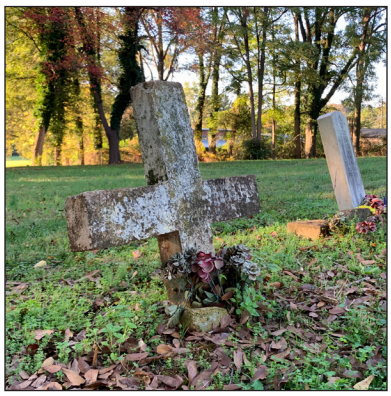
The Historic Dimension Series

A student publication series by the UNCG Department of Interior Architecture



Saving Sacred Spaces:
Preserving African American Cemeteries

by Mia Canestrari **Fall 2020**

"Too often, the graves of African Americans have been forgotten or ignored by the communities in which they were located. This has been a disservice to the memories of those who came before us, and to the preservation of our nation's history."
- Congresswoman Alma Adams

Throughout the country lie the burial grounds of enslaved people, free-black cemeteries, freedman burials, and rural family plots. Many have been lost to development, natural forces, and the passage of time. Some were plowed over, moved, or forgotten and are now overgrown. Many of the most fragile cemeteries in need of preservation are African American burial grounds that too often went undocumented and later neglected or abandoned. Stones, plants, or long since decayed wooden markers were often all that marked these sites. In this time of national reckoning and reconciliation, it is important to find, identify, and preserve these sacred grounds.

Why Preserve?

African American cemeteries and the people and lives they represent are an integral part of our nation's history that has long been under-reported or ignored. Finding these locations, telling their stories, and maintaining these sites acknowledges and honors the lives of those who came before and helps reflect our country's true history more accurately. Many African American cemeteries have already been destroyed. The actual number of lost burial sites is unknown, but discriminatory development practices that targeted African American neighborhoods are well documented. Cemeteries that can be identified now need to be cherished and preserved for the history they tell and the lives they commemorate.

Cemeteries are also very personal and sacred spaces. They can provide solace, peace, and a sense of grounding and belonging. For African Americans in search of their ancestors, tracing one's family tree is difficult. People who were enslaved were taken from their homeland, treated as property, and their life events rarely documented. The 1870 census was the first to list all African Americans by name. Searching through post-Civil War records can provide answers to some family history questions. Identifying family members, tracing them back to an area, and finding their final resting place can be a rewarding and meaningful endeavor. It is vital to find and save these sacred spaces for these more personal reasons as well.

National Register Status of Cemeteries

Because of their very personal nature, cemeteries are rarely afforded National Register of Historic Places status. Maintained by the National Park Service, the Register is a list of the most historic places in the country worthy of preservation. Only one percent of the over 95,000 entries in the National Register are labeled cemeteries. It is difficult to identify how many of these are African American without poring through the application documents for over 1,300 locations. Still, only 19 African American cemeteries in North Carolina are on the National Register.

A recent report from the African American Cultural Action Fund (AACAF) found just eight percent of the country's national historic sites represent African Americans, Asian Americans, American Latino, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiians combined. Supported by The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the AACAF is com-

Fig. 2: Broken headstone, Biddleville Cemetery in Charlotte, NC

mitted to doing a better job to reflect the history of minorities. Still, more needs to be done to move this work forward on a local and national level.

A cemetery is eligible for the National Register if it has an association with a significant event, significant person, embodies distinctive characteristics, or is of archaeological significance. Because additional considerations must be met, some cemeteries are included with churches or historic districts that meet the Register criteria more readily. Though National Register recognition does not guarantee preservation, it does offer cemeteries more status and recognition. However, there are other ways to find, protect, and preserve African American cemeteries.

