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Xavier Stevens April 10, 2023

Still Standing as Pillars of Their Community:

The Survival of Black Funeral Homes in Dawson, Georgia

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English and Creative Writing

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Abstract

Still Standing as Pillars of Their Community: The Survival of Black Funeral Homes in Dawson, Georgia

By Xavier Stevens

In this narrative, I will explore the effect of racial violence and segregation on the funeral home business in a small town in Southwest Georgia. The four funeral homes in Dawson, all owned by Black men or women, operate within one mile of each other and serve a county of 9,000 people with a total of 125 deaths per year. In rural Georgia, the funeral business largely remains segregated with races tending to bury their own, so the number of available cases for Black funeral directors becomes slimmer even in a majority African American county. A profitable year in the funeral business in Dawson, is 100 cases. The market for deaths is overcrowded and competitive, as funeral directors in town challenge one another for business.

One must look to the past to understand how the funeral homes of Dawson operate today. This small town also has a deep history of racial violence that enforced discrimination and segregation throughout the Jim Crow era of the South. With rare economic independence, Black funeral directors were leaders of the African American community at this time and defied the racial hierarchy of Dawson. Their defiance also made them a target for corrupt white authorities and forced competition that hindered Black funeral directors to help their community. I aim to connect the past to the present of Black-owned funeral homes in Dawson to show how these complications still exist today, as the four funeral homes in Dawson must survive to provide for their community.

Pillars of the Black Community:

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Acknowledgements

My many thanks to my adviser Hank Klibanoff for his advice and understanding in and out of the classroom throughout my time at Emory University. I owe much of my academic experience to his guidance that gave me direction to pursue this thesis. I'd also like to thank Dr. Jason Morgan Ward and Dr. Maria Montalvo for serving on my committee and continuing my interest in the South in the classroom.

I'd also like to thank my friends and family for their constant support and advice until the very end.

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Introduction

About three hours southwest of Atlanta, the town of Dawson, Georgia sits along a county highway like a rest stop. A new Dairy Queen shines on the road as the main attraction for visitors, but if you venture further, a slow and dilapidated main street welcomes you with storefronts that could be abandoned or just closed for the day. Like a movie cliché, traffic lights change with no cars passing.

You'll have to drive further past the main street for the local people in haunts like the meat-and-three, Wayne's Restaurant Bar and Grill. The cafeteria-style restaurant is packed for a long lunch break in late October of 2022, and like the rest of the nation, the upcoming November midterm elections dominate conversations. Dawson sits in Terrell County in the Black Belt region with a majority-Black population, but rather than debating Warnock and Walker or Abrams and Kemp, the Terrell County Commissioner race between Ernest Johnson Jr. and Cordarial Holloway is the most discussed race in town.[1] Yard signs for Johnson Jr. or Holloway stand on nearly every lawn and more frequently than the more prominent races of the purple state of Georgia. In one of the poorest counties of Southwest Georgia, decisions that a county commissioner makes on roads, parks, zoning, or budgets are amplified and can have more importance than the politics of Atlanta or Washington, DC. But the history between the two candidates in 2022 makes this race perhaps more significant than their platforms or the outcome.

Johnson Jr. is the Democratic incumbent county commissioner having served in the role for 12 years. He is also one of the most successful Black men in town, and his business is the Johnson & Son Funeral Home. His grandfather started the operation in the 1930s at the height of

[1] Stephen Owens. "Education in Georgia's Black Belt: Policy Solutions to Help Overcome a History of Exclusion." Georgia Budget and Policy Institute: 2019. https://gbpi.org/education-in-georgias-black-belt/.

Jim Crow segregation in Dawson when the Black community needed a funeral director to bury their dead.

His opponent, 39-year-old Cordarial Holloway, also is a Black funeral director. He opened up C.O. Holloway Mortuary in January 2022 with a remodeled facility sporting a large conference room to meet with families. Holloway and Johnson Jr. immediately became rivals vying for funerals within a small population. Shortly after Holloway opened up, Johnson Jr. relocated to a bigger funeral home with conference rooms of his own and a fleet of black Cadillacs parked at the side of the building. They each boasted upgraded services for funerals and memorials while lowering costs further and further than each other.

Holloway joined the county commissioner race in the summer with the express purpose of shaking up the status quo in Dawson. The decision against Johnson not only intensified the rivalry between their businesses even further but also broke an important, unwritten rule among funeral directors. Never challenge each other in public, much less public office.

This rule is well-known between Dawson funeral directors. There are four funeral homes in town — all owned by Black men and women and all located within one mile of each other. The former mayor of Dawson, Robert Albritten, has operated for 57 years continuously and refused to vote in the race to not show preference to competition. Petronia “Lady Ward” Shanks took over the family funeral business in 2019 that her grandfather Sammie Lee Ward started in 1968. Lady Ward believed the race was a direct challenge that created a conflict of interest for funeral homes in Dawson.

This broken rule is also crucial to the funeral director’s classification as a professional, like a doctor or lawyer. In her book *To Serve the Living*, Suzanne Smith studies the history of Black funeral directors and the traditions specific to the segregated industry. She notes that Black

funeral directors rely on professionalism to mask the commercialization of death. Smith writes, "The professional was perceived as driven by a moral code of ethics and a desire to serve the public good rather than by a profit motive alone."[2] The principal job of every funeral director is to serve a family at the most vulnerable time of their lives, but when funeral directors challenge each other for public office, the calm curtains of the business are torn away to reveal a colder competition of the death of loved ones. The curtains are off in Dawson with its competition between Black funeral directors in the open.

When he announced to run, Holloway intended to run as a Democrat, but important local organizations, like the Terrell County chapter of NAACP, continued to endorse Johnson Jr. So Holloway ran as an Independent, and the campaign leading up to November became personal. Holloway publicly challenged Johnson Jr.'s lack of accomplishments over his 12-year tenure. Holloway also criticized Johnson Jr.'s choice to live in Albany, the larger hub city of Southwestern Georgia, in neighboring Dougherty County, rather than in Dawson. By the amount of Holloway signs in front yards in October, it looked like he had the advantage going into November.

But the incumbent Johnson Jr. held on against Holloway by just 12 votes — 360 to 348.[3] Even though Holloway lost, the slim margin for the newcomer shows change in politics but also the funeral business in Dawson with its fierce competition of a younger generation challenging the old.

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[2] Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 37.

[3] FOX 31. "2022 November Midterm - Southwest Georgia Election Results." *WFXL*, November 9, 2022, https://wfxl.com/news/election-results/2022-november-midterm-southwest-georgia-election-results.

The four Black funeral directors of Dawson serve all of Terrell County, that is approximately 9,000 people with about 125 deaths per year.[4] In rural Georgia, the funeral business largely remains segregated with races tending to bury their own, so the number of available cases for Black funeral directors becomes slimmer even in a majority African American county. A profitable year in the funeral business in Dawson, according to Johnson Jr. and Albritten, is 100 cases. The funeral homes in Dawson are open to all, yet only Johnson Jr. has ever buried members of the white community and only a few cases within the last year. The white-owned Harvey Funeral Home in Dawson closed down in 2021, and the white community in need of a funeral home now travels to Albany, the city of southwest Georgia, 25 miles from Dawson.

Yet the position of funeral director provides one a foundation for a Black leader in Dawson. Their importance to the community lies within Black history of the South but also Dawson's once-embedded segregation and violence that once made death lucrative. The stories of Black funeral directors in Dawson are important to add to the history of Black funeral directors but also have significance in the present day. The racial hierarchy and terror from the Civil Rights era still affect Dawson today through the segregation and cold competition that exists in the funeral industry. Before the Civil Rights Movement, the death trade was one of the only avenues for Black Americans to gain economic and political power in the South. In this small Georgia town today, funeral homes continue to be the main avenue for Black economic and social power after decades of racial violence.

[4] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Mortality: Compressed Mortality File 1999-2016 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released June 2017.

The History of Black Funeral Directors in the South

Following the rise of Jim Crow in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the funeral business, or undertaking as it was then known, became one of the only profitable professions for Black people. In 1957, prominent Black scholar E. Franklin Frazier acknowledged that white Americans dominated Black businesses with greater capital and a reputation of reliability, yet undertaking was one of the only segregated industries for African Americans to establish businesses in the Jim Crow South.[5] White funeral directors, reluctant to handle Black bodies or funerals, created a segregated marketplace divided by race. Black funeral directors then opened their own businesses and relied on a secure base of consumers from the African American community, who also valued the burial traditions stemming from slavery that Black funeral directors could honor.

The demand for Black funeral directors allowed undertaking businesses to operate within communities in the South. Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal in his 1944 book *An American Dilemma* examined race relations in the United States and the economic struggle of African Americans. Myrdal notes the success Black people could find in the South through the funeral business and writes, "There is one semi-professional service which is unique in that only Negroes serve Negroes: this is the undertaking service. The live Negro body may be handled by the white physician but the dead one handled only by the Negro undertaker. This is as much, or more, in accordance with the desires of Negroes as of whites. Undertaking is consequently one of the most lucrative businesses open to Negroes."[6] The funeral industry became segregated by these social preferences and created a firm base of customers for Black funeral directors.

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[5] Frazier, E. Franklin, *Black Bourgeoisie*, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1997, 25.
[6] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, (New Brunswick: Harper & Bros), 1944, 638.

The African American community also valued services from someone who could cater to burial traditions that stemmed from slavery or African cultures. Customers were consistent and willing to pay for the service, as Myrdal notes the African American community "to spend relatively much on funerals."[7] The revenue from funerals for African Americans allowed for a rare economic independence that laid the foundation for leaders in the living Black community. By 1910, already 953 African American undertakers existed in the U.S. That number nearly tripled by 1930 with 2,946 African American undertakers.[8] Black-owned funeral homes, much like the African American church, became a pillar of the community during Jim Crow segregation through their economic success and proliferation.

In Georgia, the history of Black-owned funeral homes is rich with notable leaders and contributors to African American history in the South. In 1878, Mayor William H. Royall, a deacon at First Bryan Baptist Church, founded his funeral business in Savannah out of necessity when the yellow fever epidemic killed many Black people in the community. He built coffins to bury the dead, and in the decades following, Royall trained other Black men in mortuary science to set up their own businesses throughout the state. By the early 1900s, several Black-owned funeral homes were established in Atlanta in the African American neighborhood of Sweet Auburn. Cox Brothers Funeral Home started in 1902 and buried several lynching victims.[9] Hanley's Funeral Home was established in 1915 by W.H. Hanley, grew to two locations by 1930, and facilitated the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Atlanta in 1968.[10] Geneva Moton Haugabrooks opened Haugabrooks Funeral Home in 1929 and was a key financial

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[7] Ibid. 310.
[8] Ibid. 309.
[9] "Cox Brothers Funeral Directors." Atlanta History Center. Juneteenth Program. https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/programs-events/public-programs/juneteenth/cox-brothers-funeral-directors/.
[10] "Hanley's Funeral Home Historical Marker." The Historical Marker Database, Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=186420.

contributor to the Atlanta Negro Voters League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.[11]

Beyond services for the dead, funeral directors also served the living through everyday necessities Africans Americans did not have. Smith and other scholars of the funeral home industry note this living aspect of the funeral business as historic for African American funeral directors from the Civil Rights era. "As entrepreneurs in a largely segregated business," Smith notes, "funeral directors were usually among the few black individuals in any town or city who were economically independent and not beholden to the local white power structure. For these reasons, African American funeral directors…often found themselves serving the living as much as they buried the dead."[12]

Gregory Levett is a funeral director in Atlanta who grew up around the business. His father opened the second Black-owned funeral home in Conyers, 30 miles east of Atlanta, in 1950. The business was a family operation, and it also cared for families every day through their basic needs. When Levett was a teenager, he drove the hearse as an ambulance on the weekends for emergencies in the Black community or to take people to doctor's appointments. "You have doctors who deal with sick patients. You have preachers who deal with people spiritually. You have lawyers who deal with people legally. You have bankers who deal with people financially. The funeral director wears all of those hats," Levett said.[13]

He opened his own funeral business, Gregory B. Levett and Sons Funeral Home in 1980 and operated with the same attitude as his father. "You deal with rich people, poor people, educated

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[11] "Haugabrooks Funeral Home Historical Marker." The Historical Marker Database. Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=186438.
[12] Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8.
[13] Dr. Gregory B. Levett. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Atlanta, Georgia, February 12, 2023.

people, uneducated people. And when people trust you, they will come with their personal lives, share their needs, and hope that you can help them," Levett said. "I have advised people on their finances, on their spiritual growth, legal advice, medical advice. When you get involved in a community and people get to know you, they trust you, and you do all you can to help those individuals and make their lives better." The communal part of Levett's job still exists but in a minor capacity. His family operation transformed into a corporation of four funeral homes in the Atlanta area with executives, a human relations department, and district managers. The community power that Black funeral directors once held used to give them political power, but Levett expressed that it's just business now for those in Atlanta.[14]

In the early twentieth century, rural Georgia, concurrent to Atlanta and Savannah, established funeral homes throughout the state, particularly concentrated within the Black Belt region. Andre Jenkins is the president of Slater Funeral Home in Milledgeville, Ga. that opened in 1911, and president of the Georgia Funeral Service Practitioners Association, a historically Black professional organization that began in 1926 in Macon, Georgia as a member of the formerly National Negro Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association.[15] With dues at $1 per year, the founding members of the Georgia organization, then known as The Georgia Colored Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association, included a few members from the cities of Atlanta and Savannah but was largely made up of directors from small rural towns like Sylvania, Cordele, and Americus in the Black Belt region.[16] Jenkins comes from a tradition of funeral home directors in rural Georgia with communal responsibilities. In Milledgeville, people still walk in a

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[14] Ibid.

