful woman who did not show her age, had a flawless complexion, and long, dark hair. She did her hair by combing it out with a hot comb and setting it with wax and pressing oil on leather curlers. She only wore make-up on special occasions. "Nut brown" and other face powders made specifically for African American women were carefully saved among her personal grooming materials.

A selection of three Florida dresses that Alice Mathis saved for many years reveal several of her "faces." A low-cut black evening gown discloses her youthful sensuality. A dressy, pink summer dress is personalized by the addition of lavender/blue buttons. A comfortable plaid housedress clothed her for the doctor or shopping in later years. Mrs. Mathis' friends recall that she wore little jewelry other than earrings.



A dressy summer dress, a comfortable housedress and a stylish evening gown were among the dresses Alice Mathis preserved. Photograph by David C. Eggers, the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

Church People

Historically, the Black Church has been the center of African American life. Mainstream political, educational, business and social opportunities were largely closed to Blacks. African Americans had to organize and develop their own institutions, traditions and appropriate forms of social and cultural expressions. Much of this development reflected the teachings learned and experience gained in the Black Church. Many distinctive African American cultural contributions—such as music, thirst for freedom, protest, etc.—also stem from that Black Church experience.²⁸

The church was a vital force in the lives of many African Americans. Members carefully recorded their church histories and celebrated the anniversaries of their institutions annually. In addition to regular services and auxiliary group meetings, southern African Americans attended church revivals and homecomings.²⁹ African American pastors were highly respected and well-known leaders in their communities. Members of church congregations took turns inviting the pastor to dinner to help support the cost of the pastor's salary.

The objects that Mrs. Mathis saved show that she was very close to the church and had been since childhood. Among them were prints of Bible stories. Many southern African Americans remember similar images from Sunday School where they appeared on cards that were discussed in class and distributed to the children to take home afterwards. An image of an angel watching over children was one that made a particularly lasting impression on many young people; Alice Mathis kept two versions of this.

Paper advertising fans, a feature of southern life, were distributed in African American churches, where temperatures rose very high in the summer. Mrs. Mathis preserved several of these fans, along with the all-black and all-white usher's dresses that she wore as an usher in a Baptist church in Sanford. Membership in her church's usher board indicates one of her positions of responsibility in the church.

Like many who moved to northern cities, Alice Mathis did not attend church regularly in Rochester. She was in her

seventies, a time of life when it is not easy to establish new friendships. Also, farm work took a toll on her health. The influence of the church was close to her, however, and in addition to her religious prints, usher's dresses, fans and church anniversary souvenirs, she saved much of the dressy clothing she had worn to church in Florida. Several Bibles and an 1887 copy of W. W. Everts' *Pastor's Hand Book* were the only books that Alice Mathis retained.

Goin' on the Season

I caught the tranp truck
goin' north
leaving Florida behind, my 3-year old son
at my side.

It was June, and the celery was ripe
in upstate New York, and the sunshine
baked the necks of us migrants
as we bumped along the roads of Georgia,
the Carolinas, Virginia, and up.

I wanted to see the world,
bein' twenty-one and needin' to be free.
And when the driver said Savannah New York,
well, it sounded like Georgia
under a big, northern, money sky,
and I found a seat in the back
of that tranp truck, twenty or more of us,
sleeping along the road at night
under the trees, on the sweet beds
of grass in this big
endless country, travelin' free, travelin' free...³⁰

For more than a century, the rich agricultural lands of the Genesee Country have attracted migrant farm workers. In the early nineteenth century, men from the Southern tier came north to the Genesee Valley to harvest wheat.³¹ Since World War II, most of the seasonal agricultural workers who have come to this region have been of African descent, and they have come here from the rural South.³²

Wayne County attracted the largest number of seasonal agricultural workers and today supports the greatest number of migrant labor camps in New York State.³³ Alice Mathis worked on farms in Port Byron, Cayuga County, and in Red Creek, Wayne County, from the 1940s to the mid 1960s.

