

BUILT FOR THE LIVING:
AFRICAN AMERICAN FUNERAL HOMES ON THE TENNESSEE LANDSCAPE

By

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ABSTRACT

African American funeral homes are an understudied part of the historic built environment that provide a unique window into the African American experience from Reconstruction to the present. The extant funeral homes of Tennessee today emerged on the landscape following World War One, but stem from a longer history of professionalization in the funeral business starting in the 1880s. African American funeral homes were expressions of entrepreneurial spirit and cultural responsibility forged in the midst of Jim Crow segregation to serve communities in their toughest times of loss.

The adapted and purpose-built buildings that served as funeral homes became deliberate physical statements that bordered the white and black communities and anchored neighborhoods, serving as an integral space for the needs of the community. Specific case studies of African American funeral businesses in Maury and Rutherford Counties highlight the buildings and their location on the landscape that made funeral homes a community asset for stability and pride. Today, these funeral homes—operational and no longer open—serve as effective tools for understanding the segregated past and require heightened attention from historians and historic preservationists to capture their stories.

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INTRODUCTION

Funeral homes are places where the living go to confront the dead in a complex space intersecting between the sacred and secular. The extant funeral homes of Tennessee today emerged on the landscape following World War One and the Southern transition to a modern death culture. Like most businesses in the South during this time, towns usually had at least two. Each funeral home served one side of the segregated community. In both a fight for racial equality and effort of necessity, African American funeral homes were expressions of entrepreneurial spirit and cultural responsibility. These built establishments and their location on a divided landscape were active reflections of segregation and deliberate physical statements of autonomy for the African American community.

These statements manifested in buildings that bordered the white and black communities and anchored black neighborhoods. From commercial buildings to repurposed houses, African American funeral homes from the 1880s to the 1970s served as an integral space for the needs of the community as economic pillars, cultural institutions, and gatekeepers to the outside world. Many funeral homes remain open and in the possession of the founding families, but now face challenges that may compromise their future. Large funeral company buy-outs and the waning support of an all-black customer base in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries threatened

the businesses that have helped anchor communities for generations—some for over a century.

Funeral homes have also evolved into buildings on the landscape whose presence has slowly become expected, and thus forgotten. Preservationists have neglected these historical resources and marginalized their position in the built environment and consequently in the popular historical narrative. African American funeral homes are significant buildings that evoke a power of place, and through their identification and preservation, historians can chart a significant part of the African American experience from Reconstruction to the present.

The overarching American perception of death, which the evolution of the funeral industry both shaped and influence, began with grave uncertainty and concern for the judgement of the soul and the fate of the body. The association of fear with death slowly lessened and separated as society developed a more palatable experience based upon the heightened belief of a merciful God in the dominate Christian faith and the scientific care of the corpse.¹ Two major themes defining the transition were the changing American perceptions from a Protestant-based fear in final judgment to a more rational scientific naturalism, and the rapidly modernizing economy of the nation that fostered a new middle class and its consumerism.² The resulting notion of a socially

¹ James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 159.

² Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*; Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7-11.

acceptable death moved from the saved soul to the well-being of the grieving survivors and the removal of any macabre aspects such as a slowly decomposing body.³

Embalming became standard practice to ameliorate the living's discomfort around the body, while also representing a product of the newly established standards of sanitation within the institutionalization of health.

The organized professionalization of the funeral industry starting in 1882 and the emergence of the modern "funeral home" by the 1920s were part of the larger transformation in the way Americans of all races handled death.⁴ The new funeral home represented the point of departure of death from familial care in the home to a domesticated public service aligned with modernization and the transformation of religious beliefs. Connecting the two points of the continuum were itinerant embalmers who would care for the bodies in the homes of the dead, and eventually would begin removing the body for care at their own establishment.⁵ The delayed acceptance of an industrialized market economy and the tighter grip on traditional cultural beliefs in the American South created a decidedly different perception of death than the wider trends of the United States.⁶ Southern funeral professionals, as new arrivals to the business

³ Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, translated by Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 89.

⁴ Laderman, *Rest in Peace*.

⁵ Charles R. Wilson, "The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 67, no 1 (Spring 1983): 52.

⁶ Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., introduction to *Death and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11; Wilson, "The Southern Funeral Director," 60. For a

world in the later part of the transition to modern funeral homes, had to gain the trust of their respective communities to provide a new and unfamiliar service that invaded the traditional roles of the family.

Respectful care of the body and the growing financial means to provide a proper burial contributed to the simultaneous rise of the funeral profession among African Americans. The parallel rise of a black middle class within American society at the end of the nineteenth century and an entrepreneurial spirit geared towards the cultural mores of white society, situated black funeral professionals alongside their white counterparts in an equal implementation of innovation and practice. Black funeral professionals, however, “were responding not only to a business opportunity but also to a sense of cultural responsibility and community necessity,” because racial violence, particularly lynching, exhausting labor, and unequal access to healthcare made death a pervasive element in the lives of African Americans since enslavement.⁷ The widespread societal instability resulted in a more meaningful death ritual.⁸ African Americans looked closer to their religious beliefs to cope with these travails, most notably in a “homegoing” ceremony with their ancestors away from the evils of this world. African Americans’

fictional interpretation of early twentieth century southern death culture, see William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage International, 1985).

⁷ Karla F.C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 16.

⁸ David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study of Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 122. Stannard argued that the death of founding members of Puritan communities and the increasing secular culture of America resulted in a heightened awareness of how one dealt with death through the lens of their cultural beliefs. His conclusion was social instability instilled a greater sense of death tradition.

bodies deserved a care that only other African Americans could provide and respect compared with the often mistreatment by white funeral professional.⁹ The shared cultural practices and experiences of proprietor and customer solidified the importance and meaning of African American funeral homes as an alternative to white-owned businesses.

The introduction of funeral homes represented the larger African American effort to provide trusted services specific to their cultural needs and to create space that enhanced their maneuverability as citizens. Funeral homes were more than just new businesses; they were also a new space for social and economic interaction on the built landscape. The post-Emancipation landscape of the United States reflected a combination of factors including the continued racial hierarchy of white supremacy under American slavery, the implementation of Jim Crow laws, and the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In the increasingly restrictive atmosphere of the southern United States, funeral homes were one way African Americans actively forged their own physical and active space in politics, economics, and society. African Americans created a world of their own through the institutions they created: funeral homes, schools, churches, businesses, and social organizations.¹⁰ “By focusing on the creation of community and the contestation over space,” architectural historian Angel David Nieves argues that historians can analyze how African Americans “across time and location

⁹ Holloway, *Passed On*, 21.

¹⁰ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), xvi.

have sought to create space in American society in a way that both reflected their community ethics and asserted their right to exist in a society that rejected their equality and citizenship.”¹¹ Nieves alludes to the double consciousness of African Americans, the psychological and social concept W.E.B. Du Bois introduced as the complex “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”¹² The collective African American struggle to maintain a sense of identity while simultaneously asserting their right to equality translated into a separate and unique cultural landscape in a time of an emerging funeral industry.

It is important to understand the position of the undertaker or funeral director—as the individual attached to the image of the business—within the community to understand the ways his or her place of business represented the persistent double consciousness. Their middle-class philanthropic tendencies and close relationships with fraternal organizations and churches elevated their social status and opened avenues for more leadership in business, religion, and politics. Society thus held them in high regard for conducting culturally significant services and as examples of black success, but also as worthy counterparts to white professionals who many saw as individuals who established the image of achievement.

¹¹ Angel David Nieves, “Cultural Landscapes of Resistance and Self-Definition for the Race: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Socio-Spatial Race History,” in *We Shall Independent Be: African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, eds. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

Alongside physicians and pastors, undertakers made a consistent impression as individuals of unique skill who earned the respect of their fellow community members. In G.P. Hamilton's 1908 compendium, *The Bright Side of Memphis*, he ascribed the characteristics of intelligence, ambition, and thrift to the five undertakers in the city.¹³ All five men, including prominent Memphis citizens Thomas H. Hayes and Wayman Wilkerson, served as examples of economic security within the citizens of the African American community. Similarly, undertakers made frequent appearances throughout the pages of the African American-owned *Nashville Globe*, including full-page advertisements and feature articles in the eight-page newspaper.¹⁴ Through the Jim Crow era and into the modern Civil Rights Movement, undertakers evolved into businessmen, civic leaders, and emotional comforters. Women also fulfilled these expanding roles as prominent undertakers, but did not gain the same attention as their male counterparts—even though some owned their own business and invested in other real estate.¹⁵ In 1955, C.W. Lee, a leader in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, spelled out the many roles of the black funeral professional.

A man serves his community because he loves people. He learns of their woes and sorrows and sympathizes; he helps solve their problems. He not only serves

¹³ G.P. Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee, Showing Their Achievements in Business, Industrial, and Professional Life and Including Articles of General Interest on the Race*. Memphis (1908; repr., Memphis: Burke's Book Store, 1978), 277.

¹⁴ *The Nashville Globe*, October 17, 1913; *The Nashville Globe*, September 4, 1908; *The Nashville Globe*, December 25, 1908; *The Nashville Globe*, February 11, 1910; *The Nashville Globe*, December 21, 1917.

¹⁵ For example, five different women from the Morton family managed the two businesses that the family owned in Columbia, Tennessee from 1899 to the 1990s. *Nashville Globe* April 12, 1940; *Columbia City Directory, 1933-1934*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 15.

as funeral director but he is a combination of bondsman, counselor, civic worker, church worker, political leader and social agent, contributor to every kind of cause. He is sometimes referred to as the community's burden bearer.¹⁶

The collective burden of African American communities was a heavy load that funeral professionals did not handle alone, but their kind consideration to grieving families went a long way to mend the reoccurring wounds of black society, gain respect, and support positive social change.

The needs of the business, the restrictions of segregation, and the assertion of an autonomous African American identity guided the placement and aesthetic of these buildings. The material analysis of funeral homes as reflections of their African American owners restructures the approach to these buildings' every day presence as an embodied expression of the community's identity.¹⁷ In most parts of Tennessee and the southern United States, these buildings were restrained in style and aesthetic in order to avoid reprisal from racial violence. The spatial relationships of businesses, homes, and roads within the African American community emphasized the funeral home's role in the segregated portions of towns as well as its representative position to the outside world. The location of funeral homes within the cultural landscape of Tennessee highlighted their significant role in the African American community. Funeral homes

¹⁶ Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 159.

¹⁷ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 212-223. Funeral homes, whether constructed or adapted, are expressions of African American identity. James Deetz argues the architecture at Parting Ways, Massachusetts, represented one point of the African American housing continuum and the expression of ethnic identity in a building.

served along racial boundaries, were tucked away within the domesticity of a neighborhood, and served as hubs of a modernizing American death culture to their community and the African American communities in the surrounding rural areas.

Funeral homes are excellent material evidence of Jim Crow segregation because by the time undertaking became a viable business in the 1880s, Tennessee towns and cities had segregated into residential neighborhoods and business districts in which black funeral homes had to exist. The close proximity of African American homes and businesses provided a sense of social and economic solidarity and most practically, a dedicated customer base. Although collectively divided from white society, African American communities were not homogenous entities; their cultural landscapes reflected a similar sense of hierarchy. The position of the African American funeral home upon this landscape emerged as an established economic anchor of the community that persists today, among the social institutions of the church and the school.

Their continued existence functions as both evidence of the past and proof of how everyday experiences within physical division perpetuated the socially driven racial divide.¹⁸ Crossing racial boundaries for funeral services was not uncommon. One undertaker broadcasted to readers of the *Nashville Globe*, “I have to depend upon race patronage,” because there was still a lingering perception that white proprietors offered

¹⁸ Richard H. Schein, “Race and Landscape in the United States,” in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, Richard H. Schein, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

superior service.¹⁹ Direct competition between white and black funeral homes diminished greatly in southern states like Tennessee by the turn of the twentieth century because embalming and transport required close, personal contact with the body.²⁰ News in 1912 of an African American undertaker handling the bodies of “white paupers” in Chattanooga made the news in Nashville. Charity workers found the body of a white woman—miscegenation heightening the disapproval—in G.W. Franklin’s funeral establishment, which “stirs up a hornet’s nest” in the city.”²¹ Separate services for separate races overwhelmingly defined the majority of the funeral profession, however, and still holds true in the twenty-first century.

Maury and Rutherford Counties serve as effective case studies for the identification and analysis of African American death care and the interaction of the living with the dead, because segregation still defines the area’s physical landscapes and social interactions. The county’s historic fabric also remains relatively intact, unlike the larger urban landscapes from which most documentary evidence resides. The African American populations in both of these Middle Tennessee counties were of significant size in the years following the American Civil War, and continued to flourish in the creation of their own internalized communities through the growth of churches, schools, and neighborhoods.²² The first successful African American funeral businesses

¹⁹ *Nashville Globe*, June 31, 1910.

²⁰ Barbershops and beauty salons were other businesses faced with strict segregation. Holloway, *Passed On*, 21.

²¹ *Nashville Tennessean*, March 30, 1912.

in each county started in their county seats, Columbia and Murfreesboro. James M. Morton started his undertaking business in Columbia in 1891, while H. Preston Scales opened the doors to his downtown Murfreesboro establishment in 1916. The funeral homes also served the surrounding rural areas and nearby counties, extending modern death traditions and illustrating the distance individuals would go for proper funeral services and a suitable resting place.

The current state of historic preservation practice still does not fully consider historical resources within marginalized communities and the difficult pasts associated with sites like African American funeral homes. The existing approach stems from a long line of efforts directed towards the dominant subject of American history—affluent white men—and a national narrative that too easily ignores a majority of its citizens.²³ The landmark legislation of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and its subsequent interpretation and implementation by preservationists have privileged historical resources that predominantly are architecturally significant or associated with the lives of dominant societal groups, primarily white Anglo-Americans. The need to

²² In 1870, the African American populations for Maury and Rutherford Counties were respectively 45% and 49% black. Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>.

²³ For accounts of past preservation work and challenges with marginalized communities see Carroll Van West, "Assessing Significance and Integrity in the National Register Process: Questions of Race, Class, and Gender," in *Preservation of What, For Whom?: A Critical Look at Historical Significance*, Michael Tomlan, ed. (Ithaca: National Council for Preservation Education, 1998); Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Robert R. Weyeneth, "The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past," *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 11-44; Richard H. Schein, "Acknowledging and Addressing Sites of Segregation," *Forum Journal* (NTHP) 19 (2005): 34-40; David Rotenstein, "Historic Preservation Shines a Light on a Dark Past," *History @ Work*, National Council on Public History, July 28, 2015, <http://publichistorycommons.org/historic-preservation-shines-a-light/>.

alter space and update buildings to attract customers makes professionals' assessment using strict guidelines of historical integrity difficult for funeral homes. By considering the historical significance of funeral businesses and their enduring presence on the Tennessee landscape for African American communities, their preservation should be considered an important priority. Black funeral homes serve as an important community institution that have transcend the eras of an underrepresented African American past.

This work will present the important histories of African American funeral homes in Tennessee as institutions that emerged to provide critical services to the community and their growing need for preservation in three chapters. The first chapter discusses the formation of a separate African American funeral business by tracing the professionalization of American funeral services and the emergence of specific building styles and spaces that black proprietors used to conduct their services. Economic self-sufficiency and respect from both sides of the racial divide allowed African American owners—and the families who helped run them—to create buildings and offer social services that transcended the expected roles of funeral professionals. The second chapter assesses these evolutions in death services and African American funerary spaces in Maury and Rutherford Counties as landscapes that have remained relatively segregated since the Jim Crow era. The funeral homes of Maury County served as important landmarks in the struggle for racial equality, while those in Rutherford County provided the economic stability for African Americans to assert their political power. The third chapter introduces the need to identify and preserve African American funeral homes as historical resources because historic preservationists have long ignored their

significance as material evidence due to their unassuming appearance and form, and association with the African American past.

CHAPTER ONE: A NEW BUILDING FOR A FAMILIAR DEATH

The built environment of the African American funeral business in Tennessee ranged from the seemingly mundane and small to the sizeable and elaborate. This range in visual appearance and location reflects the complex narratives of the African American experience that differed across rural and urban settings. Philosopher William Ernest Hocking wrote of the American farmer and their land: "Property makes a man visible and accessible. I cannot see a man's mind or his character. But when I see what he has chosen and what he does with it, I know what he likes, and quite a good deal about his principles."¹ The stability of the funeral business provided African Americans a means to greater autonomy and property ownership, which they expressed through their buildings' location, size, aesthetic, and use. African American funeral homes thus become a lens for understanding the intent of their owners and their role within society. They also remained a fixed position of success within African American neighborhoods facing economic instability and gained a great deal of communal respect.² Funeral

¹ William Ernest Hocking, "A Philosophy of Life for the American Farmer (and others)," in *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940: Farmers in a Changing World*, United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 1064.

² African American funeral professionals typically are dependable philanthropists within the communities they serve. For example, R.S. Lewis and Sons in Memphis celebrated their centennial year of business by donating school supplies to youth of the community. Jody Callahan, "Historic Memphis Funeral Home Turns 100, Gets Marker," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, accessed June 15, 2015, www.commercialappeal.com/news/local-news/historic-memphis-funeral-home-turns-100-gets-marker_89037720.

homes and the services professionals offered within their doors and in aid to their neighbors were extensions of pride that translated into a message of progress for the whole community.

THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FUNERARY SPACE & DEATH

Funeral businesses emerged across Tennessee starting in 1882 as new facilitators of existing cultural traditions that created a new space for the dead and an integral space for the interaction of the living. The physical space needed to fulfill these roles translated into evolving building types and positions on the landscape that acted as gathering points in challenging times. Funeral homes and their owners were part of a new profession, but they were connected to death tradition stretching back to enslavement in the antebellum South. Through the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, and the modern Civil Rights Movement, African Americans commemorated the sacrifices of those lost in the ultimate fight for freedom and collectively turned inwards to face the deadly trials of racial violence and inequality. Death became a uniquely emotional and rehearsed reality in the everyday lives of African Americans; the plot all too familiar, the audience beset by grief, and a steadily growing presence of new stagehands—funeral professionals.³

Prior to the 1860s, death evoked a complex response from enslaved individuals in Tennessee and the rest of the South. American slavery fostered an environment for

³ Karla F.C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 136.

the creolization of spiritual beliefs, melding African cosmologies of the afterlife with the evangelical spirit of Christianity that stretched across the south by the nineteenth century.⁴ The end of an enslaved person's life thus brought a great sense of loss, but also celebration for the soul's journey to the afterlife, which could include heaven and reunion with their ancestors back in Africa.⁵ The "homegoing" celebration—practiced into the current day—became an act of autonomy for recognizing the life of an individual beyond his or her society-assigned worth. Funerals also provided an interruption from the travails of enslavement for the living as a time of communal gathering and affirmation of familial ties outside the authority of slaveholders. Funerals and other religious and social gatherings were usually tucked away in the wooded "hush harbors" near the enslaved quarters, constituting the earliest funerary space in the black experience of death activated by the assembly of fellow enslaved individuals.⁶ A proper burial offered a sense of dignity to the deceased and instilled a hope for the living that they would receive the same.

