

The McGowan Project Volunteers

By RL Canady *



Volunteers hard at work

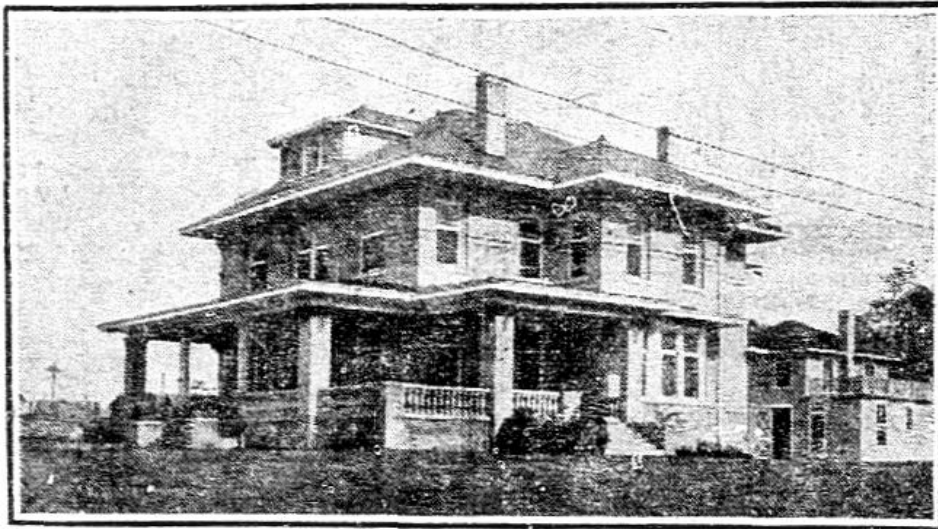
Photo by Tony Hanson

In 1955, Alto McGowan started a funeral home business with Chester Johnson, whom he soon bought out. By 1956, McGowan had expanded to two locations. In 1957, he purchased a home that once belonged to prominent Dallas jeweler Simon Linz, located at 2830 South Ervay Street in Dallas, Texas. This became the permanent location of the business. The purpose of the business was to serve African American families not being served by other funeral homes.

The new funeral home carried the name of its two owner-employees, Alto and Georgia McGowan. The couple gained the confidence of the community through their dedicated professionalism, providing the highest quality of service for the deceased and their families.

The McGowan's business served Dallas, Dallas County, and the North Texas region. They met the requirements of licensing by state, county, city, and professional organizations. Among the requirements were the accumulation of large files of proof and certification on the deceased. African American families provided the funeral director with the necessary documents. After 39 years of operation, McGowan Funeral Home had a wealth of information that had the potential

to be important to family history, genealogy, and other research projects, if researchers had a way to access it.



RESIDENCE OF SIMON LINZ, SOUTH ERVAY STREET
—Photo by Clogenson.

*The Linz Home on South Ervay Street
photo by H. Clogenson*

Alto McGowan died on 16 July 1998 and is buried at Lincoln Memorial Park in Dallas. He had closed the funeral home about four years earlier. Georgia Eldridge McGowan died on 27 November 2006 and is buried with her husband.

The journey's start

After the death of Georgia McGowan, Donald Payton, an inquisitive historian and Chairman of the African American Genealogy Interest Group (AAGIG) of the Dallas Genealogical Society (DGS), made a visit to McGowan Funeral Home and asked about the disposition of the records. The new owner, Eternal Rest Funeral Home director, Gerald Weatherall was glad to have the records archived at some permanent repository, because he needed space for his new business. Mr. Payton had the records moved to the J. Erik Jonsson Central Library on Young Street in Dallas. The collection was stored at the library on 10 January 2007 until the administrative details of the acquisition could be finalized.

