

# REVITALIZING “FORGOTTEN” AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

The degradation, abandonment, and “forgetting” of African American cemeteries have become chronic issues throughout the Southern United States. At their base, these spaces are examples of manipulated landscapes and represent a long history of minimization as the result of an imagined history via the influence of Lost Cause ideology- a negationist ideology which continues to affect the visibility of African American heritage spaces and their contribution to American history. In order to mitigate this manipulation and preserve both historic and contemporary cemetery spaces from further decline, plans for revitalization need to be implemented while simultaneously considering the various terminological, economic, political, and social issues/considerations that are a result of this manipulation. Examples across the South further emphasize the ambiguities of addressing one-sided representations of heritage, culture, and history within the landscape. A current project being conducted by East Carolina University’s Department of Anthropology on a “forgotten” African American cemetery in Ayden, North Carolina serves as a model of action for similar projects seeking to mitigate manipulation and reintroduce these cemeteries into their communities.



REVITALIZING “FORGOTTEN” AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERIES

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By

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# **INTRODUCTION**

## **Chapter Outline**

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter outlines and defines the concepts of manipulated landscapes, imagined histories, and the Lost Cause ideology. These concepts have had far-reaching implications for the development of modern power-structures, identities, heritages, and landscapes of the American South. Chapter 1 also explores the development of the “dominant” and “non-dominant” narratives that primed Southern landscapes for manipulation, beginning with the arrival of the first Africans to Virginia in 1619 and extending into the modern day. Chapter 2 discusses how the current state of many African American cemeteries are prime examples of the consequences of manipulated landscapes, imagined histories, and the Lost Cause ideology, resulting in large-scale degradation of black cemeteries generally and the application of labels such as “abandoned” and “forgotten”.

Additionally, I will discuss a series of case studies from throughout the South that will provide examples of attempts at redirecting racist narratives and histories to reincorporate and revitalize African American cemeteries and those buried therein. Chapter 3 will analyze the various theories, contributors, and stereotypes about the use and abandonment of African American cemeteries and the challenges that these contemporary spaces encounter. Finally, this chapter will discuss the various issues and considerations that are to be taken into account while interacting with and advocating for the revitalization of African American cemeteries.

## **Intellectual Merit**

The merit of this research lies in the approach that “forgotten” and “abandoned” terminology obscures the work of revitalization and that the “forgotten” are instead under-recorded/underfunded spaces affected by a variety of factors. Secondly, the analysis of the Lost Cause and imagined histories influence on African American cemeteries is significant because previous literature addressing these landscapes are overwhelmingly skewed towards the analysis of mortuary materials or discussions of the landscape’s connection(s) to antebellum history and figures (Rainville, 2014). There has been much public interest in the histories and upkeep of marginalized spaces like African American cemeteries, but they often fall short of implementing long-term change or research that is accessible and inclusive for those outside of academia.

This is likely driven by/influenced by three factors. 1) There can frequently be a lack of communication between parties, typically between professionals and community members. 2) advocacy typically focuses on preserving the physical, but not acknowledging the influence of the intangible (rhetoric, ideologies, terminology, etc.) by examining the historical record. 3) There is a lack of consideration for the fact that any plans developed need to be able to be realistically maintained long-term. Anthropology provides an ideal framework from which to study and identify the non-tangible influences on African American cemeteries and for revitalization plans because the field is structured to consider not only the archaeological evidence, but the social and cultural aspects that affect the landscape, affected communities and the historical record.

## **Broader Impacts**

This thesis and subsequent research have coincided with a rise in interest concerning African American heritage and landscapes due to both the Black Lives Matter Movement and the

protests surrounding Confederate Statues and iconography throughout the South (particularly in areas representative of power structures, such as courthouses). Both movements have desires to bring attention to the ways that certain rhetoric and ideologies of the Lost Cause have produced inequalities for African American and the curation of their heritage, culture, and traditions within the landscape in comparison to other groups. Legislation concerning the recording and maintenance of African American cemeteries at both the state and federal level to create task forces, funding avenues, and databases are in the early stages of implementation or pending approval. Thus, research on historical African American cemeteries in their current state is timely and may allow for a broader understanding of the trajectory which leads them to degradation and forgetting and for the trajectory of modern-day cemeteries if left unattended.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### Manipulated Landscapes, Imagined Histories, and the Lost Cause Ideology

#### **Defining Manipulated Landscapes**

Public landscapes should be understood as mythologized spaces in that they are frequently designed and curated in ways to present views, events, individuals, and ideologies of the past representative of a group-specific narrative (Anschuetz et.al, 2001). “Truth” is subjective to the memory of its practitioners and manipulated landscapes almost always portray a version of events curated by the dominant group (2001). Typically, these versions of events are presented by the majority in order to manipulate the minority, but manipulation by the minority has been documented. For example, the system of apartheid instituted by the minority white population in South Africa was a manipulation of the black majority through a system of institutionalized racial segregation, very similar to the Jim Crow South in the United States (Mayne, 1999, p. 52). Ultimately, truths curated by a dominant group often result in tangible environmental change through the construction of monuments and buildings, but also the intangible: heritage, identity, and memory.

Consequently, while these landscapes are simultaneously commemorative and communal, they tell only one side of a story. This process, however, contributes to the myth-making process of producing manipulated landscapes because “numbers matter at the end point (of history) ...the more people that participate, sanction, or contribute to commemoration” the more legitimacy is given to the historical event and the more “historic” it becomes to those that observe it (Trouillot, 1995). Commemoration is an important construction because the events that are tied to the action of commemoration (such as parades, marches, and other types of large gatherings) bolster how people perceive their history. That is, there is an ongoing reciprocal

relationship between people and the places they inhabit: the more people that enforce this relationship, the more legitimate and accepted an agenda becomes. While monuments, streets, neighborhoods, cemeteries, churches, and parks are all material things, they evoke emotion and serve physical manifestations of identity for the group.

The outcomes of manipulated landscapes are damaging in a number of respects for those who are excluded from history and its record. The public spaces and landscapes of the dominant group produce unequal levels of visual representation where their ideals, beliefs, and preferences overrule those of the non-dominant group (King, 2010). In the Southern United States, visual manipulations through the use of Confederate monuments and other whitewashed histories have reinforced racial and social stereotyping that continues to marginalize non-white history and experiences to a level of importance second to that of whites. In doing so, the trauma of the diaspora, slavery, and contemporary racial injustice have also been excluded from landscapes. None of these realities are unknown, in fact, these consequences have been pointed out as far back as the abolitionist movement in the late 19th century (Gallagher & Nolan, 2000). How, then, has the past been continually silenced and these manipulations allowed to remain in place?

Chief in this silencing is the denial of alternative narratives' very existence. The past becomes silenced when power structures reinforce ideals about heritage, identity, and belonging to the point they are taken as undebatable fact- rather than one group's interpretation of the past (Trouillot, 1995). In the South, portions of the past have been silenced through the prioritization of a way of life that did not exist outside of the realm of the white gentry. Referencing back to the fact that manipulated landscapes need communal commemoration and memory to survive, two types of communal memory represent history in the Southern landscape. The first type of communal memory in the South is represented by the white population, especially those with

family histories reaching back to the antebellum period. This group's view of the past often was and remains an idealized and romanticized version of the country's reality. They subsequently reinforced this by altering the landscape to convey levels of success, leisure, and plenty at the expense of African Americans who could not alter the landscape to reflect their contributions to history, place, and space in the same ways. The white gentry, for example, built grand houses, monopolized large tracts of land, and maintained an economic system based on enslaved labor that minimized their presence on the landscape apart from their physical production of goods (Rainville, 2009).

These themes are still prevalent and influential to the image of certain locales in the South, such as plantations. Plantations often double as wedding and event venues and as living history sites that present a skewed, one sided heritage focus. Supporters of this "imagined history", descendants of the former gentry, and supporters of the Lost Cause then, as I will discuss later, were the architects of re-championing this version of the past as fact rather than one group's version of events. The second type of communal memory is represented by African Americans who experienced commodification of the body, exploitation, and subjugation. Undoubtedly, the cumulative effects of migration, economic disenfranchisement, and violence towards African Americans communities has influenced how family and community lore are passed on from generation to generation in contrast to white Southerners. Their memories have become one of exclusion where heritage has not been conceptualized along similar as that of Euro-Americans, nor the narratives as well preserved in record or visuals,

### **Developing Narratives & Background**

I have used the word "narrative" thus far as a way of organizing the many views and versions which may exist when discussing the past. My choice to use terms such as "dominant"

and “non-dominant” do not reflect any measure of objective worth, but rather that one version of the past has superseded the other. Indeed, recent efforts like The 1619 Project have focused on developing neglected narratives of the past and, in turn, to “reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative” where they have been chronically absent (The 1619 Project, 2020). To understand the trajectory and influence of manipulated landscapes and their development, we need to understand the evolution of the “dominant” narrative and the “non-dominant” narrative of the South. For African Americans, manipulation was a result of whitewashed productions of important identity-driving historical events which, over time, skewed the landscape away from their history and, indeed, very presence.

In 1662, the Virginia House of Burgesses passed the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* (loose translation: “offspring follows belly”). The doctrine has had a long use in the history of slavery from Roman civil law to the provincial governments of the Spanish conquistadors during colonization (Morris, 1996). Long understood as a law that codified and sanctioned hereditary racial slavery via the maternal line in that the children of enslaved women were born into slavery and those born to white women, even those serving as indentured servants, were born free regardless of the status of either parent (Morris, 1996). Previously, the racial laws of the British colonies had not been as restrictive or as race based as later iterations. The earliest legal records of the Virginia colony illustrate a lengthy process in enslaving black bodies, which ultimately resulted in the colorism (a type of discrimination because of and against individuals who possess a dark skin tone) and castes of the antebellum period.

While the earliest African arrivals to North America were, without debate, enslaved peoples (because they were bought and brought against their will for their labor), most were not



*legally* restricted from the process of obtaining freedom after the traditional period of indebtedness. Nor were they restricted from owning land, farming, or contracting their own indentured servants (Finkleman, 2012). By the turn of the 17th century, however, the British economy had begun to stabilize to a point where white indentured servitude in the Americas began to decline and planters began to turn towards chattel slavery, following Spanish and Portuguese patterns, to combat the loss of labor (Morris, 1996). Chattel slavery is where the enslaved person and their descendants are legally rendered the personal property of the slave owner, without legal or social recourse to challenge their lack of autonomy (Finkleman, 2012). By 1670, British colonists had introduced African slavery to such a degree that the port of Charleston became the largest and busiest slave port in North America, before spreading further through Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana- the landscape associated with the traditional “Deep South” (Rothman, 2005).

A prime example of the evolving duality of the early American landscape and the move towards silencing narratives concerning non-white histories, comes from the legal case of Anthony Johnson and John Casor. Johnson and Casor, who were both thought to have originally been from Angola, were brought to Virginia and contracted as indentured servants (Finkleman, 2012). Johnson went on to serve out his term and became extremely wealthy, acquiring large tracts of land along Virginia’s Eastern Shore (Billings, 2009). By 1651, Johnson had amassed enough land to acquire “headrights” or the legal ability to contract and import indentured servants from England (Billings, 2009). At some point prior to 1654, Casor came under the employ of Johnson to serve out the remaining length of a "seven or eight sum of yeares" of an indentured contract, however, after attempting to claim his freedom at the end of this period Johnson informed him that he did not possess an indentured contract for Casor and he was,

therefore, not legally able to claim his freedom (Billings, 2009). Casor was then contracted to another colonist named Robert Parker, who later testified in court that Casor possessed an indentured contract and had served the term lawfully (Billings, 2009). Later that same year, Johnson sued Parker alleging that Parker had illegally detained Casor and prevented him from returning to Johnson, stating that “hee never did see any [indenture] but that hee had ye [Casor] a Negro for his life”. In the case of *Johnson v. Parker*, the court of Northampton County upheld Johnson's right to hold Casor as a “lifetime indentured”, saying in its ruling of 8 March 1655:

This daye Anthony Johnson negro made his complaint to the court against mr. Robert Parker and declared that hee deteyneth his servant John Casor negro under the pretence that said negro was a free man.....It is therefore the Judgement of the Court and ordered That the said John Casor Negro forthwith returne unto the service of the said master Anthony Johnson, And that Mr. Robert Parker make payment of all charges in the suit (Bilings, 2009; p 286-287)

In essence, the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* functioned economically to provide a steady supply of slaves in-country and socially to produce a new racial caste of lifetime laborers who could not own land and could not possess any means of control over production (Lovell et.al, 2008). The colonial legal system produced doctrines that limited early African and African American existence outside of chattel slavery and emphasized their subjugation to the economic structure, even as far as conceptualizing them as a part of the landscape themselves (Finkleman, 2012).

By the 18th century, the narrative of Euro-American dominance was in full effect through their participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the uptick of slave labor use to cultivate

rice, tobacco, and indigo plantations (Mitchell, 2001). However, following the Civil War, the majority of the late 19th century's narratives for both Southern white's and African Americans centered on Reconstruction and grappling with the loss of labor and a struggling economic system and legal, but not social, freedoms respectively. Reconstruction (1865-1877) was the period directly following the Civil War in which slavery was abolished and the Southern landscape was simultaneously being rebuilt from the effects of the war (Mitchell, 2001), This period was portrayed as an intermediate period of loss for and by white Southerners.