The start of the American Civil War edged freedom and a chance at a dignified life closer to the grasp of African Americans, whose ultimate sacrifice in service to the Union Army went beyond not only the loss of an individual, but as a contribution to the

⁴ Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., introduction to *Death and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵ Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

entire body of enslaved individuals. The deaths of freed and escaped African Americans who filled the ranks of United States Colored Troops (USCT) units echoed the larger transformation of death culture in the chaos of war. Mass casualties and the separation of families and soldiers necessitated mourning on a broader stage, one directed towards larger ideals of preserving the Union, protecting the South, and fighting for freedom from enslavement. The death of black soldiers represented a willing sacrifice to fight to the end, often times unable to surrender knowing the retribution they would receive from their Rebel counterparts.⁷ The grand funeral of USCT Captain Andre Cailloux in New Orleans, Louisiana, stands as a rare, yet poignant, example of a well-known free African American who fought on the battlefield for the abolition of slavery. "Defending the integrity of the sacred cause of Liberty," *Harper's Weekly* reported Cailloux "vindicated his race from the opprobrium with which it was charged."⁸ USCT units were also widely responsible for the internment of white Union soldiers in national cemeteries found across the South, helping mend the wounds of northern families and immortalizing the service of their fallen brethren.

The re-interring of tens of thousands of Union soldiers of all colors instilled a unique connection between USCT troop burial units and the death experience in the aftermath of war. The members of the 111th USCT were responsible for uncovering the bodies that soldiers hastily buried after battle throughout central Middle Tennessee and

⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 51-53.

⁸ *Harper's Weekly*, August 29, 1863.

re-interring them at Stones River National Cemetery in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.⁹ The Union Army predominantly assigned USCT units to burial duty, leaving African Americans with an honorable yet gruesome task that required interaction with the all-to-familiar face of death. Like other soldiers throughout the war, burial units had to mentally dehumanize the bodies or suffer from further trauma in their daily tasks. Stones River National Cemetery eventually included 187 USCT troops whose deaths earned them the right of burial alongside white men who fought for their freedom.¹⁰ Over the next decades, members of the local African American community would often gather at the cemetery on Memorial Day to commemorate those who died, undoubtedly connecting to the power of African American gravesites and the remembrance of service equal that of all other soldiers.¹¹

The Civil War changed the way many individuals perceived death and it marked a turning point in the way Americans handled the practical matters of death: care for the body, the funeral, and burial. The earliest African American associated with this transition was Prince Greer, an African American apprentice under Nashville businessman W.R. Cornelius, a contracted employee for the Union Army who embalmed the bodies of fallen soldiers.¹² According to Cornelius, Greer became an expert

⁹ Michael Gavin, "A History of the 110th and 111th Regiments United States Colored Troops (USCT)," Stones River National Battlefield, National Park Service, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, accessed June 15, 2015, http://www.nps.gov/stri/learn/historyculture/upload/History_110_111_regiments-2.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Miranda L. Fraley, "The Legacies of Freedom and Victory Besieged: Stones River National Cemetery, 1865-1920," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 2005): 148.

embalmer and continued into practice for himself.¹³ Prince Greer quickly vanished from the historical record, but his training in embalming was critical to success as the preservation of the corpse became central to the future of the funeral business. The embalming of President Lincoln's body and its subsequent national tour broadcasted to the American public the capabilities of science to maintain an image of "life" and reinforced the pre-existing centrality of the body to the funeral process.¹⁴

The care and burial of the body remained in the hands of many Tennessee African American communities into the twentieth century. African Americans faced the drastic transition from enslavement and the instability of Reconstruction by forming their own communities complete with the services and organizations needed to live. Fraternal organizations and benevolent aid societies amassed a fund to care for community members in time of sickness and helped with the evolving financial burdens of death. In rural parts of Tennessee, these organizations managed death in communities where businesses like funeral homes could not survive with a relatively small and scattered customer base. The African American community in Bolivar, Tennessee, founded the United Sons and Daughters of Charity in 1873 to "aid and assist each other, attend the sick, bury the dead, and advance the standard of our race and

¹² Robert Wesley Habenstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Brookfield, WI: National Funeral Directors Association, 2010), 210.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁴ Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1779-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 163.

people.”¹⁵ Forming the United Sons and Daughters of Charity exemplified the collective efforts of African Americans in the secluded parts of rural West Tennessee and the delay in requiring the services of an African American funeral professional.

Black funeral homes created their own burial societies after opening their doors to guarantee their business and fostered a sense of continuity in the expectations of handling the dead. Homer H. Hudson started the Color People’s Burial Society in Dyer County sometime in the 1930s or 1940s. According to family members who still operate the business, members of the society paid with hogs, chickens or vegetables out of the garden if they could not afford the \$1.50 annual membership.¹⁶ The burial societies sometimes caused competition between rival funeral homes. G.W. Franklin fought with another African American undertaker in Chattanooga after the wife of a deceased man insisted that that funeral business care for her husband’s body even though he belonged to a burial society that had a contract with Franklin.¹⁷ Burial societies helped African Americans slowly relinquish control over care of the body from their families to the trained hands of local professionals.

¹⁵ Carroll Van West, “United Sons and Daughters of Charity Lodge Hall,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2005; Brian D. Page, “Stand by the Flag: Nationalism and African American Celebrations of the Fourth of July in Memphis, 1866-1887,” in *Trials and Triumphs: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History*, Carroll Van West, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 188-191.

¹⁶ Willie Lumpkin, telephone interview by author, March 22, 2015.

¹⁷ *Nashville Tennessean*, March 20, 1912.

STOREFRONTS TO HOMES

The first spaces utilized by the early funeral business were primarily commercial buildings that combined products and services of preexisting trades to the needs of burial. Tradesman such as furniture makers, cabinetmakers, carpenters, and blacksmiths could fashion and sell coffins and associated metal adornments. Their storefronts and places of business served as a point of contact to sell.¹⁸ G.W. Franklin started as a blacksmith in Georgia before moving to Chattanooga to concentrate on his undertaking business. The carpentry skills of Murfreesboro's H. Preston Scales of Murfreesboro allowed him to build his first horse-drawn hearse to transport bodies.¹⁹ The industrialization of the late nineteenth century transitioned the fabrication of goods from craftsmen to manufactured mass production, which allowed undertakers to detach themselves from other trades since they could purchase already built coffins.²⁰ After their successful start as undertakers in 1908, Wayman Wilkerson and J. Jay Scott founded the Tri-State Casket Company in Memphis, which was one of the few black-owned casket-manufacturing companies in the nation.²¹ Access to a means of transportation such as horses and carriages also provided African American workers at

¹⁸ Charles R. Wilson, "The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 67 (Spring 1983): 52.

¹⁹ Rita Lorraine Hubbard, *African Americans of Chattanooga: A History of Unsung Heroes* (Charleston: History Press, 2007), 107; *Nashville Globe*, May 13, 1910 .

²⁰ James Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 148-149.

²¹ Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 72.

livery stables a path into the funeral business. Those who entered the funeral business began through basic transportation, and then as itinerant embalmers who traveled to the deceased's home to prepare the body and transport the body between the home, church, and cemetery.²²



Figure 1: G.W. Franklin Undertaker in Chattanooga, Tennessee, circa 1890s. *Trials and Triumphs: Tennesseans' Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity*, Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University, accessed August 16, 2015, [http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm /ref/collection/p15838coll7/id/76](http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15838coll7/id/76).

As African American entrepreneurs began to explore the exclusive production of the needed hardware and services associated with funerals they also began to locate these goods and services under one roof. G.W. Franklin's undertaking establishment in Chattanooga at the intersection of Sixth and Chestnut Streets was a one-story commercial block building. His business fit into the aesthetics of stores typical of what

²² Wilson, "The Southern Funeral Director," 52.

customers expected from an establishment that sold goods and services. The storefront windows with window lettering and inset front door marked the entrance and defined the business appearance. Large awnings adorned the storefront windows while “Undertaker” painted on the raised cornice above prominently marked the location for customers. Attached to the right side of the building was a corrugated aluminum stable that revealed Franklin’s practical efforts to build a compound that suited all aspects of his business.

African Americans in Memphis witnessed similar efforts with the start of T.H. Hayes Undertakers & Embalmers in 1902.²³ Thomas Hayes began his undertaking business in a storefront at 247 Poplar Avenue, just a few minutes’ walk from downtown Memphis.²⁴ The two-story Romanesque Revival building commanded the respect of citizens on the street, while its brick and stone construction anchored the structure permanently in place (see figure 2). Hayes boasted of having a fully stocked business, including a complete line of caskets, robes, and trimmings (to line the caskets), all located on the second floor of the building. The variety of consumer products and accompanying elaborate funeral process reflected the strength of the African American middle and upper classes of Memphis. Hayes’ showroom exemplified the commercial

²³ “Dust to Dust: Demolition Buries Historic T.H. Hayes Funeral Home,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 8, 2001, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/local-news/dust-to-dust>.

²⁴ *Nashville Globe*, November 4, 1910.

nature of the new space and the growing importance of an undertaker's image to the success of his business.

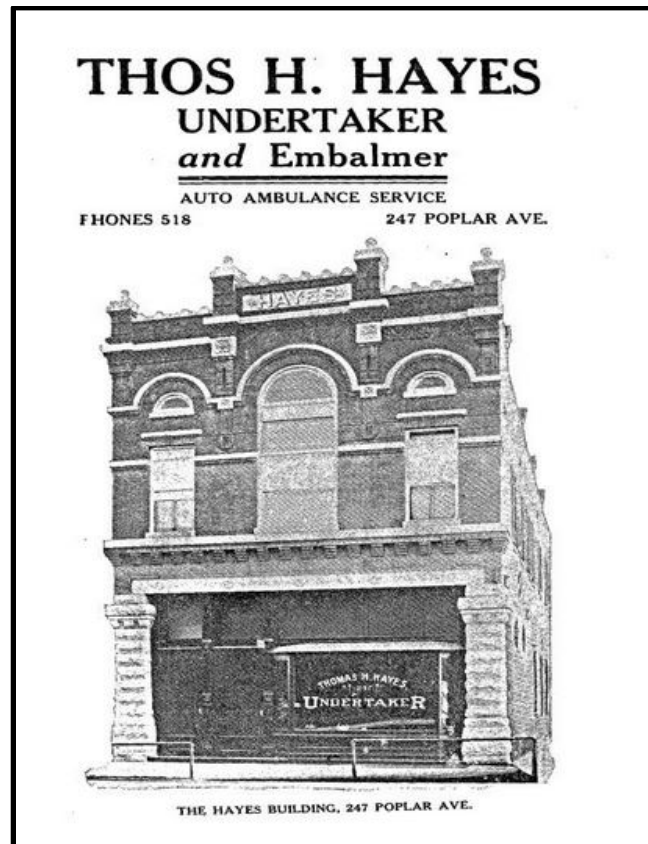


Figure 2: T.H. Hayes Undertaker and Embalmer storefront in Memphis, Tennessee. *Memphis City Directory (1912)*, Shelby County Register of Deeds, Memphis, Tennessee, accessed August 16, 2015, <http://register.shelby.tn.us/index.php>.

Preston Taylor, having already gained a good reputation and financial stability through railroad construction in Kentucky, moved to Nashville around 1884 to pursue new opportunities, including opening the first successful undertaking business in the city

in 1887.²⁵ According to contemporary accounts, Taylor's second location at 449 North Cherry Street was a two-story brick building, which was

divided and furnished in the most convenient style, with reception hall, office, chapel, show rooms, supply rooms, trimming rooms, dry rooms, carpenter shops, paint shops and a morgue. In the rear stands a large stable occupied by eighteen head of horses, seven carriages, hearses and all kinds of vehicles used in the undertaker's business.²⁶

Taylor & Company Undertaking was located in an atmosphere of downtown commerce and tenement housing that combined the abilities to produce and sell goods as the first black-owned funeral business (see figure 3). The *Nashville Globe* championed the new building because it was an enormous investment that Taylor quickly came to own debt free, but his second location was also in a residential building.²⁷ The newspaper claimed that Taylor was the first undertaker to conduct his business "from a residence building," and that other undertakers in the city "have had to pattern after him."²⁸ Taylor may have been the first undertaker in Nashville to operate out of a residential building, but the adaptive reuse of houses for the funeral business would become a standard for the trade by the 1920s.

²⁵ James T. Haley, *Afro-American Encyclopedia; or the Thoughts, Doings, and Sayings of the Race, Embracing Lectures, Biographical Sketches, Sermons, Poems, Names of Universities, Colleges, Seminaries, Newspapers, Books, and a History of the Denominations, Giving the Numerical Strength of Each. In Fact, It Teaches Every Subject of Interest to the Colored People, as Discussed by More Than One Hundred of Their Wisest and Best Men and Women* (Nashville, Tenn.: Haley and Florida, 1896), 220; Joseph E. McClure, "Preston Taylor," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1298>.

²⁶ Haley, *Afro-American Encyclopedia*, 220.

²⁷ *Nashville Globe*, April 11, 1913.

²⁸ *Nashville Globe*, January 24, 1906.

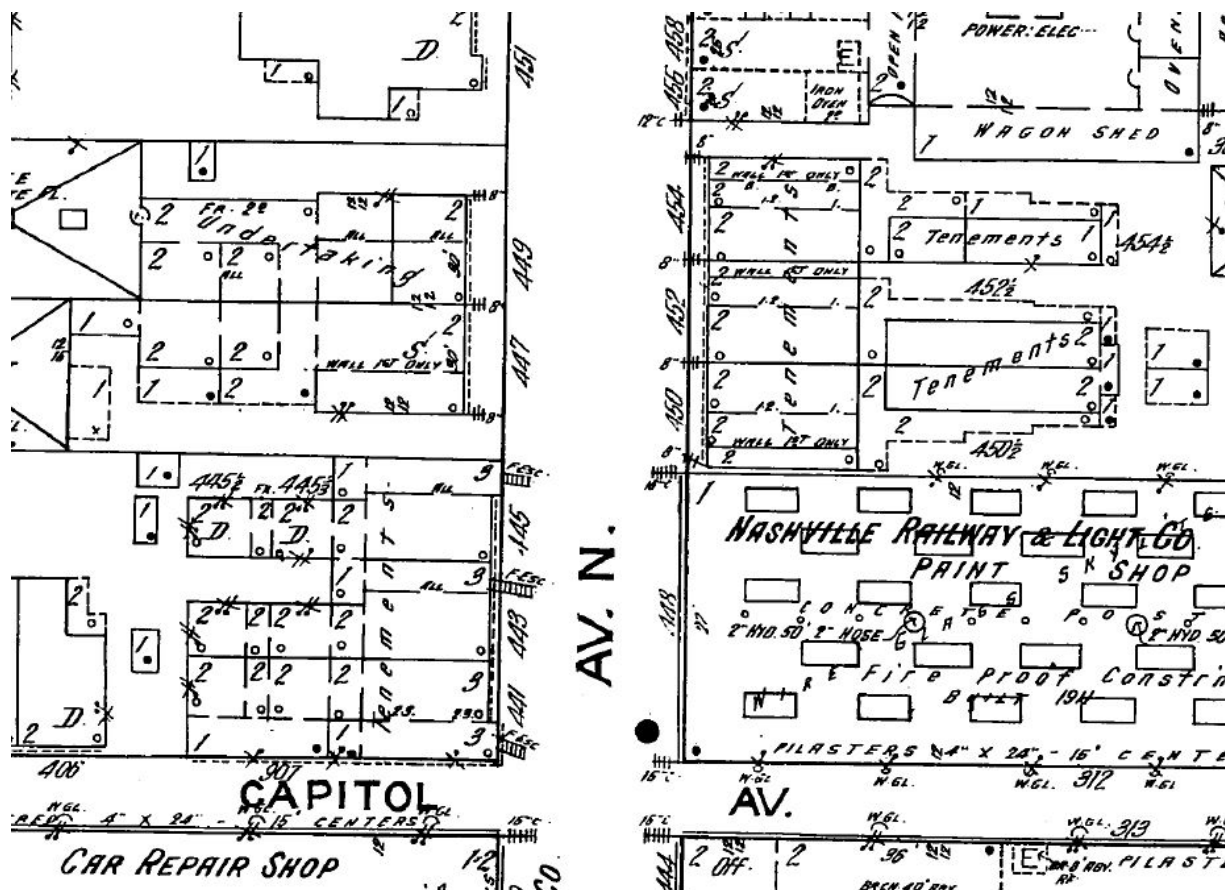


Figure 3: Taylor & Co. Undertakers located at 449 Fourth Avenue North (previously North Cherry Street), was surrounded by tenements, warehouses, mechanical shops, and other small businesses. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Nashville, Tennessee, 1914, vol. 1, sheet 10. *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, ProQuest, accessed August 16, 2015, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/>.

In other cases, African American funeral professionals in Tennessee sometimes operated their businesses from their own repurposed houses in an effort to cut costs, and refrain from the possible issues arising from renting from a white property owner. The earliest itinerant embalmers performed their duties at the homes of the deceased,

requiring no large space of their own. Even when African American funeral professionals formed the Volunteer State Funeral Directors and Embalmers' Association in May 1917, most still held funerals in private residences or churches.²⁹ While most funeral professionals nationally began to move operations from a commercial environment to a domestic setting in cities like Nashville and Memphis, and smaller towns such as Mt. Pleasant, black undertakers lived and worked from the same dwelling. The Scales family of Murfreesboro conducted its undertaking business and lived in the same building for three years until they could afford to build a separate building next door in 1934.³⁰

Because they offered services from their own homes, early undertakers in urban areas hosted funeral services in their own parlors because the small tenement apartments and houses characteristic of urban African American neighborhoods did not allot space for a funeral service. Simultaneously, the role of parlors in middle and upper class homes was generally dissipating, reinforcing the need for the funeral and for the viewing to take place at the newly established "funeral home."³¹ According to cultural historian Gary Laderman, "as a domesticated space of death," the newly conceived funeral home "upset conventional boundaries between the religious and the profane, commerce and spirit, private and public," because funeral proprietors could negotiate

²⁹ The Tennessee branch of the National Funeral Directors Association formed five years after the 1882 founding of the national organization. Wilson, "The Southern Funeral Director," 57.

