

Living Together in the Alabama River Basin

Alabama's Black Belt

<http://irhr.ua.edu/blackbelt/intro.html>

The crescent-shaped region known as the Black Belt stretches from Texas to Virginia. As noted by Arthur Raper in his 1936 study Preface to Peasantry, this region historically has been home to “the richest soil and the poorest people” in the United States. In his autobiographical work Up from Slavery, Dr. Booker T. Washington observed that he had “often been asked to define the term ‘Black Belt.’ So far as I can learn,” he wrote:

...the term was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the color of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white. (Washington, 1965, p.68)

In the roughly two hundred counties comprising today’s Black Belt, over half the population is African-American.

The Alabama Black Belt extends from Mississippi's border through the heart of the state. From DeSoto’s meeting with Tuscaloosa to the birth of the Confederacy and the civil rights struggles of the mid-twentieth century, it was here that some of some of Alabama's most significant historical events occurred. It is an area rich in cultural traditions and the strength of its people. Unfortunately, however, it is also an area in dire need, confronted with economic stagnation, declining population, and insufficient health care and schools.

Black Belt Counties: [Barbour](#), [Bullock](#), [Butler](#), [Choctaw](#), [Clarke](#), [Conecuh](#), [Dallas](#), [Escambia](#), [Greene](#), [Hale](#), [Lowndes](#), [Macon](#), [Marengo](#), [Monroe](#), [Perry](#), [Pickens](#), [Sumter](#), [Washington](#), and [Wilcox](#).

Zigzag wall crack brings bad news

Replacing drywall recommended, and it's a messy job

BY BILL AND KEVIN BURNETT, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2, 2008.
Inman News

Q: I just read an article on repairing drywall at the joints, which I have a lot of. But in one room the wall is cracked in a diagonal -- sort of zigzag -- all the way down the wall. It really looks as if I need all new drywall. What do you suggest?

A: Zigzag cracks in a finished wall, either in drywall or in plaster, indicate abnormal stress. The cracks can look like a map of the Nile River, traveling in a somewhat vertical path. Or they can look like a map of the Colorado River, meandering across the wall in a diagonal fashion. Sounds like your wall has headed to Colorado?

In either case, the cause is the same -- stress on the wood framing underneath.

Unfortunately, you're right about replacing the drywall on the damaged wall. It's failed, and replacement is the only viable option. You could try to cut out the damaged section and replace that, but depending on the size of the section compared with the size of the wall, you may as well re-rock the whole wall.

Replacing the whole wall also allows for a little preventive maintenance in the form of diagonal bracing. Before you start, take a look at the rest of the room and try to figure out the source of the stress. Are there diagonal cracks above doorways or window openings in addition to the one in the wall? If so, the cause may be that the building is settling or moving with the fluctuation of moisture in the soil.

Kevin has a stress crack in one of the outside walls of his house. That corner of the house moves as winter moisture expands the soil and the summer heat dries it out. The crack opens and closes like clockwork with the seasons. It's not that bad, so he's opted to do nothing. If the cracks get worse, he'll have to look into reinforcing the corner of the house to mitigate the effects of the movement.

If your diagonal crack is the only one, it's more likely that the crack was caused when the wood framing cured. Replacing the drywall should solve the problem.

The process is pretty straightforward and, while a bit messy, can be accomplished by a do-it-yourselfer. First, carefully remove the casework from any door and window openings and the baseboard from the target wall. Then comes the fun part: demolition.

Let your inner child out and pound holes in the wall large enough so you can get a hand into the opening and pull the drywall off the wall. Once all the drywall is off, pull all the nails from the studs.

With the wall open, this is a great time to add additional electrical outlets, wall sconces with switches, or an extra phone jack. If the wall is an exterior wall, check for adequate insulation and add it if needed.

As an added precaution, we suggest you install some diagonal bracing at each end of the wall. Metal let-in braces are available at home centers and lumberyards. These are rigid "L"-shaped pieces of metal that are solid on one side and perforated for nails on the other.

To install the braces, snap a chalk line diagonally across the wall from the top plate to the bottom plate. Use a small circular saw to cut niches the width of the blade, called kerfs, into each stud. Put the solid edge of the brace into the kerfs and nail the perforated edge to the studs. This prevents the wall from racking if diagonal forces are exerted on the wall.

After installing wiring or insulation, hang the new drywall.

Match the thickness of the old drywall. It's probably 1/2 inch. We like to use drywall screws to hang the rock, although drywall nails work. Beware, though, that nails tend to work their way out, leaving impressions of nail heads on the finished wall. If you use screws, install them about 8 inches apart. If you use nails, 6 inches on center is the standard.

We recommend using fiberglass mesh tape with a first coat of a hot mud, such as DuraBond 90 to tape the joints.

This base coat tends to be stronger and more resistant to cracking than paper tape and standard joint compound. Because it dries harder, it's harder to sand. Use joint compound for subsequent coats because it's easier to sand and has a longer pot life.

Once the final coat of mud is sanded, paint the wall using drywall primer and one or two coats of acrylic finish. Reinstall the casework and baseboard and you're done.

