



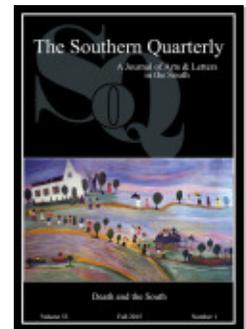
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“ ‘Ours is a Business of Loyalty’: African American Funeral Home Owners in Southern Cities”*

BEVERLY BUNCH-LYONS

I was five years old when my grandmother Olivia—or “Mother” as we called her—died. During her lifetime, Mother, the daughter of a prominent racially mixed North Carolina educator, and my grandfather Louis, a poor sharecropper, gave birth to twelve children, most of whom would go on to earn graduate degrees. I never knew my grandfather Louis, or the aunt and uncle who died before Mother. Mother was the center of our family and her passing was my first experience with death, and also the process of burying the dead. I still recall vividly the day of Mother’s funeral. I sat there on the hard church pew squeezed in between my older brother and cousins trying to get comfortable in my yellow dress with the white ruffled collar, and the white tights that made my legs itch. I had already mourned for Mother by the time the funeral was held. I would miss her, but was happy to know that her wheelchair would be replaced by wings and she would no longer suffer from the multiple sclerosis that ravaged her body. In my mind, the funeral was not to be a sad occasion—however, the familiar and unfamiliar faces all around suggested otherwise. I recognized many of the faces at the funeral—aunts,

*I am very grateful to the men and women who took time from their extremely busy schedules to share the intimate details of their work in the business of death. My deep appreciation is extended to Aprile Belk for connecting me with some of the interviewees, Percy Murray of North Carolina Central University for encouraging me to pursue this topic, Walter Friedman of Harvard University for offering useful feedback on the version of this article presented at the Business History Conference in June 2015, and the library staff at Virginia Tech (especially Debbie Cash). This article is dedicated to my mother, Anne Bunch, an educator, a friend, and a woman of grace and dignity who passed in 2014. Her passing further enhanced my respect for the work of the undertaker.

uncles, cousins and a host of extended family members, but there were also faces I did not recognize—the stoic, hard-faced men in their black suits, white shirts, and black ties who seemed to be telling everyone what to do. Quietly, and with great dignity and poise these men orchestrated Mother’s going home ceremony.

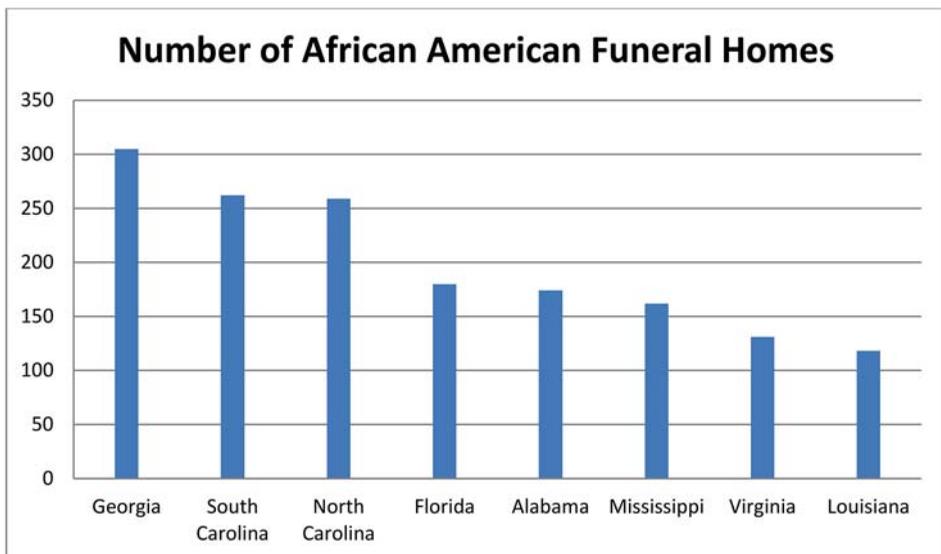
Since Mother’s death over forty-five years ago, I have attended many funerals, and watched with great fascination the work of the men (and now women) who engage in the business of death in African American communities. The death of a family member near the time I was searching for a thesis topic for my master’s degree prompted me to explore the business that had fascinated me as a child. I completed this thesis in 1990 which was narrowly focused on my hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina, which at the time had three African American owned funeral homes. My research led me to Booker T. Washington’s work. His words about the African American funeral business struck me then as quoted in my 1990 thesis, as they still do today, and certainly bear repeating. He states, “It is a curious fact that with the exception of that of caterer there is no business in which Negroes seem to be more numerously engaged or one in which they have been more uniformly successful” (94).

