



John Clarence "Skeepie" Scarborough III comes in, quiet and impeccably dressed. He's wearing a black three-piece suit and a splendid white tie fastened up tight. Orthopedic dress sneakers, also black, are his only apparent concession to age. At 77, he is stooped but still has an athlete's gait. He keeps a thin mustache and his gray hair is slicked back. "How you holding together?" he asks.

The meeting room, like the rest of the place, is on the shabby side of comfortable. There are cracks in the ceiling tiles and chips in the furniture. A larger than life-sized Martin Luther King, Jr. statue dominates the corner. The urns on display are heavy-lidded enamel things. This is where Mr. Scarborough counsels families. He waits like a *maître d'* at the door to usher them in.

Mr. Scarborough's vocation is to preserve—flesh and memory. Preservation is his hobby, too, and he's earned a reputation as a sort of amateur historian, speaking in front of school groups mostly. Today we're here to look through his scrapbook, which lives in the front

office, next to a mess of obituary submissions. "A whole lot of history here," he says. There's a young Arthur Ashe at the Hillside High School summer tennis tournament. There's Johnny B. McLendon, the basketball legend. There's the one o'clock luncheon club, a meeting of the community's most prominent business leaders, men in pencil mustaches and pinstripe suits. A young Skeepie sits proudly on the side of the frame, next to his father and grandfather.

This was all before Highway 147 tore through the center of Durham's thriving Black community, a neighborhood called Hayti. It was also before the end of official segregation. Life was neither simpler nor better then, but there's a lot to miss. Even before the highway, the Hayti shops began to lose their business to those downtown. Across the South, only three sorts of Black-owned businesses tended to survive Jim Crow. The first was the barbershop and its corollary, the salon. The second was the bar. The third was that of the Scarborough men: the funeral home.

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Mr. Scarborough was born to lead the troops. His grandfather nicknamed him Skeepie after Scipio Africanus, the great Roman general. To most, he's Skeepie, and to everyone else, he's Mr. Scarborough.

On a dreary February afternoon, he heads to pick up a family in the big Cadillac lead car. Everything is behind schedule, and Mr. Scarborough is stressed out in his mild-mannered way. "I'm rippin' and runnin'," he says, fumbling his cellphone with a white-gloved hand. We cross the overpass to collect the family of Mrs. Kathryn Paige Poole, then head back across the tracks, toward the church, with motorcade in tow and the flashing hood light whirring gently. Before us, traffic grudgingly gives way.

Funeral directors didn't always have the power to stop traffic. Before the Civil War, post-mortem rituals were simple: the local furniture

maker banged out a coffin, and the family put it in the ground. The modern science of embalming, a product of wartime necessity, made its spectacular debut when Lincoln's corpse embarked on a 17-day tour. By the turn of the 20th century, embalming had become a widespread practice, but the real shift came over the next 20 or 30 years with the rise of the funeral home. In the Victorian era, people died and were embalmed where they lived. That began to change in a process of medicalization or commercialization, depending on whom you ask, and the funeral director or mortician (titles that gained favor while "embalmer" and "undertaker" receded) transformed from shadowy technician to master of ceremonies.

In time, the funeral director became a trusted person, a widely connected person, and a wealthy person. He became a community leader. Mr. Scarborough is a Freemason, active in his fraternity, on a half dozen boards, and operates a non-profit daycare. His father and grandfather are his greatest role models. "This is a business about caring for people," he says, and he means it.

Mrs. Paige Poole's service is lengthy and stirring. There's great music and an occasional response from the congregation. A woman in the front row holds up a tissue-clenching hand and shouts "push it!"

I'm goin' up yonder

I'm goin' up yonder

I'm goin' up yonder

To be with my Lord

When it's over, Mr. Scarborough takes the microphone on behalf of the family. He speaks for less than a minute and says "thank you" six times.

On the way out, Mr. Scarborough points out the house of his ninth grade teacher. He had to wash her windows when he got in trouble. And his father would threaten to send him to Beachwood. "I didn't know what that was," he says, "but I knew I didn't want to go there." Then we head down Fayetteville St. at a stately pace toward Beachwood, the cemetery, where Mr. Scarborough attends the burial of Mrs. Paige Poole. Then he goes back to work.

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For nearly 50 years, Scarborough and Hargett occupied a corner lot on Pettigrew St., Hayti's main commercial thoroughfare. The funeral home was a refuge and a gathering spot. The partners ran a weekly ad in the Carolina Times promising "hot weather comfort" and inviting readers to stop by. Then urban renewal effectively wiped out Pettigrew St. J.C. Scarborough Sr. died a few years later at 93.

Scarborough and Hargett found its feet again in a gleaming new facility closer to downtown. It was the Vietnam era, and the home was doing 500 burials a year. There was a chapel that could fit 1,000 and rooms for community meetings. But when the city developed plans for a sprawling new courthouse, Scarborough and Hargett was yet again in the way. "Since I'm being forced out of my home, I'm going to my backyard," Mr. Scarborough told the local paper. He hatched plans for a new site back on the south side of the tracks. It was to have a museum and a banquet hall.