³⁰ 1920 U.S. Federal Census; 1930 U.S. Federal Census; 322 East State Street, Rutherford County Property Assessor, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://rutherfordcounty.org/apps/propertydata/REALRESULTS.ASPX?acct=R0064630&version=20141231999&taxyear=2014>.

³¹ Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 18.

casket prices, hold funeral services, prepare bodies, and raise children all under the same roof.³² Most practically, African Americans were more likely to own their house than a commercial space, providing them with control and autonomy over their place of business.

The growing turn towards a domestic “funeral home” in Tennessee and across the nation was due largely to the decrease in death. The new approaches of medical practitioners and public health officials, and the institutionalization of medical care by 1920 marked a steady decline of death’s daily presence for Americans.³³ Funeral professionals considered that a more domestic environment paired with the powerful ability of embalming literally to mask the face of death diminished the shock of the less common experience of death. The simulation of a parlor complete with furniture, decorations, and the “resting” body also smoothed the transition from family homes to a paid public service.

³² Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 24-25.

³³ Carol R. Byerly, *Fever of War: The Influenza Epidemic in the U.S. Army During World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 20.



Figure 4: Jarnigan & Son Undertakers, Knoxville, Tennessee. *Trials and Triumphs: Tennesseans' Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity*, Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University, accessed August 16, 2015, http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15838_coll7/id/239.

The buildings of Jarnigan & Son Undertakers and Scales-Danner-Scales

Morticians represent two great examples of funeral homes located in two variations on Victorian houses. In 1886, Clement Jarnigan founded his Knoxville business, Jarnigan & Son, after learning the trade from white undertaker L.C. Shepard.³⁴ The business began in a gabled front-and-wing dwelling, a type of “Victorian cottage” that had decorative, wooden millwork in the main front gable characteristic of the late nineteenth century. Functional awnings over the entranceways and manicured landscape further

³⁴ “Jarnigan & Son, Undertakers,” Middle Tennessee State University Walker Library, *Trials and Triumphs: Tennesseans' Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity*, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15838coll7/id/239/rec/3>.

accentuated the building. The Scales building at 601 Jefferson Street, on the north side of Nashville, was a small and more restrained Victorian cottage with added millwork in the front gable, but with the addition of a large bay window on the front facade. It appears the funeral business added the extension on the back of the original house, which most likely connected to the garage with an enclosed hyphen, or hallway. J. Robert Scales started his business in 1945, when funeral homes became an expectation in the neighborhood setting, while Jarnigan & Sons represents a very early example of a domestic funeral home that fulfilled the traditional, nurturing atmosphere characteristics of the changing death industry.



Figure 5: Scales-Danner-Scales Morticians at 601 Jefferson Street, Nashville, Tennessee. Scales Funeral Home, accessed August 16, 2015, <http://scalesfuneralhome.com/main.htm>.

The southern funeral industry's pervasive use of the Colonial Revival style starting in the 1920s to evoke a rural, antebellum house represents the wider trend to cater to the varying conceptions of "home" and its accompanying social statement.

Historian Kristine McCusker argues the rural migration into Southern cities required funeral professionals to adapt to the death traditions of the incoming families.³⁵ African American migrants into the cities did not share the overwhelming nostalgia for the grand mansions and towering columns from under which they were enslaved. Black funeral businesses that could afford architecturally ornate homes chose variations of Victorian Queen Anne and Italianate. The majority of black citizens were unable to achieve the wealth required to live in these grand homes, but the promise of a final journey through their doors contributed to the growing desire of a domesticated death that espoused a higher social status, the same as owning a beautiful home might display.

Funeral businesses evolved into multi-use institutions that provided space, services, and safety for the community within the widening restrictions of segregation in the use of public space.³⁶ In Richmond, Virginia, A.D. Price, Sr., purposefully divided his funeral business to separate the workspace and livery on the first floor away from the top two floors, which contained community halls for rental.³⁷ The funeral home could

³⁵ Kristine M. McCusker, "Funeral Music and the Transformation of Southern Musical and Religious Cultures, 1935-1945," *American Music* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 431.

³⁶ For an overview of Jim Crow segregation and the contest over social and physical space, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since The Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1999); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957); Jane Dailey, *The Age of Jim Crow* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008); Keith Medley, *We as Freeman: Plessy v. Ferguson* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2012).

contain a number of spaces including an embalming room, stock room, chapel, and extra rooms for traveling families and employees.³⁸ Given the variety and segmented spaces needed to perform the duties of the undertaking business—for both the living and the dead—funeral business owners opened the doors to their spacious and well-maintained buildings as a social venue of interaction.

Tennessee funeral businesses and their owners hosted banquets and meetings in their beautifully adorned parlors and chapels. As president of the Nashville Negro Board of Trade, A.N. Johnson was able to hold numerous business meetings in the parlor of his funeral home at 422 Cedar Street.³⁹ Fraternal organizations found funeral homes frequently useful because many religious denominations would not allow secret societies to meet in the church, especially when their gatherings included activities like card playing, drinking, gambling, and dancing.⁴⁰ They very likely already had working relationships with undertakers and funeral directors through burial agreements within their group or for a burial society that they managed. In turn, the social prominence of owners would almost guarantee their own membership to these fraternal organizations. Several city directories across the state connected fraternal lodges and funeral businesses with shared addresses. H.H. Hudson Funeral Homes in Dyersburg,

³⁷ Michael A. Plater, *African American Entrepreneurship in Richmond, 1890-1940: The Story of R.C. Scott* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 8.

³⁸ Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 20.

³⁹ *Nashville American*, December 8, 1910.

⁴⁰ Plater, *African American Entrepreneurship in Richmond*, 12.

Tennessee, shared the same address with the Free & Accepted masons Silver Leaf Lodge No. 134.⁴¹ The Rawls Funeral Home in Brownsville shared a similar connection. The southernmost building in the complex, a chapel (c. 1940), has a Masonic symbol (see figure 6) on the gabled end of the brick building, noting its use as a meeting place for local masons.⁴²



Figure 6: Rawls Funeral Home, Brownsville, Tennessee. Photograph by Brad Miller.

A.N. Johnson set aside the parlor of his new funeral home in Nashville to be a space for African American women to relax in the bustling city because segregated

⁴¹ *Dyersburg City Directory, 1958*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 101.

⁴² It is unclear whether the Rawls family purchased the building before or after its use by the fraternal lodge. Fieldwork, Brownsville, Tennessee, August 3, 2015; 26 South Jackson Avenue, Haywood County Property Assessor, accessed October 28, 2014, http://www.assessment.cot.tn.gov/RE_Assessment/ParcelDetailIMPACT.aspx; Homepage, Rawls Funeral Home, accessed November 20, 2014, http://www.rawlsfuneralhomes.com/home/index.cfm?fh_id=11501.

facilities like department stores excluded their presence. Johnson declared on Christmas day in 1918: “[T]oday the spacious parlor on the first floor has been converted into a Ladies’ Parlor and Resting Room as beautifully decorated as in antebellum days. Here the tired shopper can come and rest and be free from offense as at those places where our women are not wanted longer than they have made settlement for their purchases.”⁴³

The funeral home’s adaptive use as a space for women was part of a larger, mainly rural, Ladies Rest Room movement of the Progressive Era geared towards an increase in consumerism. Implementation of ladies rest rooms was most popular from the late nineteenth century through the first two decades of the twentieth century as new spaces to make women feel comfortable in the male gendered spaces of downtown central business districts. The more comfortable women and their accompanying children were in consumer spaces, the more money the women would spend and boost the local economy.⁴⁴ The initiatives to create ladies rest rooms across Tennessee gained attention with the agricultural hardships following World War One, but ladies rest rooms did exist prior to this gain in momentum.⁴⁵

⁴³ *The Nashville Globe*, December 25, 1908.

⁴⁴ Katherine Merzabacher O’Bryan, “Gender, Politics, and Power: The Development of the Ladies Rest Room and Lounge in Rural America, 1900-1945” (PhD diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 2013), 1, 3.

⁴⁵ Carroll Van West, “Assessing Significance and Integrity in the National Register Process: Questions of Race, Class, and Gender,” in *Preservation of What, For Whom?: A Critical Look at Historical Significance*, Michael Tomlan, ed. (Ithaca: National Council for Preservation Education, 1998): 109-116.

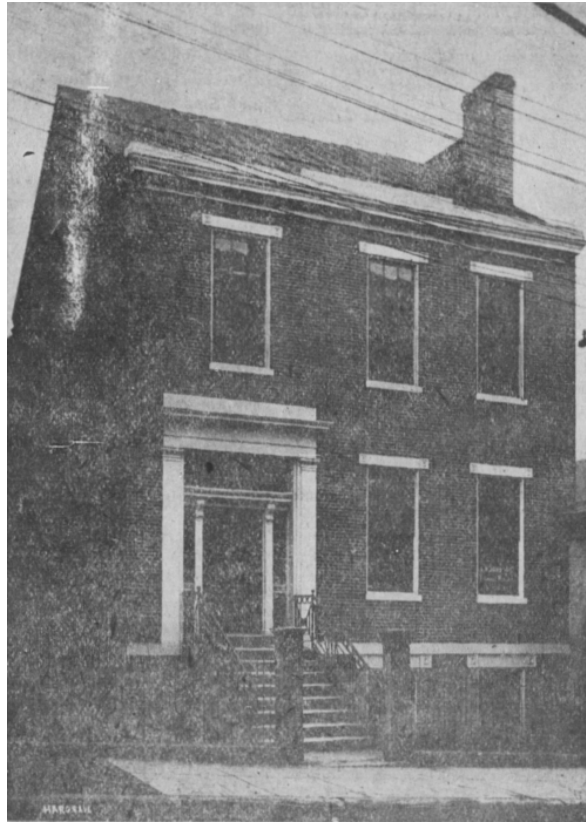


Figure 7: A.N. Johnson Undertaking & Co. *Nashville Globe*, December 25, 1908.

Johnson's sacrifice of space to give back to the community was not an original idea in Nashville; W.H. McGavock & Co. advertised their new location on Fourth Avenue North seven months earlier as a "modern establishment" with a "ladies' rest room."⁴⁶ The newspaper expounded upon the importance of this use of space, "[T]he people will appreciate a neat, clean and inviting resting place...such accommodations as are not given to our people, and are given by hotels, drugstores and similar places down in the city to other races, goes without saying."⁴⁷ Government agencies and social

⁴⁶ *Nashville Tennessean*, May 19, 1918.

organizations that installed ladies rest rooms did so in public buildings, including courthouses, cooperatives, railroad stations, libraries, and even some purpose built rest rooms, but did not welcome their use by African American women.⁴⁸ Given the segregation of public buildings at the time, black women were not welcome in the mainstream ladies rest rooms. The early African American civil rights activists in Tennessee held the end of discrimination in public spaces as a top priority beginning in the late nineteenth century, but after repeated clashes with the dominate white authority, they had to instead create alternative public spaces.⁴⁹

Johnson and McGavock offered a comparable space for women of their race for the same benefit of increased consumerism, but in downtown African American businesses. There was also little required change on the part of these proprietors because funeral homes already offered a well-furnished parlor and the domestic atmosphere that the ladies rest room movement was attempting to replicate in downtown business districts.⁵⁰ The telling difference between these separate spaces of the same movement was the public and private nature of the ladies rest rooms. Communities adapted public spaces for white women's use, while African American businesses had to rely upon their own private business space, seemingly transforming

⁴⁷ *The Nashville Globe*, September 13, 1907.

⁴⁸ O'Bryan, "Gender, Politics, and Power," 3-4.

⁴⁹ Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), xx.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

parts of the funeral home for women of the black community, and not just paying customers.

FUNERAL HOMES ON THE DIVIDED TENNESSEE LANDSCAPE

The location and position of funeral homes expressed the institution's standing in society, while their persistent placement next to African American churches displayed the inextricable connection between the black funeral profession and the church—the center of African American life.⁵¹ In “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance,” Carroll Van West analyzed the importance of African American churches across rural Tennessee as a declaration of space making and identity. “During the Jim Crow era of segregation,” West argued, “these sacred places of faith and community became even more important” through their roles in “religion, education, politics, music, and ethnic identity.”⁵² Funeral homes fulfilled many similar roles by providing safe space for group gatherings, and through the resulting financial stability, gave back to the welfare of the community. West's study of African American place making centered on the importance of rural African American churches because they were one

⁵¹ Social and community institutions were typically located near African American churches because they established and enabled an optimism that translated into outward forms of expression in culture and citizenship. “Powerful Artifacts: A Guide to Surveying and Documenting Rural African-American Churches in the South,” Center for Historic Preservation, Middle Tennessee State University, 2000, 33.

⁵² Carroll Van West, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance: Rural African American Churches in Jim Crow Tennessee,” in *We Shall Independent Be: African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, eds. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 440.

of the few community buildings that persisted in isolated African American populations, and that foundational role persisted in the towns and cities of Tennessee. Churches and funeral homes also contributed to the community as landowners who helped establish control over property. The proximity of the two institutions highlights the importance of funeral homes within the community's social construction. Both were statements of social autonomy, but the secular characteristics of the funeral home compared with the sacred characteristics of religion allowed for a more pronounced statement of economic prosperity.

A funeral professional's close ties with the local church provided a large congregation for whom they could provide their services. In St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), they observed African American pastors in the South Side neighborhood of Chicago favoring one funeral business and then advertising it to their congregations.⁵³ Chicago was a destination during the Great Migration for many African Americans leaving the South, which created a fluid movement of cultural ideas, including the etiquette of funeral professionals. Bob Scales recounted during his time managing Scales and Sons Funeral Home in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, as well as during his father's leadership, that the business held a close working relationship with the pastors of Murfreesboro.⁵⁴ Reverend

⁵³ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 457.

⁵⁴ Bob Scales, interview by author, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, October 27, 2014.

Preston Taylor, proprietor of Taylor and Company Undertaking in Nashville, served as a pastor at the Lea Avenue Christian Church, where the congregation held him in high regard for helping pay for most of the church's construction.⁵⁵ These close ties are apparent in the contemporary landscapes, just as much as they are in the past built environment of Tennessee.

Scales Funeral Home started at 601 Jefferson Street, Nashville, in 1945, only to relocate one year later next to Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church at 1412 Jefferson Street.⁵⁶ The funeral home continues to stand next to the church after sixty-five years as neighbors. Pleasant Green is a long-standing community institution along Jefferson Street, a historically African American section of Nashville, which offered a strong customer base. The neighborhood centered around two all-black institutions of higher education, Fisk University and Meharry Medical College. The proximity also offered ease of access transporting the body to the church for the funeral service or hosting a celebration of life in the fellowship hall.

On the other side of Nashville, Patton Brothers Funeral Home expanded, eventually taking over prominent black religious leader, Reverend Zema Hill's funeral home at 1306 South Street.⁵⁷ The grand Italianate mansion offered a great opportunity:

⁵⁵ Haley, *Afro-American Encyclopedia*, 220; McClure, "Preston Taylor."

⁵⁶ "About Us," Scales Funeral Home, Inc., accessed October 10, 2014. <http://www.scalesfuneralhome.com/aboutus.htm>.

⁵⁷ "About Us," Patton Brothers Funeral Home, accessed, May 15, 2015. http://www.pattonbrothers.net/fh/aboutus/history.cfm?&fh_id=14313; Reavis L. Mitchell, "Zema W. Hill (1891-1970)," in *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee*, Bobby L. Lovett and Linda T. Wynn, eds.

it shared property lines with the African American congregations of the Bethel Methodist Church and the Missionary Baptist Church.⁵⁸ Reverend Hill had operated the business in the neighborhood since 1919. The new locations of Scales and Patton Brothers Funeral Home revealed a funeral profession reacting to the location of church buildings, but other examples also show that churches located themselves near African American funeral homes. A comparison of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from Clarksville, Tennessee, in 1903 and 1913 reveal that the St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Zion congregation constructed a church next to an established undertaker.⁵⁹ Discovering the order of establishment is not as important, however, as understanding the reasons for their mutual proximity.

In the historic African American community of Orange Mound in Memphis, Tennessee, there are two great examples of this built proximity of funeral homes and churches that reveal very similar chronological origins. Harrison's Funeral Home is still located across Carnes Avenue from Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, the oldest congregation in Orange Mound, which was founded in 1879. The congregation held services in the

(Nashville: Annual Local Conference on Afro-American Culture and History, 1996), accessed March 10, 2015, <http://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/hill.htm>.

⁵⁸ *Insurance Maps: Nashville, Davidson Co., Tennessee, 1914*, sheet 214 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1914), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8292/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

⁵⁹ *Insurance Maps: Clarksville, Montgomery Co., Tennessee, Sept. 1903*, sheet 14 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8292/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2812n>; *Insurance Maps: Clarksville, Montgomery Co., Tennessee, Aug. 1913*, sheet 16 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1913), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8292/dateid-000007.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

current building beginning in 1921, but construction was not complete until 1926.⁶⁰ Harrison’s Funeral Home, first known as Orange Mound Embalmers & Undertaking Company, also traces the location’s history back to the early 1920s with founder Charlie Jones. These dates reveal an almost simultaneous beginning for both institutions at that location along Carnes Avenue, a prominent African American business district.⁶¹ Half a mile southwest of Harrison’s Funeral Home, is the former home and business of undertaker Edward Davis. According to census data, Davis arrived sometime between 1920 and 1930, establishing himself and his wife along Saratoga Avenue. In 1930 and 1940, Davis reported himself as an undertaker; with the 1940 Census listed his occupation “at home.”⁶² The founding of Davis’ business happened within the same period as the congregation of Mt. Pisgah Christian Methodist Episcopal Church—another prominent Orange Mound church—which constructed its current building in 1929, across Marchaneil Street.⁶³ African American funeral homes were invested citizens who understood the importance of the black church and the positive impact it had on the community and the success of their business.