[15] "About Us: Georgia Funeral Service Practitioners Association." https://gfspa.net/about-us/. The National Negro Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association played a pivotal role in defining the role of funeral directors in the Black community and professionalizing the business, and in 1957, the national organization adopted the name, the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, which it still holds today.

[16] Ibid.

few times a week to talk to Jenkins for advice on real estate, business, or life. Community members call on him every year to pursue political office, but the Jenkins and the other funeral directors in Milledgeville abstain from competing against each other. "[Funeral directors] are the professionals touchable in the African American community, for lack of better words, and reference point," Jenkins said. "When we are called upon, we provide resources to meet needs for our people."[17]

Jenkins recounted the stories of Slater Funeral Home that had the only printer for the community, led literacy campaigns to teach families how to read, and used its hearse as an ambulance service for Black people. Before his leadership at Slater's, Jenkins worked at M.C. Smith Funeral Home in Sandersville, Georgia, founded in 1931. In the funeral home's record, he found a list of several Black men that the late M.C. Smith bailed out of jail in the early 1970s.

Black funeral home directors and their economic independence were integral to a community that often lacked the resources to succeed. Following the Civil Rights movement, the community started to rely on funeral homes less and less, as more resources like an ambulance or schools became more accessible for all. Jenkins said that by the turn of the 21st century and the introduction of the internet, the use of funeral homes as a resource faded away in Black communities.[18]

Down in Dawson

As a student at Emory University, I took the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases class and discovered the Dawson of 1958, when the small Southern town reached national headlines for the brutal and unjust killings of James Brazier and Willie Countryman. The majority-black

[17] Andre Jenkins. Phone Call Interview by Xavier Stevens. Atlanta, Georgia, February 22, 2023.
[18] Ibid.

Dawson and Terrell County were minority-ruled by the white population through Jim Crow laws and segregation enforced by terror and intimidation. In the 1950s, Black people represented 64 percent of the county's 12,700 population.[19] Out of approximately 3,00 registered voters in 1960, only 51 African Americans were registered to vote.[20] Dawson and Terrell County reached national news that year through the brutal and unjust killings of James Brazier and Willie Countryman by Dawson police officers, who went unpunished. An article in *The Washington Post* in 1958 ran with the headline "Death and Violence Terrorize Negroes in Georgia Town" that detailed the brutal cases of violence committed by white police officers. Terrell County sheriff Zachary Taylor "Zeke" Mathews said, "There's nothing like fear to keep niggers in line. I'm talking about 'outlaw' niggers. And we always tells them there are four roads leading out of Dawson in all directions and they are free to go anytime they don't like it here."[21] By the early 1960s, the national press nicknamed the area, "Terrible Terrell County," for the many stories of unforgiving violence and voter suppression from this small county of Southwest Georgia.[22]

In an effort to understand more about the racial violence of the 1950s, locals of Dawson directed me to the Black funeral directors of Dawson. The four funeral home owners in Dawson today each have roots through their relatives or mentors in the corruption, competition, and defiance that defined the Black-owned funeral homes during the Terrible Terrell era. Through the deaths of Black men in this era, the past funeral directors in Dawson came in direct contact with racial violence in Dawson. Their position also gave them close contact with the racial

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[19] "An Overview of the Brazier Case." The Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project, July 25, 2014. https://coldcases.emory.edu/the-james-brazier-case/.
[20] "Nightriders Bomb, Shoot Registration Worker," Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Press Release, 1963.
[21] Robert E. Lee Baker, "Death and Violence Terrorize Negroes of Georgia Town," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1958, 1.
[22] "Celebrating The Southwest Georgia Movement," Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project, Duke University, 2000.

violence in Dawson and an opportunity as Black leaders in their community to expose the violence. However, the white community also recognized this ability and interfered with Black-owned funeral homes to corrupt and obstruct justice. Although its own segregated industry, Black-owned funeral homes in Dawson became subject to the racial hierarchy of the South that ruled over Black society.

Federal court rulings spurred some change in Dawson through integration and the dismantling of Jim Crow laws and at-large elections. African Americans, many funeral home directors, started to run and win political office. But progress has been slow with segregation maintained by neighborhoods and education. Black people tend to live near the city, and their children attend Terrell County public schools. White people live in the surrounding suburbs of Dawson, and their children attend Terrell Academy, a private school. There are no historical markers or memorials to remember the heroic Civil Rights advancements in Dawson or the "Terrible Terrell" era. Dawson also is the hometown of two significant Black figures — Walter Washington, the first black mayor of Washington, DC, and Otis Redding, regarded as one of the greatest singers of American soul music. No signage or markers recognize their great achievements either.[23]

Like the rest of the rural South, the county population has dwindled in the area, losing an average of 200 residents each year.[24] Dawson is poor with a median household income of $35,817 and thirty-nine percent of its population lives below the poverty line.[25] As of the 2020 census, the racial makeup in Dawson is still majority Black at eighty-one percent and fourteen

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[23] "An Overview of the Brazier Case." The Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project, July 25, 2014. https://coldcases.emory.edu/the-james-brazier-case/.
[24] United States Census Bureau, "Terrell County, Georgia," 2022. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/terrellcountygeorgia.
[25] United States Census Bureau, "Dawson CCD, Terrell County, GA," American Community Survey, 2021.

percent white.[26]The town has lost white residents throughout the twenty-first century, and in 2000, the demographics stood at seventy-seven percent Black and twenty-one percent white. Terrell County, the suburbs of Dawson, show a slimmer majority of fifty-nine percent Black and thirty-eight percent white that has grown by two percent since 2000.[27]

The funeral director remains one of the most lucrative and growing professions in the impoverished town and county. The industry provides a rare, steady source of income through the constant of death. Funeral homes attract the most qualified, educated Black people in Dawson, as all four funeral home directors have a college education. Funeral directors remain the leaders in the Black community several decades after integration, and the industry is still unofficially segregated with funeral directors primarily burying their own race.

In this narrative, I will explore the effect of racial violence and segregation on the funeral home business in Dawson by looking at the past and present of each of the funeral homes in Dawson. Three parts guide the perspectives of several funeral home directors in Dawson who each have origins in the town's dark past. The first part, titled with the acronym Terrible Terrell, will focus on Dawson from 1940 to 1964, ending with the passing of the Civil Rights Act, to exhibit the origin of the Black funeral home business in the face of a racial hierarchy that used violence and terror to corrupt the business and pit funeral directors against one another. The second part will cover 1964 to 2005, when a new generation of funeral home directors used corruption and cut-throat competition to survive in Dawson. The third part will cover the present state of four Black-owned funeral homes vying for funerals in Dawson and how the past still affects them today. The perspectives of the funeral home directors are from oral histories through interviews that I conducted throughout 2022 and 2023.

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[26] United States Census Bureau, "Dawson city, Georgia," 2020.
[27] United States Census Bureau, "Dawson city, Georgia," 2000.

Investigating the Black-owned funeral home industry in a small town, it proved difficult at times to unearth the web of unwritten rules and untold, long histories that people may choose to discuss or not. From extensive interviews, several things about the business were left unsaid, but several secondary sources and interviews with funeral directors throughout Georgia hope to fill the gaps of the industry in Dawson. When looking back on Dawson's past, traditional primary sources of newspapers, death certificates, FBI interviews, and testimonies provide details for events with which oral histories interact. As with many small Southern towns, the perspective of the Black community lacked frequent presence in official records or local newspapers that selectively covered Dawson.

Scholarship on Black-owned funeral homes begins with Myrdal's observation of their economic success in the 1940s in America. 21st-century scholars have used this observation to tell the history of Black-owned funeral homes, and Smith's *To Serve the Living* in 2010 presents the authoritative historiography of Black funeral directors and their great role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. My narrative on Dawson focuses on the individual stories of Black funeral directors in Dawson and the complications of handling death in a Southern town with a violent racial hierarchy. I hope to connect the present to the past of Black-owned funeral homes to show how these complications still exist today.

The stories of the funeral homes in Dawson are an integral part of understanding how funeral homes operate within communities in the 21st century. In a 2020 article titled, "Black Deaths Matter Earning the Right to Live: Death and the African-American Funeral Home," Candi K. Cann writes, "During the 1960s there were well over 4000 black funeral homes in the U.S., and today it is estimated that there are somewhere between 2800 and 3000, yet they have been written about in history as a token phenomenon and not a valuable and integral part of American

Death Culture and History."[28] As a white author, I don't wish to present the stories of Dawson as a phenomenon but present a narrative that connects the past to the present to show how Black-owned funeral homes remain critical in the town and not just during key moments of change or violence. This structure engages in the many perspectives of the Black funeral home directors in Dawson, and therefore, it does not provide an authoritative history of Black-owned funeral homes in the small Southern town. But how their stories are told illuminates how racial violence is remembered and how Black-owned funeral homes survive today.

[28] Candi K. Cann, "Black Deaths Matter Earning the Right to Live: Death and the African-American Funeral Home," *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020): 390 (article number), 1-15.

Part 1

Terrible Terrell: 1940 to 1964

On a summer afternoon in 1940, Joe Moore sat in his lawn chair on the sidewalk outside his funeral home. He often took meetings with families and friends outside rather than in his small office on the Main Street of Dawson. Moore's Funeral Home opened at this location in the early 1930s as the first and only Black-owned funeral home in town to serve the African American community, and Moore quickly became one of the only successful Black businessmen in Dawson.

An unidentified Black man suddenly sprinted past Moore, heading towards a group of houses down the road with porches raised off the ground. Moore then saw the Terrell County sheriff ZT Mathews turn the corner chasing after the Black man, but Mathews stopped in front of Moore for a second to catch his breath.

"Joe," Mathews said to the Black funeral director, "I'll have you one in a few minutes." Then he continued to chase after the man. A few minutes later, Moore heard gunshots down the road near the group of houses. Mathews shot and killed the man in cold blood and called Moore to pick up the body. Moore pulled the black man's bullet-ridden body from underneath a porch.[29]

Moore's front seat in the Black funeral home business and on Main Street gave him one of the closest views of the racial violence in Dawson from the 1940s to the 1960s. He complied with sheriff Mathews and picked up the man's body with no questions asked, marking one of the first recorded instances of the funeral home business working with corrupt police. Moore told this tragic story to his grandson, Ernest Johnson Jr., who does not second guess his grandfather's silence at the time of the killing. Johnson Jr. recognized that Moore did what he had to do for the

[29] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Richard Halicks, Isaac Gittleman, and Xavier Stevens. Personal Interview. Dawson, Georgia, November 12, 2021.

family business. “My grandfather made [the white community] think that he feared them and respected them,” Johnson Jr. said. “And he went along with the program.”[30]

The program of racial hierarchy of Dawson that Johnson Jr. alludes to, Moore followed. As the only Black funeral home in town, Moore’s business during the Great Depression helped the oppressed African American community but also gained interest from the minority, white authorities in Dawson. They recognized his economic status within the African American community and its weakness against the power of white Dawson that could use Moore’s funeral home to serve them. Red Dupree, a white funeral home director in Dawson during the 1940s, employed Moore to embalm for his business during nights.[31] The Dawson Police and sheriff Mathews called Moore as an ambulance to pick up injured or dead African American men who had violent encounters with the police without saying a word to any further authorities. This relationship defined the corruption of the Black-owned funeral homes of Dawson that were forced to answer to white authorities by submission or defiance.