Efforts to Build a National Database

There has been a push in recent years to find and document these sacred places on a local and national level. While online crowdsourced cemetery websites exist, historians and archaeologists caution that information here can be missing or incorrect. More formalized regional and national database efforts are underway. Historian Sandra Arnold founded the Periwinkle Initiative and the National Burial Database Project for Enslaved Americans to create a public repository with the burial location of those who died during slavery or after emancipation. Congress took up the cause in 2018 with the introduction

Fig. 3: Post emancipation era Biddleville Cemetery in Charlotte, NC

of The African American Burial Grounds Network Act. Co-sponsored by North Carolina congresswoman Alma Adams, if passed, it would create a voluntary national network of historic African American burial grounds within the National Park Service and a national database of burial sites. It would also set aside money for research and restoration. Although there was no vote on the bill in 2020, it remains in subcommittee.

In North Carolina, concern over abandoned cemeteries led to the 1978 formation of the Abandoned Cemeteries Study Committee. Their findings led to more robust statutes to protect graveyards and a statewide survey to record all state cemeteries. The work that started 40 years ago is far from over. According to North Carolina State Cemetery Specialist Melissa Timo, the cemetery surveys completed in the 1980s did not always make it back to state offices. Many records ended up in county libraries or with the recorders who completed them. Increasing development statewide has led to the rediscovery of forgotten cemeteries and lots of questions from the public. The state recently hired Timo to educate the public, answer questions about cemetery laws, and create a statewide burial database.

Know Before You Go

If you are interested in finding or researching the whereabouts of African American cemeteries, there are some things to keep in mind before you begin your search.

Cemeteries are often located on private property. Like North Carolina, many states allow descendants or interested parties access to cemeteries on private land, but you need to either get permission from landowners before venturing out or petition the county for permission. Once on site, do not move stones or pull out plants.

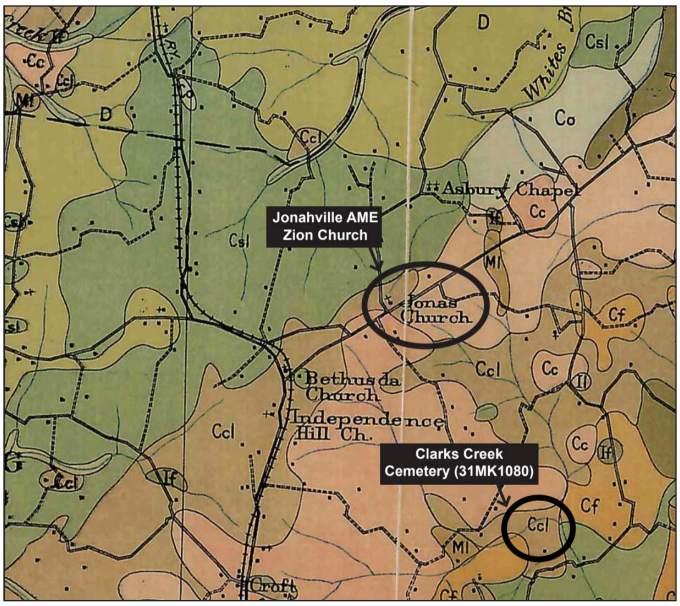


Fig. 4: 1910 map shows the proximity of area churches to a rediscovered cemetery in Mecklenburg County, NC

Though informal by today's standards, these may have been placed there long ago so friends and family members could locate a loved one's final resting place. Historians and archaeologists look for these markers to confirm burial sites.

Tombstones are fragile (See Fig. 2). It is best to consult with specialists before attempting to clean, upright, or repair broken monuments. There are several free resources available. The Chicora Foundation, Cemetery Resource Protection Training, the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, and the State of North Carolina all offer workshops or online guidance on the care and maintenance of historic cemeteries. Until you are armed with this knowledge, it is best to leave tombstones and markers alone.

However, it is important to create a site map of the cemetery, identify cemetery markers or tombstones, and take pictures of each burial site. A strong flashlight or mirror can help illuminate headstones and make them easier to read. Note fencing and any cemetery boundaries. Use a tape measure to record the distance between markers accurately. Make notes about landscape features, vegetation, groundcovers, and trees.