Each year, the season began in the spring when some workers came north to sow plants and then to weed and thin out rows. Most workers came in July, in time to harvest the fruits and vegetables. They stayed until November, working on the harvest or in food processing plants or both. The crops harvested included apples, cherries, strawberries, snap beans, potatoes, cabbages, carrots, celery and onions. "When one considers just the sheer volume of French fried potatoes sold and consumed every day in our state, the amount is staggering. Not one potato could be consumed without the work of the migrants."³⁴

Despite their importance in making America the best-fed nation on earth, migrant farm workers are among the lowest paid workers in the United States.³⁵ They work on a piece-rate basis and lack vacation pay, unemployment or health insurance, and often social security benefits.³⁶ Because perishable crops have to be harvested in a short period of time, everyone available works, including children. Agriculture continues to be the only U. S. industry in which child labor is not outlawed.³⁷

Farmworkers are an unusually hard-working and self-reliant group. Mrs. Mathis' work clothes, typically a sweatshirt and khaki or denim blue jeans, worn through and reinforced with sturdy patches from knees to ankles, attest to the backbreaking physical nature of her work. Cutting cabbage and celery and digging out potatoes and carrots was done on hands and knees. Alice Mathis generally worked ten hours per day, every day except Sunday.

Like Alice Mathis, who made the 1300 mile round trip between Sanford and western New York twice each year, seasonal agricultural workers are willing to travel long distances to obtain work. Most were members of crews that were recruited and organized in Florida. Crew leaders brought them to western New York and supervised every aspect of the workers' lives at camp and in the field.

Alice Mathis was enterprising in her approach to work, self-directed and self-promotional. As the following letters indicate, she was among the few independent workers who contracted directly with farmer-growers for work, and train or bus tickets north. Joseph Albano was the Wayne County farmer for whom Mrs. Mathis worked; she also worked for Mr. Albano's brother-in-law in Port Byron.

Red Creek, New York
May 3, 1960

Alice Mathis
804 Bay Avenue
Sanford, Florida

Dear Alice:

Pee Wee said that you wanted us to send you a ticket so we are enclosing ticket #F31711 from Sanford, Florida to Port Byron, New York.

You can leave as soon as you receive the ticket. Try to keep your luggage with you as you change busses. If there is no one at the office when you reach Port Byron, call us at Red Creek 6494 and we will send someone down after you.

We are also sending tickets to Mary Dixon for Paul Keitt and James Dunlap. You can get in touch with them if you want to and travel together.

Very truly yours
Joseph Albano



Alice Mathis' baby doll, and the dresses that she sewed for it, convey the strong maternal feelings that she had, despite the fact that she never had children of her own. Photograph by David C. Eggers, the Rochester Museum & Science Center.



Alice Mathis was born in 1898 in the Florida panhandle. Her parents died when she was young. She left home at the age of 12 and worked for a white family as a domestic worker. Photograph from the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

Sanford Fla
804 Bay Ave
July 1, 1964

Dear Sir

I am a little late this time but if you... send me a ticket I can work standing but no crawling. If you can please let me hear from you after the 2nd Sunday in July I am feeling some better now. I have been sick mostly ever since I been home. Should you send me a ticket I want my same room.

From
Alice Mathis³⁸

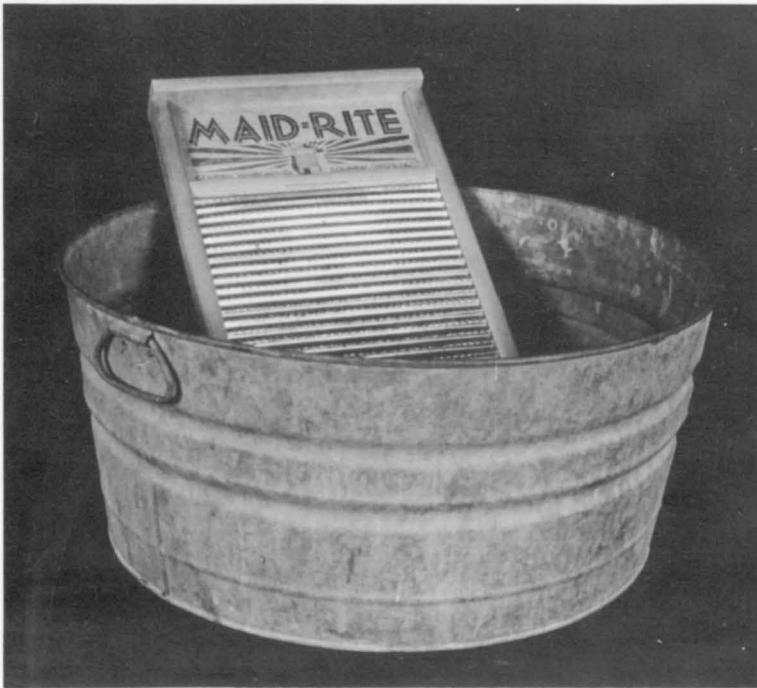
Many agricultural workers came north in family groups. Other crews consisted only of men, who worked away from their families to earn extra income. Alice Mathis was the only member of her family to work as a seasonal agricultural worker.³⁹

