

## **Narrative:**

### **Margurite and Peter S. Johnson, business office and dwelling**

By all accounts from those who live, or have lived there, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina “is certainly a pleasant place to live in.”<sup>1</sup> Before English settlers came to the area, Mount Pleasant had been inhabited by Native Americans, namely the Wando, Etiwan, and Sewee.<sup>2</sup> It was not until 1674 that Captain Florence O’Sullivan was granted the land that today makes up the Old Village, the center of the town.<sup>3</sup> Though land was cultivated in the area, it was in 1749 that Jacob Motte endeavored to consistently use the land of modern Mount Pleasant. His plantation was named Mount Pleasant Plantation, giving it the name it still holds today.<sup>4</sup> Motte’s interest in the land, and its proximity to Charles Town, encouraged others to invest in the land, and Jonathan Scott developed Greenwich Village. By the 1770s there was a ferry that connected Mount Pleasant to town, and the waterside village was a desirable place to live.<sup>5</sup> It only grew from there, and “finally the area had grown in such size and number that, in 1837, the various villages united, and in taking the name of Mount Pleasant, the town was born.”<sup>6</sup> However, over the course of the next decades, war and antebellum American economics hit the area hard, and the once vibrant plantations were no longer a viable place to make money. Development in terms of new agricultural practices, but also ferry business and merchant shops expanded Mount Pleasant, until the plantations that once took over the land are nothing but a namesake for the neighborhoods that took their place.<sup>7</sup> For African Americans, the growth of Mount Pleasant was influenced by similar events until the post Civil War era and emancipation. It was at this point when the outskirts of the Old Village began to see development and construction of vernacular houses, churches such as Friendship AME, and the Laing School for African Americans.<sup>8</sup> Though many accounts state that race relations in Mount Pleasant were largely peaceable by the middle of the twentieth century, there has always been a clear divide in the Historic Old Village of Mount Pleasant and the rest of the historic houses in the town.

This land around Venning Street dates back to the founding of the village, and the earliest deed found lists this area as part of a large acreage of land sold from Theodore Gregorie Venning

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<sup>1</sup> "Mount Pleasant, S.C." *Resources and Attractions of Charleston*, 1898. South Carolina Room Vertical Files.

<sup>2</sup> Miles, Suzannah Smith. *East Cooper Gazetteer History of Mount Pleasant, Sullivan's Island and Isle of Palms*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2004. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Miles, Suzannah Smith. *East Cooper Gazetteer History of Mount Pleasant, Sullivan's Island and Isle of Palms*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2004. 13

<sup>4</sup> Miles, Suzannah Smith. *East Cooper Gazetteer History of Mount Pleasant, Sullivan's Island and Isle of Palms*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2004. 14

<sup>5</sup> Miles, Suzannah Smith. *East Cooper Gazetteer History of Mount Pleasant, Sullivan's Island and Isle of Palms*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2004. 15

<sup>6</sup> Miles, Suzannah Smith. *East Cooper Gazetteer History of Mount Pleasant, Sullivan's Island and Isle of Palms*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2004. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Miles, Suzannah Smith. *East Cooper Gazetteer History of Mount Pleasant, Sullivan's Island and Isle of Palms*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2004. 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Fordham, Damon L. "The Black History of Mount Pleasant." *Moultrie News*, February 22, 2011. [https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/the-black-history-of-mount-pleasant/article\\_3c1cb28d-0b5f-5a72-a98a-b7678f26d381.html](https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/the-black-history-of-mount-pleasant/article_3c1cb28d-0b5f-5a72-a98a-b7678f26d381.html).

