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NEWS

Documents found in old Harlem bank revealed

Joe Hotchkiss jhotchkiss@augustachronicle.com

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When renovators in Harlem found a forgotten compartment above an old bank vault, they didn't find money.

What they did find, many of the city's residents consider much more valuable – and it could help provide the foundation for a local museum expected to open in Harlem's historic Columbia Theater.

Dozens of people gathered at the Harlem Branch Library on Thursday to get the first public glimpse at forgotten documents dating back more than a century – showing glimpses of what life was like long ago in the small Columbia County town.

The trove also revealed personal connections to one of Harlem's most prominent residents in the early 1900s, and a widow who became the first woman to win elected office in Georgia – just months after women nationwide won the right to vote.

Former Harlem Mayor Bobby Culpepper called the find “a time capsule extraordinaire.”

The Bank of Harlem was chartered in 1905 and for several years was Columbia County's only bank. It seemed to have been used as a secure location to house important local documents. DeFoor Realty had bought the old bank building at North Louisville and North Hicks streets and was renovating it in early 2017 when workers found a forgotten attic door hidden by a more contemporary drop ceiling.

Inside the attic, according to Harlem Arts Council historian Phil Turner, was about 2,000 pounds of records from banks, long-shuttered local businesses, courts and the school system – dating as far back as 1909.

Among the more mundane piles of cancelled checks, Turner's knowledge of local history helped identify some of Harlem's most respected residents from a century ago.

Two of those checks were made out to O. McDaniel and to Carrie L. McDaniel. Both are tied to a milestone of Georgia history.

Overton McDaniel was Columbia County's tax collector when he died in October 1920, nominated but not yet elected. Within days the state appointed his widow, Carrie, as his replacement until an election could be held. She won election that November against three male opponents. But debate erupted statewide about her eligibility for office because women couldn't yet vote. The 19th Amendment was ratified earlier that year but in some places, including Georgia, it wasn't yet enacted. The state attorney general later declared her election legitimate.

Ike Vale Ballard was a prosperous landowner; co-owner of Harlem Supply Co., a general merchandise store; and for a time the publisher of *The Columbia Sentinel*, a forerunner to today's *Columbia County News-Times*. He died at age 71 in 1919, after he was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives but before he could serve. Ballard is tied to the document project because he donated the land on which the bank was built in 1905. A commemorative marble plaque recognizing that fact was uncovered during the same renovations that uncovered the documents.

Turner said Ballard also is important to this project because he was a Confederate veteran – the youngest soldier in Company K of the 16th Georgia Regiment. Ballard-related artifacts were sent to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Richmond, Va., in hopes of obtaining UDC funding for further curating the other documents.

Preserving the documents is part of the prelude for forming a museum for the city of Harlem, planned to go inside Columbia County's first movie theater near the center of town.

DONATIONS WELCOME

The Harlem Arts Council is spearheading a fundraising campaign to start a museum in Harlem for items of historical interest to the town, including the thousands of recently discovered documents. To make a tax-deductible donation or to find out more about the campaign, email harlemartscouncil@gmail.com.

