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African American Deathways

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Black Funeral Directors and Civil Rights

Despite being legally freed by the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, African Americans were still in economic and social bondage after the Civil War. In the years immediately following the Civil War, Blacks faced difficult economic prospects and were discriminated against and faced threats of violence from individuals and groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (Holloway, 2002, p. 134). Discrimination began to be codified into laws, known as Jim Crow laws, in the late 1800s. Black funeral directors advanced the cause of Civil Rights, defined as basic rights that allow a group to fully participate in the social, political, and economic life of a society, through social support, financial support, and activism despite threats of violence and potential adverse financial impacts.

After the Civil War, freed slaves, especially those who remained in the South, faced a lack of economic opportunities after the Civil War for a variety of reasons including the resistance of Whites to hire newly freed slaves, a lack of literacy and education that kept them from finding more skilled labor, and Jim Crow laws that began to be passed in the late 1800s (Smithsonian American Art Museum). These Jim Crow laws not only reduced the economic opportunities available to Blacks, they also segregated public spaces. Although Jim Crow laws were passed at the state and local level, the US Supreme Court supported them through rulings, such as the decision in the 1896 case of Plessy v. Ferguson which legally upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine of public accommodations. This meant that public establishments could legally discriminate against Black people (Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), 1896). Jim Crow laws and other forms of discrimination, meant that in many ways Blacks were kept as servile as they had been during the Antebellum era.

African Americans, especially those who had the audacity to become business owners, not only faced discrimination, they also faced violence from individuals and racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Instances of violence against Black business owners include a Black business owner in Alabama having three businesses, including a funeral parlor, burned out from under him by Whites who were jealous of his success. In another instance, Black funeral home owners in Hattiesburg, MS took

threats against their business so seriously that they rotated sleeping on the premises. While Whites did not want to hire Blacks, they also did not want them to succeed and used violence to reinforce this message, which made it difficult for Blacks to find economic independence.

One of the few paths to economic stability and respectability for African Americans after the Civil War and into the 20th century was funeral directing. Jim Crow laws called for public spaces to be segregated and as a result, many White funeral homes would not provide services to Black people or they provided substandard care to Blacks including leaving Black bodies on porches and refusing to carry them in the house and forcing African Americans to use back doors and basement entrances. They also disrespected black bodies by not providing the same level of care as they provided Whites (Smith, 2010, pp. 31-32). In addition to disrespecting Black bodies intentionally, White funeral home owners did not understand the special needs of Black bodies and were unable to properly care for them. These needs include applying makeup with the appropriate skin tones and carrying for black hair (Fletcher, 2023). Because of Jim Crow laws and the unique needs of Black bodies, African American funeral directors were able to succeed in undertaking (Holloway, 2002, p. 39) and to gain economic stability. According to Ebony magazine in a 1953 article, Black funeral directors performed 150,000 black funerals and grossed over \$120 million (Holloway).

Although Jim Crow laws were in some ways advantageous for Black Funeral directors and other professions that catered solely to Black people as it meant they had a built-in audience, most funeral directors chose to put equality above their own financial interests and fight for the end to segregation. W.E.B Dubois was one black leader who believed that Blacks, including Funeral Directors, should take advantage of the segregationist laws to create a closed economic circle where Black people patronized the businesses of other Black business and had an economy that was largely independent of the majority White economy. However, while a racially segregated economy may have been advantageous financially, most funeral directors, including Claire Collins Harvey who understood that while she currently enjoyed

a closed market with Blacks only coming to Black funeral home integration would end that (Smith, 2010). Fighting to end segregation meant that Black funeral homes would have to compete directly with White funeral homes, but for most funeral directors the choice was clear: fight for integration and then for their share of the integrated market.

