



Love and Black Lives, in Pictures Found on a Brooklyn Street

A discarded photo album reveals a rich history of black lives, from the segregated South to Harlem dance halls to a pretty block in Crown Heights.

By [ANNIE CORREAL](#) JAN. 27, 2017

One night six years ago, on a quiet side street in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, I came across a photo album that had been put out with the trash. I lived around the corner, and I was walking home when I saw it sitting beneath a streetlamp on Lincoln Place.

It looked handmade, with a wooden cover bound with a shoelace. But it had been tied up with twine, like a bunch of old newspapers, and left atop a pile of recycling.



After hesitating a moment, I picked it up and took it home.

The pages were fragile, and they cracked when I turned them, as if the album hadn't been opened in a long time, but the photos were perfectly preserved. They seemed to chronicle the life of a black couple at midcentury: a beautiful woman with a big smile and a man who looked serious, or was maybe just camera-shy, and had served in [World War II](#).

As I turned the pages, the scenery changed from country picnics to city streets and crowded dance halls in what appeared to be Harlem, and the couple went from youth to middle age. Looking at the album, I was struck by how joyful the photos were — and by the fact that as fabled as this era was, I had never seen a black family's own account of that time.

I wondered who these neighbors were, and who had thrown the album out.

For decades, this part of Crown Heights had been mostly black. When I arrived in the neighborhood, several years before, I was one of the few nonblack residents on the block. The neighborhood was changing, though; newcomers were arriving and longtime residents were moving out.

I went back to Lincoln Place, hoping to find the album's owner; it had surely been thrown out by mistake. Lincoln Place was the very image of old Brooklyn promoted by real estate agents. On

other blocks, the houses were carved up or crumbling. Or they had been torn down and replaced by big buildings with spotlights and no-loitering signs. But on Lincoln Place, the stately rowhouses were still intact and well loved. The block was preserved in amber.

Photo



Lincoln Place in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Credit Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

I knocked on doors and left my number, but I never heard from anyone. So I put the album on my bookshelf. A few years later, my landlords got an offer they couldn't refuse, and my short time in Crown Heights was up. I stumbled upon the album while packing and pulled it off the shelf. Now I really had to reckon with it.

[Gentrification was transforming the neighborhood](#) — soon there might be no one left who recognized the world in these pictures. And the album was literally falling apart in my hands. If I was ever going to try to get to the bottom of it, this was the time.

I decided to uncover its story. I thought it would be simple. But chasing the album would become something of a journey, one that would take me far from present-day Brooklyn to the Jim Crow South, from a remote island in the Pacific to the packed tenements of Harlem, before returning me to Lincoln Place at another moment of great change.

Last spring, I began the search.

The photos were arranged on black blotter-paper pages with little mounting corners and Scotch tape that had turned yellow with age. There were 167 pictures, and they covered both sides of the pages, as if to save space. But the photos stopped about halfway through the album. The rest of it was blank.



I looked behind every photo, but there were only a few clues, handwritten notes like “From your old pal Duke,” “Myself and Sylvia” or “Love to Etta Mae, From Dorothy.”

The name Etta Mae was written on three or four photos, and I began to suspect she was the woman who appeared throughout the album. She had a full figure and elegant hands. She smoked. But I always spotted her by her smile.

She was often with the same man. They were embracing, or they were in separate photos on the same page. I guessed that he was her husband; on one photo, someone had written, “To my best friend’s hubby.”

Photo



Carrying photocopies of a few pictures, I went back to Crown Heights.

I had been gone less than two years, but there were all sorts of changes. On Nostrand Avenue, a West Indian market that had carried buckets of salt cod had closed. Where once the only coffee had come in yellow cans of Bustelo, cafes served locally roasted espresso. There was a retro cocktail bar.

On Lincoln Place, a for-sale sign hung outside one house, and another was under renovation. There was a Pilates studio. There were more young families now, and when I asked them about the album as they swept the sidewalk or sat on their stoops, they apologized: They were new to the block and couldn't help.