Almost immediately, the AAGIG suggested a project where members would manage the accessioning of the records and create a searchable database on the DGS's website. Volunteers were sought out and after several sessions on importance of documenting these records, members were ready to tackle the project. The learning curve for assembling a collection for archiving in a repository is extensive and challenging for volunteers, in comparison to paid professional archivists. Some AAGIG members were raised or attended school nearby to the funeral home location and felt a had a community connection. This natural bond provided an additional incentive to care for the McGowan records. The volunteers found purpose and satisfaction participating in the project. Many had experienced the poor quality of records available to African American researchers, from both the era of slavery and afterwards. The volunteers expressed a deep concern for saving records of deceased who left behind social, civic, and family memories, and sometimes sheets of paper with writing that let the reader know something of the once living person.

It is hard to imagine where genealogy societies would be today without volunteer workers performing tasks like these. Our volunteers performed data entry, arranging, assembling, indexing, cataloging, and other tasks related to documenting the records for genealogical and family history use.

2007 Volunteers

Donald Payton, Robert Rigdon, Lois Lilly, Stacy Bennett, Alvin Blakes, Ora Penn, Shelia Brown, Robert Price, Jermaine Price, Ari Wilkins, Willie Taylor, Ernestine Taylor, Darlene Rothwell, Juanita Davis, Tommy Briggs, Pamala Scott, Ed Hunter, Eva McMillian, Marilyn Clark, Virgie Freeman

Archive process

In September 2007, the DGS returned from its annual summer break. AAGIG volunteers met on the Second Floor of the library to break the preservation process into steps.

Preservation steps

The archival process was planned and developed by Dallas Public Library Administrators and managers of the Seventh Floor, Texas and Dallas County History, and the Eighth Floor Genealogy Section, along with the DGS board. Archival instructions were given to the AAGIG volunteers to perform on certain tasks.

First was the preservation process. In the drying out stage, records sat on the DPL dock to remove dampness, and later, insects and cobwebs. Eventually, the records were moved to the basement for acclimation, to allow the documents to become accustomed to their new location. Next came the culling stage, where volunteers removed all metal objects such as paper clips and staples, as well as carbon copy sheets and unwanted scraps of paper. Volunteers reinserted the remaining information into archival acid free folders to prevent degeneration from chemical reactions that can occur with unprotected paper.

Next was file management. This process varied based on documents found in each folder. Volunteers organized the folders, starting with death certificate, funeral program, first call sheet, insurance information and membership payment books, pictures, letters, correspondence between city, county and funeral home, funeral home notes, military papers, lodge and Masonic records, newspaper articles, and finally, wills. This was the preferred arrangement for each file. The outside of each folder was marked with the name of the deceased and date of death. Each folder was given a numerical ID inserted on the outer tab. Folders were arranged alphabetically in the storage box. Each box was identified by year.

Having begun in September 2007, the preservation process ended in May 2008.

Next came the data entry stage. There was about a year's hiatus caused by the need to make database decisions. Eventually, the Dallas Public Library staff came up with a compatible program for the library computer system. This left the problem of how to enter the data into the system. Computers were needed for data entry. A single laptop appeared, and by winter 2009, the data entry started with AAGIG volunteer Ora Penn as the designated data entry operator. Clearly, one computer was not going to be sufficient for the task of cataloging this massive collection.

In 2014, changes were made in the way data was abstracted and entered. The creation of the data information sheet freed-up the data entry person to strictly concentrate on keyboarding without interruption.

In 2015, the AAGIG members were asked to help with the cataloging of each folder in every box of the collection. The cataloging forms would be used by the data entry person for the exact information needed as input data. All volunteer members were assigned a box to extract data from each folder and write it in the appropriate space on the information sheet for that folder.

Thanks to the members for their timely work, that project was completed in early 2016.

2015 Volunteers

RL Canady, Tommy Briggs, Ora Penn, Pamala Scott, Pearlena Sanders, Donald Hinson, Ricky Wright, Timberly Louis, Cynthia Gully, Billie Reed, Robert Rigdon, Stacy Fuller, Juanita Davis, Alvin Blakes, Patricia Stigger, Linda Holland.



*WWI discharge certificate bound in leather
Photo by Tony Hanson*

Our next task was to enter the data from information sheets. DGS President Tony Hanson developed a custom program that allowed multiple users to perform data entry tasks online. Tony always showed a special interest in the projects that DGS volunteers undertook. The data entry process ended in the summer of 2017.