⁶⁰ Lauren Nickas, “Orange Mound: A Historic African-American Neighborhood, Memphis, Tennessee,” Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation (March 2006), 15.

⁶¹ “Orange Mound Embalming and Undertaking Co. Mr. Charles Jones, MRF, Memphis, TN,” 1926-1927, video, Yale University Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, *Solomon Sir Jones Collection*, accessed October 28, 2014, http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/celluloidwest/SolomonSirJones/Film_4/Chapter_9; 1930 U.S. Federal Census.

⁶² 1930 U.S. Federal Census; 1940 U.S. Federal Census.

⁶³ Reverend Willie Ward, Jr., interview by Center for Historic Preservation field team, Memphis, Tennessee, October 30, 2014.

The leadership from African American funeral businesses in their communities was both a prerequisite and product of their often-prominent location along the borders between white neighborhoods. W.E.B. Du Bois observed throughout his time traveling the South around the turn of the twentieth century, “that in nearly every Southern town and city, both whites and blacks see commonly the worst of each other.”⁶⁴ The segregation of races, led in part, to the misunderstanding of one another and the African American response, driven by concepts such as W.E.B. Du Bois’ “Talented Tenth” black elite to present an image of white-defined respectability to the outside world. Black funeral homes became one physical landmark of pride and respectability that dotted locations of most visibility to the outside world and an example of the success of that “Talented Tenth.”

The locations of black funeral homes commanded the respect of onlookers, while others took on a more symbolic meaning in the time of segregation. Since its construction in 1913, the J.C. Oates and Sons Funeral Home stood as a strong anchor in the neighborhood surrounding Greenlaw Park, in North Memphis.⁶⁵ The brick building had a Georgian-inspired aesthetic, with a symmetrical two-story façade, which stood apart from the surrounding single-story, wood-frame shotgun homes.⁶⁶ The later

⁶⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), chap. 9, accessed October 1, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.

⁶⁵ *Memphis City Directory, 1913*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 2287.

⁶⁶ *Insurance Maps: Memphis, Shelby Co., Tennessee, 1907- 1951*, sheet 18 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu /tn/8292/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

addition of an eight-car garage for the storage of the funeral business' hearses added to the image of success. J.C. Oates and Sons, which provided goods and services to the local residents and African Americans traveling from the surrounding rural areas since 1913, also shared the intersection of Seventh Street and Auction Avenue (now A.W. Willis Avenue) with the all-black Grant School in its earlier years.⁶⁷ The two structures stood as symbols of pride and progress against the neighborhood's southward view of the segregated St. Joseph's Hospital, separated by railroad tracks and an often-flooded depression.⁶⁸ Although no longer in business, the building that once housed J.C. Oates and Sons now serves as a physical marker for the entrance into the resurging Uptown community.

A.N. Johnson's purchase of an equally substantial property to J.C. Oates and Sons Funeral Home, known as the "Eakin Mansion," displayed the prominence of A.N. Johnson in the Nashville African American community, and sent a message of black success to white citizens. The newly acquired property, which Johnson intended for the "handling of his large and increasing business," was located on Cedar Street, just one block from the State Capitol building and a reported fifty feet from the prominent, white Duncan Hotel.⁶⁹ The purchase of a previously white-owned mansion near the seat of

⁶⁷ *Insurance Maps: Memphis, Shelby Co., Tennessee, 1907-1951*, sheet 57 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu /tn/8292/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

⁶⁸ *Insurance Maps: Memphis, Shelby Co., Tennessee, 1907- 1951*, sheet 39 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu /tn/8292/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

⁶⁹ *Nashville Globe*, August 28, 1908.

Tennessee government was a powerful symbol of progress, even foreshadowing the spread of an African American presence in the downtown area. Leading African American businessman, Henry Allen (H.A.) Boyd, later purchased the Duncan Hotel to repurpose it as the Colored YMCA and African American-owned Citizen's Bank, contributing to the efforts of Johnson to express black pride.⁷⁰

Similar symbols of racial progress mark the landscape of smaller towns in Tennessee, where black funeral homes bridged the African American and white communities. In rural Dyersburg, Tennessee, Homer H. Hudson Funeral Home served a more pronounced and long-standing example of these border businesses. Homer H. Hudson founded H.H. Hudson Funeral Home in 1910 at what is now 525 W. Market Street. Heading southwest from the town square of Dyersburg, the H.H. Hudson business divided the downtown district and the beginning of the African American residential part of town. Despite a fire in the late 1960s and a tornado in May 2003, the family continued to rebuild and serve their community at the same location.⁷¹

Funeral homes at the entrances and edges of neighborhoods provided easier access for the residents of the surrounding rural African American communities. The wide disbursement of African Americans in parts of rural Tennessee meant funeral businesses were typically located in county seats and large towns and were made easily

⁷⁰ Paul Harvey, "Henry Allen Boyd (1876-1959)," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=119>.

⁷¹ John Leeper, "Hudson Funeral Home to Begin Rebuilding," *State Gazette*, November 19, 2003, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.stategazette.com/story/1057688.html>.

accessible from out of town. The home and undertaking business of John Thompson Patton established a border point between the white and black community of Franklin that was close to a major roadway. A local minister turned undertaker, Patton lived and worked at 223 9th Street.⁷² From downtown Franklin, 9th Street leads onto Natchez Street, the historically African American residential area south of Franklin. His business would have also been the first visible building on 9th Street from the heavily traveled Columbia Avenue (U.S. Highway 31), which connected Franklin with the nearby town of Columbia.⁷³

Motley and Rivers Funeral Home continues to sit at the entrance of the segregated African American community in the rural town of Whiteville. Located along State Route 179, Motley and Rivers marked the turn onto Jackson Street, which still serves as the main corridor in the black neighborhood. Several churches, homes, and the now closed Hardeman County Industrial School (an African American Rosenwald School) are tucked away within this neighborhood, while the funeral home served as gatekeeper alongside the presence of the Lane Chapel C.M.E. church. The existence of a funeral home in the remote parts of West Tennessee, such as Whiteville, opened access to the modern death care industry after World War Two and the increasing access to automobiles.

⁷² 1930 U.S. Federal Census.

⁷³ *Insurance Maps: Franklin, Williamson Co., Tennessee, September 1928*, sheet 6 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1928), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8312/dateid-000007.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

CONCLUSION

As they drew death practices out of the home and placed them in the modern setting of the funeral home, African American funeral professionals created a new space on the landscape that served the needs of the living. African American funeral homes may have been a new building, but they echoed a long tradition of death and its powerful ability to challenge black individuals while also sending a promise for something greater. Funeral homes harnessed this duality of death and created institutions that maintained African American culture and broadcasted symbols of hope. Between offering space for social gatherings and expressing the aspirations of entire communities, the messages and power of funeral homes continue to reverberate across the Tennessee landscape as gateways into the African American journey from Reconstruction to the present.

CHAPTER TWO: SURVEYING THE BLACK FUNERARY LANDSCAPE IN MAURY AND RUTHERFORD COUNTIES

The African American funeral businesses that have served Maury and Rutherford Counties provide a detailed window into the African American experience from the late nineteenth century to the present. The very presence of a professional funeral business culture with multiple businesses, stood as a sign of the successes and size of the African American community. The two counties' primary commercial centers—Columbia, Mount Pleasant, and Murfreesboro—also served as hubs of death services for surrounding rural, unincorporated communities. Dwarfed in comparison to the number of possible customers in cities like Nashville and Memphis, the undertakers of Maury and Rutherford Counties still developed successful, lasting ventures that mimicked their urban peers. Architectural stylings and full-page newspaper advertisements did not define their public image, but their buildings and locations projected their centrality, stability, and success to their customers.

MAURY COUNTY

The success of African American funeral businesses in Maury County was due to the substantial population of black individuals stemming from the antebellum era. Before the Civil War, nearly half of Maury County was enslaved individuals who later developed a thriving free African American population dispersed in town centers and

unincorporated communities.¹ In 1850, 39 percent of Columbia's population was enslaved individuals, a proportion characteristic of many Middle Tennessee county seats where enslaved individuals worked in a relatively integrated atmosphere.² The town was also home to Burns' Spring church, one of antebellum Tennessee's first independent black churches.³ Agriculture continued to dominate the local economy through the production of cotton, grains, tobacco, and raising livestock; however, the discovery of phosphate in 1888 contributed to a mining boom and structured industrial production in both Mt. Pleasant and Columbia.⁴ The prospect of employment and prosperity brought thousands of miners, a majority of them African American, to the area causing a population increase of over three thousand individuals between 1880 and 1900.⁵ By 1933, African Americans comprised nearly a third of residents within the city limits of Columbia.⁶ The substantial African American population and the timely rise

¹ 45.3% of the Maury County population was enslaved individuals in 1860; fourth highest in Middle Tennessee only to Montgomery, Williamson, and Rutherford Counties. "Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Populations of the Southern States of the United States," 1861, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C., accessed June 15, 2015, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgibin/query/h?ammem/gmd:@field%28NUMBER+@band%28g3861e+cw0013200%29%29>.

² Lisa Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 197, n.19.

³ Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes*, 222.

⁴ Marise P. Lightfoot, "Maury County," *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, February 21, 2011, accessed June 12, 2015, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=847>.

⁵ Lester C. Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 133.

⁶ *Columbia City Directory, 1933-1934*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 87.

of the funeral industry warranted a professional who could provide death services, particularly to the expanding black middle class of Columbia. The county seat thus served as the location for the first African American undertaker to make his mark on the community.

James M. Morton and his Morton & Sons Funeral Home in Columbia allows for a thorough exploration of the African American funeral business and its pronouncement of space in the racially divided city. The Morton family maintained one of the oldest African American funeral businesses in Tennessee, tracing its roots well over one hundred years. Morton, with his wife, Clara, and son, Andrew, moved to Columbia from Shelby County in 1887. According to *The Century Review of Maury County* (1905), he founded the business in 1891 at 13 East Eighth Street in the downtown area.⁷ The business' prominent location at 13 East Eighth Street, which was eventually renumbered 115, became an anchor position within the African American business district. While the county's centennial history recorded this location as the origin of Morton's business, it actually started a block south.

Morton's first location was somewhere on the south side of East Eighth Street, between South Main Street and what was then South Embargo Street, now Woodland Street. Morton operated from a house he shared with an African American physician named Dr. Miller. The use of the house by two African American professionals reveals the adaptability of undertakers to their settings and the little space required for an early

⁷ David Peter Robbins, *Century Review, 1805-1905, Maury County, Tennessee* (Maury County, TN: Board of Mayor of Aldermen, 1905), 69.

undertaker to conduct his work. Dr. Miller and Morton also did not have the financial stability to own their own building and had to rent the space under the supervision of the white owner, William M. Buchanan.⁸ On September 21, 1898, a devastating fire ignited at the W.H. Watkins & Co. livery, causing the walls to collapse and irreparably damaging the adjoining building where Morton was operating his undertaking business.⁹ Mr. Buchanan had to rebuild the house in brick—instead of the existing wood frame—in accordance with city ordinances, providing the two men a new place of business. Almost exactly one year later, James M. Morton fell ill and died.¹⁰ The turmoil set in motion a transformation for the funeral business within the community.

The profitability of early African American funeral businesses and \$250 from a fire insurance policy provided financial stability for the Morton family business to expand its service.¹¹ In the three years following the fire, Morton's widow, Clara, and son, Andrew, lost James and a business location, but still managed to acquire property and construct a new building. They purchased property from the African American congregation of the First Missionary Baptist Church for five hundred dollars. Clara and

⁸ *Columbia Herald*, September 30, 1898.

⁹ *Columbia Herald*, September 23, 1898.

¹⁰ *Columbia Herald*, September 29, 1899.

¹¹ *Columbia Herald*, September 23, 1898.

Andrew Morton obtained the deed on June 26, 1901, and constructed the extant building around the time of the deed's settlement.¹²



Figure 8: Mrs. A.J. Morton Funeral Director and Embalmer, Columbia, Tennessee, circa 1900. Courtesy of Maury County Archives, Columbia, Tennessee.

Their new building and location conveyed their aspirations of permanence and economic success.¹³ The photograph of Mrs. A.J. Morton, Funeral Director and Embalmer (figure 8) depicts a humble, yet respectable one-story commercial block

¹² Kayla Utendorf, "African American Business in Columbia, Tennessee, 1934-1958," unpublished paper, Seminar in Public History, Middle Tennessee State University, December 2012, in possession of the author, 9.

¹³ 115 East Eighth Street, Maury County Property Assessor, accessed October 28, 2014, http://www.assessment.cot.tn.gov/RE_Assessment/ParcelDetailIMPACT.aspx.

building with two large storefront windows and an attached garage for storage of the business' carriages. The use of bricks mirrored the construction of the church next door and conveyed a message of stability, while contributing to the Morton family's continual use of the building for over one hundred years. The workmanship of the wooden cornice and bricked window lintels, along with the clear advertisements above the porch roof and across the windows, exuded a sense of pride and created a dominant aesthetic for the area's businesses. The Morton funeral business projected this sense of stability and pride to the surrounding African Americans and the white citizens of Columbia. The staged photograph displaying the horse-drawn carriages and well-dressed employees—including Clara and Andrew—was an extension of the business' image and a popular motif of racial pride and success.¹⁴

Given both the constraints of racial segregation and access to affordable space, the Mortons were able to choose a particular lot for the business. In 1899, James, before he died, purchased the deed to two plots of land in the Fourth Ward where he would construct his family's home. Shortly after his death, Clara Morton purchased twenty-five acres in the Ninth Civil District of the city.¹⁵ Overlooking her other properties, Morton established the center of the undertaking venture alongside a number of other African American businesses, homes, and churches. The concentration of these institutions were also due in part to white government officials and landowners

¹⁴ Veronica Sales, "The Morton Family Funeral Home," unpublished paper, Seminar in Public History, Middle Tennessee State University, May 2014, in possession of the author, 4.

who wanted to constrict racial interaction and minimize the breadth of new space where African Americans were conducting business.¹⁶ The new funeral home was part of a large growth of black businesses in the late nineteenth century along East Eight Street and down South Main Street, forming the black business district. By the 1930s, these businesses included establishments like J.W. Blair & Sons Barbershop and Soda Fountain, the Ever-Ready Lunch Room and medical offices including a dentist, Charles E. Jones.¹⁷

The business district, which continued east down Eight Street and along South Main Street, was a direct product of spatial segregation from the white downtown business district of Columbia. From the Maury County Courthouse on the city square, Main Street continues down a steep incline, turning into South Main Street and intersecting with Eight Street, an area the white community unfavorably referred to as the “Mink Slide.” Although Morton’s Funeral Home was situated a half-block southeast of the commercial center of the city, James would not have been able to find a more suitable location. The physically detached and socially constructed segregation divided the white and black businesses as much as possible to minimize daily interaction between the races.¹⁸ African American acceptance of the divide fostered a thriving

¹⁶ Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes*, 231. Tolbert argues that the end of the integrated townscapes of antebellum Tennessee—including Columbia and Murfreesboro—contributed to racial violence post-emancipation because the new segregated spaces meant a loss of territory for white residents.

¹⁷ *Columbia City Directory, 1933-1934*, 89-103.

business community where social and economic interaction could take place free of constraints found in the downtown square.

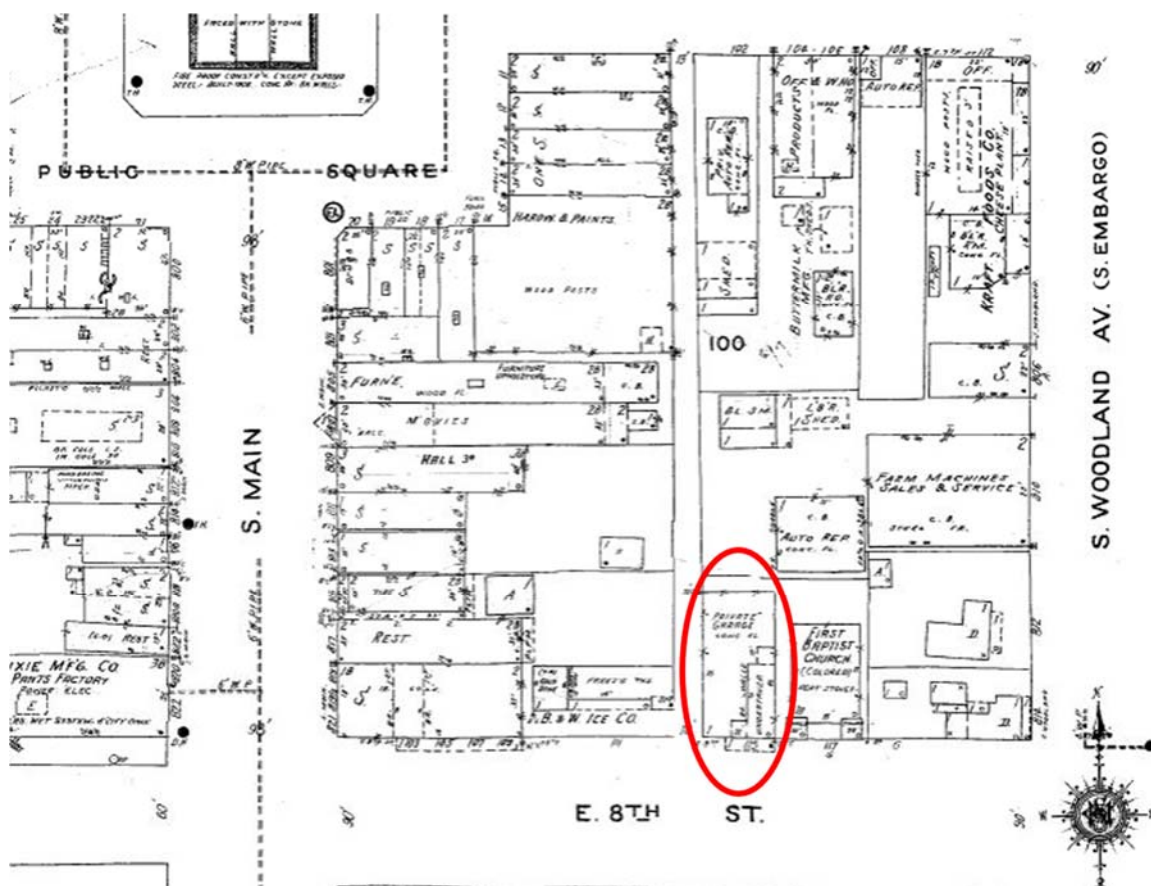


Figure 9: Columbia, Tennessee, 1946. The bottom of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map page containing the white business district ends at East Eighth Street, which marks the beginning of the African American business district. Morton Funeral Home (circled in red) and the neighboring First Baptist Church are the only black-owned institutions visible on the map. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Columbia, Tennessee, 1946, sheet 6. *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, ProQuest, accessed August 16, 2015, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/>.