It was difficult to be a single woman in a migrant camp.⁴⁰ And as an older worker in her fifties and sixties, Mrs. Mathis was teased by younger workers.⁴¹ She kept to herself, carried on her artistic and craft projects in her spare time, worked hard, and saved her money to maintain her house in Florida and to pay her bills.

Agricultural workers lived in camps on farmers' land. Their housing ranged from dormitory style concrete or wood barracks to apartments in frame houses. Alice Mathis' situation was unusual in that she was able to have her own room. There, she could enjoy some solitude after working. Life in a migrant camp was usually noisy, cramped and lacking in privacy.

Many camps were without electricity and running water, and had only outdoor toilets and showers. Residents had to pump their water into various containers and carry it back to their quarters. Alice Mathis purchased metal and enamel buckets for water at the hardware store in Port Byron and used them while living in migrant camps.⁴² She washed her clothes in a large washtub with homemade lye soap and a rub board. The same tub doubled as her bath tub. A smaller foot tub was used before bed each night. The dish pan held water to wash both dishes and greens. Clean drinking water, sipped from a dipper, was kept in a water bucket, while hands and face were washed in a wash basin. A slop pot or "night pot" allowed her to avoid the trip to the outdoor toilet in the dark.⁴³

Seasonal agricultural workers brought very little with them to the New York farms where they worked and camped for the season—usually just work clothes and cooking utensils. Other necessities were purchased on arrival. Some people, like Mrs. Mathis, fearing that their possessions would be stolen during



Alice Mathis bathed and washed her clothes in this metal tub. She laundered with the rub board and homemade lye soap. Photograph by David C. Eggers, the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

their long absence from Florida, brought everything that they could carry with them. This meant that she was crowded into one small room at the camp, with all of her things packed in trunks, chests and suitcases.⁴⁴

When weather was bad, equipment was broken, or crops were not ready to harvest, seasonal agricultural workers faced days without work, and without pay. When not working, Alice Mathis used the time to make, alter and repair clothes. Her craftsmanship surfaces in her patched jeans and in the handmade waist belt with a pocket in which she carried her lunch and her snuff.⁴⁵ Working without patterns and without tape measures, Alice Mathis created and sewed dresses entirely by hand.⁴⁶ She also made objects like a wooden footstool, showing her familiarity with tools and her ability to complete a variety of projects.

For several summers in the 1940s, Alice Mathis lived with the Williams family of Port Byron, New York. Her god-daughter Louise Williams remembers "Miss Alice" as a tall, stern woman who made everything by hand. She recalls that Mathis sat with the Williams children every evening while they read and did their homework. She used to encourage them, saying "You're gonna be somebody if I have anything to do with it." All of the nine Williams children went on to graduate from high school and college. None of them knew that Alice Mathis could not read or write.⁴⁷

Household Assistants For Hire

Rte. 1
Hobe Sound, Fla.
Oct. 29, 1967

Dear Sister Alice,

How is you all doing fine I hope we all is doing fine.

Mrs. McDonald has been trying to get in touch with you, she wants you to work for her daughter, so please get in touch with her. If you get the job it will be a year round job and you won't have nothing to worry about.

I will write more the next time but I have to close now.

