



## Preservation in May

May 3, 2018

### **Early Twentieth-Century African American Culture**

In towns along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1940, clear boundaries existed that segregated the African American sector of that city—in Biloxi it was north of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad tracks to the Back Bay and approximately between Couevas Street on the west and Lee Street to the east. In that year, approximately 2,765 African American citizens lived in this area. A city within a city operated in the confines of accepted racism. Businesses lined Main Street, cafes, such as the Big Apple or The Southern Kitchen, were on every block. Men gathered at the Elite Tonsorial Parlor on Division Street, while Mrs. Orleans Reese's Beauty Shop catered to women. Six churches offered spiritual support, while the Delphia and McDaniel & Sons Funeral Homes arranged eternal rest. The Biloxi Colored High School and Our Mother of Sorrows Catholic Church provided educational opportunities. With segregated medical care, Dr. S. F. Johnson provided dental care, and Dr. William P. Kyle extended medical attention to the citizens of the area. Blues music floated through the air at local clubs on Main Street, continuing the rich musical heritage of the area.

In this 1940 neighborhood, the Doster, Clay, and Ellis families lived and worked. Many of the African American citizens found economic opportunities in the tourist industry as maids, chauffeurs, doormen, laundresses, and gardeners at the large hotels on Highway 90. A fair number of them found employment in the seafood industry. Others became craftsmen, such as bricklayers, who labored in the building industries. The three families who are highlighted in this Preservation Event are like many others who lived in Biloxi in the 1940s. They worked their jobs, raised their children, and contributed to the neighborhood and development of the city. However, they operated in a segregated world where full citizenship privileges were denied. Even though, they were integral to the development of Biloxi as both a tourist destination and seafood market. Working long hours in the seafood factories alongside Croatians, Cajuns, and other Biloxians, their efforts built Biloxi as a seafood center. Others, literally constructed the buildings of the city, many of which still exist today. These three families, and others like them, provide a vital piece of Biloxi and Mississippi Gulf Coast history.