There’s no detailed record between Moore and the Dawson police to point to a motive or coercion that started their relationship. Moore told his family that this decision to work for the police and the white community was for safety. This reason aligns with common practices of Black business leaders during the Jim Crow era of the South, whose fragile fortunes depended on obedience to the program. Nicholas Lemann in his book *The Promised Land* explores the Great Migration and why some Black business leaders chose to remain in the South. He wrote, “In addition to keeping white people’s secrets, black people kept their own. In daily life, any resentment that blacks felt for whites was usually kept hidden under a mask of slightly

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

uncomprehending servility that black people knew fit whites' basic picture of them."[32] It's possible that Moore traded his ability to stay open and operated in return for his services as an ambulance service for injured or dead African Americans who came in contact with Dawson police.

There's also no evidence of financial transactions between Moore and the Dawson police, but the relationship with the Dawson police also could have also presented financial opportunities to Moore. Smith's *To Serve the Living* also examines Black funeral directors working with the police within her book, and a discussion surrounding police corruption took place in March 1929 in the pages of the *Colored Embalmer*. Smith wrote that an address by Kelsey L. Pharr, president of the Florida Negro Embalmers Association, "described the corrupt tactic that some fraudulent funeral directors used to get more customers. These schemes included 'a grafting policeman' to ensure that the funeral director got 'called in case of violent deaths.'"[33] In Dawson, corrupt white authorities also enlisted Black funeral directors to pick up dead bodies from violent encounters with police. Robert Albritten is a Black funeral director in Dawson and a competitor of Johnson Jr. today. Albritten worked for another funeral service in town in the 1960s, and from stories told by his mentors, corruption kept Black-owned funeral homes in check. "In that time, all the white man did here, they got a black man to do," Albritten said. "Whites were killing blacks, but why go down to prison for a black man? You just choke up $1,000, $2,000, tell a [funeral director] what you want done, and he's doing it."[34] Johnson Jr. doesn't believe money was involved and understood Moore's relationship with Dawson police to not go any further than an ambulance

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[32] Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.), 1991, 36.
[33] Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8.
[34] Robert Albritten. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, October 31, 2022.

service used for Black people. As a child in the 1950s, he often rode in the passenger seat with his grandfather who attended daily calls in the African American community.

From 1940 to 1964, Moore and other Black funeral directors of the area had to answer to the white community's expectations or corrupt tactics for control. When funeral directors defied the racial hierarchy of Dawson, they risked closure of their business or death. The choice for a funeral director to obey or defy the racial violence and hierarchy that Black people experienced in Dawson altered the funeral industry throughout the next century.

The Corrupted Program: Joe Moore

Over 130 years ago, Joseph "Joe" Moore lived in a small house with 13 siblings in Southeast Georgia in a small town known as Quitman, about 15 miles west of Valdosta. On a Sunday night just a couple days before Christmas, the family walking home from church saw a black man run into their front yard. A white mob followed the man and apprehended him. On a tall oak tree in the yard, the white mob hanged the man, as the Moore family watched.[35]

This lynching was part of two-day event in Quitman and Brooks County in 1894, a series of murders referred to as the "Brooks County race war," by the local periodical *The Literary Digest*. The recorded events do not show a two-sided battle. White lynch mobs formed after the death of a white man, Joseph Isom, and pursued the alleged murderer, a black man, Waverly Pike. The mob killed a total of seven African Americans, some connected to Pike and other Black members in the community in the wrong place at the wrong time. The killings made national news in the *New York Times* under the headline "Hunting Negros Near Quitman."[36]

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[35] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.

[36] "Hunting Negroes Near Quitman; The White People Aroused by Two Recent Murders.," *The New York Times*. December 24, 1894. Page 1.

Following the killings, Moore told his descendents that the Ku Klux Klan continued to threaten the Black community in Quitman cross burnings at Moore's church. In 1897, the Moore parents decided to find a better home for their 13 children. They bought 15 train tickets that took them as far as their life savings would take them. The train traveled northwest for a couple hours and stopped only 94 miles later in Dawson.[37] Joe Moore and his family settled in another small and segregated Southern town, where Moore brushed shoulders with racial violence that would once again make national news.

Over three decades, many of Moore's siblings fled Dawson for better lives up north. Some moved to Pennsylvania and New York. Others to Michigan, California and Washington. But Moore stayed in Dawson, for reasons that Johnson Jr. says he never disclosed. He opened Moore's Funeral Home in the 1930s during the Great Depression to serve the black community.[38] "For most, there wasn't no staying in Dawson and surviving. That's why a lot of them left," Johnson Jr. said about Moore. "My grandfather owned a Black business, and it was a Black business that was a must in the community—a funeral home. He was here because he had to be."[39]

Moore's Funeral Home was vital for Black citizens in Dawson, as the only funeral service for the African American community in Dawson from the 1930s to the early 1950s. Through the sure supply of death, Moore became one of the most economically prosperous African Americans in town. Beyond his work for the dead, Moore also helped the living by using his hearse as an ambulance and hiring local men to work for him. Moore met a young Ernest Johnson Sr., who took a day trip to Dawson during his off day from Fort Benning in Columbus,

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[37] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[38] "About Us: Johnson & Son Funeral Service." https://johnsonandsonfs.com/about-us/.
[39] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Richard Halicks, Isaac Gittleman, and Xavier Stevens. Personal Interview. Dawson, Georgia, November 12, 2021.

Georgia. Moore hired Johnson Sr. as an assistant for the funeral home, and soon after, Johnson Sr. married Moore's daughter, Edith. The couple had three children, Lucian Moore in 1937, Nathaniel in 1943, and Ernest Jr. in 1954. "My father was just like my grandfather," Johnson Jr. said. "They were dead close."[40]

In a Southern town like Dawson, segregation determined where the African community could go and not go. The Johnson family lived in the African American neighborhood east of Main Street, and the parents made strict rules to keep the kids safe. Johnson Jr. remembers not venturing beyond the dirt roads of the neighborhood. "My father had a rule…'You can go anywhere you wanna go. As long as when I call you, you come. I laugh about it now because how far can you really go? Maybe a block!"[41]

The kids grew up as morticians, playing assistant to Moore in the embalming room and hanging out at the funeral home after school. Even as a child, Johnson Jr. understood Moore's relationship with the police. He remembers his grandfather and father crying together after they picked up the body of Price Holmes, an unarmed black man shot and killed by Dawson police on Main Street during the day in 1960. *The Dawson News*, the town's conservative newspaper, ran a short article on the front page with the headline, "Officer Shoots Berserk Negro in Self Defense."[42] Holmes suffered from mental illnesses and was once a patient at the mental hospital in Milledgeville, Georgia. According to the report, Holmes attacked a police officer, who tried to subdue Holmes with a blackjack and then shot him. Police found no weapon at the scene but claimed Holmes held a half brick in his hand when he attacked. Johnson Jr. remembered that his father continued to say that Holmes "died for no reason."

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[40] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[41] Ibid.
[42] "Officer Shoots Berserk Negro in Self Defense," *The Dawson News*. February 25, 1960. 1.

Johnson Jr. recognized the corrupt relationship of his grandfather and father with the police but also advocated for the work Moore did in secrecy to help the Black community in Dawson. Later in his life, Moore told Johnson Jr. about his work to "slip people out of Terrell County." White landowners in the area locked down black sharecroppers on their farms with false promises, economic oppression, and threats of violence. Moore helped these black sharecroppers disappear at night and drove them to Florida or Atlanta in his hearse, where they settled or began their migration North for new lives.[43]

On May 24, 1958, Dawson Police Officer Weyman Burchle Cherry and his partner Robert Terrell Hancock patrolled the African American neighborhood on the night shift. Around 1:30 am, the officers believed they heard a disturbance on the opposite block and decided to walk across the yard of Willie "Wootie" Countryman.[44] The 33-year-old truck driver and Army veteran lived there with his grandmother, and in the backyard, he spoke with his girlfriend in the backyard. Countryman heard the sound of what sounded like someone urinating in the front yard, so he went to the side of the house to see who he heard in the yard.[45] Cherry and Countryman met face to face at the side of the house, and Cherry shot Countryman in the abdomen. Countryman died later that morning in the hospital. The police officer claimed self-defense, asserting that Countryman jumped on top of him and attacked with a knife.[46] The girlfriend stated that Countryman rather greeted the police officers before the encounter turned violent. His

[43] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Richard Halicks, Isaac Gittleman, and Xavier Stevens. Personal Interview. Dawson, Georgia, November 12, 2021.

[44] Interview Report with Weyman Burchle Cherry, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 12, 1958. When FBI investigators came to Dawson in early June, Cherry took a two-week vacation and was unavailable to interview. Within this time, key pieces of evidence were either repaired, like his alleged cut cap, or disappeared, like Countryman's knife.

[45] Interview Report with Mary Edith Robinson, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 5, 1958.

[46] Interview Report with Weyman Burchle Cherry, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 12, 1958.

family and girlfriend labeled Cherry's story a lie, as they never knew Countryman to carry a knife.[47]

That night, the Dawson Police called Moore's Funeral Home to pick up the body of Countryman. Moore, Ernest Johnson Jr, and Harrison Powell, another son-in-law and employee of Moore's Funeral Home, arrived at the scene. The Dawson Police Howard Lee greeted them and told the ambulance crew to "look for a knife when you pick [Countryman] up."[48] Johnson Sr. and Powell picked Countryman up and placed him on their cot, and Powell saw a knife on the left side of Countryman's body in the cot when an officer shone a light on the knife. Powell described the knife as six inches long counting both the handle and ridged blade, and he stated he saw no one place the knife in the cot.

The appearance of the knife conflicts with several FBI interviews from a Dawson police officer on the scene, Robert Hancock, as well as Moore, who did not see a knife.[49] But the knife that Powell found on the cot incriminated Countryman and proved crucial to the Dawson police's claim for self defense. The Terrell County coroner's jury found Cherry to have acted in self-defense even though the knife presented in court was a dull "switchblade knife 10 to 12 inches long when open" with the point broken off, differing greatly from Powell's description.[50] Moore and his funeral home employees played a crucial role in the Countryman killing for finding the alleged weapon in the ambulance cot next to Countryman. The Dawson police may have not properly investigated the crime scene, yet they more likely trusted Moore's Funeral Home to aid as a witness to their unjust killings of Willie Countryman.

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[47] Interview Report with Mary Edith Robinson, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 5, 1958.
[48] Harrison Powell, Signed Statement, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 6, 1958.
[49] Interview Report with Joseph Lucian Moore, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 4, 1958.
[50] Coroner's Jury Report, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 9, 1958.

Following his death in the hospital, the Countryman family buried Countryman with another Black funeral director — B.W. Cooper, rather than with Moore's Funeral Home. Cooper also operated in Dawson and conducted funerals for another victim of racial violence in Dawson, James Brazier. The Countryman family never stated why they chose Cooper over Moore, who picked up Countryman's body. It's possible that because of Moore's terms with the police he could not bury victims of racial violence. But Cooper also held a reputation as an honest man within the Black community that the Countryman family could trust.

Competition and Closure: B.W. Cooper

In the early 1950s, Baylor William (B.W.) Cooper started Cooper's Funeral Home, the second funeral for the Black community, and operated from a small house on Flint Street[51]. The house stood one block from Sardis Cemetery — the largest cemetery used by the African American community in Dawson. Cooper never married and left no descendants or records to tell his story, but FBI interviews and newspaper clippings show Cooper as a significant figure in the African American community in Dawson. Black leaders in Dawson today still talk about his role in speaking out against racial violence in Dawson. Reverend Ezekiel Holley, the president of the Terrell County chapter of the NAACP, remembers Cooper as vocal, and more importantly honest, when it came to the unjust killings in Dawson. Holley said, "Cooper buried the folks that Joe Moore did not want involvement with like Countryman and Brazier. Joe Moore, from my understanding, would cater to the status quo, but B.W. was educated and didn't scratch his head if it wasn't itching. He didn't laugh if it wasn't funny, and he wasn't tied to the system."[52]

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[51] Lucius Holloway, and Charlene Holloway Bishop. *The Civil Rights Movement Through the Eyes of Lucius Holloway Sr*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing, 2008.

[52] Reverend Ezekiel Holley, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.

Cooper's willingness to bury the dead that "Moore did not want involvement with" earned him trust within the Black community but also made him a target for the white authorities in Dawson.

Cooper was born in 1921 in Dawson to a successful Black family. His father, Cooper Sr., worked as an insurance agent for Black communities throughout Georgia, and in 1906, Cooper Sr. earned the position of State Manager for the Guaranty Aid and Relief Society, a large insurance company for African Americans in Georgia based in Savannah.[53] By 1930, the Cooper family owned their house in Dawson, and the US Census valued it at $1,000 — the most expensive on their street by 500 dollars.[54] In 1931, when Cooper was 10, his father passed away at age 68 from heart disease, but his father's successful career afforded B.W. Cooper greater opportunities later in life than most Black men from Dawson.[55] Cooper enrolled at Bethune-Cookman University, a historically black university in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1940 and attended school for two years. In 1942, Cooper left to enlist in the U.S. Army at Fort Benning for WWII.[56] During training, Cooper joined and wrote for the all-Black news staff on the *Shavetail*, a camp newspaper published by the Third Student Training Regiment.[57] It's unclear from Army records if Cooper ever left the US during WWII, but he served four total years and returned to Dawson in 1946 at age 23.