Reconstruction was conversely portrayed as a boon for African Americans under policies like Special Field Orders No. 15 or "Forty Acres and a Mule" (Mitchell, 2001). Many of the formerly enslaved believed, after being told by various political figures, that they had a right to own the land they had been forced to work as slaves and could now themselves profit from their own labor. Freed people widely expected to legally claim 40 acres of land and a mule after the end of the war. Some freedmen took advantage of the order and took initiatives to acquire land plots along a strip of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida's coasts (Mitchell, 2001). These types of policies, however, never produced said promises nor provided the kind of infrastructure needed that could accommodate the millions freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, who had begun to move North in large numbers (Mitchell, 2001). Policies such as these made it evident that the landscape was still under the purview of white power structures.

The African American experience during slavery continued to be overlooked in favor of white narratives about the "memories of the bloody, unbearable realities of war." (Adkins, 2014). Memorialization of the war and the backing of the "Old South" via erecting Confederate monuments and mobilizing preservation of the historic homes, cemeteries, and other locales came in waves after the end of the Reconstruction Era in 1877 (see figure 1.1). A particularly

intense period of activity followed World War I as veterans of the Civil War died out, and during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's/60's as part of the work of supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (Blight, 2001).



**Fig 1.1: Union soldiers gather at the front of Arlington House, then the plantation of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Circa 1864. Former plantations like Arlington House were pivotal for advancing the Lost Cause's romanticized version of history during the antebellum period.**

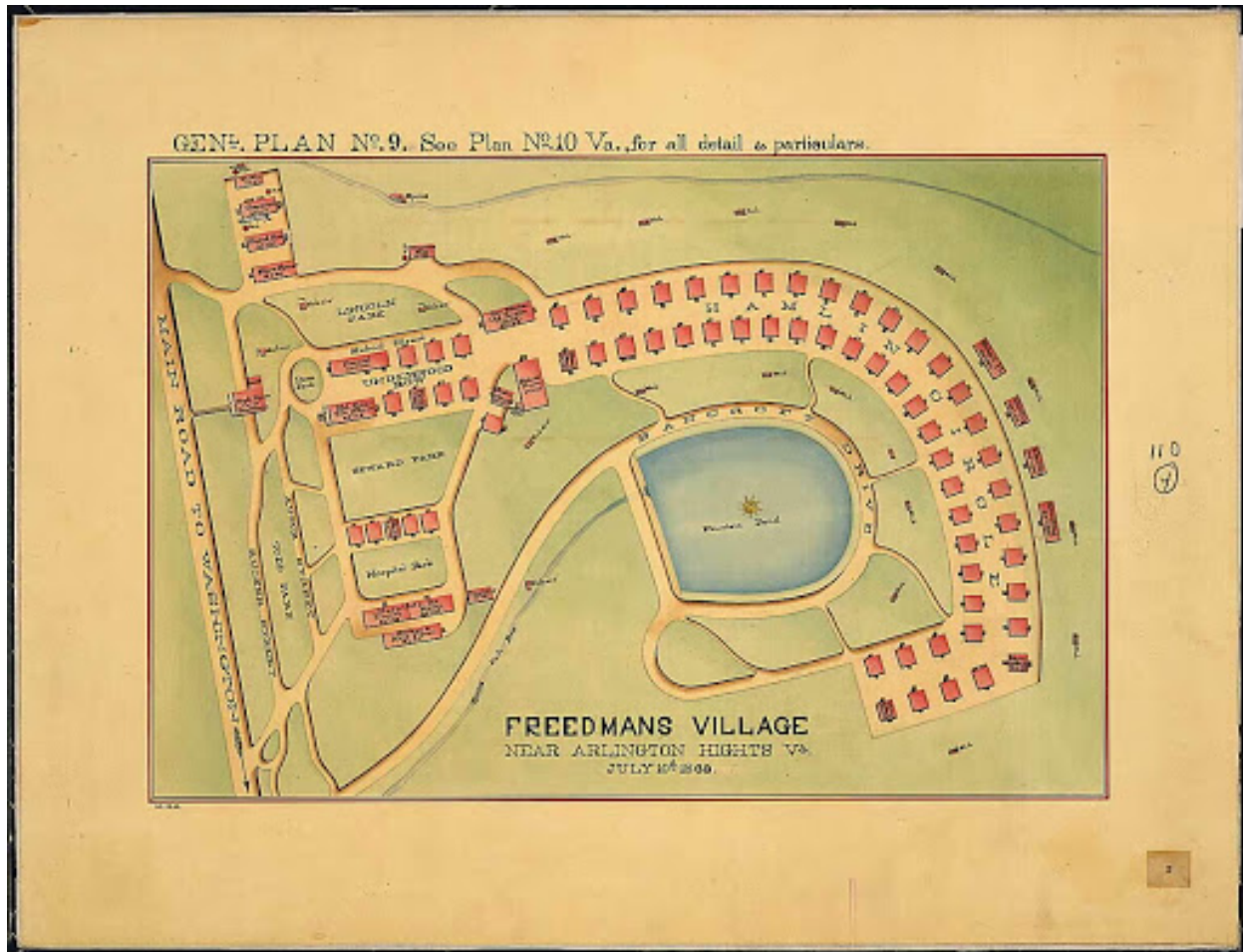
## **Defining Imagined Histories**

Imagined histories rely heavily on the written record (Trouillot, 1995). This is inherently an obstacle in representing different versions of experiences of/in the past, as the written record most often represents select groups over others. Imagined histories represent a “mythic present, a place in time in which past and present are compressed, constructed and reconstructed to meet the immediate needs of the nation” (Binnington, 2013). The way history is remembered is often shaped by how people *desire* to remember history. Myth, imagination, and nostalgia can “produce” a history that makes people feel comfortable about the events of the past—while shaping the “image” they want to project to the world about it.

For example, prior to its establishment as a war memorial, portions of Arlington National Cemetery formed an area known as “Freedman's Village”. Freedman's Village operated as a Union camp to accommodate, in part, the influx of former slaves fleeing to the North in the final years of the Civil War (McElya, 2018). For over sixty years previous, enslaved peoples had been buried on the grounds of nearby Arlington House- the plantation of Confederate General Robert E. Lee (McElya, 2018 ). Arlington House had been selected as a Union occupation zone for this very reason, in order to project an image about the impending demise of the Confederate cause and, subsequently, the plantation system (McElya, 2018). Many of these former slaves helped to bury war dead on the grounds once it was commandeered by the Union Army in 1863. Despite this, neither they nor the former residents of the Freedman's Village were permitted to be buried there or allowed to tend the graves of those already buried (McElya, 2018). Eventually, Freedman's Village and the surrounding landscape were leveled to create more space for graves and by doing so, the history of the landscape as a plantation and then rallying point for freed

slaves was stripped to produce a largely white only cemetery celebrating the Union (see figure 1.3).

The graves of deceased slaves were re-purposed for white Union soldiers while the bodies of groups such as the United States Colored Troops (USCT) were segregated to a far edge of the property known as the Lower Cemetery, cataloged as “contraband space” in cemetery records (McElya, 2018). African American graves were also excluded from Decoration Day, the ceremonial decorating of military gravestones. Once Arlington became a national cemetery, the landscape became curated to promote a national sense of pride and honor in life and in death. The landscape prioritized the memory and contributions of white soldiers' and expunged that of black soldiers and the enslaved. Far from the exception, the imagined history of Arlington highlights the presence of an ideology that continues to see support and use in the landscapes of the South, known more broadly as the Lost Cause ideology.



**Figure 1.2: Artist's rendering of the Freedman's Village layout in what is now Arlington National Cemetery, circa 1865. The Freedman's Village was leveled in order to make room for the burials of white war dead, effectively stripping Arlington of any African American presence.**



**Fig 1.3: UDC members pose around a newly erected Confederate monument in Lakeland, Florida, circa 1915. The UDC were the primary organization that advocated for Confederate commemoration and memorialization of war dead, historical figures, battlefields, and former plantations.**

**Defining the Lost Cause Ideology**

The Lost Cause ideology is a pseudo-historical, negationist ideology of political, social, and religious influence. It was crafted by white Southerners immediately following the Civil War to reconcile the perceived “loss” of a way of life that depended on the productions of enslaved



labor and claims of racial superiority (Gallagher & Nolan, 2000). Blight defines their conceptions of the Lost Cause ideology as “a public memory, a heritage community awaiting its exodus, and a (white) people forming a collective identity as victims and survivors” (2001). Early supporters of the Lost Cause crafted a narrative where, at the end of war, African Americans fled their “homes and livelihoods” for the North en masse. As a result, they perceived themselves as victims who now had no means of production or economic mobility traditionally based on body counts and labor (Gallagher & Nolan, 2000).

The popularization of the Lost Cause interpretation and the drive of the ideology to fill up the landscape with monuments, plaques, and other memorabilia in public spaces was primarily the work of Southern women, the center of which was the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) (Nelson, 2018). Hall attributes the success of memorializing the Confederate dead over/instead of other groups to their “lobbying for the creation of state archives and the construction of state museums, the preservation of national historic sites, and the construction of historic highways; compiling genealogies; interviewing former soldiers; writing history textbooks; and erecting monuments, which now moved triumphantly from cemeteries into town centers” (Hall, 1998; p. 450). During the organization’s most popular period in the first two decades of the 20th century, Brundage concluded:

These women architects of whites' historical memory, by both explaining and mystifying the historical roots of white supremacy and elite power in the South, performed a conspicuous civic function at a time of heightened concern about the perpetuation of social and political hierarchies. Although denied the franchise, organized white women nevertheless played a dominant role in crafting the historical memory that would inform and undergird southern politics and public life (Brundage, 2000; p.115-16)

There are competing theories about the production of the Lost Causes motives. The myth, according to Gallagher and Nolan, did not center on slavery as a matter of ethics but instead what the absence of slavery did to the white Southerner's sense of identity and power, and by extension, the landscapes of both the South and the North. The latter of which relied on the former's exports to a great degree. Other issues, like those below, influenced perceptions of the Lost Cause's mythos:

1. [That] slavery was a benevolent institution that benefited slaves but was “dying off” as an institution by 1860 because of manumission, runaways, and industrialization.
2. That cultural and constitutional differences, not a singular interest in preserving slavery, forced the slave holding states to secede. While denying the centrality of slavery to secession
3. That the mass exodus of slaves with/after the invasion of the Union army was not a reflection of their harsh lived experiences, but isolated incidents of owners' lack of control over their “property” (Bonekemper, 2015).
4. That motive post-bellum was to rebuild all economic structures that had existed in the South, not just the agricultural system that relied on African American labor.

Gallagher and Nolan conceptualize the motives of the Lost Cause as:

"The architects of the Lost Cause acted from various motives. (They) collectively sought to justify their own actions and allow themselves and other former Confederates to find something positive in all-encompassing failure, in memory, in the landscape. They also wanted to provide their children and future generations of white Southerners with a 'correct' narrative of the war."

Others, like Binnington, have categorized its motives as “a group of intertwined concepts, specifically tropes of the Worthy Southron, the Demon Yankee, and the Silent Slave, and a sense of shared history that [we can] call Confederate Americanism” (Binnington, 2013 p. 3). Domy argues that motives of the ideology are less important than the fact it is built inherently on a wide-range of falsehoods (2020). Regardless of motive, these notions were used to perpetuate racism and racist power structures during the Jim Crow era in the American South, to mitigate the blame for slavery away from the gentry, and to deny the role of white supremacy in the social order (Domy, 2020).

The Lost Cause’s influence remains prevalent throughout the South. It has produced highly politicized landscapes that have adhered to the color lines of the antebellum period, even in areas that have legal frameworks in place to the contrary (Gallagher & Nolan, 2000). Non-white spaces were heavily influenced by the Lost Cause’s monopoly of the landscape as commemorative spaces for the dead, for lost battles, and for the Southern cause’s ideas of heritage took over (Burkhardt, 2011). While there has been considerable efforts to combat this monopoly through the removal of Confederate monuments and other kinds of histrionic memorabilia, these differences continue to contribute to the marginalization of African American spaces, particularly cemeteries. African American cemeteries serve as prime examples of America’s “silencing of the past” through their existence as peripheral, overlooked spaces. In doing so, African American communities have lost access to an important kind of heritage site that should be maintained and incorporated. Plainly, black history has been left to die in Southern cemeteries and this pattern of neglect needs to be understood and corrected in order to address the long history of inequities and exclusion that have positioned them to be forgotten. In Chapter 2, I will explore how African American cemeteries have become a manipulated

landscape and how they have been affected by imagined histories and the Lost Cause ideology. I will also discuss how they have been silenced/manipulated to the point of large-scale degradation.

## Chapter 2

### **African American Cemeteries as Manipulated Landscapes**

In Chapter 1, I explored how manipulation curates a landscape that is one-sided in its presentation of the past and how the popularity and influence of the Lost Cause made it next to impossible for non-white heritage and landscapes to be perpetual or assembled in the public domain. An example of manipulated landscapes in action exists in the form of African American cemeteries. White populations in the United States have, overall, had the economic and social freedoms to make choices about where they are buried and how, whereas African Americans have had little to no semblance of choice in these matters as a result of enslavement and racism. Cynthia Conner, who studies African American cemeteries and mortuary culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry, found that the fundamental characteristics of black and white cemeteries differed down to the types of physical space they have occupied, the types of materials used as grave goods and decoration, and the kinds of curation within the mortuary landscape. Further still, the outcome of manipulation can be seen in various case studies of African American cemeteries which I will also discuss in this chapter.

