

The McGowan Funeral Home Collection

By Alvin Blakes*

The Dallas Genealogical Society's African American Genealogical Interest Group (AAGIG) has completed the McGowan Funeral Home Collection project, a 13-year initiative to preserve, catalog, and provide a digital index of the names in the records. The project, which began in 2007 and continued until 2020, was a way to make valuable family records available to the ancestors of the McGowan clients and their descendants. The AAGIG meets monthly and consists of Dallas residents who share a keen interest in African American history, genealogy, and culture. In recognition of their work on the McGowan Collection, AAGIG project teams were awarded Dallas Genealogical Society Heritage Preservation Awards both in 2009 and in 2018.



Alto McGowan, owner of McGowan Funeral Home

The McGowan Funeral Home was operated by Alto and Georgia McGowan between 1956 and 1995. African American families served by the McGowan Funeral Home, then located at 2830 South Ervay Street in South Dallas, provided the funeral directors with the necessary documents to support the burial of their deceased family members. Many unique documents were provided as material to be used in the obituary and as proof of the deceased person's identity and evidence of contributions made to their community and country. After 39 years of operation, the McGowan Funeral Home collected and preserved valuable information that is important to family historians and researchers in genealogy and other research areas.

The McGowan Collection consists of 61 boxes containing the records of 5,565 burials. Each record is represented by a folder of documents with some memorabilia included. Some of the folders contain rare items, including photographs, military medals, military discharge papers, lodge memberships, birth certificates and personal letters of correspondence. The records are now available to view upon request on the 8th floor of the J. Erik Jonsson Central Library in downtown Dallas.



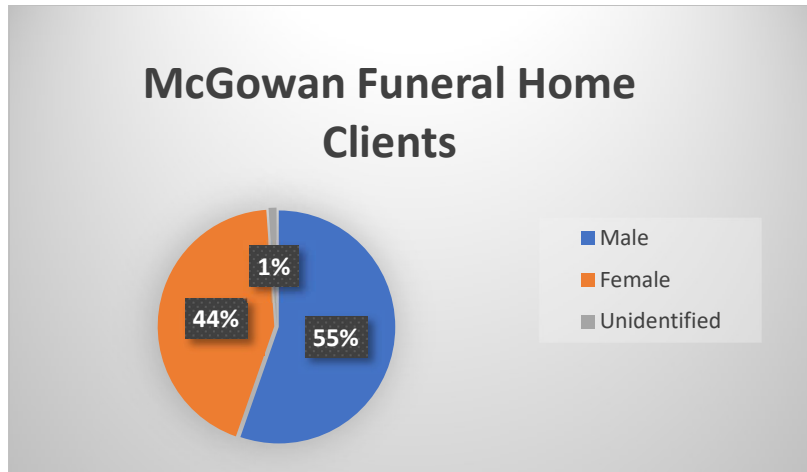
McGowan Funeral Home Collection

Over the last 3 years, the AAGIG created *The McGowan Funeral Home Search Tool*, an online search index of the records in the collection. The searchable database is now available on the Dallas Genealogical Society website (<https://dallasgenealogy.com/dgs/local-records/mcgowan-funeral-home/>) and contains detailed information from each person's death certificate along with the number of the box and folder where the physical record is located.

