

African American Cemetery Preservation

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African American burial grounds are national challenges, and while each burial ground is unique and deserves individual attention, each is part of a larger challenge. It is important that we look at each burial ground within the contexts of the larger story and at the same time uplift each one separately.

To that extent, preservation of each burial ground will have its own challenges, successes, and preservation plan. Getting started on a positive and solid plan leads to more fruitful and successful results. The intention of this leaflet is to provide you with practices, guidelines, and tips for organizing your group for success. There is not a “one size fits all” approach, so expect to make allowances as you gain experience.

This pamphlet is organized into the following sections:

- Before you start
- Organize
- Collaborate build partnerships
- Tips for success
- Legal considerations
- Register the burial ground
- Wholistic approach to preserving
- Getting started
- Final thoughts

I. Before You Start

Before you begin, lay the groundwork within yourself first. Resist the temptation to rush to “do something.” Build your success story by planning – short range and long range.

Commitment

Be honest with yourself. We each have our limits and personal goals. Preservation is not short-term but perpetual. However, there is room for those with limited time, energy, resources, and desire. Each person needs to acknowledge their expectations and commitment level and be honest about it with the group.

Education

Talk with other “like” groups. You’ll find what works for one doesn’t work for the other. But there are many similarities and similar steps to take.

Do the research to know the legal status of the cemetery. Notice I didn’t say “fix it.” Having a solid understanding of legal challenges allows you to be proactive and not reactive when a situation arises. Some legal issues can be easy to resolve and others may take time, money, and professional advice. Another example is historical markers. Be familiar with the process before starting.

Understand regulations that impact burial grounds in your area. Every state is different. NC has a state office of archaeology and within it a cemetery specialist. Its purpose is to protect the state’s legacies through laws and regulations, maintain inventories of sites, provide education, and more.

II. Organize

It is so easy to see a need and pull others in to assist, such as a clean-up effort. And once a burial ground is cleaned, everyone pats themselves on the back and thinks it's done. It only takes a few years before nature reclaims the space. Setting the organization's goals and mission is critical to continued success and ongoing care.

- 1.** Define the organization's goals. Use techniques such as brainstorming and group think tanks to gather everyone's ideas of the group's purpose. Even newcomers to the project have ideas. If you are reviving a group, look at what the group accomplished earlier.
- 2.** Organize the results and prioritize them. Use the results to develop goals. Does that mean they are perfect and can never be changed? NO! They are a starting point and evolve as the group matures.
- 3.** Develop a mission statement. This becomes your compass and ethical guide for decision-making. It takes time to develop a mission statement, so don't rush through it. The mission statement is not the day-to-day description of what you do but what guides your work and stands the test of time. If your mission statement is finished in a period of time, you have a goal and not a mission statement. Lots of information exists on the internet on developing a mission statement. You'll find that information helpful if you have never developed one.

Examples:

Friends of Geer Cemetery works to reclaim, restore, and respect one of Durham's first burial grounds for the African American public. We reject the erasure of African American history and culture by honoring the lives and legacies of those laid to rest in this sacred place through preservation, storytelling, education, and community-building. (www.friendsofgeercemetery.org)

The Friends of Oberlin Village, through preservation and education, honors Oberlin, one of the last known surviving free and freedmen's villages in the state of North Carolina that grew out of an antebellum Free Black settlement. (www.friendsofoberlinvillage.org)

Restoring Our Heritage, One Plot at a Time. (www.oddfellowscemetery.org)

4. Determine the organization's structure. How will the organization function? Is it a grassroots or a formal organization? Developing a formal organization takes patience, planning, and funding. Taking small steps makes the process easier. With a mission statement and initial goals in hand, developing the governing structure moves the organization to a different level and helps to ensure that the mission and goals are implemented. Plan for leadership and structure early to continue work toward the group's mission and avoid pitfalls. It is easier to plan before a situation arises than to fix it. The outcome of this step is the organization's bylaws. Keep them simple but effective.

5. Go public. After the organization's foundation is set, it's time to go public, but proceed with caution. You want those coming to your organization to share in the organization's mission and not their personal agenda. With this in mind, articulate the group's mission clearly.

If all the above seems daunting and difficult, ask for assistance from other groups or businesses. In NC, the NC Community Colleges have workshops on starting a non-profit or business. You'll meet others like you and people within your community to help support your efforts. There might be other organizations specific to your community who assist new groups. This is a journey where others should be welcomed.

Grassroots to formal

- Hold regular meetings to keep everyone informed and ensure activities are on target. Irregular meetings cause people to lose interest or think the organization isn't committed to its mission. Build a strong alliance by keeping people involved in the decision-making process and hands-on activities.
- After the group has had some time together, consider moving to a more formal organization. You might consider registering the organization under Chapter 59B of General Statutes of NC Uniform Unincorporated Nonprofit Association Act. This is an available NC structure if an organization has revenue less than \$5000. It gives the organization a formal legal status. With this status, bylaws and a governance structure is needed. If the organization has existed for some time before moving to this step, creating by-laws, which includes a governance structure, is a fairly smooth process.

Tip: You'll want a structure that can stand the test of time. For guidance, look at other organizations and how they are structured. Resist the urge to be "top heavy." Identify positions needed to keep the organization moving forward.

- 501c3 Non-profit

Moving to a 501c3 non-profit organization is a big step. It sets the tone of permanence. It also opens opportunities for the organization, including applying for grants and more. There is a cost associated with incorporating into a 501c3, and it is a legal process. This step identifies the need for how to fund the organization. Again, validating the need to plan both short and long term. If being a 501c3 has been in the plan, then most likely there has been a plan for having the funds. Otherwise, you must plan for funds before you start the process.

Tip: Use community resources! We are fortunate to have several universities in NC with law schools. Yes, you can learn the process to create a non-profit organization, but using professionals allows you to focus on other goals and saves time. Using a law school clinic usually doesn't require legal fees. Student lawyers are in their senior year and they work under the guidance of a professor.

III. Collaborate and Build Partnerships

Collaborate to accomplish more. Think about your community - what entities exist in your community that you can partner with to accomplish various goals. For example, if your goal is research, is there a local historical society that can help? Or, maybe there is a senior citizen who lives in the community willing to take on a research project.

Become aware of other resources such as a cemetery commission within your local government. There might already be profit and nonprofit organizations available to assist, whether it is a limited or on-going partnership. For example, Keep America Beautiful is a national organization but has affiliates throughout the country and their focus is on cleanup. They can help organize cleanups and provide equipment. Don't reinvent the wheel!

The following is a list of potential collaborators and partners. Think out of the box when looking for partners.

- School teachers
- Local K-12 schools
- Cemetery monument companies
- Nearby historic sites
- Local youth groups (for example: Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts)
- Local government leaders
- Colleges and universities
- Civic groups
- Fraternal organizations
- Preservation organizations
- Volunteer coordination

IV. Tips for Success

- Learn about archaeological considerations before initiating a cleanup. Removing key artifacts causes the loss of data that cannot be restored. In some cases, it might help with solving who is buried in a location or identifying a burial site.
- Learn about burial practices in your area. If there are no records for the burial ground you are preserving, again this might provide clues and information about the history and who is buried there.
- Learn about types of markers. Remember our enslaved ancestors were limited to how burial sites were marked. A very beautiful and solemn site might be a burial ground with little human damage with fieldstones. It is a reminder of our ancestor's lives, struggles, and loss of identity.
- Know before you need it. There might be actions you will want to take such as historical designation. Do the research early, before you start a process to ensure the needed documentation is gathered before you begin.
- Look for low-budget and no-budget ways to have a presence. Websites are wonderful but involve money and time. Other social media platforms can provide a presence until a website can be developed.
- If you have access to local media, develop a partnership. A regular column or radio program could be a method for sharing life stories.
- Layout your calendar of events and share with the community.
- Preserve the integrity of the burial ground. Do not rush the process.

V. Wholistic Approach to Preserving

So much of our ancestors' accomplishments are diminished and destroyed, and there are few artifacts of their existence. Their final resting places are an example. To find and preserve a burial ground is like finding a box of jewels. To preserve it is like polishing those jewels so that they shine and lead to knowledge and recognition for current and future generations to experience in a small way a piece of history.

Many American burial grounds are a place to honor Americans who helped create and build this country; however, many are not where African Americans are buried. It's time to provide honor and celebration of their lives. Becoming a preserver for one of these spaces is an opportunity to shine a light on the achievements, contributions, and tribulations our ancestors realized.

Physical

It is important to not to do some things:

Typically, our initial concern is reclaiming the physical grounds. We all want the burial ground to look good. However, make sure that you understand how the burial ground looked when it was active. Strive to keep the integrity set by the ancestors and not a modern day perspective.

Take account of what needs to be done to protect the space. And create long-range plans for preservation. Trees that endanger headstones and burial plots are more important than planting flowers. Filling sunken graves should be discussed and agreed upon. There are pros and cons to both approaches - filling versus not filling.

Be careful of what you move and remove. Traditions and practices of the community might be the reason for certain plants and objects found in the burial ground.

Life stories

Telling the history and life stories of the community reflected in the burial ground brings to life the joys, sorrows, challenges, and achievements of individuals and the community. There are many positive stories to be shared that enlighten our youth and community, revealing the successes, knowledge, activism, entrepreneurship, and more. These stories can instill a sense of pride in what our ancestors accomplished even when faced with obstructions or obstacles. The ancestors were more than enslaved people.

Connecting with historical groups, genealogists, and historians both individuals and organizations of historians expands your volunteer base. Their expertise and skills can help develop life stories. Many groups are looking for opportunities (Church of Latter Day Saints, senior citizens groups (AARP) and living communities, universities, etc.). Additionally, you can train and build your own team of researchers.

Descendant outreach

One of the most important and satisfying outcomes of preserving a historic African American burial ground is connecting with descendants. Remember the burial ground contains their family ancestors. Keep them involved and an important part of decision-making related to the burial ground. Many were disenfranchised not by choice but by historical events.

Descendants can provide information for life stories and artifacts. They might also be a critical part of resolving potential legal issues. They also bring a sense of gratification to your efforts, making your soul feel good and providing motivation to continue.

VI. Getting Started

- Register the burial ground with the NC Cemetery Survey. Use the [North Carolina Citizen Cemetery Site Form Instructions](#) located on the website.
- Introduce yourself and the organization to the NC Office of State Archaeology Historic Cemetery Specialist. The specialist can provide invaluable information to help you along the way.
- Register the burial ground with the Black Cemetery Network Archive. The Black Cemetery Network is a site created and managed through the University of South Florida in Tampa Heritage Research Lab.
- Host a community celebration, which doesn't need to be fancy or cost anything. You want to brand the organization to the cemetery. Invite the community, press, etc. Have your scripts ready! People love to hear the stories associated with the burial ground, and share the stories. Keep it positive but factual. Be able to state what you're doing and what you need from the community. Having a mission statement ready is an important part of your message.
- Realize that once you are "out there," there is no turning back. What was once protected by being "unknown" is now "known". Both good and evil exist in our society.

VII. Final Thoughts

Once you have started and accumulated data and artifacts, you'll need a place to store them. Whether it's physical or online storage, include in the organization's plan what happens to the data and artifacts in the future. Ensure that the work done today isn't lost tomorrow.

In February 2022, legislation was introduced to assist with preserving African American burial grounds in both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The legislation is titled the "African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act (S. 3667 / H.R. 6805)." It is important that everyone working to preserve an African-American burial ground become familiar with it and follow its progress.

"When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground." Saving and documenting the African-American burial grounds helps to restore some of what was lost. A burnt library can be rebuilt.

Resources

Online

[NC African American Heritage Commission \(AAHC\)](#)

[NC State Office of Archaeology](#)

[NC Cemetery Commission](#)

African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act: [House](#)

African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act: [Senate](#)

[Black Cemetery Network](#)

[Cemetery Census NC Cemeteries on the Web](#)

[Chicora Cemetery Preservation](#)

[Chapter 59B - Uniform Unincorporated Nonprofit Association Act](#)

[FamilySearch](#)

[Keep America Beautiful](#)

[NC Center for Nonprofits](#)

[Nonprofit Corporations in NC](#)

Books

Wright, R. & Hughes, W. (1996) *Lay Down Body*, Visible Ink Press.

Little, R. (2014), *Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers*, The University of North Carolina Press.

Videos

[Webinar: Beginner's Guide to African American Cemetery Preservation](#)