Historically, Southern states have denied the purchasing of burial plots to African Americans through different types of racially restrictive covenants well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rogers, 2005). Moreover, white power structures within the economic/social system and in the legal codes of the post-bellum South primed African American cemeteries to be segregated, peripheral spaces. By the 1930's, around 90% of cemeteries in the South contained some sort of racially restrictive laws or economically limiting tax associated with cemetery care. Integration attempts were often protested by white community members: *“so great is the opposition . . . to the interment of colored persons . . . large numbers of the dead already interred therein would be*

*removed . . .*”(Engelhardt, 2020). The type of landscape white and black bodies occupy, therefore, is an important distinction because it prefaces ideas about worth: where the idea that occupying “good” land over “bad” land directly reinforces the power structures of segregation, nationalism, and the production of a one-sided public memory. In white cemeteries, idealization and romanticism have been paramount to produce a “welcoming” space (Brown, 2019). In essence, white spaces are often curated to host strong visual ties between the living community and the dead by accommodating visitors for longer, more leisurely amounts of time (Conner, 1989). Conner describes these spaces as park-like in their construction by the addition of trees, flowers, and space for non-mortuary practices like picnics and trail walking (1989). Marginal property is incapable of being agriculturally viable and as a result, it was the type of landscape reserved for non-white bodies (Mixer & Henry, 2017) .

This type of locale became one of the defining characteristics of African American cemeteries in the South. Described as “ragged..patchy places of live-oak..graves scattered without symmetry, without headstones (or) head-boards” and “hidden away in remote spots among scragged trees and underbrush ” the sense of abandonment, degradation, and denigration is multi-level and present throughout in these descriptions (DePratter et.al, 2016). The idea that “unproductive” land that is wild, ragged, or otherwise unkempt should be associated with African Americans is reinforced by Garman’s expansion of W.E.B Du Bois’ writings on the visual/non-visual barriers, known as the “color line” that restricted African Americans in most aspects of their daily life. The color line should not be confused with the tangible restrictions implemented as a result of Jim Crow and segregation, but rather intangible beliefs about things such as worth and status (1994). The body of literature surrounding African American cemeteries is extensive and I have attempted to summarize two influential examples. Both of these examples

heavily support the notion that visual elements can be the decisive factor in whether or not a space is “abandoned” and/or “forgotten”. This thesis challenges the notion of the ascribed “abandoned” and “forgotten” terminology by approaching them from a non-tangible perspective (e.g manipulation, the influence of ideologies) whereas the other studies do not.

I will focus on a few prominent historical theoretical perspectives within the field of anthropology that influenced the early literature’s social view of African American mortuary culture, practices, and their history over time. These perspectives span from the early twentieth century to the late 1970s, specifically, the Boasian concept of acculturation, Herskovits’ survival-acculturation model, and the creolization model. These approaches have been continually employed by American power structures (academic, political, and certain ideological groups) often to make generalizations about the state of African American mortuary culture and heritage in the past and today (Brown, 2019). The influence of these theories has thus far been far reaching within African American studies and adapted by various practitioners within anthropology. Therefore, it is important to establish a foundational understanding of these approaches and their influence on the literature. The creolization model and Herskovits’ survival-acculturation model in particular have been influential in shaping archaeological studies of historic African American cemeteries (2019).

### **Theoretical Models**

Boas’s acculturation model emerged in the early 20th century as a way for practitioners to describe the processes by which European immigrants experienced, adapted, and integrated into American society. Boas’s model regarded things like European phenotype, language patterns, and culture as normative and as a type of baseline by which all groups could then be

compared and contrasted against (Boas 1911; 1912). The Boasian acculturation model is dated and no longer embraced as a viable social theory because it prefaces a need for full integration of the “other” into the culture of the “dominant” group. As demonstrated by the work of Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* (1995) the dominant group's very existence is a manipulation of a false social order that has little to no bearing in fact (1995). In the case of the post-bellum South, this social order revolved around the support of the Lost Cause and a sense of worth revolving around that membership. This requirement for full integration becomes complicated when applied to non-European groups because it was impossible for most people of color to blend into or fully assimilate within a white American social context.

In one of his better-known works, “*The Negro Family in the United States*” (1939), E. Franklin Frazier remarked that “never before in history has a people been so nearly stripped of its social heritage as were the Negroes who were brought to America” (Frazier 1939: 337). By this statement, we can see the issue of African American culture and heritage formation was viewed through a lens which positioned it to be “forgotten”- because practitioners like Frazier emphasized an entire or near loss of culture as a requirement and by extension a consequence of enslavement, instead of noting the materials, traditions, and knowledge that had been present in African American communities since the first Africans came to North America. The acculturation model was then expanded by Frazier to argue that there were no inherent cultural differences between African Americans and Euro-Americans, therefore there was no manipulation. Instead, there was simply one group imitating another at a baser level of culture (Frazier, 1939).

The acculturation model prevented a critical point from being studied and developed in these early studies that would be integral to how mortuary spaces would be perceived and



understood in the future: they were not only expressions of non-European culture, but had deep roots in rich African traditions that, at that time were viewed as “simple”, “savage”, “dilapidated”, or “pathetic” (1939). Those who could not adequately participate in the “one American” (white) social life and culture, like slaves and then the African American working class, were diagnosed as culturally deprived and their heritage spaces peripheral to the rest of society (Herskovits 1941:1). For Frazier, these sentiments extended to every aspect of African American life and culture including communal memory, commemorative practices, burial patterns, and cemetery maintenance. As a result, many of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century studies of African American cemeteries viewed African American burial and commemorative practices through an acculturative lens (Woofter 1930; Combes 1972; Vlach 1977; Jones-Jackson 1987; Creel 1988; Connor 1989; Burton 1985). These studies frequently compared African American mortuary spaces and practices to white spaces and practices, rather than contrasted or evaluated for other influences. In doing so, they were manipulating the narrative to undermine their importance to individuals, communities, and the nation (Brown, 2019).

In 1941, Herskovits “survival-acculturation” model challenged the Boasian method with the publication of *The Myth of the Negro Past*. His approach coined the study of Africanisms, or cultural traits that are distinctively African and identifiable within the history of the African diaspora. Herskovits contended that the acculturation method had perpetuated “the myth of the Negro, (where) the principle supports race prejudice...it rationalizes discrimination in everyday contact between Negroes and whites...and affects the trends of research by scholars whose theoretical approach, methods, and systems of thought...are in harmony with it” (Herskovits 1941:1). While not the first person to demonstrate that African Americans had their own unique,

generationally held cultural traditions for both the living and the deceased, he was one of the first to publicly support the idea that African American mortuary practices had African origins that while visually different from Euro-Americans, were no less central to their sense of identity. The Herskovits model does not refute the presence of manipulation the way the acculturation model does, but rather redirects attention to the living communities themselves for information.

The presence of Africanisms has confirmed for anthropologists the existence of cultural connections between Africa, African American communities, and their deathscapes (Singleton, 1994). Deathscapes being the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death', such as grave goods, decorations, and the land itself (Teather, 2001, p. 185). Consequently, the discipline's focus with finding objects that demonstrate an innate "African-ness" has, at times, obstructed the interpretations of African American heritage sites (Blake, 2009; Gwaltney, 1980; Franklin, 1997; Mahoney, 2013). This is particularly true in earlier studies that sought to understand the uses/meaning behind the material culture found in cemeteries (Fairbanks, 1974; 1984). The survival-acculturation model serves, along with Charles Fairbanks' seminal work at Kingsley Plantation in Jacksonville, Florida, as the foundation for the practice of attempting to identify connections between material culture found within African American cemeteries and their possible African antecedents (Fairbanks, 1974; 1984). Neither Herskovits nor Fairbanks work/methods were particularly occupied with the *state* of cemeteries, the interactions of the living community with them, or even what the living community remembered versus what they did not. Subsequent scholars have referred to degradation and forgetting as a type of cultural loss.

In the 1970's and 80's the literature and studies around African American culture expanded Herskovits' model to explore the process and effects of creolization. Creolization

theory proposed that, while enslaved individuals did go through very real cultural loss as a result of the policies of slavery, the wide scale “forgetting” of cultural traditions premised under the acculturation model was not plausible because African American’s retained and used aspects of various African cultures. These examples can be seen in both the written and material record. Instead, creolization as a relational process where new forms of identity are produced and new cultural expressions brought about by contact between societies and relocated peoples, was more likely and plausible a model because African Americans *did* form “new” hybrid practices as a result of slavery and interactions with Euro-Americans (Cohen, 2007). Cohen writes that creolization occurs when “participants select particular elements from incoming or inherited cultures, endow these with meanings different from those they possessed in the original cultures, and then creatively merge these to create new varieties that supersede the prior forms” (2007, p 369). The subsequent ways in which the concept of creolization has been employed varies (Brown, 2019). It is accepted to be the preferred approach for understanding the interactions of enslaved Africans with other groups and the histories behind material culture, but not necessarily in understanding the enslaved themselves or the spaces they inhabited (Baumann, 2004). The creolization model features heavily in historical archaeology and plantation archaeology, both of which frequently advocate for and assist descendant communities in heritage projects and, as a result, have had opportunities to investigate the “forgetting” phenomena among them. Although, the organization of the field around subjects like the search for “Africanisms” has restricted them from doing so on an appropriate scale. The nature of the theory tends towards studying the African American and Euro-American traits and interactions in historical locales alone, while underestimating the state of modern cemeteries and interactions of modern-day communities with them (Baumann, 2004).

To summarize and provide an example, acculturationists like Frazier would have approached typical African American cemeteries (overgrown, isolated locations, mixed typologies of grave goods) without anything other than a critique of its visual state as a result of generalizations about African Americans as “other”. They do not resemble typical Euro-American standards of cemetery maintenance, decoration, or community presence, so they must be abandoned/forgotten by the living or lack value. Herskovits model would have approached the same space with an inclination towards identifying Africanisms but would have stopped short of considering the ways the communities using them conceptualized their physical state or the broader social impacts of the spaces decline. The creolization model has the ability to approach what the other two do not because it prefaces a look at what *and* how African American communities have and continue to interact with their heritage spaces. None of these models preface a need for exploring the larger socio-historical factors that have influenced public spaces like cemeteries. Therefore, use of these theories over time has guided studies of these cemeteries away from community voices instead, they have often been viewed as remnants of African American’s historical pasts in a way that keeps them from a place in the modern day (Brown, 2019). With the models discussed, this discussion can now turn to look at the specific characteristics that make up the mortuary culture of African Americans, as well as the history and possible origins of these characteristics.

### **African American Mortuary Culture**

A common theme in studies of African American cemeteries is a discussion of traits and what criteria constitutes an abandoned space over those influenced by long histories of inequities. In contemporary spaces public records, obituaries, epitaphs, and a living consumer

base could provide definitions by supplying information about the space. Perhaps even a glimpse of the deceased and facets of their identity might indicate broader community connections.

African American spaces almost always lack these types of information, some to a critical degree where other things like environmental effects, grave materials, and the historical contexts of their communities are the only way to gather information. If that information is missing or otherwise indiscernible, it hinders community revitalization efforts and reintegration.

Cemeteries, as a whole, are centered around two acts while in use, burial and mourning, and one when in repose, remembrance. It was a universal practice of the antebellum period to locate enslaved burials away from those of their owners, typically in wooded areas that were difficult to clear for agriculture (Rainville, 2014). Exceptions were occasionally made for “favored” slaves who were buried close to the white families they had served (King, 2010). Krüger-Kahloula interprets this gesture as evidence of a dual subjugation of the enslaved. By doing so, it denied them the ability to participate in community identity by inclusion in their mortuary settings and robbed them of time-honored expressions of grief (Krüger-Kahloula & O’Meally, 1994:137). As time went on, knowledge of burial location and mortuary traditions were passed from generation to generation in effect “screening” who was able to remember them and contribute to their upkeep and their history (Kruger-Kahloula & O’Meally, 1994). After centuries of control- which attempted to control virtually every facet of life- keeping the private traditions, traits, and rituals of burial and mourning hidden seems a logical act, but it is one that has complicated the public history of “forgotten” areas (Garman, 1994).

This is not to say that traits or mourning activities were secretive knowledge, conducted in secrecy, or unacknowledged by the gentry. In fact there is a rich written record authored by slave owners which refer to slaves' mortuary activities but rather that cemeteries were arranged

in such a way that graveside traditions would be veiled from public view and accessible only to the enslaved community. African American funerals took place primarily at night. The most practical interpretation of this practice is that the bulk of the day was not their own and activities conducted at night allowed for more people to attend the event, particularly those that occupied different spaces of the plantation and did not often interact with one another (Garman, 1994). This is supported by testimonies like that of Elijah Green, a freed slave from the South Carolina lowcountry: *“slaves was always buried in the night, as no one could stop to do it in the day”* (Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, 1936). Another interpretation hypothesized that when held without the presence of white surveillance, the occasion fostered a sense of community where traditions could be carried out without the fear of repercussion for “acts of resistance”.

Many owners prohibited the expression of African traditions, the congregation of slaves in one area, and even certain relationship dynamics between groups (Rainville, 2014). Other testimonies, like that of Sam Polite-also a freed slave from the lowcountry- point to more ancient roots: *“when (they are) dead, you can't knockoff work for bury'um. You have to wait till nighttime to put'um in the grave. You bury 'um by the light of torch.”*(Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, 1936) Polite reinforces Green’s testimony about the practicality of nighttime burials and alludes to an African belief that the dead, escorted by torch light, would find its way out of the land of the living easier than by moonlight (1936). This is in stark contrast to the traditions of the white gentry.

In spite of the lack of broad control over time and location, enslaved African Americans frequently had control over funerary rituals, commemorative devices, internment style, and some autonomy over the treatment of the deceased's body, or the “sending off” once the period of

mourning began (Genovese, 1976). Rituals surrounding death began with the “settin up” of/with the body, where the body would be watched over by community members, shrouded, or made ready for a coffin if one was used (Genovese, 1976). This time would be accompanied by prayer, song, and other activities that allowed their community to “formulate their communal bonds and create mortuary specific memories” of the deceased (Rainville, 2014: 55). Burial ceremonies were also an opportunity for enslaved laborers to express more preserved aspects of African culture and belief systems, of which has had strong influences on the way materials, symbols, and patterns of the cemetery have been configured into communal African American memory (Genovese, 1974).