Your sister
Girtrude⁴⁸

The letter from Alice Mathis' sister expresses the constant pressure that Mrs. Mathis was under to find work and maintain a year round income, at a time when she was nearly seventy years old. Domestic work was one of the few choices that rural, southern African American women had to earn wages. Some took in washing, while others worked as live-in housekeepers and baby sitters for white families.⁴⁹

Many of the African American women who worked on farms turned to seasonal housework to supplement their incomes, because farm jobs were just not available year round. For others, housekeeping offered the possibility of year round work, both in Florida and later, in Rochester. In the north, women became housekeepers in hotels, apartment complexes and college dormitories, as well as in private homes.

Alice Mathis maintained her income through a combination of agricultural and domestic work throughout her life. As described in the letter of reference below, it was not unusual for a domestic worker in the South to enter a short term of service for a week or two with one employer. When a needed sum of money was earned, the domestic worker terminated the employment.⁵⁰

PAIR-O-DICE
HOBE SOUND, FLA.

To Whom It May Concern:-

Alice Mathis has been in my employ for the last two weeks.

I have found her honest, sober and a very pleasant person. She cooked breakfast for five every morning and very seldom a plain dinner She is a very sweet person

Sincerely yours,
Mrs. M. Donald Grant

Thursday, November 30th

In addition to her letter of reference, Alice Mathis saved her maid's identification badge, her maid's uniform and her handsewn apron, fastened with two pearl buttons. She loved to cook and is remembered by friends as an excellent one. Among the foods that she liked best were cornbread, pig feet, ox tails, chicken feet, beans and collard greens.⁵¹

The New Rochesterians

From 1950 to 1960 the African American population in Rochester grew by greater proportions than in any other location in New York State.⁵² In that decade, the number of African Americans in Rochester tripled, growing from 7,590 to 23,586, to total 7-1/2 percent of the population. In the following ten year period, 1960 to 1970, these figures doubled. U. S. Census data shows that 49,647 African Americans lived in Rochester in 1970 and that they comprised 17 percent of the population.⁵³

Charles Jackson wrote:

I had to leave Florida because I owed my children a better future. I needed more money. The farms up North did pay more than the southern farms. With my educational limitations, it would have been hard to find work even in a factory.⁵⁴

Minnie Miller Brown added:

The decade from 1950 to 1960 was the one in which Black migration from southern farms reached its greatest proportions. Migration, indeed, continued to be principally in response to economic conditions, i.e. moving out of the rural south into places where there were better opportunities for making a living.

We know now that chances for a better life for Black southern migrants are at best problematical in the often overcrowded and decaying urban areas of the North.⁵⁵

The new Rochesterians came predominantly from Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, with the largest share coming from Sanford, Florida. The migrant stream was the largest contributor to this growth, as agricultural workers determined

to take a chance on a more settled lifestyle in Rochester with its increased economic and educational opportunities. Though some chose to stay in the rural farming communities surrounding Rochester, most gravitated to the city to seek employment.

The newcomers began to find jobs, rent and buy homes, raise families and become citizens of the community. However, as the crush of migratory workers became significant and visible, they faced an unwelcome reception from long-time Rochesterians.

Some of the established members of Afro-Rochester resented the influx of deep South African Americans. The newcomers brought different—even unacceptable—ways that many old-timers feared would be ascribed to them, and thereby undercut the ‘advances’ they thought ‘colored people were making.’

Of greater significance was the resurgence of racial discrimination experienced by the former agricultural workers, other recently arrived African Americans and even the established people of color.⁵⁶

Among the obstacles facing the newly arrived southern agricultural workers was a lack of educational background, training and experience suited to the jobs available in Rochester’s highly skilled worker, white collar labor market.⁵⁷

In spite of these limitations, however, employment studies indicated that the majority of the new Rochesterians did succeed. Construction jobs supplied initial employment for many of the newly arrived African American men, while women found their first jobs in Rochester in the service industry, primarily in private homes.⁵⁸ By 1969, the principal of the Sanford high school (from which most who migrated to Rochester had graduated) reported that he was “deluged with requests for transcripts from Rochester employers (Rochester Telephone Co., Eastman Kodak Co., the hospitals) and some from Monroe Community College.”⁵⁹