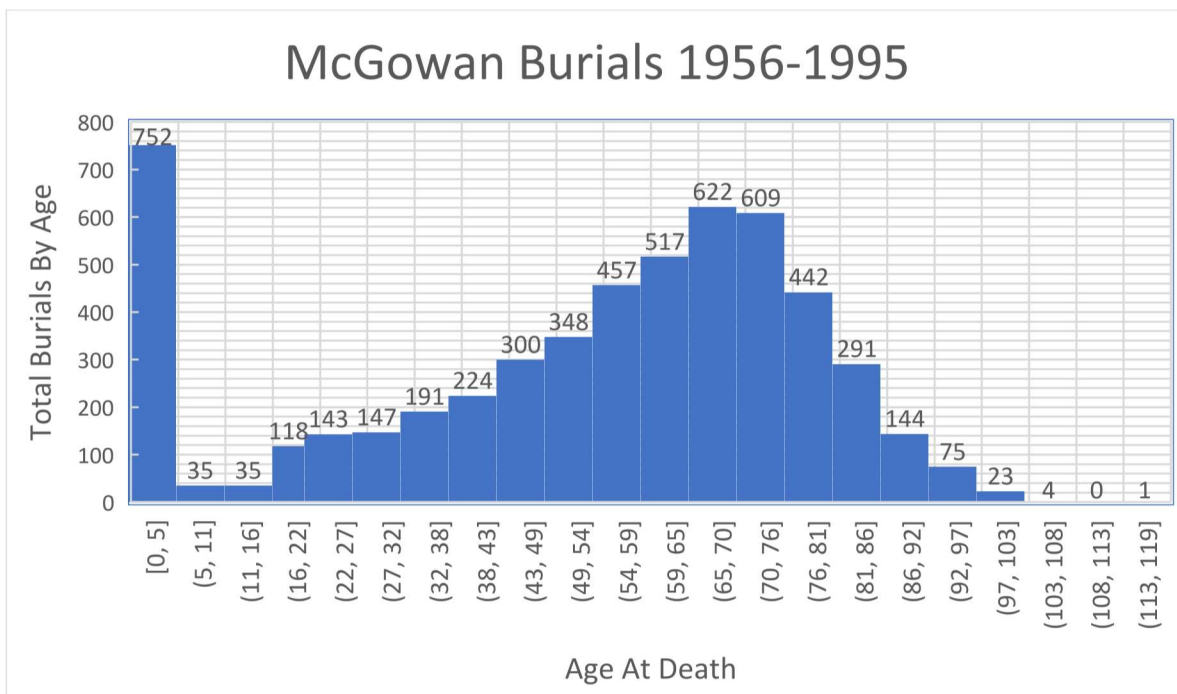
After the database was completed the AAGIG volunteers compiled several key statistics from the McGowan records. Further study is underway to determine whether the McGowan statistics can be used to make correlations about the African American population in Dallas and across Texas.

A. Who were the McGowan Clients?

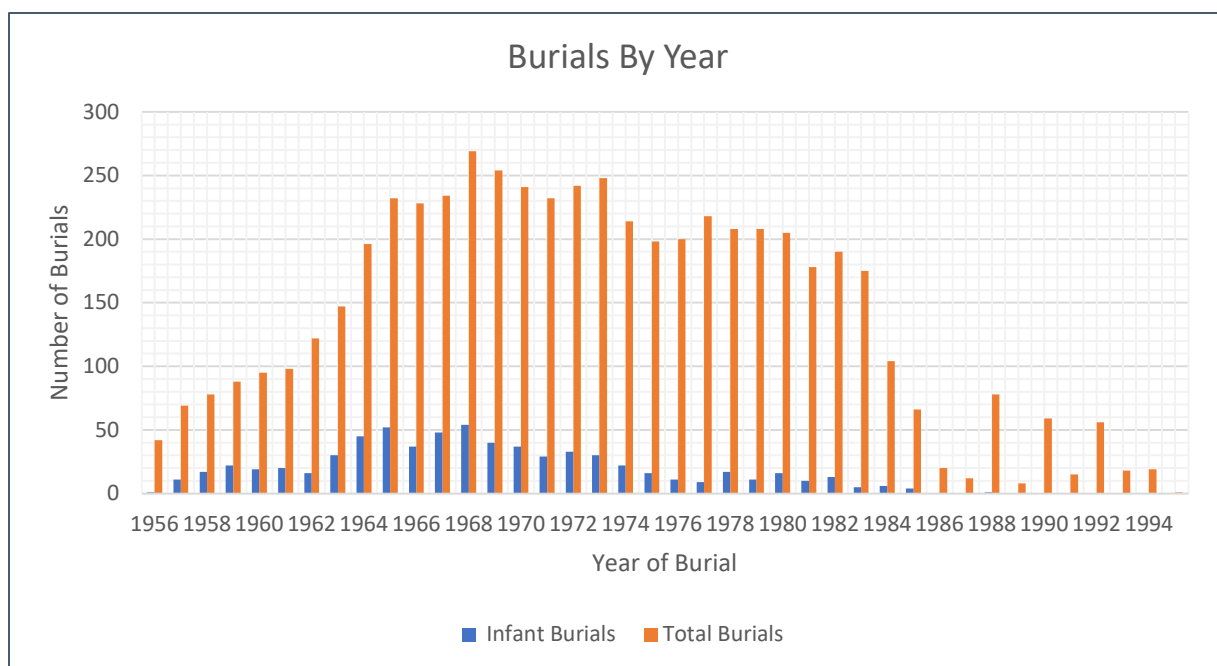
- a. Gender -The McGowan records identified 55% (3,080) of the burials as male and 44% (2,425) as female. The gender was unidentified on 1% (60) of the records.



