

Black Kentucky Pioneers:

John Abner Agnew (c1870-1934)

By Jerry Long

John Abner Agnew was born circa 1870 in Floyd County, Virginia. According to his obituary he was born near Huntington, WV (Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 14 March 1934 p12). His death certificate states he was the son of Thomas & Maria (Lane) Agnew and was born 15 October 1873 Floyd Court House, WV. The latter was actually Court House District in Floyd County, Virginia not West Virginia (Kentucky death certificate 1934 – certificate #5881). The 1900, 1910, 1920 & 1930 censuses all report he was born in Virginia. The informant on his death certificate was his brother, Dr. Charles L. Agnew. His gravestone has a birth year of 1868 inscribed on it. His birth date was given as 25 October 1873 on his registration for the World War I (World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, Internet, Ancestry.com). The 1900 Federal Census gave his birth as October 1875 Virginia.

John A. Agnew is listed as being 10 years old and born Virginia in the 1880 census of Cabell County, West Virginia (enumeration district 17, p165A). His family, reported to be mulattos, were enumerated as:

Agnew, Thomas	60	married	works on farm	VA-VA-VA
Maria	45	wife	keeping house	VA-VA-VA
Thomas G.	20	son	works in lumber yard	VA-VA-VA
Emmett	18	son	laborer	VA-VA-VA
Charles	12	son	attended school	VA-VA-VA
John A.	10	son	attended school	VA-VA-VA
Layne, George	23	stepson	laborer	VA-VA-VA

Thomas G. Agnew, brother of John A., married Emily Brown, 25 May 1881 and F. C. Dickinson on 12 May 1892. Both marriages were performed at Guyandotte, Cabell County, WV. And both of his marriage licenses recorded that he was born in Floyd County, Virginia. Thomas died in Cabell County, WV on 31 May 1932. Thomas, Jr. was buried in the Spring Hill Cemetery in Huntington, Cabell County, WV. On his death certificate his parents were given as Thomas Agnew & Myria Lane. Another brother of John A., James Emmett Agnew, married Patsey Murray at Guyandotte, Cabell County, WV on 29 January 1885. His marriage license gave his place of birth as Floyd County, VA. At the time of the 1900 census Emmett Agnew was living in Huntington, Cabell County, WV. George Layne, a half-brother of John A., married Emma Mays, 20 October 1886 at Guyandotte, Cabell County, WV. George was a teamster and the 1920 census of Huntington, Cabell County, WV shows that his brother, Thomas Agnew, was living with him. George Layne died 10 November 1937 in Huntington, Cabell County, WV. Both his marriage license and death certificate reported that he was born Floyd County, Virginia. He was buried at the Spring Hill Cemetery, Huntington, Cabell County, WV.

Thomas Agnew, father of John Abner Agnew, was born into slavery in Virginia during 1812-1820. He died in Cabell County, WV on 6 November 1882. A death record reported that he was Black, age 69, was a farmer, married and his wife was Mariah. In the 1870 census of Floyd County, VA there appear several black and white Agnew families but Thomas & Maria Agnew were not found.

John A. Agnew by 1896 was residing in Louisville, KY. By then he had been educated for the profession of dentistry at the McHarry Medical College in Nashville, TN and the Haskill post graduate school of Chicago, IL. He practiced this profession for about 11 years. Prior to coming to Owensboro, KY he had practiced in Louisville. He was reportedly the first Negro dentist in Kentucky (Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 14 March 1934 p12). He practiced this profession in Louisville during 1896-1902; in each of the Louisville City Directories during these years he is listed as a dentist. The 1900 census of Louisville shows him as being single and residing alone; and the census taker listed him as a physician.