Black funeral home directors served their communities during the era of segregation by providing safe spaces for African Americans to gather, rest and relax. Richmond, VA funeral director AD Scott had fourteen meeting rooms built into his funeral home to provide space for Black organizations to gather (Holloway, 2002, p. 1163). When Nashville funeral director A.N Johnson relocated his funeral home to landmark Nashville mansion, he created a Ladies Parlor and Resting Room where African American women, who were often treated rudely by White shop owners, could find refuge from the racist world (Holloway, 2002). One of the grandest ways that a black funeral director created a place of refuge for the black community was to create a park for African Americans. In 1905 Preston Taylor created Greenwood Park on land adjacent to his funeral home. He actively worked to ensure the park, which included a clubhouse, amusement hall, and a skating rink, was a safe space for Blacks to gather safe from white intrusion. While creating safe spaces for Blacks may not seem like civil rights activities, there were some who considered such activities radical and worked to actively shut such spaces down. For instance, in Nashville, a group of Whites worked to shut Greenwood Park down by working unsuccessfully to pass a bill that would not allow parks to be located near a cemetery. As Greenwood Park was the only park near a cemetery, it was obvious that this was a targeted effort. The efforts of Black funeral directors to provide safe spaces for their race may not have directly tied to civil rights efforts, these efforts did help remind Blacks they were worthy of respect and the battles that were won over these spaces did legally advance the cause of civil rights.

Black funeral directors funded civil rights activities as another way of helping to end segregation. Funeral Director Claire Collins Harvey supported the Freedom Riders, a group of Blacks who protested

Jim Crow laws segregating public busses, by attending the hearings of the Freedom Riders and creating an organization, Woman Unlimited, to provide resources, such as food and clothes, for Civil Rights Activists (Holloway, 2002). In Nashville, funeral director Preston Taylor publicly supported streetcar boycotts in 1905 after laws segregating streetcars were passed. He also was part of the group that founded an alternative streetcar system. In Georgia in the 1950s, Funeral Director Dan Young organized and funded a campaign to register voters. Through these and other activities, Black funeral directors used their wealth to benefit and advance Civil Rights.

Black funeral directors showed their courage by providing sanctuary and support for Black activists. James Farmer, the head of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) in Plaquemine, LA. Farmer had been leading a nonviolent protest when he was arrested and jailed. After he was released, another protest was held, which turned violent when state troopers attacked the young people involved in the protest. The escaped to the sanctuary of the Plymouth Rock Baptist Church, but LA state troopers demanded that Farmer, who they perceived to be an outside agitator, be turned over to them. The crowd refused and the troopers used tear gas. Despite the chaos, Farmer devised a plan to have the protestors move to a funeral home. The troopers followed, but the funeral home director, Lizzie Powell, demanded a search warrant and the troopers left. Farmer ultimately escaped in a hearse. Despite the risks to her personal safety, Powell believed that it was important to protect a civil rights leader, and the movement from the inevitable lynching that would have occurred if the state troopers had caught Farmer and in doing so she advanced the cause of civil rights.

Black funerals have open caskets so that the deceased can be laid out casket sharp and admired by their loved ones; however, Black funeral directors have also used open caskets to showcase the horrors that White violence has wrought on Black bodies. One of the most graphic displays of a Black body was that of Emmett Till. He was murdered in 1955 by a white mob in Mississippi for the supposed crime of disrespecting a white woman. The White funeral home that embalmed his body did so only

with the promise that the seal on his casket would never be broken. However, when his body arrived in Chicago, his mother insisted upon casket and A.A. Raynor, a Chicago undertaker obliged (Smith, 2010, pp. LOC 1625-1628)). George W. Lee was a Civil Rights activist who was murdered in Mississippi and his widow requested an open casket so the horrors done to his body could be seen by the world. Ebony magazine covered the funeral and included photos of his body with the right side of his face blown away (Smith, 2010). While funeral directors take pride in their ability to embalm a body to be presentable for an open casket, it is a testament to their commitment to civil rights that these funeral directors worked with the families so that Black bodies, mutilated by White violence, were given the funeral they deserved that their bodies were seen as symbols of violence that rallied people to action.

While African American Funeral directors enjoyed economic stability after the Civil War, they used their stability and their respectability to fight for the Civil Rights of other Blacks, despite the risks of violence and the potential loss of income. African American funeral directors like A.D. Scott provided meeting rooms where African Americans could safely gather, and Preston Taylor created a private city park for Blacks in Nashville. Other funeral directors such as Claire Harvey Collins funded Civil Rights activities and other funeral directors provided sanctuary for activists. Civil Rights activists also worked with family members to show the grim remnants of black bodies ripped apart by violence. For their efforts, Black funeral directors faced threats of violence. Additionally, in a way they were working against their own economic security because Jim Crow laws in some ways enabled their prosperity. In conclusion, Black funeral directors actively worked to advance the cause of Civil Rights.

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