Funeral home operators occupy a unique place in African American communities. They comfort the living while burying the dead. As business owners, they are necessarily concerned with profit, yet their business demands compassion. Relying on the personal accounts of funeral home operators from three Southern states, this work demonstrates the powerful linkages between the personal, political, social, and economic lives of funeral directors and the communities they serve. Furthermore, these accounts offer insight into factors that motivated African American men and their families to engage in the funeral business, and highlight the challenges they faced as black entrepreneurs occupying Southern spaces at the turn of the twentieth century.

The long history of African American involvement in business ventures is fairly well-documented. Historian Juliet Walker notes, “Antebellum blacks, primarily slaves, in addition to being business owners, also participated as managers (intrapreneurs) in urban, industrial, and agricultural enterprises in the South’s business community” (xxv). As descendants of slaves; the desire to own one’s labor and profit from hard work, served as a motivator to entrepreneurship. During the post-bellum era, those with an entrepreneurial spirit operated their own businesses selling food, used clothing and furniture, and hand-made crafts (Jones 8; Logan 112; Walker xxiv). Others were involved in businesses such as journalism, hairdressing, shoemaking, and tailoring (Jones 8). Emancipation provided the opportunity for African Americans to expand their business ventures into other areas including the undertaking

business, but only rarely did it provide the opportunity to expand one's client base outside of the black population.

Washington believed the funeral business was a popular and profitable endeavor for African Americans. Growth in the number of funeral firms over the years suggests the accuracy of his assessment. For example, the 1890 census records 231 African American funeral firms nationwide, (US, "Economic" 526). Today there are over two thousand. The vast majority are concentrated in the eight Southern states of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Virginia, and Louisiana (Purple Directory). Washington praises these early undertakers and attributes their success to hard work, but also to the fact that they provided a service "which the white business men could not or were not able to properly provide for (94)."



This information is based on data obtained from the 11th edition of the *Purple Directory: National Listing of African American Funeral Firms*.

Later scholars such as Merah Stuart and John Sibley Butler provide a more nuanced explanation for the circumscribed position of black entrepreneurs. In his 1969 work, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes*, Stuart argues that racial segregation limited business opportunities for blacks. He writes:

Of all the cruel mockeries to which, in racial experimentations, the American negro has been subjected, the 'opportunity' to operate a separate business, to employ his commercial talents

and make his way in business and professions confined to that small fraction of the population of his own people which he may attract and hold in competition with the mass production and marketing, the giant financial combinations, the cumulative wisdom and financial strength of centuries, is perhaps the most ironical and obviously difficult. (xix)

