

# The Augusta Chronicle

## Museum keeps Laney's legacy of learning alive

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By Lynn Davidson  
Staff Writer  
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Long before the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was born, a black woman was making dreams possible for blacks in Augusta.

Lucy Craft Laney was born and raised in Georgia in the 1850s, when slavery was permitted and laws prohibited blacks from learning to read.

Yet, Laney learned to read when she was 4 and graduated from Atlanta University before she was 20. In 1883, Laney started Augusta's first private school for black children in the basement of Christ Presbyterian Church on Telfair Street.

Today, Laney-Walker Boulevard is named in her honor, as is Lucy Craft Laney High School. Both are beside her home, which is now a museum of black history.

"The children are walking all over the streets around her house every day, just like when she was living," said Christine Miller-Betts, the executive director of the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History. "I like to imagine what she would think if she were here today. It's just what she envisioned."

In a time when public black high schools were either nonexistent or underfunded, students in Laney's Haines Normal and Industrial Institute studied English, Greek, Latin, French, rhetoric, history, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, physiology, biology, physics and sociology, classical piano and music, public speaking, debate and drama, and competitive sports, according to *A Review of Early Education in Augusta, Georgia* on the Laney High School Web site.

Laney didn't stop with high school. She started the first black nursing school in Augusta and the first black kindergarten.

The museum continues to enhance children's education through art and history classes during summer and holiday breaks, and it plays host to field trips in 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 Historical Places marker and period garden out front to the six permanent exhibits and several 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 nursing 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. It served as the largest employer for blacks in Augusta from the late 1890s through the late 1900s. 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 many 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 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.lucycraft>

[2] <http://laneymuseum.com>

[3] <http://chronicle.augusta.com/sites/default/files/editorial/images/feed/msms/photos/4611422.jpg>