Volunteers started to number the database files over the summer of 2017. We discovered a problem – mixed years – in deaths category. As we corrected the problem, it was decided to renumber the entire database. Members geared up for this tedious task with surprising enthusiasm.

The project was completed in June 2019.

2018 Volunteers

RL Canady, Patricia Stigger, Linda Holland, Billie Reed, Teri Fields, Stacy Fuller, Timberly Louis, Ricky Wright, Alvin Blakes, Brenda Cannon, Donald Payton, Cynthia Gulley, Olivia Peacock.

After finishing the database, volunteers started to plan for the numbering of the physical folders in each box to match the database. In August 2019, work started with a few members. The work of numbering folders requires patience and is very monotonous. This work was about half finished when it was identified that a large number of files had not been recorded. This was such upsetting news that we allowed the work to sit for a while. Our volunteers were saddened by this oversight, after such hard work that was put into the project. Correcting the problem meant starting the numbering over from the beginning. The project was at a standstill over the rest of the month.

In our September SIG meeting, the group was asked to come back and continue work on the folders.



*Linda Holland (left) Donald Hinson Cynthia Gulley and Patricia Stigger ready to work
Photo by Tony Hanson*

2019 Volunteers

In November 2019, volunteers were alerted to the need to finish the last step. Stepping up to the call were Mrs. Lethia Moore, Brenda Cannon, Terri Fields, Billie Reed, and Olivia Peacock, all of whom began renumbering the folders. Others came in on different days and worked around the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. AAGIG members came back to help finish on January 2nd of the new year of 2020. Great strides were made on the next week and left only four boxes to complete.

The Journey's End

A great accomplishment for a greater purpose

On January 10, 2020 volunteers from the AAGIG met on the 8th floor of the J. Erik Jonsson Central Library. This was the day that the final four boxes of the collection would be numbered. We had reached a milestone in the project that had taken thirteen years when all files in the remaining four boxes were numbered.

Volunteers Patricia Stigger and Linda Holland, both retired librarians from the Dallas Library system, were promptly at the designated workstation on the Eighth Floor at 10:30 am. The last four boxes to have the folders numbered were issued and completed. The final box was divided between Patricia Stigger, Linda Holland and me (RL Canady). At about 1:30 PM an electrical storm in southern Oak Cliff prevented Linda from leaving so she continued to work. At 2:15 pm Patricia and Lynda had finished their last folder. I was the last to finish and placed the last folder to be numbered in Box 25. This was the end of a long journey and a great accomplishment for the AAGIG volunteers and the DGS, and a gift to family history researcher not only in Dallas but anywhere since the collection is searchable online. This was the end to this project but not to the memory of the work and the volunteers.

The McGowan funeral home record collection was started by acquisition of the records on January 10, 2007 and completed on January 10, 2020 (thirteen years from its delivery to the Library in 2007).

The experience gained from assembling the McGowan Records Collection is immeasurable. There were mistakes and some unscheduled stops. However, we were able to overcome our mistakes and continue our journey. The AAGIG learned the importance of planning and having work strategy, working with other established organizations like the Dallas Library system, technical coordinators, webmasters, and programmers. We learned to structure our work and

have quality checks to ensure that our community records would be accurate and cared for with integrity.

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

Notes

1. Bosse, Paula; *Flashback: Dallas Beautiful South Ervay Street*, <https://flashbackdallas.com/2016/08/01/beautiful-south-ervay-street-ca-1910/>
2. Simon Linz home, 2830 S Ervay St, Dallas, TX. Dallas Morning News, 1 January 1908, photo by H. Clogenson, commercial photographer
3. Interviews of members with firsthand knowledge
4. Donald Payton interviewed by RL Canady by phone on 26 May 2020
5. Donnie Irving; Eternal Rest Funeral Home, 31 May 2020, Dallas, Texas
6. Gerald Weatherall; Director of Eternal Rest Funeral Home, 31 May 2020 Dallas, Texas
7. timeline and dates from personal notes.
8. Library time sheets
9. Lincoln Memorial Cemetery, Find A Grave, #127783943 and #127784037

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