A section of this thesis has already addressed the historiography surrounding the connections (or, in some arguments, lack of connection) that early generations of slaves retained of their African cultural identities or the degree to which their descendants practiced them. When examining African American burial practices, research has emphasized two schools of thought. One, championed by the sociologist Orlando Patterson, is that the institution of slavery caused the “social death” of enslaved people’s sense of self, culture, and related practices in that the inherited meanings of these conceptions and those of their ancestors were denied to them through the policies of enslavement or developed in spite of those policies. As a consequence, he argued that tracing the African origins of cultural practices would eventually “dead-end” before becoming unobservable in the modern day (Patterson, 2018). The second, proposed by historical archaeologist Ross Jamieson, is that the kidnap of Africans and their “bringing over” via the slave ship did preserve some practices outright, creolized others, and have historically remained staunch even into modern communities through material culture and ethnographic evidence (Jamieson,1995). Both of these arguments have their merit; Patterson’s concept of social death

(e.g social alienation, cultural forgetting, loss of identity/identity markers as a consequence of enslavement) and its influence on the broader societal treatment of the marginalized fits well into this discussion. Slaves invariably had to resist desocialization in countless ways with Patterson summarizing this experience as follows:

*(Slaves) differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory or landscape. (Patterson, 2018, pg. 5)*

However, Patterson was not concerned with studying the treatment of slaves after death or what traditions had an African origin or were a product of creolization. Jamieson, on the other hand, focuses entirely on the material and oral evidence of both having lasted into the 21st century. In summary, a large number of practices from various African cultural systems found practice in the United States as a result of the diaspora and over time, some of which integrated with aspects of Euro-American culture. Two facets of these belief systems are prevalent even in modern systems: spirituality and the ability for the deceased to inhabit space after death.

Although burial traditions varied across the African societies impacted by the transatlantic slave trade, those traditions shared a common belief in the deceased spirits ability to exist after death. The belief in an afterlife encouraged adherence to the shared tenet that the dead must be interred according to custom, and the conviction that offended spirits could harm the living. In many African belief systems, spirits continued to hunger and thirst after death and the living were accountable for satisfying the needs of the spirits with regular upkeep and visitation or would suffer the consequences of their neglect (King, 2010). It was also believed that the



spirits were aware of events occurring in the material world and could exert influence over the living (Herskovits 1931). To combat spirits returning in anger, great emphasis was placed on the funeral, the burial, and the visual components that mourners left behind.

The most common visual traits of early African American grave marking practices are the use of "offerings" on top of/around the grave itself, the use of organic markers, and the integration of the landscape in and around graves as opposed to the manicuring the landscape to accommodate the grave. Formal landscaping, typical of Euro-American spaces, was not the widespread practice of 19th and early 20th century African American cemeteries. The abolitionist Frances Kemble noted that, on visits to Butler Island in Georgia, slave owners and white laborers often had enclosures around their burial spaces while slave spaces were left "trampled on by the plantation cattle" and were often upended by farmers tilling the land (Chicora Foundation, 1996). Kemble noted that the African American graves she saw on Butler Island were mostly unmarked and the ones that were marked were marked so by wood markers or fieldstone. Epitaphs were not common during the antebellum period as many Southern states made it illegal for slaves to be literate. Du Bois estimated that less than 10% of the enslaved had a "marginal degree of literacy" before Emancipation, while Genovese argued that even that figure was conservatively low (1974). Epitaphs were, however, more notable in later periods when vaults and concrete headstones became more popular and literacy rates increased among African Americans particularly in the decades directly following Emancipation and Reconstruction (Rainville, 2014). Some graves in more rural areas were marked using plants such as cedar trees and yuccas.

Less common examples of grave marking include iron piping and placards. Little found that a common marking practice included "mounding" of soil over graves which in time led to

the formation of shallow depressions to serve as a marker of the grave shaft due to soil displacement (Little, 2016). Though this practice is not limited to African American cemeteries, Little was informed that to some African American communities reworking the soil of grave mounds to prevent depressions was viewed as bad luck (2016). The real reasons for this practice and the others could very well vary and be the result of individual preference, community patterns, and traditional beliefs systems. What is certain given the extensive research by Genovese (1974) and Vlach (1990) is that an emphasis on memory, or retaining memories of the dead, of Africa, and of spirituality imbued many of the choices made by enslaved African Americans.

The custom of decorating graves with the “brick-a-brack”/everyday items like crockery, glass bottles, brick, and other decorative items alongside objects used by the recent deceased was such an important, widespread, and unique practice of African American cemeteries that it was noted by authors such as Faulkner. In *Go Down Moses*, Faulkner noted that:

....the grave...resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read. (131: 2011)

Culturally, the practice of using pottery in and around graves can be linked to the BaKongo culture with particular long-term use attributed to the Ovimbundu people of Angola, as well (King, 2010). The BaKongo people believed that the dead, placated and guided by mortuary practices and continual visitation, retained some of their power and control of the living world (Creel, 1988). The BaKongo originated from parts of the contemporary countries/provinces of Bas-Zaïre, Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, and northern Angola and may have represented

as many as 60% of the enslaved individuals who arrived in the United States between 1817 to 1843 (King, 2010). Groups of the Ivory Coast and West Africa, like the Mende, Ibo, Kimbundo, and Kikongo left food and other provisions on graves for the deceased's use in the spirit world (2010).

Though its origins are less sure, the intentional breaking or “killing” of glass bottles and ceramics on graves has a spiritual and memory component, as does the use of shells in some particular areas of the South. “Killing” consists of creating a hole in the vessel in such a way as to render it unfit for its intended purpose of holding a liquid but leaving the vessel with the overall appearance of a complete one (Smith, 2009). Thompson explains the purpose of grave offerings as decorative objects that, both in Africa and the Americas, “cryptically honor the spirit in the earth, tie it to the grave, guide it to the other world, and prevent it from wandering or returning to haunt survivors” (Thompson, 1983; 132). By breaking the bodies of vessels, the living was preventing the dead’s spirit from returning and by leaving the remnants behind as grave decoration, the living were ensuring that the memory of the dead remained visible to those who saw them and could contextualize them. Those that could not contextualize them labeled them as refuse or the result of environmental factors (Chicora Foundation, 1996).

Shell use on graves is not an exclusively African American cemetery trait: in parts of coastal North Carolina, shell decoration on grave mounds, along boundary lines, and in Euro-American cemeteries has been noted. Shells have been used in European iconography for centuries as a symbol of protection and pilgrimage. In African (mainly the BaKongo peoples) contexts they have been used as a symbol of the soul’s ability to have an immortal presence in the lives and minds of their communities (Downer, 2008). Traditionally, the mbamba shell would border the grave and be left with a parting prayer: “*As strong as your house you shall keep my*

*life for me, (when) you leave for the sea, take me along, that I may live forever with you”* (Chicora Foundation, 1996). In African American contexts like the Gullah people of the lowcountry, shells were used as symbols of the spirit and of memories of diaspora and the return to Africa: *the sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory, and the land of demise”* (Chicora Foundation, 1996).

The presence of ceramic and glass wares with African American cemeteries is widely noted in cemetery studies and is generally considered an indicator not only of the presence of African American graves, but also an indication of the survival of African traditions and their adaptation in the development of an independent African American culture (Little 2016; Vlach 1990). Vlach noted wide variation in materials: from decorative flower containers, dishes, clocks, toys, medicine bottles, farming tools, and candlestick holders, to things like conch shells, oyster shucks, razors, plaster, and turpentine cups which were used to delineate the borders of graves (1990). The use of decorative ceramic and glass was often noted in nineteenth century writings, often from an acculturalist view, by white writers. Ingersoll writing in 1892 (68), noted:

*I saw at Columbia, S. C., a practice in vogue among the blacks which exists nowhere else so far as I can learn, and is savage or childlike in its simplicity of idea. When a negro dies, some article or utensil, or more than one, is thrown upon his grave; moreover it is broken. If you go through a dilapidated weed-grown graveyard which straggles in and out of the hollows on a side hill covering the high bluffs along the river, you will see some very strange examples of this mortuary custom. Nearly every grave has bordering or thrown upon it a few bleached sea-shells of a dozen different kinds, such as are found along the south*

*Atlantic coast. Mingled with these is a most curious collection of broken crockery and glassware.*

The traits discussed above remained popular well into the early 20th century. By the 1930's, African American cemeteries began to change location, organization, and conception as a result of migration, urbanization, and increasing socio-economic status compared to that of the previous century (Schwenk, 2001). They began to gain prominence in professions traditionally reserved by white society, particularly in the mortuary businesses established in the late nineteenth century that catered to black communities and their traditions (Schwenk, 2001). The education of black landscape architects and engineers, and consequent exposure to Euro-American design aesthetics resulted in change in cemetery and burial practices within the African American community, skewed more towards the organization and decorative elements found in white cemeteries post-bellum (Schwenk, 2001). This is best represented by a 1925 advertisement for the Park Plan Cemetery, a "planned" African American cemetery in Jackson County, Missouri:

*[Go to] any of the older cemeteries and the eye is greeted by confusion. Monuments here, monuments there, without symmetry, without design, some of them lovely, many of them hideously ugly. The magnificent marble shaft which one man rears above his loved dead casts its shadow across a dozen cheap and tawdry stones. The stately vistas of the spreading trees are marred everywhere by grotesque distortions. How different is the park plan. The velvet lawns are unbroken by any of the marble monstrosities of the older type. No unsightly mounds appear, no scattered, ragged weeds around the bases of the monuments,*

*no chicken wire fences - only the trees, the shady paths, the close clipped lawns,  
the flowers, the shrubs and the spotless purity of the white marble markers*

The advertisement goes on to explain that the advantage of the park plan over the old-fashioned cemetery is that it allows "*unrestricted development of landscaping plans and unhampered utilization of all the natural beauties*"(1925). By this description we can see some significant shifts in attitude about the organization of the space and the supposed merits of using certain materials over others, representing the larger social trends of this period that developed as a result of the Lost Cause ideology discussed in Chapter 1. Other traits, especially in the eastern region of North Carolina, Florida, and South Carolina, include a close proximity to water and more broadly, grave orientation and burial patterns (Smith, 2009). Some authors have suggested that African American cemeteries are often located near water as an attempt to include symbolic representations of reflection and rebirth, such as mirrors or other reflective surfaces and vessels, and perhaps even as a reflection of cosmology (Jamieson, 1995). change over time and the geographic realities that affect coastal areas make determining the significance of locations close to water difficult to support archaeologically, as there are few locations that are not close to water in some capacity. Furthermore, limited opportunities for land ownership and lack of control of the land used for burials may obscure this trait as a preference (Smith, 2010).

In the early 20th century, the general attitude concerning cemetery patterns for African Americans believed that they did not typically preserve family groupings in the way that Euro-American ones did (Chicora Foundation, 1996). It is now generally accepted that burial in the same space as relatives was the dominant and preferred pattern as opposed to specific plots. The Bennett Papers record several stories that recount African Americans wanting to be buried in specific graveyards, but not plots, because of a superstition about being buried in "strange

ground” and fear of not being remembered or visited by their living relations (Bennett, 1875). The spatial layout typically follows an east-west patterning. The explanations behind this patterning vary; King proposes that the positioning of graves are West African based in order to follow the rising and setting of the sun or perhaps to accommodate the Christian belief that graves should orient themselves as such for the second coming of Christ (2010). Others propose the pattern allows the dead to face Africa, given that oral narratives support a belief that death allowed the dead to return home to Africa in the form of “home-goings” (Genovese, 1976; Rainville, 2009). Other patterns include group clusters that appear “haphazard” when in reality, they may showcase groupings based on familial ties, age, sex, or even social status (2009).

With the traits of the African American cemetery defined and their origins, history, and use discussed, we can now discuss what they mean for assessing abandonment, mitigating manipulation levels, and developing revitalization plans. Much of what has been discussed in this chapter still holds court in African American cemeteries today. African Americans are still burying their dead with traditional tributes at South Carolina’s Coffin Point Cemetery, a former burial site of a plantation’s enslaved laborers and a modern cemetery, and in the Coosaw Islands where household items are left atop graves outlined by conch and other shells (Holloway, 2003:201). Home-goings, spirituals, and decorating graves with everyday items of personal significance are staples of modern mortuary practices in African American communities (Williams & Williams, 2007).

The penchant for incorporating the landscape in and around graves versus altering the landscape to accommodate the grave can complicate visual perspectives. Overgrown or unkempt space is a paradigm associated with abandonment, a type of “perpetual neglect” (Rainville, 2009). Additionally so when “broken” materials are visible in the amounts that these spaces

typically have. It is important to keep in mind that the term “African American” is the result of the historical collective trauma that was the transatlantic slave trade and the term as an identity marker requires acceptance on the part of those that experience the contemporary effects of that event (Eyerman, 2002). The traits described above are typical and can assist in identification, but they are not exhaustive or restrictive; some showcase individual choices and others follow more collective criteria. When dealing with cemeteries it is rarely, if ever, that the “racial” or “ethnic” identities on an individual or collective scale are easily discernible by visuals, materials, or even records. Therefore, “African American cemeteries” should be understood as a fluid label based on connection to community, place, and time.