to Samuel Venning Gregorie.<sup>9</sup> Samuel Venning Gregorie also purchased adjacent land from the Christ Church Sheriff,<sup>10</sup> though it is unclear how he loses possession of the land, as the next location of this particular parcel of land is sold in 1879, by the Porter Master.<sup>11</sup> This land was mortgaged to Lucca (found Luke Marino in other deeds) Marine, and Raphael (Given as R. Julius in other deeds) Rogero, in 1879, and was paid off by the next year. It is in the next deed, from Marine and Rogero to Cupid Buist in 1884, that the property is described as divided and sold in eight parcels to “sundry persons,”<sup>12</sup> meeting the current dimensions of the lot--61 feet, 9 inches by 184 feet.<sup>13</sup> From 1884 until today, the land has remained the same size, though it passed from Buist to his wife Henrietta, when he passed away, and Henrietta Buist sold the property to Richard Brown in 1904.<sup>14</sup> Though little is known about the Brown family, according to an interview with lifelong Venning Street resident, Lois Brown, they began the funeral business at 440 Venning Street sometime after their 1904 purchase of the property.<sup>15</sup> An interview with Margurite Johnson shows that she and her husband, Peter S. Johnson, “purchased the funeral home in 1929,”<sup>16</sup> though the deed transfer for the property did not occur until 1939, when Margurite Johnson purchased the property from Ellen Brown (wife of Richard Brown) and Ellen Williams (daughter of Mary Brown), who had been willed the property from brother and sister, Richard and Mary Brown.<sup>17</sup> It remained in Margurite Johnson’s possession until 1997, when she passed ownership to her longtime employee, Sam Halls, who still owns the property and runs the funeral home.<sup>18</sup>

The period of significance for 440 Venning Street begins in 1929, when Margurite and Peter S. Johnson began working at the property, as their longtime dedication to Venning Street as a business and community is what marks the local significance of this property. Though the property was still owned by Richard Brown at the time, Margurite and Peter began their funeral directing career at Venning Street, as listed in the 1930 Census. Peter Johnson was listed as an undertaker, while Margurite operated a laundry service, which had an all African American,

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<sup>9</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book O17, p110.

<sup>10</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book N17, p5.

<sup>11</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book B18, p83.

<sup>12</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book A32, p66.

<sup>13</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book A32, p66.

<sup>14</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book R24, p227. [microfilm].

<sup>15</sup> "Oral History: Lois Brown." Interview by Katherine Pemberton. *Historic Charleston Foundation Archives*, June 21, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> "Oral History: Margurite Johnson." Interview by Betty Lee Johnson. *The East Cooper Pilot* (Mount Pleasant). Johnson, Betty Lee. As I Remember It: An Oral History of the East Cooper Area. Vol. 1. Round O, S.C.: the author, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book K43, p487. [microfilm].

<sup>18</sup> Charleston County. Records of the Register Mesne Conveyance (RMC), Charleston SC. Deed Book A287, p646. [microfilm].

female staff.<sup>19</sup> In this period, funeral directing was a highly respected position in the African American community, and “Undertakers [were] often among the wealthiest and most influential men in Negro society.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, funerary services were the third largest industry in African American economics, behind cosmetics and insurance.<sup>21</sup> However, it is interesting to note that when the deed indicates the transfer in ownership in 1939, Margurite Johnson is listed as the sole owner of the property. Though Peter Johnson’s role in the business and town is significant in its own right, Margurite Johnson was a property owning business woman, in Jim Crow South Carolina. Explained in more detail in the coming paragraphs, the story of 440 Venning Street is one of overcoming racial barriers to become successful, as a woman and African American in Mount Pleasant.

The Johnson’s left a strong legacy in Mount Pleasant as community leaders in all senses of the word. Peter S. Johnson and his wife, Margurite G. Johnson were a community couple with a focus on political and religious awareness and advocacy. Peter S. Johnson was the town funeral director, and was widely respected for his career and his dedication to the business that he continually grew. In fact, he seems to have echoed the significance of the African American funeral director, as Suzannah E. Smith writes about in her book *To Serve the Living*:

One of the most important contributions of black funeral directors to African American culture was the way they used their role as community leaders to promote the respectability of the race...The public image of the black funeral director, who exuded affluence and impeccable decorum, stood in dramatic contrast to these ubiquitous images.<sup>22</sup>

Those images being the racially derogatory depictions of African Americans perpetuated in American culture at the time. However, Peter Johnson more than just a businessman; he was a founding member of the original NAACP charter in the town,<sup>23</sup> and was largely involved in politics in the area by both “conduct[ing] voting and adult literacy classes,”<sup>24</sup> and running for offices. He was an outspoken member of the Democratic Party, and even ran for Mount Pleasant School Board trusteeship against a white man; the newspaper making sure to highlight that difference in their article with the line, “the incumbent, Clarence B. Pearce, a lawyer, was being

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<sup>19</sup> "Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930." Sheet 8A, 232. South Carolina Historical Society Collection.; Blakeney, Barney. "Mount Pleasant African American Settlement Commission Dedicates New Headquarters." *The Chronicle*. Accessed November 2, 2017. <https://www.charlestonchronicle.net/2017/11/02/mount-pleasant-african-american-settlement-commission-dedicates-new-headquarters/>.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Suzanne E. *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. Proquest. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, Suzanne E. *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. Proquest. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Suzanne E. *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. Proquest. 93-94.

