

Contextual Background Notes Re: Black Embalmers

Email from Dave Evans to eastlawrence@yahoo.com, August 19, 2014

For Context - other early Black Kansas funeral home proprietors /
Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death

Xavia Hightower Howard

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/223608>

A photograph of Xavia Hightower Howard who was born in 1916 and lived in Wichita, Kansas. Her mother Victoria Murdoch-Hightower owned and operated Citizens Funeral Home. In 1941, Xavia graduated from Williams Institute of Mortuary Science, Kansas City, Kansas. After her mother's death in 1942, Xavia became the proprietor of Citizens Funeral Home. She was the first female African-American licensed funeral director and embalmer in Kansas. Xavia was active in the community serving on many committees and boards. She retired from the funeral business in 1998.

----- Thatcher Family Collection, Kansas Collection,
RH MS 1250, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas
Libraries

BIOGRAPHY of Thatcher Family -- Nathan W. Thatcher, Sr. (circa 1884-1952) and wife Jennie began the Thatcher Funeral Home in 1912 in Kansas City, Kansas. The Thatcher's had four children: James, Harold, Nathan Jr., and Marion.

Following his father's death, Nathan W. Thatcher, Jr. took over as general manager of Thatcher Funeral Home. He later became the Kansas State Board of Embalming's first black president. Thatcher, Jr. married Myrtle E. Green (b. circa 1910), who was also a Kansas City, Kansas native and Sumner High School graduate. Mrs. Thatcher became a licensed funeral director and worked alongside her husband in the family business. Beyond the funeral home, Myrtle Thatcher was an active community member; she was a long-time member of Pleasant Green Baptist Church, the Kansas Citians and L'Esprit Clubs, and the Alice M. Brown Chapter No. 40 of the Order of the Eastern Star.

Nathan, Jr. and Myrtle Thatcher had one child, Quintelle, born in 1928. After graduating from Sumner High School and attending the University of Kansas, Quintelle worked in community service groups in several states before returning to the family business. Following her father's death in 1980, Quintelle Thatcher Davis took over as general manager of Thatcher Funeral Home, where she worked alongside her mother. Like Myrtle Thatcher, Davis was also a member of the Kansas Citians, as well as the Greater Kansas City Chapter of the Links and

Phi Delta Sigma Sorority. Quintelle Thatcher Davis had three children, Robert L. Davis, Jr., Judy Johnson, and Jackie Hams. Upon Quintelle Thatcher Davis's 2007 death, her son Robert Davis took over as Thatcher Funeral Home general manager.

-----Proud History and Legacy -

<http://www.thatcherfuneralhome.com/about/about.php>

Thatcher's Funeral Home began during the time when horses pulled wagons through the streets of Kansas City, KS. The area of 1st, 2nd & 3rd streets in Wyandotte County, Kansas City, KS were populated by black families who had moved to "Free Kansas" when they left the cotton and sugar plantations of the South. To serve the Negro community with a first class mortuary, in 1912 Nathan W. Thatcher Sr. founded Thatcher's Funeral Home located at 1514 North 5th Street 47 years after the abolishment of legal slavery in the United States.

Continuing the family legacy, the business passed on Thatcher Sr.'s death to son Nathan W. Thatcher, Jr. who operated the business for 28 years then upon his death to daughter Quintelle Thatcher Davis. Mrs. Davis, with assistance of her mother, Myrtle Thatcher, ran the business for 27 years. Upon Mrs. Davis' death in 2007, her son (and great grandson to Thatcher, Sr.) Robert Davis, Jr. became the general manager of Thatcher's Funeral Home. Mrs. Myrtle Thatcher, though retired, remains a pillar of the community and available to advise her grandson who carries on the 100 year legacy of Thatcher's Funeral Home. Through the generations, all stayed dedicated to the ideals of Nathan Thatcher Sr. to provide a first class mortuary service.

http://www.biglowbethea.com/memsol.cgi?user_id=1159774

On Tuesday September 28, 2010 from Wichita, KS. Ms Xavia M. Hightower first African-American woman to hold a dual license as a Funeral Director and Embalmer in the state of Kansas crossed over into eternity with all of the dignity and courage that was characterized throughout her life.

Xavia Earline Hightower was born February 1, 1916 to the union of Rufus and Victoria Hightower in Coffeyville, KS. As a youth, she attended Sardis Baptist Church. She became a Christian at a young age. She attended Cleveland Elementary School. Upon graduation from Field Kindley Memorial High School, she matriculated at Coffeyville Jr. College.

