2nd World
Sustainability Forum
1-30 November 2012

Presentation

Urban Development, Cemeteries, and a Need to Remember

Justin Dunnavant [1]

[1] University of Florida / Turlington Hall Room 1112, PO Box 117305, Gainesville, FL 32611

E-Mail: jdunnavant@ufl.edu

* Justin Dunnavant; Tel.: +1-240-529-5578;

Abstract: For part of its short tenure, the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery (1870-1890), served as the largest African American cemetery in the District of Columbia. However, no sooner than it was founded, local residents and city officials conspired to have it subsequently condemned and the land reappropriated. Largely succeeding in their efforts to remove the cemetery and the memory of those interred, the lives of more than 8,400 African Americans and several European Americans remain concealed underground for more than a century. In 2005, soil erosion revealed the remains of several burials and with it the memory of the historic cemetery resurfaced. Using data acquired from an on-going archival and archaeological survey, this paper will demonstrate how deliberate attempts to erase the historical memory of the African American presence have coincided with the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the capital of the United States of America. Furthermore the case of Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery serves as an ardent reminder of importance of maintaining public memory in the face of urban development.

Keywords: Cemeteries; African American; Heritage; Washington; D.C.; Quaker

1. Introduction

In the Fall of 2005 government officials initiated construction project to address a soil erosion issue at the Walter C. Pierce Community Park in heart of Washington, D.C.'s Adams Morgan community.

At the time, the park served as a hub of community activity; commuters would pass through the park on their way to school, soccer and basketball games would populate the courts, and parents would bring their children to play. However underneath the park laid the remnants of two historic cemeteries. While the government had assured the community that no human remains would be disturbed, concerned members urged government officials not to proceed with construction until a further examination of the site had been conducted. After the relentless pressure from the community, the city finally agreed to allow a non-invasive archaeological survey and reduced the size of their initial soil-erosion project. More than six years later, research surrounding the history of the site of the Walter C. Pierce Community Park would unearth a rich history of Quaker and African American life in the District. Underneath the Park lay the remains of two historic cemeteries, one African American and the other Quaker.

The African American cemetery dates back to 1870 and was founded by the Young Men's Benevolent Association – late named the Colored Union Benevolent Association. The mutual aid society established the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery to serve as the burial ground for their organization members as well as other African Americans who were denied burial in many of the white cemeteries that populated the city. During the height of its tenure, the burial ground would serve as the busiest African American cemetery in the city, burying more than 21 percent of all interred African Americans in 1880 [1].

The archaeological evidence reveals that the dead were buried in coffins and graves were mostly marked with painted wooden headboards while some were marked with marble headstones and other ornamentation. While pedestrian survey revealed remnants of wooden coffin fragments and coffin handles, bones uncovered at the site showed a brown discoloration often associated with coffin burials [2]. Throughout its tenure, the cemetery went by several different names including: Mount Pleasant Plains Cemetery, Colored Union Benevolent Association Cemetery, Young Men's Cemetery, Young Men's Baptist Cemetery, Pretty Prospects Cemetery, and the Union Benevolent Association Burying Ground, raising new questions with each iteration [3].

Situated next to the Mt. Pleasant Plains cemetery was an older albeit smaller Quaker cemetery, which dates back to 1807 [4]. The Quakers had established a community in the early-nineteenth century, solidifying their presence with the establishment of a Quaker church in 1808 [5]. The Friends' Burying Grounds, as the cemetery was known, lasted until 1890 before it was eventually forced to close in conjunction with the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery. While more than 8,400 individuals were buried in the Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, it is unclear exactly how many were buried in the Friends' Burying Ground.

2. African Americans in D.C. and the Closure of the Cemetery

In the wake of the American Civil War Washington, D.C. had undergone a dramatic shift both demographically and structurally. Between the years of 1860 and 1870 the black population in the District increased from 19.1% to 33% as newly freed African Americans migrated into the city. African Americans were particularly interested in migrating to the District for a number of social, economic, and political factors. Socially, newly freed African American were looking to reconnect with long-lost relatives and establish a new sense of community. Economically, black Americans were

looking for employment and housing opportunities in hopes that they would earn higher wages than through sharecropping or tenant farming. Politically, African Americans attempted to gain some form of citizenship and reap the benefits of government protection from vigilantly groups. The District was also unique because African Americans were afforded the right vote early on.

