

Recovering and Preserving African American Cemeteries

By Special Contributor posted 06-02-2016
16:28

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By Nadia Orton

The reverence attached to cemeteries and burial grounds, which have long been considered sacred sites, is an example of enduring Africanisms and cultural tradition in the African American community. Burial grounds have always been regarded as places where ancestors could be properly honored and provided with the dignity, care, and respect in death that had often been denied them in life.



Pine Forest Cemetery in Wilmington, North Carolina | Credit: Nadia Orton

Interest in the study of my family tree has led me to over a dozen cemeteries throughout Tidewater Virginia and North Carolina, and helped reconstruct a family legacy spanning over 400 years. Cemeteries offer an important, tangible connection to history allowing closer interpretation of days past than most other sources can. Genealogists and family historians have long recognized the benefit of cemeteries in the study of family history and an increasing popular interest in genealogy has led to an increased focus on them.

Cemeteries, along with churches and schools, were some of the first institutions founded by African Americans after the Civil War. Developed by various coalitions, masonic groups, or benevolent associations, they became cornerstones of newly freed communities. Today, they are often a virtual time capsule that provides insight into the social, anthropological, and archaeological history of a community. Headstones may carry the names of little-known yet influential figures whose voices have been left out of the historical record.

However, the history these important sites convey is at risk of becoming lost. Thousands of cemeteries have been destroyed by development, while many others are overgrown, neglected, and abandoned, often the sites of trash accumulation and illegal dumping or repeated bouts of flooding. Headstones are vandalized or disappear, taking with them family legacies and stories of struggle, freedom, and triumph. Decades of such neglect take their toll, and African American burial grounds have become endangered sites of our collective heritage.

A Neglected History

How did these important institutions deteriorate so much over time? To answer that question, we must consider African American burial grounds and cemeteries within the appropriate historic context. The issues are manifold, but understanding their economic, political, and social causes can center African American burial grounds and cemeteries within the larger construct of cemetery preservation.

African American cemeteries have been abandoned for the same reasons as many other historic cemeteries, including severed family connections coupled with a lack of provision for long-term maintenance. As a cemetery fills up, profits decrease, and it becomes too expensive to maintain. Overgrowth sets in, and the cemetery becomes impassable. Gravestones are broken by tree roots or covered by bushes, leaves, and tree limbs.



Cedar Grove Cemetery in Charlotte, North Carolina | Credit: Nadia Orton

But other causes are specific to African American burial grounds and cemeteries—the ramifications of slavery and of the structural racism that persists in the United States. The history of segregation is evident in the distance of slave cemeteries from the “big houses”; in laws and city codes, many only repealed between 1960 and 1975, that forbade the burial of African Americans in historically white cemeteries; and in the physical barriers, like fences, walls, or drives.



Oakwood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia | Credit: Nadia Orton

In Virginia, there's the winding road separating the African American section from the main body of Oakwood Cemetery in Richmond; the brick wall that separates Norfolk's West Point Cemetery from Elmwood; and the intersection of Danville's National and Green Hill cemeteries with Freedman's Cemetery, where depressions from the fence that used to separate the two are still visible.

The rise in racial animus following the end of Reconstruction led to the destruction of thousands of African American communities, some founded after the Civil War, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the last 60 years, freeway construction, eminent domain, "urban renewal" programs, and gentrification have caused large-scale displacement. The cemeteries that remain become all that is left of once-vibrant, historic communities. In Atlanta, Georgia, Mount Olive Cemetery at the entrance of Bagley Park (Frankie Allen) represents the last vestige of the Macedonia Park community. Gilbert Memorial Cemetery, a former slave burial ground, continued as a community cemetery after emancipation but fell victim to the construction of Interstate 95.

Making Up for Lost Time

In extant African American cemeteries and burial grounds, headstones are not always visible. Many African American families were not able to afford the large monuments and statuary that are commonplace in historically white cemeteries, or the stones may have been taken or vandalized over the years. Flood waters have caused soil disturbance resulting in “orphan stones” that no longer mark the original gravesites.



Uncovered graves during cemetery cleanup in Calvary Cemetery in Norfolk, Virginia |
Credit: Nadia Orton

Unmarked graves can be recognizable from depressions in the ground caused by the decay of the wooden boxes and the resulting fill of soil or by plantings like yucca or groundcovers of periwinkle or ivy.



Yucca among the overgrowth in Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia | Credit: Nadia Orton

It Takes a Village

Preserving a long-neglected African American cemetery or burial ground is an intricate undertaking. Cemetery preservation specialists and guides taught me the importance of developing a thorough preservation plan to assess the condition of the cemetery and identify priorities.

Volunteer work can include cleaning and righting fallen gravestones and recording gravestone inscriptions or clearing overgrowth and applying the appropriate weed killer to maintain cleared sections. Horticulturists can help identify dead and/or diseased trees for removal and locate plantings with possible historic significance to preserve. Lost and unmarked graves can sometimes be located through ground-penetrating radar studies.

Oral histories from descendants and members of the community can help find lost cemeteries and provide information on the family interred there. It may be a mutually beneficial relationship, as families may be able to share little-known historic context. In 2014 I helped one descendant locate his Civil War ancestor's

gravesite in the same cemetery where some of ancestors are also buried and assisted in securing a replacement headstone from the Department of Veterans Affairs. He showed me the spot that had been the end point of annual Memorial Day parades, a time-honored tradition that ceased once the cemetery became overgrown in the 1950s.



Replacement gravestone for Civil War veteran in Mount Calvary Cemetery in
Portsmouth, Virginia | Credit: Nadia Orton

Though many funeral homes that once served African American communities have closed, death certificates, obituaries, and church records can help reconstruct cemetery databases. Additionally, property tax and court records, as well as deeds, can help identify owners, who may wish to petition cities or townships to take over abandoned cemeteries and provide stable, long-term maintenance.

The cemeteries and burial grounds of enslaved African Americans and their descendants are sometimes the last remaining repositories of the history of their communities. What stories do the cemeteries contain? How much of our history remains to be rediscovered? I've visited nearly 300 cemeteries in the last seven years and continue to see the systemic blight affecting these important institutions; often, it matches the conditions of the surrounding neighborhoods.

As the communities deteriorate or disappear due to lack of jobs and resources or to the impact of commercial development, this fragile but important history may be lost to future generations.

Genealogists and historians like me feel a sense of urgency surrounding the reclamation and preservation of this history. These places matter and merit our respect and protection because they represent our collective history and offer a way to preserve voices of those who were often left out of our historical narrative. Telling their stories through the preservation of their last resting places is vital to providing an authentic narrative of American history

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For more on preserving burial grounds download [Preserving African American Places](#)

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