

SOUTHERN CALLS  
**PLACES**

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**VINES FUNERAL HOME**  
LaFayette, Alabama

On a sunny, early autumn day in LaFayette, Alabama, a sleepy little town of fewer than 3,000 people, professional vehicles were displayed on the front lawn of what was once a modest brick bungalow. There was a stage encircled with a wreath of balloons woven into an American flag. There was food. There was music. There was merriment. The occasion was the unveiling of a historical marker commemorating the listing of Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service on the National Register of Historic Places. It's a distinction held by only one funeral home in the entire



state. But for Marilyn Vines, president of Vines Funeral Home, the day was bittersweet. Her daddy, Julius Summers Vines, the man who began the home's historic legacy, wasn't there to witness the festivities.

Julius Vines was born in 1922 in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, to Adolphus and Ada Vines. The Vines' were farmers, growing cotton, corn and other vegetables that would sustain them during the Depression.

Marilyn said of her grandmother, "Ada was an entrepreneur before the word was invented. She had a vegetable stand and sold extra produce from their farm."



Left Page: Marilyn Vines, President and Dr. Angela Vines, Vice President (seated)  
Roger Vines, President of Vines Ambulance & Transport Services  
Above: The Front Door – Julius S. Vines' grandmother's antique door featuring  
stained-glass mosaic, green-floral-leaf, logo





*“Over the years Julius S. Vines built a legacy for his family and community to inherit.”*

**NOTICE**  
**Vines Funeral Home**  
 LaFayette, Ala.—Ph. 7128  
 Serving Tallapoosa County  
 We Service the following Burial Policies:  
 1. Service Ins. Co. of Alabama  
 (Brown Service)  
 2. Mutual Saving Burial  
 3. Booker T. Washington Burial  
 4. Vulcan Burial.  
 Dignified Service with the Best Equipment  
**JULIUS VINES**  
 Licensed Embalmer



At an early age, Julius showed an aptitude for engines. He could often be found tinkering with anything mechanical on the farm. After high school, he moved to New York to be near Houston, his older brother, and pursued a degree in auto mechanics. When Julius graduated, America had entered the fray after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and he was drafted. Because of his technical training, he was assigned to drive a Model 1942 WC Dodge ¾ ton 4x4 in the ambulance corps. Julius landed on Omaha Beach and was later attached to the 3rd Army under Gen. George Patton. He followed Patton as the Army fought its way across Europe, ferrying soldiers from the front lines to field hospitals. His service included six frozen weeks in the Ardennes Forest in 1944 and 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge, as well as taking part in the liberation of several Nazi concentration camps. While overseas, Julius was awarded three Bronze Stars, a medal given for “heroic service in a combat zone.”

After the war, Julius was bartending in Cleveland when a friend showed him a local funeral home with an ambulance service. Most funeral homes at this time – the late 1940s – provided the ambulance service for

their town. This firm in Cleveland piqued the veteran’s interest because caring for the sick was something that had become part of his DNA.

Deciding this would be his career path, Julius moved home and attended Welch Mortuary School in Birmingham while working at a local funeral home. Three-quarters of the way through the program, Welch lost its accreditation, but Julius didn’t lose heart. He chose to fight on, enrolling at Gupton-Jones in Nashville and completing the program, becoming licensed in Tennessee and Alabama.

Julius decided to practice close to home where he already had a network of family and friends. Through the GI Bill, he secured a loan to build a small brick house in LaFayette (pronounced La-fet by the locals) that served as the residence for him and his new bride, LeMerle, as well as the newly minted Vines Funeral Home, which opened for business in 1952.

