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Mutual Aid Societies

by

Betty L. Morefield

The end of slavery did not bring African Americans equality. In the struggle to improve their lives they established mutual aid societies to feed the hungry, visit the sick, support widows, bury the dead, and "to elevate the whole man." The funds for this aid came from the dues the society members paid at their weekly meeting.

There were some local, short-lived aid societies such as the Colored Man's Aid Society, but the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows (GUOOF) became the earliest and largest national organization in Loudoun County. African Americans in the County established seven GUOOF lodges between 1873 -1897. Five lodges constructed or rented halls for their meetings. The Odd Fellows stated their primary goal in a *Report of the Twenty-first Annual Session of the Grand Lodge of Virginia*:

(T)he comforting of the sick, burying the dead, and providing for the widows and orphans . . . There is nothing on earth the Negro of Virginia needs more at this critical period of his existence, when he is being ostracized and legislated against, than money, and there is never a time when the need of money is more keenly felt than immediately after the death of a family member.

The annual "turnouts" of these lodges was in May when they would meet at their halls and then march, wearing their uniforms and insignias, to a church where a thanksgiving service would be held. Afterwards they marched back to their halls for a banquet. The halls also provided places where other organizations or the community could hold events.

An illustration of the role that mutual aid societies played in the lives of Loudoun County African Americans can be seen in the following obituary from the Times Mirror, June 28th, 1937.

Aged Negro Resident Expires In Leesburg

"Uncle John" Douglas, colored, born December 3, 1846, passed away, Friday, at Leesburg. He had served faithfully in the employ of Mrs. R. D. Shroy and the late Mr. Shroy for the past 37 years where he was held in the highest esteem. He was a former slave of William Jackson and in his early life, before the War Between the States, he was house boy for the family of Major Wilson S. Sanders of the Goresville community. "Uncle John" was a familiar figure on the streets of Leesburg and had the respect of all who knew him. He was a member of the G.U.O. of Odd Fellows Lodge for 50 years. He served as an official of the Lodge for 20 years and for 10 years had been a member of the



board of trustees. He was a past Noble Father in the Lodge.
Funeral services were conducted by the Lodge members in the Old School Baptist Church, Leesburg, Elder Chapman of the Providence Baptist Church officiating. Pallbearers were members of the Lodge - Nathan Johnson, William Valentine, Austin Fitts, R.H.L. Harris, David Helm and Jesse L. Moton.

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