Continuing the long relationship between undertakers and the church, Morton chose the property lot next to the First Colored Missionary Baptist Church (now First

Missionary Baptist Church) and diagonally across from the Negro Episcopal Church (now 8th & Woodland Church). The First Colored Missionary Baptist was a well-established pillar in the community and large enough to split into two congregations by April 1871.¹⁹ An undertaker's close ties with the church provided a large congregation for whom they could provide services for any family or friend who had died, while the willingness of the congregation to sell the land provided proof of a reciprocal relationship. It is interesting, however, that throughout the twentieth century the Morton family faithfully attended St. Paul AME church on the other side of Columbia. The church was located in an African American neighborhood away from both its businesses and homes.²⁰ The family's choice of church resonated with the typically more socially elite and politically active demographic of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in comparison to the nearby Missionary Baptists.²¹

African American residents of Columbia and the county at large could have had the choice between the professional services of the two white funeral businesses in town or rely upon Morton and Sons, which was the only African American-owned establishment. Competition later evolved among black businesses from the split of the Morton family into two different undertaking ventures between 1910 and 1920.²² While

¹⁹ *Columbia Herald*, April 28, 1871.

²⁰ "Lottie J. Morton" obituary, undated, Morton Funeral Home, Funeral Homes, Vertical Files. Maury County Archives. Columbia, Tennessee; "Mrs. Mary Morton," undated obituary, Morton Funeral Home, Funeral Homes, Vertical Files. Maury County Archives, Columbia, Tennessee.

²¹ Carroll Van West, "Historic Rural African-American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Properties Nomination Form, 1995, E5.

Andrew's widow, Callie, continued operating the original business, Clara and her daughter Pearl opened the Clara B. Morton undertaking parlor at 906 South Main Street.²³ This period of separate businesses in the Morton family history shows the commonplace ownership and management of these institutions by women who helped create a domestic and familial atmosphere for customers. Clara and Pearl Morton continued a strong presence in the black business district, taking over a former automobile repair shop just a minute walk from their former establishment.²⁴ By 1934, the two businesses even placed rival advertisements in the city directory. The "Mrs. Callie Morton Funeral Home" provided a twenty-four hour ambulance service and boasted that its "prices are never more, sometimes less."²⁵ The Clara B. Morton Undertaking Company highlighted its ambulance service and the important presence of a "lady attendant."²⁶

The black funeral businesses in Maury County have been central to the thriving African American community by providing civic leadership, liaising for their race in town-related matters, and providing space pertinent to the changing needs of the people. Starting with James, members of the Morton family continued a long line of selfless

²² 1910 U.S. Federal Census; 1920 U.S. Federal Census; Sales, "The Morton Family Funeral Home," 7.

²³ *Columbia City Directory, 1933-1934*, 89.

²⁴ *Insurance Maps: Columbia, Maury Co., Tennessee, Jan. 1927*, sheet 9 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1927), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 20, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8296/dateid-000009.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

²⁵ *Columbia City Directory, 1933-1934*, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

service and contribution to the community's realization of cultural capital to build institutions of learning and social welfare.²⁷ The white-run *Columbia Herald* declared James E. Morton was "respected by everyone, both white and black;" there were even white friends among the mourners at his funeral.²⁸ His grandson and third generation owner, James K. Morton, led efforts to sell war bonds during World War II and used his business as a headquarters to serve as assistant chairman for Red Cross fundraisers.²⁹ His wife Mary was a graduate of Fisk University, an active member of the Eastern Star and a long time board member of St. Paul AME Church.³⁰ Their daughter, Lottie J., went on to graduate from Tennessee State University and moved around the country in the 1950s and 1960s advocating for her community as a teacher and Urban League representative.³¹

The actions of James K. Morton and his wife Mary as a race riot unfolded in Columbia in 1946 speaks to the centrality of this generational leadership. Morton and

²⁷ Franklin and Carter define cultural capital as "the sense of group consciousness and collective identity that serves as an economic resource for the financial and material support of business enterprises that are aimed at the advancement of an entire group." V.P. Franklin and Julian Savage Carter, eds., introduction to *Cultural Capital and Black Education: African American Communities and the Funding of Black Schooling, 1865 to the Present* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004), xiv.

²⁸ *Columbia Herald*, September 29, 1899.

²⁹ NAACP Press Releases on Columbia, Tennessee Riot Case, February 1, 1946-May 31, 1946, Part 7: The Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912-1955, Series A: Anti-Lynching Investigative Files, 1912-1953, NAACP Papers, ProQuest, accessed March 26, 2015, <http://hv.proquest.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/historyvault/hv.jsp?pageid=whatsin&action=Civil%20Rights%20and%20the%20Black%20Freedom%20Struggle>.

³⁰ "Mrs. Mary Morton," undated obituary, Maury County Archives.

³¹ "Lottie J. Morton," undated obituary, Maury County Archives.

Sons Funeral Home was among the many businesses that suffered the violence and destruction of the 1946 Columbia Race Riot. The physical altercation between white business clerk, William Fleming, and African American Navy veteran, James Stephenson, sparked a violent uproar between a white lynch mob and African Americans protecting their property in the Eighth Street business district.³² Newspapers reported that after local black businessman James Blair posted bond for Stephenson, the white mob gathered at the county courthouse while “Negroes gathered in groups, armed with pistols,” only a block away at Morton’s and other buildings in the black business district. Other African Americans “barricaded themselves in stores and houses.”³³ Positioned on the elevated, northern side of East Eighth Street, Morton Funeral Home served as one of the main gathering points for the African American defense. Funeral director James Morton directed a group of African Americans gathered outside the funeral home, reminding them to not fire at any law enforcement personnel who may approach, but to stand their ground if the white mob entered the street.³⁴

³² Dorothy Beeler, “Race Riot in Columbia, Tennessee: February 25-27, 1946,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (March 1980): 49-61; Robert W. Ikard, *No More Social Lynchings* (Franklin, TN: Hillsboro Press, 1998); Gail Williams O’Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post World War II South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 18-22; Carroll Van West, “Columbia Race Riot, 1946,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, December 25, 2009, accessed July 23, 2016, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=296>.

³³ *The Daily Herald*, February 26, 1946.

³⁴ O’Brien, *The Color of the Law*, 86-87, 170.



Figure 10: James K. Morton. Original caption from the *Nashville Banner* read: "Sgt. Don Kelly of Murfreesboro questions James K. Morton, Negro undertaker, at whose establishment a number of Negroes surrendered," February 26, 1946.

Morton's leadership in the black community and the prominence of his funeral home resulted in his arrest and the defacement of his property. He was among the first of over one hundred African American males arrested during the riot, most of them for attempted murder.³⁵ The sheriff used Morton as the main point of contact during the outbreak of violence because the white community regarded him as the "leading Negro

³⁵ *The Daily Herald*, February 26, 1946.

citizen of Columbia.”³⁶ The police, accompanied by deputized members of the community, searched African American owned businesses for weapons, leaving behind vandalized shops including Morton and Sons, which was the recipient of exceptional destruction. The vandals “destroyed all records, broke chandeliers, lights, venetian blinds, cut up draperies, broke floor lamps, file cabinets,” dumped embalming fluid and defaced multiple caskets including the pronounced addition of “KKK” spray painted across the top.³⁷ The funeral home figured prominently in the black community and as a result became the target of white aggression and the need to trample on the outward displays of success from African American businesses. Local African Americans knew this as well and on February 28, only two days after the destruction, they were again meeting at the funeral home to organize a response to the actions of the law enforcement, especially the killing of two black prisoners and the wounding of one other while in police custody.³⁸

³⁶ NAACP Press Releases on Columbia, Tennessee Riot Case.

³⁷ “KKK on casket at Morton Funeral Home (Columbia, Tennessee),” Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, accessed November 6, 2014, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001701777/>.

³⁸ Dorothy Sue Beeler, “Race Riot in Columbia, Tennessee, February 25-26, 1946,” (Master’s thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1972), 32.



Figure 11: V.K. Ryan & Son Funeral Home. The funeral home and the detached garage to the left were part of a bustling hub of social activity between downtown Columbia and the College Hill neighborhood. Photograph by Brad Miller.

Vernon Keen Ryan provided a safe space among the ever-present threat of racial reprise—apparent by the 1946 riot—with his funeral home just outside downtown Columbia. Ryan, of Franklin, Kentucky, founded V.K. Ryan & Son Funeral Home in 1938 after graduating from Kentucky State College and Gupton-Jones Embalming College in Nashville.³⁹ The business spent its first year in a three-room house at 114 Cemetery Avenue, near the town’s segregated black cemetery called Rosemount. The dwelling had an outbuilding where Ryan and his helper, Sam Garner, prepared the bodies.⁴⁰ He moved to 300 East Seventh Street within a year and repurposed the large, single family

³⁹ V.K. Ryan & Son American Bicentennial Flyer, Funeral Homes, Vertical Files, Maury County Archives, Columbia, Tennessee.

⁴⁰ 1940 U.S. Federal Census.

home that continues to serve the business.⁴¹ The building's square columned portico transformed the gabled roof into a faux pediment on the façade, which attributed a sense of achievement to the new location juxtaposed with the white columns of antebellum homes—erected by the labor of enslaved individuals—that persisted across the county landscape.⁴² The Ryan family renovated the building in 1956, creating a more comfortable living space upstairs and a functional first floor for the needs of the funeral service.⁴³ One citizen noted that Mr. Ryan had “one of the most beautifully equipped homes and outfits in our community.”⁴⁴ Ryan quickly gained the trust of Maury County's African American community and made an immediate impression, evidenced by the honor of speaking at the Culleoka School graduation ceremony in 1940. The business also served as the meeting place for the Tennessee Lodge No. 1701 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, a benevolent fraternal organization.⁴⁵

The Ryan funeral home developed as a hub of social activity on the corner of Seventh and South Glade Streets and as a gatekeeper into the predominately African American neighborhood known as College Hill. There used to be a filling station at 302 East Seventh Street, which the Ryan family also owned; this is where they operated

⁴¹ V.K. Ryan & Son American Bicentennial Flyer.

⁴² Steven Hoelscher, “The White-Pillared Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South,” in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, Richard Schein, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42.

⁴³ V.K. Ryan & Son American Bicentennial Flyer.

⁴⁴ *Nashville Globe*, March 29, 1940.

⁴⁵ *Nashville Globe*, March 29, 1940; *Columbia City Directory, 1961*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 579.

Ryan's Cab Company, Ryan's Service Station & Café, and Thornton & Ryan Barber Shop.⁴⁶ The concentration of businesses doubling as places of daily social interaction and leisure reveals the African American response in the restrictive racial space of Columbia. Access to College Hill and downtown Columbia on Seventh Street required passage by V.K. Ryan & Son, its accompanying businesses, and the watchful eyes of their patrons.⁴⁷ It served as an important physical marker that separated the chaos in the business district with the majority of black citizens sheltering in their homes during the race riot and a strategic position for those who were willing to defend their businesses.

The Morton family and the Ryan family dominated the funeral business of Columbia, but the brief work of undertaker Elmer H. Watkins reflected the common practice across rural Tennessee of operating exclusively from an undertaker's home and the attempts of many individuals to make a living through the funeral profession. Between 1935 and 1940, Watkins moved to Columbia from Nashville and started his funeral business in his mother's house at 309 North High Street.⁴⁸ The ell-shape small home, which is not extant, appeared to have a rear addition that may have served as a workspace for Watkins.⁴⁹ He performed only a few services a year and did not require

⁴⁶ *Columbia City Directory, 1953*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 447.

⁴⁷ The other major entrance into the College Hill neighborhood along Eighth Street was surrounded by multiple African American churches, including Meredith Memorial Methodist Episcopal and Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church. *Insurance Maps: Columbia, Maury Co., Tennessee, Jan. 1927-1947*, sheet 17.

⁴⁸ 1940 U.S. Federal Census.

⁴⁹ *Insurance Maps: Columbia, Maury Co., Tennessee, Jan. 1927*, sheet 16.

that much space as an individual operator.⁵⁰ Residing in a house, Watkins' funeral business was immersed in the predominately black, residential neighborhood in northwest Columbia that revolved around St. Paul A.M.E. Church and Whitespring United Primitive Baptist Church. The business' small scale left a small footprint in the neighborhood and did not attract the same visual attention compared to the building size and volume of customers from Morton Funeral Home and V.K. Ryan & Sons.

African American funeral businesses appeared in Mt. Pleasant, fifteen miles southwest of Columbia, during the phosphate mining boom of the early twentieth century. The first black funeral business dates between 1910 and 1916 at 128 Broadway Street, although the original proprietor of the business is unknown. The extant building is a two-story commercial block structure with a bay of storefront windows and a door next to the arched garage door on the ground floor. The addition of light blue vinyl siding now masks its original brick façade and concrete block construction.⁵¹ Segregation produced a separate space of social and economic interaction for African Americans between Blue Grass Avenue and the grain mills along the railroad tracks. The new

⁵⁰ Watkins recorded only three services in 1945 and three in 1948. Maury County, 1945, *Tennessee, Death Records, 1908-1958*, Ancestry.com, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2376>. Maury County, 1948, *Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1958*, Ancestry.com, accessed May 21, 2015, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2376>.

⁵¹ *Insurance Maps: Mount Pleasant, Maury Co., Tennessee, Feb. 1910*, sheet 7 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1910), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8353/dateid-000003.htm?CCSI=2812n>; *Insurance Maps: Mount Pleasant, Maury Co., Tennessee, Mar. 1916*, sheet 9 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1916), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8353/dateid-000004.htm?CCSI=2812n>; *Insurance Maps: Mount Pleasant, Maury Co., Tennessee, Oct. 1926*, sheet 7 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1926), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8353/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

establishment near the mill was not ideal, but it anchored the end of Broadway Street as more African American businesses moved away from downtown Mt. Pleasant towards the railroad tracks.⁵²

Mt. Pleasant's first black undertaker, Payton T. Blanchard, and Jasper W. Patton from Franklin, Tennessee, may have operated at this location. Blanchard lived on Broadway with his family in 1910, but by 1925, Patton was also providing undertaking services with C.A. Roundtree who would be the eventual owner of the building.⁵³ The collaborative endeavor was a pragmatic business technique and training tool for undertakers looking to get started, which laid the groundwork for future institutions like Roundtree, Napier, and Ogilvie Funeral Home, which continues to serve African Americans of Maury County.⁵⁴ In May 1940, the *Nashville Globe* reported that Mrs. C.A. Roundtree had "beautified her funeral home," which revealed the continued ownership of the business after the death of her husband a year earlier.⁵⁵ The commercial atmosphere of Broadway also required her to heighten the inviting and domestic appeal with the standards of contemporary funeral homes.

While the early ownership remains unknown, the setting reveals a street in transition. From 1905 and 1916, Broadway Street transformed from the main, white-

⁵² 1920 U.S. Federal Census; *Insurance Maps: Mount Pleasant, Maury Co., Tennessee, Oct. 1926*.

⁵³ 1910 U.S. Federal Census; Maury County, 1925, *Tennessee, Death Records, 1908-1958*, Ancestry.com, accessed May 21, 2015, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2376>..

⁵⁴ 1940 U.S. Federal Census.

⁵⁵ *Nashville Globe*, May 3, 1940; James Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 177.

controlled thoroughfare between the train depot and the public square, to an African American business district and residential area. The addition of Mount Nebo Baptist Church and the African American undertakers were part of the initial transition. The closure of the Southern Hotel just north on Columbia Avenue also highlighted the change to a black section of town where two other funeral business locations emerged.⁵⁶ In 1965, Roundtree, Napier, and Ogilvie moved to one of its current locations at 115 Columbia Avenue, while Chavers Funeral Home proved its place among the competition in its new commercial building (c. 1940) at 214 Columbia Avenue.



Figure 12: Chavers Funeral Home and residence. The new commercial space along Columbia Avenue retained features from the house at 208 Olive Street, including the double hung windows and iron porch adornments. Photographs by Brad Miller.

Odie and Minnie Chavers possibly began their business at their home at 208 Olive Street before opening a purpose-built structure on Columbia Avenue. The current faux rectangular storefront façade hides the long, one-story building, circa 1940, that

⁵⁶ *Insurance Maps: Mount Pleasant, Maury Co., Tennessee, Feb. 1910; Insurance Maps: Mount Pleasant, Maury Co., Tennessee, Mar. 1916.*

houses the enterprise today. The new building did not require a separate living space typical of contemporary funeral businesses that needed to remain economically stable. Odie was a barber, and his wife Minnie, a prominent beautician.⁵⁷ Barbers and beauticians, like funeral professionals, were successful because their services required close, personal contact with customers that dismissed any competition from white businesses.⁵⁸ Their loyal customers allowed the couple to afford ownership of two separate buildings and for them to take on the funeral trade between 1930 and 1940.⁵⁹ Although the building retained a commercial storefront appearance with prominent entranceway, windows, and signage, the Chavers' location within a residential setting coincided with the need to present a domestic setting in death services. The Roundtree, Napier, and Ogilvie Funeral Home followed the trend a block west, penetrating even further into the neighborhood.

⁵⁷ 1930 U.S. Federal Census, 1940 U.S. Federal Census.

⁵⁸ Adia Harvey Wingfield, *Doing Business with Beauty: Black Women, Hair Salons, and the Racial Enclave Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 20; Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 3-4. Mills argues barber shops were part of the "black commercial public sphere," which were spaces where African Americans, particularly men, gathered as consumers and were also able to engage in racially specific, socio-political dialogue. Funeral homes served in similar, yet less frequent, ways by allowing social organizations that were not customers the use of their space after business hours.

⁵⁹ 1930 U.S. Federal Census, 1940 U.S. Federal Census.



Figure 13: Roundtree, Napier & Ogilvie Funeral Home. The building blends into the neighborhood atmosphere as an oversized, brick version of the small, ell-shaped wood frame homes along Columbia Avenue in Mount Pleasant, Tennessee. Photograph by Brad Miller.

