

# Arab, Alabama: Reviving the Spirit of Its Founders in Modern Growth



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**T**hirty miles south of Huntsville, nestled on top of Brindley Mountain, is Arab, Alabama. Here lies a small city with a strong sense of community and a history of perseverance.

From its origins on land once inhabited by the Cherokee Indians to its growth as a community shaped by settlers, many stories define the identity of the city we know today.

Scotch-Irish families from the Carolinas, Tennessee and Georgia first began arriving in Arab in the early 19th century. Notable pioneers included Philip Fry, who built the first log cabin in 1790, and Mace Thomas Payne Brindley, for whom the mountain is named. Joseph Thompson settled in the area in 1836, and his son, Stephen Tuttle Thompson, built the first house on Arab land in 1857. Stephen later established the Arab Post Office, naming it after his son Arad, though a clerical error changed the name to “Arab.” Arab’s story reflects a history of collaboration and progress that continues today through its participation in the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program.

Arab, incorporated in 1892, is one of 45 cities in the state to have earned the Alabama Community of Excellence designation. With a population of approximately 8,800, Arab is known for its small-town charm and safe, family-friendly atmosphere. The city has become a bedroom community for Huntsville, offering a quieter lifestyle while remaining close to the metro area.

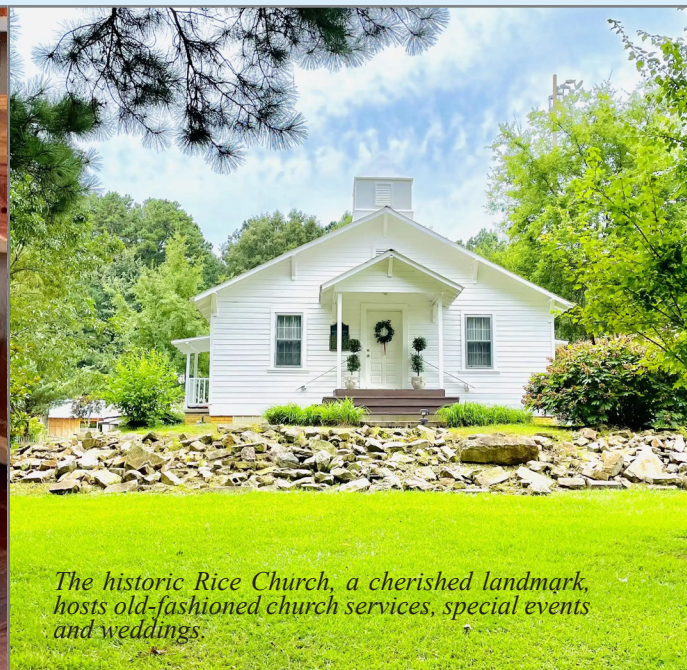
Established in 2002, ACE provides technical assistance and tools to help small cities with populations between 2,000 and 18,000 achieve long-term success. Its three-phase program brings together experts from state agencies, universities, banks and utilities to create development plans tailored to each city’s strengths and priorities. Arab applied to ACE in 2010 and became an official ACE community in 2012. Today, Mayor Bob Joslin, who was elected to the position in 2012, and Economic Development Director and Special Projects Coordinator Melissa Cook work to ensure Arab continues moving toward its ACE goals.



Although neither Mayor Joslin nor Cook were involved in creating Arab’s original strategic plan, they have worked to keep the city moving forward. Cook, who began working for the city in 2016, has used her professional



*A friendly game of checkers is one of several nostalgic items on view at Smith's Country Store in Historic Village at Arab City Park.*



*The historic Rice Church, a cherished landmark, hosts old-fashioned church services, special events and weddings.*

background to help update and manage Arab's plans. She is currently assisting the administration in maintaining the distinction between the strategic plan, which focuses on short-term, actionable goals, and the comprehensive plan, which outlines a broader, long-term vision for growth.

"When ACE came and did our strategic plan update in 2021, it was so successful. Without a doubt, it was the most community support that I have ever seen in my career experience either conducting or participating in them in three different states and 25 years of chamber and economic development experience," Cook said.

The city uses the plan to guide key projects and ensure growth does not come at the expense of its historic character. The Arab Historic Preservation Commission oversees changes in the downtown district, ensuring they align with the area's history. Recent improvements include renovating sidewalks to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards, installing period-style lighting, adding benches and landscaping and upgrading infrastructure. The \$850,000 sidewalk renovation project was funded through a Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) phase II grant, administered by the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT). This federally funded program supports projects that improve pedestrian and cyclist safety, enhance accessibility and promotes non-motorized transportation.

Arab's investments in recreation, infrastructure and development extend beyond the downtown district. A \$9 million city park renovation modernized eight ballfields, snack stands and restrooms, turning the park into a top-tier facility for community use. A bikeway and walkway project, funded by city resources and a private benefactor, is under construction to create more green space. Traffic improvements are underway, including a \$2.7 million project to upgrade signals along U.S. Highway 231.



Top left: Arab High School students engage in hands-on learning in an advanced placement robotics class. Bottom left: Sugarfest, held annually on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, features over 150 arts and crafts booths. Bottom right: A vibrant butterfly mural adds charm to the Fall Family Fun Fest.

Residential and retail growth reflect Arab’s appeal as a small-town alternative to urban living. This growth is balanced by a commitment to preserving the city’s identity, a priority for Arab’s leadership. Recent infrastructure investments, such as a \$2 million ALDOT grant to fund a new road supporting a major industrial project relocation, underscore the city’s strategic efforts to diversify its economy.

While challenges remain in retail recruitment due to competition from nearby cities like Guntersville, Cullman and south Huntsville, Arab’s status as an ACE city has strengthened its ability to secure funding and attract new businesses. The city’s retail trade area, encompassing approximately 53,000 people, continues to expand, drawing more opportunities year after year.

In addition to its growing retail sector, companies such as frogg toggs®, Progress Rail-CATERPILLAR®, BK Aerospace, Atrion® Medical Products, Laysan Bio, Inc., UMICORE Specialty Chemicals and WEBER-Hydraulik-HYCO have established a strong presence in the city, contributing to its local economy.

Arab’s appeal to families is strengthened by its exceptional public school system, consistently ranked among Alabama’s top-performing districts for over 25 years. Arab High School’s HOSA Future Health Professionals program, formerly Health Occupations Students of America, has earned national recognition and claimed the No. 1 ranking in the state for 39 of the past 42 years. Along with this, the district’s success extends to its pre-K program; a nationally recognized musical theater program; award-winning choral and band programs; and a wide range of athletic offerings. Arab City Schools continue to attract families and set a standard for public education in Alabama.

This dedication to excellence in education is complemented by Arab’s access to top-tier health care services. Marshall Medical Systems, which serves the entire county, was acquired by the Huntsville Hospital System, connecting Arab to world-class physicians and state-of-the-art facilities within their extensive regional and statewide health care network.

The city is actively pursuing grants for projects such as wastewater system upgrades and a new road to support industrial growth. Cook also notes that the ACE designation has not only provided valuable resources but also strengthened connections with other communities. “Being able to describe Arab as an Alabama Community of Excellence says a lot without saying anything,” she said.

Arab shows that by embracing the principles of its early settlers, a small community can grow and adapt while preserving its identity. Its partnership with ACE has opened doors to opportunity, serving as a testimony of what is possible for cities ready to invest in their future. ■



*Left: The Arab Splash Pad has become a popular, favorite summertime attraction since its opening in 2019. Right: Each year, over 450 kids take on the soccer field at Thompson Edison Park.*