MURFREESBORO — Before sweeping federal reform was born from the Great Depression, economic assistance for families who faced financial hardships due to illness or death was basically nonexistent — especially for those of color.

But during the late 1800s, some African-Americans joined together to form what were known as “mutual aid societies,” which offered some semblance of a “safety net” in times of need, explained Leigh Ann Gardner, a historian and master of arts student in the Public History Program at MTSU.

“They formed their own groups to help each other out,” said Gardner, who will present a free lecture, “We Are As Grand As We Want To Be: African American Mutual Aid Groups in Murfreesboro,” at 7 p.m. Thursday at Bradley Academy Museum and Cultural Center, 415 S. Academy St.

Gardner’s lecture is held in conjunction with the celebration of Murfreesboro’s Bicentennial “Our People” month, in partnership with The Heritage Center of Murfreesboro, Rutherford County and Bradley Academy Museum.

“Some of the members of the groups were launderers or laundresses, they were laborers and cooks. … Two Murfreesboro African-American doctors were members of the Benevolent Society. … There was a pretty wide range of social classes,” Gardner said.

Even women and youth could pledge membership to the society. And
membership had its privileges. If you became too ill to work and support your family, you would get a stipend — usually about $1 a week, Gardner said — for a certain time period. The societies served as a sort of insurance policy — the equivalent of what an company such as Aflac does today, Gardner said.

“First, you had to be sick for seven days. You’d be visited by a ‘sick committee,’ who would check to see if you were really entitled to the funds,” she said. They also came by to inspect living conditions to make sure your environment wasn’t contributing to ill health, she added.

Most groups also offered burial policies, too. Family of society members would receive a payout upon death, which would go toward burial expenses, she said.

Although the mutual aid societies were pretty much open to all adult African-Americans, Gardner said there were standards set by members. “For instance, if you got arrested for public drunkenness, you could be fined,” she said. Some even banned alcohol consumption all together.

Today, little physical evidence of these societies remains, other than the Benevolent Society Cemetery, which is all but completely obscured by thick brush near one of Murfreesboro’s most-traveled overpasses. There are no photos, no oral histories passed down through generations, but Gardner is still on the hunt in hopes that someone has a box of records or photos to help piece together the history of these local societies.

“I feel like somewhere in someone’s attic, there are records,” she said.

For more information about Gardner’s free lecture, call The Heritage Center at 615-217-8013 or Bradley Academy at 615-867-2633, or send an email to heritage@mtsu.edu.

The Heritage Center of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County is a joint venture between the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, Main Street: Murfreesboro/Rutherford County, the City of Murfreesboro, and the Center for Historic Preservation at MTSU. Additional support comes from the Rutherford County government and State Farm Insurance. Visit the website at www.hcmrc.org.

Bradley Academy Museum and Cultural Center offers special cultural events and educational programs throughout the year. Visit www.bradleymuseum.org.
A grave marker at the Benevolent Society Cemetery on South Church Street marks the final resting place of an early resident of Rutherford County. / Jim

If you go
What: Lecture, "We Are As Grand As We Want To Be: African American Mutual Aid Groups in Murfreesboro"
When: 7 p.m. Thursday
Where: Bradley Academy Museum and Cultural Center, 415 S. Academy St., Murfreesboro
Cost: Free, open to the public