From race riot rally points to community gatekeepers, the funeral homes of Maury County chart the transformation of the modern funeral home and the powerful ways African Americans utilized these new spaces to assert their presence on the landscape, incite pride in the community, and organize positive social change. The Morton family set a precedent for businesses when it built the brick storefront along East Eighth Street, while V.K. Ryan and Son Funeral Home invested in other businesses to provide services African Americans may not otherwise receive. African American funeral businesses followed Columbia's example as the black population increased in

Mt. Pleasant, triggering a second wave of funeral professionals in Maury County. Today, the first funeral service building remains along Broadway in Mt. Pleasant as one of the few reminders of a once bustling black commercial district that started with an undertaker opening his doors for business.

RUTHERFORD COUNTY

The emergence of the African American funeral profession in Rutherford County provided the means for several funeral business owners to assert political power outside of the black community, while their presence within the Murfreesboro townscape paralleled the anchored position and physical buildings of their counterparts in Maury County. These men and women successfully introduced a professional death service that replaced the work of local benevolent societies by immersing themselves and their businesses within the black neighborhoods and proving themselves as civic leaders that crossed racial boundaries. The success of African American funeral professions in the area was no easy task, because like most of the South following the Civil War, Rutherford County was rife with racial conflict. The families behind these funeral businesses in Murfreesboro met this challenge with resilience and outward support to members of the community, relying upon their self-sufficiency and control of space through their funeral homes.

The strategic importance of Rutherford County during the Civil War, particularly the county seat of Murfreesboro, established a strong Union presence that fostered a

safe haven for African Americans seeking asylum. The resulting Union troop garrison at Fortress Rosecrans and the internment of fallen soldiers by USCT troops at the newly established Stones River National Cemetery helped protect African Americans in their transition to citizenship.⁶⁰ Historian Miranda Fraley argued, however, that the “Civil War did not really end in this county in 1865,” because racial violence and unresolved tension of Confederate defeat persisted around the battlefield.⁶¹ The unrest continued in the county and across Middle Tennessee following emancipation, particularly erupting with violence led by the Ku Klux Klan over the dramatic change in social interaction between races and the African American right to vote in the starting in the 1868 election.⁶²

By 1870, the county population was almost split evenly between white and black residents, which raised a significant concern for the resettlement of half the people into new spaces. These numbers were slightly higher than the near 47 percent of enslaved individuals on the eve of the Civil War.⁶³ African Americans outnumbered whites in eight

⁶⁰ Some African Americans, particularly those tasked with the internment of Union soldiers, formed the post-emancipation community northwest of Murfreesboro known as Cemetery through acquisition and farming of land, the erection of homes, and the creation of social institutions like churches and a school. Lydia Simpson, “Settling In: Tracking the Formation of the Cemetery Community through Public Records” (Master’s thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2011), 12-27.

⁶¹ Miranda Fraley, “The Politics of Memory: Remembering the Civil War in Rutherford County, Tennessee” (PhD. diss., Indiana University, 2004), 8.

⁶² Martha McCullough Bouldin, “A Decade in Rutherford County, 1865-1875” (Master’s thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1973), 27; Stephen V. Ash, “Isaiah’s Time: Race Relations and Black Society, 1865-1870,” in *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 546-550.

civil districts and three wards of Murfreesboro.⁶⁴ The large population of African Americans resulted in the formation of black communities across the rural landscape and in two distinct parts of Murfreesboro. According to John Lodl, African Americans concentrated just south of the Oaklands plantation home and southeast of the town square around the city cemetery and Allen Chapel AME church, whose congregation first met in 1866.⁶⁵ The dominant agricultural economy of Rutherford County, as well as the various mills and factories on the southwestern corner of the city limits, provided African Americans with employment opportunities. Black citizens of Rutherford County turned inward to build religious and social organization to help one another and physically separate themselves as the fear and reality of racial reprisal increased.⁶⁶

Prior to the appearance of African American funeral professionals, the black residents of Murfreesboro relied upon the services of a local benevolent society that set a standard for collective care in times of death. The Benevolent Lodge No. 11 was founded in the late 1880s as a branch of the Nashville Benevolence Society to provide

⁶³ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, accessed June 8, 2015, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>; "Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Populations of the Southern States of the United States," Library of Congress.

⁶⁴ Bouldin, "A Decade in Rutherford County," 22.

⁶⁵ John H. Lodl, "Building Viable Black Communities: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1860-1880" (Master's thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2004), 57; Carroll Van West, "Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1995.

⁶⁶ John Lodl, "The Transition from Slavery to Freedom in Murfreesboro," in *Occupied Murfreesboro: Historic Photographs from the Civil War Era* (Murfreesboro, TN: Center for Historic Preservation, 2004), 18.

for the welfare of those in the community, particularly in times of sickness and death. In 1886, three African American citizens purchased a plot of land south of the city limits on South Church Street to serve as the burial grounds of the society; the land became known as Benevolence Field.⁶⁷ Burials continued at the cemetery into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The cemetery, although in poor upkeep, serves as the final resting place for at least six hundred African Americans.⁶⁸ The work of the Benevolent Lodge and its purchase of land for Benevolent Field set a precedent of death service in Murfreesboro that the funeral profession had to consider.

Scales & Sons Funeral Home demonstrated the important role of death services in transition from benevolent societies to professional businesses. Scales became a leading example of how these institutions provided a provision of stability by anchoring the African American community in Murfreesboro for nearly a century. In 1904, H. Preston Scales moved from his native Williamson County. He worked as a carpenter. Scales and his wife Willie lived at the home they owned on State Street, adjacent to the city cemetery. By 1916, at the age of 36, Scales began his own business, H. Preston Scales Undertaker at 124 South Maple Street among the row of one-story businesses derisively known by whites as the "Mink Slide," that served as a segregated business

⁶⁷ Lodl, "Building Viable Black Communities," 51.

⁶⁸ Leigh Ann Gardner, "'To Care for the Sick and Bury the Dead': Murfreesboro's African American Benevolent Groups," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 34; Clint Confehr, "Old Graveyard Undergoes Restoration," *Daily News Journal*, August 27, 1994; "Group Wants to Clean Up Historic African American Cemetery," *WSMV*, January 2, 2014, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.wsmv.com/story/24350771/groups-wants-to-clean-up-historic-african-american-cemetery>.

district for blacks.⁶⁹ The commercial storefront buildings on this small stretch of South Maple Street defined a blurred line between white and black-owned stores.⁷⁰ The African American businesses located just off from the downtown square included a pool hall, restaurant, grocery store, and Scales' undertaking.⁷¹ Owners of these businesses became the de facto representatives of African American commerce along this racial boundary, heightening the responsibility of men like Scales to convey an image of respectability to his white counterparts and gain the respect of his fellow black citizens.

⁶⁹ *Murfreesboro Union*, April 29, 1933.

⁷⁰ Charles B. Arnette, *From Mink Slide to Main Street* (Murfreesboro, TN: Charles Byron Arnette, 1991), 2-3, 14.

⁷¹ *Insurance Maps: Murfreesboro, Rutherford Co., Tennessee, Feb. 1924*, sheet 6 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1924), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8353/dateid-000003.htm?CCSI=2812n>; *Insurance Maps: Murfreesboro, Rutherford Co., Tennessee, Jan. 1931-July 1945*, sheet 7 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1931), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8355/dateid-000009.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

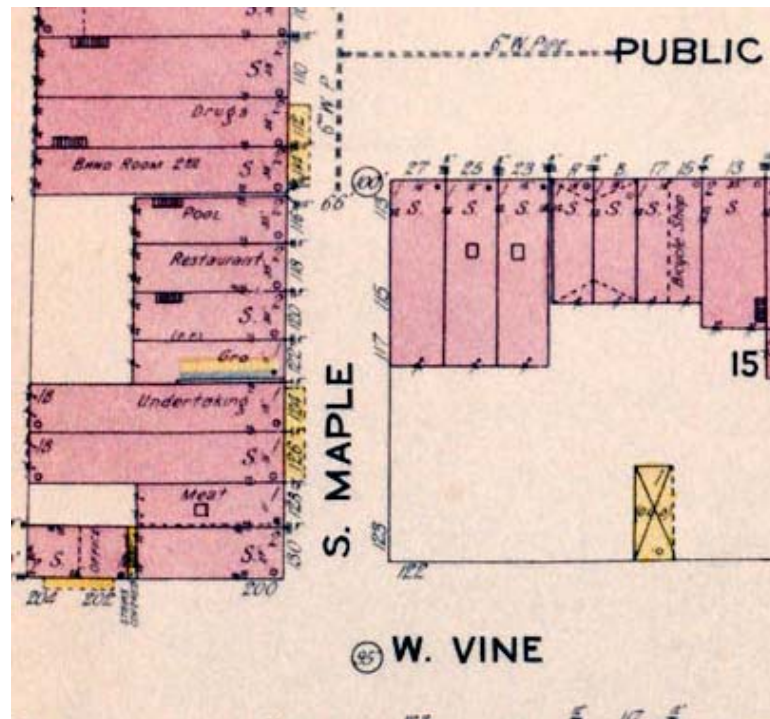


Figure 14: H. Preston Scales Undertakers establishment at 124 South Maple Street at the edge of the public square. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1924, sheet 17. Courtesy of the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

In an effort to establish his reputation, reinforce his business, and help the community, Scales founded the Helping Hands Mutual Burial Association and got involved in his church. During his thirty years of service to the community as a provider of funeral care, Scales also served as a deacon and treasurer of the First Missionary Baptist Church, which he was regarded as a “leader in the activities of his race.”⁷² His Helping Hands group fostered a collective effort to help individuals pay for the expenses associated with death and burial that paralleled the efforts of the Benevolent Society

⁷² *Daily News Journal*, July 24, 1946.

established in the nineteenth century. After a death, each member of Helping Hands contributed up to twenty-five dollars that went towards care for the family and the one hundred dollar service including a burial robe, casket, pine box, and the transportation of the deceased.⁷³ The organization helped preserve a sense of dignity in death for community members who could not afford the expense.⁷⁴ As a true testament to this ideal, members of the Scales family popularly recount the hearse returning home with chickens because some families paid for a funeral by bartering livestock.⁷⁵

Scales' association with the earlier Benevolent Society was direct. In 1917, the Benevolent Society constructed on East State Street a lodge hall that also served as a community meeting space. The lodge hall sat prominently within the predominantly African American Sixth Ward, fixed between two central black landmarks: Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church and Bradley Academy, Murfreesboro's black elementary school. In 1931, the Benevolent Society sold its property and accompanying meeting hall to Scales for one hundred and ten dollars, a transaction that served as a symbolic transference of community responsibility to the established undertaker.⁷⁶ Willie Scales continued the connection as a member of the Benevolent Society.⁷⁷ Over the next decades, the Scales

⁷³ Melvin E. Hughes, comp., *A History of Rutherford County's African American Community* (Murfreesboro, TN: Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church, 1996), 145.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Mary C. Scales, interview by Kristine McCusker, November 9, 2005, Middle Tennessee Oral History Project, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee; Bob Scales, interview by author, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, October 27, 2014.

⁷⁶ Gardner, "'To Care for the Sick and Bury the Dead,'" 37.

⁷⁷ Confehr, "Old Graveyard Undergoes Restoration."

family acquired other properties on East State Street between South Academy Street and South Maney Avenue.

In 1931, Scales opened his new funeral business at 314 East State Street, which continued to serve as the address of Scales & Sons Funeral Home.⁷⁸ The one-and-a-half story bungalow-like dwelling (c. 1905), with a hipped roof and central dormer window, impressively matched the aesthetics of the smaller, contemporary homes of white, middle class residents in Murfreesboro. One photograph of the funeral home shows the addition of a clock on a porch column much like the clock on the courthouse of the town square.⁷⁹ The addition of a clock provided a fixed central location for trustworthy knowledge throughout the day and labeled the Scales home as a community-oriented building. The Scales family and H. Preston's assistant, Rubin Harris, lived at the residence until 1934 when they built a new bungalow style home next door at 322 E. State Street and completed the funeral business' move from the square into their old home.⁸⁰

The larger presence of Scales' business in the neighborhood coincided with the broader changes of the funeral profession: operating in a more domestic space, fostering a socially welcoming space, and providing comprehensive services with more

⁷⁸ *Insurance Maps: Murfreesboro, Rutherford Co., Tennessee, Jan. 1931*, sheet 12 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1931), ProQuest, *Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970*, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8355/dateid-000004.htm?CCSI=2812n>.

⁷⁹ "Facilities," Scales & Sons Funeral Home, accessed June 12, 2015, <http://www.scalesandsons.com/facilities.php>.

⁸⁰ 1930 U.S. Federal Census; 322 East State Street, Rutherford County Property Assessor, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.rutherfordcountyttn.gov/propertyassessor/>; *Insurance Maps: Murfreesboro, Rutherford Co., Tennessee, Jan. 1931*, sheet 12.

options for customers. Scales' repurposed house provided a new domestic and serene setting for hosting funeral services. Funeral professionals met the shrinking customer base due to urban migration (1900-1920s), by broadening their selection and quality of caskets and funeral services that increased the profit per burial.⁸¹ The move into the Sixth Ward also meant locating near a larger concentration of African American property owners. The neighborhood remains a black middle-class section of Murfreesboro today.⁸² Multiple generations of Scales family members eventually inhabited five different houses on the small stretch of East State Street, a place where they raised their children and called home.⁸³ They lived side-by-side with neighbors who grew to trust and cherish the work of the Scales family.

Following the death of H. Preston Scales in 1946, his son, Robert Winston "T-90" Scales, continued the family's active service to the African Americans of Murfreesboro. In the midst of segregation, Robert Scales opened a tavern and motel on the Dixie Highway so that African Americans had a place to stay and socialize while traveling through the area.⁸⁴ According to his son, he was a "man of integrity," and that integrity was tested in the trying decades of the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁵ In 1964, Scales became the

⁸¹ 1900 U.S. Federal Census; 1910 U.S. Federal Census; 1920 U.S. Federal Census; Lamon, *Black Tennesseans*, 120; Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 156.

⁸² Lodl, "Building Viable Black Communities," 32.

⁸³ 1940 U.S. Federal Census, *Murfreesboro City Directory, 1956*, Tennessee Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 459; *Murfreesboro City Directory, 1989*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 263.

⁸⁴ Bob Scales interview.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

first African American elected to Murfreesboro City Council since Reconstruction. He served for the next twenty-four years. Many citizens of Murfreesboro credit Scales with keeping the peace during the modern Civil Rights era by always encouraging dialogue over violence.⁸⁶ The Murfreesboro City Council, the City Board of Education, and several social organizations facilitated a slow and controlled integration of the area schools and put strict laws in place to prevent open displays of protest.⁸⁷ Scales' contributions mainly remained political, while his leadership in the African American community was based on diffusing open acts of defiance. One night, he even met a busload of protestors at the city limits in order to turn them around and maintain the peace.⁸⁸ His wife, Mary C. Scales, a local school teacher, prominent member of the City Board of Education, and the first African American professor at Middle Tennessee State University, replaced Robert Scales on City Council for one year after he suffered a heart attack.⁸⁹ Murfreesboro City Schools later named the Scales Elementary School in recognition of contributions of both Robert and Mary.⁹⁰ The Scales family could not have given back to their community without the stability and success of their funeral business on East State Street.

⁸⁶ *Daily News Journal*, October 31, 2000.

⁸⁷ Melinda Lickiss, "The Integration of Schools in Murfreesboro, Tennessee: A Community Study" (Master's thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), iii-iv.

⁸⁸ Madelyn Scales Harris and Mary Scales, interview by John Hood, Murfreesboro Storytellers, February 1, 2013, accessed May 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJu-GcVq92g>.

⁸⁹ Hughes, *A History of Rutherford County's African American Community*, 27.

⁹⁰ Mary C. Scales, interview.



Figure 15: Scales & Sons Funeral Home. Photograph by Brad Miller.

The building that now stands at 314 East State Street, circa 1960, is the culmination of the growth and service of Scales & Sons in Murfreesboro. The combination of the large gabled front, rounded arch stained glass window and offset gabled entranceway echoes the aesthetics of a vernacular African American church. The chapel dominates the front half of the building, signaling the important role of recreating a sanctuary as the final piece of the all-in-one funeral home.⁹¹ The larger space was needed as greater access to transportation allowed larger numbers of family and friends from outside of Murfreesboro to attend a centralized service at the funeral

⁹¹ Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 173.

home, rather than at the deceased's home.⁹² The new chapel's capacity exceeded two hundred people, which allowed more opportunities for use as a meeting place for community organizations and fraternal lodges.⁹³ Upon entering the pew-lined chapel, visitors encounter a plaque that reads, "This home is dedicated to the memory of those who in eternal sleep repose herein and is for the use and comfort of relatives and friends."⁹⁴ The building transcends its commercial identity and opens its doors as a healing home for the African American community to use as their needs change. The various functions and successes of the Scales family has transformed the building into a landmark for African American citizens in Murfreesboro.

The second African American funeral business to emerge in Murfreesboro was Ransom, Page & White Undertakers and Embalmers, which held an interesting connection with the local benevolent society. There is little evidence remaining of the business' existence other than its location from 1925 to 1933 at 216 South Maple Street, the home of undertaker Gordon M White.⁹⁵ A lone advertisement in the *Murfreesboro Union* touted the business' ambulance service and "lady attendant," Mrs. Anna B. Ross. The advertisement also made a request to the reader: "When the last clear call is sounded within the circle of your dear ones...We invite your confidence."⁹⁶ As one of the

⁹² Mary C. Scales, interview.

⁹³ Bob Scales, interview.

⁹⁴ "Facilities," Scales & Sons Funeral Home.

⁹⁵ *Murfreesboro City Directory, 1925*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 113; *Murfreesboro Union*, April 29, 1933.

first two funeral businesses for the African American community, Ransom, Page and White, needed to gain the trust of possible customers—against white and black competition—and a call for “confidence” and the services of a nurturing woman were an appropriate strategy. White was the only designated undertaker, while Walter Page remained listed as a plasterer and David Ransom a railroad worker.⁹⁷ Ransom was also a member of the Benevolent Society, which made him a beneficial business partner. With his connection to the organization that funded the burials of the economically disadvantaged, Ransom had the ability to lower costs for the Benevolent Society or streamline customers under its support.⁹⁸

A more lasting funeral business emerged from James C. Hellum and John S. Killgo who began providing separate death services in 1934 from their funeral homes in the Sixth Ward. After John Killgo moved from his hometown in Jackson, Tennessee, and graduated from Gupton-Jones College of Embalming, he opened up a funeral home with his wife, Isabelle. Through the successes of the business, they both emerged as community leaders, including Isabelle Killgo’s service as the first African American woman elected as a county commissioner.⁹⁹ Killgo Funeral Home, which also served as

⁹⁶ *Murfreesboro Union*, April 29, 1933.