When identifying a cemetery, it helps to search through land records, old maps, newspaper reports, wills, birth and death records, census data, funeral home paperwork, and old directories (See Fig. 4). Talk to the members of local churches and longtime residents. Sometimes the whereabouts of old cemeteries are only known in the memories of those who live in the community. The location and physical characteristics of African American cemeteries and burial markers changed over time. Knowing these differences is helpful in the identification process.

Fig. 5: A wall opening at the rear of the Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church cemetery leads to the rediscovered Enslaved African American Cemetery in Charlotte, NC

Free Black Cemeteries

Tens of thousands of free African Americans lived in North Carolina in the 19th century. They were either never enslaved or were freed by their owners. Despite this, historian and author M. Ruth Little says no pre-Civil War free black cemeteries are known to exist in North Carolina though there are graves of free black people in a segregated section of the Greenwood Cemetery in New Bern, NC. Historian Lynn Rainville notes there are burials of free black people in Lynchburg, Virginia's city cemetery, but unless you know these people's names, you would not be able to distinguish the free black tombstones from their neighboring white ones. Rainville has found a few free black cemeteries in Virginia, but she says these are the most difficult types of African American cemeteries to locate because people were often buried in small family plots on their own land. She suggests searching for free black neighborhoods sometimes labeled on old maps as "Canada" or "Free State." Cemeteries in these areas could have free black graves though graves are often unmarked.

Enslaved American Cemeteries

The burials of enslaved African Americans are generally found on former plantations or church cemeteries – separate from white burial grounds (See Fig. 5). Large plantations usually had their own cemeteries. These sites were often located on marginal plots of land unusable for crops. Unlike today's neatly lined, garden-like parks with rows of marble and granite tombstones, enslaved people's burial spots rarely contained tombstones, and the positioning of burial sites was less formal. While some pre-Civil War accounts of enslaved funerals in South Carolina tell of large nighttime funerals, others report enslaved people were forbidden to gather and instead commemorated family events in secret. In New

Fig. 6: Homemade gravestone from The Friendship Chapel Cemetery in Forestville, NC

York, Colonial law limited African American funerals to 12 people and burials had to be held before sunset.

Enslaved burials were marked with shells, shiny objects, and pieces of pottery or glass. Placed on the top of a grave, these offerings did not have the permanence of stone markers. Wooden grave markers or crosses marked some burials, but these were prone to decay. More often, fieldstones marked a burial site, either as a headstone or a headstone and footstone. Enslaved people were not permitted to read or write, but stones sometimes had symbols or were worked into shapes. Pink quartz marks some children's graves. Planting trees or native plants like yucca or periwinkle was also common (See Fig. 7). Archaeological evidence has found bodies were buried east to west – with the head to the west. Bodies were usually interred in wooden coffins and sometimes shrouded. Personal effects were placed in coffins. Historians say these practices can be traced back to West African religious practices.

Today these cemeteries can be difficult to find. Plantation owners and church authorities rarely documented the burials of enslaved people or burial locations. A grove of cedar trees, the ground covered with periwinkle, faint depressions in the earth from decayed coffins, and scattered stones may be all that is visible. Rainville suggests looking for such cemeteries on a high elevation, next to a ring of trees, or near old fence lines. The location of plantations can be found on old Civil War-era maps, and slaveholders confirmed through the 1850 or 1860 census records. Taking the time to research an area's history and enlisting the help of local residents can aid in the search.

Post Civil War

After emancipation African Americans began to establish their own communities, churches, and cemeteries. Though they were technically free, racism and segregation continued. Burials are found in segregated sections of existing cemeteries, in separate neighborhood or church cemeteries, and on rural family-owned land. The layout is generally informal, almost random (See Fig. 3). Depressions in the ground from collapsed coffins may be visible. During this time period, grave markers were more varied, though many sites went unmarked. Some historians say this was intentional and a way to ensure that there was always space available for those who needed it.

Fig. 7: Periwinkle covers the ground of the African American Cemetery at Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church. Flags mark evidence of burials.

