

African-American Funeral Homes

Although black entrepreneurs were technically “free” after the Civil War, they faced long odds starting businesses that allowed them to be their own bosses. For decades, former slaves and their descendants were excluded from a spectrum of trades, and higher education remained largely out of reach.

One notable exception was the profession of mortician. It was a specialized field for African-Americans that managed to thrive despite a culture of racial division. A helping profession, it offered the promise of prestige and the chance to grow a nest egg.

When the use of embalming became more widespread during the Civil War, both races considered it taboo for a white undertaker to handle a black corpse. This segregation of the dead created a parallel funeral industry, complete with a self-contained network of African American-owned casket companies and chemical suppliers.

In 1900, the National Negro Business League included some 500 male and female funeral directors. That number swelled to thousands through the mid-century.

The enduring importance of a proper burial, whether the deceased was rich or poor, has enabled black-owned funeral homes to persevere from the industrial revolution to the modern day, according to historian Suzanne E. Smith in her book, “To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death.”

Black funeral parlors are more than sanctuaries for grieving families. They can also be a link with African-American culture

During the Civil Rights era, morticians joined the fight for equality in unique ways. For example, when Martin Luther King Jr. and other activists met with death threats, an informal network of black morticians helped them travel safely from speech to speech by secretly transporting them in hearses and housing them overnight in funeral homes spanning the South.

Even the industry journal, the *Colored Embalmer*, evolved into a political publication. And a flashpoint in the movement was the funeral of a Chicago teen lynching victim, Emmett Till, whose battered remains were displayed with minimal restoration to make a statement.

Smith suggests in her book that funeral directors continue to play a special role within African-American communities — entrusted by mourners, closely linked to the church and helping to better the areas they serve.

“Funeral directors are community leaders whether it’s in the Northeast or the South,” says Samuel Arnold, president of the Garden State Funeral Directors Association in New Jersey. “Even today, we join forces to participate in various community activities and affairs that say, ‘Let’s get together and solve some problems.’”

excerpt from Black History Month: African-American funeral directors as community leaders, by Lisa Rose, New Jersey Star-Ledger, February 18, 2011

Jesse Ray Funeral Home
 (Colored)
 Licensed Morticians and Funeral Directors
 Ambulance Service
 DAY AND NIGHT
 267 College
 Phone 391

W. C. ALLEN J. F. BIRCHETTE
ALLEN-BIRCHETTE FUNERAL HOME
 FUNERAL DIRECTORS
 AMBULANCE SERVICE
 24 HOURS
 WE ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE
SUNSET CEMETERY
Asheville's Newest and Largest Negro Cemetery
 350 SOUTHSIDE AVE. TEL. 2-1251



The Allen Funeral Home was located at the corner of Southside and South French Broad Avenues



W. C. Allen



Jesse Ray, Sr.



This historic marker is part of the *Southside Heritage Trail* along the *Town Branch Greenway*, made possible by the City of Asheville and the Federal Transit Administration, 2014



This area in 1968



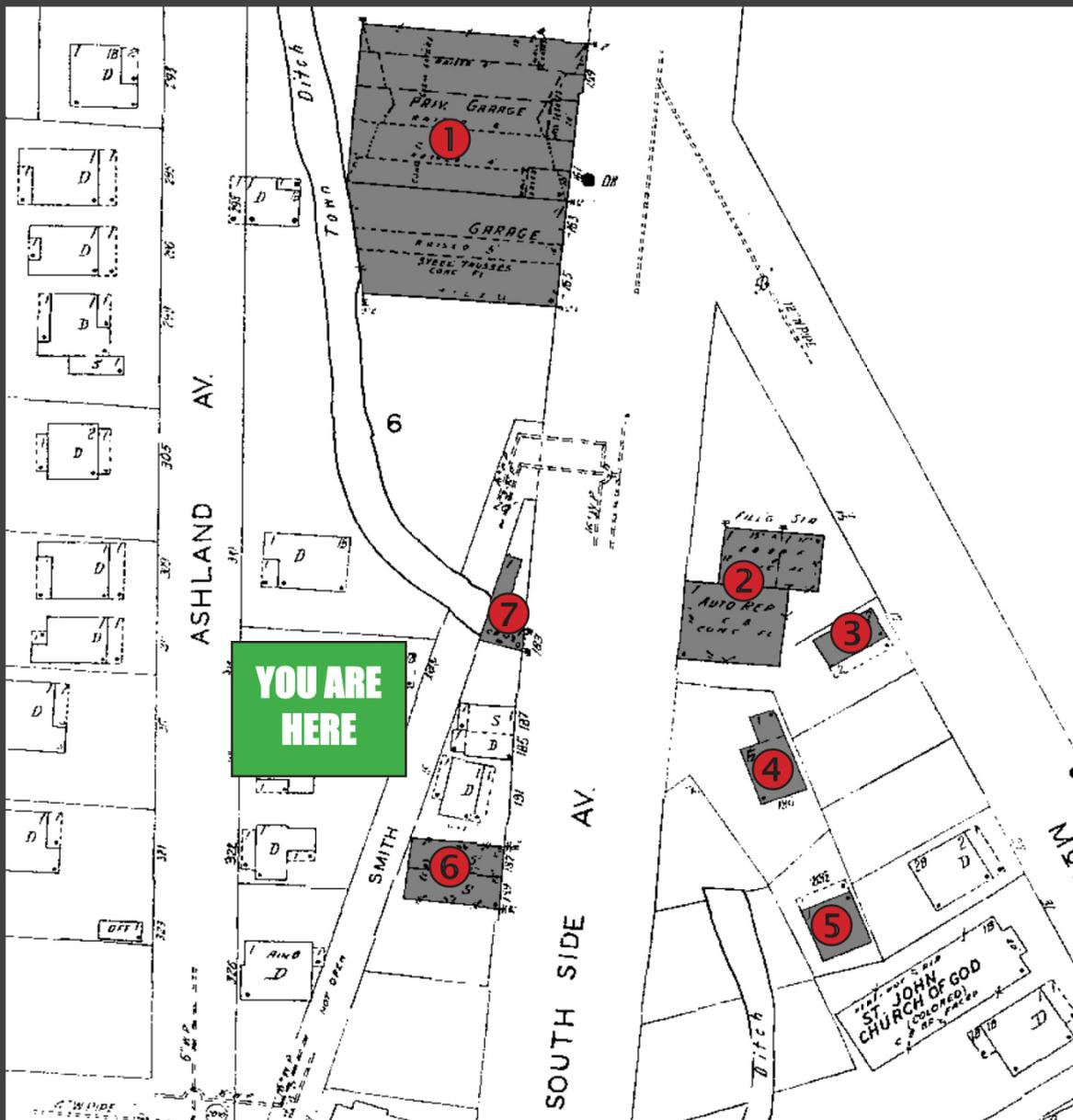
1 159 Southside
Citizen's Heating Company (1956)
Sun Heating Supply (1980s)



2 15-17 McDowell Street
Spurlin Sinclair Station



3 15-17 McDowell Street



Photos from the Housing Authority of the City of Asheville Archives in the D. H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, UNC-Asheville



4 186 Southside Avenue



5 188 1/2 McDowell Street
(St. John Church of God in the background)



7 183 Southside Avenue
Miller's Cab Service



6 187-189 Southside Avenue
Conley's Barber Shop
Rhapsody Dining Room
Jack Curry, Patyent Medicines