Entrepreneurial skills were displayed by many former Sanfordites who established or managed successful businesses in Rochester. These included beauty and barber shops, liquor, grocery and record stores, service stations and garages,

laundries, restaurants and lounges.⁶⁰ A *Sanford Herald* reporter who visited friends in Rochester in 1969 gave a glowing report of Rochester as "a town where the money is just floating around ready to be grabbed if you really want to get ahead and prosper. Quite a few Sanfordites have well-established businesses and beautiful homes. But, I must say, there are some who are just here."⁶¹

Additional problems encountered by the newcomers included inadequate housing (limited to concentrated areas of the city), school transfers, and social services.

In May, 1967, recognizing that the Sanford area was an important source of in-migration to Rochester, Rochester School Superintendent Herman R. Goldberg proposed the establishment of programs to ease the transition of Sanfordites into life in Rochester. The precise number of people who came to Rochester from Sanford was not determined. That it was a significant number is attested to by the involvement of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Florida Governor Claude Kirk. These officials created a New York-Florida interstate opportunities panel to address the issues surrounding the Sanford to Rochester migration.⁶² By the late 1960s, efforts were underway to improve educational programs for in-migrants, create new jobs in the Sanford area, and provide vocational training for those wishing to enter the technical industries in Rochester.⁶³

Like many of her fellow Floridians, Alice Mathis stayed with friends and relatives when she first came to Rochester. In the late 1960s, she lived with sisters Pearl and Louise Williams and their children, members of the Port Byron family with whom she had lived while working on the season.⁶⁴ In the early 1970s, Mrs. Mathis moved her things to Rochester and lived with her nephew and his wife, Dennis and Ruby Scurry. Mrs. Mathis returned to Florida several times since she still had a house there. At one point, she carried her belongings back to Florida in a U-Haul and stayed there for several years. In 1979, at the age of 80, she made her final move to Rochester and became a permanent resident.⁶⁵

Some agricultural workers took advantage of the bus ticket sent by a farmer-grower to move themselves and all their goods to Rochester. Alice Mathis paid a moving company to move her belongings and her car. She made certain that all the objects



Alice Mathis in 1982, three years after she moved permanently to Rochester. She had stayed with family in Rochester since the early 1970s. She died in October 1990 and is buried in Penfield. Photograph from the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

that had meaning to her, from her handmade quilts and clothing to her slop pot and buckets used at camp, made the journey to Rochester with her.

Because it was important to her to retain the lifetime of furnishings and other objects so carefully acquired and saved, Mrs. Mathis hoped to buy a house in Rochester. That dream was never realized. Instead, by 1980 she was living in subsidized housing at Fight Village Apartments on Joseph Avenue, where she would stay for nearly a decade. In January, 1989, she relocated to Kennedy Tower, a senior citizen apartment building managed by the Rochester Housing Authority on South Plymouth Avenue.

In Rochester, Alice Mathis earned money doing housework. She looked for live-in positions as a babysitter and domestic worker. She purchased work tops intended for use as a uniform, but never needed them. As some point, probably after her move to Fight Village, she retired.

Mrs. Mathis continued to sew, working from bags of scraps that people gave her.⁶⁶ One king-sized quilt top created during her Rochester years survives and testifies to the strength of her spirit. In its bright colors, juxtaposition of different textured fabrics, and innovations on nine-patch and log cabin designs with "strips" intermingled, the "African American aesthetic surges out."⁶⁷

When she first moved to Rochester, Alice Mathis set out to make connections with old friends. As an elderly woman living alone in the city, however, she became interestingly distrustful of other people. She isolated herself in her apartment and carefully guarded her possessions in locked trunks, cedar boxes and suitcases. In her last apartment, she was jammed in with all of her belongings, just as she had once been in an agricultural camp.