To compensate for this mass urban migration, there was a desperate need to build the infrastructure for the city that would become the nation's capital. While African Americans contributed the labor and planning required to building much of this infrastructure, including the Capitol building, they began to develop the infrastructure necessary to sustain their own communities. In addition to the construction of school and churches, African Americans expanded upon existing social networks to develop social welfare programs such as financial support during times of illness, widower's benefits, and the securing of a formal burial plot.

In addition to the actions that local black and Quaker communities were taking to secure their semi-autonomies communities, the government and other white communities were taking steps to actualize their idea of what the nation's capital should be. In the case of Washington, D.C. it is my contention that there was a concerted effort made to rebrand the District in the aftermath of the Civil War, which intentionally sought to remove and relocate African American and impoverished immigration populations.

The beautification of the District was a major concern for government officials around the turn of the century. In one sense, beautification meant the conservation and exhibition of flora and fauna through the use of "green space" and nature parks; in another sense, it meant the relocation of dark bodies. As early as 1852, the city passed an ordinance that prohibited the creation of new cemeteries within D.C.'s city limits, which affected the overall number of cemeteries in the city. The number of all cemeteries in the District diminished from 51 in 1885 to 25 in 1920, with black cemeteries diminishing from 29 in 1890 to 16 in 1919 [1].

The haste with which the land acquisition and disinterment process of the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery was conducted, signals the underhanded intentions of city officials. Officials working to establish the National Zoo had been watching the land immediately surrounding the cemetery for some time. Harboring plans of their own, the National Zoo officials had assessed the land at a value of $15,000 and considered it a desirable place to herd buffalos. They had made two consecutive attempts trustees of the Colored Union Benevolent Association members to sell the cemetery land in the 1880s, each time receiving no reply. After these failed attempts, zoo officials tried another tactic. Assistant Smithsonian Secretary, G. Browne Goode, bought land near the cemetery and rallied 68 neighbors to petition the City Health Department to close the cemetery on the basis that it was polluting the area and harmful to their wellbeing. Following the petition of the Cliffburne Association, the Health Department condemned the cemetery in 1890 for marshy soil and health concerns; it was subsequently shut down. Less than a year after the cemetery was officially shut down, the National Zoo purchased a 1.7-acre strip of land to serve as a buffer between the cemetery and zoo and began disinterring bodies. The zoo officials were not interested in purchasing any additional cemetery land. However, when plans were made to widen Adams Mills Road in 1903, Association members were given an order to reinter all potential bodies impacted. Zoo officials eventually expressed interest in acquiring the rest of the cemetery property in 1925 and by 1930 the cemetery was described as being "without fencing and is a general wreck." Although the cemetery appears on an 1893 map of D.C., it would disappear soon after

[3]. Two years later, city officials made plans to expand D.C.'s boundaries and Georgetown was officially incorporated into the District.

Thus cartographers and government surveyors were able to erase the memory of the African American cemetery from the urban landscape through the power of omission; a similar trend exhibited with the African Burial Ground [6]. The death records show that the cemetery was in use up until its last days with two-month-old Jennie Johnson being the final person laid to rest on June 15, 1890. After the cemetery was shut down roughly 1,305 individuals were reinterred at Woodlawn Cemetery in 1940. Some reinterments were also made to Columbian Harmony cemetery but the extent is unknown. With the closure of the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, the Harmony Cemetery located on Rhode Island became the main black cemetery in Washington. By 1959 the Harmony Cemetery was relocated to Prince Georges County, Maryland due to a lack of space and deteriorating conditions, becoming the National Harmony Memorial Park [1]. Lasting close to a century, the Colored Union Benevolent Association was effectively dissolved by an Act of Congress March 4, 1923 [3].

As for the rest of the cemetery it is overwhelmingly apparent that human remains are still interred in the ground. Between 1939 and 1941 alone nearly 500 bodies were taken from the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery and reinterred at Woodlawn, another black cemetery in the city. In 1941 the developer Shapiro, Inc purchased a portion of the cemetery land. No records of the location of graves were available so the company hired undertaker W. Ernest Jarvis to reinter bodies as they came up. In total, business records indicate, 129 burials were located and reinterred in 1940. In 1959 the Shapiro firm was forced to halt construction and conducted another round of reinterments both from the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery and the Quaker Cemetery. However, the excavations were conducted rather haphazardly and a number of neighborhood children absconded with skeletal remains, which they took and showcased at school. The police eventually required the children to return the remains and they were then handed over the District Coroner. The excavations had located "some rather ornate hinges," as well as infant burials [3].

