HISTORY OF AMBULANCE SERVICE IN GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

In my childhood in Gainesville ambulances were often called when there were accidents in front of my house. There were a lot of accidents because we lived on the northwest corner of the intersection of Northwest 13th Street and 10th Avenue (called, at that time, North 9th Street, or US-441, and Cypress Street). There were a lot of accidents because it was soon after the end of World War II, and the GI Bill had almost doubled the population of Gainesville. Firefighters did not provide ambulance service because they were firemen who fought fires at that time. Funeral homes provided ambulance services in the 1940s and 1950s--it was a side business for them.

In an interview with Gene Williams, present owner of Williams-Thomas Funeral Home, Gene told me about the history of their family's involvement in the ambulance business. His father, Dick Williams, started Williams Funeral Home in Hawthorne about 1940, and moved the business to Gainesville in 1944. The Williams family lived next door to my family and, when an ambulance siren could be heard, all of the Williams children could tell which funeral home's ambulance siren we were hearing. The lives of the Williams children were intricately involved with their dad’s business. Gene now owns Williams-Thomas Funeral Home. Milam’s Funeral Home is owned by Gene's brother-in-law, Mickey Milam. Gene’s sister, Mary Katherine, was married to Mickey until she died.

I also spoke with Charles Chestnut, owner of Chestnut Funeral Home, and he assured me that the African-American-owned funeral homes in this area had ambulances during those times and provided the same services that were provided by white-owned funeral homes.

Serving the white community in the 1940s in Gainesville were the following:

- Dewitt C. Jones Funeral Home, located at 311 South Main Street; after Dewitt C. Jones, it was Jones-Johnson, and then Johnson-Hayes; it is now Milam’s Funeral Home.
- Thomas Funeral Home was located at 404 North Main Street; the business was on the ground floor and the Thomas family lived upstairs.
- Williams Funeral Home was located at 900 West University Avenue from 1944 to 1954; in 1954 they merged with Thomas Funeral Home, located at 404 North Main Street. The name of the firm became Williams-Thomas Funeral Home. They are still at that location, and Gene Williams' son works there with his father.

Serving the African American community in the 1940s in Gainesville were the following:

- Chestnut Funeral Home, located at 18 Northwest 8th Avenue; interestingly, Charles Chestnut Sr. served as an apprentice with Williams Funeral Home.
- Duncan Funeral Home, located at 428 Northwest 8th Street
- Pinkney-Smith Funeral Home, located at 727 Northwest 2nd Street

The ambulance service provided by funeral homes ended with the passage of the Federal Emergency Medical Response Act of 1973. The act created “an entity that provides for the arrangement of personnel, facilities, and equipment for the effective and coordinated delivery of health care services under emergency conditions in an appropriate geographic area….” At that time, the firefighters took over the responsibility for ambulance services. Government regulations brought about those changes—not just locally, but across the United States.