

Special Seasonal Pages for Cape Charles

September 18, 2020

Eastern Shore

POST

Cape Charles

THE SHORE'S ONLY LOCALLY OWNED NEWSPAPER



Historical Society Exhibit Highlights Prominent Black Businessman

Story and Photo by Jim Ritch

In 1884, a slight, 24-year-old Taylor Daniel Jefferson moved to Cape Charles to find work building a railroad. Instead, he built a career as a local retailer, banker, and ardent campaigner to educate Black children on the Eastern Shore.

His story will be featured through the end of November in a new exhibit at the Cape Charles Museum and Welcome Center.

Laura Smith, a heritage scholar for the society and donor of some of the exhibit's materials, created the exhibit "to show that he wasn't just a business owner, but a visionary of African American education and community."

Taylor and his brother, John, found jobs easily in the gritty, newly born town arising next to the railroad yard, but the work, especially for Black Americans, was hard, physical labor. Taylor saw other opportunities.

In 1886, he purchased a lot at 624 Mason Ave., between Nectarine and Fig streets, where with the help of other family members, he opened T.D. Jefferson General Merchandise to supply the Black community.

The store became a Cape Charles fixture, operating through two generations of the Jefferson family until the 1970s.

The store soon expanded from groceries and other supplies. His wife, Mattie, opened a school for Black children in the rear of the store in 1887.

After a year in cramped quarters and with more Black families and children streaming into town, classes moved to a small building behind Bethany Meth-

odist Episcopal Church at the corner of Madison and Nectarine streets.

T.D. Jefferson served as the school's treasurer. On display is a 1904 check he received for \$4 from the school board in Cape Charles. The check covered the entire monthly rent for the school.

He also signed a paycheck for the school's principal, Professor J.H. Curtis, who received a monthly salary of \$25.

Jefferson went on to help found the Tidewater Institute, a residential school.

Meanwhile, Jefferson expanded his store to include men's apparel and appears well-dressed in a photograph, wearing a morning coat. He also built a large home with wraparound porch on Madison Avenue between Nectarine and Fig streets.

Jefferson was known as a man of "high moral character," said Smith.

A cousin who jointly owned the store tested Jefferson's personal values by pushing to apply for an "ordinary" license to serve alcohol. Jefferson bought out the cousin's share.

In 1910, Jefferson served as the founding treasurer of a new bank in Northampton County, the Brickhouse Banking Co., of Hare Valley.

Jefferson had already been extending credit to customers of his store for years, allowing them to purchase food and supplies until payday arrived.

The practice complicated his fight to survive the Great Depression, but with the patience of his own suppliers, the store made it through.

His business acumen was appreciated far beyond the Eastern Shore.

He was a member of the executive



Three generations of the Haynes family, of Richmond, watch Laura Smith, heritage scholar for the Cape Charles Museum and Visitor Center, explain a new exhibit, "T.D. Jefferson: Cape Charles Merchant and Visionary." From left are grandfather Tim Haynes, son Ty Haynes, and grandson Jack Haynes, 4, peeking around his father.

committee of the Virginia State Negro Business League, headquartered in Richmond, and corresponded with Black leaders Frederick Douglas and Booker T. Washington.

He invested personally in the Tide-

water Institute, loaning funds that were secured by bonds. The bonds were left to Jefferson's son, Walter, who inherited them when T.D. died in 1936.

Unfortunately, the Tidewater Institute had closed its doors the year before.

WHEN YOU GO

WHAT: "T.D. Jefferson: Cape Charles Merchant and Visionary"

WHERE: Cape Charles Museum and Welcome Center, 814 Randolph Ave., Cape Charles

WHEN: Saturdays through the end of November, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

COST: Free

ONLINE: View a blog post on the exhibit at www.sundayhistorical.com