The Birmingham Public Library would like to thank:

The Alabama Humanities Foundation, the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Shackelford Family for sharing invaluable knowledge of their family history, many hours of time with the curators, and their support of the exhibition.

Dr. Psycher Williams-Ferson of the University of Maryland, College Park for providing expertise in African American history and visual culture and offering insight and guidance throughout the development of this exhibition.

Francis Ruffin of Huntsville for sharing her extensive knowledge of photography and Alabama history.

Jan Brackner of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture

Morris Moreno of APO, Birmingham, Alabama

John Delk of Delk Farms, Mountain Brook, Alabama

Both Sides of the Lens was curated by Andrew Nelson of the University of Maryland, College Park and Dr. Reggiani and dep.

Shackelford Family of the Birmingham Public Library Archives Department. The materials in question are:

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Both Sides of the Lens

Photographs by the Shackelford Family

Fayette County, Alabama (1900-1930)

From the collection of the Birmingham Public Library Archives
Both Sides of the Lens
Photographs by the Shackelford Family
Fayette County, Alabama (1900-1935)

In the early twentieth century, posing for a photographic portrait was an event—it was an opportunity for people to make meaningful visual statements about themselves, their families, and their communities. Those living in Fayette County, Alabama, and the surrounding area did not need to travel to a photo studio to have their picture taken. Instead, they could simply visit the Shackelford family. Mitch and Geneva Shackelford, along with their children, were multi-talented African American artists who played a central role in the rural Fayette County community of Covin. Though farming was their primary vocation, the Shackelfords were also commercial photographers who left behind a collection of more than 850 glass-plate negatives that are now preserved in the Birmingham Public Library Archives.

The Shackelfords photographed local residents and visiting travelers, taking pictures of individuals, families, school groups, and civic organizations. In an era when demeaning and stereotypical depictions of blacks were prevalent in the United States, the Shackelfords provided African Americans with a vehicle for self-representation. The Shackelford photographs offer a dynamic and rarely seen depiction of the African American experience in rural Alabama and show black people living full and vibrant lives in the face of the racial and socioeconomic oppression of the Jim Crow era. This exhibition offers a glimpse into life on both sides of the lens, telling the story of these remarkable photographers and those who stepped in front of their camera.

Unidentified portrait, c. 19105.

Mitch and Geneva Shackelford with an unidentified boy, c. 19105. Mitch and Geneva Shackelford were leaders in Fayette County’s African American community and were instrumental in forming a local school and Baptist church. Geneva was known for her cooking, salt making, and musical skill. The couple is pictured here on the steps of their home in Covin.

Unidentified portrait, c. 1905.

Mitch Shackelford and unidentified children, c. 1905. The Shackelford home stood on the road between Columbus, Mississippi, and Birmingham, Alabama, and served as a rest stop and boarding house, with Geneva Shackelford cooking for both black and white travelers who often spent the night. People also came to the Shackelford place to have their picture taken. The family owned a large format camera that used glass negatives to produce high resolution images. They developed the photographs in a darkroom built in the attic. Multiple members of the Shackelford family are thought to have produced the photographs in this collection.

Unidentified portraits, c. 19205.

The Shackelfords and the people they photographed carefully selected locations and poses to record specific aspects of leisure and everyday life. As seen here, posing on the porch steps with a pet can capture a sense of a casual day at home.

Unidentified portraits, c. 19105.

The Shackelfords were often called on to take portraits. Customers would visit the Shackelford home and have their pictures taken there or, as in this portrait, the Shackelfords would photograph a family, group, or individual outside of their own home or at another site.