The artifact I chose to display was a copy of the marriage license of my great-great-grandparents, dated October 4, 1965. 1965 was a period of change for the African-American community. The Civil Rights Act was passed a year prior, ending segregation in public places and outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed as a way to end discriminatory practices (like literacy tests) and ensure that all minority groups had the right to vote. My great-great-grandparents got their license in Calhoun, a small county in South Carolina, home to nearly fifteen thousand people as of 2017. The fact that my great-great-grandparents were able to have their marriage recognized by a governing body wouldn't have been possible without the work done by government programs and black activists after the freeing of enslaved Americans.

A licensed marriage between two black people wasn't even a possibility at one point. Black people in America were enslaved from the inception of the United States in 1776 until 1865, nearly ninety years later. Slave marriages weren't uncommon but they weren't recognized by a governing body. They were also viewed by owners as a way to stop a slave from acting in a rebellious manner. They believed that a married slave would be less likely to run away (Simkin 1997). Slave owners also encouraged marriage for religious reasons. Many slaves would later write in their autobiographies that they were hesitant to marry a woman on the same plantation as them (Ibid.).

The first state-licensed marriage by a black couple was held in 1866, three years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The couple who got married were former slaves Benjamin Berry Manson and Sarah White (Washington 1997). The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, colloquially known as the Freedmen's Bureau, recognized their marriage as a legal one after over two decades of Manson and White being romantically linked with one another. They were wed in Wilson County, Tennessee. Tens of thousands of newly-freed slaves, including Manson and White, sought the help of Union Army clergy, provost marshals, northern missionaries, and the Freedmen's Bureau on the quest to have their marriages licensed by their state's government.

In 1965, decades after their initial marriage in 1928, my great-great-grandparents obtained a copy of their marriage license in South Carolina. This would not have been possible without the work of the aforementioned Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau worked to help newly freed slaves and poor white people with basic amenities like clothing, food, and lodging, as well as later having their power expanded to acts like certifying marriages.

The license is important to my family and I because it represents an expansion of civil rights for African-American people in the United States. There weren't any legally recognized marriages until only decades before the one between my great-great-grandparents. The fact that they were able to do this is symbolic of the Civil Rights Movement and post-slavery government sectors did a lot to get black people closer to equality in America. It's essential to my community that items that seem as mundane as a marriage license are kept because it serves as a reminder of how far we've come over the last 150+ years.

Sources:

Washington, R. (2005, Spring). Sealing the Sacred Bonds of Holy Matrimony. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/spring/freedman-marriage-recs.html.

Simkin, J. (1997, September). Slave Marriages. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from https://spartacus-educational.com/USASmarriage.htm.

Tarter, B. (2016, August 18). Cohabitation Act of 1866. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Cohabitation_Act_of_1866#start_entry.

History.com Editors. (2009, November 9). Voting Rights Act of 1965. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act.