He opened his funeral home in the 1950s, and Cooper served the poorest of the African American community in Dawson. No records of Cooper's business survive today, but his first

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[53] "Hundreds of New Members Each Week." *Savannah Tribune* (Savannah, Georgia) XXI, no. 19, February 10, 1906: 5. NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current.
[54] Year: 1930; Census Place: Dawson, Terrell, Georgia; Page: 8A; Enumeration District: 0008; FHL microfilm: 2340122.
[55] Baylor W Cooper, Death Record, Georgia Department of Health and Vital Statistics; Atlanta, Georgia, 1931.
[56] National Archives at College Park; College Park, Maryland, USA; Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, 1938-1946; NAID: 1263923; Record Group Title: Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, 1789-ca. 2007; Record Group: 64; Box Number: 08183; Reel: 240.
[57] "After Two Years Camp Paper Writes 'Thirty'." New Journal and Guide (1916-), Jan 19, 1946, https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/after-two-years-camp-paper-writes-thirty/docview/567781688/se-2.

notable involvement in Dawson history occurred in 1958. That year, Cooper buried two Black men killed by the Dawson police in brutal fashion. James Brazier died from brain trauma after several beatings by Dawson police, who arrested him for challenging their authority when they arrested Brazier's father. They later charged him with a DUI, and Brazier died after improper medical care from Dr. Charles Ward, a white doctor from Terrell County Hospital, who excused signs of brain bleeding as drunkenness. After Brazier died, Cooper handled the funeral arrangements, but he also provided key evidence to Brazier's injuries a month removed from the death. In his interview with the FBI two months after Brazier's death, Cooper gave an unofficial autopsy noting "abrasions on the victim's head." He also provided an explanation to why fluid administered at the hospital to help Brazier recover flowed in too slowly. Cooper stated to the FBI that "the arteries seemed tight which indicates that pressure had been applied to the arm."[58]

A month later, Cooper also buried Willie Countryman, and the funeral director served in the best way he could for the Countryman family to receive justice. Cooper stated in his FBI interview another partial autopsy to the FBI that "during the course of preparing the body for burial he observed a gunshot wound on the body of Countryman…about three inches below the navel."[59] Cooper's description supported the autopsy given by Dr. Ward at Terrell County Hospital, who said that the bullet traveled from the navel downward through the abdomen.

Cooper's reputation of caring for victims of racial violence in an honest way built him firm support within the Black community. Reverend Holley remembers the positive sentiment from his family and others about Cooper. "Every black person knew that if some foul play was going on," Holley said, "B.W. Cooper was going to let it come out." Cooper's honesty also led to possible resentment from the white community for his work for justice as a funeral director. In

[58] Interview Report with Baylor W. Cooper, FBI Files on James Brazier, June 17, 1958.
[59] Interview Report with Baylor W. Cooper, FBI Files on Willie Countryman, June 4, 1958.

February 1959, *The Pittsburgh Courier* published an article titled, "New Intimidations Breakout in Ga," and reporter Trezzvant Anderson noted that Cooper closed his funeral home only eight months after burying Brazier and Countryman.[60] With his Flint Street location closed, Cooper operated from his own home. Anderson didn't report the reasons for the funeral home's closure, but rumors of corruption spread within the Black community. Albritten inherited Cooper's former funeral business in 1966 from Cooper's business partner Archie Hayes. Working under Hayes, Albritten heard stories of foul play by both the white authorities and Black funeral home competitors to push Cooper out of business. "If the phone doesn't ring, you can't pay the light bill," Albritten said.[61]

After his closure, Cooper operated from his home at a limited capacity and mentored others to be morticians. He mentored Lucius Holloway and Archie Hayes, who carried on the funeral home and mentored Albritten. One of Cooper's last-known burials occurred in March of 1961 of Marvin Goshay, an eyewitness to the James Brazier killing, who died in a mysterious way connected to another funeral home in town.

Goshay was arrested on April 19, 1958, for disorderly conduct and held over the weekend in the Dawson jail.[62] One day later, Dawson police threw a bloodied Brazier into Goshay's cell, and the two cellmates discussed the beating that Brazier received from police during his arrest. Later that night, Goshay witnessed Dawson police officers Cherry and Randolph McDonald forcibly take Brazier out of the cell, and after he attempted to grab his shoes, Cherry warned that Brazier "don't need no shoes" where he was going.[63] Goshay recalled seeing Brazier the next morning

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[60] Trezzvant Anderson, "New Intimidations Break Out in Georgia," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 28, 1959.
[61] Robert Albritten. Interview with Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, October 31, 2022.
[62] Interview with Marvin Goshea, Donald L. Hollowell Collection, Box 10. Brazier, Mrs. Hattie Bell. Auburn Avenue Research Library.
[63] Ibid.

leaning in the hallway with his suit dirtied, shirt torn, and scars on his back like he was beaten. Police officer Shirah Chapman asked Goshay to help Brazier into a car to take him to the local mayor's court due to his physical condition.

In August of 1958, a federal grand jury in Macon examined the Brazier case with Cherry and other Dawson police officers charged with the fatal beating. The grand jury subpoenaed Goshay to testify with his valuable eyewitness account, but Cherry arrested Goshay and put him in jail during the week of the proceedings, when the grand jury did not indict the Dawson police officers. After Goshay asked Cherry why he was being arrested, Cherry responded, "You just need to be in jail."[64]

Goshay had another chance to tell his story during a civil suit filed by Hattie Bell Brazier, the wife of James Brazier. Goshay did an interview with her lawyer Donald Lee Hollowell, the prominent civil rights attorney, and recounted the night of Brazier's death with detail and prepared to testify in court again. Yet, he again could not testify after dying from "asphyxiation" in the burning of a small Black-owned Battle and Battle Funeral Home in Dawson on March 14, 1961. [65]The FBI at the time found no foul play, yet those in Dawson and Goshey's family believe he was killed. Ira Goshey, Marvin's sister, told the Cold Cases Project at Emory University that Goshey was shot in the woods by the Dawson police and placed in the funeral home to stage his death in a fire.[66] Lucius Holloway, who worked for Cooper in 1961, also recounted Goshay's death as a killing and said, "He didn't die a natural death, we all kind of know that. He was in jail when all this beatin' was going on. And they was going to only let you

[64] United States Commission on Civil Rights, Justice: Commission on Civil Rights Report 5, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), 174.

[65] Ibid.
[66] Ira Goshay. Jacob Busch. "Buried Truths." Season 4: Episode 3. *WABE*. 2023.

live so long knowing so much. That's what the devil would do."[67] Holloway also believed that Charlie Battle, the owner of the funeral home, worked with the police like Joe Moore to facilitate and silence the killing of Goshay "Battle went along with it. It was up there at his funeral home," Holloway said, "He did everything. He boot-legged liquor. They gambled in there. They did everything illegally in there, so he wasn't go against them white folks. No he wasn't, and if I would've been that kind of person, I wouldn't either."[68] The Goshay family never saw justice for Marvin's death, and the mysterious circumstances of his death highlight the corruption of white authorities to silence the Black community through coercion and violence. In the case of Battle and Battle, Holloway suggests that working with the police may have been the only choice to keep Battle's business alive. On Goshay's death certificate, B.W. Cooper is listed as his embalmer.[69]

A year after Goshay's death in 1962, Cooper suddenly left to serve in the Army again, although there are no military records for this second term. Cooper handed over his business to Hayes at this time.[70] Cooper returned to Dawson in 1963, and he didn't return to the funeral service. He instead dedicated himself to service for civil rights in the Dawson community. A December 1963 report on Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) work in Southwest Georgia listed Cooper, along with Lucius Holloway, as a regular attendee of SNCC meetings who helped reinvigorate the fight for voting rights in the Black community in Terrell County who feared for their lives to support a civil rights campaign.[71]

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[67] Lucius Holloway. Interview with David Barasoian and Hank Klibanoff. Terrell County Library. Dawson, Georgia. March 2020.
[68] Lucius Holloway. Interview with David Barasoian and Hank Klibanoff. Lucius Holloway's House. Dawson, Georgia. March 2020.
[69] Marvin Goshay, Death Record, Georgia Department of Health and Vital Statistics; Atlanta, Georgia, 1961.
[70] Lucius Holloway, and Charlene Holloway Bishop. *The Civil Rights Movement Through the Eyes of Lucius Holloway Sr*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing, 2008.
[71] "Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals," Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, ProQuest History Vault, 1963.

Defying Silence: Lucius Holloway

Lucius Holloway was born in 1932 on a farm in Terrell County to a family of Black sharecroppers on a white-owned farm. When the harvest came, the landowner took his share that included both profit and farm expenses, leaving the Holloway family with little. Holloway joined the US Army in 1952 and served in the Korean War.[72] When he returned home in 1955, he settled in Dawson, marrying Emma Kate Lewis and starting a family. He also joined the small Terrell County NAACP chapter at the time, who destroyed their membership cards in fear of punishment from white Dawson authorities.[73] Holloway's vocal leadership led the president of the chapter to invite Holloway to join as vice-president. In an interview with the Civil Rights History Project in 2013, Holloway described that some members of the Black community in Dawson wouldn't even associate with Holloway for his NAACP leadership. "I would be told *anytime*—if I was walking down the street, and some black folks met me—they would run on the other side [of the street]." Holloway said. "They'd say, 'When them white folks shoot you, I don't want to get shot.' So, if I would walk up in the church or in the crowd, they would just get away from me. I was just like a sore finger standing up there by myself."[74] During the late 1950s, Holloway also began to work in the funeral business under B.W. Cooper and Archie Hayes and earned his funeral license.

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[72] Emma Kate Holloway, Interviewee, Lucius Holloway, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Lucius Holloway, Sr., and Emma Kate Holloway oral history interview conducted by Hasan Kwame Jeffries in Albany, Georgia. 2013. Video. https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669161/.

[73] Lucius Holloway, and Charlene Holloway Bishop. *The Civil Rights Movement Through the Eyes of Lucius Holloway Sr*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing), 2008. 3.

[74] Emma Kate Holloway, Interviewee, Lucius Holloway, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Lucius Holloway, Sr., and Emma Kate Holloway oral history interview conducted by Hasan Kwame Jeffries in Albany, Georgia. 2013. Video. https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669161/.

In 1958, Holloway witnessed Dawson police officer Cherry beat his neighbor James Brazier in his front lawn. Brazier died of the injuries days later. His interview with the FBI exhibits the same honesty of Cooper, as Holloway described Brazier not showing any resistance before a policeman struck him.[75] In the early 1960s, Holloway began to work with SNCC workers, most notably the civil rights activist Charles Sherrod, to register voters in Georgia. Sherrod started the SNCC campaign for voting rights in Southwest Georgia, and when he arrived in Dawson in February of 1962, he received an immediate threat of the racial hierarchy from white authorities. While picking up voting registration applications, Sherrod ran into sheriff Mathews and boldly introduced himself and his desire to register voters in Dawson. Sheriff Mathews responded by demanding identification and where Sherrod was staying. In the Terrell County Report by SNCC, Sherrod writes "Before I left, [Mathews] told me that I still could be anybody, that he had never seen me before, that his men have been watching me…and that if there were a robbery, I would be the first suspect."[76] In four months in Dawson, police arrested Sherrod four times for charges of vagrancy, a common charge against Black people in the South for the inability to prove employment at a police officer's request. The violent threats from Mathews and the Dawson police toward SNCC continued from 1962 and 1963 and soon met the outspoken funeral director Holloway.

On July 26, 1962, SNCC planned to hold a voter registration meeting at Mount Olive Baptist Church in the small town of Sasser in Terrell County. The group expected trouble, as prior to the meeting, Holloway heard from a Black maid of a white family in Dawson that there was a plot to kill him for his role in voter registration in Terrell County. *New York Times* reporter Claude

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[75] Interview Report with Lucius Holloway, FBI Files on James Brazier, April 25, 1958.

[76] "Sherrod's Report," Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, ProQuest History Vault, 1963.