3. Disenfranchisement and Unequal Heritage

The plight of African Americans in the nation's capital continued to decline into the early twentieth century. No sooner than they migrated to the city, racial segregation increased, particularly in D.C.'s inhabited alleys. As black residents moved into areas, white residents soon moved out. Nationally, the Post-Reconstruction era, which ensued following the election of 1876, spelled the demise of many African American economic and political advances along with a wave of racial violence. According the census records, the African American population in D.C. reached its high of 33.6% in 1880 but would not see numbers that high until 1950. In his summation of the African American experience during the later half of the nineteenth century, W.E.B. DuBois declared, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back toward slavery" [7].

As we move forward today in a rapidly developing context it is important that we critically understand who are deemed stakeholders in the discussion of sustainability and development. "Urban renewal" projects have come under great scrutiny in Washington D.C. where projects such as Hope VI are viewed by residents more as "urban removal" than "urban renewal," relocating African American communities outside of the city into neighboring counties in Maryland. Within the past decade the

black population of Washington, DC has diminished by more than eleven percent [8]. A site that African Americans once termed Chocolate City has recently lost its black majority.

There is a growing literature of discourse surrounding the intersectionality of gentrification and cultural heritage preservation with case studies from all over the world including, but not restricted to: Jordan [9], Mexico [10], and Korea [11]. City officials often favor gentrification because, as Stephanie Frank [12] notes, gentrifying populations bring increased tax-revenue, spendable income, and require fewer social services, which promotes outside investment and the development of local business. While some have argued that historic conservation have been used as tools to facilitate the gentrification process [13, 14] other studies have argued that historic preservation has had little or no impact on the dislocation of low-income residents in the area [15].[i]

An important component of gentrification is the reappropriation of space and landscape. In the case of Washington, D.C. it could be argued that there is a growing trend to pay lip service to historically African American sites. Increasing historical markers are appearing along Washington, DC's historic African American communities of Georgia Avenue, LeDroit Park, and U Street. Restaurants such as Busboys and Poets, Marvin, and Eatonville, and apartment complexes such as Langston Lofts, pay homage to the historic African American figures – Langston Hughes, Marvin Gaye, and Zora Neale Hurston respectively – while at the same time gentrification is pushing African Americans out of these very communities. The restaurants and apartment complexes cater to a unique clientele within D.C. that remains largely outside of what would be considered affordable for many local black families. Thus while there are historic markers that outline the history of African Americans, little is being done to retain their presence.

With such a rich history it is clear that the closure of the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery and its erasure from the physical landscape served a decisive blow to the African American community. Sadly Steven Richardson's [1] observation of the lack of preservation of black cemeteries in the District more than twenty years ago, still hold true today. The case of Mt. Pleasant Plains speaks to a much more pandemic problem of racial inequality that haunts the field of historic preservation. Of the District's top five cemeteries where whites were interred at the turn of the century – Oak Hill, Rock Creek, Congressional, Glenwood, and Mount Olivet – all remain in use at their original locations and four of them are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Conversely, of the top five black cemeteries – Harmony, Payne's, Mount Olivet, Mount Zion, and Mount Pleasant Plains – Mount Olivet, the only interracial cemetery on the list, is the only one that remains in use at its original location and Mount Zion is the only one listed on the National Register of Historic Places. There is an urgent need to identity, preserve, and commemorate these forgotten cemeteries. Resurrecting the history of the cemetery and those buried there will serve to rectify the contribution African Americans made to the city and to the nation.

Unfortunately this is not just a trend that has been noticed in D.C. but in other states such as Virginia. In her analysis of slave cemeteries in Virginia, Lynn Rainville soon discovered that there were six historic cemeteries within a two-mile radius of his cemetery study site. Of the six, two of the cemeteries were white and four were black. He found the white cemeteries were still intact while three of the four black cemeteries had been disturbed or destroyed by recent construction [16].

Since the city appropriated $200,000 for the research and commemoration of the site four years ago much work has been done. The site has been through rigorous pedestrian survey, ground-penetrating radar, and an intensive history of the site has been uncovered. Perhaps the most important

phase of the research still remains: the commemoration of the site. Local community members have worked tirelessly to include the cemetery as part of a historic African American heritage walking tour, however no physical markers exist other than signs that warn against gardening. Since the project began researchers have also faced impediments from the local officials and a dog park has since been installed in an area that could still possess human remains.