Likewise, the presence of some mortuary traits may indicate specific times or periods of use like the use of conch shells in and around graves by the Gullah or the presence of more modern materials like tires, plastic, and automobile parts (Rainville, 2014). The same should be considered when using the term abandoned. African American cemeteries can have resurgence periods in use, go long periods without community specific maintenance (e.g. upkeep by the community along traditional/cultural lines), and dips in visitation. Descendant communities may conceptualize the modern state of their mortuary spaces quite differently than other groups would. The state of North Carolina defines cemetery abandonment as spaces that have not been used for “interment purposes over the course of/within” a ten-year period (Article 17, 1917: 160A-343). Many states use the “perpetual neglect” terminology, however, this is often misleading as it rarely refers to the actual tenure of the space as a cemetery. Instead, it refers to the lack of ongoing funding for maintenance plans that for profit white cemeteries have as a result of their tax revenue and longer periods of use by the community (Rainville, 2014). It also



emphasizes a Euro/white centric conceptualization of neglect that is tied to visual appearance instead of an actual absence in care, visitation, or memory.

### **Case Studies**

Case studies provide a window into the ways that different publics have contributed to revitalizing forgotten spaces and by extension, reinvigorate places of heritage and challenge the historical manipulations of the Lost Cause. Each case study highlights a stage of the revitalization process from discovery, consultation, planning, execution, and briefly, the various issues that arise with this kind of undertaking. Some, like the African Burial Ground, have directly challenged the narrative of manipulation that has left African American cemeteries across the United States to decay as a “other”. Others like the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland have been the subject of both public interest and community support but have waned in their progress towards upkeep and reincorporation in recent years due to social and political issues. Spaces like the Enslaved Burial Ground at Sweet Briar College in Virginia provide a study of how revitalization directly challenges the Lost Cause’s silencing of the past through acknowledgment of the institution's own racialized history. There are additional questions that can be addressed by a discussion of these case studies:

- What exactly is revitalization. what does it look like, and who participates?
- Where does responsibility lie for upkeep to ensure “forgotten” spaces once again become co-opted into the public fold?
- What is the future of revitalized/reincorporated spaces in an era where challenging of social/cultural inequities has become increasingly visible to/for public?

A key issue with cemetery care in the United States is the concept of the “in perpetuity” model of care offered in cemeteries under public purview. Under this agreement, a cemetery agrees to leave the deceased's body interred and maintain the gravesites and grounds indefinitely. This model, however, is problematic and the “in- perpetuity” model is not, in fact, indefinite nor as the many locations mentioned later this chapter will show, accessible to all. Alongside this model, the chief barrier to revitalization is the veritable gray areas that exist in state and federal legislation. Human remains and mortuary features are protected to some extent in all fifty states but they vary in coverage, definition, and punishment for violations.

Perhaps the best-known federal example of grave protection legislation is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). NAGPRA, however, only extends to Native American remains on public and tribal lands. National historic cemeteries, like Arlington National Cemetery, are protected under the American Battlefield Protection Act of 1996, but these spaces have their own legacy of inequality and use of imagined histories towards African Americans. Even further still, ownership of forgotten cemeteries is often a no man's land of responsibility where neither states or cities claim responsibility for upkeep, assisting descendants, or promoting community action (Rainville, 2009). The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and its accompanying National Register of Historic Places could, in theory, extend protection to African American cemeteries who are deemed to have some historical significance but cemeteries, as a rule, are not considered eligible for inclusion on the register under its current guidelines. Additionally, the nomination process is long and requires documentation and time that many of these spaces simply do not have.

As an example of further complication, only 25% of states have statutes that allow descendant communities access to graves located on private property and even fewer have

statutes that allow “recourse of care” to degraded sites (Rainville, 2009). North Carolina, for example, reserves the power to create, cooperate, control, condemn, and “abandon” cemeteries to the cities in which they are located (NC General Statutes- Chapter 160A, Article 17). The state does allow descendants and “persons of special interest” to maintain, restore, or visit abandoned public cemeteries. For sites located on private property, the consent of the landowner is required, or a circuit court approved petition for access (NC General Statutes - Chapter 65 Article 12. 1. Article 12. Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries. Part 1. General. § 65-85. 2013).

There is currently no comprehensive database for African American cemeteries at the individual state or national level, though legislation has been introduced in the House- known as the African American Burial Grounds Network Act (H.R.1179). If passed, the bill would assist individuals, landowners, community organizations, and state/local governments in recording sites and provide funds for training, education, restoration, and other heritage initiatives directed towards tourism. As well as the development of a database to house data collected through these projects. As of 2021, the bill passed the Senate but failed to pass in the House and is currently being amended. Ultimately, the issue of legislation has been recognized as problematic and many states have begun to mobilize towards developing their own initiatives. The state of Florida, for example, has submitted legislation to the state senate known as the Task Force on Abandoned African American Cemeteries to identify at-risk sites throughout the state (S. 585-02004-20. 2020).



**Fig 2.2 Vandalized entryway to Sweet Olive Cemetery, the oldest African American cemetery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (2020)**



**Fig 2.1: Graffitied headstones at Evergreen Cemetery in Austin, Texas (2020).**

## **Threats and Preservation**

Revitalization works tandemly alongside preservation efforts to combat threats, many of which are consequences of historically discriminate ideologies. Preservation works to salvage the tangible material remains of the past while revitalization often addresses the intangible aspects of these spaces. Vandalism occurs in cemeteries of all backgrounds, even those that are currently being used, but especially so in non-white space. While grave looting/robbing is rare, disturbances of external decorations and other vandalism are not. Environmental threats like flooding, groundwater pollution, root encroachment, etc are easily fixed with available funds but often go unmitigated as a result. Another less tangible threat is apathy and disconnection, which will be discussed further in Chapter 3. There has been a decline in the social importance put upon cemeteries and the memories they produce on a wide scale, leading to a type of spatial apathy about their upkeep (Smith, 2010). As a result of African American cemeteries having historically relied on the care of family members and descendants rather than publicly funded and maintained, many post-bellum cemeteries saw a decline in upkeep as a result of the Great Migration in the 19th century and the subsequent waves of migrations that lead to African Americans leaving the rural South for more industrial and urban areas (2010).

### **What Does it Look Like?**

If preservation aims to keep the material and visual record up to par, then what does revitalization look like in cemeteries long left in a state of neglect? Indeed, revitalization may not include any physical alteration, or it may include extensive ones that return them to an original state or alter them significantly. Studies have shown that bringing the cemetery back to the urban core while providing functional and accessible public open-spaces have numerous community benefits. In African American cemeteries, common themes of revitalization include boundary

delineation, irrigation/drainage, marker restoration, signage, distributable information, and community outreach/involvement in restoration. Chiefly, revitalization incorporates different approaches, voices, and opinions through collaboration and positions them on equal footing. Thematically, revitalization works to address links between significant events, peoples, and time periods that have shaped the places and society we live in today. While also having the potential to enrich and strengthen communities through remembrance and action.

### **Whose Responsibility is it Anyway?**

The narratives of African American heritage spaces rarely deviate from a prescribed set: slavery, emancipation, and their struggle as a marginalized group socially and economically for hundreds of years (Rainville, 2009). These are important themes to acknowledge and in no way are their historical realities debatable, however, underdeveloped/under focused narratives should be considered a disservice because they fail to acknowledge the wide range of experiences that produce notions of heritage and subsequently, keep memory going in spaces that rely on it to survive. There are many roles to be played and audiences to address in rectifying the unequal representations of communal memory across the American landscape.

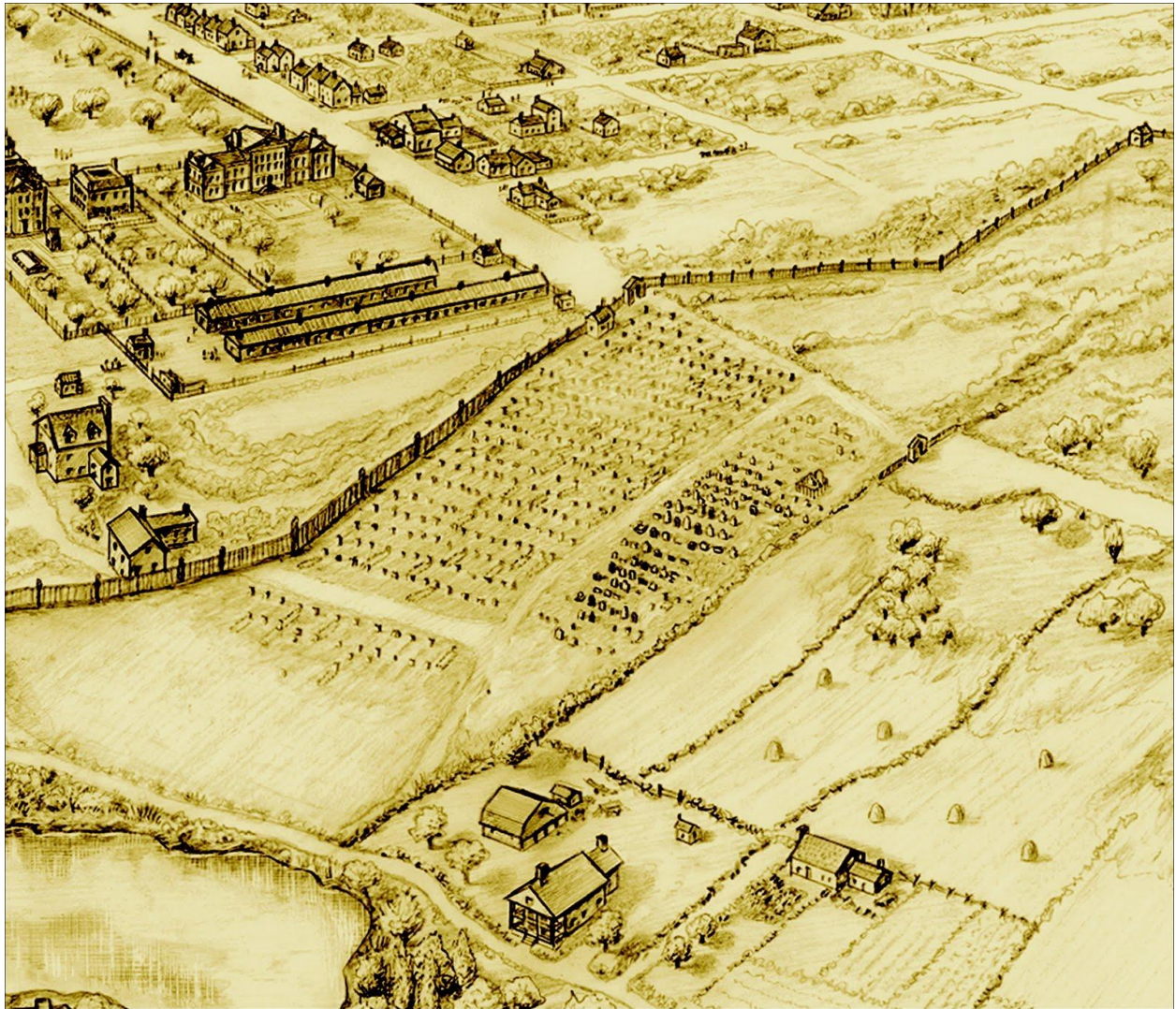
The public at large undoubtedly plays an enormous role in terms of mobilizing and promoting continued interest for these types of projects. There are different groups that can be identified within the public for revitalization work: descendants, allies, and professionals. Collaboration with the public is warranted when investigating abandonment because it can often directly involve groups whose participation can assist in mitigating the effects of historical inequities. Conceptualizing descendant communities can be complicated by cultural factors aside from the biological. They can be defined by their historical, cultural, and symbolic associations

to places, values, and belief systems practiced by people of the past (Little, 2016). Descendant communities can reside locally, at a distance (wherein, they are often referred to as “associated” communities), come from varying socio-economic backgrounds, (Little, 2016). Deciding which social groups form communities that can “claim” memory of the past and space has important social implications. Additionally, these groups have often provided the physical labor that turns the tide of these spaces from being forgotten to being reincorporated. Allied and professional groups often have different interests, and their place should be defined as one of support and their action inclined towards cohesion with the wishes of descendant and associated communities. When these groups take on these roles, they assist in mitigating future exclusion. There are some cases, like the African Burial Ground, where this distribution of roles has had positive results for abandoned spaces.

In the fall of 1697, the religious clergy of New York City adopted a policy of “mortuary apartheid” against the cities enslaved population. The policy forbade the internment of Africans in the city’s churchyards, stipulating that “...no Negroes (need) be buried within the bounds and Limits of the church yard...” (Frohne, 2015). Burials continued in spite of this order until around 1703, when the African community was forced to find a new location for burials after Trinity Church, which hosted the majority of the cities dead, annexed its remaining plots from their use and banned the enslaved from entering the grounds (2015). The new location for African burials eventually moved to the farthest outskirts of the city in an isolated, ravined section of land dubbed “The Commons”--known today as the Commercial District--where an estimated 10,000-15,000 burials occurred between 1712 and 1796 (Frohne, 2015)(see figure 5.3). Use of the space continued without interference for some time, until the last decade of the 18th century when three events began to erode the community's use of the space: a city ban on nighttime burials,



accusations of grave robbing and medical experimentation on the recently deceased, and intense development of what would become Lower Manhattan.



**Figure 2.3: Rendering of the “The Commons” and environs. Late 1700’s.**

Subsequently, the African Burial Ground passed out of public memory and into the communal memory of successive African American descendant communities. Few records indicated its location or extent and, as a result, came as a surprise to the team of archaeologists

working on top of it as part of a federal construction project in 1991 (Frohne, 2015)(see figure 2.3). The original scope of the project had proposed that graves might be present on the perimeter of the excavation site, but no plans for recovery, analysis, or preservation were put into place if any were discovered on site. Due to the increased pace of excavation set by the city, major errors began to occur, including the destruction of several burials and various coffin materials (Frohne, 2015).