Sitton attended the meeting at Mount Olive Baptist Church and gave a detailed account of the night of terror in his article titled, "Sheriff Harrasses Negroes at Voting Rally in Georgia." Sheriff Mathews and his deputies interrupted the meeting and paraded between the church aisles brandishing revolvers and slapping blackjacks in their hands.[77] Outside, more police officers shouted out the license plate numbers of those who attended the meeting. Sitton wrote, "The three officers took turns badgering the participants and warning of what "disturbed white citizens" might do if this continued to happen." Throughout the performance of authority, Sherrod read scripture passages from the church pulpit to give faith to the fearful Black audience. Holloway stood up during the intimidations, and Sitton wrote, "'Everyone is welcome,' [Holloway] said. 'This is a voting registration meeting.'" Holloway's defiance invited Mathews to address the crowd and Sitton writes that Mathews warns that he cannot control the anger of the local white community.

When Mathews and his deputies finally left, attention in the church turned toward the threat made on Holloway, who feared for his safety returning home after the threats made by Mathews. In his autobiography written in the third person, Holloway recounts a plan made by Hershel Blackshear, a young Black soldier from Dawson, that involved Blackshear taking Holloway's car from Sasser to Dawson to act as a decoy. Holloway would take Blackshear's car and take a detour north to Bronwood, where he could take a different road to Dawson. The two went forward with the plan, and like fate, Blackshear in Holloway's car ran into a roadblock created by white men. The men pulled Blackshear out of the car and realized he was not Holloway. Holloway describes their reaction and writes, "'What are you doing in this car? Where is that Holloway nigger?' Blackshear told them, 'Mr. Holloway had to go to Albany to bring back some

[77] Claude Sitton, "Sheriff Harasses Negroes at Voting Rally in Georgia," *The New York Times*, July 27, 1962, 1.

material. His car wasn't good enough. I let him use my car to pick up the material. He's going to come right back and bring my car, and I'll give him his car.'"[78] The white men let Blackshear go, and Holloway made it home safe.

Threats on Holloway's life continued during his work for voter registration, and the next came from his closest Black peer in the funeral industry. After Cooper rejoined the military in 1962, Archie Hayes took over his funeral business, and Holloway continued to work under Hayes. In his autobiography, Holloway recounts that year Hayes and Holloway decided to go racoon hunting together one night after discussing it at work. When they entered the woods, Hayes with a shotgun in hand gave Holloway a flashlight and told him to lead the way. Holloway resisted and remembered a lesson from his grandfather that the front man should have the shotgun and the back holds the flashlight. The two argued, and Hayes decided to also hold another flashlight to bring them to a resolution. With Holloway in the front, they walked in the woods, but Holloway noticed Hayes' flashlight continuously veering from their path. Holloway writes, "When Archie put the light back on the path, Holloway looked back, and Archie had raised the shotgun to his head. Holloway looked up and screamed, 'Man, what are you doing?' Archie just went crazy, shouting, 'I ain't going to do it. I'm sorry; the white folk told me to shoot you. I'll carry you home.'"[79] Holloway refused Hayes's offer and walked home.

The betrayal between the funeral directors and what brought Hayes to a near-murder attempt shows the corruption of the Black-owned funeral industry by the violence and terror of Dawson's racial hierarchy. There's no evidence of Hayes ever receiving threats from the white community, but from his actions and said motive, it's likely his own life was placed under threat to take the

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[78] Lucius Holloway, and Charlene Holloway Bishop. *The Civil Rights Movement Through the Eyes of Lucius Holloway Sr*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing), 2008. 9.
[79] Ibid. 10–11.

life of Holloway. Like Moore and Cooper, Hayes experienced terror that the white authorities of Dawson used to oppress the Black community, even its leaders.

Despite his near-death encounters, Holloway continued to work with SNCC to register Black people to vote in Terrell County in 1962 and 1963. The Black people of the county needed the local encouragement, as the white community met SNCC's voting registration efforts with violence and terror. In 1962, three Black churches burned from suspected arson, including Mount Olive Church where Mathews interrupted a SNCC meeting in July. After returning from the Army in 1963, B.W. Cooper also joined Holloway to reinvigorate voter registration of Black residents in Terrell County. Their efforts led to the registration of 140 Black voters from Terrell County by August 1963, a significant step from the 51 registered in 1960.[80]

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and altered the course of US history by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. That year at the polls, Holloway decided to test the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, in the general election. Citizens of Terrell County voted in the Terrell County Courthouse in the heart of Dawson's downtown, yet for elections prior to the Civil Right Act, Black registered voters casted their ballots in the basement rather than upstairs, where white people voted. On the day of the general election, Holloway did not go downstairs to the basement and walked into the courthouse to vote. Holloway wrote that Sheriff Mathews met Holloway and told him to go downstairs to the basement if he wanted to vote. Holloway refused, citing the Civil Rights Act in response, and Mathews conceded but warned, "'You can vote upstairs if you want to, but I am not going to be responsible for anything that happens to you.'"

[80] "Nightriders Bomb, Shoot Registration Worker," Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Press Release, 1963. The SNCC press release also details the attack on the house of Carolyn Daniels with gunfire and a bomb. Daniels was a Dawson citizen who housed several SNCC workers during the Southwest Georgia Project to register Black voters.

After casting his ballot upstairs, Holloway wrote that white men blocked all exits from the courthouse. He walked toward an exit, and the men blocked him from leaving. The commotion freed up the north exit, and Holloway ran home.[81]

Holloway's test of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 challenged the racial hierarchy of Dawson and Terrell County through a new protected avenue. The landmark law presented a window of possibility for Black people in Dawson to fight for equality that was not previously presented to Holloway or previous Black leaders like Moore or Cooper. The terror enforced by white authorities threatened these Black funeral home directors to choose survival as a pillar of the Black community or closure. In the case of Hayes and Holloway, the stakes were raised to a choice of life and death. Even though the characters change, the threats of racial hierarchy created a cold competition between Black funeral directors that would last for decades to come.

[81] Lucius Holloway, and Charlene Holloway Bishop. *The Civil Rights Movement Through the Eyes of Lucius Holloway Sr*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing), 2008. 15.

Part 2

A Segregated Industry: 1964 to 2005

Archie Hayes retired in 1966 and passed on his business to the two young men he mentored, Robert Albritten and Sammie Lee Ward. Both Dawson natives and second cousins, Albritten and Ward led the funeral home as a rival to Moore's Funeral Service for two years before a disagreement on the price of funerals severed their relationship. In 1968, Ward left as a partner of their funeral home and formed Ward's Funeral Home a year later with a focus on the rural poor in Terrell County. Albritten created Albritten's Funeral Service and spread himself beyond the funeral industry, first as a local radio host and then as an insurance agent. He became a prominent member of (ATOC) African Methodist Episcopal Church and hosted the local NAACP chapter meetings in his funeral home chapel. Reverend Holley is native to Dawson and joined the local NAACP chapter in the 1960s. Holley said that Albritten ascended quickly to the top funeral home in Dawson as the "pimp of the community," who used his economic success as a funeral director to build his connections. "He stayed on top of everything," Holley said. "He could tell you what's going on at the banks [in Dawson]. He knew what's happening in the NAACP. He knew what was happening at the churches. [Albritten] was on top of the game." Holley added, "Albritten did a lot of things for his business, and so did Joe Moore."[82]

Albritten was the face of a new generation of Black funeral home directors that emerged from the predecessors of Moore and Cooper. Along with Ward and the Johnson family, Black funeral directors led the African American community in Dawson through a period of great change. Yet this new generation participated in similar competition that plagued the Black funeral industry in Dawson from the 1940s and 1960s. In Dawson, businesses tended to serve

[82] Reverend Ezekiel Holley, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.

those of their own race even following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As the Black-owned funeral homes hoped to grow out of the era of Terrible Terrell, the memory of the racial terror created distrust between races in Dawson. In a 2015 *Southern Quarterly* journal article, author Beverly Bunch-Lyons notes that Black business leaders struggled with consumer discrimination following the Civil Rights movement. Bunch-Lyons writes, "[African American business owners] focused their energy on securing a racially segregated market such as that found in the funeral business."[83] By competing within a smaller demographic, funeral home owners could find success but also limitations to who could be a consumer.

Neither federal nor state legislation officially segregated the industry, but social and cultural habits continued to divide funerals in the South. However, in 1973, the case Wilbert Oliver vs. Escude Funeral Homes reached federal court in a case led by the Southern Poverty Law Center.. Oliver sought out funeral homes in Mansura, Louisiana, following the death of his mother, and two white-owned funeral homes refused burial services for the Black family. A federal judge ruled that segregation by a funeral home business was unconstitutional.[84] Although the federal desegregation signaled a victory in the business, race continued to determine private business choices, including in the funeral industry in Dawson.

The New Establishment

Albritten was born on May 12, 1942, in Dawson and grew up with his grandmother on a small dirt street north of main street called Porter's Alley. He remembers his childhood well — from the names of kids he played with on the street to the injustices in Dawson he observed as a

[83] Beverly Bunch-Lyons. ""'Ours is a Business of Loyalty': African American Funeral Home Owners in Southern Cities"." *The Southern Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2015): 57-71.
[84] "Wilbert Oliver et. al. vs. Escude Funeral Home et. al." Southern Poverty Law Center. Case Number: 19353. September 11, 1973.

kid. Albritten attended a segregated school system in the 1940s and 1950s. Every school day, he walked to school, as the African American schools could not afford to offer transportation to students. His friends who lived further from the school took rides from friends or relatives lucky enough to own a car.[85]

Albritten experienced the racist abuse that defined Dawson as a teenager. On a winter night in 1959, a 17-year-old Albritten and two friends went to go see a movie across the street from the Terrell County Courthouse and former jailhouse. The theater was segregated, and Albritten and his friends sat in the balcony.[86] At around 11 p.m. when the movie ended, they stepped out of the theater and onto the empty main street. Albritten liked to dress nicely, and that night, he wore a button down white shirt with a thick overcoat on top. As he walked, he realized his shirt became untucked, so he unzipped his pants and pulled his shirt down before zipping his pants back up.[87]

As this happened, Dawson Police Officer Weyman Burchle Cherry, the same police officer who killed Willie Countryman and James Brazier, drove by in his patrol car on main street and stopped alongside the group. Cherry rolled down his window and asked Albritten what he was doing. Albritten replied that he wasn't doing anything. He and his friends decided to continue walking and turned the corner at Dawson Pharmacy. About five minutes later, Cherry came back and drove up in his patrol car. This time, he didn't ask any questions.

"Nigger, get in the car," Cherry said.

"Sir, what have I done?" Albritten asked.

"I said get in the car."

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[85] Robert Albritten. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[86] Robert Albritten. Interview by Emory University Cold Cases Class of Fall 2021. Personal Interview. Dawson, Georgia, November 12, 2021.
[87] Ibid.

Albritten obliged, and Cherry drove him straight to jail, where Cherry refused to explain the charge of the arrest. Albritten, "as humble as possible," asked if he could call his mother to let her know where he was.[88] Cherry, in response, slapped Albritten so hard that he "could see the stars." [89] After a night in jail, Albritten appeared before the local mayor's court and pleaded guilty to public indecency. He paid a $25 fine.

Following high school, Albritten wanted to leave Dawson to pursue an education. In 1960, he first attended Morris Brown College, a historically black college in Atlanta, but Albritten could only afford one year at Morris Brown. He then transferred to Albany State University, only 25 miles from Dawson. Graduating with a degree in history, Albritten planned to attend law school, but he returned home to Dawson in 1964. With thoughts of law school still in the back of his head, he picked up a job in the funeral home business.

Albritten learned how to embalm and earned his funeral license under Archie Hayes, who partnered with B.W. Cooper.[90] Following Hayes's retirement in 1966 and Albritten's split with Ward, Albritten formed his own funeral home by 1968 at 24 and operated from a house on Lemon Street, one block from Dawson's main street. Albritten's involvement in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Terrell County NAACP, and eventually politics propelled his funeral home within the Black community to compete with Moore's Funeral Service.

Also in 1968, Joe Moore passed away at 82 and left the company to Ernest Johnson Sr., who ran the company with his oldest son Nathaniel. The family rebranded to leave the Moore name behind and named the business "Johnson & Son Funeral Service." The other siblings didn't want to be involved in the funeral home business after having opportunities for higher education.

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[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Robert Albritten. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, October 31, 2022.