One evening, I was close to giving up when a young man in a garden apartment told me to talk to Jimmy, the oldest guy on the block. He pointed to a red house a few doors down.

An old man answered the door. Yes, he said, he was Jimmy — James Burton. I showed him the photocopied pictures, and he squinted. “That’s Mrs. Taylor,” he said. “Etta Mae.”

Photo



James Burton, outside his home on Lincoln Place. Credit Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

The man in the pictures was her husband, Isaiah Taylor. Everyone called him Ike, Mr. Burton said. The Taylors had lived on Lincoln Place forever. He pointed next door, at a white house with classical molding.

When I returned to Lincoln Place a few days later with the whole album, Mr. Burton and his wife, Lenore, were doing a puzzle at a card table. “You say you just found this album on the street?” she asked, laughing. “I wouldn’t touch it. I’m amazed you would touch it.”

“Would you pick it up?” she asked her husband.

“Maybe,” he said.

They were in their late 80s. Ms. Burton had worked as a bookkeeper, and Mr. Burton had been a chauffeur and a shipping clerk. They had lived on Lincoln Place since the early 1950s, and raised their two daughters there.

The Taylors had been their neighbors and close friends, almost like family.

“In those days, we knew most everybody, and then they started disappearing and dying and moving away,” Mr. Burton said. “Now I’m lucky if I know 10 people.”

We sat on the couch and opened the album. Pages had torn loose from the binding, and as we passed them between us, black flakes fluttered to the floor.

“No, no,” Mr. Burton said, peering at the faces to see if he recognized anyone. “Etta and Ike. That’s all I know is them two.”

Halfway through, we came to a page crowded with small pictures.

Mr. Burton paused.

“That looks like me,” he said, his voice a little louder. “Your mother, Uncle Fernando — that’s my wedding.”



I was hooked. Now that I had names, I enlisted a researcher at The New York Times, Susan C. Beachy, and she pulled documents for Etta Mae Taylor: census records; birth, death and marriage certificates; old phone books; newspaper clippings.

Etta Mae didn't have children. Her siblings had all died. But she had relatives scattered across the country.

The Burtons remembered a niece from North Carolina, and the researcher found someone in Raleigh named Joann Barnes. She was now in her 70s. For months, the only other thing I knew about her was that she didn't pick up her phone.

I didn't blame her. "Hello," I would say when I left voice mail messages, "I'm calling about a photo album that may have belonged to your family." Even as I said it, I knew it sounded like a scam.

I tried her relatives, calling, sending emails and friendly Facebook messages, but always with the same result: silence.

The documents, at least, gave me the beginnings of Etta Mae's story.



Etta Mae Barnes was born on July 28, 1918, in [Wilson, N.C.](#), which once called itself the world's greatest bright-leaf tobacco market. When Ms. Taylor was young, it was a [boomtown](#). Thousands of African-American families had migrated to Wilson from the countryside to pick tobacco on farms and [hang it in big warehouses downtown](#).

The first pages in the album seemed to be of Wilson; several photos had stamps from photographers' studios there. There were portraits of women in flouncy dresses, babies, a boy with a dog, a group in straw hats in a field.

In two portraits placed side by side, a middle-aged couple posed by a flowering bush, in front of a clapboard house. I wondered if they were Etta Mae's parents.

Etta Mae's mother, Anna Bell Green Barnes, was born in Virginia and worked as a hanger at a tobacco company, the documents revealed. Her father, James Frank Barnes, was a grocery store clerk. His family went back generations in Wilson County.

Etta Mae was one of six. When she was still a child, her oldest brother, Charles, boarded the train that passed through Wilson and became part of what we now call the [Great Migration](#), the exodus of millions of black Southerners from the Jim Crow South. Judging from the album, many of Etta Mae's relatives had gone north; I could tell them apart from their country kin by their suits and furs.