Marble and granite tombstones of affluent African Americans are found in some urban areas, but many postbellum burials continued to be marked with fieldstones and wooden markers. In rural areas, homemade markers made of concrete or reused found materials were utilized (See Fig. 6). After the turn of the century, commercially made tombstones came into use and were usually inscribed locally. Sometimes temporary metal name markers can be found marking a burial.

Verification

The visual characteristics of a cemetery combined with local historical information are very useful in identifying African American cemeteries. When additional information about the size and scope of a cemetery is needed, archeologists can probe an area, use ground-penetrating radar, or excavate the area to identify burial sites.

Probing is fairly low-tech, somewhat invasive, and requires an experienced operator. It involves pushing a T shaped steel rod through the soil in spaced intervals. Soil is softer where a grave has been dug. Probing can identify these soft areas as burials. Care needs to be taken not to probe into a burial shaft. Ground Penetrating Radar, or GPR, is a non-invasive way that archeologists use to map burials (See Fig. 8). A wheeled unit is rolled across the ground in a grid pattern sending electromagnetic en-

Fig. 8: Looking for burial sites with GPR at The Friendship Chapel Cemetery in Forestville, NC

Fig. 9: Excavations at Washington's Mount Vernon uncovered burial shafts of enslaved people

ergy into the ground. The reflection from below ground is recorded and compared to nearby soil patterns. The more decayed a burial is, the harder it is to determine if one exists. Soil conditions, the water table height, and prior disturbance in an area can make mapping more difficult.

Excavating a few inches at a time until a grave shaft is found is conclusive evidence of a burial. The grave shaft is different in color than the surrounding soil (See Fig. 9). However, it is invasive and must be done carefully to avoid damaging or entering a burial shaft.

Rediscovered African American Cemeteries

Forgotten cemeteries are often rediscovered during development, through word of mouth, oral history, and and research by family members or professionals. Sometimes, community members notice a cemetery's decline and decay and bring it to the authorities' attention or organize locally to clean up the area. In the past two decades, historic plantations open to the public have put more time and resources into sharing the history of those who were enslaved and preserving their burial grounds.

Development led to the rediscovery of the nation's largest enslaved and free African burial ground. In 1991 in New York City, plans were moving forward to build new federal offices in Lower Manhattan. During excavation, authorities uncovered intact burials some 25 feet below the surface. The construction plans were put on hold so archaeologists could continue work at the site. Meanwhile, there was growing concern about how the project was being conducted. After two Congressional hearings and input from the descendant African Community, the excavation was halted. A team led by Dr. Michael Blakey from Howard University and archaeologists from John Milner Associates were brought in to handle the research. More than 400 bodies were found, examined, and studied, before being reinterred at the site in 2003.

The excavation site was just a small portion of what was originally a six-acre cemetery. Researchers believe as many as 15,000 people were buried here from 1626 to 1795. Years of extensive research following the excavations resulted in volumes of information about these enslaved and free Africans, their lives, health, customs, and burial traditions. Today this sacred site is a National Monument where people learn about the lives and resilience of African Americans in Colonial America.

Rapid growth and the construction that comes with it have led to the rediscovery of cemeteries across North Carolina. In 2017 developers announced plans to build a Topgolf entertainment complex and nearly 400 apartments on land next to Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. Neighbors were against the project, and stories came to light that enslaved people might be buried on the property. The antebellum church was established in 1830, and slaves were known to have attended church services there with their owners. Though the 1860 census does not list enslaved people by name – it does confirm that 6,800 of the 17,000 people who lived in Mecklenburg County at the time were enslaved. No historical records were found to verify claims of an enslaved cemetery. Still, a report by historian Dr. Dan Morrill that included interviews, an on-site inspection, and comparisons with other known enslaved cemeteries concluded there was a burial ground just beyond the boundaries of the official church cemetery (See Fig 5 and 7). These results were confirmed using ground-penetrating radar. Plans for a Topgolf have been canceled, and developers say they are committed to saving the graveyard. However, nothing further has been done to protect the site or commemorate the people buried there.