Lucian Moore Johnson graduated from North Carolina A&T with a degree in architecture and stayed in North Carolina where he started a family. Johnson Jr. graduated from Albany State University and began a career as a middle school teacher in Terrell County. Johnson & Son Funeral Service struggled to have the same success as Moore following the increase of civil rights in Dawson. Albritten's growth and political popularity relegated them to second place in Dawson.[91]

Sammie Lee Ward started Ward's Funeral Home in 1969 on Graves Station Road to add another funeral home in town. His granddaughter, Petronia "Lady Ward" Shanks, said that Ward strove to serve the poorest of the Black population, many of whom worked on farms outside of Dawson, and in his first years of business, Ward spent his time going from church to church in Terrell County to offer his services for little cost.[92] He was a deacon himself at a small church in Dawson called Beulahland Baptist Church. Ward was born in Dawson in 1929 to a family of sharecroppers and grew up down Graves Station Road on a farm. Lady Ward didn't know much about his childhood except his admiration for his parents, who raised him in a small shack with his twin brother. He also attended Terrell County public schools, and then Ward picked up a job in the funeral business under Hayes. In 1966, Ward earned his funeral license, and three years later, he opened up his own funeral home after the failed partnership with his cousin Albritten.

For the new generation of Black funeral home owners, the funeral industry in Dawson remained segregated by race, as Dawson's history of racial violence persisted in the minds and actions of Dawson citizens when choosing a funeral home. The competition of three Black-owned funeral homes for a small number of consumers during this period nearly drove two of the funeral homes out of business and drove another to corruption. The Black community still

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[91] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[92] Petronia "Lady Ward" Shanks, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.

entrusted their services to the funeral directors of their own race, regardless of the change around them.

The Program Persists

In the 1960s and 1970s, Dawson and Terrell County slowly moved toward integration and Black participation in voting and politics. Several advancements came through the courts and were led by former funeral director Lucius Holloway continued pivotal work for advancing civil rights in Terrell County. Holloway was a plaintiff in 1968 in a successful lawsuit against the Terrell County jury commissioners for discrimination in the selection of grand and traverse jurors. In 1976, Holloway won another lawsuit against the Terrell County Board of Education and Board of Commissioners for discriminating against Black voters.[93] The ground made on civil rights through the courts, however, did not greatly change the racist attitudes of those living in Terrell County, and in that same year, another case of violence showed the racial hierarchy of Dawson and made national headlines.

On January 26, 1976, Gordon Howell was shot during a robbery at Tiny Denton's Grocery store near Dawson. Tiny Denton, the only witness, claimed that five young Black men robbed the store and identified a 19-year-old Roosevelt Watson as the killer. Watson then gave a forced confession indicating four additional teenagers in the crime. The five Black teenagers, all illiterate, became known as the "Dawson Five," and *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* covered their case throughout 1976 and 1977.[9495] The stories of the "Dawson Five" showcased the racial hierarchy still dominant in Dawson through the abuse shown by white

[93] "3 Blacks Elected to Dawson City Council." *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov 04, 1979.
[94] Frederick Allen, "'Dawson Five' Case: A Town on Trial," *The Washington Post*, August 7, 1977.
[95] Wayne King, "A Case of Murder; a Charge of Forced Confessions," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1977, 18.

authorities. Terrell County sheriff Jerry Dean attached Roosevelt Watson to a machine, and Dean told him it would electrocute him if Watson did not confess. Wayne King of the *NYT* wrote, "the defendant indicated that he was not aware that he had been hooked to a polygraph machine and that he believed he might be electrocuted." Terrell County deputies forced another member of the Dawson Five, Johnny Jackson, to search the pond behind his house for the murder weapon, and if he didn't find it, the police threatened to put a gun to Jackson's head and castrate him. The trial did not reach court for over a year, and three of the five defendants stayed in jail for over 18 months. The Defense Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center adopted the criminal court case in 1977. In the Terrell County Courthouse for pretrial hearings, the defense fought against murder and armed robbery charges for the Dawson Five with evidence of police misconduct and intimidation causing Watson's confession. Judge Walter Greer decided to dismiss the case after invalidating Watson's confession and finding truth to the findings of the Defense Project.[96]

Although the Dawson Five saw justice, their case showed the racist system in Dawson exploiting their Black citizens still alive. Justice through the judicial system appeared to be the only way to break down racism in Terrell County. After the Dawson Five case, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit in 1977 on behalf of Black voters against Dawson for denying equal access to the system of at-large elections that the city used for the Dawson City Council. At-large elections were used following the Voting Rights Act in 1965 to allow a white-minority to put full support behind selected candidates for city council, dilute the votes of Black people, and win each seat through a coordinated plurality. In Georgia, the ACLU filed more than 100 lawsuits from 1974 to 1993 against cities and counties for discriminatory at-large elections,

[96] Tom Wicker, "Still 'Terrible Terrell,'" *The New York Times*, August 14, 1977, 153.

including in Dawson.[97] On February 1, 1979, federal judge Wilbur D. Owens ordered a reapportionment plan to draw six districts within the city of Dawson.[98] The *Atlanta Daily World*, a black newspaper in Atlanta, covered the historic election following the decision in an article titled, "3 Blacks Elected to Dawson City Council."[99] The court-ordered districts resulted in the election of three Black men — Abraham Breedlove, Lucius Holloway, and Robert Albritten. The *Atlanta Daily World* wrote that "both Holloway and Albritton had previously run for positions on the Dawson City Council on three separate occasions…both men had always been defeated in at-large elections."[100]

The court-ordered plan brought the first Black representation to politics in Dawson and Terrell County and rewarded the persistence of Holloway as well as Albritten. The new city councilmen, two with history in the funeral home business, made an immediate change to allow Black people to also be buried in the town's white cemetery. *The Atlanta Constitution* documented the first changes of the Black councilmen, who asked Albritten about the Dawson Five trial's effect on his success. "I would not attribute my election to the Dawson Five trail,'" Albritten told *The Atlanta Constitution*. "There are two things — blacks have seen the importance of becoming registered voters, and the court decision changing the method of voting from citywide towards.'" The newspaper also spoke with Millard Farmer, the chief attorney of the Defense Project who defended the Dawson Five and warned "Dawson would have never heard of Team Defense if black people had the strength they now apparently have…if they had been strong enough to elect anybody, they would have never had a trial. Dawson was a modern

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[97] "Testimony of Laughlin McDonald, Director of the ACLU's Voting Rights Project, Before the House Judiciary Subcommittee." American Civil Liberties Union: May 9, 2006. https://www.aclu.org/other/testimony-laughlin-mcdonald-director-aclus-voting-rights-project-house-judiciary-subcommittee.
[98] "3 Blacks Elected to Dawson City Council." *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov 04, 1979.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.

version of a plantation system, a system where a dual society existed."[101] The warning of Farmer illuminated the reality of the long road ahead in Dawson for true equality to be reached. The public and political advances still needed to overcome the habits of racial divide that dominated the economic and social choices of those in Dawson.

Old Habits

After a decade in city council, Albritten decided to run for mayor in 1990 and won, becoming the first African American mayor of the city. Albritten said that he received threats following his election from the Ku Klux Klan who sent messages through the white community in Dawson. Albritten had the Dawson police circle his block every hour to ensure his safety.

Albritten inherited a declining Dawson, and much of his work involved saving the few jobs in the city throughout his 22-year tenure as mayor. After the second-largest employer, Atlanta-based apparel manufacturer Oxford Industries, left Dawson, Almark Mills, a local textile plant that employed over 500 people threatened to also leave. Albritten introduced a plan to change the plant to a cooperative, with each worker would have a stake in the plant. It led to Albritten receiving the 1998 American Hometown Leadership Award, which was read before President Bill Clinton in the Senate. The Congressional Record lists Albritten's other achievements of changing the city seal to read "The City of Dawson, Committed to a Better Quality of Life for All" and building a community center named "Robert L. Albritten Neighborhood Community Center."[102] The 1998 award hangs on his office wall.

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[101] "Election of Blacks Alters Town." *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jan 14, 1980.

[102] Congressional Record – Senate. Tribute to Mayor Robert L. Albritten of Dawson, Georgia, The 1998 American Hometown Leadership Winner. September 18, 1998. S10609.

When Albritten served in public office, he continued as a funeral director and dominated the funeral business, as his popularity in office made him the first choice for the Black community in Dawson. In the late 1970s, Albritten expanded his business to a new building designed as a funeral home with a lobby, office, and reception room for wakes. He bought several white Cadillacs modified as hearses and lined them up on the side of the building.[103] NAACP president Reverend Holley believed that Albritten handled 90 percent of the funerals of the Black community in Dawson, nearly driving his competitors out of business.[104] Johnson Jr. said that their family funeral home teetered in and out of operation throughout the 1990s, struggling to stay consistently open without regular funerals. Ward's Funeral Home never reached beyond the families he gained the trust of when he first started visiting churches and offering low-cost funeral services. His granddaughter Lady Ward said that his focus at the time was just keeping the funeral home open.[105]

Albritten also worked as an insurance agent for the Baltimore-based Monumental Life Insurance Company on the side with his funeral home. The relationship between these two businesses is historically notorious in the funeral industry for benefiting from life insurance policies, another important industry for Black professionals. Myrdal in *An American Dilemma* notes that both African American and white insurance companies charged high premiums on life insurance that exploited low-income populations. As Black communities had lower median incomes nationwide, life insurance policies sold by insurance agents tended to affect African Americans the most and could benefit the segregated funeral industry. Myrdal writes, "Low-income insurance is, at best, burial insurance. At worst, it gives little, if any protection, in that

[103] Robert Albritten. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, October 31, 2022.
[104] Reverend Ezekiel Holley, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[105] Petronia "Lady Ward" Shanks, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, February 2, 2023.

persons who are not likely to keep up their payments for more than a few years are induced to take life insurance…The burial business in most countries tends to be more or less a racket, capitalizing on the reluctance of the relatives of a deceased person to economize the last time they can make any sacrifices for him. The American mortician business is no exception. The prices quoted in this country often appear high, at least to an outsider. One cannot avoid the impression that great ingenuity is used to induce even poor patrons to buy unnecessary luxuries. This happens in Negro communities as well…And Negro insurance men often work hand in hand with morticians."[106] Albritten's work as both an insurance agent and funeral home owner ultimately led him down a road of corruption that tarnished his established reputation in Dawson.

In September of 2002, Dougherty County deputies arrived at the funeral home and arrested Albritten. Dougherty County charged him with 28 charges of fraud and forgery of selling insurance to elderly people without their knowledge. Between 1990 and 1994, he had taken out life insurance policies on 10 elderly residents at the Quality Care Personal Care Home in Albany, totaling to about $42,000 in payouts to Albritten. According to then-Georgia Insurance Commissioner John Oxendine, the mentally ill or low-income residents were being taken care of by state expenses at the home. Albritten conducted the insurance fraud with the personal care home's owner, Pearlie L. Johnson.[107]

Before his arrest, three of the victims died, and Albritten buried all three with his funeral home, receiving life insurance payouts of $8,000. The scheme came to light following the death of one of the victims, James Burton. Pearlie Johnson refused to seek medical care for the ill Burton while collecting his Medicaid payments, and Burton passed away a week after his transfer to a nursing home. After Burton's death, Johnson faced murder charges and told

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[106] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, (New Brunswick: Harper & Bros), 1944, 316–317.
[107] "Dawson Mayor Awaits Trial." *WALB News 10*, 2 Sept. 2002.

Dougherty County investigators about the insurance fraud scheme with Albritten. None of the victims knew they had life insurance policies through Albritten, who listed Pearlie Johnson as a relative and forged their signatures, said Oxendine.[108]

Albritten paid a $5,000 bail to attend the Dawson City Council meeting that week to continue as mayor. Albritten asserted his innocence and fought the charges, which would be enough for the election. He was arrested again within a month of his first arrest this time for drunk driving after an accident that hospitalized a woman. He recorded a blood alcohol level of .167 in jail, twice the legal limit. In November of 2002, Albritten still won the mayor's race in Dawson by a comfortable margin — his 733 votes defeating Paul Rankel with 453 votes and Ken Claybaugh with 33. In an article published following his 2002 election, *WDUN*, a Georgia news and radio outlet, reported members of the Black community seeing Albritten "as a benevolent godfather" who acted in the best interest of Dawson even if he had legal trouble. Dexter Greer, a barber at a barbershop in downtown Dawson, spoke to *WDUN* about Albritten's DUI and said, "He's done so many great things as mayor…I feel if you're at home and want to take a drink, that's your business. I'm not even convinced he was drunk."[109]

During his trial for insurance fraud, a Dougherty County jury acquitted Albritten on only seven counts of insurance fraud, but a Dougherty County judge re-indicted Albritten on the 21 other charges. In 2005, Albritten negotiated a plea bargain dismissing 12 felony counts and reducing the other nine to misdemeanor counts. He pleaded no contest to the reduced charges and retired as an insurance agent. A Dougherty County judge sentenced Albritten to 12 months probation and fined him $9,000.[110]

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[108] Ibid.
[109] "Dawson Mayor Keeps Winning Elections, despite Legal Problems," *WDUN*, November 18, 2002. During this time, Albritten also won the Georgia Lottery (a total of $500,000) dollars that bolstered his public image.
[110] "Insurance Fraud Allegations Against Ga. Mayor Settled," *Insurance Journal*, February 17, 2003.

