

The Augusta Chronicle

Laney Museum honors educator

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By Lynn Davidson
Staff Writer
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In a time when public black high schools were either nonexistent or underfunded, Lucy Craft Laney decided to take action. She started Augusta's first private school for black girls and boys in the basement of a church.

Students in Laney's Haines Normal and Industrial Institute studied and excelled in English, Greek, Latin, French, rhetoric, history, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, physiology, biology, physics and sociology, classical piano and music, public speaking, debate and drama, according to A Review of Early Education in Augusta, Georgia, on the Lucy C. Laney High School's Web site.

Even with all the success, Laney, a daughter of free blacks, wanted to do more. So she started the first black nursing school in Augusta, the first black kindergarten and the first black high school football team.

"Ms. Laney was a forward-thinking person. She believed that the only way for blacks to be successful in America was by being well educated," according to her biography on the Lucy Laney Museum of Black History's Web site.

The museum is housed in Laney's home on Phillips Street, off of Laney-Walker Boulevard. The boulevard is named in Laney's honor, as is Lucy Craft Laney High School. An elementary school and middle school in Minneapolis also bear her name.

Christine Miller-Betts, the executive director of the museum, said pupils from Laney High and A.R. Johnson Health Science and Engineering Magnet School walk across the street to visit the museum.

"The children are walking all over the streets around her house every day, just like when she was living," Betts said. "I like to imagine what she would think if she were here today. It's just what she envisioned."

Born and raised in Georgia in the 1850s, when slavery was permitted and laws prohibited blacks from learning to read, Laney learned to read when she was 4 and graduated from Atlanta University before she was 20.

Today, the museum continues her work of educating children with art and history classes during summer and holiday breaks and by playing host to field trips during the school year.

"During Black History Month, elementary schools call and ask if it's OK for the small children to come," Miller-Betts said. "We tell them that's the best time to bring them, when they're young."

From the National Register of Historic Places marker and period garden out front, to the six permanent exhibits and rotating exhibits inside, the museum offers something to spark almost anyone's interest.

Tours begin with a film in the conference room, which also serves as an art exhibit hall.

"It's been interesting. I liked the movie best. It told what she (Laney) did," said Daelan Washington, 9, who recently visited the museum with his family from Watertown, N.Y.

The first permanent exhibit honors the museum's namesake. The Lucy Craft Laney Collection features pictures and banners from Laney's schools, a uniform from her nursing school, artists' renderings of Laney, and dishes and vases that were salvaged from her house when it was restored after a fire in the 1980s.

"The ladies in our group are very tenacious," Miller-Betts said, referring to members of Delta House Inc. "They kept these things, cleaned the smoke off and brought them back wrapped in towels."

The room is furnished and decorated as it was when Laney lived there. The late Rosa Beard, a longtime Augusta educator, knew Laney and visited the house when she was young. "So she checked it out for us and validated it," Miller-Betts said.

The Pilgrim Health and Life Collection highlights the first insurance company founded for blacks in Georgia, which served as the largest employer for blacks in Augusta for many years. The exhibit features wax figures made and loaned to the museum by a local sculptor.

The Ebony Legacy Collection features pictures of James Brown, Ed McIntyre, Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen, Jim Dent, the Rev. Charles Walker and others.

"The pictures change because we can't display them all at once," Miller-Betts said.

A permanent art exhibit features clay sculpture by Dr. Charles Smith and paintings and masks by Alice Davis. Other small treasures, including a stamp collection, quilts and books, are displayed in nooks and crannies throughout the house.

"The concept of history is wonderful, and for a woman to do what Lucy Craft Laney did is incredible," Miller-Betts said. "So, we're trying to keep that alive."

Links:

[1] <http://www.lucycraftlaneymuseum.com>

[2] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4610607.jpg>

[3] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4610605.jpg>

[4] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4610610.jpg>