

KEEPING THE PAST PRESENT



James "Jack" Hadley

It all started one day in 1978, when his son, Jim, came home from school, confused.

At that point in Thomasville, GA Branch 1026 member James "Jack" Hadley's 28-year career in the Air Force, he was stationed in Wiesbaden, West Germany. His son was a junior in high school there and was dismayed that no one at school was interested in doing a lesson during Black History Week.

It didn't sit right with Hadley, so he decided that the two of them would do their own project. They started creating a collage, using pictures and articles cut out from old *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines as well as copied from books on black American achievers.

"Jim brought it to school," Hadley said, adding that the teachers liked it so much that they turned a trophy case into a makeshift black history exhibit.

Spurred by the experience, Hadley continued to add to his collection of black memorabilia and soon established the first black history exhibit at Lindsey Air Station in Wiesbaden. He continued throughout his military career to establish exhibits at other bases where he was stationed.

After retiring from the Air Force as a chief master sergeant in 1984, Hadley and his family moved to Thomasville, GA, where he had been born and raised. There, he joined the Postal Service as a letter carrier, delivering mail for 12 years before retiring in 1997.

His interest in black history never waned. His collection has swelled to

include more than 5,000 artifacts from pre-slavery to present day, such as iron leg shackles and a bronze Buffalo Soldier statue. It focuses on several topics, including civil rights, politics, sports, poets/writers, military, slavery, blacks living and working on plantations, black women and President Barack Obama.

He did his first exhibit in Thomasville in the basement of his church in 1984.

By 1995, Hadley and his family decided to incorporate his collection as a non-profit organization, which he called the Jack Hadley Black History Memorabilia, Inc. Doing so would allow the 501(c)(3) organization to receive public support to continue to grow the collection.

"Interest was developing," Hadley said. "People started asking to borrow pieces, and things kicked off and continued to grow."

They moved the collection to a room at an historic black school in town, but the school board soon decided to close the school and sell the property. As part of his high school alumni group, Hadley joined in to persuade the school board to sell it to the alumni.

"We put together a package," Hadley said. "We scrambled to get liability insurance on the property. We took over the building and I took over the museum."

Since he already had organized as a 501(c)(3), they sought donations. "In less than a year, I raised \$90,000 to renovate the complex."

JACK HADLEY BLACK HISTORY MUSEUM



Above: Hadley poses with a group of visitors to the museum

The Jack Hadley Black History Museum opened in 2006 in its current form.

“I didn’t realize what I was getting into,” Hadley said. He explained that it takes approximately \$100,000 a year to maintain the facility, and that they rely on grants and donations.

But it’s all been worth it, he says.

“Blacks have lost so much history,” he says, adding that the museum helps to preserve the memories. In 2018, the museum welcomed more than 3,000 visitors.

When African Americans die, he says, sometimes their possessions are lost and their accomplishments are forgotten. “We have buried so much history,” he said. “Our kids need to know the history and culture. We need a black history museum in every community.”

Hadley can’t display all of the thousands of items he has at once, and has to cull the collection so that the most meaningful are being shown at a time. “I have enough artifacts that I could open another museum,” he said. “I cherish every piece in here. I wouldn’t put it on the wall if it didn’t have an impact on the community.”

His personal favorite item in the museum is his grandfather’s bullhorn, which he had used while working on a Georgia plantation. “It’s a talking piece in the museum,” Hadley says.

The museum has received a donation of 3,000 African-American books from the collection of a woman who had recently died, and Hadley and the board hope to eventually digitize them.

Hadley said when students walk through the door, “They say, ‘Wow.’ They had never seen anything like it before.” He loves that reaction.

And “teachers say, ‘Thank you for what you’re doing,’” he added, because “teachers can’t do it all.”

The museum also has a series of posters on various subjects—including black women, unsung heroes, military, plantation life, slavery, the Jim Crow era—that it loans out to schools, hospitals, libraries, retirement homes and community centers that want to have their own exhibits. “We don’t take anything off the wall,” Hadley said.

A few years ago, Hadley said it was pointed out that the museum should be more visible in town. The fate of

**Below: Some of the material on exhibit
Bottom: School groups are among the museum’s 3,000-plus annual visitors**



Right: Included in the museum's materials are press clippings, such as this one that reported on the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Bottom: Hadley in his postal uniform from when he was an active letter carrier

an historic hotel no longer open to the public, in the downtown area of Thomasville, began to come into question. People asked him, "What are you going to do about the Imperial Hotel?"

The eight-bedroom hotel had been open from 1949 to 1969 and was a popular place on the "Chitlin Circuit," which was a collection of performance venues throughout parts of the Eastern, Southern and Upper Midwest areas of the United States that provided commercial and cultural acceptance for African-American entertainers during that era of racial segregation. Many musicians, including B.B. King, Five Blind Boys of Mississippi and Earl Bostic, had stayed there.