In 1954, the Vines family was expecting a new addition, and LeMerle told Julius they needed more room. The family lived upstairs and the funerals were held on the first floor, also the location of the only bathroom. Julius



Opposite Page Top: Vines Ambulance Service, 1963 Ford Ambulance Service, Model F-3

Opposite Bottom Left: The Dadeville Record, Dadeville, Alabama - August 19, 1954

Opposite Bottom Right: Julius S. Vines, Founder - Vines Funeral Home, 1952

Above: Julius Vines with his staff in the 1970’s





Marilyn Vines and Roger Vines

built a house next door to the funeral home where he would live for the rest of his life.

In the late 1960s, many funeral homes stopped providing ambulance service because federal regulations regarding the training of ambulance personnel shifted that role to hospitals and fire companies. Initially, Julius and his staff took the required classes to remain in the ambulance business, but the regulations eventually became too much to deal with. But when word circulated through the surrounding counties that Julius was ready to sell his ambulance, he received a knock at the funeral home door. On the front step were the mayor, the sheriff, commissioners and several members of the City Council. They wanted Julius to reconsider.

“They were all white,” said Marilyn, “something completely unexpected in rural Alabama in the early 1970s, but they respected my daddy and what he did for the community. For some people, a job is a job. You punch a clock. For Daddy, [ambulance service] was a calling. If you’re sick, you want to be dealing with someone who isn’t looking at their watch.”

Julius relented and kept the ambulance service, which still operates today out of the funeral home. In 1983, he sold the ambulance business for \$1 to Roger Vines, who is not only an EMT but also a funeral director and the funeral home’s embalmer. About 20 years ago, Roger branched out to transport service and added wheelchair-accessible vans to his fleet, a service that’s in high demand in the community. Today, Vines Ambulance and Transport service holds the distinction of being the only funeral home-based ambulance service in the state.

In 1999, Julius suffered a debilitating stroke and his daughter, Marilyn, perhaps an unlikely candidate, stepped in to take the mantle.

“I call it my Act II,” said Marilyn in her Southern lilt, and then laughed as she is wont to do.

Talking to Marilyn F. Vines, the first thing you notice is her natural charm and typical Southern manners. But speak with her for any length of time and you’ll realize there’s a quiet energy to her, an efficacious personality that makes her a successful small business owner and enabled her to thrive in her earlier career working for three Fortune 500 companies over the course of two decades.

“The earliest lesson about education was taught to me by my daddy,” she said. “Mom was a schoolteacher, so when I got home from school, Daddy would be the one



waiting for us. One day I got home and hadn't done my homework. Daddy was upset, but he wasn't the disciplinarian in the family. He simply said, 'Let's go for a drive.' We drove out to the country country," she said twice to emphasize they were in the sticks. "There was a big white house and a quarter mile or so down the road some shacks with kids playing outside. We stopped. Daddy said, 'Don't get out of my sight, and no questions until we're back in the car.' When we got out of the car, someone brought Daddy a table and chair. The people lined up at the table to talk to Daddy while I played hopscotch. Later, back in the car, I asked him, 'What were those people lined up for?'"

Julius explained to his daughter that they were sharecroppers who needed his help reading letters and filling out forms.

"The lesson was that education is important and that we should do everything we can to help others without one," Marilyn, who grew up in the house next door to the funeral home, said. "I always did my homework after that."

She never forgot that lesson, excelling in school and graduating as her high school's valedictorian. She earned a degree in business administration from Tuskegee University and an MBA from the University of Alabama in human relations management.

Merilyn's plan out of school was to work in HR and help her daddy with the funeral home on the side, but the corporate world had other ideas. Her first job was with the chemical division of Shell Oil in Mobile. Merilyn was an analyst in the HR Department, where she was tasked with moving workers to Saudi Arabia to set up



The Vines Conference Center



The Vines Funeral Home Staff

oil plants. When Shell sold its ag-chem business to DuPont, Merilyn moved to Texas, where she recruited workers from the textile mills that were closing in North Carolina.

"It was very sad," Merilyn said. "Some of them were fourth- or fifth-generation textile workers. That's all they'd ever known. There was a lot of grief involved in the closing of those mills."

