

# ACE Spotlight: Demopolis Experiences Impressive Growth and Attracts New Industries

By Ella Painter • Communications Intern • ALM



**F**ounded in 1817, the charming city of Demopolis was established by French settlers hoping to harvest grapes and olives. Although their efforts were unsuccessful, the “River City” has grown to have a profound impact on west-central Alabama, both economically and recreationally.

Today, Demopolis is home to more than 7,000 Alabamians. Beautiful historical homes, reminiscent of the antebellum era, line the city’s streets and serve as a reminder of the state’s complex history to visitors and citizens alike.

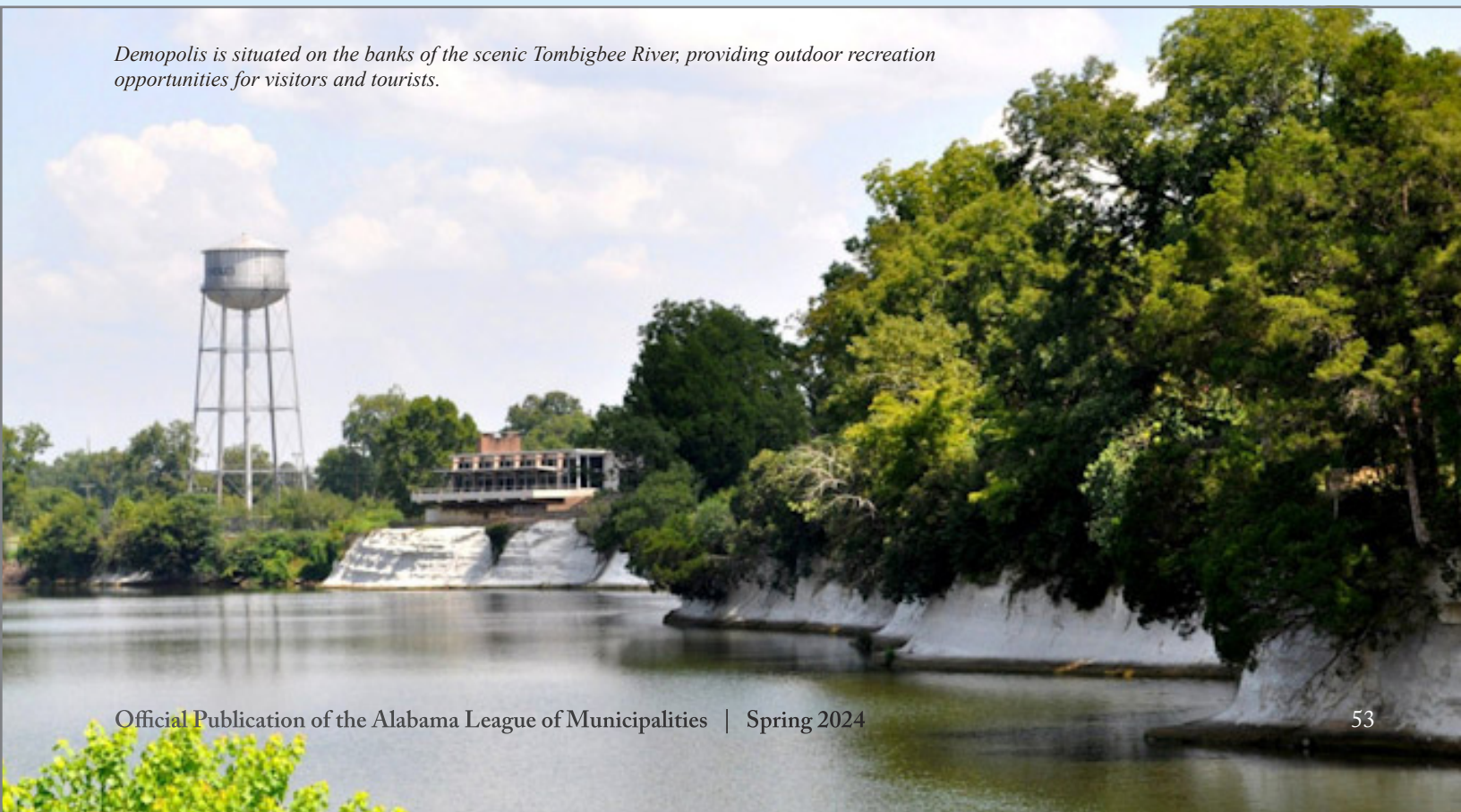
In 2003, city officials looking to grow Demopolis’ population and improve its infrastructure applied to the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program. ACE was established in 2002 with the mission to provide technical assistance to select communities with populations of 2,000 to 18,000. ACE has grown to support more than 40 communities statewide. Through program participation, communities establish various long-term goals to grow and thrive, focusing on economic improvement. Since being designated an ACE community in 2005, this gem on the river has experienced various economic, educational and health care improvements.