Scarborough and Hargett's accountant, Thurman Dorch, has been piecing together the events that sank those grand plans. Soil tests revealed the prospective site was toxic. A court battle followed. "Mr. Scarborough ... He's a very trusting man," Thurman says. "What happened was people took advantage of him."

When highway construction displaced the Pettigrew St. businesses, many shops had moved into a nearby cluster of hastily erected shacks called Tin City. In 2010, Scarborough and Hargett moved back to Tin City, to one of the original shacks that had been bricked over.



A hardwood casket contains between 150 and 250 board feet of lumber (that's one foot by one foot by one inch) that has been grooved, fitted, sanded, glued, baked in a kiln, lacquered three times, wet sanded, buffed, and ornamented. Metal caskets weigh somewhere between 250 and 300 pounds, depending on whether they're steel, stainless steel, or copper and whether they're 16, 18 or 20 gauge. Outside the casket, most cemeteries also require a vault, a concrete or metal casing that entombs the casket and prevents the ground from shifting, for easier mowing.

For the funeral home, revenue earned is roughly proportional to the mass of hardware involved. But the perpetually escalating decorum that has sustained the industry's growth has at last met its match in cremation.

Half a century ago, almost no one was cremated. In 1958, 4 percent of funerals involved cremation, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. Some time in the next five years, that figure will surpass 50 percent. So far, the trend is stronger for White funerals. Black funeral practices tend to be more old-fashioned—viewings have remained in favor much longer, for instance—but they, too, increasingly feature cremations.

With cremation on the rise, the art of cossetting and dressing is declining, and so are the fees. It's hard to cover overhead and liability. Thurman says business is fine, but it's not what it used to be.



February is Black History Month, and Mr. Scarborough is in high demand for his Durham history talks, mostly at schools. But this one is at St. Joseph's Place, an assisted living facility. The drive takes us down

Fayetteville St., past Mr. Scarborough's childhood home, a mansion with plantation-style columns out front.

Five minutes later we're parking in front of the nursing home. "Just ease right in. Alright." Then Mr. Scarborough is checking the trunk for pamphlets and a calendar he likes to hand out and for something else, which he can't seem to find. "This means I am not in order. This is what you call going by memory."

The event is in the kitchen, where everyone is already sitting in place. Those who know Mr. Scarborough catch his eye, and he says hello. Then to everyone—a little fewer than 20 women and two men—he continues, "First of all, will it be alright if I remove my coat?" There is a chorus of assent.

The story starts in Kinston, N.C., with the death of Wiley Lowrey. Lowrey served as grocer to the town's sizeable Black population. As such, he was a prominent figure. But when he died, in 1897, the White mortician held his viewing in the basement instead of the chapel and opted for a wagon instead of a horse-drawn hearse. Joseph Crooms Hargett, Mr. Scarborough's great-grandfather, declared, "Well then I will open up my own business to give my people dignity in death."

J.C. Scarborough Sr. was J.C. Hargett's protégé-turned business partner-turned son-in-law. Hargett bankrolled Scarborough's education at the prestigious Renouard Training School for Embalmers in New York City, making him perhaps the first licensed Black embalmer in the country. Upon his return, Scarborough Sr. moved the home to Durham. The area was what MBAs today refer to as "blue ocean," a wide-open market. During the 1918 influenza epidemic, Scarborough Sr. was needed all over Wake, Pearson, and Orange Counties while his wife Daisy Hargett Scarborough, by then a trained embalmer herself, saw to Durham's needs.

Durham, as Mr. Scarborough says, was different. Supported by the two other pillars of the death industry—cigarettes and life insurance—the African-American community here was unusually prosperous and unusually independent. Booker T. Washington praised the city as a model of self-sufficiency. E. Franklin Frazier later dubbed it "The Capital of the Black Middle Class."

Mr. Scarborough recalls how C.C Spaulding, the most prominent businessman in Hayti neighborhood, used to come sit on the corner by the home on Pettigrew St. When Spaulding got out of his car people would clap, and Spaulding would just sit there on the corner and shake hands and exchange kind words. "And people were getting off of work. And as they walk down the street they were waving at each other. They were hugging each other. And I stood there for all that time."

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Later in the spring, we're driving back from a graveside service and detour through downtown toward a stretch of tobacco auction houses-turned trendy restaurants. It's unfamiliar terrain. "My word, I'm learning my own city," Mr. Scarborough says. I ask him how he manages the emotional fatigue of the job. "I just deal with it," he says.

We detour to see what's left of Pettigrew St, now a no man's land of shipping outlets and car dealerships. Mr. Scarborough reconstructs the place from memory: Malcolm X School here. Booker T. Theater. Carolina Times. Shoe shops. Shoe repair school. Five and ten store. Shoeshine parlor. Beauty shop. Barber shop. Scarborough and Hargett. It was a place that had everything you needed, cradle to grave.