- b. Age at Death –The ages of the McGowan clients were compiled from death certificates found in the records.
 - i. The median age of the McGowan clients was 59 years old, excluding infants who died at childbirth.



- ii. Infant mortality rate (infant deaths in first year of life per 1000), a major indicator of health status for African Americans, is historically 2 times the rate of whites. The large number of infant deaths in the McGowan burial records was very disturbing to AAGIG volunteers as they combed through the records. Infant deaths accounted for 12% (682) of the McGowan burials. 7% (383) of the burials were made up of infants that died at childbirth.



- iii. Eleven individuals in the McGowan records lived to be over 100-years old. Four of these individuals were born during the slavery era -- before June 19, 1865 and the reading of General Order No. 3 announcing the emancipation of those held in slavery in Texas.



Emma Williams 1860-1966

1. *James Earl Hortorman* was born June 17, 1856 and died July 26, 1959 at 103 years old.
2. *John Wesley Simpson* was born July 5, 1858 and died February 14, 1960 at 102 years old.
3. *Emma Williams* was born October 13, 1860 and died May 21, 1966 at 106 years old.
4. *Minnie Renee Scoggins* was born July 6, 1864 and died December 12, 1964 at 100 years old.

- iv. *Emma Winn* was the oldest person in the database at 118 years old. She was born in La Grange, Texas in 1875 and died in Dallas, Texas in 1994.



Emma Winn, longest living person in the McGowan database

B. Causes of Death - A detailed study of the McGowan records will be completed to determine the statistical breakdown of causes of death. The death certificates clearly identified the most prevalent causes of death as shown below:

1. heart disease
2. hypertension
3. stroke
4. cancer
5. diabetes
6. respiratory diseases

C. Military Veterans - African Americans have fought in U.S. wars as far back as the *Seven Years War* in 1756, the *Revolutionary War* of 1776, and 200,000 African Americans fought in the *Civil War* to end slavery. It is not surprising that 14% (767) of the McGowan burials were Veterans.

a. 610 Veterans were identified as having participated in six U.S. Wars.

US Wars	No. of Veterans
Spanish-American War (1898)	1
World War I (1917–1918)	124
World War II (1941-1945)	405
Korean War (1950–1953)	51
Vietnam War (1960–1975)	28
Persian Gulf War (1990-1991)	1

b. 285 Veterans were identified in four military service branches.

Military Services Branches	No. of Veterans
US Army	215
US Navy	41
US Army Air Force	19*
US Marine Corps	10

*6 probable Tuskegee Airmen

- c. 60 records contained military discharge papers and certificates.
- d. 42 records contained military headstone applications.

- D. Cemeteries - The McGowan records contained the names of over 644 cemeteries.
- a. 93% (5,162) of the cemeteries were in Texas.
 - i. 65% (3,603) of the burials were at *Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery* in Dallas, Texas.
 - ii. 4% (234) of the burials, the next highest total in one location, were at *Carver Memorial Park Cemetery* in Ferris, Texas.
 - iii. 1.5% (84) of the cemeteries were listed with “Colored” as part of the name. (i.e. Cameron Cemetery for Colored, and Rowlett Cemetery for Colored)
 - b. Transfers were sent to 14 cemeteries identified in states other than Texas.

State	Cemeteries By State
Alabama	5
Arizona	36
California	4
Florida	3
Georgia	1
Illinois	2
Louisiana	76
Mississippi	8
North Carolina	2
New York	1
Oklahoma	11
Pennsylvania	2
South Carolina	3
Tennessee	1
Texas	5,162
(no listing)	248
Grand Total	5,565

What began as a noble effort by AAGIG members to preserve the history of the McGowan clients has yielded valuable information about Dallas Black life, and death, in the 2nd half of the 20th century. And through the collective approach and diligent work of the AAGIG volunteers, the project can serve as a model to other communities on preserving and interpreting Black Family Funeral Home records.

*The AAGIG Writing Committee was formed to study and publish findings from the McGowan records, provided review comments and contributed to this article.

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