To accommodate the project's increased scope, forensic anthropologists were brought in to oversee the excavated remains, however, it soon became apparent that the team was unable to accommodate the quantity of excavated remains. Burials remained wrapped in newspapers and in cardboard boxes while awaiting cleaning, study, and interpretation. Many burials were stored without proper environmental controls and, as a result, several were irreparably damaged by mold (Frohne, 2015). As a result, outrage among the African American community reached new levels. Although, as required by Section 106, public meetings to inform the "descendant community" about the project were held, community members were not included in the decision-making process regarding the pace of excavation, the post-excavation care of remains/mortuary materials, or the future of the space itself which was scheduled to continue construction plans despite the findings of the excavation. As evidence of the project's disregard, some pointed out that at the outset of the project the agency, and by extension the city, had failed to alert the black community about the possibility of extant remains and had not even distributed the environmental impact statement to groups in predominantly African American neighborhoods (Frohne, 2015). Many residents had already spoken of their outrage at what they perceived as yet another round of desecration of the graves of the deceased and the continual denial of the ability

of African Americans to determine their own history and identity, as well as to exercise a measure of power and control of memory in the public realm.

It is during this period, in mid 1992-1993, that revitalization via communal memory of local African American communities began by soliciting them for history related to the site, prompting the creation of the African Burial Ground and Commons District, its inclusion on the National Register, and removal of the remains to Howard University in Washington D.C where they were studied primarily by a team of African American anthropologists (Frohne, 2015). Upon completion of the analysis, plans for physical revitalization began with the aim of activating memory through “personal interaction and interpretation of which the purposes are not to console, but to provoke...not to be ignored but to accept the burden of memory...”(Frohne, 2015; p 112). Despite this, a contingent of community members soon voiced concern over the construction of the memorial itself: “[T]hey’re disrespecting us by turning our gravesite into a museum” (Confessore, 2005). Ultimately, multiple battles between the city’s plans and descendant communities’ wishes would arise before the selection of the memorial plan in 2000 and reburial of the remains in October of 2003 (figure 2.4).





**Figure 2.4: African Burial Ground National Monument. Courtesy of the National Park Service. 2007.**

Shaped by the interplay of political, social, economic forces the African Burial Ground today stands as a prime example of a cultural landscape made forgotten by no fault of the associated community. The African Burial Ground became integral to discussions about memory and the discourse of revitalization efforts for abandoned, forgotten, and neglected spaces of African American heritage in the United States. Chiefly, that through a process of intentional forgetting on the part of state, city, and community officials, African Americans in the city of New York had been denied the ability to insert themselves historically and culturally into the landscape as white Americans had been able to through the preservation of their cemeteries and historical sites, such as the New York Marble Cemetery and Ellis Island (Frohne, 2015).

David Dinkins, former mayor of New York City, encapsulated the issue with the following statement:

Millions of Americans celebrate Ellis Island as the symbol of their communal identity in this land. Others celebrate Plymouth Rock. African American New Yorkers had no site to call our own. There was no place which said, we were here, we contributed, we played a significant role in New York's history right from the beginning...Now we—their descendants—have the symbol of our heritage embodied in lower Manhattan's African Burial Ground. The African Burial Ground is the irrefutable testimony to the contributions and suffering of our ancestors.

The African Burial Ground, its memorialization, and its subsequent revitalization attracted international attention as a testament to the heritage of slavery and what Edward Rothstein conceptualized as an “absence” in consulting what living memory may have existed among African American communities in New York at the time (2010). As a case study, it demonstrates that revitalization must be approached with the aim to preserve not only the physical, but what historian Dolores Hayden describes as “the power of place—the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizen's public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory” (Hayden, 1997). Similar cases can be found on much smaller, but no less incorporative, scales in communities across the United States (Rainville, 2009).

#### Mount Auburn Cemetery- Baltimore, Maryland

In 1872, the Reverend James Patrick of Sharp Street Church in Baltimore purchased thirty-two acres of land where the church established the first (and at that time only) burial ground for Baltimore's African American population. It would go on to inter an estimated fifty-five thousand (55,000) individuals before falling out of use in the early 20th century. The

cemetery, originally called the "City of the Dead for Colored People," was incorporated by an Act of the Maryland State Legislature on January 4, 1882 and, in 1894, the cemetery was renamed "Mount Auburn". It was entered into the National Register of Historic Places on September 7th, 2001 due to many high profile 20th century burials of Baltimore's African American community.

Jones conceptualizes the significance of the cemetery as such that "through an overlay of African-American cultural practices and memory, a connection to the land and nature, to the now and hereafter, an orchestrated disconnection from the cemetery's urban setting has evolved" (Jones, 2011; p 227). Mount Auburn was conceived as a way for the African American community to assert their growing presence and growing economic success in what had previously been a predominantly white area. Today, the neighborhoods surrounding the cemetery consist of row houses, public housing, scattered commercial and retail plazas, and several industrial and manufacturing sites that effectively box-in the site, but it is nonetheless degraded (Kirchner & Soflael, 2018).

Mount Auburn curated a sort of microcosm while in use: championing attributes seen more commonly in rural areas, while occupying an increasingly urban area that should have threatened its boundaries and preservation long term (Kirchner & Solfael, 2018). However, once it ceased operating as an active burial space and maintenance declined, the lack of upkeep outraged some groups and polarized others. Changes in the demography of the surrounding communities resulted in the cemetery's loss of value from the collective memory of its immediate neighbors and the city residents (Kirchner & Soflael, 2018). Descendant groups were, as a result, concerned about how the memory of the space would be impacted by its decline. They became concerned that instead of being remembered as a heritage space where many

prominent, black Baltimoreans were buried; it would instead be remembered as a derelict space on the outskirts of town. Beginning in 2004, professional and allied groups championed that the space could become an example of community-led, “socially sustainable” open space and those privately-owned open spaces may be revitalized as public spaces for contemplation, social encounters, and communal memory (Kirchner & Soflael, 2018). These groups proposed that revitalization meant a complete overhaul of the space, transforming it from burial ground to community “green” space.

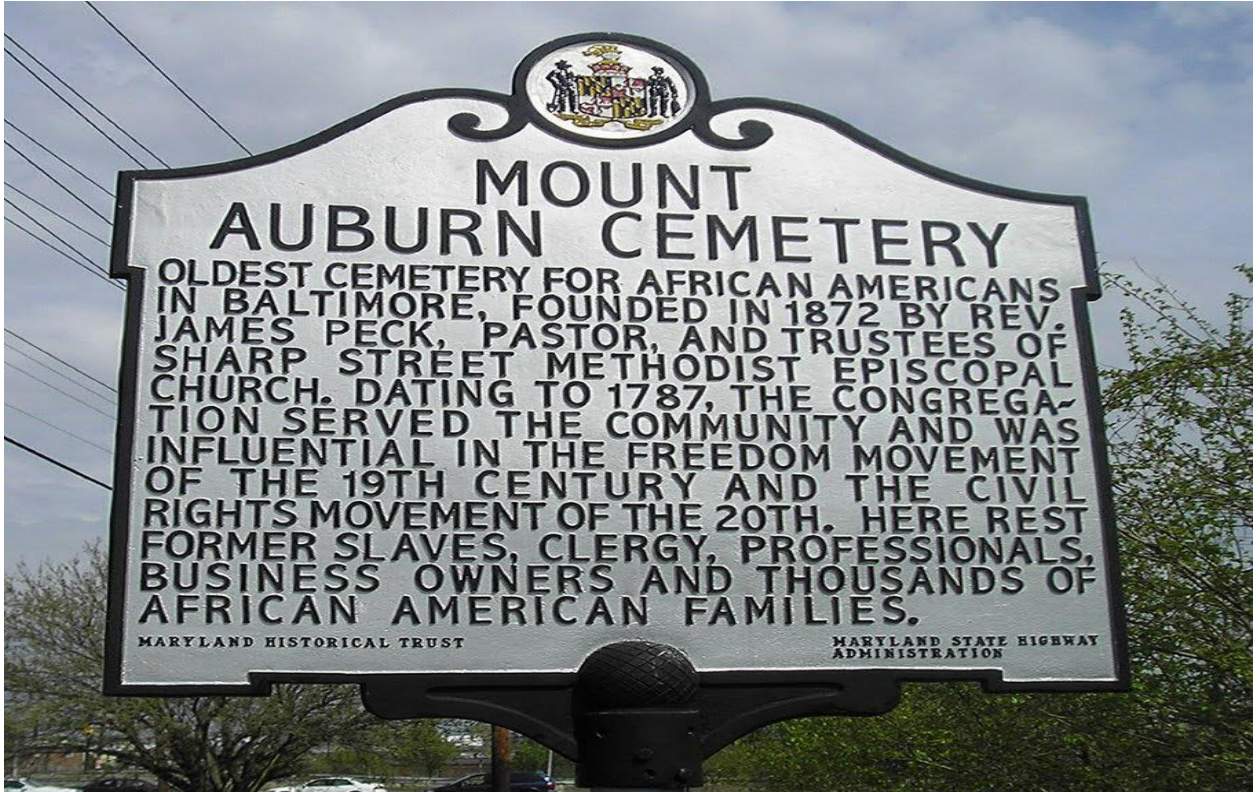
The resulting investigatory group solicited the community to produce a report on issues, concerns, and revitalization efforts. The report concluded the following. Though cemeteries are conceptualized as “mournful” spaces, urban communities can reincorporate them to fulfill community needs without erasing their past. In the case of Mount Auburn, that meant producing an in-perpetuity model of care for graves but opening and recharacterizing it for community use. While the cemetery’s historic and present ownership remains tied to the city, the neighborhood residents surrounding it were not directly connected or engaged with the upkeep of the cemetery, for a variety of reasons (Kirchner & Soflael, 2018). The main issue being funds, asserted by community members like Dorothy Johnso: “they (the city) didn't foresee that they need to do perpetual care, and to have the money to constantly come in there..it takes money; everything takes money” (Baltimore Sun, 2012). This social disconnection between the city and the neighborhood is one of the reasons for the perceived deterioration of the cemetery. Finally, though the city and the community have both faced great social transition, revitalizing the cemetery as an urban memorial park through community engagement process would reconnect the cemetery as a “City of the Dead” to their collective memory and enhance civic identity

The plan proposed by the investigatory groups did gain some traction within the community, but not the city, who insisted maintenance be funded by the groups themselves. Much like the African Burial Ground, Mount Auburn's revitalization was important to the community's sense of their contributions to the city of Baltimore. Unlike the African Burial Ground, the cemetery did not have the critical levels of support outside of the community to maintain its goals nor the funding to produce the level of visual maintenance that negates a sense of abandonment (figure 2.5 & 2.6). As of 2021, the in-perpetuity model has not been successfully implemented at Mount Auburn nor has the space been reincorporated/expanded in the ways proposed by the investigatory groups. The city has redirected inmate labor to the site in an effort to keep it "visitable and safe" (Kirchner & Soflael, 2018). The community continues to advocate for its upkeep and the development of a city and community approved in- perpetuity model.





**Figure 2.5: Mount Auburn Cemetery circa 2016, after initial revitalization work was conducted by a series of volunteers and community action groups**



**Figure 2.6: Commemorative marker for the Mount Auburn Cemetery. The marker denotes the cemetery's importance as a heritage site and to the African American community of Baltimore.**

From 1840 to 1865, the Fletcher Plantation, "Sweetbrier", or "Sweet Briar House" was an active plantation with over 150 slaves on record (Rainville, 2014). In 1901 it became Sweet Briar College, an all-women's college that is still in operation today. Many former plantation-turned institutions in Virginia have burial grounds on their property (e.g University of Virginia, William & Mary, James Madison University) and they have in recent years begun to develop plans for locating, researching, and incorporating them into their institutions histories after many decades of non-observance. The Enslaved Burial Ground has a historical trajectory quite different from other burial grounds, due to the college's agricultural programs and entry onto the National Register of Historic Places. Its location was never directly hidden, unrecorded, or unknown to the community or the college itself, both of whom have proposed plans, dedications, and traditions akin to those afforded to the white cemetery on the grounds. The Enslaved Burial Ground was left largely undisturbed for decades and received intermittent levels of upkeep. The gravestones are a combination of local fieldstones and quartz. None of the stones is inscribed, but several are carved along the top of the stone. While some stones appear to be paired head- and footstones, other graves contain no preserved markers. The cemetery contains more than 60 stones and at least 19 depressions, some of which may have been placed after emancipation (figure 5.7)

In spaces that are undoubtedly the resting place of slaves, revitalization is often scaled back (the African Burial Ground being an exception) to preserve the space close to its original state. There is often the perception that these spaces, different from the resting places of freed