Merilyn made the move to DuPont's headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, and shortly thereafter her division started downsizing. When she accepted a job at Cummins and took a buyout from DuPont, she was thrilled to be posted at a plant in Huntsville, Alabama, close to home. The feeling was short-lived. Three weeks later, corporate announced the plant was shutting down. It took a year for her to close the plant, and Merilyn transferred to company headquarters in Columbus, Indiana.

"It was clear to me that manufacturing was leaving America," said Merilyn, who was again put in charge of laying people off as Cummins divested itself of subsidiaries. That's when she decided it was time to make a change.

"I don't like laying off people and being the bearer of all that grief. And that grief is a different type of grief than in the funeral business," she explained.

It was time to return to LaFayette, to that brick house and to undertaking.

"When I returned home, I gave Daddy a list of things that needed to be done. He looked over that list and said to me, 'Merilyn, that is a very fine list, but I'm not going to do anything on it. I've done enough. This is your list to complete.'"









Merilyn with Austin, her eleven-year-old nephew

Nearly a year after she returned to the family business, Julius Vines suffered a devastating stroke that left him paralyzed on one side and impaired his speech. It was a trying time for the family, but one Merilyn described as “where I discovered the rubber meets the road.” By that, she’s referring to her faith seeing her through her daddy’s illness as well as an affirmation of her faith. Merilyn said, “It helped me assume all the responsibility of running a business.”

Merilyn, with two decades of corporate leadership under her belt, dove right into her list. Item No. 1 was no small feat: get listed on the National Historic Register.

“I always had an interest in history in high school, and I carried that with me. Initially, I had an idea to do a documentary on the African American funeral experience in Alabama in conjunction with the Alabama Funeral Directors and Morticians Association.”

But that fell through, so Merilyn decided to press on alone. That’s where the impetus for the National Register came from.

Merilyn went to the State Historic Preservation Office in Montgomery. For a building to be listed nationally, it first has to be approved and listed by the Alabama Historical Commission. After telling the historian what she was aiming to do, the woman brought out a tall stack of books.

“Here are the criteria that need to be met,” she said, pushing the stack toward Merilyn.

“You can tell when people don’t think they’re going to see you again,” Merilyn said, laughing.

Once home, she began looking through the mound of literature and called her sister, Angela Vines, a Ph.D. whose career was research, and said, “I think we can do this.”

And do it they did.

It was a grueling three years of research and data compilation, but, in November of 2008, Vines Funeral Homes and Ambulance Service was recognized by the National Park Service as significant because it is an example of, “a mid-20th century rural African American-owned funeral home.”

That was a year of great change. Not only had the funeral home just been listed, but they were about to undergo a major renovation because of the tax credit offered by their historical designation. Plans for the renovation were put together by Suzanne Fields, an architect approved by the Historical Commission.

The recession was hitting hard, and the pharmaceutical company Angela had been working for in Atlanta left America. Angela and her son, Austin, who Merilyn “absolutely adores,” moved back home to help out at the funeral home. Angela’s arrival was a godsend to Merilyn. In addition to being a Ph.D., Angela is an interior decorator, and she was able to help her sister with color palettes and décor to transform the once tiny brick home into a modern funeral facility.



West Point Lake Family Reunion  
L-R Merilyn, LeMerle & Julius (parents)  
and Angela Vines



An aerial photograph of the Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service property. The main building is a large, red, two-story structure with a dark roof. To the left of the building is a large parking lot filled with many cars. To the right of the building is another parking lot, also filled with cars. A yellow school bus is parked in the lower right parking lot. In the foreground, there is a large crowd of people gathered under a blue canopy. The property is surrounded by lush green trees. In the bottom left corner, there is a historical marker sign. In the top right corner, there is a text overlay.