As a Demopolis city councilman in the early 2000s, Mayor Woody Collins’ involvement with the ACE program began when municipal leaders became aware of the community’s deficiencies. Realizing the unfulfilled potential of the biggest city in Marengo County, city officials eagerly partnered with ACE to create a strategic plan to ensure its prosperity. ACE participants take a comprehensive, three-phase approach to reach each goal. The three phases are: Assessment; Leadership Development and Strategic Planning; and Implementation and Comprehensive Planning. Once a municipality has successfully completed all three phases, it is designated an “Alabama Community of Excellence,” illustrating its commitment to a positive, robust future.

Today, more than 20 years after the city joined the program, Mayor Collins has plenty of examples demonstrating the sweeping impact ACE has had on a Black Belt community in need of revitalization.

“ACE has created a spark in our community that has manifested itself as excellence in education, excellence in health

*Demopolis is situated on the banks of the scenic Tombigbee River, providing outdoor recreation opportunities for visitors and tourists.*





care and a now vibrant downtown area through our newly established Main Street Alabama Community designation,” Collins said.

On June 1, 2022, the city’s downtown joined the Main Street Alabama program, a partner of the League. This prestigious designation came to fruition as the result of the hard work of municipal officials and several community leaders looking to preserve the city’s historical downtown and reinvigorate its once lively business district. Through this project, Demopolis receives assistance with building restoration and attracting local businesses to downtown storefronts.

The city has also seen vast educational improvements. Wallace State Community College opened in Demopolis in 2019 and recently received recognition as an accredited two-year college. Offering economic incentives to local students interested in attending the institution, Demopolis effectively promotes higher education opportunities in the Black Belt. In August 2023, the college opened another location after receiving \$3.9 million to repurpose the city’s former National Guard Armory.

Additionally, Demopolis has the potential to host the innovative Alabama School of Healthcare Sciences (ASHS). If funding is approved by the Alabama Legislature this spring, the residential high school will attract students from across the state interested in pursuing careers in health care.

Mayor Collins said, “The ASHS is a tremendous honor for our community, as the governor has reached out to our community and shown her faith in us.” He believes the school has potential to become a nationwide model for future health care needs.

Ivey and several state leaders have concluded that Demopolis is the ideal location for ASHS based on the results of an extensive feasibility study and the city’s “gold standard” rural hospital, Whitfield Regional Hospital. The hospital recently underwent a \$25 million renovation and is a member of the prestigious University of Alabama at Birmingham Health System.

The city has also attracted new industries and major employers to the area since joining the ACE program. In January 2017, Two Rivers Lumber opened for business, investing \$65 million and creating 95 jobs in the area.

Mayor Collins views the city’s ACE distinction as a major selling point in convincing



*“Christmas on the River” parade participants smile and wave at onlookers. This annual event attracts tourists and spreads holiday joy to the community.*



*Lane's Fire Pros' Christmas tree display won second place during a “Christmas on the River” event.*



*Demopolis hosts a variety of fishing events on the banks of the Tombigbee River, including Alabama High School Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS) Nation competitions.*



businesses to join the community, stating, “It was an accomplishment to have the designation for our historic community, and it is very important to be able to display this designation to prospective businesses.”

An industrial-grade pellet manufacturer, Drax, also joined the community as a new business in 2019 and has had a massive economic impact. With an investment of \$100 million, the manufacturer employs 350 workers.

Leaning on its natural resources, the city continues to provide its citizens with various opportunities to experience the outdoors. For example, a newly renovated landing on the banks of the Tombigbee River can host more than 150 boaters for fishing tournaments, attracting outdoorsmen from across

the state in search of healthy competition.

The Demopolis River Walk also allows

nature lovers in search of a peaceful stroll the opportunity to enjoy scenic views and birding sites.

Furthermore, the river creates unique experiences for visitors and community members and furthers economic development during holiday seasons. Demopolis’ annual “Christmas on the River” and “Freedom on the River” events attract tourists from around the state and spread seasonal cheer to all who attend. “Christmas on the River” has become a timeless tradition in the city and is a week-long celebration consisting of more than a dozen events, including two parades and a tree lighting ceremony. Similarly, “Freedom on the River” is held on the Fourth of July and features a children’s parade, fireworks and festive music. Thousands come out to enjoy these festivities each year, without fail, significantly boosting the local economy.

Despite experiencing major progress in the last 20 years, Demopolis is not yet done. The city is determined to continue to improve and pursue its ACE program goals through a steering committee, which consists of various community members passionate about Demopolis’ continued advancement.

When asked what advice he has for cities interested in participating in the program, Mayor Collins said, “Take the time and sign up. You’ll discover issues you’ve been overlooking for years.”

If your municipality needs assistance with updating your strategic plan or is interested in becoming an ACE community, contact Mary Jackson at [mjackson@almonline.org](mailto:mjackson@almonline.org). Learn more about the ACE program at [www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org](http://www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org). ■

*Top: Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce members and business owners celebrate the ribbon-cutting of Nancy and Co. Fine Jewelers.*

*Bottom: Two Rivers Lumber was named “Business of the Year” by the Demopolis Chamber of Commerce in June 2020.*



**For more information about the ACE program and its impact on smaller communities, scan this QR code.**

