268# Chestnut Funeral Home (Script by Peggy Macdonald and Joanna Grey Talbot)

Chestnut Funeral Home is one of the oldest continuously-operated businesses in Gainesville. Cofounder Charles S. Chestnut Senior was a descendant of enslaved laborers at Kanapaha Plantation, owned by Thomas and Serena Haile. After emancipation, Johnson Chestnut left the plantation on the outskirts of town and moved to Gainesville, where he was elected to the City Commission in 1868. His grandson, Charles Chestnut Senior, and business partner Matthew E. Hughes founded the Chestnut Funeral Home in 1914.

Chestnut and Hughes took their roles as funeral directors to heart, knowing that their business placed them in a role of leadership within the local African American community. They were also founding members of the Florida Morticians Association, an organization for black morticians.

Before he opened his own funeral home, Chestnut served as an apprentice at what is now Williams-Thomas Funeral Home at 404 North Main Street. Originally the Hughes and Chestnut Funeral Home, the business was among the first licensed funeral homes in Florida. After Hughes died in 1947, the Chestnut family purchased his half of the business and changed the name to Chestnut Funeral Home.

During the Civil Rights Movement, the Chestnut family worked to desegregrate schools and businesses. The Chestnut Funeral Home served as a safe meeting space for the local chapter of the NAACP.

Charles Chestnut Senior died in 1977. The funeral home has been operated by four generations of Chestnuts. In addition to carrying on Charles Chestnut Senior’s family business, the Chestnuts have continued Johnson Chestnut’s tradition of public service. The Chestnuts have been active in local and state politics from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.