After attending there she went on to now Kansas University Medical

School for Mortuary Science then Williams Institute of Mortuary Science. In 1940, Victoria Hightower, her mother started the funeral business in Coffeyville, KS., Hightower Funeral Home and then acquired another upon expanding to Wichita in 1942. Upon her Mothers death, Xavia began operating Citizens Funeral Home and Hightower Funeral Home. She became the first (1st) African-American woman to hold a dual license as a Funeral Director and Embalmer in the state of Kansas.

It was also in July 1942 that she married Frank Howard. August 19, 1942 is when Xavia began her Christian journey with the Calvary Baptist Church. As a dedicated Christian, she sang in the Senior Choir, taught Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, Blood Pressure Assistant, delivered Lunch for Seniors, and served as a Trustee for over 25 years.

Xavia Hightower Howard has served the Wichita, Kansas community in many volunteer capacities; Life Member of the NAACP, YMCA, YWCA, Wichita's Civil Rights Equal Opportunity Commission, VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance), recipient of the coveted Eagle Award by Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority.

She served on the Boards of the Wichita Urban League, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Sedgwick County Dept. of Aging and the Central Plains Area Aging Agency. She was also affiliated with Wichita Chapter of Links, Inc. (charter member), and Masonic affiliations; Princess Chapter #12 O.E.S. and Daughters of Isis, plus member of Eta Phi Beta Sorority. Her most significant award was received in May 1992, during the Kansas State Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association Convention for being in business for 50 years.

In November 1998, she retired from the funeral business after 56 years of service. In 2009, "Miz Hightower" received special honoring from; The Community Voice Newspaper, Calvary Baptist Church, Research on Black Wichitans from 1945- 1958, National Links, Inc. Platinum Honoree, Interfaith Ministries, KU Archives, Northeast Senior Center, The Kansas African American Museum Trailblazer.

Her survivors are the following; Frankie Mason (daughter) of Wichita, Robbyn Johnson (granddaughter) of Houston, TX, Robert Mason (grandson) of Waco, TX, Ryan Mason (grandson) of Houston, TX plus 6 great grand children, David Wilson (nephew) of Wichita and Vicki Hightower-Bowers (niece) of Rialto, CA and Norma, Susan and Kent Eddington (nieces and nephew) and a host of cousins and church family and friends!

The visitation of remembrance/celebration of Life for Mother Hightower will be Saturday October 9th, 2010 11AM at Calvary Baptist Church 2653

North Hillside Wichita, KS.

Friends may visit mother Hightower while she reposefully rests in royal splendor Thursday October 7th, 2010 10AM-5PM in the Biglow-Bethea Funeral Home Chapel of Legacy and Friday October 8th, 2010 10AM to 5PM with a Wake to follow 6-8PM in the Holy sanctuary of Calvary Baptist Church 2653 North Hillside Wichita, KS.

Final Resting Place: Old Mission Cemetery, Wichita, KS.

(AP Wirephoto) Services for Dowdell -The casket of Donald Rick Dowdell, is carried after services Thursday. Dowdell died July 16 when fatally shot by police after a car chase, leading to a week of civil unrest in the community.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=VEsxAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=OOYFAAAAIBAJ&pg=5050%2C2876253>

Lawrence daily Journal-World (Friday) July 24, 1970, p.9:1

One week after he was slain by a Lawrence policeman, Donald Rick "Tiger" Dowdell, was drawn through the streets of Lawrence to his funeral (at St. Luke AME church) on a farm cart pulled by two brown ponies. The shiny black coffin was surrounded by young blacks dressed in blue denim and black in the funeral march from Bower-Lee Mortuary, 618 Vt., down Vermont to Ninth, across Ninth to the St. Luke AME Church at Ninth and New York.

Review of -- Suzanne E. Smith, To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death.

"The Colored Embalmer: Homegoings, Capitalism, and African American Civil Rights" Blog posted by Paul Harvey
<http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2010/05/colored-embalmer-homegoings-capitalism.html>

A really fine new book to recommend, more about religious history than I would have guessed initially: Suzanne E. Smith, To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death.

I always like it when a book tells me about a subject I presumed to know a fair deal about, but (as it turns out), as I read along I realize the half ain't never been told. This is one of those books.