Upon coming to Owensboro in 1902 John A. Agnew quit the dental profession and began to study embalming and undertook the profession of undertaker. An article in the Louisville Leader, a Negro newspaper published in Louisville, KY, stated "he moved to Owensboro after taking a course in embalming at Cincinnati" ("Pay Last Respects To Owensboro Leader - Pay Last Respects To Dr. Agnew In Owensboro", 24 March 1934 p1). The Owensboro Inquirer on 28 September 1902 (p10) announced that "Dr. J. A. Agnew, a well known dentist of Louisville, will open handsome dental quarters in this city about October 5." And less than a month later the Owensboro Messenger issue of 25 October 1902 (p7) reported that J. A. Agnew, colored, of Louisville, will open by November 1st an undertaking establishment in Owensboro at Fourth & St. Ann Streets.

Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY
28 September 1902 p10, Colored Column:

Dr. J. A. Agnew, a well known dentist of Louisville, will open handsome dental quarters in this city about October 5. The doctor is a graduate from the dental department of McHarry Medical college, of Nashville, Tenn., and has had eleven year's experience in his profession. He comes to our city well recommended and will no doubt add prestige to the profession which he represents.

An undertaking firm is the next addition to Owensboro's colored business enterprises, that will try its fortune here. This city is one of the few prominent places in Kentucky, which has not this class of business. The firm will have the latest improved methods in handling the dead. We owe it to ourselves to give this enterprise encouragement. Courteous treatment is promised the patrons by the promoters.

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY
Saturday, 25 October 1902 p7:

UNDERTAKING ESTABLISHMENT
Will Be Opened Up By J. A. Agnew,
of Louisville.

J. A. Agnew, colored, of Louisville has rented the building on the corner of Fourth and St. Ann streets, formerly occupied by H. Weibel, and will open an undertaking establishment. The house will be remodeled and opened for business by the 1st of November. Agnew stated that he would also do embalming and that he would bring his own hearse, carriages and horses from Louisville.

Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY
Sunday, 16 November 1902 p10:

* COLORED COLUMN. *

The dental parlors of Dr. J. A. Agnew, corner of Fourth and St. Ann streets, are now open to the public. They are neatly furnished, with all of the latest appliances necessary for this branch of business.

The doctor is a graduate of Meharry dental college, Nashville, Tenn., and Haskill post graduate school of Chicago, Ill. He has had several years' practice and is well prepared for his business.

The 1903-04 Owensboro City Directory shows John A. Agnew, undertaker, 200 W. 4th, residence the same. On 29 August 1905 he incorporated the J. A. Agnew & Co. and at the time the Owensboro Messenger (30 August 1905 p2) reported that he had been operating an undertaking establishment at the corner of Fourth and St. Ann Streets for three years. In January 1906 he moved his firm to the corner of Fourth & Elm Streets (Owensboro Inquirer, 21 January 1906 p3).

He is listed as a funeral director – undertaker in the 1910, 1920 & 1930 censuses of Owensboro, Daviess County, KY; each of these gave his residence as 715 West 4th Street. Owensboro City Directories show that he resided at 715 and his undertaking firm was at 719 West 4th Street. For over thirty years he was Owensboro's leading Black undertaker. His obituary stated he was "active in all civic affairs toward the advancement of his race."

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY
Wednesday, 30 August 1905 p2:

ARTICLES ARE FILED

Incorporating the Undertaking Establishment of J. A. Agnew & Co.

Articles were filed yesterday incorporating J. A. Agnew & Co. The object of the incorporation as stated in the articles is to conduct a funeral undertaking business. The capital stock is \$5,000, of which \$1,000 is preferred, bearing six per cent. interest and redeemable at any time. The stock is divided into shares of \$25 each. The concern is to begin business September 15.

The stockholders are: J. A. Agnew, fifty-eight shares; Stirman Wheatley, three shares; E. A. Watts, one share; James R. Harris, sixteen shares.

All of the stockholders are negroes. J. A. Agnew has conducted an undertaking establishment at the corner of Fourth and St. Ann streets for three years.

Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY
Sunday, 21 January 1906 p3
Colored Column:

J. A. Agnew & So have moved the undertaking establishment to the corner of Fourth and Elm streets, where they will soon be ready for business.