At Kennedy Tower, Alice Mathis resided near several old friends from Sanford with whom she had also worked on farms in Port Byron. Mrs. Mathis made a deep and lasting impression on all who knew her. When Alice Mathis entered the hospital in January, 1990, Sharon Clark, the Housing Specialist at Kennedy Tower, moved to save her collection by bringing it to the attention of the Rochester Museum & Science Center. Home Health Aide, Johnnie Mae Sutton, along with several other people who were close to Mrs. Mathis, volunteered their time and efforts to help in the identification and interpretation of the Mathis collection. Through her power of attorney, Mrs. Mathis agreed to bequeath whatever objects the museum was interested in to the permanent collections.

Alice Branson Mathis did not live to see "Goin' North," the retrospective exhibition of her life history. She died October 9, 1990, nine months before the exhibit opened, and is buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Penfield, New York. Her gift to a public institution of her personal possessions constituted a huge leap of faith that people would indeed "understand better." It is clear that her legacy will continue to inform and inspire future generations because her belongings communicate a triumph of the human spirit.

END NOTES

(Unless otherwise identified, all newspapers cited are published in Rochester.)

1. Mrs. Alice Branson Mathis, interview with author and Andrew J. Williams, Rochester, N.Y., July 18, 1990.
2. Dr. Mary Arnold Twining, consultation with author, May 16-17, 1991. Dr. Twining is a widely published specialist in African and African American material culture and is currently a lecturer at Clark-Atlanta University. She conducted a two-day examination of the Mathis collection at the Rochester Museum & Science Center.
3. "Goin' North" exhibition dates: July 10, 1991-August, 1992.
4. Twining consultation, May 16, 1991. The quoted words are a comment from Dr. Twining.
5. Ruth Forsythe, comp., **The Rochester Area: Selected Demographic and Social Characteristics** (Rochester, N.Y.: Monroe Community College, 1984), 50.
6. "New York Florida Program Planned for County Migrants," **Democrat & Chronicle**, March 31, 1968; and Adolph Dupree, "Rochester Roots/Routes," **about...time** (July 1984), 14. For a fuller account of the Sanford to Rochester connection see William Ringle, "A Tale of Two Cities, A Story of Two Sisters," **Times-Union**, Mar. 11, 1969.
7. These are common terms in the literature of migrant work. See Dorothy Nelkin, **On the Season: Aspects of the Migrant Labor System** (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1970), and Mary Arnold Twining, ed., "The New Nomads: Art, Life and Lore of Migrant Workers in New York State," **New York Folklore** (Winter-Spring 1987).
8. Minnie Miller Brown, "Black Women in American Agriculture," in Vivan Wisner, ed., **Two Centuries of American Agriculture** (Washington, D.C.: The Agricultural History Society, 1976), 212. Brown points out that these are the qualities of a great many African American women who have been agricultural workers.
9. Willie Hooks, quoted in Ringle, "Two Cities, Two Sisters," Mar. 11, 1969. Hooks was a former Sanfordite and owner of a gasoline station and auto repair business in Rochester.
10. Untitled brochure from the Henry Shelton Sanford Memorial Library and Museum.
11. Altermese Smith Bentley, **Georgetown: The History of a Black Neighborhood** (Sanford, Fla.: Altermese Bentley, 1989), 9.
12. *Ibid.*, 7, 17-19.
13. Eugene Barrington, "New Beginnings: The Story of Five Entrepreneurs who Migrated from Sanford, Florida to Rochester, New York." Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1976, 22.