<sup>23</sup> "Oral History: Sam Halls." Interview by Katherine Pemberton. *Historic Charleston Foundation Archives*, June 21, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Fordham, Damon L. "The Black History of Mount Pleasant." *Moultrie News*, February 22, 2011. [https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/the-black-history-of-mount-pleasant/article\\_3c1cb28d-0b5f-5a72-a98a-b7678f26d381.html](https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/the-black-history-of-mount-pleasant/article_3c1cb28d-0b5f-5a72-a98a-b7678f26d381.html).

opposed by Peter S. Johnson, negro undertaker of the town.<sup>25</sup> Though few records remain about Peter Johnson, largely because of his untimely death in 1953,<sup>26</sup> he is still fondly remembered by community members today, and his obituary ran with a number of organizations memorializing his service. He was an honored member of the Freemason's Pisgah Lodge No. 169, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, the Benevolent Brotherhood Society, Masonic Lodge of Education Progressive Lodge No. 1249, and a trustee of Friendship AME Church ( he was also involved in having this rebuilt after significant damage had occurred<sup>27</sup>), member of the George Washington Carver Consistory No. 162.<sup>28</sup> Though Peter Johnson's life was short, he contributed to Mount Pleasant in an unforgettable way by paving the road for his wife to continue his legacy of involvement, philanthropy, entrepreneurship, and advocacy.

As tragic as the death of Peter S. Johnson was, it created a situation that thrust Margurite Johnson into a unique and rare position for African American women in 1950s South Carolina. She was a single, female, black business owner. In her own words, Margurite shares, "I learned to be a mortician from my husband. I am the only lady mortician in Mount Pleasant. There aren't many lady morticians. I've run the business alone since my husband died in 1963, and it keeps me very busy."<sup>29</sup> Similarly to her husband, Margurite was entrepreneurial and widely involved in the community. After a search of her files from her business and home, it is clear she was also a member of the Democratic party, a trustee at Friendship AME, a member of Women in Rural Electrification (WIRE), and a perennial member of work related organizations such as the South Carolina Colored Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association, for which she traveled to conventions and meetings frequently.<sup>30</sup> It was also revealed in those files that she was a savvy business woman in her prime, and took aspects of her funeral home such as advertising and understanding life insurance very seriously.<sup>31</sup> Margurite Johnson served her community in a groundbreaking way, and conducted her business out of 440 Venning Street, an understated structure that tells the story of a woman rising to challenge the conventions of the time in order to run her own funeral home from 1953 until her death in 1997.

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<sup>25</sup>"Voting Moves at Snail Pace Here Today." *Newsbank*. America's Historical Newspapers. The Charleston Evening Post, November 5, 1946.; Blakeney, Barney. "Mount Pleasant African American Settlement Commission Dedicates New Headquarters." *The Chronicle*. Accessed November 2, 2017. <https://www.charlestonchronicle.net/2017/11/02/mount-pleasant-african-american-settlement-commission-dedicates-new-headquarters/>.

<sup>26</sup>"Peter Samuel Johnson." South Carolina, Death Records, 1821-1965. Accessed August 01, 2018. [https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=8741&h=968716&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=iZf15&\\_phstart=succesSource](https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=8741&h=968716&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=iZf15&_phstart=succesSource). South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Columbia, South Carolina; Year Range: 1950-1961; Death County or Certificate Range: Charleston

<sup>27</sup> Horton, Tom. "H&R Sweet Shop on Royall Ave. Turns 65." *Moultrie News*, March 29, 2012. [https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/h-r-sweet-shop-on-royall-ave-turns/article\\_016abf56-cf77-5027-9f76-b3382445503a.html](https://www.moultrienews.com/archives/h-r-sweet-shop-on-royall-ave-turns/article_016abf56-cf77-5027-9f76-b3382445503a.html).