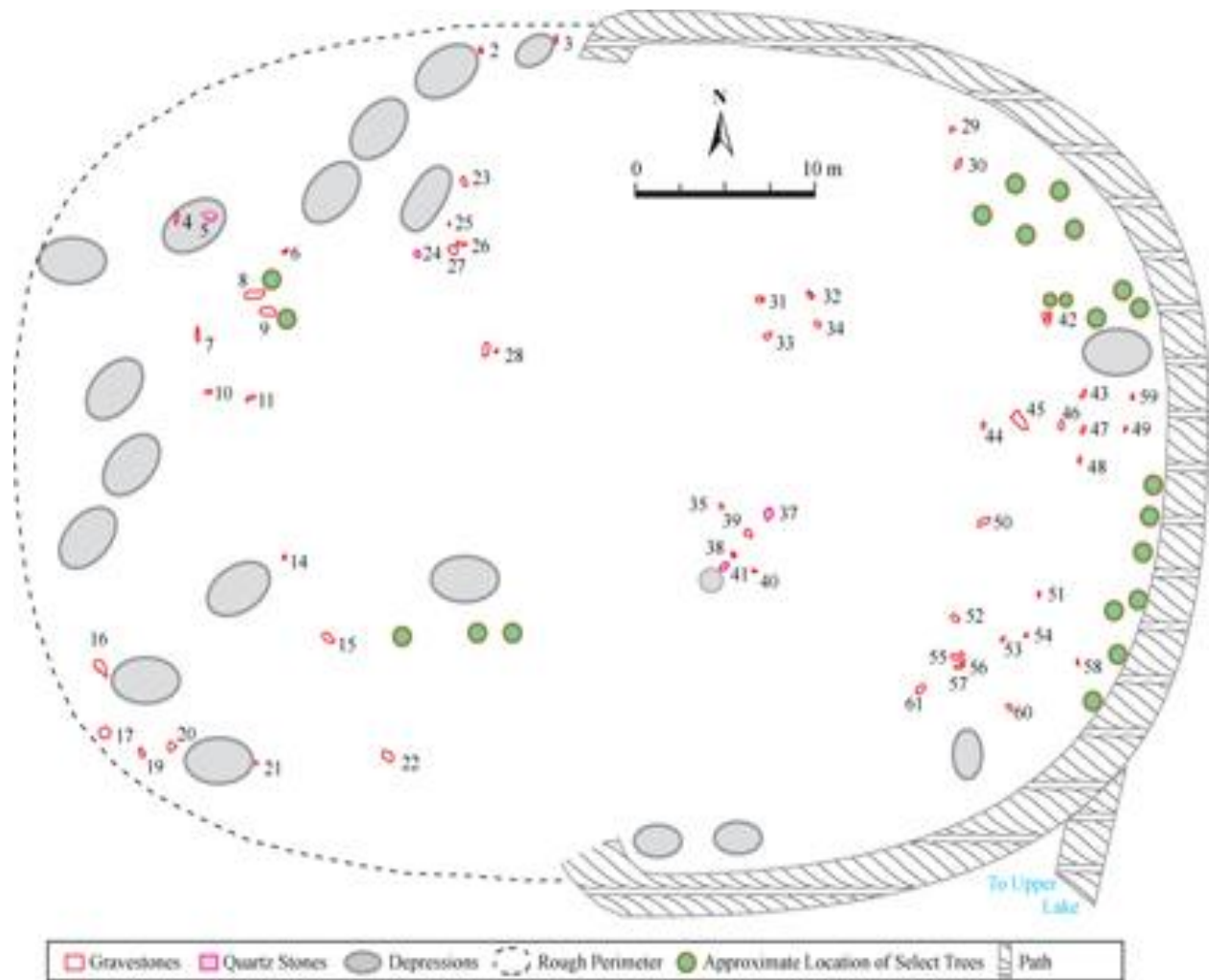
slaves and modern African American cemeteries, carry a “sacred testimony of the past, of memories integral to African American heritage” and therefore, some have argued that they should not be overhauled to fit modern day narratives (Rainville, 2014; p 45). Instead, they should be cared for along the wishes of direct descendants and the themes they wish to emphasize or minimize. In the early 2000’s, SBC’s administration was petitioned by students to provide maintenance, memorial care, and a survey of the grounds. The administration countered by offering funding for signage and a ceremony, which was implemented in 2003 to much regional acclaim, but no maintenance plans were made nor was any survey undertaken (see figure 5.7). The initial interest in the burial ground as a result of the ceremony faded from 2004-2014. The site became overgrown, and visitation decreased

Ironically, this decade of declining engagement by students and administrators was a critical and successful period of research into the history of the space and the descendant community. Previous administrations had asserted that the site's degradation and abandonment was the result of Emancipation and freed slaves moving North, leaving little to no descendants in the area to provide care or to engage in discussion about the site (Rainville, 2014). Simultaneously, the college shifted responsibility for upkeep and began to posit that preservation efforts would eventually take place on the back of student lead fundraisers. In 2014, a physical survey was done, and genealogical research of the outer community took place.

The research showed that many descendants of Sweet Briar’s enslaved population lived within a relatively short distance from the college, and many had, at some point, worked for the school and were aware of the burial grounds' existence. In fact, African American descendants had hosted multiple gatherings at the site to remember the deceased (Rainville, 2009). Many more still had memories of visiting the burial ground or had some knowledge of it passed on

from other people. With this information in hand, the college was once again petitioned with the wishes of the descendant community; primarily that the burial ground receives the same attention as the white cemetery on campus and be included in the school traditions constructed around that space. Additionally, the college was then petitioned to recognize the college's tenure as a plantation and acknowledge the effect that the neglect of the cemetery has had on the descendant community.

As of 2021, regular maintenance, a sunrise service, eulogy, and other activities are planned to be carried out over the course of the academic year. In the case of the other cemeteries in this chapter, descendant's call to action was critical to combat the many issues preceding the spaces revitalization (figure 5.8). For the Enslaved Burial Ground, it was the work of professionals and allies that directed attention to the site's degradation. In doing so, they redirected a popular narrative of the South that enslaved burial grounds and post-bellum African American cemeteries that believes abandonment is always the result of lack of knowledge, lack of care, or that degradation equals an intentional forgetting.



**Figure 2.7: Map indicating the distribution of gravestones and unmarked depressions at the Enslaved Burial Ground. Courtesy of Dr. Lynn Rainville, Tusculum Institute, Sweet Briar College. 2003.**



## **Chapter 3**

### Contemporary Spaces, Issues, & Considerations

*Death is permanent, but your grave isn't- Alice Gorman, 2017*

Much of the discussion in this thesis has focused on presenting various historical examples of African American cemeteries, as well as a brief analysis on how some modern-day communities have interacted with them to develop new narratives and revitalize them physically. I will now touch on the issue of modern day African American cemeteries- those that are currently in use or those that have had long tenures of use from the past into the present day. Historical African American cemeteries retain most of the focus in the literature, but modern day African American cemeteries are in danger of following the same trajectory towards disrepair, degradation, and forgetting as these historical examples. Especially if there is no intervention to challenge and mitigate the rhetoric and ideologies that have been discussed in previous chapters from taking hold. Overall, the manipulated landscape represents a host of social, political, and cultural ambiguities that further complicate an already complex situation, represented by the following lines of questioning:

- 1) how do we mitigate physical decline, neglect, and abandonment?
- 2) Who/what is involved and who/what is not involved in the process of mitigating manipulation?
- 3) What should be considered/kept in mind when navigating within spaces and communities who have had their heritage minimized across the landscape?

There are various issues and considerations that are to be kept in mind when working in these spaces that can often be lost, go unaddressed, or go unrealized to the extent that revitalization warrants. In addition to these issues and considerations, I will provide a model-of-

action that can be used on both the modern and the historical African American cemetery through the example of a current project being conducted between East Carolina University and the town of Ayden, North Carolina.

## **Issues**

### **Addressing Manipulation & Abandonment**

A critical facet of the identity of both kinds of cemeteries is the issue of abandonment. Abandonment as a label is somewhat misleading as what abandonment “is” can be subjective to time, place, and people (Shackel, 2003). Referencing back to Chapter 2’s discussion of the differences in the perception of black versus white mortuary spaces, abandonment is frequently used to describe the aspects of African American cemeteries that appear visually disordered, overgrown, or otherwise unkempt in contrast to patterns of organization typically used in Euro-American cemeteries (Rainville, 2009). This perceived disorganization may indicate a space that is no longer used for burials or one that has been forgotten- it may very well indicate the opposite or a kind of middle ground. What is apparent, is that abandonment as a visual type tied to curated and manipulated landscapes is often used as a blanket statement of sorts. Instead, its use should be critically evaluated before it is applied, as it carries connotations about the history and communities tied to a manipulated landscape.

Abandonment as a label of a cemetery's state signals a kind of forgetting where knowledge of the landscape has been snuffed out or is otherwise unavailable as a result of lack of care (Shackel, 2003). I argue that the frequent use of abandonment as a term to describe African American cemeteries signals the existence of a conscious choice to allow a landscape to degrade or to no longer be in use. As numerous examples in this thesis have shown, these connotations are inaccurate. African American cemeteries *do* frequently lack wide-scale knowledge, but that is

not the case within their own communities. More often than not there is a rich degree of information among descendant and associated communities or, at the least, oral narratives that can assist in establishing a link with the community (Silliman, 2010). There is often, however, a lack of knowledge within the power structures, such as city councils and administrations, who have the economic ability to make these cemeteries “unabandoned” (e.g., revitalized). Further still, African American’s have been prevented from having a choice in matters of the mortuary, from location to grave goods, to the times of day for burial and much more historically in the South. This is not to say modern day African American communities lack the kind of agency needed to “abandon” a space if they so choose, but rather that historically the choice was not theirs alone, but the result of a host of racially influenced social factors. With this in mind, preventing manipulation and physical decline from increasing and the abandonment label from being applied can be addressed through the consideration of three initial steps:

- 1) acknowledgement of “painful pasts and histories” (Little, 2016)
- 2) consideration and identification of contributing factors to manipulation
- 3) development of partnerships that address bias, complicity, and neglect

in regard to addressing the label of abandonment, there is the issue of confronting painful pasts and histories (Little, 2016). The cemetery can be a physical representation of larger issues at play, of long and difficult histories intersecting with the present, and of individual/collective opinions, critiques, and often, highly charged emotions. For African American cemeteries, this is a two-fold issue because not only are cemeteries typically conceived as places of sacredness for the memory of the deceased, but they also represent heritage and the presentation of identities that have historically been minimized and restricted (Smith, 2010). An example of this kind of reckoning between painful pasts and the present can be seen in the work of Pastor Michelle



Thomas at the African American Burial Ground for the Enslaved at Belmont in Ashburn, Virginia.

In 2015, Thomas came across records that indicated a sizable plot of land marked as a “slave cemetery” on the grounds of the former Belmont Plantation. Thomas then set about to identify the extent of the plot and begin the process of revitalization with the help of her congregation and various community members. The project soon evolved away from a historical lens when Thomas’ teenage son passed away in a swimming accident in June of 2015. Thomas opted to bury her son on the grounds of the slave cemetery, making him the first free African American to be buried there. In doing so, Thomas set out to accomplish two goals: one, that through a “reclaiming of history and space [by using the space for modern burials] ...Black cemeteries are to be cared for and respected in perpetuity” and secondly to situate the neglect and obscurity of the cemetery as an example of the state’s lack of regard for non-white spaces. In Thomas’ work at the African American Burial Ground for the Enslaved, both an individual event and a communal history of a painful past served to reconcile one another for the benefit of the cemetery moving forward.

On the other end of the spectrum, away from revitalization and acknowledgements of painful pasts/histories, are efforts that go unrealized or the failure to take any action overall. While many power structures like universities, schools, and federal buildings have made strides in reinterpreting their histories and complicity as they are related to slavery, racism, and other inequalities put upon African Americans- many do not or do so on very small scales that leave petitioners wanting. In 2016, the University of Mississippi became embroiled in a controversy surrounding the acknowledgement of its complicity in slavery and overall support of the Lost Cause ideology through their promotion of the University Greys. During the Civil War students

from the university were part of a Confederate infantry unit known as the “University Greys” (Smith-Barrow, 2018). The unit suffered one hundred percent casualties and they were commemorated with a large stained-glass window in 1891, which remains in place today.

Until the 2010’s, the university had made little effort to acknowledge their contribution to painful histories and is no stranger to racist sympathies and debates- such as the 1962 riot surrounding desegregation which required intervention by the National Guard. In 2015, after the school agreed to remove the state flag with its Confederate emblem from campus, students and alumni formed the “Our State Flag Foundation” to bring the flag back. After the development of the “Universities Studying Slavery” consortium- which is actively working to address issues of race and inequality on college campuses and their subsequent legacies on American society- Ole Miss attempted to acknowledge its complicity in slavery and the Lost Cause by “contextualizing” both the University Grays “sacrifice” and their role as Confederate soldier by placing “historically sensitive” plaques at the site of the University Grey’s memorial and other location that host Confederate statuary (Smith-Barrow, 2018). There has been much criticism in the aftermath, particularly from student organizations, of the way the plaques were contextualized: they do not outright decry or acknowledge the university’s connection to slavery and the Confederacy. The contextualization committee’s final report advocated other changes to the school’s landscape that have yet to be rolled out, such as creating a marker to honor African American troops from Lafayette County who served in the Civil War’s Union Army and acknowledgement of its use of slave labor to build the campus (Smith-Barrow, 2018). Although the example of Ole Miss and the University Grays is not a cemetery, it highlights an important fact that applies to them: without context, acknowledgments fall short of producing an adequate scope to the issue of manipulation.

Another issue pertaining to acknowledgment is that, also highlighted by the example put forth by Pastor Thomas and the University Greys example, it is often at the behest and diligence of the African American community that these cemeteries and need for contextualization's are brought to public attention or have their issues addressed in substantive, perpetual ways. Though the work is invaluable, addressing manipulation via the Lost Cause or any other ideology, regime, or inequity needs to be the work of more than one group, institution, organization, or community in order to be successful and have the kinds of effects that are needed to make African American cemeteries central to discussions of/about American heritage and history.