# The National Historic Marker Celebration

*September 26, 2019*

A historical marker sign for the Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service. The sign is dark with gold lettering and a gold border. It features a circular seal at the top with the text "ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION" and a map of Alabama. The main text reads "VINES FUNERAL HOME AND AMBULANCE SERVICE". Below this, there is a paragraph of text describing the history of the funeral home and its founder, Julius Summers Vines. The sign is mounted on a white post.

## VINES FUNERAL HOME AND AMBULANCE SERVICE

Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service was established in 1952 and is representative of a mid-20th century rural African American funeral home. It is the only funeral home in Alabama still operating an ambulance service. The main building of the funeral home was constructed in 1952. A chapel was added in 1988.

Julius Summers Vines was the founder and sole proprietor of the funeral home from 1952-2001. He exemplified the entrepreneurial spirit of black funeral directors and morticians of the period. Since the mortician was one of the few professions open to African Americans during segregation, professionally trained morticians joined doctors and lawyers at the top tier of the social economic ladder. As a result, Julius S. Vines was able to play a leadership role in LaFayette, earning the respect of the entire community.

Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service has been placed in the National Register of Historic Places.





Dr. Joseph Downs M.D., Julius Vines' friend and physician, speaks at the unveiling celebration

"What makes us unique is most funeral homes are under one roof. We're more like a campus," Marilyn said proudly.

At the entrance of the original brick home, visitors are greeted by a wooden door inset with a custom stained-glass mosaic containing the firm's logo – a green "V" with a flower stem poking out. The door – mid-19th century solid wood – was rescued from Marilyn's great-grandmother's house by Julius and had been sitting in the funeral home's garage collecting dust. The original part of the building now contains two well-appointed viewing rooms, Marilyn's office, the prep room and a dressing room. Julius and LeMerle's old upstairs apartment has been turned into the office and lounge for the ambulance company's staff.

"The walls upstairs are solid hardwood," Marilyn said, "like you'd find on your floor. Just beautiful! You couldn't afford something like that today."

The renovation exposed the brick of the original building leading into the "Rose Room," a viewing room. The chapel seats 100 and features a hand-painted mural that Angela commissioned of an idyllic Mediterranean scene – matching several others throughout the funeral home.

"We have an overhead projector to make the services personalized," Marilyn explained, "as well as [web] streaming capability."

Even the building's bathroom doors and doorknobs are architecturally significant. The doors, another garage rescue, were obtained by Julius many years ago when an antebellum mansion in Georgia was torn down. The doorknobs throughout most of the building are cut glass, similar to the type installed in the original structure.



Seated guests, with a patriotic theme, Historic Marker ceremony



Across the street, Marilyn purchased an abandoned shotgun house from the 1940s and converted it into her family conference center, adding an area that serves as the showroom. The conference center is well-appointed and comfortable, Angela having worked her magic on the décor, but, most importantly, it's spacious. In the African American community, it's not unusual for eight to 10 people to be involved in the arrangements.

"The separate conference center allows for families to come and make arrangements without interrupting a funeral service," Marilyn said.

Julius would be proud. The list is finally complete.

"When I was young, Daddy was always gone growing his business or doing trade embalming, so those 13 years were really a gift that I got to spend with him," Marilyn said, recalling the time she moved in with her mother to help with her daddy's care after the stroke.

Sadly, two years after Marilyn moved in, LeMerle died suddenly of a heart attack. Julius followed her in 2012.

The patriarch of the family is gone, but he lived to see his beloved funeral home listed on the National Register, one daughter successfully take the reins and another join her. But Marilyn isn't alone. She has Angela, her cousin Roger, her beloved nephew Austin and a supportive staff. Together, they continue to serve the families of Chambers County and beyond as Vines Funeral Home and Ambulance Service has done since 1952. It's truly a family business, and "family," said Marilyn, "is the most important thing."



Above: A Personalized Touch - Vines Funeral Home logo displayed in hearse door  
Right Page: September 26, 2019 - A full day of fun, food and friends including area high school seniors, church groups and the community