In a later work, John Sibley Butler echoes a similar point when he “resurrects” Stuart’s concept of economic detour. Butler states, “The idea of economic detour is that Afro-Americans, especially in the period following the Civil War, were restricted by law from operating their business enterprises in an open market” (71). Butler argues that the US Department of Commerce in 1939 recognized “a separate Afro-American market,” and that blacks were expected to operate their business “only within their own group,” while this expectation was not true for other groups such as the Japanese or Chinese (72-73). In a 2013 article, Moises Naim argues that when business operators are . . . “like Gulliver, tied down by thousands of micropowers they’re less able to address the most pressing issues of the day” (4-5). In the case of African American entrepreneurs race-based regulations served to restrict would-be business owners from operating and possibly growing their business. The irony for African American funeral directors, and other African American entrepreneurs who catered primarily to African American clientele, is that while segregation allowed business owners to corner an entire race-based market, it also hindered business owners from expanding their markets outside of their race. As a result, most funeral businesses remained small, family-owned endeavors. Those that reached what Andrew Grove refers to as, “the strategic inflection point,” (qtd. in Galambos 1) experienced likely demise, rather than rejuvenation.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century most African American funeral owners operated businesses that were segregated by fact, though not necessarily by law. While Jim Crow laws were intricately intertwined in virtually every aspect of life in Southern states, the funeral business was one area where racial boundaries were sometimes crossed by white undertakers who buried black bodies. The opportunity to bury white bodies was rarely afforded African American undertakers (Smith 117). Up until the early twentieth century, most African Americans relied on white undertakers to bury their dead simply because there were not any black undertakers in most towns and cities. In Washington’s previously mentioned work, he describes the circumstances that lead Elijah Cook of Montgomery, Alabama, to start his own undertaking business. According to Washington, Cook witnessed the corpses of African Americans being thrown into old wagons and taken to the

cemetery at the end of the Civil War (94). Concerns about the manner in which black bodies were laid to rest by white undertakers fueled the desire among African Americans to have their family members buried by black undertakers whom they believed would bury their dead with care and dignity. A desire to meet this community need, while also earning a comfortable, stable living led would-be entrepreneurs to the undertaking business. For example, William Porter, a former Tennessee slave started a profitable undertaking business in Cincinnati, Ohio, and eventually amassed real estate holdings in the amount of \$25,000 prior to the twentieth century (Washington 95-96). By the turn of the twentieth century there were African American undertakers throughout the South. Undertakers, like other African American entrepreneurs, faced a number of obstacles; the most prevalent was often access to capital and credit (Jones 12; Blayton 60).

Starting a business on a “shoestring” budget was common among African American entrepreneurs, especially undertakers. Most started modestly, and grew their business by saving and investing in additional equipment over time. Working wives contributed their earnings from teaching or other professional jobs to the family funeral business. When Nelson Greene Sr. opened his funeral business in 1954 in Alexandria, Virginia, he relied on personal savings and a little help from relatives. These were truly family endeavors as wives and children often worked in the business, driving cars, or attending to other business matters (Greene).

Some funeral home owners relied on other sources to finance their business. Clarence Lightner explains that when in 1929 his father, Calvin Lightner decided to expand the funeral business he opened in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1908, he turned to Dr. Aaron McDuffie Moore, a physician in Durham, North Carolina, and one of the original organizers of the North Carolina Mutual and Provident Association, later known as North Carolina Mutual Life. North Carolina Mutual Life in Durham, North Carolina, the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company in Washington, DC, and Mechanics and Farmers Bank in Raleigh, North Carolina, were all organizations with a similar mission—provide loans, life insurance, and a place for African Americans to save their earnings for future use and investments. Owners of these businesses advocated thriftiness and promoted fiscal responsibility for their patrons. They opened the door for business ventures by loaning money to African American entrepreneurs who were not able to secure the necessary funds elsewhere (Jones 13; Woodson 213-14; Kenzer, 38-40).

In addition to capital, successful businesses required a stable, employed population capable of buying the goods and services offered. When Calvin Lightner opened the first African American owned funeral home in Raleigh in 1908, the town had well over 6,000 African American residents. The pos-

sibility for population growth within the town was strong as the state was home to nearly 700,000 African American residents who made up almost one-third of the entire population of the state by 1910 (Gibson; Crow & Hatley 39). As the African American population grew, so did the need for additional undertakers. In 1939, there were only two African American owned funeral homes in Raleigh (US, *Summary*). By 1954 there were 352 African American funeral directors and embalmers throughout the state. In order to keep up with changing trends in the business, many African American funeral directors joined North Carolina's burial associations. Eventually African American associations accounted for 117 of the 336 burial associations in the state (State Burial Commissioner; Larkins).

