

Seeking to preserve disappearing Black cemeteries

'Sacred ground' under threat from developers

N'dea Yancey-Bragg

USA TODAY

Harvey Matthews remembers spending time in Moses Macedonia African Cemetery as a child growing up in the vibrant River Road community of Bethesda, Maryland.

Hundreds of formerly enslaved Black people and their descendants are believed to be buried in the cemetery. But as Matthews got older, he watched developers bulldoze the area, bury the cemetery under asphalt and turn it into a parking lot. In 1968, the neighboring high-rise apartment building called Westwood Towers was completed.

"That's your last, final resting place, and to have that uprooted, bulldozed, and this that and the other, it's just cra-

zy as hell to me," said Matthews, 80.

At the time, Matthews said he felt there was little he could do to stop the desecration. But in 2021, a group of descendants and community members sued Montgomery County's Housing Opportunities Commission to stop it from selling the property to developers. Last year, an appeals court sided with the commission in a decision that Chelsea Andrews, president and executive director of the commission, said "con-

firms that HOC has properly observed the laws that protect burial grounds in Maryland."

But in January, that case made its way to the Supreme Court of Maryland, which is expected to rule in the next few months, according to attorney Steven Lieberman, who is representing the Bethesda African American Cemetery Coalition. Lieberman believes this is the

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first case of its kind to go to a state's highest court and said it could have national implications.

"This issue is really critical because right now there are literally hundreds of African American burial grounds around the United States that are in various stages of desecration," Lieberman said.

Others who are fighting to protect these cemeteries in and around the nation's capital say they need more resources to stave off developers, maintain the sacred grounds and learn more about the people buried in them. Experts and advocates told USA TODAY these sites are not only important to their local communities, but to American history as a whole — particularly at a time when Black history is under attack.

"When you think about the systems of Jim Crow, and so forth, they were really built to dehumanize us even in death," said Rep. Alma S. Adams. "And so we want to make sure that we honor folks who have actually made these contributions and are individuals who have been a part of our history and our culture."

Black cemeteries need more funding

Antoinette Jackson, a professor of anthropology at the University of South Florida, has helped identify over 140 African American burial grounds nationwide, but said there could be thousands.

"Many of these historic Black cemeteries are now found to be pretty much erased or marginalized or built overtop of because of the history, the U.S. history of slavery and segregation," Jackson said.

The majority of attempts to preserve these cemeteries are grassroots efforts by the descendants of those buried in them and other community members who are often working with limited resources, Jackson said.

In 2022, Congress passed legislation which authorized the National Parks Service to establish a program meant to offer \$3 million in grants for the identification, preservation, and documentation of these sites, but the program hasn't been funded, according to Ad-



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JERRY WOLFORD/AP FILE

ams, the congresswoman from North Carolina who co-sponsored the legislation. Adams said she hopes the funding will be secured by early next year.

"If we can get the funding, it will give people an opportunity — communities who are interested — a way of doing the research," she said.

Meanwhile, nonprofits like the National Preservation for Historic Trust and state governments in Maryland and Virginia have stepped up, offering thousands of dollars in grant money to preserve historic Black cemeteries.

But accessing such funding can be a challenge. Friends of East End, a nonprofit that for more than a decade has helped maintain the East End Cemetery in Virginia, applied for state funding after a bill passed in 2017 offered \$5 per grave marker for African Americans born before 1900 or interred prior to 1948, according to Brian Palmer, a founding member of the group. But the group was denied funding because they are not the legal owner of the cemetery, according to Ivy Tan, a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Tan said the funds were dispersed to a nonprofit called The Enrichmond Foundation, which collapsed in 2022 amid allegations of financial mismanagement. The city of Richmond has since expressed interest in taking over East End and two other historic cemeteries, according to local media. And Friends of East End have resumed their work, relying on donations and other grants, Palmer said.

When Palmer first visited the 16-acre cemetery in 2014, it looked more like an overgrown forest than a burial ground. To make matters worse, amid the nearly impenetrable matrix of vegetation swallowing up headstones, Palmer and a

group of Boy Scouts that had come to clear the land encountered a group of deer hunters.

"That was truly, figuratively mind-blowing, and that also made me think about the nature of white supremacy in this nation," he said. "That you could have these people who felt it was OK to go shooting in a place where African Americans had been laid to rest. Even though it was forest, it was still sacred ground."

Palmer initially set out just to document the Boy Scouts' cleanup efforts but said soon he and his wife, Erin Holloway Palmer, found themselves traveling from New York to volunteer there regularly.

In addition to doing what Palmer calls "extreme gardening," he and other volunteers sift through records including death certificates and African American newspapers to find any information they can about the people buried in East End and the surrounding community. They share the information and post photos of each grave marker online to make their findings accessible to the public.

Palmer estimates more than 80% of the overgrowth in the cemetery has been cleared, but maintenance is still needed.

"Given that Jim Crow followed people to the grave, these sites are not just reminders, but they are, as I said, powerful sites of memory where we can begin to understand that history," he said. "Both the resistance, the resilience, the achievement and the nasty brutal, violent actions that were visited on African Americans."

More threatened by development

When the three-acre Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries were established in the 19th century, the historically African American section of Georgetown in Washington known as Herring Hill was a vibrant, thriving community, according to Lisa Fager, executive director of the Black Georgetown Foundation, which helps manage the properties. But the cemeteries fell into disrepair as the area gentrified and in the 1960s, developers tried to take the land, Fager said.

Fager said a descendant of someone buried in the cemetery, an African American community organization and their attorneys successfully fought the developers off by getting the burial

ground listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

Still, the cemeteries "have suffered perpetual, systemic neglect," according to the Washington city council, which included \$1.65 million in the 2023 budget to improve stormwater management at the neighboring cemeteries. Fager said there's more work to be done.

"Death reflects life, so the mistreatment we get in life, we get the same in death," she said. "And that's what I am trying to stop because if anybody deserves to be treated respectfully, it is those who are in the cemeteries today."

Much like those who preserved the cemeteries in Georgetown, a descendant of someone buried in one of Virginia's Black cemeteries is still using some of the same tactics to fight developers today.

Lenora McQueen, a genealogist from Texas, spent years tracing the final resting place of her fourth great-grandmother, Kitty Cary, to the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground. But when she arrived in Richmond in 2017, she found what was once a roughly 30-acre cemetery where an estimated 22,000 people of African descent are buried now lies beneath a highway, railroad tracks and a gas station.

"Even though it's been pretty well erased, there's a lot of history there," she said.

McQueen learned a small part of the property was set to be auctioned off, and she quickly put together a team of archaeologists and rushed to get the burial ground and the surrounding historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2022, their success not only halted the sale, according to McQueen, but also led officials to reopen a federal review and conclude that a proposed high speed railway project in the area would have a negative impact on the burial ground. Gerica Goodman, a spokesperson for the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority, said officials have "no plans to do any additional infrastructure in the area of the burial ground for this time, or any future time."

McQueen, however, said she is still concerned about the impact of future rail projects and said "it's disrespectful that the track is there at all."

"A burial ground is still a burial ground. They disturbed the remains, but the function hasn't changed," she said. "It still holds that person's remains. They didn't go anywhere."