

1967 triple funeral program tells story beyond the headlines

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

Their faces smile at you from the front cover of the decades-old folded-paper program, the handsome young man in his cap and gown, and the beautiful sisters, one a majorette and the other a choir girl.

But this carefully-preserved program is not from a graduation or an honors society event; this is a triple funeral program from Oct. 1, 1967, the day that David Otis Grigsby, Mamie Lou Maples and Mary Frances Maples were laid to rest at the end of their too-short lives.

A few months ago, Athens resident Imogene Burrell brought in a treasure trove to share with the Limestone County Archives and its patrons: Her collection of more than 200 funeral programs, all from local African Americans' funerals dating back at least to the 1960s. Most of these obituaries had never been published in local newspapers, and the programs full of biographical and genealogical information are a veritable gold mine for researchers.

For an archivist, the process of scanning and organizing these programs has been fascinating, leading me often to wish I had known this person while he was living, or to wonder how exactly this person's life ended so soon. This curiosity drove me to the Sept. 26, 1967, issue of the *Limestone Democrat*, and the headline "Slaughter on Lucas Ferry Brings Death Total to 12." According to the story, the wreck happened at 10:20 p.m. on a Saturday night after 19-year-old Grigsby pulled his 1959 Chevrolet into the left lane of Lucas Ferry Road to drive alongside his 18-year-old friend Donald Gene Horton's 1957 Chevy. Horton told authorities later that they were traveling side by side "talking back and forth to make up their minds where they were going." When 17-year-old Tommy Wayne Goode's 1967 Pontiac Firebird crested the hill in Grigsby's lane, there was no time or room to avoid the head-on collision that slammed all three cars. David and 15-year-old Mamie both were dead on arrival at Athens-Limestone Hospital; 14-year-old Mary Frances died soon after. Three more teens were injured in the crash: David's only sister, 17-year-old Carolyn Grigsby; 14-year-old Annie Maples; and 14-year-old James Wales, Goode's passenger.

The funeral was held on a Sunday afternoon at 1 p.m. in the Trinity High School gymnasium with Sammie Crutcher and Clarence Jordan providing "words of consolation," such as they could.

So who were these teens anyway, and what did they contribute to our community in their short lives? While I'm sure there are many folks still living here who can answer that question better than I can, here is what we learn from that carefully-preserved piece of paper:

- David Otis Grigsby of Lester, born Jan. 29, 1948, had just graduated from Trinity the previous May and was ready to go into the U.S. Army. A member of Willow Grove Missionary Baptist Church, "he was a very obedient child and respected his parents and teachers. He was very cooperative in his class."
- Mamie Lou Maples of Lester, born Aug. 18, 1951, had confessed her hope in Christ the year before, under the same Sammie Crutcher who now preached her funeral. She was a faithful member and active choir member at New Berea Missionary Baptist Church, and was a majorette with the Trinity High Marching Band. "She was obedient child to her parents and teachers and made friends easily with all who came in contact with her."

- Mary Frances Maples of Lester, born Feb. 18, 1953, had just a month prior also confessed her hope in Christ under Crutcher and joined the New Berea church, where she sang alongside her sister in the choir. She had just begun to play in the Trinity High Band, and as an 8th grader at Trinity was “a good student and very cooperative.” The program says that she “was an obedient child and had much respect for her parents, teachers, and friends. She was always deeply concerned about her father’s and mother’s welfare and was helpful around the house. She always wanted her parents to be happy.”

All three teens left behind a host of family, friends, and classmates, many of whom could probably still tell you stories about them.

And that is why the Archives is here, to preserve and share those stories that make up the fabric of our shared community story. We welcome anyone who wants to learn more about the story, or to add to it with the story of your own history. Come on by!

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

Staff: Archivist Rebekah Davis and Assistant Archivist April Davis

Location: 102 W. Washington St., in the 1905 L&N Passenger Depot

Hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

Phone: 256-233-6404

E-mail: lcarchives@knology.net or lcarchives2@knology.net

Web: www.limestonearchives.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives