

A Journey Through Time: A Burial Ground for the Enslaved

Description

A 19th century Black cemetery was (re)discovered by landowner Jeffrey Taylor near Front Royal, Warren County, Virginia, in 2018 while he was walking around his property. Marked mostly by deep depressions and field stone markers, Jeffrey was determined to see this cemetery recognized and take its place in local history. He engaged local historian Jonathan Noyales of Shenandoah University, whose students conducted an archaeological survey and found evidence of at least 193 burials. Jonathan speculated that the cemetery dated back to the early 1800s. A friend called to tell me what was happening 20 miles from my home and said “we” needed to figure out who those 193 unnamed souls were. All indications are that he did not include himself in “we.”

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Iâ??ll admit thereâ??s nothing I like better than a mystery. And one that could possibly be solved with skills Iâ??d been honing for yearsâ??genealogy and historical researchâ??was better yet. I got bit by the genealogy bug when my 5th grade teacher, Miss Margaret Oâ??Brien, gave us a homework assignment to build a family tree. Sixty years and 30,000 relatives later, Iâ??m still working on that assignment. The fascination with history is a little harder to explain. I hated history in school. But much of what was taught was mythologyâ??the Lost Cause narrative that passed for history in the pre-Civil Rights era South. Real history about real people, some related to me, proved to be much more interesting.

Where to begin to figure out who is buried in that cemetery hidden in the woods atop a hill in rural Warren County? Figure out who owned the land. The earliest land records for this area are the land grants issued starting in the early 1730s, some issued by the authority of Lord Fairfax as part of his Northern Neck Proprietary by the King of England, and some issued by Jost Hite and Robert McKay,

Sr. in the Shenandoah Valley by the authority of the Lt. Governor of Colonial Virginia.

The earliest grant recorded in the area was issued to Robert McKay, Jr. (1708-1796), son of Robert McKay, Sr., land speculator and partner of Jost Hite. On 3 October 1734 Robert Jr. patented 828 acres of land on both sides of Crooked Run. He continued to buy up land bordering his holdings, eventually accumulating over 2300 acres. While the cemetery did not lie within the bounds of the original grant, subsequent purchases did. Eventually, Emily McKay Painter's father gave her 80 acres of family property that had passed down through family and included the cemetery in the Pine Hills. Emily was the wife of Joseph Painter.

After the Civil War, Joseph Painter began selling his wife's Pine Hill property to free and newly emancipated Black families, beginning in 1870. While he had property of his own and another 50 acres that Emily had been given by her father, this was probably the least valuable property the couple owned. It was situated on the top of a steep hill, the soil was rocky and not well suited for cultivating, a small creek at the western edge of the tract was the only water source, and it was far from the main roads and commercial establishments. Regardless, Black families were hungry for land of their own and soon established a community they named West Africa. In addition to building homes for their growing families, they also built a church and a school.

And, of course, the cemetery pre-dates all of that. The cemetery straddles 15+ acre plots owned by two of the earliest buyers in the West Africa community, Henrico Baltimore and Washington Wells. Both were free before the Civil War. The earliest burials appear to be those lying in the eastern part of the cemetery. Some existing markers are strongly reflective of African influence with the fieldstones shaped into rough obelisks and pyramids, engraved with an arrow pointing upward or a seashell. These may be the graves of people born in Africa or their children who learned African burial customs from their parents. Some of the earliest graves may be of free Blacks who show up in the census records residing in McKay households in 1820s and 30s. Moving westward, there are indications of family burial plots, as seen with engraved markers for Kenner family members in close proximity to each other. At the western edge of the cemetery is a lone rusted funeral home marker, the card inside no longer legible.

Using a combination of deeds documenting Joseph Painter's land sales and census records, I was able to determine who lived in the West Africa community over the years, and then search death registers and death certificates to identify the cemetery's post-Civil War burials. The burials of 67 people were identified this way. Another 18 people have been identified as possible, but will require additional research to determine where they were living at the time of their deaths. Also missing from the list of identified burials are the children who were born and died between censuses and people whose deaths were either never reported or died in the years where death registers are missing. Their names are probably lost forever.

More difficult was determining the enslaved people buried in the cemetery. This required tracing deeds back from the 1860s to earlier years to establish who lived in the area. Once landowners were identified, I researched pre-Civil War census records, wills and estate records, chancery cases, and deeds (which sometimes recorded slave sales) to identify the people they enslaved. For the most part, the McKays made this research easier than other families in the area. With one notable exception, they identified their enslaved people by name when bequeathing them to family members in their wills. Burials of 25 enslaved people have been identified, but the research is far from complete.

Much of the land on Reliance Road is still large parcels between what was the historic Front Royal-Winchester Turnpike, today's Rt. 522/Winchester Road, and the town of Reliance, with the exception being the Reliance Woods subdivision. The map of the subdivision is little changed from the 1880s map of West Africa. A few parcels have been subdivided, and one of the smaller parcels was absorbed into a larger parcel.

One landlocked parcel is still owned by a descendant of Henrico Baltimore, its physical description is listed as West Africa in the tax records. That single reference was the only remaining evidence of the thriving community that largely disappeared from memory after the 1920s, when most of the residents had moved away. Some moved to the thriving Black community of Happy Creek or into Front Royal where jobs and the conveniences of life were more readily accessible. Others moved to New York and Pennsylvania to escape the Jim Crow South. But thanks to Jeffrey Taylor and his friend Ellen Gant of the Middletown Heritage Society, their existence is no longer forgotten. In 2022, Jeffrey Taylor deeded the cemetery to the Henrico Baltimore Family and West Africa Community Cemetery Foundation, founded by two of the descendants of Henrico Baltimore.

The Foundation was recently awarded a yearly grant to defray costs for maintenance and upkeep of the cemetery from Virginia Department of Historic Resources's Historic Black Cemetery and Graves Fund. We will be applying for additional grants to upgrade access to and within the cemetery, add informational signs, and conduct ground penetrating radar, particularly of possible grave sites lying outside the cemetery's current boundaries. We are currently working on an application to include both the cemetery and the West Africa Community on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's register of historic places. And the hope is that the Foundation can one day buy land adjoining the cemetery to build a museum to tell the story of the people of West Africa and the people buried in the Henrico Baltimore Cemetery.

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Mary Brown Haak is an amateur genealogist and historian. A career civil servant, she worked for the Postal Service, starting as a clerk and working her way up to computer programmer. She transferred to the National Institutes of Health where she served as the lead administrative troubleshooter for the Clinical Center. Since retirement, she has spent her time further exploring her family roots and volunteering for a variety of charities and nonprofits. She was the secretary of Fauquier NAACP for several years, and has volunteered with Blue Ridge Hospice, several animal rescue organizations, and the Rappahannock Rapidan Medical Reserve Corps. She is now Vice President of the Lincoln Preservation Foundation in Loudoun County, Virginia, where her ancestral roots run deep. She is working closely with Lenox and William Baltimore, founders of The Henrico Baltimore Family and West Africa Community Cemetery Foundation to ensure that this sacred ground and the historic Black West Africa community that once surrounded it is preserved, remembered, and celebrated.

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