Etta Mae left school after seventh grade and went to work as a housekeeper in a private home, according to the 1940 census. That year, 10 other people were living at the Barneses', including an aunt; an adopted daughter; Etta Mae's sister Mildred; Mildred's husband, Jack Artis; and their baby, Charles.

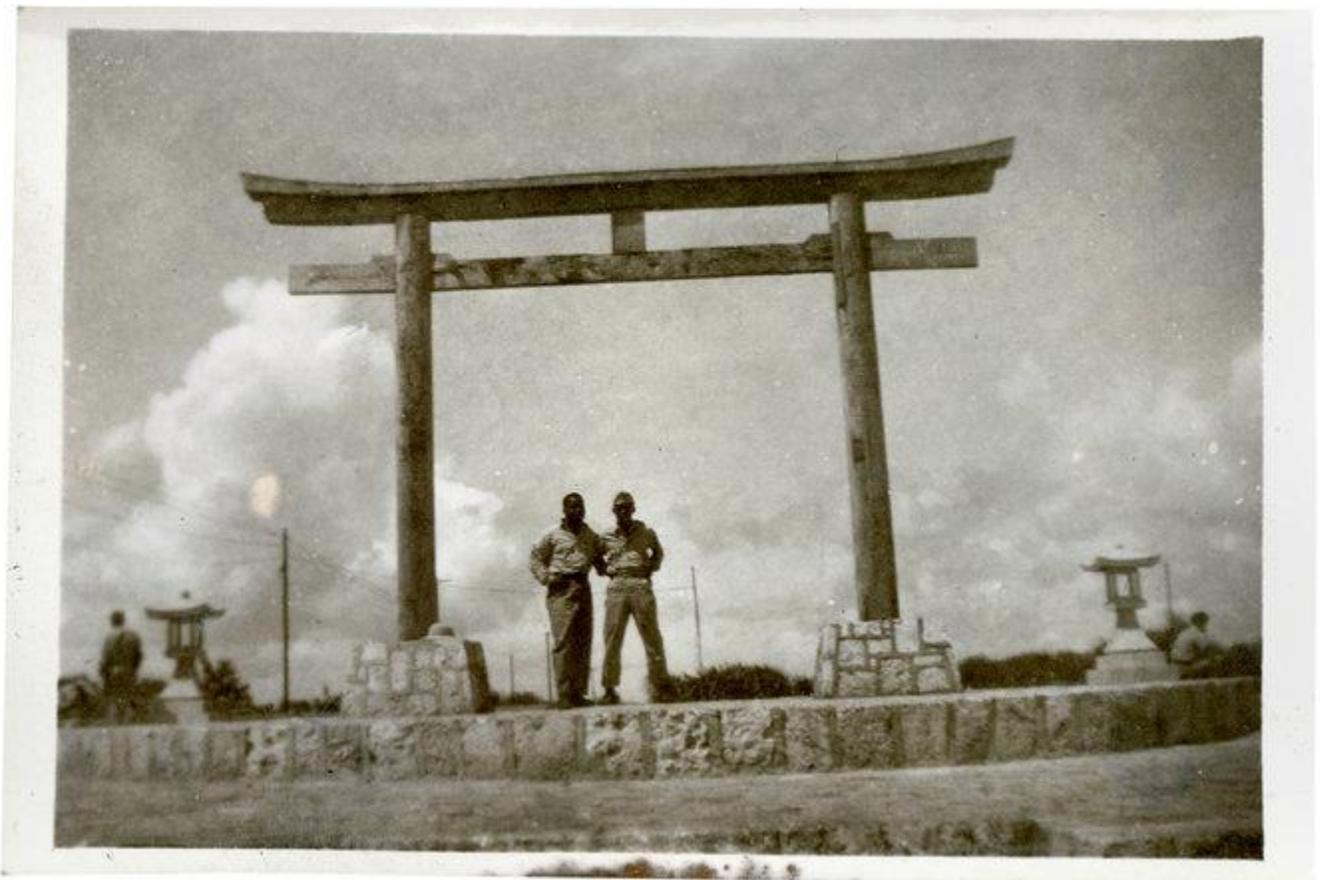
In 1940, Etta Mae left her crowded home. But she didn't go north just yet. She went to Suffolk, Va., where, according to her marriage license, she wed Isaiah Taylor on the day after her 22nd birthday.