Roy Green was one of three to be legally executed by hanging in Owensboro. After his execution on 17 February 1905 his body was taken to the J. A. Agnew's undertaking establishment at Fourth & St. Ann Streets. J. A. Agnew made the preparations for burial and delivered his body for burial in the colored burying ground adjacent to Owensboro's Elmwood Cemetery.

In February 1906 John A. Agnew was one of 34 African Americans in Owensboro that purchased a 16-acre plot and formed the Greenwood Cemetery Association. Greenwood Cemetery continued to serve the city's black community for the following 70 years (Greenwood Cemetery: 1821 Leitchfield Road, Owensboro, KY, by Jerry Long, Utica, KY, McDowell Publications, 2006, pp1-6). In 1907 Agnew was one of seven residents of Owensboro that formed the Negro Chautauqua Company. He contributed greatly to the success of the annual Chautauquas that were held in Owensboro thru 1925 (Daviess County, Kentucky: Celebrating Our Heritage, 1815-2015, M. T. Publishing Company, Inc., Evansville, IN, 2015, pp169-170). A branch library for colored people was established at his home in 1912 (Owensboro Inquirer, 9

June 1912 p9). He was the only black coroner in the area for many years. He was a member of the American Association of Physicians, Surgeons, Pharmacists and Dentists and the Colored Funeral Directors Association of Kentucky (Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, 12 October 1899 p4 and 12 August 1904 p4). He was affiliated with several fraternal and civic organizations.

J. A. Agnew married Nannie P. Wheatley on 31 December 1907 in Owensboro (Daviess County, KY Negro marriage book I, p464). Her middle name is given as Phillip in her obituary (Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, 24 December 1918 p6) and as Phylis on her death certificate (1918 – certificate #38513). Nannie was born 5 December 1883 Owensboro, Daviess County, KY and was the daughter of Elijah B. Wheatley (12 November 1844 – 18 May 1907) and Amelia Bell Thompson (29 March 1848 – 22 January 1929). Her father, a barber, served as a sergeant in the Union Army during the Civil War. He and his wife were buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Owensboro. Nannie Wheatley Agnew died of gastritis on 22 December 1918 at her home 731 West 4th Street in Owensboro. She was buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Owensboro. She was survived by her husband, three children, her mother, one brothers and one sister.

Owensboro Messenger, Tuesday, 24 December 1918 p6:

**WELL KNOWN COLORED
WOMAN DIES ON SUNDAY**

Nannie Phillip Agnew, wife of J. A. Agnew, a colored undertaker, of Owensboro, died of complications at 3:30 o'clock Sunday afternoon at her home 715 West Fourth street. She was thirty-five years of age and was one of the best known colored women of Owensboro. She is survived by her mother and three children, and one brother, Stirman Wheatley and a sister, Mary Etta Stewart. The funeral will be held when her sister arrives from Fayetteville, N. C., which will probably be Thursday.

REGISTRATION CARD					
SERIAL NUMBER	7802			ORDER NUMBER	A-4357
Name (Last, first, middle) <i>John Abner Agnew</i>					
Present Home Address <i>731 West 4th Street Owensboro Davis Ky</i>					
Age in Years	Date of Birth				
<i>34</i>	<i>Oct 25 1883</i>				
RACE					
White	Negro	Oriental	Indian	Chinese	Japanese
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
U. S. CITIZEN					
Native Born	Naturalized	Citizen by Father's Naturalization Before Registrar's Majority	Declarant	Non-declarant	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					
15 If not a citizen of the U. S., of what nation are you a citizen or subject?					
PRESENT OCCUPATION			EMPLOYER'S NAME		
<i>Undertaker</i>			<i>Self</i>		
18 PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR RESIDENCE					
<i>731 West 4th Street Owensboro Davis Ky</i>					
19 Name					
<i>Wife</i>					
20 Address					
<i>731 West 4th Street Owensboro Davis Ky</i>					
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE					
P. M. G. O. Form No. 1 (Revised)					
<i>John Abner Agnew</i>					

John A. Agnew died of tuberculosis in Owensboro, KY at his residence, 709 West 4th Street on 14 March 1934 (Kentucky death certificate 1934 - #5881). The Owensboro mayor and city commissioners attended his funeral (Louisville Leader, Louisville, KY, 24 March 1934 pp 1 & 4). He was buried at Greenwood Cemetery in Owensboro. His gravestone has John A. Agnew 1868-1934. On the same monument is the name of his daughter, Amelia M. Agnew 1908-1938.

Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY
Wednesday, 14 March 1934 p12:

J. A. Agnew, Well Known Negro Undertaker, Dead

John Abner Agnew, well known negro undertaker of Owensboro for the last thirty years, died at 4 o'clock this morning at his home in West Fourth street, after a lingering illness.

"Doctor" Agnew, by which term he was generally known, was born in Huntington, West Virginia. He was educated for the profession of dentistry at McHarry Medical college, Nashville. He practiced his profession in Louisville and was the first negro dentist to practice in Kentucky. Coming to Owensboro he quit the dental profession and studied embalming. He was prominent in negro fraternities and active in all civic affairs toward the advancement of his race.

In 1906 he was married to Nannie P. Wheatley, who died several years ago. He is survived by two daughters, Amelia and Inez Agnew, and one son, Charles Agnew, all of Owensboro. A brother Dr. C. L. Agnew, of Aurora, Ill., also survives. For the last ten years he has been senior member of the firm of Agnew & Wheatley undertakers.

No funeral arrangements have been made.



Form V. E. 1-A--Rev. 3-30-33

COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY
State Board of Health
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

File No. 5881
Registered No. 120

1. PLACE OF DEATH
County Owensboro
City Owensboro, Ky.
St. Ky. (No. 21145)
Death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME (instead of street and number)

2. FULL NAME John A. Agnew
(a) Residence No. 709 W. 4th St. Ward (If nonresident, give city or town and State)
Length of residence in city or town where death occurred 3 yrs. 1 mo. 0 da. How long in U. S., if of foreign birth? yrs. 0 mo. 0 da.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3. SEX Male 4. COLOR OR RACE Negro 5. Single, Married, Widowed or Divorced (write the word) Widowed
6a. If married, widowed, or divorced (a) WIFE of 10-15-1873
7. AGE 60 Years Months Days If less than 1 day hrs. 0 min.
8. Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as engineer, sawyer, bookkeeper, etc. Undertaker
9. Industry or business in which work was done, as silk mill, cannery, bank, etc. Undertaker
10. Date deceased last worked at this occupation (month and year) 3-16-1934
11. Total time (years) spent in this occupation 23
12. BIRTHPLACE Floyd Court House, W. Va.
13. NAME Thomas Agnew
14. BIRTHPLACE W. Va.
15. MOTHER NAME Maria Lane
16. BIRTHPLACE W. Va.
17. INFORMANT Wm. C. F. Agnew
(Address) Owensboro, Ky.
18. BURIAL, CREMATION, OR REMOVAL Place Owensboro, Ky. Date 3-16-1934
19. UNDERTAKER Agnew and Wheatley
(Address) Owensboro, Ky.
20. FILE NO. 3-16 John A. Agnew

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

21. DATE OF DEATH 3-14 1934
22. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from 4-12-34 to 3-13 1934
I last saw him alive on 3-13 1934 death is said to have occurred on the date stated above, at 4:00 p.m.
The principal cause of death and related causes of importance in order of onset were as follows:
Pulmonary Tuberculosis
Contributory causes of importance not related to principal cause:
Tuberculosis
Name of operation _____ Date of _____
What test confirmed diagnosis? _____ Was there an autopsy? _____
23. If death was due to external causes (violence) fill in also the following:
Accident, suicide, or homicide? _____ date of injury _____
Where did injury occur? _____
(Specify city or town, county, and State)
Specify whether injury occurred in industry, in home, or in public place.
Manner of injury _____
Nature of injury _____
24. Was disease or injury in any way related to occupation of deceased? If so, specify _____
(Signature) A. Cornelius M.D.
(Address) 305 E. Frederick St.
Owensboro, Ky.