14. See Chapter 1 in Peter Gottlieb, **Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30** (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
15. William Ringle, "A Tale of Two Cities: From Sanford, Fla. to Rochester, N.Y.," **Times-Union**, March 10, 1969; and Dwayne E. Walls, **The Chickenbone Special** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 167-9.
16. Barrington, "New Beginnings," 23.
17. Several birthdates for Mrs. Mathis appear in the documents she saved; the 1898 date is based on Social Security records. Details of Mrs. Mathis' life are based primarily on documents in the Mathis collection and on interviews with three people who were close to her: Ms. Johnnie Mae Sutton, interviews with author, Rochester, N.Y., Mar. 13, 1990 and Jan. 4, 1991; Mrs. Ruby Scurry, telephone interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., Apr. 2, 1991; Ms. Louise Williams, interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., May 7, 1991.
18. Pandora Tinsley Cole, former seasonal agricultural worker who began coming to Wayne County in 1965, quoted in Joyce Woelfle Lehmann, ed., **Migrant Farmworkers of Wayne County, New York: A Collection of Oral Histories from the Back Roads** (Lyons, N.Y.: Wayne County Historical Society, 1990), 5.
19. So many people bleached and used flour sacks as fabric that feed and flour companies purposely marketed their products in attractive materials to increase business. For more on the use of flour and feed sacking in quilts see Barbara Brackman, **Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts** (McLean, Va.: EPM Publications, Inc., 1989), 130-31.
20. Mathis interview, July 18, 1990.
21. Twining consultation, May 16-17, 1991.
22. For more on the connections between West African and African American textile traditions see Maude Southwell Wahlman and John Scully, "Aesthetic Principles in Afro-American Quilts" in William Ferris, ed., **Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts** (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 78-97; and John Michael Vlach, **The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts** (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 44-75.
23. Christopher Spring, **African Textiles** (New York: Crescent Books, 1989), 3-8, Plates, 21, 23; and Twining consultation, May 16-17, 1991.
24. Gladys-Marie Fry, "Slave Quilting on Ante-Bellum Plantations" in **Something To Keep You Warm: The Roland Freeman Collection of Black American Quilts from the Mississippi Heartland** (Jackson, Miss.: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1981), 4-5.
25. Wahlman and Scully, "Aesthetic Principles," 85.

26. Twining consultation, May 16-17, 1991. Dr. Twining describes other examples of African American quilts that contain important family history in "Echoes from the South: African-American Quiltmakers in Buffalo," **New York Folklore** (Summer-Fall, 1984), 105-15.
27. Twining consultation, May 16-17, 1991.
28. The Reverend Obadiah Williamson, interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., May 2, 1991. The Rev. Mr. Williamson is a social worker and a graduate of Oberlin College and Colgate Rochester Divinity School. He grew up in both Central Florida and Rochester.
29. Gottlieb, **Making Their Own Way**, 20-21; and Daisy Williams, interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., May 4, 1991.
30. Alberta Williams, excerpt from "Upstate," transcribed and written by Ross Talarico, in **Rochester Voices: Uncommon Writings from Common People** (New York: David Lang Publisher, 1989), 93. "Tramp" truck is a term for a migrant transportation truck.
31. Neil Adams McNall, **An Agricultural History of the Genesee Valley 1790-1860** (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1976), 88, 112.
32. Lehmann, ed., **Migrant Farmworkers of Wayne County**, 1. Increasing numbers of Haitians, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans now constitute the seasonal workforce of agricultural laborers in Wayne County.
33. *Ibid.*, 104.
34. Mary Arnold Twining, "The New Nomads," **New York Folklore** (Winter-Spring 1987), 1.
35. Brent Ashabranner, **Dark Harvest: Migrant Farmworkers in America** (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1985), 44.
36. Lehmann, ed., **Migrant Farmworkers of Wayne County**, 103.
37. Ashabranner, **Dark Harvest**, 45. This information was corroborated in interviews with former seasonal agricultural workers. It is also important to point out that when parents were offered opportunities for their children, such as day care and school programs, that they took advantage of these programs, rather than have their children work in the fields. See David A. Anderson, "Migrant Child Care Center" (Rochester, N.Y., 1959, photocopied).
38. The envelope is addressed to Joseph Albano, Red Creek, New York; it was never mailed.
39. Mathis interview, July 18, 1990. Mrs. Mathis stated that she was the only one in her family who liked to do this kind of work.
40. "The Special Oppression of Women" in migrant labor camps is described in Patricia DuPont, Carl H. Feuer and Jean Kost, "Black Migrant Farmworkers in New York State: Exploitable Labor," **Afro-Americans in New York Life and History** (Jan. 1988), 15-16.

