

# ***SAVING AN HISTORIC CEMETERY***

## ***Tallahassee's Greenwood Cemetery: A Case Study***

### ***Introduction***

Greenwood Cemetery was established in 1937, when the City of Tallahassee closed its public cemetery to further burials of African Americans. The founders of the Greenwood Cemetery Company provided a place where the dead of Tallahassee's black community could be properly and respectfully buried. For fifty years it was considered private, separate from the public cemeteries of the City. Greenwood eventually fell into a deteriorated condition, primarily because no arrangements were made for perpetual care when the cemetery was founded. This is the story of how one historic African American cemetery was rescued from neglect and social injustice. It is meant to be an example – and an inspiration -- for others who may encounter similar challenges as they try to care for African American burial sites.

A citizens' campaign to restore Greenwood Cemetery was initiated in 1987. Against what sometimes seemed to be over-whelming adversity, within one year this sacred place was returned to a state of dignity and grace. During this special year, a Foundation was organized to “restore the cemetery to a safe and respectable condition.” Volunteers worked to clear the cemetery of debris and overgrown vegetation, while others recorded inscriptions on the grave markers. Funds were raised to support the future maintenance of the cemetery. Because of the success of these actions, City of Tallahassee officials were persuaded to make Greenwood Cemetery a public cemetery, and they agreed to assume responsibility for its upkeep and administration.

In 1997, a decade after the ceremony that transferred ownership of the property to the City, a celebration was held at Greenwood Cemetery to commemorate the dedication of the volunteers and public officials who rescued this part of Tallahassee and Leon County's heritage. Greenwood Cemetery is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is an historic site on the Florida Black Heritage Trail.

### ***Historical and Cultural Significance***

Greenwood Cemetery possesses diverse grave markers that reflect Tallahassee's 20<sup>th</sup> century burial customs. Inscriptions on the markers reveal important information about the African American community's settlement geography, religion, and attitudes toward death and resurrection. The markers also offer clues about the social history of the community during the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Generally, the grave markers are of three types:

- 1) commercial markers of marble or polished granite made by professional companies or provided by the U.S. Government for military veterans;
- 2) cast concrete (with the inscriptions incised in the material while it was wet), usually provided by a funeral home or a local business;
- 3) markers of various materials such as wood, metal, or concrete, hand-fashioned and decorated by relatives and friends of the deceased. These often display elements of folk art and/or items associated with earlier African American burial traditions.

Each marker is a monument to a person who lived in the community and contributed to its development. The spot is also the final resting place for many people who played pivotal roles in Florida's African American heritage, including Maxwell Courtney, the first African American to attend and graduate from Florida State University; Willie Gallimore, a three-time All American Running Back for Florida A & M University's football team and a player for the Chicago Bears; James M. Abner, principal of Lincoln High School; and T. M. McKinnis, owner of the Red Bird Café, a local jazz club that introduced many African American musicians to the general public.

### ***Historical Background***

During Florida's territorial and ante-bellum periods, the black population of Tallahassee and Leon County was almost entirely comprised of enslaved people. In 1830 the total population of Tallahassee included 541 whites, 381 black slaves, and six free people of color. In 1860, the year the Civil War began, there were 997 whites, 889 slaves and 46 free people of color residing in the city.

At this time, enslaved people living in rural areas were usually buried on the plantations and farms where they worked. Generally, burials were in segregated burying grounds near the family graveyards of the white owners, or in areas designated solely for interment of enslaved people. The types of markers placed at the graves of slaves were often ephemeral in nature – field stones, plants, wood boards or stakes, and various personal items placed on graves that, over the centuries, deteriorated or have been scattered and lost.

In towns and settlements, both enslaved and free people of color were usually buried in segregated sections of public burying grounds, or in cemeteries designated separate from those used for white burials. During Florida's colonial period, Spanish law allowed free people of color some degree of equality. The cemeteries in the early towns of Pensacola and St. Augustine were probably not sharply segregated until after the United States acquired the Territory from Spain in 1821.

The charter for Florida's Capital specified that cemeteries should be located outside the city of Tallahassee's boundaries. In 1829 the Florida Territorial Council

established the official burying ground near what was then the western edge of the city. It became the property of the City of Tallahassee in 1841 when a virulent outbreak of yellow fever occurred. Because of the epidemic, an ordinance was developed to regulate how burials were conducted.