Calvin Lightner had much in common with other African American entrepreneurs of his time. He was part of the growing black middle and upper class of the South. This group included doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, educators, and ministers. According to John Larkins:

These groups, white collar and professional are considered by Negroes and whites as the best people who have achieved middle class status. Usually they live in nice homes with well-kept lawns and surroundings. Their homes are well-furnished Usually they belong to college fraternities and sororities and hold membership in the Mason, Elks, Shriners, Eastern Star Lodge and other civic, fraternal and religious organizations. Finally, they send their children to college and professional schools (Larkins 2, 11).

Born in 1877 in Winsbore, South Carolina, to Frank and Daphney Lightner, a carpenter and homemaker, Calvin attended public school in his hometown, and in 1898 moved to Raleigh to attend Shaw University where he received a Bachelor's degree. He graduated in 1908 as a member of the Bars Down Class, or the BDC, meaning, no bars too high to climb in college and in life. According to Clarence, his father Calvin preached this message of success to his children (C. Lightner; Pace).

Like many other African American funeral directors, Calvin Lightner served as an apprentice to a mortician before operating his own business. In 1908, both African Americans and whites were using horse drawn buggies for funeral processions. Calvin's son quotes him as saying, "whites seemed to always have better horses and buggies." Even though the Lightner family performed funeral services in 1908, it was not until 1911 that they received an official charter, the result of concerted efforts to keep an African American owned business out of downtown Raleigh where it was argued it might bring

undesirables, and tarnish the image of the growing city (C. Lightner).

In spite of obstacles, Calvin Lightner began his business in a small wooden building located on Hargett Street in southeast Raleigh. He soon expanded and renovated, adding on a large, three-story brick building. Lightner's business prospered allowing him to engage in other business ventures. According to Clarence Lightner, his father helped create the Acme Realty Company which operated from one of the floors of his funeral home. The company was later sold to the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company. Clarence stated that his father's goal ". . . was to provide for my people, to give us a nice movie theater to sit in on Saturday afternoon, nice places to go."



Front entry of Lightner's Funeral Home. Raleigh, North Carolina. 2014. Reproduced with permission of the photographer, Beverly Bunch-Lyons.

Across the street from Lightner's building was a piece of property priced at \$24,000. Lightner's plan was to purchase the land and build a three story building which would house a hotel, theater, dining area, drug store, and barber shop. To realize this plan he needed money to buy the land, furnish each facility, and stock the shelves in the drug store. He secured a loan in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars from North Carolina Mutual Life. Construction began on the buildings in earnest, but was never completed because Lightner experienced financial trouble in 1929 as the Great Depression began. This disappointing setback cost Lightner a great deal financially as he had already used part of the loan to purchase furnishings for the theater (C. Frazier; C. Lightner).

Financial setbacks could prove disastrous to small family-owned enterprises and this was indeed the case with Lightner. He continued to operate his funeral business, but also turned to local politics, a fairly common practice among funeral home owners (Bunch). As well-respected members of their communities, funeral directors were able to capitalize on their status and use it as a segue into politics. Involvement in local politics served as a platform for undertakers and other entrepreneurs to encourage black citizens to support black businesses, and get involved in affairs affecting their communities by exercising their right to vote, and by becoming better educated. Civic mindedness characterized many of the African American business leaders,

or “race men” as they were often called (Hornsby-Gutting 140; Hornsby 276). Using his father’s experience as an example, Clarence Lightner argued that “blacks need political leadership and representation at all levels of government, but especially at the local level where the success or failure of a business is determined.” In 1919, Calvin Lightner and two other African American entrepreneurs sought elective posts in city government. They were not successful, but their efforts received a great deal of support from African Americans, and resulted in public sanctions from whites who launched efforts to discourage white patronage from black-owned establishments, and further attempted to enact economic sanctions upon all the business efforts of the trio (Christensen 10).