The Imperial Hotel was listed in the Green Book, a travel guide that letter



carrier **Victor Green** initially wrote in 1936 and subsequently updated. It helped African Americans traveling through the South during the Jim Crow era identify places where it was safe for them to stay and eat. (See the September 2013 *Postal Record* or nalc.org/greenbook.) It had recorded Thomasville's only black-owned hotel.

The hotel's next two owners didn't do anything with the property, and by 2018, Hadley got word that the current owner was ready to sell. The retired carrier knew he wanted to save the hotel, lest someone else tear it down, so they began to try to raise funds to buy it.

"People started rallying behind us," he said. They raised the money in collaboration with Thomasville Landmarks Inc. and the Williams Family Foundation of South Georgia, and then purchased it. Hadley's nephew convinced him to also buy the shotgun house beside the hotel, which they did; they now use it for storage.

Hadley didn't know the building's connection to the Green Book when he purchased the property.

"After we bought the hotel, a lady walked in," he recalled. She recently had bought a Green Book and told them that the Imperial Hotel had been included in the 1954 edition.

"If [the previous] investor had known it was in the Green Book, I wouldn't own this hotel," Hadley

said, adding that the 2018 Oscar-winning movie of the same name helped their public relations and added buzz for what they were trying to do in Thomasville.

But once Hadley and the board had the hotel in its possession, Hadley said, "I had no idea what to do with it."

The one thing they knew they needed was money to restore the hotel, about \$1 million. Last fall, the museum board held a fundraising gala. The money raised there, along with a grant from a foundation, allowed them to complete the stabilization of the building that was underway and put on a new roof. The next step is to fix the original sign and replace it on the front of the hotel. When it opens officially, the building also will get a historical plaque.

Hadley says that on the first floor of the hotel, where there originally was a barber shop and café, they will have rotating exhibits from the museum that he hopes will direct people to visit the main museum.

The board is still trying to figure out the best use of space for the upstairs of the Imperial Hotel. Ideas suggested have been as an Airbnb, office space or an all-purpose training center. Whatever is decided, Hadley says, "it's got to be self-supporting, not a drain on the museum." He says they expect to have a business plan in place for use of the building before the end of the year.

Hadley says he feels “blessed to be around to capture this history” and appreciates all the support from members of the community. “They believe in what we’re doing,” he said.

In addition to the museum and hotel, Hadley has pushed for other initiatives to remember black history—in Thomasville and beyond.

In town, that includes a black history parade, which began last year, as well as a festival celebrating Buffalo Soldiers (African-American soldiers who served on the Western frontier following the American Civil War), and a memorial wall and plaques for where businesses used to be in the black business as a part of the Thomasville Black Heritage Trail.

In 2000, he wrote a book along with co-author Dr. Titus Brown titled *African-American Life on the Southern Hunting Plantation*, after interviewing more than a dozen African Americans who worked or lived on Southern hunting plantations.

“Thomasville wants to make sure black history is not lost,” Hadley said. “It makes a big difference when blacks get involved in the community.”

Hadley, who is 83, knows he will not be around forever. But he hopes to have a positive impact while he still can, and says that his board will carry on his legacy.

“When I leave this world, I know I’ve done my best to make a difference,” he said. “I didn’t do it for myself. I’m giving back and I hope people appreciate what I’ve started. I did it for the community.”

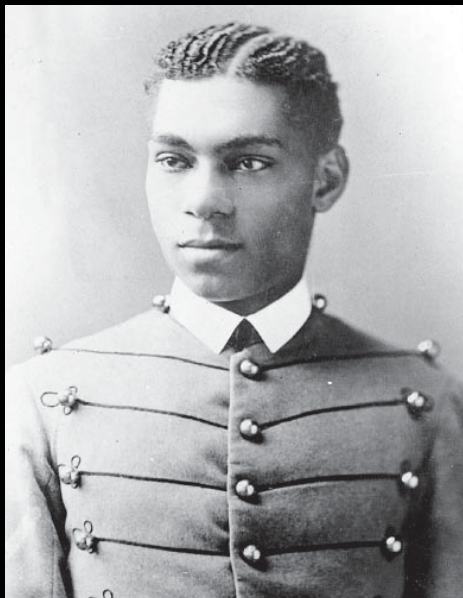
The retired carrier had no idea that his son’s frustration all those years ago would lead to all this. “It’s been a journey,” he says. **PR**

To learn more, visit the website at jackhadleyblackhistorymuseum.com.



Hadley is now working to restore the Imperial Hotel (above), Thomasville’s only black-owned hotel.

Once a letter carrier, always a letter carrier



Hadley has been part of an effort for more than 30 years to get a U.S. postage stamp commemorating Lt. Henry Ossian Flipper (pictured), a native of Thomasville who was a Buffalo Soldier and the first black American to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The petition is still under consideration.

In 1998, Hadley initiated a special action to introduce a bill in Congress that would name the new substation of the Thomasville post office, which opened in June 1999, the “Lt. Henry Ossian Flipper Station.”

“It’s important to capture this piece of history,” Hadley said.