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ECGRL Unveils Valuable Local Resource for African Americans

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ECGRL unveils valuable local resource for African Americans

An unexpected donation to the East Central Georgia Regional Library inspired librarian Dottie Demarest, Genealogy and Local History Specialist, to create a new and valuable resource for the African American community. Four years ago Gloria Lucas brought her aunt Eula Mae Ramsey Johnson's funeral programs to the library. There were nearly 300 programs in the donation from the funerals of Mrs. Johnson's extended family and friends that she had collected over more than 30 years. Gloria did not want them discarded, which is the fate of many such collections once the people who own them pass away.

Fortunately, the value of having an African American Funeral Program collection was recognized right away. The funeral programs provide a wealth of information about the lives of the deceased, their parents, where they lived and went to school, the jobs and churches they attended and the names of their children and grandchildren. In the more modern programs, pictures of the deceased and sometimes their family are included. Holding the programs in a central location means that they are available to many more people and will be available for future generations.

The funeral programs are kept in a special filing cabinet and a printed index was created for the collection that could be updated as needed. Deborah Barron, Assistant Librarian, has been instrumental in keeping the index of the collection up to date. At first, the focus of the collection was on the Central Savannah River Area but it quickly became apparent that the African Americans of this community had a network of friends and family that spanned the nation. As more people heard about the collection, funeral programs trickled in from people in many places. If the owners wish to keep their programs, they are copied and returned. That turned out to be a

good decision. These are often valued keepsakes of beloved family members and sometimes people have a hard time parting with them, something that is completely understandable.

By last summer, the collection had grown to about 1200 programs when Demarest approached Edward A. Johnson, the Project Director at Georgia HomePLACE, with the idea of digitalizing the collection and placing them online. To Demarest's great delight, Georgia HomePlace liked the idea. ECGR Library Director Gary Swint agreed that the library would pay for the digitalization of the programs, which was done by OCLC, and Georgia Digital Library agreed that they would create and maintain a searchable database for them. There were some small glitches. The digitalization took just a little longer than expected and some of the copies of the funeral programs were unusable. Still, more than a thousand funeral programs went online in July 2009. It is believed to be the first of its kind.

The earliest program is of Lucy Laney who died in 1933. Another program is of a woman who was born a slave and died at 113 years of age. What a wealth of information it holds about her for her

family! Now it does not matter where in the world her relatives are, they can access the information and view her program or those of other friends and family at any time.

Today the collection contains over 1500 programs and continues to grow. ►►

— **Dorothy Demarest**
Local History Librarian
Augusta-Richmond County Public Library