Ike Taylor was three years younger than Etta Mae, and when they married, he had recently graduated from high school and was working as a deliveryman. His father was a cook. His mother worked at a peanut processing plant.

[Suffolk](#), like Wilson, was segregated, unofficially divided by the railroad tracks. On one side, a sizable black community had grown, drawn by jobs in the factories of peanut producers like Planters.

The Taylors' wedding announcement in a local paper said, "The couple will reside here." But in 1941, the United States entered World War II, and farm work had grown scarce amid an agriculture crisis. Hundreds of thousands of black Southerners rushed to enlist, and Ike was one of them.

Photo



There were about a dozen photographs from the war in the album, loose snapshots tucked in the back. They showed black soldiers amid spindly trees and what looked like Japanese shrines.

Ike was an army truck commander in the 510th Port Battalion and rose to the rank of master sergeant, according to his military records. His unit was stationed on [Tinian](#), an island in the Pacific that the United States captured from the Japanese, where the armed forces built a [huge air base](#). (It was from Tinian that the [Enola Gay](#) took off for Hiroshima.)

Today, most of the men in Ike's unit would be approaching 100, if they were alive at all, and I had given up on getting a firsthand account, when I found a videotaped interview with a member of the 510th in the [Library of Congress](#).

James W. Taylor (no relation to Ike) died in 2014. In the video, he described their time in the army. The armed forces were still [segregated](#), and there were almost no black combat units until troops thinned at the end of the war; black soldiers were instead relegated to labor and service units. Their battalion unloaded ammunition from ships and provided transport.

On Tinian, they lived apart from the white soldiers. They slept in tents in a separate camp, ate separately and drank from water tanks that they filled, separately, from a mountain spring.

These men may have enlisted in the army to escape Jim Crow, but instead they found themselves on a tropical island in the Pacific that had become a replica of the segregated South.

Photo



This was where records trailed off. To go any further, I needed a guide.

One night in the fall, I found one. I got a Facebook message from someone in Wilson named Craig Barnes Jr., whom I had written to months before. “Sorry, I’m just seeing this now,” he said. “Do you still have that photo?”

I replied immediately with a smiley face. “I have the entire album!”

Over the phone, Mr. Barnes, 25, said that he was related to Etta Mae, but that he didn’t know much about her; the person to talk to was his grandmother, Joann Barnes — the woman in

Raleigh who hadn't taken my calls. He promised to set up a conversation, but weeks went by. When we finally spoke, he had bad news: She wasn't answering the phone.

But that was all I had. So a week later, I boarded a flight for Raleigh, the album in my bag.

I met up with a photographer and we drove to the last listed address for Ms. Barnes: a retirement complex in a low-slung apartment building surrounded by trees.

I was unsure if she even lived there, much less how she would feel about my visit, and as we approached, I felt nervous for the first time. I had come all this way, and though I thought the album was important, maybe I was just intruding.

I pressed the buzzer and identified myself over the intercom as a reporter from New York. After a long moment, a woman's voice crackled through the speaker.

"All right," she said. "I'll buzz you in, dear."

As we walked down the hall toward her apartment, Ms. Barnes stepped out from her door, as if she planned to give us only a minute. She had short gray hair and wore a floral-print blouse.

"Are you a relative of Etta Mae Taylor?" I asked.

"Yes, I was her niece," she said.

I explained, quickly, how I had met the Burtons, that they had told me Etta Mae's name and that I should look for her niece.