By the 1950’s Lightner’s Funeral business was declining. Unsuccessful business decisions and competition from a newer African American funeral home were partly the cause. In 1959 Calvin turned the declining business over to his youngest son, Clarence Everette Lightner. “Baby Lightner,” as he was known by family and friends, breathed new life into the family business. Clarence never intended to run the family business. He wanted to be a physician instead. When he completed college in 1942 he enlisted in the army for four years before then enrolling in the Echols College of Mortuary Science in Philadelphia. Upon his return to North Carolina, Clarence was given control of the family business after the death of his brother Lawrence. The funeral business was rapidly changing as a result of new technologies, increasing professional standards and greater demands from clients. Colleges offering an education in Mortuary Science were slowly cropping up around the country to meet the increasing demands for those undertakers attempting to keep up with changing trends in their profession (Laderman 5-7, 158-59). “Baby Lightner” acquired the education necessary to operate the business. He already had the experience since most of his free time during high school was spent working with his father (C. Lightner).

Like his father Calvin, the younger Lightner aspired to do more than operate the family business; he sought to occupy a prominent position in local politics. In 1967 he became a member of the Raleigh City Council. During his tenure he served as chairman of the Law and Finance Committee, Chairman of the Transit Study Committee, member of the board of directors of the city/county tax committee. His most prestigious positions were mayor pro-tem of Raleigh, and eventually mayor of Raleigh. The transition from business to politics was a step familiar to many African American businessmen. The same patrons that supported their business ventures often also supported their political endeavors. Furthermore, the same political and social climate that prompted many to engage in entrepreneurial activities to meet community needs, also spurred them to get involved in local politics (C. Lightner).

A few years after Calvin Lightner opened his funeral business, Charles Albert Haywood Sr. opened the second African American owned funeral home in Raleigh in 1914. Haywood along with eight investors started what was known as the Raleigh Undertaking Company, and later the Raleigh Funeral Home. The business was operated from the old Masonic Temple building which was located at the corner of Blount and Cabarrus Streets. Haywood promised prompt and courteous service, and also provided ambulance service to transport African American patients to the local hospital. Years of success in this business venture created the need for expansion; in 1949 the building was renovated and enlarged to accommodate additional customers. The morgue and office occupied the first floor, and the second floor of the two-story building housed an apartment, an office, a display room, and living quarters for some of the staff members. These features made the Raleigh Funeral Home one of the best equipped in the state of North Carolina. In addition, Haywood had numerous vehicles to serve his customers. These consisted of four family cars, two coaches, one ambulance, and one truck. These vehicles were necessary for Haywood to keep his promise of twenty-four hour ambulance service at a modest price of three dollars. Haywood eventually passed this successful business on to his son. Passing along the ideology of self-help was as important as passing along the actual business. These small business heirs were expected to breathe new vitality into the business through their educational expertise, while remaining true



Haywood Funeral Home. Raleigh, North Carolina. 2014. Reproduced with permission of the photographer, Beverly Bunch-Lyons.

to the core values that governed the business—honesty, hard work, self-help and thriftiness (Haywood).

The younger Haywood altered his plans of attending Medical School and instead took over the family business in 1943 after attending the Echols College of Mortuary Science in Philadelphia. He served as funeral director and embalmer. With the primary responsibility for the funeral business in the hands of his son, Haywood Sr. branched out into other business ventures. He opened a gas station, and a dry cleaning business. The younger Haywood chose not to get involved in local politics for fear that it would have an adverse effect on the family's funeral business. He recalled the stories of the sanctions faced by the Lightners and other prominent African Americans seeking political offices in Raleigh. He clearly recognized the toll that such sanctions could take on his business. Even though whites did not as a rule patronize his or any other black-owned funeral business, the sanctions could have repercussions for his family's other businesses, and the businesses of other African Americans (Haywood).