Ron's notes: Black soil, Mississippi mud, Gumbo mud, Prairie mud, etc., common names used for a soil which is hard like rock in the summer months and soft as mush in the winter months, which causes many slabs to “*expand and crack*,” and also causes walls to do the same.

Another problem is the slab may sink slightly or greater depths causing severe problems. The Alabama State Highway Department and State Engineering have maps showing where this soil runs through Alabama. The vein usually runs just south of I-85 from East to West. However, there are areas where the Red Clay soils may be just South of I-85.

Within the City of Montgomery, this soil is very well known in the Old Cloverdale areas. Many of these homes have witnessed this problem for years and many have not, and have been under-pinned (slab has been re-enforced.) You may view maps on pages

In West Alabama there is a region commonly called “The Black Belt” this name arrived from the “Black Soil” which runs through Central Alabama toward the West into Mississippi.

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Next page: **“The Origins of Alabama's Black Belt Prairies”**

The Origins of Alabama's Black Belt Prairies



Wildlife and the Outdoors

The Origins of Alabama's Black Belt Prairies

By David K. Nelson, Supervising Wildlife Biologist, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Alabama's Black Belt Prairies originated about 90 million years ago during the Cretaceous Period. During this time, warm ocean waters covered a shoreline that extended from present-day Montgomery, Alabama, westward into Mississippi, then north toward Memphis, Tennessee. These prehistoric waters teemed with marine creatures and algae that produced tiny plates of calcium carbonate. When they died, their remains settled to the ocean bottom and over eons of time accumulated to form a thick layer of white chalk-like material. When ocean waters receded, these landmasses began to weather and plants colonized them. The impermeable nature of this underlying chalk and the alkalinity of the soils originating from chalk promoted the growth of grasses and cane. The organic material left behind from many generations of grasses produced a fertile black clay soil that gave the Black Belt its name.

Prairie grasses were frequently burned, either by natural occurrence, such as lightning, or by people that began to inhabit this region about 10,000 years ago. Frequent burning of this natural prairie maintained the meadows by killing back trees and shrubs that tried to establish in these areas.

Archaeological records of Native Americans found in the Black Belt indicated only limited use, mainly by small groups of hunters and gatherers. The large civilizations of native Alabamians were associated with those areas that were suitable to slash and burn agriculture. Trees were killed by girdling, the area burned and the sandy soils were worked with simple tools of wood, bone and stone to grow corn and beans. Black Belt soils, although fertile, are very sticky when wet and dry out to form a hard crust. They are very difficult to cultivate with simple tools.

Hernando De Soto and his expedition were the first Europeans to see the Black Belt Prairies. In November 1540, De Soto and his expedition traversed an extremely fertile, but uninhabited county called Pafallaya, now portions of Marengo and Greene counties. The French occupation of Alabama gives us a more vivid description of the Black Belt Prairies. In the *History of Alabama*, Albert Jones Pickett writes of a French expedition into the Black Belt regions in May 1736. "The banks on either side (of the Tombigbee River) were covered with large cane. Soon, however, the French were relieved by the appearance of the most beautiful county in the world. The prairies were stretched out wide before them, covered with green grass and flowers, while forests of magnificent trees were seen in the distance."

By the early 1800s, the fertile soils of the Black Belt Prairies began to attract a flood of immigrants. Armed with plows and teams of mules, these immigrants began to change forever these natural prairies as they were cleared and tilled, turning the native prairie grasses and flowers into cotton fields. In many areas, the fragile black prairie soil was washed away exposing the underlying chalk. Today, much of the agriculture of the Black Belt is pasture for livestock or used for aquaculture, with only limited amounts of row crops.

Lands throughout the Black Belt region continue to be highly desirable for their recreational value. The rural nature of this area, the abundance of wildlife and the suitability of these soils for construction of lakes and ponds all contribute to this demand. Through education and management, it is hoped that some of these areas can be brought back to the native grass prairies that were a unique part of Alabama's historical landscape.

Next page Map of the "Black Belt" Region

The “Black Belt” Region

There is a large swath of Central Alabama known for its dark rich soils and primarily agricultural economy and communities. Alabama’s “Black Belt” consists of the Alabama River Basin counties of Bullock, Butler, Montgomery, Crenshaw, Dallas, Lowndes, Marengo, Montgomery, Wilcox, Perry, and Wilcox. This region is characterized as experiencing severe social and economic hardships. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the counties contain some of the lowest scoring school systems and highest rates of poverty, illiteracy and infant mortality in the state. In addition, the communities in these areas are among the 100 poorest counties in the United States, with poverty rates ranking in the poorest 13 percent of counties nationally. A combination of these factors has resulted in the general opinion that this region is the most economically depressed area in Alabama, a situation that is thought to be attributable to poorly developed infrastructure and sparse economic opportunities. A report issued by Governor Bob Riley’s Black Belt Action Commission summarizes the need to address the conditions in this part of Alabama:

“Often called the state’s ‘Third World’, the problems of the Black Belt impacts all of our citizens. If Alabama is to reach its full potential, the challenges of this region must be addressed.”

-Black Belt Action Commission

Traditional Counties of the Alabama Black Belt



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This information on “*Black Soil*” obtained from an article presented in the Montgomery Advertiser.

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