"O.K.," she said.

"And, well," I said, "basically, I found this on the street."

I held out the album.

She gave a surprised laugh. I laughed too, with relief.

"You know, it kind of makes you leery," Ms. Barnes said. She had gotten my messages, and her grandson's, but she was skeptical because she had never seen her aunt's photo album.

She invited us in. Her apartment was small and neat. She had been cleaning, and after she washed her hands, we sat down. She was from Wilson, she said, but she left when she was young and spent nearly 30 years in New York, where she was a visiting nurse.

Photo



Joann Barnes, Etta Mae's niece. Credit Left: Eamon Queeney for The New York Times

She opened the album.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said. “These are from way back.”

She spotted her grandparents — Etta Mae's parents — in front of the clapboard house in Wilson where she, too, had grown up. There, in the yard, they played horseshoes and caught pigeons.

She named her aunts and uncles and cousins. “And that's me,” she said, touching a photo of a little girl.

“I always liked this picture. I believe my father made this skirt. He used to make clothes for me when I was small. And I always had those big bows.”

She shook her head and smiled.

“Little knock knees,” she said.

Wilson was about an hour’s drive east. The downtown was deserted, the brick warehouses the only remnant of the tobacco era. Across the tracks, the house where Etta Mae grew up had been torn down. In the empty lot where it once stood, there was no trace of the family that had become so real to me. A pickup was parked in the overgrown grass.

Most of Etta Mae’s family had left Wilson and scattered, but Craig Barnes Jr. was still there. We met up at an Applebee’s off the highway. I thanked him for writing to me and handed him the album.

As he turned the pages, I said I had never seen a black family’s photos from this era. He said he hadn’t either.

“The lifestyle they’re living looks amazing,” he said.

Photo



Craig Barnes Jr., a great-grandnephew of Etta Mae. Credit Eamon Queeney for The New York Times

In Etta Mae's day, the magic of Harlem reached the South through newspapers, relatives' letters and the radio, and in the 1940s, another wave of Southern migrants moved to New York, drawn by [Cab Calloway](#) and [Duke Ellington](#) as much as by the promise of factory jobs.

"New York was the place to be," Ms. Barnes said.

While Ike was in the Pacific, Etta Mae joined her sister Mildred and her husband, along with her brother Charles, in Harlem, and the sisters found jobs pressing drapes at a factory in the [garment district](#). "They were pressers," Ms. Barnes said. "That was kind of the going job at the time."

When the war was over, Ike and Etta Mae were reunited in New York. On weekends, they would go dancing — at small clubs and at the blocklong [Savoy Ballroom](#) on Lenox Avenue, where thousands of couples did the jitterbug.

From the time she was little, Ms. Barnes would take the train every year to visit the Taylors. "I was a Southern girl; I used to go every summer with my grandmother," she said. "When I would see them dressed up, it was exciting. Like these were some movie stars or something."

Of her two aunts, Ms. Barnes said, Etta Mae was the serious one. "Mae thought she was the boss. She always thought she was smarter than everybody else. She was always saying, 'Sister, you shouldn't do that; Sister, you should.'"

But she loved to dance, Ms. Barnes said. "And she could sing, too."