By the time Rudy N. Lea opened his funeral business in Raleigh in 1980, the city had changed dramatically from what it had been at the time that Lightner and Haywood opened their businesses. Schools were legally desegregated, and children were bused across the county in an effort to achieve racial parity within the Wake County school system. Unlike his competitors, Lea was not taking over a business established by his father. The success or failure of his business was completely in his hands (Lea).

Lea was a native of Burlington, North Carolina. He came into the funeral business mainly by happenstance. A close friend worked part-time for a funeral home, and Lea often accompanied his friend on ambulance calls. He also helped out by washing cars, putting up tents at burial sites and delivering cadavers to the funeral home. When his friend quit the job, Lea was hired as his replacement. Lea eventually decided to open his own funeral business, and attended Pittsburg School of Mortuary Science. After completing school in 1968 Lea moved to Raleigh where he was soon hired by the Lightner family. In a short time, Lea became the new manager of Lightner's Funeral Home. He was given full responsibility for the business while Clarence Lightner pursued his political aspirations.

A growing family made it challenging for Lea to support his family on the salary earned working for the Lightners. Salary increases were rare. Lea eventually concluded that his best option was to start his own funeral company. With \$1,300, Lea started his funeral business in an unused funeral home at the intersection of New Bern Avenue and Carver Street in southeast Raleigh. He used the \$1,300 to pay rent and utilities on the building, and relied on the use of cars and equipment from a funeral director outside of Raleigh.



Lea Funeral Home sign on Poole Road in southeast Raleigh, North Carolina. 2014. Reproduced with permission of the photographer, Beverly Bunch-Lyons.

During his first year of business he averaged about one call a month, enough to keep the bills paid since he did not have a hearse or other equipment. With each funeral that was performed he made enough profit to purchase a piece of equipment. In a short time he was able to purchase twelve cars. He eventually moved to a new sprawling location on Poole Road. He expanded his business to include a florist shop, insurance, tombstones, and monuments. He operates one of the most successful funeral companies in Raleigh (Lea).

African American funeral directors in the South often knew each other personally. They belonged to the same fraternal organizations, attended the same social, political, and business functions, and often graduated from the same colleges, as there were only a few mortuary science schools that accepted blacks during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, when Nelson Greene Sr. opened his funeral business in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1954, the Lightner's gave him the equipment necessary to get started. He and the Lightner family remained friends. Greene Jr. stated, "We had a network of college educated men involved in business." These college educated men and their families formed the backbone of the middle and upper class in the South. Greene adds, "The funeral business was a good business, it was a lucrative business, it was a stable business. It was more stable than being a doctor because at the time doctors had to make house calls and they had less control over their hours and time."

While the funeral business is often characterized as profitable, profit was not always generated in the early stages of operation and could sometimes take



Nelson Green Jr. in the sitting area of his funeral home in Alexandria. 2014. Reproduced with permission of the photographer, Beverly Bunch-Lyons.

several years. Starting the business from scratch required a significant investment, which is why most were acquired through inheritance, or by purchasing an already established business. Many funeral home owners often had multiple streams of income and continued to engage in these income generating activities even after their funeral business became profitable. For example, Greene Sr. worked as a substitute teacher during the early stages of his funeral business, and then in the 1970s he and four friends bought and sold townhouses. Likewise, George W. Joynes, of Joynes Funeral Home in Warrenton, Virginia, recalls how his father, the founder of their funeral business which began in 1938, “dabbled” in other businesses.

“He did well in the taxicab business during WWII because a shortage of autos during the war made taxis a lucrative business. He purchased land and started an apartment rental business. At its peak, he had twenty-one rental apartments” (Joynes).