First, a more general summary, then I'll focus a bit on the parts that

most intersect with this blog's interests. "Throughout African American history, death and funerals have been inextricably intertwined with life and freedom," Smith writes in this vigorously argued survey of African American death "homegoing" practices from slavery to the twenty-first century. Smith provides fascinating details about diverse subjects while mounting an important argument about the central paradox of black funeral home direction: "that one needed to both fight racial discrimination and cultivate race patronage." The author explores the role of the black funeral home industry in twentieth century black capitalism, and the central place behind the scenes of black funeral home directors in the civil rights movement. From the key role of black funeral director pioneer Preston Taylor in organizing a boycott of segregated streetcars in early twentieth century Nashville, to the Floridian Robert Miller's sponsorship of Mahalia Jackson's early career (when she sang for \$2.00 a funeral), to the famously public viewing of the mutilated body of Emmitt Till in Mississippi, to black tycoon E. G. Gaston's mediation during the crusade in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, black morticians have quite literally embodied African American history.

Now, a few notes more specific to this blog's interests. The early parts of the work, in a chapter entitled "From Hush Harbors to Funeral Parlors," discuss the origins and meanings of slave funerals, and the close connection of funeral practices and rites with the origins of African American churches. The connection between those two remains in focus through the books. White authorities certainly recognized the potential threat posed by this. Hence, they surveiled black funerals, and dishonored/mutilated the bodies of black rebels. The black funeral tradition came about in part as a means to honor bodies that had been dishonored in life.

In the post-civil war years, as the new science of embalming and other techniques took hold, the black funeral industry grew up, providing embalming/funeral services to a black clientele. In 1888, Preston Taylor, a former slave and Baptist minister in Nashville, opened Taylor and Company Undertakers and later created Greenwood Cemetery (which white authorities later tried to close down) "to provide Nashville's black citizens with a dignified burial ground." In the early twentieth century, Taylor teamed with Richard H. Boyd, founder of the largest black-owned publishing house (the National Baptist Publishing Board) in the country, to organize a boycott of Nashville's newly segregated streetcars, and to organize an independent streetcar operation. Here, black funeral homes and churches were intertwined in providing the capital and the personnel for early freedom struggles in the Jim Crow era, a theme that will reappear throughout the book.

In a chapter entitled "My Man's An Undertaker" (from a clever Dinah Washington song) Smith follows the close connection of black funerals and the early history of black gospel. Robert Miller, first president of the Independent National Funeral Directors' Association (INFDA, the nationwide trade organization for black funeral directors, who were not allowed to join the equivalent national organization for whites), drove Mahalia Jackson around in his hearse to her early singing engagements, and hired her to sing at funerals, where the emotional depths of the music could be fully expressed. Funeral directors also "sponsored gospel music radio shows as a way to promote the music and tastefully advertise their services."

As the funeral industry and the number of black undertakers grew, so did allegations (sometimes justified) of price-gouging, fraud, and hucksterism. The shyster undertaker came to have a reputation akin to that of the jackleg preacher. Each was dependent upon, and learned to exploit, a captive audience, enriching himself in the process. Miller and other figures in the INFDA fought to preserve the reputation of their industry. At the same time, their industry basically depended on a segregated economy, and it was the official policy of the black undertakers' organization to actively discourage white competitors from seeking out black bodies to service.

(A little off topic, but worth noting: the book has fascinating discussions of various black funeral directors' organizations and controversies within them, as well as a section about The Colored Embalmer, the first African American trade publication).

Black funeral directors proved instrumental during the civil rights years. They weren't usually in the public eye, but for that reason they could serve to provide meeting facilities, post bail, comfort the families of the murdered, and (at times) negotiate with white authorities from a position of strength. Black undertaker C. W. Lee, a funeral director in Montgomery, Alabama, served as treasurer of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and was instrumental in organizing financing for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He and others in the civil rights era cemented the relationship between religion, race, and civil rights. As churches were bombed, funeral directors offered their facilities for civil rights organizing meetings, including one attended by James Farmer of CORE. Stuck in jail in Louisiana during the March on Washington in 1963, Farmer organized protests in Plaquemine that nearly resulted in his life; he managed to escape a lynch mob, using as his getaway vehicles two hearses from the local funeral home, which sped him out of town and on to New Orleans.

There's much more in the later chapters of the book, including

extended discussions of the funerals of Malcolm X and Rosa Parks, as well as the fate of black funeral homes in recent years. Jessica Mitford's famous expose of the industry received surprisingly little discussion among black funeral home directors, who simply had more pressing matters to contend with in the 1960s. In the 1990s, the consolidation of the industry into mega-conglomerates challenged the role of independent black entrepreneurs, and gang shootings at funeral homes brought senseless death into places that historically had brought meaning to death. "Today," Smith concludes, "African American funeral directors continue to serve the living while burying the dead; in so doing, they continue to remind us of the role that death and funerals have always played in the long quest for freedom."