MARGIN RESERVED FOR BINDING

NOTE: Every item of information should be carefully secured. Exact statement of occupation is very important. See instructions on back of certificate.

NOTE: WRITE PLAINLY, WITH INK. THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. PHYSICAL CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Exact statement of occupation is very important. See instructions on back of certificate.

John A. & Nannie Agnew were the parents of three children – Amelia Marie Agnew (born 2 August 1908 Owensboro, died 29 August 1938 Owensboro, KY, buried Greenwood Cemetery, Owensboro, KY, single); Inez Gladys Agnew (2 December 1909 Owensboro, KY – 27 December 1993 Owensboro, KY, buried Cave Spring Cemetery, Hopkinsville, KY, wife of A. L. Woods), and Charles Abner Agnew (6 August 1913 Owensboro, KY – 15 December 1966 Chicago, IL, buried Elmwood Cemetery, Owensboro, KY, married Lovenia Wells). J. A. & Nannie Agnew left no surviving grandchildren.

By 1926 John A. Agnew became partners with his brother-in-law, Wilbur Stirman Wheatley. The name of his business was then changed from J. A. Agnew Co. to Agnew & Wheatley. After the death of John A. Agnew his son, Charles, and daughter, Amelia, continued to operate Agnew & Wheatley Undertakers firm. On 19 June 1937 they opened the business in a newly constructed building at 721 West Fourth Street (Owensboro Messenger, 20 June 1937 p6A). The funeral home continued under the name of Agnew & Wheatley until the death of W. S. Wheatley in 1951. On 6 November 1951 the funeral home became the Griffith Funeral Home, Inc. The new firm continued operating at the same address, 721 West Fourth Street, under the ownership and management of Lee R. ('Jack') Griffith (Owensboro Messenger, 15 December 1951 p5). In 1964 Griffith Funeral Home became the Young's Funeral Home. On 24 May 1964

the new owner, Harry Young, held the open house for the new firm (Messenger-Inquirer, 24 May 1964 p8A). Young's Funeral Home at 721 West Fourth Street closed its doors during 2013.

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY

Sunday, 20 June 1937 p6A:

AGNEW & WHEATLEY FUNERAL HOME OPEN FOR INSPECTION

The new Agnew and Wheatley colored funeral home, situated about half a block from the Fourth Street Baptist church, will be open for inspection between 1 and 8 p.m. today. This home has been erected by the daughters and family of the late Dr. J. A. Agnew and Stirman Wheatley. The building has been erected of 10-inch red cedar siding and includes two stories and basement, or three floors.

On the first floor will be found halls, lounge rooms and business offices on one side, and a modern, modest chapel. The morgue is located in the basement, and the third floor is given over to a display room.

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 15 December 1951 p5:

Formal Opening of Griffith Funeral Home, Inc.
SUNDAY

Dec. 16, From 12 to 6 p. m.

The Griffith Funeral Home was formerly the old J. A. Agnew Funeral Home. Later it was the Agnew & Wheatley's Funeral Home, and remained under that name until after the death of the late W. S. Wheatley. On Nov. 6, members of the new corporation started doing business under the present name.

L. R. (Jack) Griffith, Pres. and Mgr., of the newly organized mortuary, extends a cordial invitation to all citizens and friends in Daviess and adjoining counties to visit and inspect this completely remodeled and rearranged mortuary home, which is more convenient, with a more home-like atmosphere for the convenience of relatives and friends of the loved ones who pass away. We are determined to improve in every phase of service that we are entrusted to perform you you: Our Ambulance Service shall be prompt, sincere, and courteous, anytime, anyplace.