Bernard and Helen Ames of Ames Funeral Home in Manassas, Virginia, kept their focus primarily on the funeral business, not attempting to branch out into other business arenas when they opened their doors in 1959. The Ames Funeral establishment was unique; they were one of the few firms with white clients. They held a one year contract with Lorton Prison in Lorton, Virginia, to bury prisoners who died while jailed. This included any prisoner regardless of race. The prisoners made their own caskets, and the Ames buried each for fifty dollars (Ames).

The funeral business like most other businesses was tied directly to the ebbs and flows of the economy. While the need to bury the dead did not diminish during economic downturns, the ability of clients to pay for services did. Since blacks were especially susceptible to financial difficulties during economic downturns, funeral home owners offered flexible payment plans, and sometimes allowed customers to barter for their services. Lorin Peri Palmer of Palmer Funeral Home in Sumter, South Carolina, recalled the stories of her grandfather Edmund Perry Palmer regarding the impact of the Great Depression on their funeral business. She states, “During the

Depression people were paying for funerals with livestock—pigs, chickens, and sometimes even artwork. We still have some of the IOU's in a file from that period. Ours is a business of loyalty. There is a client-based loyalty that is built into the funeral business, and most funeral directors do what they can to accommodate their long-time customers.” Palmer goes on to describe how families who migrated to the North during the Great Migration sent the bodies of loved ones back to their funeral home in South Carolina to be buried, a practice that continues today. Lorin Palmer is the only female funeral home owner in Columbia and Sumter, South Carolina (Palmer). While wives and daughters often worked behind the scenes in the funeral business, it is only in recent years that their presence has become more visible as owners and operators. Lorin Peri Palmer, Helen Ames, and Nina Greene are part of a growing trend that places women at the forefront of the funeral business.

African Americans have a long history of involvement in business ventures. The business of death was historically a business that in the words of one funeral home owner, “. . . defies inflation and all other economic woes,” however changing trends are making it increasingly difficult for the small family-owned businesses like many of the ones discussed here to remain solvent (Greene Jr.). Changes in technology, coupled with shifting value systems among their clientele (choosing cremation—a practice historically shunned by African Americans, over traditional, more costly burials), as well as expanded burial options, have created challenging markets for funeral home owners. While the number of options available to African American clients in need of funeral services has expanded greatly in recent years as a result of desegregation, for most African American funeral home owners, the client base still remains largely African American—thus resulting in a decrease in the client base (B. Lightner; Joynes; Green Jr.; Ames). The work of scholars such as John Sibley Butler and Merah Stuart is useful because it highlights the challenges faced by African American entrepreneurs competing in markets outside of a specific racial category (Butler 143-64; Davis 75-78).

Like so many early African American businesses across the South, the black owned funeral home was born out of a need for self-sufficiency in an often hostile racial climate. Sydney Nathans argues that businesses such as The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company were “founded in response to the reign of terror visited upon North Carolina’s blacks during the successful white supremacy campaign of the 1890s” (Nathans 442). Raleigh like so many other towns and cities across the South witnessed a proliferation of small black owned businesses at the turn of the twentieth century. Spurred on by a common goal to “. . . build businesses for the employment of black boys and girls,” (qtd. in Nathans 442) as well as a desire to escape the virulent discrimination that often characterized Southern

living, these entrepreneurs prospered by advocating thriftiness, solidarity and self-help (Weare 8).

The successful African American business person had to be shrewd, willing to make sacrifices and to take risks. In the South at the turn of the twentieth century as so many scholars have noted, Jim Crow laws impacted virtually every aspect of life for African Americans. The savvy business person had to overcome many obstacles in order to operate a successful business. Business owners either found a way to overcome “consumer discrimination,” or focused their energy on securing a racially segregated market such as that found in the funeral business (Cook 211-34).

Virginia Tech

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