

Memories Matter

by Gayle Jessup White - March 13, 2017

Some brought photographs, others brought books and at least two people brought quilts. But most of those bearing their family treasures at a recent Jefferson School African American Heritage Center (<http://jeffschoolheritagecenter.org/>). event had questions.

“Memories Matter,” a Black History Month program sponsored jointly by Monticello and the Jefferson School in Charlottesville, paired local experts with people eager to learn how to protect and preserve decades-old family artifacts. “It’s a little like Antiques Road Show without the appraisals,” said Niya Bates, Monticello’s Public Historian of Slavery and African American Life referring to the popular PBS program.

Memories Matter - What It's All About?



There were stations for photographs and albums, books and documents, objects and textiles. On hand were experts in document and artifact preservation from Monticello, Montpelier (<http://www.montpelier.org/>) and Highland (<http://www.highland.org/>), along with historians and genealogists.

Joyce Goodell, who drove from Fredericksburg, VA, wanted to know how to save memorabilia, including trophies and old school records, from the Buckingham Country Training School, for decades the county's only African-American secondary school which closed in 1953. "I see value in trying to preserve those stories," she said.

Johnny Bates of Cismont, VA, brought an old family album filled with 19th and early 20th century photographs of African Americans dressed to the nines. "Some of these things are the only way people had to document history," said Monticello guide and 19th-century photography scholar Horace Ballard, Jr.

Memories Matter - How to Store an Old Book



The good news is that modern technology has made it easier to preserve documents and photos. Ballard said old photos can be stored in acid-free folders. And according to Ellen Hickman, Associate Editor, Papers of Thomas Jefferson; Retirement Series (<https://www.monticello.org/papers>) at Monticello, photos and documents can be uploaded into the internet's cloud using free services such as Turboscan.

That was good news for local sisters Helen Johnsen and Gloria Johansen. "We're the family archivists," said Helen as she and her sister Gloria made their way to the documents research station to get advice on how to save their grandparents' letters.

For those searching to learn more about their family roots, “Memories Matter” offered multiple resources. Nicole Pace said she hit a dead end while searching for her Orange County family ties. “It was frustrating,” she said. However, she felt reassured after talking with genealogist Zann Nelson of the [Montpelier Descendants Project](https://www.montpelier.org/learn/a-more-complete-american-story) (<https://www.montpelier.org/learn/a-more-complete-american-story>). “She said it’s more difficult for African Americans to research their families than it is for whites because there’re more resources for them,” said Pace, adding that she appreciated Nelson’s help.

Memories Matter - Using Heirlooms to Track Your Family's History



Tonya Mitchell grew up in Washington, DC, but wanted learn more about her Charlottesville family. “It was good to be around people helping me trying to figure out how to trace my family’s history,” said Mitchell.

Other participating groups included the Burke Brown Steppe Historical and Genealogical Society, the Louisa County Historical Society, the [Orange County African-American Historical Society](http://www.ocaahs.org) (<http://www.ocaahs.org>), James Monroe’s Highland and Monticello’s *Getting Word* Oral History Project.

Memories Matter - How It Went



About 40 attended the inaugural event. Jefferson School African American Heritage Center Executive Director Andrea Douglas believes future attendance will grow. “If we can see this as an on-going partnership” with Monticello “that would encourage people to trust you and to bring their objects,” she said. Douglas hinted that future events might include hands-on workshops.

“People really learned today and they made a lot of connections with other community groups that are invested in community history,” said Monticello’s Niya Bates. “It was a great success.”

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