The Ordinance, published in the 20 August 1841 edition of *The Florida Sentinel*, stated that the ground “. . . between Call, Boulevard [present-day Martin Luther King Boulevard], and McCarty [present-day Park] streets, and Grave-Yard Alley, running from McCarty to Call street,” was the City Cemetery. The superintendent was required to

*. . . bury all white persons to be interred in such section of the premises as shall be set apart for that purpose by the direction of the City Council; and all Negroes and persons of color, in such other section as shall be designated by a partition fence to be erected by order of the City Council.*

In addition, it was the duty of the superintendent

*...to keep two separate books, in one of which he shall fairly and accurately register the interment of all white persons, and in the other the interment of all Negroes and persons of color in this burying ground. The latter book . . . shall distinguish free persons of color from slaves, and state the date of interment, the name of the person interred, and if a slave, the owner's name, the age, place of nativity, time of residence in the city, and the disease or casualty of which the person died.*

A former caretaker for the cemetery, Mr. Sneed Hall, recalled that as late as the 1950s a hogwire fence divided the two sections of the City Cemetery. Plants, including camphor trees and bamboo, partially screened the fence from view. Some of those plants still grow in the southern part of cemetery and a grassy area indicates where the fence was once located.

In Tallahassee, after Emancipation in 1865, burials for people of African descent continued in the segregated public cemetery until the late 1930s. A second public cemetery for the city was established in 1902-03. Known as Oakland Cemetery, it included a section that contained 1408 grave spaces for black people, although the grave lots were not sold to African Americans until 1962. (The city's records for Oakland Cemetery show that between 13 July 1936 and 22 January 1962, no burial lots were sold to black persons, but lots were sold from 23 January 1962 through October 1963).

In September 1936, a plan for a separate cemetery for black burials was initiated. The City established “an official cemetery and public burying ground for colored persons of the city of Tallahassee” and provided regulations “governing burial of bodies of the dead in such cemetery.” This site, known as Evergreen Cemetery, was located near present-day Abraham and Alabama streets. Members of Tallahassee's African

American community opposed the location of this new cemetery. At the City Commission meeting on October 13, 1936,

*...A delegation of colored citizens consisting of J. R. D. Laster [Lassiter], Annie L. Sheppard, J. G. Riley, Godfrey Wilson and Thomas Morrow appeared . . . and objected to the establishment of Evergreen Cemetery as a burial ground for the bodies of colored persons in the City of Tallahassee, stating that the land upon which Evergreen Cemetery is located is too low for cemetery purposes.*

The following week, two members of the City Commission announced that “they had conferred with all the colored people who had objected to the use of Evergreen Cemetery as a burial ground for colored people, and all but one of the Committee were favorable to Evergreen Cemetery; and that the single objector was J.R.D. Laster, colored undertaker.” Discussion and a subsequent vote during this meeting also established that

*...No one may be buried in a [old] city cemetery lot belonging to others unless the one buried is related by blood or marriage to the owner of said lot. The Commission directed that the City Sexton be notified that no future burials in the colored Oakland cemetery be allowed which did not comply with the stipulations in deed to cemetery lots. Commissioner Wesson made a motion duly seconded by Commissioner Yaeger that the City Auditor and Clerk be directed to notify the owners of lots in the colored section of Oakland cemetery, who have no one buried in such lots, that the city would purchase for said owners, a similar lot in Evergreen cemetery upon the surrender to the city of deeds to lots owned in Oakland cemetery . . .*

At the City Commission meeting on 12 January 1937, the “matter of closing the Negro cemetery of the old cemetery” was recommended by the city sexton. The City required that the “part of the old cemetery devoted to the burial of Negroes be closed unless they can show title to family lots in the said cemetery.”

The next day, the *Tallahassee Daily Democrat* published an article, reporting that

*...The vexing problem of burial lots for Negroes and cemetery regulations, including titles to cemetery lots, is before the city commission again . . . the commission directed its attorney, James Messer, jr., to draft an ordinance for early adoption that will regulate the depth of all graves to be dug in the four cemeteries inside the corporate limits. Officials admitted the new law will have a definite bearing on further use by Negroes of one of their burial grounds in the city. Recently a new Negro cemetery was opened, but members of that race have vigorously protested and so far are said to be almost unanimously opposed to its use as a burial ground.*

At the City Commission meeting two weeks later, on January 26<sup>th</sup>, the Ordinance was read in full for the first time:

... *An ordinance closing that part of the city cemetery heretofore designated as the public burying ground for the purpose of the burial of the dead bodies of colored persons and prohibiting the further burial of the dead bodies of colored persons in said cemetery.*