In 2013 a woman living in the Biddleville neighborhood in Charlotte, NC, called the city to report illegal dumping and vandalism at the cemetery near her house. The

Fig. 10: Flags mark the location of burial sites in Woodland Cemetery at Clemson University

Fig. 11: Headstone from Biddleville Cemetery in Charlotte, NC

city had no record of the cemetery. The association that owned the site no longer existed. She continued to call city officials, and her persistence paid off. In 2016 the site was declared a local historic landmark. A report written by historian Susan Mayer found the cemetery was "one of the oldest non-slave black cemeteries in Mecklenburg County not connected with a church"(p. 4). Though less than 20 headstones dot the cemetery, it is the final resting place of over 300 people (See Fig 1, 2, 3, and 11). A fence now surrounds the cemetery, but there is no other information on site to let you know about its historical significance.

Students at Clemson University are responsible for recent efforts there to identify and preserve African American burial sites at the school's Woodland Cemetery. The students notified the school of neglect at a small fenced off area known as an African American burial site after taking part in the university's Call My Name history project. The school investigated and found fieldstones well outside the fenced area. Clemson was built on former plantation land. To date, researchers have identified 614 unmarked burials believed to be those of enslaved individuals who worked on the plantation or convict laborers who helped build the school (See Fig. 10). The university has created a website https://www.clemson.edu/about/history/woodland-cemetery/index.html as a "living archive" to be transparent and share updated information about their research and steps to protect the cemetery and commemorate those buried there.

In the past two decades, several historic plantations have located the cemeteries of enslaved Americans and have begun to tell their stories. At George Washington's Mount Vernon, an archaeological project that began in 2014 has identified 87 enslaved burials (See Fig. 9). Tours now include an Enslaved People of Mount Vernon tour and a Through My Eyes Tour that takes you through a day in the life of an enslaved chambermaid. At Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, the enslaved burial ground is known to be the final resting place of at least 40 enslaved people, though more burial sites are thought to be on the grounds. Archeological work is ongoing to discover more information about the people enslaved at Monticello. This work and these stories must continue so a more truthful historical narrative is told.

Preserving Cemeteries

The best way to preserve a cemetery is to get the word out about it and keep the site's history alive. The more people who know about the cemetery, the better. Tell your local landmark commission, state historic preservation office, local history museum, and genealogical societies about the site. Tell local churches about its existence. Though it is difficult to get a cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places – it may qualify for local or state historic designation and make the site eligible for funding. Organize a cemetery support group and create a long-term plan for the cemetery's preservation. Visit the cemetery regularly and hold clean up days. Tell local newspapers and television news departments about your efforts.

According to Timo, a vital step in the preservation process in North Carolina is getting the cemetery listed with the Office of State Archaeology. The Citizen Cemetery Site form is available online at https://archaeology.ncdcr.gov/programs/cemeteries. Putting a cemetery in the database gives local and state governments, contractors, and other interested parties access to the information when looking to comply with State and Federal preservation laws. Updating the state with new details about cemeteries is also encouraged.

State and federal laws protect burial grounds on both public and private property. If you notice graves have been disturbed or if you see vandalism or illegal dumping, contact your local sheriff's office. Cemeteries are

rarely moved once located, but landowners can move burials at their own expense if they advise the community or known descendants about the plans. A city, county, or state can take ownership of a cemetery and use the land for other purposes if it is legally declared abandoned. If a cemetery is known, recognized, visited, and cared for, it is harder to declare it abandoned. If a cemetery must be moved, the Chicora Foundation, a South Carolina preservation organization, suggests descendants can request an archeologist perform the removal and conduct a study of the location before reinternment elsewhere. While some people feel this is desecration, much can be learned about those who died, their lives, and their traditions.