LEE R. GRIFFITH
Manager

Funeral Home, 721 W. 4th, Phone 3-5717 - Res. Phone 3-9764

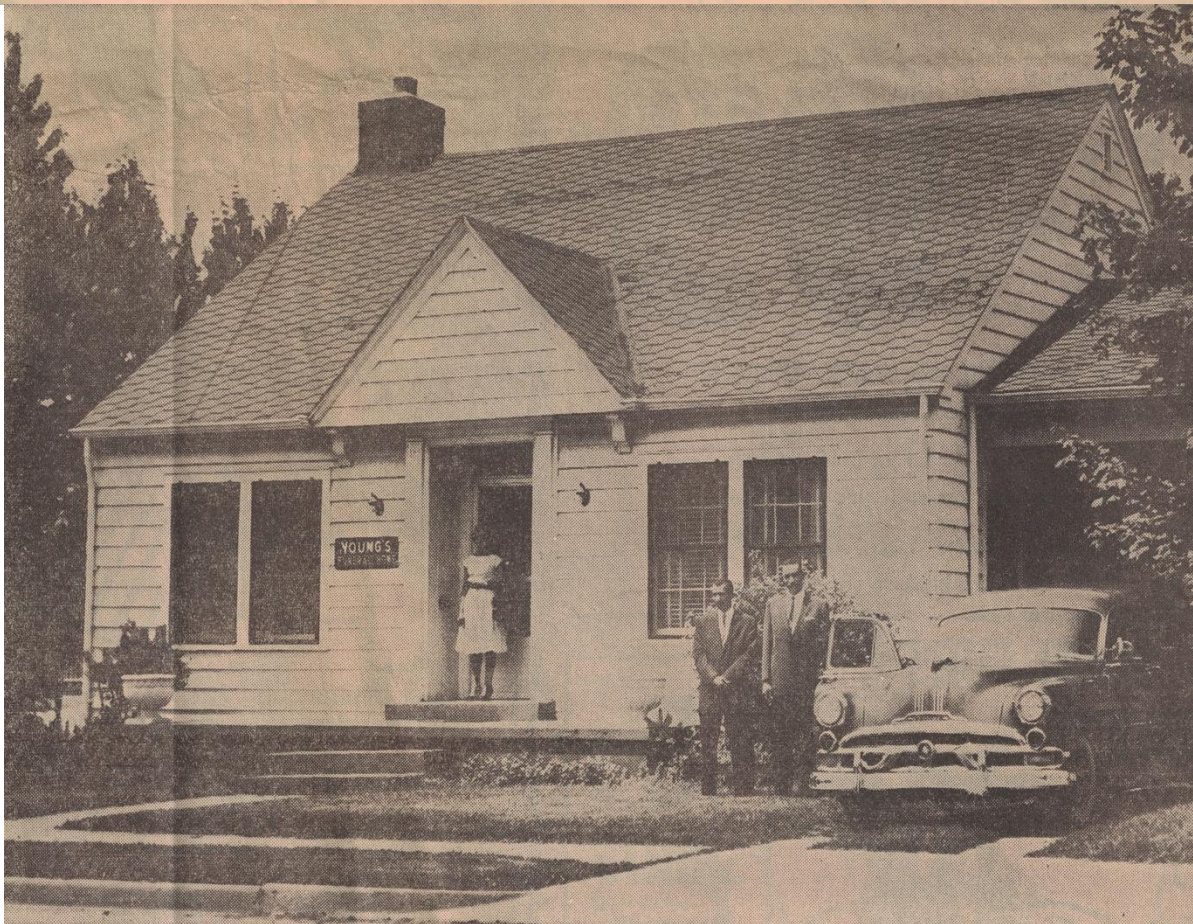
Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 24 May 1964 p8A:

YOUNG'S

FUNERAL HOME

721 West 4th St. Owensboro

(FORMERLY GRIFFITH FUNERAL HOME)



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 25 May 1964 p10A:

CORRECTION

The pictures in Young's Funeral Home Open House advertisement appearing in Sunday's Messenger and Inquirer were inadvertently transposed and should have appeared as follows:

THIS IS:

HARRY YOUNG

owner of
YOUNG'S FUNERAL HOME
721 W. 4th



HARRY YOUNG

.....