<sup>28</sup> "Funeral Notice." *Newsbank*. America's Historical Newspapers. The Charleston Evening Post, May 25, 1953.

<sup>29</sup> "Oral History: Margurite Johnson." Interview by Betty Lee Johnson. *The East Cooper Pilot* (Mount Pleasant). Johnson, Betty Lee. As I Remember It: An Oral History of the East Cooper Area. Vol. 1. Round O, S.C.: the author, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> "Margurite Johnson, Personal Papers." 440 Venning Street, Mount Pleasant, SC, Vertical Files.

<sup>31</sup> "Margurite Johnson, Personal Papers." 440 Venning Street, Mount Pleasant, SC, Vertical Files.

Co-founder and President of the African American Settlement Communities Historic Commission, John Wright, grew up in Mount Pleasant, and fondly shared his memories of being able to participate in local sports leagues and community activities, thanks to Ms. Margurite.<sup>32</sup> Ms. Lois Brown, whose family has owned the property across the street since the 1800s, echoes the sentiments, sharing that Peter Johnson was “stately and intelligent,” while Margurite was “tall and no-nonsense,” though both were leaders in the community who believed in education, current events, and the community.<sup>33</sup> Margurite’s nephew, Anthony Major helped out his aunt at the funeral home from time to time because, as he put it, she and her husband helped everyone in the area by loaning money to family and friends and donating to churches.<sup>34</sup> And perhaps one of the people most affected by Margurite Johnson and her husband’s legacy is Mr. Sam Halls, who currently owns the property and the neighboring funeral home. While part of his insider knowledge of the funeral business in the Charleston area reveals the segregation of the field, so much so that there were funeral homes who would not even accept ‘light-skinned’ African Americans, he also shared that working for Margurite was an opportunity to serve the entire Mount Pleasant area. 440 Venning Street never served as the funeral home, but rather the office and living space of the Johnsons--the front, street-facing parlor housed many meetings of family members grieving, turning to Margurite for comfort and guidance in their time of loss. In fact, it was such a popular funeral home that everyone knew Margurite, and often referred to the business as “Margurite’s Funeral Home,” rather than the P.S. Johnson Funeral Home.<sup>35</sup>

Research into the Johnson’s and their property revealed a history rich in community, love, and generosity. However, research also presented many challenges, as very little exists about the African American experience in Mount Pleasant, particularly in the Old Village. Just outside of the purview of the existing National Register Historic District, it is almost as if the historically African American section of the village has been left out of any narrative of the town. 440 Venning Street at Simmons (formerly Boundary Street), has housed a funeral home for 100 years--an African American, female run business that also funded political parties and committees, sports, and other local and state clubs. In fact, in a 2006 meeting of the Town of Mount Pleasant Historical Commission, it was proposed that “a historical marker regarding Ms. Marguerite [sic] Johnson and her funeral home might be appropriate as it was the only funeral home for the black community that has survived.”<sup>36</sup> There is currently no marker in the area, though the property has been named the “Peter S. & Margurite Johnson Center” by the African American Settlement Historic Commission. However, in terms of research, there are no hurricane records, earthquake records, historic images, interviews, books, archives--and this void of information is not just in relation to 440 Venning Street, it is lacking across all narrative of African American history in Mount Pleasant. This nomination, and the story of the Johnson’s business and community, serves to bring awareness to the lives of the working class, African

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<sup>32</sup> "Oral History: John Wright." Interview by Sada Stewart and Katherine Pemberton., June 21, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> "Oral History: Lois Brown." Interview by Katherine Pemberton. *Historic Charleston Foundation Archives*, June 21, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "Oral History: Anthony Major." Interview by Katherine Pemberton. *Historic Charleston Foundation Archives*, June 21, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> "Oral History: Sam Halls." Interview by Katherine Pemberton. *Historic Charleston Foundation Archives*, June 21, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Montgomery, Louisa, et al. "Section 4: General Discussion, Issue 1." Town of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina Historical Commission Minutes, September 14, 2006.

Americans in a historic town that currently has zero Nationally Registered properties related to African American history.