If we are to think more critically about abandonment and the terms application, then so too should the factors which contribute to it be understood and evaluated for their influence in a critical way. It is easy to conclude that families simply move away, pass away, or that, as time goes on, the responsibility of upkeep and memory become less central a task to descendants. In the literature, the Great Migration (1916-1970), where over six million African Americans fleeing the violence of Jim Crow left the rural South for the larger industrial cities of the North and the Midwest, is often cited as a catalyst of the decline of African American cemeteries across the South-particularly in rural areas (Luther, 2010). Luther's hypothesis certainly has some merit and while migration and time are certainly possible and plausible factors, they do not explain degradation of cemeteries in more urban areas, like the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore. Nor is the hypothesis applicable to areas of the South where migration was not as widespread of a practice and/or areas where descendants continue to live (Colwell, 2016).

Furthermore, it should be noted that cemeteries have existed and continue to exist as a commercial venture alongside its value as a socio-cultural space: the land, the plots, the gravestones, the continued maintenance, all require purchasing to exist on the landscape at all

(Chicora Foundation, 1996). A large factor to consider for a space to cease being used is that cemeteries are no longer profitable or become filled, new locations then take on the mantle as that community's burial space. It is then, speculatively, easy to call a space abandoned when the living community is not reinforcing the use of a previous space over another. Many cemeteries have what might also be considered economic "design flaws," such as fences and coping, that prevent easy maintenance or require (expensive) specialized care for their upkeep (Chicora Foundation, 1996).

### **Developing partnerships that address bias, complicity, and neglect**

Confronting manipulation in the landscape can be difficult, as it requires reflection about the ways in which individuals have benefitted, been a part of, and/or have been affected by the results of that manipulation. This is not to say that any one group is complicit in all stages of manipulation, but rather that there can often be a reticence to observe one's place in the collective rather than their place as an individual in manipulations development and its tenure within a space (Rainville, 2009). Similarly, bias operates in much the same way because it too requires reflection at both an individual and communal level to produce workable plans and partnerships. Both of which are needed in order for cemeteries to be revitalized and mitigation plans put in place. One caveat for mitigation plans is that, without a clear and defined plan of action and partnership in place, there is often a feeling by those trying to save cemeteries that work must be immediate. This usually is not the case and, when preservation efforts are rushed, there is the potential for very serious and long-lasting damage for both the community and the site itself.

When it comes to addressing discussing the physical and visual implications of mitigation/revitalization plans is important because it can vary from landscape to landscape. The

wishes of any one descendant or associated community can also vary (Ferguson, 2007). They are not a monolith and should not be viewed as such, as this has been a critical issue in collaborative works between descendant communities and the academic sphere (Ferguson, 2007) There is also a distinct difference between preservation and restoration, both of which are popular terminology for cemetery projects. Both are frequently conflated towards the idea that “remaking” a space is to make the landscape and what it holds be something visually pleasing, to look “new”, or as it did originally (Chicora Foundation, 1996). By this expectation, revitalization plans follow a path towards restoration whereas preservation aims to mitigate the factors contributing to degradation and stabilize it for the future. Partnerships that address things like bias, complicity, and neglect can then lead us into a discussion about *what* to consider, thematically, when working with African American communities and within peripheral spaces such as cemeteries.

### **Considerations**

#### **Communication & Collaboration**

A rather large quandary for African American cemeteries and one of the biggest factors in whether or not revitalization will or will not be realized is a lack of consideration for the different audiences, partners, and narratives that present themselves for the benefit of the space. In the case of African American cemeteries, there can be any number of interested parties who present themselves for solicitation. Communication is a highly valuable tool of revitalization because it not only creates partnerships but allows diverse sets of the public to have a more decisive role in the work being carried out (Little, 2016). Historically, the absence of communication or a breakdown in communication between communities and power structures offering assistance has created more issues and divisiveness to be addressed (Colwell, 2016). Frequently, archaeologists say that they are working *with* a community when in fact they are

working with a small subset of individuals who share their interests and see the potential benefits of collaboration, with an even smaller subset who are consulted on the methods, interpretation, findings, and other aspects (Colwell, 2016). Community-based participatory research is a theoretical framework but most basically “provides a method for a community and an archaeologist to work together to pursue a research design that benefits them both as equal partners” (Atalay 2012, p. 5). The method involves a continuous loop of engagement, in which archaeologists and community members collaboratively define the questions, methods, and outcomes of a project. Significantly, in this mode “collaboration is not motivated primarily by the benefits it bestows on archaeology. Rather it advocates a partnership approach that is motivated by the rights communities have to be active participants in the creation of knowledge” (Atalay 2012, p. 45). Atalay argues that the advantages of this approach are many, including building capacity for local communities, addressing real-world problems, bringing together diverse knowledge systems, fostering reciprocal benefits, and empowering communities that have often been historically disempowered (Ataly, 2012).

### **Conflict & Transparency**

Any work that revolves around the deceased, especially those that have endured marginalization, has the potential to be a minefield for conflict. As the African Burial Ground example shows, the inability to consult or the choice not to consult descendant communities in discussions and plans about landscapes of heritage can quickly turn divisive. Collaboration, where parties work tandemly to produce an accommodating result, acts as a midpoint where conflict can either be resolved or heightened (Ferguson, 2007). As Colwell-Chanthapongh and Ferguson point out, collaboration occurs along a “continuum of practices” that can reappear at

any time during a project when working with descendant, associated, and the broader community- ranging from resistance, to communicating research plans, implementation of plans, to the interpretation of the results, and their curation (2006). Minimizing conflict within manipulated landscapes requires a level of transparency about what will and will not be done, by who, and how. Transparency should be understood in this discussion as the willingness to incorporate all views, opinions, and critiques of the parties involved while disclosing information as it becomes available; even if it is contradictory or difficult to do so (Ferguson, 2007)

### **Model of Action: The Ayden Abandoned African American Cemetery (4-AC)**

The Ayden Abandoned African American Cemetery, colloquially referred to as the 4AC, is a cemetery located in Ayden, North Carolina- a town of about five thousand (5,000) people in the eastern part of the state. The 4AC is about a half-acre plot of heavily forested land which runs alongside Highway 11 and is bordered a railroad, commercial area, highway, and a separate cemetery that is currently being used by the African American community of Ayden. Dense underbrush, refuse, and the cemetery's position within a floodplain have obscured and damaged the site. Many of the headstones, vaults, and plaques are broken and their epitaphs hard to discern. Unmarked graves have been disturbed by tree roots and other invasive flora. Further complicating the space's history is the fact that there appears to be no maps or other records of the cemetery or its occupants.

The extent of community knowledge of the site appears to be slim, though there are other projects currently being developed to gauge levels of community knowledge and any memories associated with the space. A preliminary surface survey conducted by East Carolina University's Department of Anthropology in the Spring of 2020 revealed that the cemetery was in use

between the late 19th to the early 20th century, with over one hundred marked graves and possibly as many as 300 more unmarked graves denoted by depressions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, no further data collection and analysis at the site was able to be carried out to develop a more complete and accurate estimation of grave counts, their location, and other related data.

The town administration of Ayden and in a broader sense, the community itself, have expressed some interest in having the site documented, mapped, and curated. By doing so, the site has the potential to become an area of local heritage and tourism. Creating tourism locales and highlighting local heritage are both currently focal objectives of the town. In an attempt to craft a partnership, a field school under the direction of Dr. Charles Ewen was developed to address these issues and find out more about the site's history, as well as its plausible role for and within the community moving forward. The field school's objectives are fourfold:

- 1) clear, map, and record all gravestones, depressions, epitaphs, and other associated grave materials within the cemetery
- 2) develop an accurate count of burials within the cemetery
- 3) establish whether or not there is a connection between the abandoned cemetery and the Northeast cemetery to the west.
- 4) create lists, maps, and other demographic materials from the collected data for the town of Ayden to have at their disposal and to use as they see fit as they move forward towards revitalization.

Though the 4 is ongoing, it can still be used as a model of practice for similar projects. Chiefly, one of the larger aims of the 4ACproject is to be of assistance to the town and the associated communities within it who may lay claim to the site. Instead of guiding both the



discussion and defining the work that is to be done there, the field school will act as. There can frequently be opportunities for the unequal dynamics that exist between institutions, administrations, and individuals to supersede one another (Colwell, 2016). The 4AC project and the field school aim to get ahead of many of the issues described above by giving control of the objectives, scope of work, and to the town itself and engaging potential informants prior to carrying out any work. In doing so, the community is given the ability to have an early and vested interest in what is/is not planned if they so choose. This opportunity directs the conversation towards a final, but important, issue of discussion for this research: the practicality of preservation and revitalization efforts.

Mitigating manipulation typically revolves around a set plan to address the physical: removing trash, cutting back foliage, making pathways and other delineations. While addressing physical issues is important, there is also the issue of longevity and upkeep. Whatever changes are implemented need to be able to be maintained over time. Often there is a feeling by those trying to “save” cemeteries that work must be immediate and whole-scale. This usually is not the case and, when preservation efforts are rushed, there is the potential for very serious and long-lasting damage as well as the chance that the space falls into disrepair once again if plans are not concrete and understood by those providing the upkeep (Chicora Foundation, 1996). Turning back to the example of the 4AC, this issue was highlighted in conversation with town officials who lamented that the town has on-going issues keeping actively used cemeteries maintained, much less abandoned ones or ones in need of specialized maintenance care. Plans should be tailored to the community taking part in the mitigation efforts; therefore they can vary and be specialized for their needs/desires for the space.

At the very least, mitigation efforts should include discussions that produce a maintenance plan Aplan that details the expense of upkeep, and the parties responsible for maintenance. In some cases, there may be family members/descendants who wish to keep up the grave or maintenance may be the responsibility of local or state entities. In others, specialized care like that offered by cemetery removal/preservation companies may be needed. In doing so there is a better chance that cemeteries will not fall back into disrepair or be subject to more manipulation as a result of poor planning. In all, the consideration for what may happen to spaces after revitalization has taken place are important- as time has been one of the contributing factors to decline- and ultimately necessary in addressing the complicated histories of African American cemeteries as manipulated landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

Manipulated landscapes produce uneven and unrepresentative histories and create one sided narrative around ideas of social worth, belonging, status, and ultimately who is and is not deserving of being remembered. The use of "imagined histories", where one group's sense of truth, events, and the past supersedes others, further complicates representation and inclusion both in the written and archaeological record. The Lost Cause ideology mythologized the tangible aspects of the post-bellum South: the battlefields, monuments, and the internment of white war dead, while simultaneously restricting the intangible aspects of the landscape: senses of heritage, identity, and memory, to white populations as well. The popularity of this ideology among white southerners affected the political, social, and economic power structures developed in the wake of the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) and into the segregationist policies of Jim Crow, effectively disenfranchising African Americans and their contributions to heritage and the landscape.

While the Lost Cause can and should be viewed as a defining catalyst for the minimization of African American heritage in life and death, there is a long history of social covenants and legal restrictions preceding its development and application. Such as the policy of *partus sequitur ventrem* and the use of perpetual indentured contracts, like in the case of *Johnson v Parker* and John Casor's subsequent and unsuccessful attempt to achieve legal freedom in 17th century Virginia, or the failure of policies such as "Forty Acres and a Mule". The Lost Cause's influence remains prevalent throughout the South. It has produced highly politicized landscapes that have adhered to the color lines of the antebellum period, even in areas that have legal frameworks in place to the contrary (Gallagher & Nolan, 2000).

At the heart of the manipulated landscapes archetype in the South, are the many examples of “forgotten” African American cemeteries. Peripheral, physically degraded, and frequently obscured by historical and modern day environmental and man-made effects, African American cemetery characteristics differed down to the types of physical space they have occupied, the types of materials used as grave goods and decoration, and the curation of the mortuary landscape as a whole. Some traits, like the “killing” of vessels, proximity to water, and the use of shells, have West African roots. Other traits like nighttime burials, the use of wood, stone, and metal piping have economic and social connotations. While other traits like grave organization/orientation have more ambiguous histories attached to them complicated by a lack of record and reference. These trends and traits trend towards ambiguity are, in effect, an observable outcome of this landscape's manipulation. As well as the fact that many of the materials are organic in nature and break down quickly over time, making revitalization and mitigating manipulation time sensitive. Case studies of various cemeteries throughout the South further reinforce the cemetery as a manipulated space.

Revitalization efforts, then, need to expand to focus on the modern African American cemetery alongside the historical because it too is a landscape prone to the effects of manipulation, as the same ideologies and rhetoric which manipulated historical landscapes exist today. On the other hand, there needs to be more consideration of the larger, non-material issues within these cemeteries- like addressing the use of terms like manipulation and abandonment. Additionally, creating partnerships that address the real historical effects of bias, complicity, and neglect, and the importance of transparency for all parties to avoid conflict and one-sided objectives that do not serve the communities who claim these spaces as heritage. Lastly, whatever plans are developed to revitalize abandoned spaces need to be realistic in their design,

cost, materials, scope, and goals to accommodate both the wishes of the community and those that will be providing maintenance over time.

### **Further Research**

There are a great number of historical and modern African American cemeteries that, like the many examples described in this thesis, exist in a state of decline throughout the United States. Further research is needed to understand the role that descendants, general communities, and their respective memories may play in understanding the histories of degraded spaces or the trajectory of mitigating degradation and abandonment within more modern landscapes. Likewise, a critical analysis of the role that memory plays in these deathscapes is also an avenue of potential further research. While I included multiple theoretical models (Boas, Herskovits, Frazier) as a base to aid in the understanding of African American mortuary culture, its history, and its analysis in the literature, the scope of these models and their implications when used in African American spaces is in itself broad and in need of further research. Lastly, there is a critical need for research that explores the impact of economic factors and their influence on the in-perpetuity model of care, maintenance plans, and motivation for revitalization within African American cemeteries.

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