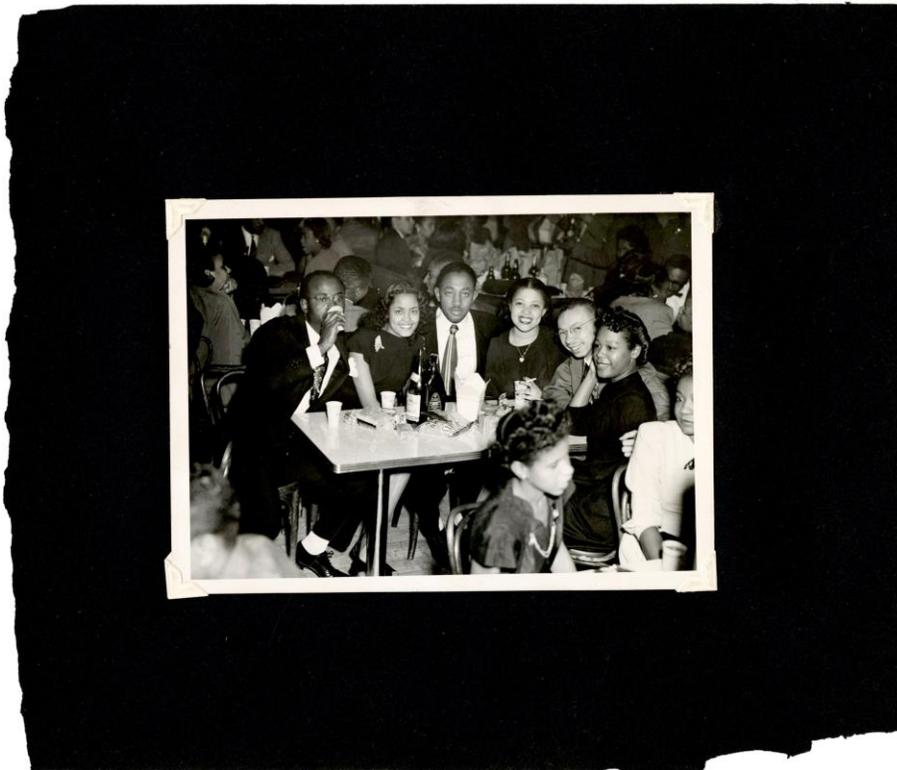
The photos speak to the glamour of life in Harlem, but they barely hint at its struggles. Housing discrimination largely confined black people to Harlem, and in the 1940s, as more Southern migrants surged into the city, its blocks became some of the most densely populated in the world. Landlords charged high rents and let their buildings fall into ruin. They knew their tenants had nowhere else to go.

After [riots broke out](#) in 1943, Langston Hughes [wrote](#) of Harlemites' poverty and frustration: "Some of them don't try anymore. Slum-shocked, I reckon."

Etta Mae and her sister lived in a packed tenement on West 116th Street. Their brother Charles, who in the album looks dashing in a dark suit with a pocket square, worked as a deliveryman for a florist, and shared his apartment on 131st Street with his wife and seven lodgers from the South.

In the middle of the album was a series of oversize portraits of couples gathered around bottle-strewn tables in night clubs. I couldn't figure out where they were taken until a clue cropped up in an old newspaper: Ike was listed among the members of the Eight Chaps Social Club, a men's club composed of Suffolians that was hosting a dance in Harlem.

Seven of the Chaps were dead now, but the eighth picked up the phone.



"Isaiah Taylor?" Walter Howell, 95, said. Of course he remembered him. "Good buddy of mine."

He told me the photos were, indeed, from the club's dances. They look glamorous, but all of the Chaps, Mr. Howell said, had blue-collar jobs. He had worked in a fur-dressing plant preparing minks and sables.

Then he answered a question that hadn't occurred to me, which was why the Taylors had such a dazzling record of their social life. The reason was that one member of the club, Jesse Williams, was a professional photographer.

[Craig Steven Wilder](#), a historian at M.I.T., told me that for Southern migrants far from home, men's clubs like the Eight Chaps "become their new kinship networks."

"That informal network is how you access news about where you can move," Professor Wilder said, "where black people are moving and welcome."

In 1950, the population of Central Harlem [reached its peak](#), and African-Americans began to inch their way into other boroughs. The Eight Chaps scattered. Etta Mae and Ike, of course, went to Brooklyn.

Crown Heights was predominantly white at the time. And when Etta Mae and Ike moved to Lincoln Place around 1950, renting a room from a black hairdresser named Lucille Stewart, they became some of the first black residents on the block.

