

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society and Museum

William Atkinson ©

William Christopher Atkinson, one of the most respected African American businessmen of his day, began his life on December 20, 1856 on Black River. Known as "Bill", he began attending the rural school on Black River in 1865. He attended school for four years, but was given some help in acquiring knowledge by the family for whom he worked. He was converted about 1886 and joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He held the offices of Steward, Trustee, Class Leader, and Treasurer of the Steward Board. His first wife, Diane, died at a very young age. They had one daughter, Ella. In 1888 Bill married Maudest Kelly and they had 9 children: William Christopher, Jr., Theodore, Huger, Ernest, Lena, Florence (Flory), Amelia, Orilla and Janie.

According to "A Walk Down Front Street", a publication describing the ownership of every business on Front Street since about 1865, Bill owned the first successful African American family business. He leased an open space in the market under the Town Clock in 1901 for three dollars per week for two years, but discovered his business partner had gone behind his back and was leasing half of the market. City Council determined that the market space would be put up for bid and awarded to the highest bidder. Bill was the only bidder and paid seventy-five dollars for the spot. He continued here until May of 1905 when he purchased 818 Front Street and relocated his business there. Although his advertising described his business as carrying "Staple and Fancy Groceries" it was referred to locally as "Atkinson's Meat Market and Grocery". His four sons, William, Jr., Ernest, Huger, and Theodore worked with him making this the first African American family to operate a business on Front Street. In 1909, Atkinson purchased 820 Front Street to enlarge his business.

By simply reading the above statements, there is no indication of the character of Bill Atkinson except he was a good business man. A salute to his good judgment, honesty, and devotion to his family, his church, and his business is found in his obituary of April 21, 1920.

THE GEORGETOWN TIMES, APRIL 21, 1920

"Pay Tribute of Respect: Prominent Families of George-Town Attend Negro's Funeral"
Georgetown, SC

A demonstration considered remarkable occurred here Sunday at the funeral of William C. Atkinson, in the African Methodist Church, when a large section of the spacious interior set aside for the purpose was filled to overflowing with white men and women of the most prominent families of the city, met to pay tribute of respect to a worthy member of the colored race. The floral offerings covering the casket and banked around the pulpit, were largely tributes from the white friends of the deceased.

Born in 1856 in Georgetown County, William Atkinson grew up on a rice plantation, there learning from the gentlefolk of the manor good manners, which coupled with native judgment, honesty and devotion to duty, in whatever sphere it came to him, had brought him not only business success and the respect and high esteem of all who knew him, both white and black. The Negroes from all the county literally swarmed in to attend the funeral.

A fitting and impressive service was carried out by the various pastors of the city and the selected choir. The Reverend Perrin, pastor of the deceased, delivered a panegyric.

"Bill" Atkinson died last Thursday, April 15, having been in failing health for some months. For the past twenty years, he has conducted a very successful green grocery here and general store. His patronage included nearly everybody to a greater or less extent and his standard of doing business was such that everyone had implicit faith in him."

Atkinson's Grocery continued on in the management of his sons and served the people of Georgetown in the same good judgment, honesty and devotion to duty as displayed by their father. The store burned in a large fire of December of 1933.