

LILMOD NEWS

Honoring Mr. Ed Allen: A Man of Service, Legacy, and Heritage

Community / Public History Feature

By James D. Height Jr. | Published May 2026 | Beaufort County, South Carolina

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A Man of Service, Legacy, and Heritage



This summer, I had the great honor of sitting with Mr. Ed Allen in his home, where he generously shared his remarkable life story and deep family history. Our conversation highlighted not only his professional trailblazing but also the resilience and contributions of his ancestors, whose legacies continue to shape Beaufort County today.

A Pioneer in Public Service

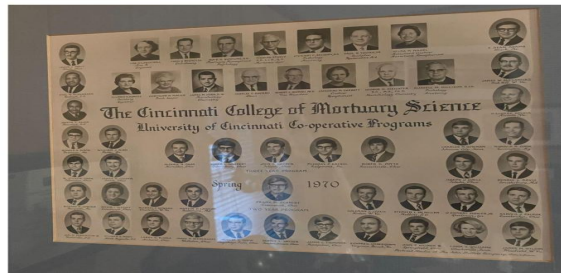
Mr. Allen retired after 33 years as Director of Beaufort County Emergency Medical Services, having begun his service in 1974 when funeral homes ceased operating ambulances. Through his work, he helped establish Beaufort County's first EMS department and trained generations of emergency responders. According to Mr. Allen and local historical understanding, he is believed to have been the first known Black EMS Director of a county in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida. His work helped transform emergency response infrastructure in Beaufort County while opening pathways for future generations of Black public servants throughout the region. In addition to his EMS work, he served as Deputy Coroner alongside Curt Copeland for nearly three decades before becoming Beaufort County's elected Coroner in 2008. He would go on to serve 12 years in that role, helping expand the office into one of the most respected in the state. Mr. Allen is also widely recognized as the second Black Coroner in Beaufort County's history, following Renty Graves, who rests in Beaufort National Cemetery.

Educational Path and Career Foundations

Mr. Allen graduated from Robert Smalls High School before enrolling at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans as a pharmacy major. Realizing the limited opportunities for private pharmaceutical practice in the area at the time, he redirected his path and later studied at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. His early career included work at Leevy's Funeral Home in Columbia before returning to Beaufort in 1972. He eventually partnered in the funeral home business he first learned as a high schooler, blending his training in mortuary sciences with a deep commitment to community service and public care.

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Educational material connected to Mr. Allen's training at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science.

Family Heritage and Community Roots

Equally powerful was hearing Mr. Allen recount his family history, which speaks to the endurance, adaptability, and achievements of Black families throughout Beaufort County. His grandfather, Willie Pigler, was a self-educated veterinarian and landowner who operated a hog farm on the very land where Mr. Allen lives today. Before the arrival of Dr. Pratt, Mr. Pigler was widely known as the county's only veterinarian. He also owned and operated a nightclub, shrimp hole, and liquor store. For those who knew him, these accomplishments pointed toward several undeniable truths: he demonstrated entrepreneurship, self-sufficiency, and a sophisticated understanding of how to remain compliant with both state and county business regulations during a period when opportunities for Black ownership and advancement were often restricted. Mr. Allen also shared that his great-grandfather, Arthur Pigler, moved from Sumter to Beaufort to work phosphate mines in the river. Following emancipation, he adopted his former enslaver's surname as a practical strategy for securing better employment opportunities during Reconstruction-era transitions. His lineage also includes veterans of the United States Colored Troops, whose service helped secure freedom and dignity for generations that followed. Mr. Allen's father-in-law, Dr. Alonzo Stephens, was among the earliest Black men to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Stephens chaired the History Department at Tennessee State University, taught at Savannah State University, and began his education at Bethune-Cookman College, where he personally drove Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune as both a trusted companion and informal driver.

Reflections and Gratitude

What I found most moving in our time together was how Mr. Allen tied personal memory to public history. Whether describing how caskets floated to the surface following Hurricane Matthew in 2016, or recalling evenings when Beaufort families slept along the Bluff to catch cool breezes while looking up at some of the clearest stars and brightest moons imaginable before air conditioning became common, he consistently connected everyday life to broader historical change. Both Mr. Allen's life and heritage remind us that service to community is not only professional, but ancestral. His example continues to teach younger generations that public service, resilience, and integrity are living traditions that must be carried forward. On behalf of the HBCUI National Park Service Internship Program, I extend my deepest gratitude to Mr. Allen for his time, generosity, and wisdom. His story stands as both a personal legacy and a communal inheritance that continues to enrich the preservation and understanding of Beaufort County history and the broader Lowcountry.