

Partnership Collecting African-American Funeral Programs

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Augusta, GA -- Lives silenced by death have been given a voice. They are being heard through the papers inside a file cabinet. Each page tells about a past that is helping to unlock valuable information in the present.

"My aunt was so dear to me that I wanted to memorialize her name," says historian Gloria Ramsey Lucas.

Lucas is talking about her aunt Eula Ramsey Johnson. She died many years ago, leaving more than 300 funeral programs...pieces of paper that would typically be thrown out as trash were collected by Lucas who viewed them as treasures.

"Early on, they didn't tell you too much except where the person came from, usually, which is important also because a lot of people migrated to a large city and Augusta is considered a large city from small towns and those small towns would be mentioned in the funeral program. So, you have someplace to go to find out more," Lucas says.

Lucas has done extensive research on her family, tracing her roots to slaves in Edgefield County. She chronicled her trip through time in a book that lists thousands of slaves owned and sold in the area. Now, the seed from Lucas's aunt's funeral programs has grown to nearly 4,000.

East Central Georgia Library historian Dottie Demarest says the programs are coming from across the country. "A lot of people who had relatives go up to Brooklyn, up to New York, mostly that corridor...Pennsylvania and Washington. They will send the programs back to us to put here," she says.

The programs are mostly from the past 40 years. Some stand out more than others, but each offers a fascinating public look into private lives. The collection even has the program of a former slave who died in 1972. "It tells about the plantation, about her life, her children. They would never know this information without something like this," Demarest says.

The Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History is a partner in the effort to collect African-American funeral programs. Historian Corey Rogers spearheaded the project and says many people saved programs as a souvenir of sorts from an important event.

"You know, older members of the community...it was almost like an event. It's like, 'we're going to someone's funeral'. (laughing) It's like we're going to a football game. It wasn't looked at in morbid details. It was a natural part of life," Rogers says.

It's a part of life that now provides a glimpse of a past that has helped family members unearth buried information.

"What the funeral programs allow you to do, in a way, is double check and back up some of the information that you might find through the Census," Rogers says.

Now, that once elusive information is within reach in a central location, thanks to one woman whose precious mementos became a memorial.

"My aunt would be pleased to know that she saved those for a purpose," says Lucas.

The East Central Georgia Regional Library and Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History welcome donations of funeral programs. For information on how to donate, click [here](#). You don't have to give up the programs...they will make copies and give you back the original.