

Black funeral programs hold trove of genealogical treasure

BY ELSA VERBYLA

A large plastic tote stuffed full with church programs, tax returns, Medicare information and other old papers also held a good yield of the items Bessida Cauthorne White of Middlesex had come to find: African-American funeral programs.

Invited by Fannie Ware of Cardinal to investigate the old records, White, who is co-founder and president of the Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society, explained the significance of her finds, which steadily mounted.

"By and large, it is a black folk thing," she explained on Thursday as she sorted out the papers. She said the programs can be found in many black homes, sometimes by the hundreds.

Fannie Ware, who said she never throws anything away (although she has all these things neatly organized), produced funeral programs for many Gloucester and Mathews residents and some for her own family members. She would get up from her chair every few minutes, go through another drawer or cupboard, and come back with another handful of papers to investigate.

White, who grew up and lives in Middlesex County, was working some years ago with Family Search, the Mormon church family records project, on another task: indexing the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau records. "I kept telling them about the funeral programs ... they didn't know about this." She knew because her father had worked as a funeral director, and she had grown up with the tradition in her home church.

So in 2009, having gained the blessing of Family Search and cooperation of the Virginia



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Bessida Cauthorne White, left, goes through a treasury of funeral programs and other old materials kept for many years by Fannie Ware of Cardinal.

Historical Society, White and her group collected 10,600 African-American funeral programs, with only 1,500 duplications. They have finally been digitized at the VHS and are available online at Familysearch.org. The success, White said, "went beyond our wildest dreams. We had no idea people were so thirsty for family history."

With the first batch done, the Middle Peninsula society launched another drive this year. Ware learned of it, recalled her large collection, and invited White to come to see her. This is one of the first inroads into Mathews County records the society has established, White said.

The value of these programs, she said, is that they contain much more than just the order of service for the

deceased. Most include a full biography: date and place of birth, names of ancestors and descendants, work and education history. These are the things family tree searchers look for when digging into their own roots.

The programs also tell where survivors live and from this information, migration patterns from African-American communities can be traced. Large migrations of black people from the South to the North have taken place in waves over the past century, she said. From this area, most moved "right up the coast" usually, "A few to Washington, but that was still too much part of the South"; still more to Baltimore, Philadelphia, south Jersey, New York and Boston. One family member would put down

roots and help brothers, sisters, cousins and friends find housing and jobs as they also moved North.

The formal biographies, White said, grew out of another African-American tradition of many generations ago: the family letter, written in long-hand and read to the congregation at a funeral, containing facts about the deceased and usually signed, "Sorryfully submitted," with a survivor's name. Someone with good penmanship would make several copies and these would be distributed to family members.

Modern funeral programs often have a version of the family letter with a similarly dolorous conclusion.

The current collection project is coming to an end this month, and White invited anyone in Gloucester and Mathews who might like to lend their programs (they will be returned after digitizing) to call her at 804-651-8753 to arrange a pickup.

As she neared the bottom of the plastic tote and eyed a paper bag full of more material nearby, White gently took from Fannie Ware the funeral program for Vanessa Ware Forrest, her daughter, who died in 1994 aged 39. She promised special handling and personal attention to getting this precious memory home quickly.

Fannie Ware said she is glad to have kept all the programs for so long, and hopes they will help other people learn about their ancestors. That's just the reason she has kept them, she said. "During the funeral service, you don't get a chance to read them," she said. To keep the deceased in her heart, she would take the program home, read it again thoroughly—and save it for another day.