721 W. 4TH STREET

Young's Funeral Home formerly the Griffith Funeral Home
and the Agnew & Wheatley Funeral Home

.....

Inez Agnew Woods



Inez Agnew Woods, 84, of One Park Place, Owensboro, died Monday, Dec. 27, 1993, at Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital. She was born in Owensboro, was a retired schoolteacher and was a member of Fourth Street Baptist Church. She taught in the elementary department at Western High School for several years and later was a teacher for the Tennessee

Board of Education in Memphis before retiring. She moved back to Owensboro about three years ago from Odessa, Texas. She was the daughter of Dr. J.A. Agnew and Annie Wheatley Agnew.

Survivors include six cousins, Dr. Wheatley C. Stewart of Odessa, Texas, Dr. George Stewart, Amelia Stewart and John Stewart, all of Sacramento, Calif., Dr. Ethel S. Beasley of New Albany, Miss., and Dr. Luther Stewart of Baton Rouge, La.

Services are at 10 a.m. Friday at McFarland Funeral Home. Burial in Cave Springs Cemetery in Hopkinsville. Visitation after 6 p.m. Thursday at the funeral home.

Dr. C. L. Agnew, one of the most popular physicians of the Blue Grass section, stopped over in the city Monday, as the guest of his brother, Dr. J. A. Agnew, and friends. He left Monday night for Jacksonville, Ill., accompanied by Dr. J. H. Fitzbutler of Louisville, and Dr. Agnew, of this city, to claim the hand of Miss Cenovia Muse, one of the most popular girls of Illinois. The wedding service took place at the residence of the bride's parents. Dr. Fitzbutler was the best man. Rev. Muse, a brother of the bride, officiated. The doctor was highly entertained while in the city by the many friends of his brother. The bridal couple left Thursday for their home at Harrodsburg, Ky.

Danville News, Danville, KY, 13 May 1902 p3:

OFFICERS ELECTED.—The State Convention of colored physicians, which met here last week, elected the following officers: J. E. Hunter, Lexington, President; C. L. Agnew, Harrodsburg, Secretary; B. F. Jones, Danville, Treasurer. The next meeting will be held at Winchester.

Dr. Charles Livingston Agnew, brother of John Abner Agnew, was born in Floyd County, Virginia and was reported to be 12 years old in the 1880 census of Cabell County, West Virginia. He was a medical doctor. In 1895, he graduated from Meharry Medical College in Nashville and began his practice in Kentucky. In 1900 he was a resident of Harrodsburg, KY; he had went there from Guyandotte, Cabell County, WV. He had at one time edited the Twentieth-Century Literary Digest and for some time was a teacher in the Reform School at Lexington, KY (Owensboro Inquirer, 24 October 1901 p1).

Dr. C. L. Agnew moved to Aurora, Kane County, Illinois in 1907 and became that city's first Black physician. The city memorialized him by designating the house at 653 N May Street, where he lived for 35 years as a local landmark. The obituary of John Abner Agnew in 1934 reported he was survived by a brother, C. L. Agnew, of Aurora, IL. In the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Aurora, IL Dr. Charles L. Agnew has the following monument:



Chicago Tribune, Chicago, IL
10 March 1996 p1D

Doctor's life was landmark like home

Charles Agnew house
is honored in Aurora

By Jeffrey Bilis
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

In 1907, Dr. Charles Livingston Agnew arrived in Aurora and became the city's first black physician—and the two local hospitals turned him away.

Nearly nine decades later, the community that once resisted Agnew has memorialized him for all time, designating the house where he lived for 35 years as a local landmark.

It is the first time the Aurora Preservation Commission has granted such a designation to a property that has no apparent architectural significance, according to Jan Mangers, commission director.

The house, with its yellow siding and brown shutters, blends unnoticeably into an unassuming neighborhood on Aurora's west side. But its nondescript appearance belies the rich history of its former owner, a man whose parents had been slaves, a man who rose to a position of stature in his community matched by few others.