⁹⁷ *Murfreesboro City Directory, 1925*, 87, 93; 1920 U.S. Federal Census; 1930 U.S. Federal Census.

⁹⁸ Leigh Ann Gardner, “Benevolent Cemetery, Murfreesboro (Rutherford County),” *Tennessee’s African American Lodges*, July 17, 2013, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://tn-africanamericanlodges.blogspot.com/2013/07/benevolent-cemetery-murfreesboro.html>.

⁹⁹ “Trailblazers: The Pillars of the African American Community,” exhibit, Bradley Academy Museum, 415 Academy Street, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, accessed November 13, 2014.

their residence, was located at 301 South Academy Street, just a block away from Scales & Sons on East State Street.

J.C. Hellum Funeral Homes originated at 102 East Sevier Street, at the intersection with South Church Street. James Hellum and his wife, Louise, lived outside of the city limits in the unincorporated community of Milton. Hellum was a member of the F & AM Masons, a deacon of the Missionary Baptist Church, and owner and operator of a farm in Wilson County.¹⁰⁰ In 1953, they moved the business to 611 South Highland Street, where they also built a residence. They located next door to Holloway High School, the all-black secondary school in Murfreesboro and a nucleus for community activity.¹⁰¹ By relocating, Hellum was asserting his business away from the first center of the African American community in favor of the residents on the eastern end of town. The move also allowed him to move his home into the neighborhood to gain a greater sense of acceptance. Hellums Funeral Home suggests the vernacular African American church with its smaller size and red brick construction, prominently conveying the connection between religion and death in the African American community. Hellum's successful start in Murfreesboro allowed his son, J.C. Hellum, Jr., to expand the business with branches in nearby Lebanon and Hartsville.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Hughes, *A History of Rutherford County's African American Community*, 57.

¹⁰¹ 611 South Highland Avenue, Rutherford County Property Assessor, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.rutherfordcountyttn.gov/propertyassessor/>; *Murfreesboro City Directory, 1950*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, 251; *Murfreesboro City Directory, 1956*, 378.

¹⁰² "Our History," J.C. Hellum Funeral Home, Inc., accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.jchellumfuneralhomes.com/our-history.html>.



Figure 16: Hellum Funeral Home, Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Photograph by Brad Miller.

CONCLUSION

The similar transformation of African American-owned funeral businesses in both Maury and Rutherford Counties provided economic success and civic engagement. The persistence of many of these businesses is a constant reminder of the influence and importance of their contribution to their community during times of extreme inequality and injustice. Dignity and solemn celebration remained a hallmark of African American culture in the services they provided. From race riots to renovations, their buildings tell a story of entrepreneurship, uplift, and growth that was due in part to the struggles of a segregated nation. Scales & Sons and J.C. Hellum funeral homes endure in Murfreesboro, while V.K. Ryan & Sons, Chavers, and Roundtree, Napier, and Ogilvie continue to offer their help in the passing of a loved one. Few funeral homes have ventured into these areas to compete with the businesses that have withstood the test of time and are engrained in the local culture of death.

CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPORTANCE AND POSSIBILITIES OF PRESERVATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN FUNERAL BUSINESSES

African American-owned funeral homes in Tennessee are important historical resources and community assets that require the attention of historians and historic preservationists. The study of the African American experience in Tennessee relies heavily upon the use of material culture because of the thin documentary record and an appreciation for the power that places, mainly buildings, hold in the historical and cultural identities of marginalized communities. Funeral homes, both operational and closed, are no exception to this approach. Integrating material culture with the documentary record is instrumental in any comprehensive understanding of the past, but the white bias within the written word amplifies the importance of what is physically remaining on the landscape.¹

As functioning businesses and buildings, funeral homes perpetuate the compassion and civic leadership passed down from past generations of owners. Their buildings as physical anchors deserve the distinction as culturally significant institutions instrumental in handling the unique experiences of life and death for African Americans in the United States. Yet, the future of these businesses and their stories remains unclear. Several historical black funeral firms remain in business in Tennessee, while

¹ Jaryn Abdallah, "More to the Story: Historical Narratives and the African American Past in Maury County, Tennessee," (Master's thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2015); James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 212-252.

most remain unidentified, out of business, demolished, and forgotten. The end of segregated business practices in the 1960s paired with the rise of large death care corporations resulted in many closed or bought-out African American funeral homes. More work in survey, assessment, and preservation is required in Tennessee to prevent further loss.

PRESERVING THE MATERIAL CULTURAL OF BLACK FUNERARY BUSINESSES

The inadequate attention paid to marginalized communities persists in the field of historic preservation and requires a reevaluation of the professional's approach to practice. Even with the new social histories of the 1970s, preservation "as a means of democratic, grassroots social change had barely begun to gel," from the narrower traditions of preserving a one-sided, nostalgic narrative of the past.² The majority of scholarly literature on historic preservation does not sufficiently discuss or instruct on matters of preserving the pasts of communities that society has marginalized in the writing and presentation of history, or provide new ways to think about what should be preserved.³ National Register nominations, historical surveys, and other professional

² Randall Mason, "Historic Preservation, Public Memory, and the Making of Modern New York City," in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason (New York: Routledge, 2004), 132.

³ Norman Tyler, Ted J. Ligibel, and Ilene R. Tyler, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles and Practice*, 2nd edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009); only two essays, of fifteen, pertain to marginalized communities in Robert E. Stipe, ed., *A Richer Heritage: Historic Preservation in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Antoinette J. Lee, "From Historic Architecture to Cultural Heritage: A Journey Through Diversity, Identity, and Community," *Future Anterior* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 15-23; Randall Mason, "Fixing Historic Preservation: A Constructive Critique of Significance," *Place* (Fall 2003): 64-71; historic preservation of marginalized communities in Tennessee was influenced by Carroll Van West, "Historic Rural African American Churches

reports continue to drive scholarship to reflect the ever growing, comprehensive approach to the past professionals are practicing in the field. Professionals and scholars who fully assess total cultural landscapes within their published work and reports are critical in the juncture for preserving multiple pasts and asking questions specifically about marginalized communities.⁴

Initial attention of preservationists toward high-styled architecture and historic sites associated with political leaders silenced the diverse narratives of the majority, including anyone who was not an affluent white male.⁵ Written evidence further unbalances the scale; however, all human culture materializes into objects, buildings, and landscapes. The analysis of African American material culture democratizes the study of the multiple pasts that make up the struggle for citizenship throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶ In Tennessee, historians and historic preservationists have made great strides towards a more equal representation of the past by building stronger narratives and inventorying material culture. The collected

in Tennessee, 1850-1970," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Properties Submission Form, 1998.

⁴ Leonie Sandercock, ed., *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997); Robert Z. Melnick and Arnold R. Alanen, eds., *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Richard Longstreth, ed., *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵ Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 5; Tyler, Ligibel, and Tyler, "The Preservation Movement in the United States," in *Historic Preservation*, 27-45.

⁶ Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 4, 11, 212-213.

essays in *Trials and Triumphs: Essays in Tennessee's African American History* (2002) increased African American presence in the historical narrative and “encourage[d] a greater appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between Tennessee history and African American history.”⁷ The partnership between Walker Library and the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University launched the *Southern Places* and *Trials and Triumphs* digital databases since 2013, which compiled a plethora of primary sources, including material evidence on the area’s African American history. Both databases help researchers and the public connect material evidence to physical locations on the Tennessee landscape, including several funeral homes.⁸

The social, political, and economic hardships African Americans faced in the Jim Crow South contributed to a number of significant differences in content between the historical evidence of the white majority and those of black communities. For example, rural African American churches and cemeteries in Tennessee represent some of the few remaining sources of material culture for many lost communities.⁹ Often times Rosenwald Schools are also in these communities, and extensive research has shown their subversion of Jim Crow material culture as leading models for educational

⁷ Carroll Van West, ed., introduction to *Trials and Triumphs: Essays in Tennessee's African American History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), xv.

⁸ “About,” *Trials and Triumphs: Tennesseans' Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity*, Digital Collections at Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University, accessed August 7, 2015; “About,” *Southern Places*, Digital Collections at Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University, accessed August 7, 2015, <http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm/about/collection/p15838coll4>.

⁹ West, “Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee.”

classroom architecture across the United States.¹⁰ The plain-style and white clapboard exteriors of African American churches and schools remain as subtle marks on the countryside and into Tennessee towns, but did not attract the attention of the first few generations of preservationists. Contributing to that neglect, Max Page and Randall Mason explained that past historic preservationists fostered “limited notions of American identity” by neglecting marginalized communities from the National Register and enforcing white supremacy.”¹¹ Troubled by the same issues, most small and unassuming funeral homes continue to be missed.

The buildings African Americans constructed, much like the etiquette of social interaction, had to negotiate between an expression of autonomy and success and the restraint of respectability. This balance was essential to remain safe from white individuals who viewed black success as a detriment to the social order. They were restrained in style due to a combination of economic instability, fear of racial violence, and by a collective choice. “The prevailing racial code frowned on exhibitions of black accomplishments that suggested an equal capacity,” historian Leon Litwack maintained, “for the Negro to get ‘out of place’ was to aspire to the same goals and possession whites coveted, and whites often found such aspirations by blacks both distasteful and

¹⁰ Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 5.

¹¹ Max Page and Randall Mason, introduction to *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15; Carroll Van West, “Assessing Significance and Integrity in the National Register Process: Questions of Race, Class, and Gender,” in *Preservation of What, For Whom?: A Critical Look at Historical Significance*, Michael Tomlan, ed. (Ithaca: National Council for Preservation Education, 1998).

unnatural.”¹² The resulting size and appearance of black funeral homes varied across Tennessee, while the businesses located within denser populations could afford to make a greater statement and feel safe within an inclusive neighborhood.

In comparison to the large colonial revival funeral homes and repurposed Victorian homes of white funeral homes, most African American funeral businesses remained in more utilitarian and simple spaces. In the case of rural African American churches, Carroll Van West argued, “their function and place—not style—within the larger space of African American institution building are what gave them distinction and primacy within the rural built environment.”¹³ African American cemeteries share the same power of place without an ornate aesthetic. Folklorist John Michael Vlach maintained that cemeteries were “one of the few places in America where overt black identity could be asserted and maintained.”¹⁴ Leaving objects, including broken glass and pottery, on the graves followed African traditions that appeared unkempt and disrespectful to white society. Assessing these vernacular spaces and buildings requires preservationists and historians to look beyond otherwise ordinary structures, and appreciate the functionality and sense of place that

¹² Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 329.

¹³ Carroll Van West, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance: Rural African American Churches in Jim Crow Tennessee,” in *We Shall Independent Be: African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, edited by Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, 439-461 (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 443-444; John A. Kouwenhoven, *The Beer Can by the Highway* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 156; Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 155.

¹⁴ John M. Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 107. See discussion of southern cemeteries in Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 13-63.

made black-owned funeral homes unique, working buildings within a complex landscape of interaction. Preservationists can only address the issue of race in the built environment, particularly during architectural surveys, once they are “ready fundamentally to question our culturally constructed definitions of aesthetics and architectural significance.”¹⁵

A statewide, comprehensive survey of African American-owned funeral homes would counteract the missed opportunities of past preservationists by highlighting an important historical resource and contributing to the larger historical impact of the funeral business within black communities in the South. One of the greatest benefits of historical resource surveys is that identification is a proactive measure that will help reveal preservation concerns before they become difficult challenges triggered by neglect and demolition. Identification is a leading challenge in preservation work with marginalized communities, because historical resource surveys have continued to neglect structures and sites that are not aesthetically pleasing, obvious in their intent, or on the fringes of towns.¹⁶ African American communities relegated themselves into separate spheres to foster a new sense of citizenship in business and society that now locates them away from the visually focused areas of a town or city where

¹⁵ Carroll Van West, “New Viewpoints on Old Places: The Future of Architectural Surveys,” *The Public Historian* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 99-104.

¹⁶ According to the National Park Service, surveying is a “process of identifying and gathering data on a community’s historic resources,” with the outcome of an inventory, which “is an organized compilation of information on those properties that are evaluated as significant.” Patricia L. Parker, et. al., *Guidelines for Local Surveys: A Basis for Preservation Planning*, National Register Bulletin 24, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1985, 2.

preservationists focus their attention.¹⁷ The physical segregation that persists today in areas across Tennessee is a testament to the separate growth and development of communities seemingly blocks apart at the bottom of the hill or literally on the “other side of the tracks.” Cultural geographer Charles Aiken is one of the few earlier scholars who recorded numerous examples of this continued white control of space during his work on the settlement patterns of the rural South following the Civil War—capturing structures that are no longer extant.¹⁸

These perpetuating landscapes of separation make it easy to forget and ignore, but attention to these details actually provide a more comprehensive analysis of the built environment.¹⁹ Funeral homes that once marked the geographic division between the white and black communities become teaching tools for difficult parts of the past. The preparation, observation, and outcomes of a historic survey for African American funeral homes would include a needed awareness among local public organizations, including historical societies and preservation groups, community members, and African American funeral professionals. The shared pasts of these entities centered in the places they call home, and are the most knowledgeable and dedicated to the cause. It is

¹⁷ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, xvi; Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South*, 251.

¹⁸ Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since The Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ After asking an older white woman who worked at the Mount Pleasant local history museum about African American funeral homes in the community, she responded that she had never thought about it but that the one she knew of was located on Columbia Avenue—a street she said she was not allowed to go down when she was growing up in town. Fieldwork notes, Mt. Pleasant, Tennessee, June 24, 2015.

difficult for individuals or communities to understand the significance of their lived experience and history until it is placed into a larger context.

African American funeral homes indicated the presence of a substantial African American community that desired and could afford the death care services of a professional, and now they indicate the remains of once thriving business districts, major thoroughfares, and black residential communities. Scales & Sons Funeral Home remains at a central point of the African American community that resided south of the town square of Murfreesboro. Businesses remain along South Maney Avenue at the intersections of East State Street and East Vine Street, and the predominantly African American residential neighborhood still extend east to the former location of the Holloway High School campus. The Broad Street Development Plan in the 1950s cleared out a portion of the neighborhood south and southeast of Scales for the construction of Broad Street, while the plan marked an area known as “The Bottoms” southwest of the town square, for demolition to make way for new city government buildings.²⁰ In Memphis, Harrison’s Funeral Home is one of the few businesses remaining on Carnes Avenue, which used to be a vibrant commercial zone in the historic African American community of Orange Mound. Other than corner convenience stores, barbershops and beauty salons are all that remain because like funeral homes, these businesses catered to the specific needs of an African American customer base that did not integrate after

²⁰“The Bottoms:’ The Community Under Broad Street,” online exhibit, Rutherford County Archives, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, accessed June 20, 2015, <https://sites.google.com/site/murfreesborothebottoms/home>.

the end of de jure segregation.²¹ Future surveys and studies of communities would benefit from locating African American funeral homes and assessing their relationships within the landscape as important structures aside from churches and schools, which have figured so prominently in previous assessments. Funeral homes are exceptionally important in this regard, because they are some of the few commercial buildings left that exemplify the racial divide as most others integrated.

The responsibility and desire for preservation must ultimately originate with the owners of these historic African American funeral homes because they are the stakeholders in the business and real estate. Fortunately, the most sustainable form of preservation for buildings is their continued operation as a business. Everyday use may be damaging, but general maintenance spanning the use of a building contributes to its overall longevity and preservation of historic fabric, not to mention the legacy of service that resonates within the walls.²² The upkeep of the interior and the exterior of funeral homes to uphold a welcoming atmosphere and calming aesthetic is central to the quality of service and helpful to the preservation of the building. The reciprocal benefit of preserving the building is the ability to convey the stories layered within its walls. A wider understanding of the African American funeral business in Tennessee contributes to this narrative and instills a sense of pride back to the owners as well as the community members they serve. The formation of an early entrepreneurial spirit in the

²¹ Fieldwork, Center for Historic Preservation visit to Orange Mound, Memphis, Tennessee, October 30, 2014.

²² Robert A. Young, *Historic Preservation Technology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), 5.

face of adversity serves as a socially constructive message to the current public that all preservation projects should hope to accomplish from the start.

African American funeral businesses have undergone the general challenges of small, family-owned businesses that threaten their livelihoods and position as anchors in their communities. Following World War Two, increased social mobility, the resulting fragmentation of local communities, and the declining role of religion in everyday life contributed to the modern challenges of the funeral industry.²³ In addition, large death care corporations began consolidating the funeral business market in the 1970s by purchasing family-owned establishments. Faced with firm competition, family-owned funeral homes turned to their history and dedication to the communities they serve. Reputations as prominent civic leaders and frequent business advertisements through the years benefited the bottom-line for black funeral businesses and enhanced their ability to keep the doors open.²⁴

African American funeral homes that have entered the digital age typically highlight their history on the pervasive “About Us” page to assure the public of their experience and care. For example, Tonya Scales-Harris utilizes her identity as a fourth-generation member of Murfreesboro’s Scales family to promote the multiple funeral homes in Middle Tennessee she operates by highlighting her lifetime of experience

²³ Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 209.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 97; Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 80.

growing up in a proven funeral business.²⁵ The Scales & Sons funeral home in Murfreesboro proudly displays the business' early twentieth-century horse-drawn hearse outside its chapel; a slideshow of historic photographs shuffle across the website of H.H. Hudson Funeral Home. Harrison's Funeral Home in Orange Mound provides an internet link to 1923 video footage of the establishment's first owner and his rolling stock of hearses.²⁶ The Ryan family concluded its biography with a list of their continuing community service, including support of the Maury County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), local Pop Warner Football teams, and student scholarships.²⁷ Inclusion on a statewide survey or acceptance onto the National Register would be further recognition of a trusted heritage that is already a vital characteristic of the business once dependent upon the unquestionable color line.