41. Joseph Albano, telephone interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., May 9, 1991.
42. Sutton interview, Jan. 4, 1991.
43. Lola Coley, Johnnie Mae Sutton, Alberta Williams, and Daisy Williams, interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., May 4, 1991. This interview was videotaped at the Rochester Museum & Science Center under the direction of Brian D. Fox.
44. Sutton interview, Jan. 4, 1991. The loss or theft of objects left behind in Florida is recounted in some of the interviews in Lehmann, ed. **Migrant Farmworkers of Wayne County**.
45. Like many agricultural workers, Mrs. Mathis "dipped" snuff: put it in her lower lip while working. Dipping snuff was a way of consuming tobacco without smoking, which required a free hand. Navy snuff was Alice Mathis' favorite brand.
46. L. Williams interview, May 7, 1991.
47. L. Williams interview, May 7, 1991.
48. Gertrude Jones to Alice Mathis, 804 Bay Avenue, Sanford, Florida.
49. Gottleib, **Making Their Own Way**, 25.
50. Ibid., 25.
51. Sutton interview, Jan. 4, 1991.
52. "New York Florida Program," Mar. 31, 1968. Between 1950 and 1960, Rochester's nonwhite population jumped 208.9 percent.
53. Forsythe, comp., **Selected Demographics**, 50. By 1980, the numbers of African Americans had risen to 62,332 or 25.8 percent of the total number of Rochesterians.
54. Charles Jackson, **More Than One Journey** (Clyde, N.Y., Galen Publications, 1989), 66. The Rev. Charles Jackson details his life story which entailed his move to Wayne County from Sanford as a seasonal agricultural worker.
55. Brown, "Black Women in American Agriculture," 209, 211.
56. Dr. David A. Anderson, consultation with author, Rochester, N.Y., June 10, 1991. Supervisor of Parent Education and Training for the Rochester City School District, Dr. Anderson has lived in Rochester since 1956, when he came here to attend R.I.T. His 1959 photographic essay, "Migrant Child Care Center," was part of the "Goin' North" exhibition. See also Adolph Dupree, "Rochester Roots/Routes," **about...time** (Dec. 1984), 14.
57. Elizabeth Benz Croft, comp., **A Study of the Unemployed in Rochester and Monroe County, New York** (Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester Bureau of Municipal Research, Jan. 1967), 11. For more on the obstacles facing former seasonal agricultural workers see Adolph Dupree, "Rochester Roots/Routes," **about...time** (Oct. 1984).

58. Ibid., 26, 84. Interviews with former seasonal agricultural workers corroborate these findings.
59. Ringle, "Two Cities, Two Sisters," Mar. 11, 1969.
60. Barrington, "New Beginnings" details the histories of five African Americans who moved from Sanford to Rochester and established businesses here. Sanfordneers, Inc., Annual Dance Programs, Rochester, N.Y., Oct. 18, 1969 and Sept. 11, 1971 contain advertisements for businesses owned, managed or staffed by former Sanfordites. Sanfordneers, Inc. was a club for former Sanford residents, founded in Rochester in 1969. Alder Brown Craig, Annie Hudson, and Cora Thomas, interview with author, Rochester, N.Y., Apr. 22, 1991.
61. Mrs. Robert B. Thomas, Jr., "Scribe Reports on Holiday Trip," **The Sanford Herald**, July 2, 1969.
62. William Ringle, "A Tale of Two Cities: Cities Appraise Year's Swapping," **Times-Union**, Mar. 12, 1969.
63. William D. Tammus, "The Hard Core: How to Make Them Workers," **Times-Union**, Jan. 9, 1969.
64. L. Williams interview, May 7, 1991.
65. Scurry interview, Apr. 2, 1991. Mr. & Mrs. Scurry were both seasonal agricultural workers from Sanford who moved their family to Penfield and then to Rochester in the 1950s. Mr. Scurry, a World War II veteran, worked in construction, while Mrs. Scurry became a Senior Nursing Assistant at Strong Memorial Hospital.
66. Mathis interview, July 18, 1990.
67. Twining consultation, May 16-17, 1991.

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Rochester Museum & Science Center.*

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Back cover: Alice Mathis hand-sewed this quilt top with scraps saved for her by friends. She improvised on "nine-patch" and "log cabin" designs and inserted "strips" throughout. Photograph by David C. Eggers, the Rochester Museum & Science Center.