Segregated in the Twenty-First Century

The competition grew after Albritten's reputation as a funeral home operator received negative publicity due to his trial for insurance fraud. Although still popular in politics, Albritten no longer dominated funerals in Dawson, and the other Black funeral home operators seized on the opportunity to compete for the dead.

In 2004, Nathaniel Johnson died and then Ernest Johnson Sr. four months later. Ernest Johnson Jr. decided to take on the family funeral business as another career with teaching. "It was a sentimental thing. My grandfather started this business, and he worked hard to get here," Johnson Jr. said. "He told me once he used to feed his family day by day during the Depression through this business."[111] Johnson Jr. also recognized the opportunity presented by a funeral home in Dawson with financial and political opportunities waiting if he worked hard enough to attain them. Johnson Jr. first remodeled the Main Street location in 2004, where his grandfather Moore first started Moore's Funeral Service.

That year, Ward also chose to run for public office and won a seat on the Dawson City Council. His position as city councilman helped him expand his business beyond the rural reaches of Terrell County and into the city of Dawson.[112] Ward also began to train his granddaughter Petronia, who he called Lady Ward, to inherit the business after him.

Compared to the 1960s, Dawson in the early 2000s was a greatly changed town on the surface. Through successful civil rights lawsuits, the Black community in Dawson and Terrell County registered to vote freely and succeeded through the elections of Lucius Holloway and Robert Albritten to city council in 1980. A decade later, Dawson voters elected Albritten mayor,

[111] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[112] Petronia "Lady Ward" Shanks, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, February 2, 2023.

and by 1994, Terrell County had four Black school board members, a Black coroner, a Black county commissioner, and a Black sheriff.[113] But the majority-Black county remained one of the poorest in Georgia with a poverty rate of 29.6% in 2005, 17 percentage points higher than the national average.[114] Funeral homes remained one of the most lucrative professions for Black people in Dawson, and if any indication of racial division in Dawson, funerals remained unofficially segregated up to the 2000s. Black funeral directors, like their predecessors, struggled to find success in a segregated industry unless through corruption or by dominating the competition into near submission.

[113] Elliott Minor, "Some Want Independent Investigation into Killing of Local NAACP Leader," *Associated Press*, September 18, 1994. James Lofton Barnes, president of the Terrell County chapter of the NAACP, was killed in his office in 1994. Local Black residents called for the U.S. Department of Justice to determine if the killing was racially motivated. The Georgia Bureau of Investigations determined the killing resulted from a robbery.
[114] United States Census Bureau, "Dawson CCD, Terrell County, GA," American Community Survey, 2005.

Part 3

Four Funeral Homes: Present Day

In the fall of 2021, I met Robert Albritten at his funeral home when I traveled to Dawson with the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project. Like a ritual, he shook the hand of every person in our class and asked us our hometowns. “I need to know the history of what I’m dealing with,” Albritten explained. As I looked into the Willie Countryman case in 1958 Dawson, I contacted a distant relative who told me to talk to Albritten to know more. He chewed on a cigarillo, as he told us about those involved in the Countryman case. To the shock of our class, Albritten revealed the only witness that night, who we presumed dead, was actually alive in a nursing home in Chicago. I continued to research for the Countryman case next spring in an effort to find this reappearing witness. I called Albritten to talk more, and we discussed the case for hours about the witness but also the funeral directors that appeared in Countryman’s case, Joe Moore and B.W. Cooper. Albritten, who told stories in fragments or with characters with only pronouns for names, pieced together an idea of the funeral home business in Dawson then as corrupt, competitive, yet crucial to the Black community all at the same time. Albritten also told me about the intense competition for burials that still happened today between Black funeral directors in Dawson.

After meeting with Albritten, I called Reverend Holley, who, as president of the Terrell County chapter of the NAACP, met with the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project several times to discuss the history of race relations in the area. “With a population of less than 9,000 people in the county, there’s just no way in the world we need four funeral homes,” Reverend Holley told me. He added that he won’t pick a side just yet. “If someone walked into my office

who had just lost a loved one and asked me for a reference, I'd give them the phone number of all four funeral homes and tell them to choose."

As I explored the subject, I met with each of the four funeral home directors in Dawson over the course of a year. I found that they each had roots in the racial violence of 1958 through their relatives or mentors. The funeral directors expressed distrust in not only the white community in Dawson but also each other with the competition of four Black-owned funeral homes in Dawson somehow working itself into every topic of conversation. The segregation of funerals persisted from the era of Terrible Terrell County throughout the late 20th century and now today. Three of the four Black funeral directors in Dawson have never buried a white person as of March 2023. The racial division of Dawson that plagued Moore and Cooper almost 100 years ago still plagues the funeral home industry today with directors engaging in corruption and attempting to drive one another out of business in the 21st century.

The History of What You're Dealing With: Robert Albritten

Robert Albritten leaned against the pillar of a one-story brick building on Cedar Hill Avenue in Dawson, a block east of Main Street. He smoked with company — another older man and kid, who looked maybe 12, also leaning on a pillar next to him. I park my red car next to a line of white Cadillacs; all but one of them were converted into hearses. When I stepped out and walked toward the building for our meeting, the conversation at the pillars stopped. Albritten did not move from his spot, but he took his cigarillo out of his mouth and shook my hand with a four-finger hand. Albritten introduced me to his friend Ronny Lewis, who later stopped by the funeral home two more times on this day for miscellaneous tasks.

"And this is Ruben, my assistant," Albritten said, pointing to the 12-year-old. Ruben said nothing, and I shook the trusted assistant's hand.

Albritten insisted to me that it was still a good time to meet, and we walked through the front door of Albritten's Funeral Service. The door swung open to a small lobby. A portrait of a younger Albritten from his tenure as the mayor of Dawson hung on the wall in front of me. Albritten turned left toward his office and waved me along. To the right, gospel music played, and I looked through the door from where it came. It looked like the reception room of the funeral home, and at its center, a casket rested open with a dead body lying in it.

Newspaper clippings, photos with prominent Georgia leaders, mortician certifications, and funeral and insurance awards covered almost every inch of Albritten's office wall, testament to the 81-year-old funeral director's long and diverse career. Albritten sat behind his desk and leaned back in his chair like he deserved to. He went through his mail for a second and replaced his cigarillo for our conversation. I asked him how things were going. "These days I just attend to my business," Albritten said. "I just read my shit and watch my cowboy movies."[115]

After losing the mayoral race in 2012, Albritten lost again in 2014 but won back his seat in 2016. After leaving his insurance job following his fraud conviction, Albritten also finally retired from politics after his term in 2018, but it wasn't an easy decision for him. He believes that politics are still needed for Black people to have a say in Dawson, and Black funeral directors can speak for the community. "Our leadership determines how race relationships will be in the community," Albritten said. "You need to be around the table when the decisions are made because there is a meeting before the meeting."[116]

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[115] Robert Albritten. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, October 31, 2022.
[116] Robert Albritten. Interview by Emory University Cold Cases Class of Fall 2021. Personal Interview. Dawson, Georgia, November 12, 2021.

Albritten still operates the funeral service in 2023. He doesn't do as many cases a year as he once did, yet his business remains busy. Every 15 minutes his door chimes or his phone rings with another friend or employee popping into his office. An old classmate came by to ask about an old building he was looking to buy in town. A woman from Atlanta calls for help to locate an old cemetery where her family members are buried, and Albritten agrees to take her there. A friend he met doing her family's funerals dropped in to say hello after returning from a cruise and brought him a bottle of Cîroc Vodka. Ronny dropped by again to ask a question about collecting payment from a family they served. Late in his life, Albritten runs the funeral home with an open door to all and sees the relationships he built from the funeral home as his family.

"I'm an only child — no sisters, no brothers, no uncles, no aunts, no parents, no grandparents, no step-parents. But I do have a family, and I'm not going nowhere. Some of them might go somewhere, but I've buried enough families to stay open…We cultivated a relationship. This lady calls, and [if she comes] to Dawson, I'm gonna take the time and take her to the cemetery to help her. She will not have the pleasure to say that I didn't help her and treat her like a queen," Albritten continued. "Now if I was making a funeral arrangement, that's a horse of a different color because that pays the light bill. They come in for free, but money comes before bullshit."[117]

Albritten runs his funeral business like a community center for Dawson. Likely a product of his mentors and when he started his business, Albritten also performed services that ranged from political leadership, philanthropy with his church, advice, and his open door policy to serve anyone who comes in. "In any small community, the black church and funeral home are pillars

[117] Robert Albritten. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, October 31, 2022.

of the community," Albritten said. "Since the end of slavery, they have provided the avenue and the building for recreation, education, and political activism for local places."

After 57 years in business, Albritten is the most experienced funeral home owner in Dawson. He is both witness and perpetrator of the corruption and competition of the segregated funeral industry in Dawson. When I asked him about his instances of fraud and the competition that hung over the Black funeral industry in Dawson, Albritten, with a shrug, said, "Money talks." The slight admission is evidence of the limited opportunities in Dawson created by the racial divide that still exists today. In 57 years of business, Albritten's Funeral Service has never buried a white person.[118]

Albritten hasn't changed much from when he first started in 1966. The furniture in the funeral home hasn't changed since the 1970s, and Albritten keeps all of his records by hand with no computer in his office. Like his predecessors, Albritten does recognize the future is just as important as the past. He has long hired young men to mentor them for the industry. One of his competitors, Cordarial Holloway, started at Albritten's Funeral Service when he was as tall as Albrittten's hip. Holloway worked for Albritten for 20 years as an employee and assistant before starting his own funeral home. Holloway asked Albritten to partner in 2021 with plans to upgrade their technology and help Albritten retire. Albritten refused. "This is something for me to do everyday," he told me.[119]

Now 81, Albritten tends to his funeral home with little help. He does enough business to get by, but with now four funeral homes in town, he recognizes it might be hard to continue with the younger generation like Holloway and Johnson Jr. competing across business and politics. Funeral homes in Dawson are still one of the more lucrative professions for the Black

[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.

community, yet the town's racial division makes it difficult to succeed in a crowded market. "Everybody wants to be boss. Everybody thinks you can ride in a damn Cadillac, but it ain't gonna be a 2000 Cadillac," Albritten said. "I'm left but nobody in Dawson, black or white, [can do good business]."

On Monday January 23, 2023, Albritten was shot in the leg in his office during an armed robbery at his funeral home. Paramedics transported him to Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in Albany, where he recovered and reported to be in "good condition." Police have not made any arrests in connection to the case. I visited Albritten's funeral home just a week later; a sign on the door listed his return date as the next day.

Tossing a Rock into a Stagnant Pond: Cordarial Holloway

Cordarial Holloway spent 20 years under the wing at Albritten's Funeral Service waiting his turn. Holloway said that in 2015 he made his first attempt to become partners with Albritten to help modernize his business. When Albritten declined, Holloway continued to work for him as an assistant. Seven years and four more partnership proposals later, Holloway decided to leave his mentor and open up his own funeral home in the crowded market of Dawson in January 2022. I met Holloway later that year in the spring through my research on his distant relative, Willie Countryman. We met in his new conference room to talk to his parents and grandparents, who told Holloway stories as a child about Countryman's killing.

Holloway was born in 1984 to a family who had lived four generations in Dawson and Terrell County.[120] He grew up with a familiarity of death, and as a toddler, Holloway took interest in funerals, as his grandparents took Holloway along with them to several funerals. He

[120] Cordarial Holloway. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, February 2, 2023.

learned to read through the obituaries of *The Dawson News* his parents left out on the kitchen table. At age 14, his interest in funerals led to a job with Albritten's Funeral Service, and Holloway worked his first funeral setting up and taking down in 1998. Like Albritten, Holloway left Dawson for college at Albany State University and graduated in 2006. He then earned his mortuary science degree from Gupton Jones College in Decatur, Georgia.