Conclusion

The need to identify and preserve African American burial sites is clear. Too many of these cemeteries have already been lost and for too long the lives and contributions of African Americans have been ignored. These sites provide important opportunities to learn, grow, and better understand our collective history. They are also very personal and sacred places for descendants. They stand as a tangible connection and living testament to the strength and perseverance of their ancestors.

Bibliography

Anderson, D. S. (2019, February 13). New Legislation Seeks To Protect Lost African-American Burial Grounds. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidanderson/2019/02/13/new-legislation-seeks-to-protect-lost-african-american-burial-grounds

Arnold, Sandra, Irma Watkins-Owens, and Fordham University. n.d. Burial Database Project of Enslaved African Americans. Retrieved September 17, 2020 (http://www.vanishinghistory.org/index.asp).

Blakey, M. L., & Rankin-Hill, L. M. (Eds.). (2009). The New York African Burial Ground: Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York. Washington, DC: Howard University Press.

Dorrel, M., & Fish, P. (2006, October 27). Mysteries & Secrets: Exploring Hillcrest Cemetery. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://friendsofpagewalker.wildapricot.org/cemeteries#HillcrestCemetery

Gaffney, A. (2020, August 19). The Fight to Save America's Historic Black Cemeteries. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/2020/08/historic-black-cemeteries-at-risk-can-they-be-preserved/#close

Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries. (1996). Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation.
Heffern, S. (2015, December 22).

How to Preserve Historic Cemeteries and Burial Grounds. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://savingplaces.org/stories/how-to-preserve-historic-cemeteries-and-burial-grounds#.

Little, M. R. (1998). Sticks & Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Lowry, S. (2017). Ground Penetrating Radar survey of the Historic Friendship Chapel Baptist Church Cemetery (pp. 1-24, Rep.). Wake County, NC: New South Associates.

Lowry, S., & Turco, E. (2016). Historical and Archaeological Survey of the Clarks Creek Cemetery in the Hampton Place Subdivision (pp. 1-37, Rep.). Stone Mountain, GA: New South Associates.

Mcgahee, S. H., & Edmonds, M. W. (1997). South Carolina's Historic Cemeteries: A Preservation Handbook. SC: Bibliogov.

Mayer, S. V. (2016). Survey and Research Report on the Biddlesville Cemetery. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Biddleville-Cemetery-Survey-and-Research-Report.pdf

Nicholson, Z. (2020, October 20). Clemson Finds 600 Unmarked Graves on Campus. But Who Were They? Researchers Race to Find Out. Greenville News.

North Carolina Cemetery Specialist Melissa Timo [Telephone interview]. (2020, September 14).

Orton, N. (n.d.). Recovering and Preserving African American Cemeteries. Preservation Leadership Forum. Retrieved October 15, 2020, from https://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/special-contributor/2016/06/02/recovering-and-preserving-african-american-cemeteries

Potter, E. W., & Boland, B. M. (1992). National Register Bulletin 41 - Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB41-Complete.pdf

Rainville, L. (2016). Hidden history: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

Roberts, K. (2016, February 18). Uncovering a Painful Past for African Americans, One Headstone at a Time. The (Westchester County, N.Y.) Journal News. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/02/18/slave-burial-grounds-african-americans/78773156/

Society for Historical Archeology webpage – Abandoned Burial Grounds. (n.d.). Retrieved September 16, 2020, from https://sha.org/resources/abandoned-burial-grounds/

Woodland Cemetery Historic Preservation. (n.d.). Retrieved November 03, 2020, from https://www.clemson.edu/about/history/woodland-cemetery/

Image Credits

Fig.4, 6, 8 New South Associates
Fig. 9 mountvernon.org
Fig.10 Clemson University

Acknowledgements

The author thanks to Melissa Timo, NC Cemetery Specialist, Sarah Lowry from New South Associates, and Sarah David with the State Preservation Office.

The Historic Dimension Series is a collection of briefs prepared by UNCG students under the direction of Professor Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll. For information on other topics in the series please visit the website at go.uncg.edu/hds