

Photos a powerful glimpse into Atlantic City's black history

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ATLANTIC CITY — The black history section of the Atlantic City Heritage Collections at the resort's public library is filled with photographs, postcards, ads and artifacts from landmarks such as Club Harlem on Kentucky Avenue.

The thousands of photos have been put to good use by researchers around the world. But the collection needs donations of diaries, letters and family reminiscences that would shed a personal light on the everyday lives of the city's black residents, from its founding in the 1800s to today, its archivist said.

"It's our mission to collect Atlantic City history," said Atlantic City Free Public Library Collections Archivist Jacqueline Silver-Morillo. "We rely on donations from the community."

The black history section has no diaries or letters, she said. "The regular collections do."

She would love families to donate either originals or copies of family papers.

"We have people all the time asking about everyday life," Silver-Morillo said. "We want to give it to them, but if it's not here, we can't."

One of its larger possessions is the mirror from Club Harlem, a nightclub that attracted the nation's top singers and musicians.

"That's in storage right now," said Silver-Morillo.

There are large collections related to Chicken Bone Beach, the segregated beach for black people between Missouri and Mississippi avenues during the Jim Crow era, and the Atlantic City Board of Trade, which listed and described thriving black-owned businesses during segregation.

There are also photos and news articles relating to individuals, such as Negro Leagues baseball star John Henry "Pop" Lloyd and Mayor James Usry, Atlantic City's first black mayor, who held office from 1984 to 1990.

The labor of black people built much of the resort and staffed it for decades, according to "The Northside: African Americans and the Creation of Atlantic City," a book by Hammonton resident and Superior Court Judge Nelson Johnson. He also wrote "Boardwalk Empire," which became the basis for the popular HBO television series of the same name.

Johnson did research on both books here, said Silver-Morillo.

The treasure trove of the city's history is located just off a reading area on the main floor of the library, in the Alfred M. Heston Room. The room is named for a former city official, newspaper editor and publisher,

historian and author, founder of the Atlantic City Hospital and trustee of the Atlantic City library. He died in 1937.

People come from all over the United States and world to use it, including the people who made the TV series “Boardwalk Empire,” and a French researcher who wrote her dissertation on beauty products entrepreneur Sara Spencer Washington, founder of Apex Beauty Products Co., Apex News and Hair Co., and many associated businesses.

Spencer Washington was a resident of Atlantic City who became a millionaire in the early 20th century, and opened the area’s first integrated golf club at what is now Pomona Golf Course and Country Club in Galloway Township.

The collections now include all the items that used to be housed at the Atlantic City Historical Museum at Garden Pier, which was founded by Vicki Gold Levi in 1985 and run by the library. The city sold Garden Pier in 2017 for \$1.5 million to Philadelphia-based developer Bart Blatstein’s Tower Investments. Blatstein also owns the Showboat nearby, which he has reopened as a noncasino hotel.

“When they sold the pier, we had to leave,” said Silver-Morillo.

There may soon be another museum at Boardwalk Hall, she said, which was recently renamed to honor the late state Sen. Jim Whelan.

The details are still being worked out, said Silver-Morillo. She hopes a new museum may open there next fall or winter.

Morillo would also appreciate a few volunteers to help her organize materials. Mayor Don Guardian recently donated five boxes of materials to the collections, and they need to be sorted and catalogued, she said.

To volunteer, call Silver-Morillo at 609-345-2269, ext. 3063.