His apprenticeship with Albritten taught Holloway about the economic and political opportunities of funeral business in Dawson. When Albritten rejected Holloway's four proposals, C.O. Holloway Mortuary opened in January of 2022. After waiting for decades under Albritten's wing, Holloway wanted to challenge the old generation of Black-owned funeral homes in Dawson. "No one was offering the service or the facility that the people deserved," Holloway said. "You could go in any of the other facilities and not even a chair had changed in the past 10 to 20 years. Not a coat of paint. Not a curtain. Not even carpet. I had a problem serving families and not giving them the value in the facility that they were paying for."[121]

Holloway modernized the funeral business by moving into a renovated building with a conference room with a large TV to show a list of offerings that include tribute videos, online memorials, and daily grief support emails. He believes that his modernized approach led to great business within his first few months and forced a competitor, Ernest Johnson Jr., to relocate to a bigger and better funeral home with conference rooms of his own. Lady Ward, the owner of Ward Funeral Home, spoke about the Holloway and Johnson Jr. rivalry as unhealthy for all four of the Black-owned funeral homes in Dawson. She hears from potential customers that Holloway and Johnson Jr. attempt to outbid one another with lower and lower costs for funerals that make it difficult to cover the expenses. Holloway must carve out clients from a small population in

[121] Ibid.

Dawson who Albritten, Ward, or Johnson Jr. likely served prior. Holloway's initial success during his opening slowed to about three funerals a month by March 2023, falling well behind the rate for the annual goal of 100 cases that funeral directors in Dawson strive for.

With his desire to own a funeral home complete, Holloway moved onto his goal of politics, and he joined the Terrell County Commissioner race in 2022. Holloway's determination for politics further challenged Johnson Jr. and showed the competition between deaths in Dawson. Holloway publicly challenged Johnson Jr. 's record as county commissioner and his residence in Albany, another county over. Like the funeral home business, Holloway wants to make an impact for a community that isn't accustomed to change. "The city and county as a whole are very stagnant. It's like a pond with no spring flowing or supply going in. Just stagnant water," Holloway said. "Whenever you're dealing with anything in terms of a small town, you need to have some type of growth, change, or development. There's no getting around it."[122]

Holloway lost the county commissioner race by just 12 votes in November 2022 to Johnson Jr. The loss in his first political campaign did not deter his spirits, and he plans to run again the next election cycle.[123] His competitive spirit, akin to a younger Albritten, could create change in Dawson with his desire to change the establishment in Dawson.

It's All Business: Ernest Johnson Jr.

In gold letters, Johnson & Son Funeral Home welcomed me into a large funeral home with a fleet of black Cadillacs parked out front. Ernest Johnson Jr. at the door stressed he didn't have time to show me around, much less talk to me with a doctor's appointment in 10 minutes. "I'm not being funny. A funeral director don't have a schedule, for real. In the morning, I hit state

[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

inspections, had a one o'clock meeting. Before the one o'clock, I had a call to pick up someone. I finished the one o'clock meeting, and then I had to go check with my family and now I have a doctor's appointment in ten minutes. Later I got a five o'clock," Johnson Jr. said.[124]

A short, stout man, Johnson Jr. is well-dressed, with an orange button-down shirt, gold earrings, and a gold watch on his wrist. We walk by his son who meets with a family on new couches in the lobby. The funeral home is new, at least to the Johnson family, who purchased the building in 2022 from the former Harvey Funeral Home that served the white community in Dawson, according to Johnson Jr. Their old location sat on Dawson's Main Street and neighbored an abandoned business and the weathered home of the local NAACP chapter. Johnson Jr. now has the biggest house on the block, which stands at the corner of a residential neighborhood in Dawson. It looks like two buildings connected, with one side the lobby with several rooms for wakes and the other side a chapel named the "Joe Moore Memorial Chapel". Behind the funeral home, a garage houses three more black Cadillacs transformed into hearses. Johnson Jr. owns another two large lots adjacent to the funeral home that visitors can use for parking. The move brought about a rebranding with "Johnson & Son Funeral Service" changing to "Johnson & Son Funeral Home."

After taking over the Harvey Funeral Home location, Johnson Jr. decided to advertise his funeral home as an option for white people in Dawson, and they have since buried less than a dozen people in the white community.[125] After 90 years of business, these were the first non-Black bodies that Moore's Funeral Service or Johnson & Son Funeral Home buried.

A purple-and-black embroidered shawl hangs on the wall of his new office. The faces of his late father, grandfather, and brother surround the Johnson & Son Funeral Home logo. It's one of

[124] Ernest Johnson Jr. Interview by Xavier Stevens. Dawson, Georgia, November 16, 2022.
[125] "Obituaries: Johnson & Son Funeral Service." https://johnsonandsonfs.com/about-us/.

the only physical reminders in the new building to commemorate the longest-running Black family business in Dawson. Johnson Jr.'s childhood revolved around his grandfather's funeral home, as Joe Moore would take Johnson Jr. as early as age 4 into the embalming room to hand Moore tools. Johnson Jr. remembers riding along in the passenger seat of a hearse, as Moore drove on an ambulance run for the Black community.[126]

When I asked him about Moore's corrupt relationship with the police, Johnson Jr. confirmed that Moore's Funeral Service did help the white authorities, but he defended his grandfather's decision. Johnson Jr. saw the compromises Moore made as necessary for Moore's Funeral Home to continue serving the Black people in Dawson.

"I think my grandfather just tried to stay neutral, and he did whatever he could to keep peace and keep his community out of the violence of Dawson," Johnson Jr. "I would say that he was a peacemaker."[127]

After he took over the family funeral business in 2004, Johnson Jr. dedicated his life to rebuilding its success, and like his grandfather, Johnson Jr. made significant changes to make that happen. Johnson Jr. no longer operated the funeral like a hang-out, renovated the Main Street location, and offered cremations. In 2011, after turning around his family business, Johnson Jr. was pressed by several community leaders to get involved in local politics. He ran for Terrell County Commissioner of District 2 as a Democrat and won. "[Politics] is nothing I ever wanted to do, but God can come and change things in your life," Johnson Jr. said.[128]

His political leadership propelled his funeral home business further, and in 2022, Johnson & Son Funeral Home underwent its biggest changes by moving locations and stepping outside of

[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

the Black community to also bury white people in Terrell County. Johnson Jr. burying some of the dead in the white community has great significance for Dawson. The integration of the long-segregated industry could provide more opportunities for the funeral home owners of Dawson to serve a greater population. It also may signal an important change in Terrell County for economic and social services without racial division.

With four funeral homes in town, Johnson Jr. faces competition in Dawson for both his political leadership and business. But Johnson Jr. is confident about his business by extending to other towns outside of Terrell County and catering toward all demographics. Johnson Jr. has appointments nearly every hour during the day with a family that he meets in his office or in the lobby. "I know I'm doing the majority of business, so I stay out of the race," Johnson Jr. tells me. "You know, God is blessed when I'm doing well."[129]

After we had talked for over an hour, Johnson Jr. leaped out of his seat. He seemed to have forgotten his doctor's appointment, but it was really time to go now. A family waited in the lobby, and he strode to the door to let me out. "Come back any time now," he said.

Never Going Away: Lady Ward

An old Toyota Corolla pulled up the driveway of a small one-story brick building on Graves Station Road. An old marble slab on the ground leaned against the wall with, "Ward Funeral Home," carved into its face. The driver exited the car and helped an older woman out of the backseat and into a wheelchair. Petronia "Lady Ward" Shanks walked out of her funeral home and down the ramp outside her front glass doors. Without question, she grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and pushed the old woman up the ramp and into her home.

[129] Ibid.

A small two-seat couch sits against the wall of the lobby of her funeral home. There's little decoration. An old bowler hat hangs on the wall, and on a side table, there is a framed photo of her grandfather standing next to a hearse and large tortoiseshell sunglasses. Lady Ward sat down on the couch and faced the woman in the wheelchair.

"How can I help you, ma'am?" Lady Ward asked.

"I heard you can do copies. I'm looking to get a copy of my mom's obituary," the woman replied and handed Lady Ward her copy.

Lady Ward attempted to make a copy through her printer, but it was not working that day. She would have to go to the Terrell County Library to make the copy later in the day. When Lady Ward described the situation and solution, the woman in the wheelchair hesitates.

"Is this your only copy?" Lady Ward asked, and the woman nodded. The woman looks out the window toward the car, but Lady Ward reassured her. "Look, I promise, I promise I will keep it safe, and I will have this returned along with as many copies as you want tomorrow" Lady Ward said. After a moment, the woman accepted.

Lady Ward is the owner of Ward Funeral Home and granddaughter of the founder, Sammie Lee Ward, who started the business in 1969 in the same location. The funeral trade is in the family's blood with nearly all of Sammie Lee's descendants acquiring a funeral director's license from his children to his grandchildren. When Lady Ward was born, her first stop back from the hospital was not the family home, but the funeral home. Her grandfather carried her as an infant and gave her a tour of Ward Funeral Home.

Lady Ward was raised in the funeral home business, and her favorite childhood memories were spending time with her grandfather working funerals. "I'd greet people at the door and sometimes talk too much, but [my granddaddy] didn't care. I was his pride and joy, and he

wanted me there as much as I wanted to be there," Lady Ward said. "I thought it was the best thing in the world to work a funeral."[130]

Lady Ward left Dawson in the early 2000s and settled in Atlanta, where she had two sons. She wanted to find other passions for work and tried pharmacy, customer service, and retail. In 2014, she decided to return to the funeral home business and earned a mortuary science degree from Gupton Jones College. Lady Ward commuted the three hours to Dawson almost every weekend to do funerals with her grandfather again.

When Sammie Lee Ward died in 2017, Lady Ward took over Ward Funeral Home even though she still lived in Atlanta at the time. "I just wanted to be like my granddaddy and make sure that somebody was going to carry on what he started," Lady Ward said. "It's all about carrying on the legacy of what we have to make sure that it doesn't die when we die."[131] For two years, she commuted from Atlanta to operate the funeral home during the week and facilitate funerals on the weekend.

In 2019, Lady Ward finally moved back to Dawson. She could dedicate more time to making the funeral home better and get more business to keep up with the three other funeral homes in town. The Ward Funeral Home added a website and business cards and now keeps records electronically. She decided to not change much of the interior. The bowler hat on the wall and tortoiseshell glasses on the side table were the signature pieces of Sammie Lee's look. The small couch in the lobby is the same from when her grandfather owned the funeral home. It faces the glass front doors, with a view of Graves Station Road, one of the busiest streets in Dawson. Sammie Lee liked to sit on the same couch on slower days and watch traffic go by.[132] When I

[130] Petronia "Lady Ward" Shanks, Interview by Xavier Stevens, Dawson, Georgia, February 2, 2023.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.

talked to Lady Ward, she told me to take a seat on the couch with her, and we watched the cars go by for hours.

Ward Funeral Home struggles to keep up with the competition of four Black funeral directors in Dawson. Lady Ward said that clients will now call her with a quote from the other funeral home owners that is so low that she can't afford to match it. The cut-throat competition bothers Lady Ward, who can't find footing within the industry in Dawson. "There are certain things that are unwritten but known rules. You don't cross me, and I won't cross you. But they do it again and again, and they're not going to stop."[133]

[133] Ibid.

Epilogue

Moving Forward in Dawson

The road to change in Dawson is a long and arduous one in the small, slow town. Although racial violence has never been recognized through a monument or marker, division did not just disappear through legislation and lawsuits. Racial segregation lived on through economic and social choices made through discrimination in Dawson and Terrell County. It separated Black and white business but also formed segregated industries, like funeral homes, who must compete with each other through unsustainable means. The current four funeral homes of Dawson show how racial divisions can create an industry that the Black community needs, yet the segregation of funeral homes and business introduces destructive competition for business and working with corruption to survive. These aspects were found as early as 1940 and continue today through a nearly segregated funeral industry in the small Southwest Georgia town.

Funeral homes remain one of the most lucrative professions for the Black community today in Terrell County, a reminder of the impoverishment in the area and the lack of change in opportunities since 1940. Unlike funeral homes with a more constant source of income through death, Black-owned businesses struggle in Dawson to stay open and close frequently. This is the situation that gave rise to four Black-owned funeral homes competing for a population that likely only needs one funeral business in town.

Yet with four funeral directors in Dawson, they also introduce hope to a community that needs it. Ernest Johnson Jr. and Cordarial Holloway both are members of the Black community of Dawson with the political and economic aspirations that could make change in town. Through Johnson Jr.'s political role, Terrell County may see its first recreation center within the city of Dawson where kids can play. Holloway's determination to be elected shows that the fight for

change is not close to over, and the funeral home industry can create leaders within the community of Dawson that hope to better what's around them.

Even the small step of integrated funerals at Johnson & Son Funeral Home also shows a significant step forward in Dawson and Terrell County. The white community, who long segregated their business, may find new trust to work with Black businesses in Dawson. Johnson Jr. believes it can only help his business and continues to push to diversify the cases he does around the area. The potential success of this step can be an example for not only Dawson and Terrell County to work toward social and private integration, but also the South to work toward a collective community also that could help Black businesses beyond just the funeral industry.

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