The Burtons, the neighbors whose wedding photos were in the album, came soon after. "We were about the second blacks on the block," Lenore Burton said.

Ms. Burton's parents, Clara and Cannon Harper, moved into the white house with the classical molding, with their daughter Jackie. After they got married, the Burtons bought the red house next door.

Etta Mae and Ike soon moved into the third floor of the Harpers' white house, and the two households became like one.



Etta Mae's album captures their communal life: They shared meals, gave each other haircuts, gathered in the kitchen in their bathrobes.

Ms. Burton's sister, Jackie Jones, still lives in the white house that she grew up in and eventually inherited from her parents. On one of my visits to the Burtons', she appeared, magically, in their living room: Back in the 1950s, they had installed a door between their homes. "All the families were intertwined more or less, though they weren't blood relations," Ms. Jones, 89, said.

The picture the Burtons painted of the 1950s was a happy one. And it took me a moment to step back and see the obvious: During this time, as black people arrived on Lincoln Place, white families were leaving.

[Isabel Wilkerson](#), the author of "The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration," said the timing was not a coincidence. "Fear led many white residents to flee," she said. "Neighborhoods began to open up because white people were so fearful that they would sell at a loss."

It was a sign of what was coming. In the next decades, hundreds of thousands of white families would leave the city, and black families would move into their homes, a phenomenon that came to be known as white flight.

In 1950, the Taylors' census tract was 95 percent white. By 1970, it was 87 percent black. White flight is often associated with the poverty and crime that plagued New York City in the later decades of the 20th century, and conjures images of muggings, abandoned buildings and urban blight.

But these photos too were images of the white-flight era: People posing beside a 1950s television console, a man at a piano, a sunny picnic.



In 1956, the new homeowners formed the [Lincoln Civic Block Association](#), which still exists. “There was a Pokeno circle, a poker circle,” Mr. Burton said. “You’d go from house to house. Nobody had a lock on the door. Our house was never locked. You’d look up, and there’d be cousin so-and-so.”

The Burtons pointed out a few houses on Lincoln Place where old-timers still lived. A neighbor, Marilyn LeGall, 72, grew up visiting her aunt and uncle on Lincoln Place. “You played stickball, you jumped rope,” she said. “Everyone looked after the other.”

That was life on Lincoln Place, said Arthur Bates Jr., 56, who grew up on the block. “It was a real neighborhood, and a black experience no one talks about, because it wasn’t filled with drugs and it wasn’t filled with poverty,” Mr. Bates said. “It was public schools, it was playing ball, it was playing music.”

Now, he added, everyone was discovering brownstone Brooklyn. “It’s been sitting here, like so many aspects of our lives. People say, ‘It’s dripping with original details.’ Who do you think maintained it? Where were you?”

Etta Mae and Ike settled down on Lincoln Place after a decade of war and uncertainty and living in cramped quarters in Harlem.

Etta Mae kept working in the garment district. She went bargain hunting on Flatbush Avenue for outfits and nice furniture for their apartment. She joined a book club.

Ike got dogs — and cars. “A blue Chevy,” Mr. Burton recalled.

On the weekends, they would go to their dances, and Mildred came over. They drank cocktails and listened to records. “They were good-times folks,” Ms. Jones said. “You could come and sit and drink and smoke and laugh. They loved to laugh.”

They traveled, driving south to see one of Ike’s sisters in Washington, and to their hometowns. In the 1960s, they went on cruises.



New York gave them a good life. And if it was lived in the shadow of white flight, it was a life they never could have had in the South.

Ike's niece, Brenda Oliver, 67, remembered her aunt arriving in Virginia wearing pretty clothes, smelling good. Ms. Oliver's mother was a maid. "My mom lived in a house with a coal stove. She was so impressed that her siblings had gotten out of the South and made a life for themselves."

In their later years, Ike and Etta Mae look content. In one photo, they stand beside each other, she in a dress, he in a suit. She is giving him a knowing little smile. His arm is around her shoulder. It is the last photo of the two of them together.