"People have a tendency to forget," said Mangers. "Hopefully, this landmark will be a constant, visible reminder."

With the landmark designation, the house will be protected, Mangers said. From now on, she said, the commission will have the right to review any proposals to change the house.

Among the 22 local landmarks that the commission has designated in addition to two historic districts, the Agnew house is the only property that earned its designation solely on the basis of historical merit, Mangers said.

The man who owned the house was born in Virginia in 1867. According to family history, Agnew worked hard as a

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DR. C. L. AGNEW

Courtesy of Aurora Preservation Commission

Dr. Charles L. Agnew, who was born in Virginia in 1867, came to Aurora in 1907 and was the city's first black physician.

Home

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

teenager teaching in a county school and saving every penny. By the time he was ready to leave for medical school, he was able to fulfill his mother's longtime dream by buying her a house.

In 1895, he graduated from Meharry Medical College in Nashville and began his practice in Kentucky. He moved to Aurora in 1907.

Spurned by the local hospitals, Agnew began a private practice at 63 S. Broadway in Aurora that attracted clients from throughout the region.

Agnew specialized in the treatment of skin diseases. He was a pioneer in the study of endocrinology. Accounts of his life describe how other doctors would come to him for help in diagnosing patients. Some of the doctors would take Agnew to see patients in the hospitals, where he was allowed to treat the patients only as an extension of the other doctors' practices.

Later, when a hospital invited Agnew to practice there, he refused, according to his foster daughter, Bernice Christmas.

As Agnew prospered, he shared his wealth with others, caring for needy children and providing shelter for the poor, said Christmas, 91, who still lives in his house at 653 N. May St.

"The house across the street, he built that," Christmas said. "He



Tribune photo by Mario Petitti

Dr. Agnew's foster daughter, Bernice Christmas, 91, lives with members of her family in Agnew's home at 653 N. May St., Aurora. "He was one kind man," she says of the physician who died in 1960.

built houses for people. Some people paid him. Some didn't. But he was one kind man."

Christmas said Agnew built his May Street house and invited her to live there when she was an adolescent, after her parents died. At first, she said, he didn't live in the house, but continued to live in the Broadway apartment where he had his medical practice.

Mangers said that city directories show Agnew moved into the house in 1925.

"Every Christmas, he would call the City Hall and ask them for the names" of families in need, Christmas said. "He would take his cleaning lady to the stores, and she would buy food for these families. They would assemble it in his office, and he would deliver it at Christmas."

Marie Wilkinsen, a longtime community activist in Aurora, said she recalls Agnew as "a man of dignity, a man of respect, a man who pulled himself up by his boot strings."

Wilkinsen, who helped care for Agnew in his old age, said she remembers seeing the doctor frequently on the porch of the house where he lived.

"All the children would go by and stop with their bikes and say, 'Hello, doctor,'" Wilkinsen said. "He was a man who enhanced Aurora and made Aurora a better place. . . . He was a famous man, and Aurora didn't realize it."

Agnew died in 1960, but his leg-

acy lives on in his house, where Christmas lives with a daughter, a granddaughter and a great-granddaughter.

Christmas said her 4-year-old great-grandson hopes to follow in the footsteps of his great-great-grandfather, who was known affectionately to his family as "Dockie."

"He used to tell me this," Christmas said, clutching a rosary in both hands. "'Little girl, the time to be happy is now.' See, he's talking to me. 'The place to be happy is here.' That was his theme. 'And the way to be happy is to make others so.' And he lived that, honey, he lived it."

Over the years, Christmas said, the house was known as a place where people could go for help.

Sitting at the kitchen table in the house that Agnew provided for her, Christmas is surrounded by memories.

"You see the birds coming here?" she asked, waving toward the kitchen window. "They've been coming here since I was a little girl. I've been feeding them every day."

Said Christmas: "This is a house where kindness and consideration have been paramount."

Tribune free-lance reporter Hal Dardick contributed to this article.