The current fate of many African American funeral homes in Tennessee is dependent upon several factors that have specifically challenged the black funeral industry since the modern Civil Rights Movement. Black businesses were reliant upon a segregated economy that guaranteed a strong customer base because customers of color were not welcome at white-owned establishments. Leading African American

²⁵ "About Us," Scales Funeral Home, Inc., accessed, October 10, 2014, <http://www.scalesfuneralhome.com/aboutus.htm>; fieldwork notes, September 10, 2014; "About Us," Patton Brothers Funeral Home, accessed October 10, 2014, www.pattonbrothers.net/fh/aboutus/history.cfm?&fh_id=14313.

²⁶ "Home," H.H. Hudson Funeral Home, accessed October 10, 2014, www.hhhudsonfh.com; Harrison's Memorial Chapel, Inc., accessed October 11, 2014, www.harrisonsmemorialchapelinc.com.

²⁷ "History," V.K. Ryan & Son Funeral Home, accessed, June 10, 2015, www.vkryanandsonfuneralhome.com/history.html.

funeral professionals constantly negotiated their support for an equal standing in society while operating a business dependent upon the separation.²⁸ The diminishing color line in public segregated spaces signaled a change in the black funeral business.

At the time of her son's death at the turn of the twenty-first century, Karla F.C. Holloway personally found "the familiarity and nearness of shared, remembered cultural spaces" that a black funeral home offered were very comforting, but it was not the same experience for all African Americans. Holloway found in her academic research that by the 1990s, African Americans began to grow disconnected with black funeral homes in urban centers. Increased social mobility and weakening color lines following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 allowed economically stable families to move into the suburbs. Convenience and location of closer businesses, including white funeral homes, undermined connections with previous neighborhoods and increased with the growing generational divide.²⁹ The decision to choose a death care professional became a choice unrestricted of race in the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1973, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Wilbert & Oliver et al. v. Escude Funeral Homes et al.* that the Louisiana funeral home (Escude Funeral Homes) could not refuse service or provide unequal treatment towards African American customers, which effectively ended

²⁸ Robert H. Kinzer, *The Negro in American Business: The Conflict Between Separatism and Integration* (New York: Greenberg, 1950), 2.

²⁹ Karla F.C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 38-43.

official racial discrimination in the funeral industry.³⁰ Since the modern Civil Rights Movement, funeral professionals will bury individuals of any race, but customers remain largely fixed to the color line.

Tennessee has lost a number of historically significant African American funeral homes after they had gone out of business, including T.H. Hayes & Son and Morton & Sons Funeral Homes. Hayes was considered the oldest African American business in Memphis. It moved to its prominent location besides the influential First Baptist Lauderdale Church and across the street from Booker T. Washington High School in 1918.³¹ T.H. Hayes & Son was the commercial focal point at the key African American intersection of South Lauderdale Street, Mississippi Boulevard, and East Georgia Avenue. First Baptist Church Lauderdale acquired the T.H. Hayes & Son building next door at 680 South Lauderdale Street after it went out of business in 2010. A set of concrete stairs leading to an empty grass plot and a state historical marker are the only remaining vestiges of the centennial business.³² According to one deacon of the church, “the cost of restoring it was out of reach.” The congregation had hoped to replace the building with a community center, but the lot remains empty.³³

³⁰ *Wilbert Oliver et al. vs. Escude Funeral Homes, Inc., et al.*, Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed June 28, 2015, www.splcenter.org/get-informed/case-docket/wilbert-oliver-et-al-vs-escude-funeral-homes-inc-et-al.

³¹ Carroll Van West and Jen Stoecker, “First Colored Baptist Church,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2000.

³² Tennessee Historical Commission historical markers designate the locations of T.H. Hayes & Sons Funeral Home and the undertaking establishment of G.W. Franklin in Chattanooga; the site of Franklin’s business has long been lost to redevelopment of the downtown area.

³³ *Columbia Daily Herald*, August 8, 2011.

Disagreement and insufficient funding continues to cause setbacks in the preservation of the Morton & Sons Funeral Home site in Columbia where time and neglect has already compromised the structural integrity of the building. The business closed sometime in the mid-1990s, but it was not until 2010 that its preservation became part of larger agendas. The Tennessee Preservation Trust included Morton & Sons on its “Ten in Tennessee” endangered historic sites list after Columbia councilwoman Christa Martin began a coordinated effort to preserve the African American landmark.³⁴



Figure 17: Morton & Sons Funeral Home. Despite a collapsed roof, the walls of the century-old structure continues to stand alongside the First Missionary Baptist Church on East Eighth Street. Photograph by Brad Miller.

³⁴ *Columbia Daily Herald*, June 20, 2010.

The city council has slated Morton & Sons for demolition on several occasions, but concerns for cost and contingency plans for memorialization of the site have hindered any action.³⁵ In media's coverage, there is little mention of Morton & Sons as a "contributing building" to the Columbia Commercial Historic District, which denotes its contribution to the historical integrity of the roughly four-block radius around the county courthouse.³⁶ Instead, its crumbling walls are treated as a "blighted property" instead of an integral part of Columbia's historic aesthetic and atmosphere.³⁷ The standing structure was a critical gathering point for African Americans during the 1946 race riot, which helps connect the local events to the national story that unfolded, including involvement by Thurgood Marshall, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the resulting formation of President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights. The century-old building still stands along East Eighth Street as one of the few poignant reminders of the prosperous, yet challenging, African American past. Its simple presence possesses the ability to counter the white-centric historical narrative of Maury County, causing inaction among individuals who wish to maintain the status quo.³⁸ The African American Heritage Society of Maury County applied for a state historical marker, and the Tennessee Historical Commission approved its request in February 2015. One side of the marker

³⁵ *Columbia Daily Herald*, March 9, 2014.

³⁶ Richard Quin and Shain Dennison, "Columbia Commercial Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Properties Nomination Form, 1984.

³⁷ *Columbia Daily Herald*, March 8, 2014.

³⁸ Abdallah, "More to the Story," 69-70.

will discuss the Morton family business, while the other side will detail the events of the 1946 Columbia Race Riot.³⁹

African American funeral homes in Tennessee have benefited from state and local historical markers, but only in cases of well-known histories. R.S. Lewis and Sons Funeral Home and the Shelby County Historical Commission erected a historical marker in 2014 to designate the historical significance of the funeral home within Memphis. It is one of the few historic buildings remaining on the short stretch of Vance Avenue southeast of downtown that has not been reduced to an empty lot. Robert Stevenson Lewis founded the business in 1914, quickly becoming a landmark in the community. Robert's son, Robert Jr., continued the business, and eventually owned the Memphis Red Sox, the local Negro Leagues baseball team and helped establish T.O. Fuller State Park, a pioneering state park for African Americans.⁴⁰ On April 4, 1968, the staff at R.S. Lewis & Sons were responsible for the transport and preparation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at their funeral home, a day after his assassination at Lorraine Motel, a half mile down the road.⁴¹ The funeral home also hosted hundreds of mourners for a viewing before King's body was sent back to his home in Atlanta. Besides its association

³⁹ Abdallah, "More to the Story," 87-88.

⁴⁰ Jody Callahan, "Historic Memphis Funeral Home Turns 100, Gets Marker," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, accessed June 15, 2015, www.commercialappeal.com/news/local-news/historic-memphis-funeral-home-turns-100-gets-marker_89037720.

⁴¹ R.S. Lewis & Sons lent Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his associates a limousine whenever he visited Memphis in the 1960s. The funeral home limousine offered an inconspicuous mode of transportation—for a civil rights activist—in the increasingly violent atmosphere. Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 108, 54n.

with a larger historical narrative of the modern Civil Rights Movement, R.S. Lewis and Sons Funeral Home has become a steady, fixed point within its built surroundings.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR NOMINATION TO THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The National Register of Historic Places is a standard among historic preservationists for assessing historical significance, yet African American funeral homes and buildings associated with the funeral business remain an underrepresented resource among its contents. The paucity of African American funeral home nominations in the ever-expanding inventory of identified and successfully nominated historically significant properties in the National Register of Historic Places reveals the marginal nature of preservation towards the material culture of African Americans. In terms of the black funeral business, the national inventory contains only four African American funeral homes out of thirty-one properties identified as buildings associated with the funeral business, which is already a marginally recognized historical resource.⁴² White individuals owned the remaining twenty-seven. The details of these thirty-one funerary properties highlight the challenges with historical resource nomination for African American properties.

The criterion primarily used for nomination to the National Register remains architecturally significant historical resources, which directly affects the possibilities for historically marginalized communities. The twenty-one properties with accessible

⁴² National Register of Historic Places Research Database, National Park Service, accessed July 9, 2015, www.nps.gov/nr/research/index.htm.

nomination forms revealed an overwhelming use of Criterion C, design and construction, a justification of a resource's significance.⁴³ The first and oldest nomination of an African American funeral home from 1983 was based on its architectural significance. In 1983, a private consultant nominated the 1830 Federal style home that contained the Saffell Funeral Home in Shelbyville, Kentucky, because of its architectural style and link to the community's early settlement. The nominator's attention to the building's aesthetic and age neglected George William Saffell's acquisition of the property in 1929 and its subsequent use as a funeral home through the nomination process.⁴⁴ George W. Saffell was the first president of the African American organization that eventually became the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association. His wife, Daisey Saffell, spoke on behalf of black funeral professionals in 1912 at the 13th Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League in Chicago.⁴⁵ The building, which no longer stands, had the potential to connect

⁴³ The authors of these documents nominated nine funeral businesses solely for Criterion C, eight for a combination of Criterion C and Criterion A (historical event or trend), three for Criterion A alone, and one for a combination of Criterion A and Criterion B—for a significant person. The remaining ten nominations were unavailable through the National Park Service online database, but research into the funeral businesses revealed that most resided in architecturally significant buildings; National Register of Historic Places Research Database.

⁴⁴ The intent of the nomination was to chronicle the residential and commercial growth of Shelbyville, which could have included the specific contribution of Saffell Funeral Home because the business was located in the building during the last four years of the period of significance defined on the nomination form. Helen Powell, "Saffell Funeral Home," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1983, 1.

⁴⁵ "Saffell, Daisy M. and George William Saffell," Notable Kentucky African Americans Database, University of Kentucky Libraries, accessed July 15, 2015, http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note_id=1583; "About Us," National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.nfdma.com/about-us.html>.

Shelbyville with local individuals and nationally significant stories and trends dealing with African American entrepreneurship and the black funeral profession.

The remaining three nominations for African American funeral business buildings relied upon an association with historical trends and important individuals. These properties joined the National Register between 2005 and 2009, reflecting the growing shift from nominations based on architecture to those based on association with a historical event or trend. African American ethnic heritage and commerce, instead, served as areas of significance, which promoted a greater sense of understanding and complexity to these buildings. Both the A.P. Williams and Angelus Funeral Homes were identified as parts of a Multiple Property Submission (MPS), respectively for “Resources Associated with Segregation in Columbia, South Carolina, 1880-1960,” and “Historic Resources Associated with African Americans in Los Angeles.”⁴⁶ A concerted effort to identify historical resources associated with the African American experience pinpointed these businesses in their communities, which depended upon a larger historical context, namely segregated economic efforts from the 1930s to 1950s, for their nomination into the National Register. Connections to larger historical trends are critical for understanding the importance of these buildings. The nomination of the Columbia, South Carolina, property also considered the local business and NAACP leadership of the building’s owner and resident, A.P. Williams. Vines Funeral Home was the only

⁴⁶ Lauren Ham, “A.P. Williams Funeral Home,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2005, 2; Teresa Grimes, “Angelus Funeral Home,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2008, 2.

independent nomination for an African American funeral home for its association with historical trends.

Vines Funeral Home in Lafayette, Alabama, demonstrates the National Register eligibility for African American funeral homes as stand-alone historical resources. The nomination of Vines Funeral Home pioneered an important property type for future nominations and presented several challenges that funeral businesses in Tennessee would face in the nomination process. The approach to the nomination coincided with most other funeral homes on the National Register that used Criterion A, because it categorized the area of significance with commerce and local business.⁴⁷ Julius Summers Vines and his successful efforts to start a business in 1952 illustrated the experiences of African American veterans and their pursuit of equality: Vines leveraged the terms of his G.I. Bill to pay for the construction of his business, claiming that it was his home. The period of significance for Vines spans a brief six years from its beginning in 1952 to 1958 in order to stay within the fifty-year assessment guideline of the National Register.⁴⁸ Several African American funeral businesses in Tennessee span from the end of the nineteenth century into the present, but over time have changed locations, erected new buildings, or constructed additions that make assessing integrity to National Register standards difficult. The post-World War II construction of the rectangular one-story

⁴⁷ National Register of Historic Places Research Database, National Park Service, accessed July 9, 2015, www.nps.gov/nr/research/index.htm; David B. Schneider and David Ray, "Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2008, 3.

⁴⁸ Schneider and Ray, "Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service," 3, 7.

Vines Funeral Home did not undergo any major additions or renovations until much later in its existence. The addition of a chapel to the complex did not compromise the integrity of the original building because it was discretely hyphenated by a breezeway in the rear of the funeral home and was an essential part of the growing business.

Efforts to prove the integrity of historical resources will prove to be the greatest challenge in the nomination process for African American funeral businesses in Tennessee. According to the National Register bulletin on the nomination process, integrity “is the ability of a property to convey its significance.”⁴⁹ The significance of black funeral businesses encompasses their entrepreneurial contribution to a segregated economy, the practice and fulfillment of African American cultural traditions, and as physical anchors to community development and growth. The forms that manifested to fulfill these roles varied across Tennessee, but within the context of their surroundings. As part of the evaluation, preservationists must identify and assess physical features that are characteristic of the historical resource’s significance, but if these characteristics are unidentified or the particular resource is understudied then other similar resources should be considered.⁵⁰ The preliminary survey of African American funeral businesses in Tennessee revealed the frequent need and desire of proprietors to expand and renovate their establishments to provide a better service to their customers.

⁴⁹ Patrick W. Andrus, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, National Register Bulletin, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1995, 44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.



Figure 18: Patton Brothers Funeral Home on South Street in Nashville, Tennessee. The original Italianate home remains the core of this building that has served as a funeral home by Zema Hill and the Patton family. Photograph by Brad Miller.

By the very nature of buildings, their form and function evolved with the needs of the users, creating the need to consider black death care buildings as living entities of the community whose own layers of change are expressions of its historical significance. The growing demand and business choice of an all-in-one domestic atmosphere for funeral homes in American culture and the technological innovations of embalming required physical alterations to buildings. By simply looking at the Patton Brothers Funeral Home in Nashville, one can decipher the original Italianate house that Zema Hill transformed into his funeral business in 1919 from the multiple one-story additions around the building. A large illuminated sign now directs guests at the top of the front

porch steps towards the front right addition that houses the funeral home's chapel. The same expansion defines Scales Funeral Home on the north side of Nashville, the unassuming front façade of the small, cross-gabled ell house gives way to a multi-stage expansion to the rear of the building that more than tripled the interior of the funeral home. The rear additions to the house most likely reveal a desire to push the logistics of body care outside of the original house and away from the spaces where the public and customers would interact with the funeral home staff.



Figure 19: Scales Funeral Home on Jefferson Street in Nashville, Tennessee. The multi-story addition to the rear, awning-covered walkways, and manicured landscape adapted the original domestic dwelling for the funeral business in the mid-twentieth century. Photograph by Brad Miller.

Growth and the needs of the business required an influx in physical alterations to the building over the years and thus, an important characteristic of historic funeral homes. Historians and preservationists must assess the function of significance based upon the dynamic characteristics of an evolving building rather than evaluation through a fixed set of features. A MPS would be an effective solution to maneuvering through some of the challenges with individual nominations, specifically in creating a context for comparison and eligibility across the state for the National Register. Establishing “African American Funerary and Death Care Buildings in Tennessee” as a working name eliminates comparison with white owned funeral homes that would otherwise be an inappropriate and anachronistic approach to assessing relevance and integrity. The context would link together the diverse property types in the state; including one-story storefront buildings, Victorian homes, and modern interpretations of the gable front rural vernacular church.⁵¹ Specific exterior characteristics of these property types could include the addition of chapels, awnings and walkway coverings, and garages, while expectations of interiors could revolve around the division of space for viewings (slumber rooms), showrooms for casket displays, and the private preparation rooms for care of the body.

⁵¹ Property types are not restricted by similar physical characteristics, but instead, can include buildings whose function and association with a specific activity links their historical significance and identity. Antoinette J. Lee and Linda F. McClelland, *How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form*, National Register Bulletin 16b, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1999, 14.

A MPS would also help contextualize the emergence of the modern funeral profession among African Americans in Tennessee and provide a framework for interested funeral homes to nominate their buildings. Periods of historic context would include: "Pioneering the Death Care Service, 1880-1919," and "The Modern Funeral Business, 1920-1965." The first era would include the entrepreneurial efforts of early undertakers that predominantly occurred in Tennessee's urban centers, while the second era witnessed the emergence of more funeral businesses in Tennessee as social mobility and expressions of autonomy spread following World War One to the achievements of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Across space and time, these men and women shared many connections in their practice through trade journals, education, and professional organizations, and interactions while working. *The Colored Embalmer* was a unifying trade journal for the "education, expression, and co-operation" of black funeral professionals who most likely attended a regional embalming school like Gupton-Jones Embalming College in Nashville.⁵² African American organizations such as the Volunteer State Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association and the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association continued the entrepreneurial coordination that the National Negro Business League began at the turn of the century. The MPS would connect these networks stretching back to the 1880s in order to compare the ways each individual proprietor developed their funeral business

⁵² Smith, *To Serve the Living*, image 6.

and manifested the ideal image in the buildings they used to serve the African American community.

CONCLUSION

Within the brick and mortar of each funeral business lies the stories, both tragic and triumphant, of African American communities in Tennessee. A comprehensive survey of black-owned funeral businesses in Tennessee would document an important aspect of the African American experience through the segregation of Jim Crow, the modern Civil Rights Movement, and into the present. Identification of these historical assets, both closed and operational, would be a welcomed addition to the historical narrative and further validation for the important role of African American funeral businesses in their respective communities. Using the National Register of Historic Places as a standard for preservation planning, buildings associated with the African American funeral business in Tennessee hold a unique value within the history of the state and deserve public recognition and protection as physically integral parts of the historic landscape. Every building lost becomes another void in the evidence critical for understanding the past, anchoring the present, and serving as a foundation for progress in the future.

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