On Aug. 5, 1971, Ike died of cancer. He was 50.

After he died, Etta Mae stopped keeping the album. That was why half of the pages were blank.

Etta Mae stayed on Lincoln Place. She took care of children for working couples, recalled the Burtons' daughter, Carol Burton, 58. Etta Mae got books in the mail, never putting them on the shelf until they were read. She went to church every Sunday, at Berean Baptist nearby. She took in relatives once or twice, for brief spells, but otherwise lived alone.

I found former residents of Lincoln Place. They remembered Etta Mae, but not as the young woman in the album. "She was always an old lady," Sherrie Tanner Hammonds, 47, said. She grew up on the block with her grandmother, Ms. Stewart, the hairdresser, and now lives in

Rochester. “She always had a small dog. She had a little set schedule. She would walk morning and night.”

“Rain or shine,” said Constance P. Jermin, 83, who left Lincoln Place for Georgia in 2002. “She was very deliberate and devoted. And she always greeted everyone. Always with a big smile.”

Photo



James Burton and his wife, Lenore, last year. Credit Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

For a few years, Etta Mae and I shared the block. Our bedroom windows looked out on the same backyards, and every day, she must have walked past my house, though I can't recall if I ever actually saw her.

When she could no longer get around, Ms. Jones, her landlady, took care of her. “She was feisty,” said Ms. Jones, who said she never raised her rent from \$200. “She was good until the end.”

The end was swift. In 2010, Etta Mae fell and went to the hospital, and from there, to a nursing home in East New York, Brooklyn. She died there, five long miles from Lincoln Place, on June 4, 2011. She was 92.

She is buried next to her husband at [Long Island National Cemetery](#), a veterans' graveyard in Farmingdale, N.Y. They share a single headstone, their names on either side.

Etta Mae's funeral program ends, "Etta lived a full life." It was all in the album: the Great Migration, Harlem at its most chaotic and crowded, the transformation of Brooklyn.

For her neighbors on Lincoln Place, Etta Mae's album brought back happy memories of their first years on the block, but it did not stop the clock from ticking. In October, Lenore Burton died. Her widower, James Burton, plans to stay in their home on Lincoln Place.

For Etta Mae's family, the album helped fill the void left by relatives who moved to the North. They let me hold onto the album until the publication of this article.

Photo



I had one last question: How did the album end up on the curb?

After her aunt died, Joann Barnes came from Raleigh to arrange the funeral in Brooklyn. She hadn't been to Lincoln Place in years and was surprised by how little her aunt's home had changed. She had moved into the back rooms and left the rest untouched.

Everything was from the 1950s — the kitchen sink and cabinets, the furniture in the living room, which was covered in plastic. In Ike's old office, there was a record player, hundreds of records, and a shelf with glasses and little stirrers, the remnants of his bar.

The closets were stuffed with linens and old clothes. When she went to dry her hands after washing them in the bathroom, the hand towel was so old it split in two. She was tired from the funeral, and overwhelmed. She just wanted to get home.

She packed up some wedding dishes for her sister, a few pots and pans. For herself, she took some change from a drawer. "A silver dollar, some old coins," she said. "That's just me. I have my memory of her and our trips and what we did together. I'm not a keeper."

As she got ready to go, Ms. Jones came in. "She asked me if I was coming back," Ms. Barnes said, "and I said no. 'Open the doors and let the neighbors come and take what they want. Just open it up.'"

In the weeks afterward, Ms. Jones worked her way through the apartment. She bagged up the clothes. She pulled the records off the shelf. She boxed up Etta Mae's books. When she found the album, she tied it up with twine. And one evening, before the trucks came to pick up the recycling, she carried it outside with a few boxes and left it on the curb.

A few minutes, or a few hours, passed. Then, just as Etta Mae had walked past my house so many times before, I walked by hers, picked up her album and carried it home.