In February, a short announcement in the Tallahassee Daily Democrat stated that  
...*municipal authorities have closed the Old City Cemetery to Negro burials. Long a public burying ground, the space allotted to Negroes is said to be filled.*

### ***GREENWOOD: A NEW CEMETERY FOR TALLAHASSEE'S AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY***

In response to the closing of the city's cemeteries to Negroes, members of Tallahassee's African American community took steps to provide a respectable place for burials. On 19 March 1937, a group of individuals formed Greenwood Cemetery Company "to acquire land so as to provide a burial place for the dead of the colored race near Tallahassee in Leon County." Founders of the organization were Rev. Robert L. Gordon, president; J.R.D. Laster [Lassiter], vice president; Maude Lomas, secretary-treasurer; William Mitchell, Erma Jenkins, Sam Hills, James H. Abner, M. Johnson, and T. H. McKinnis.

According to the Company's charter, "Any colored person of good character and not less than 21 years of age" could become a member of the company "by presentation of his or her application for membership and the approval of such application by a majority of the Board of Directors."

The Cemetery Company purchased ten acres of land, bordering the east side of Old Bainbridge Road, from Erma L. Jenkins, one of the Company's founders, for \$10.00. The lots and blocks for the new cemetery were laid out by Surveyor E. G. Chesley. Bartow Duhart was hired to mark the corners of the lots with metal stakes set in concrete. Over the years three additions were made to the cemetery, until it eventually covered more than 16 acres of land.

In May 1942, five years after Greenwood Cemetery was established, the plat for Greenwood Cemetery was approved by the City Commission. The Commission granted that Greenwood was a "colored cemetery on Old Bainbridge Road, which is being developed privately." The streets, driveways, and paths in the Cemetery were dedicated as public rights-of-way. The plat was signed by the Mayor and by the City Auditor and Clerk.

At the time Greenwood Cemetery was established, the care of graves was generally regarded as a traditional responsibility family and friends assumed because of their respect for the dead. The sale of lots by the Cemetery Company did not include provisions for perpetual care, but assumed that this custom of the times would be

followed by those who had family buried at Greenwood. However, over the years, family descendents moved away or passed on. With fewer people to care for the grave plots, Greenwood began to look neglected and abandoned; vegetation was wild and uncontrolled – trees grew from some of the graves and tall grasses and shrubs hid others from view, the soil over some of the graves sank, and left gaping holes in the ground, wood markers rotted away and other markers were covered by debris and earth. In addition, the details of burials and lot ownership were not always recorded. After the deaths of the founders of the Greenwood Cemetery Company, Mrs. Reather Doyle, the daughter of founder J.R.D. Laster, provided the only continuity for the property. Mrs. Doyle continued her father’s undertaking business and sold lots in the cemetery.

In May 1963 Greenwood Cemetery was again brought to the attention of members of the Tallahassee City Commission:

*Gilbert Porter brought up the matter of turning over to the City the Negro cemetery on Old Bainbridge Road and stated they did not have funds with which to keep it in proper shape and the Commission suggested he prepare an offer for the undeeded lots and present to them for their further consideration in this matter. Rev. Thomas and Rev. Brooks suggested that the cemetery be non-segregated.*

No action was taken on this proposal. The black community continued using Greenwood Cemetery, but because of the lack of funds for maintenance, the condition of the site continued to decline.

### ***A PLAN TO SAVE GREENWOOD***

In January 1985, a group of citizens met to express their concern about the deterioration of the Cemetery. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Greenwood Cemetery Foundation, whose purpose was to restore the cemetery “to a safe and respectable condition.” One of its first actions was to hire a lawn care company to mow and trim the cemetery. The members of Greenwood Foundation then approached community leaders, the Tallahassee City Commission, and the Leon County Board of Commissioners for assistance.

On 28 May 1986 members of the City Commission discussed options for assisting with the cemetery’s upkeep. The City Manager observed that Greenwood was the only cemetery in the city with platted streets, and remarked that “other private cemeteries [in Tallahassee] did not have a plat on record where the streets had been deeded to the public and accepted by a public body.” It was determined that \$280,000 would be needed to repair the cemetery’s streets, paths, and drainage system. The Commission voted to “accept responsibility for the construction and maintenance of the streets and drainage facilities, with the provision that perpetual

landscape maintenance would be the responsibility of the Greenwood Foundation or others.”

In January 1987 the City Commission recommended that before the City began any work in the Cemetery the Greenwood Foundation should be required to

*...have a minimum of \$50,000, to be placed in an irrevocable, interest bearing trust fund; continue the solicitation and receipt of private donations after the establishment of a \$50,000 trust fund; and to provide the City an annual audited financial statement . . . The purpose of establishing the trust fund is to provide security to the City that the perpetual maintenance care of the cemetery will be provided in the event of the Foundation’s dissolution . . .*

On 24 February 1987 Rev. James Vaughn, representing the Greenwood Foundation, former Florida Governor Leroy Collins, Mrs. Althemese Barnes, and Mrs. Aquilina Howell, appeared before the County Commission. They requested “the Board assist with the initial major clean-up and maintenance of the Greenwood Cemetery . . .” and reported that the City of Tallahassee had made the commitment of \$280,000 for drainage and street improvements to the cemetery. The Leon County Commission approved a contribution of \$25,000 “for the purpose of helping the Foundation demonstrate a financial capability of making improvements to the cemetery.”

At the 11 March 1987 City Commission meeting, Commissioner Dorothy Inman asked that the City take over the perpetual care of the cemetery after the Greenwood Foundation and community volunteers cleaned and landscaped it, and brought its condition to the level required by the City’s Public Works Department.

The following week a meeting was held to develop a four-phase plan to complete work required at the cemetery. Those attending the meeting decided to form a steering committee to oversee the research and writing of a comprehensive history of Greenwood Cemetery and to coordinate the community volunteer clean-up and landscape project. Members of the Steering Committee were to be drawn from the ministerial alliance, civic/fraternal organizations, educational institutions, the business community, Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, the Leon County Community Service Workers Program, and the Association of Minority Contractors.

At the 22 April 1987 City Commission meeting Commissioner Inman proposed that the City “assume perpetual maintenance of the Greenwood Cemetery as one of its city-maintained cemeteries” conditioned upon the cleaning of the cemetery by community volunteers and a successful fundraising effort to secure monies to finance the clearing of a densely wooded area by a professional work crew. The cost of clearing the area was estimated to be \$16,000. Funds would still be needed to provide assistance to the city for its maintenance program. The Commission voted five to one in favor of the plan.

The first cleanup at Greenwood Cemetery was scheduled for 23 May 1987. Members of the steering committee arranged for equipment and workers. Appeals for help

were made to Tallahassee's citizens through churches, schools, and fraternal and historical organizations. An announcement in the *Tallahassee Democrat* informed interested citizens about the project:

***Help needed for cemetery***

*Volunteers are needed to attend the first Greenwood Cemetery Cleanup Day, beginning 8 a.m. Saturday.*

*The cemetery was opened in 1937 after the city ran out of burial space for blacks.*

*Until racial barriers were eased in the 1960s, it continued to be one of the few burial places for blacks in Tallahassee.*

*Last month, the city agreed to take over the maintenance of the old cemetery once it is restored through a volunteer effort.*

*Those interested in helping to clean and restore Greenwood, off Old Bainbridge Road south of Tharpe Street, are asked to bring mowers, rakes and edgers.*

On Saturday morning, approximately 200 volunteers gathered at Greenwood for the cleanup. The organizers of the event were surprised, and extremely grateful, for the tremendous amount of community support. After working for approximately six hours, the volunteers had cleaned and mowed almost half of the cemetery's sixteen acres. Several other cleanup days were held during the summer and by late September the entire area was well maintained and ready to be turned over to the City.

While the cleanup of the cemetery was being completed, volunteers conducted a survey of the cemetery's grave markers. The surveyors recorded the inscription on each marker and made notes about its design and physical condition. This phase of the rescue of Greenwood was conducted under the guidance of a consultant with the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, who led workshops to train volunteers in proper survey techniques and also researched the historical background of the Cemetery's development. Because only a few of the original records for the cemetery could be found, the map and marker inscriptions compiled by the surveyors became the official records for the Cemetery.

The rededication of Greenwood Cemetery was held on Saturday, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1987. The ceremony included persons involved with bringing the condition of the cemetery to the public's attention, those who participated in its restoration and cleanup, those who recorded its history, and those who were instrumental in having it placed under the City of Tallahassee's jurisdiction.

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This abridged history of Greenwood Cemetery's restoration is taken from *A History of Greenwood Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida, 1937-1987*, by Sharyn Thompson, specifically for the UWF Archaeology Center's, "By These Hands" Workshop.  
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