Steps are currently underway to have the historic Mt. Pleasant Plains and the adjourning Quaker cemeteries listed on the National Registrar of Historic Places. Such a designation would attract more public attention and provide increase legal protection against potential hazards and threats, some of which include: squatters, gardening, dog park, run-off, and seasonal soil shifts. As we have begun to uncover the history of the site we are now beginning to reclaim the early experiences of African Americans who inhabited the nation's capital during a time of great disease and segregation as well as anticipation. Commemorating the cemetery is not only a necessity to honor those buried there but to reclaim lost histories. The mutual aid societies like the Colored Union Benevolent Association that founded the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, the historic figures who occupied the site, and the plight of everyday African Americans. Furthermore, it brings to light issues of racial discrimination in death and burial and the significance of African American sacred space.

4. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery is an important land marker in the social history of African Americans residing the district. As stated earlier, it was the largest African American cemetery in 1880 and included a broad cross section of the African American from the wealthy to the impoverished. The descendants of some of the known individuals still live in the Washington metro area and as a result of the ensuing historical research have come to associate the site of their ancestors. But these cemeteries become more than just a site for the descendants of the immediate community, or even those who inhabit the space today. In some cases an historical or cultural affinity is formed based on ethnic/racial ties, either real or perceived. In the process of conserving these spaces the sacredness of the landscape is not preserved in the static sense of the word but it is reappropriated, serving as a site of memory and belonging for contemporary communities. Archaeologist Gavin Lucas declared, "… all archaeology is in the present - it is situated and practiced in the present, even if it is about the past" [17]. Such a statement holds true more than ever in the case of African American cemeteries. The famous New York African Burial Ground is not only a museum, it a site of reaffirmation. Communities from all over the world revisit the site every year with the intention of paying homage to the Africans who were buried there.

Dually important in this need to recognize and memorialize the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, is the need for the protection and repatriation of African American burial remains and mortuary goods. This has been a discussion amongst community members for some time and bioarchaeologists such as the late Professor Mark Mack have argued for legislation akin to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [18]. Such an act would institutionalize the preservation of African American burial remains to ensure an added degree of ethical consideration when considering urban development. Today the remains of 14 individuals recovered from a botched construction project at the site of the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery are located on shelves at the Smithsonian museum [19]. No effort has been made by the Institution to locate the descendants of those interred at the cemetery and

nor have they entertained the discussion of reinterring the bones. The passage of more recent legislation is forcing additional ethical considerations in the treatment of cemeteries particularly in the cases of Virginia and Maryland. However, while there are federal laws that protect cemeteries and burials in some instances, much of the onus still remains within the jurisdiction of state law, which is replete with inconsistences and lacks enforcement [16].

Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated in honor of the life and legacy of Professor Mark E. Mack. I would also like to thank Ms. Mary Belcher for her continued commitment to the Walter C. Pierce Park Project from its inception. Additional thanks goes out to Mr. Eddie Becker for documenting the exchanges between community members and government officials and to the students of Howard University who contributed their time and energy to this project.

Conflict of Interest

State any potential conflicts of interest here or "The authors declare no conflict of interest".

References and Notes

[1]   S. J. Richardson, "The Burial Grounds of Black Washington: 1880-1919," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.,* vol. 52, pp. 304-326, 1989.

[2]   R. W. Mann and J. J. Krakker, "A Black Skeletal Sample from a Washington, D.C. Cemetery in the Context of Nineteenth Century Urban Growth," *Tennessee Anthropologist,* vol. XIV, pp. 1-32, 1989.

[3]   S. I. A. H. a. H. Preservation. (N.d.). *Union Benevolent Association and Quaker Cemeteries.* Available: http://www.si.edu/ahhp/holthous/cemetery.htm

[4]   M. Belcher, "Walter Pierce Park Archaeology Project Historic Report," DC Historic Preservation Office, Washington, DC, *In Press (2012).*

[5]   E. Williams, "Other Religous Bodies," in *Washington Past and Present: A History.* vol. II, J. C. Proctor, Ed., ed New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1930, pp. 858-866.

[6]   M. L. Blakey and C. J. LaRoche, "Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground," *Historical Archaeology,* vol. 31, pp. 84-106, 1997.

[7]   W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880.* New York: The Free Press, 1935 [1998].

[8]   C. Morello and D. Keating, "Number of black D.C. residents plummets as majority status slips away," in *Washington Post*, ed. Washington, DC, 2011.

[9]   R. F. Daher, "Gentrification and the Politics of Power, Capital, and Culture in an Emerging Jordanian Hertiage Industry," *Tradtional Dwellings and Settlements Review,* vol. 10, pp. 33-45, 1999.

[10]   G. A. Jones and A. Varley, "The reconquest of the historic centre: urban conservation and gentrification in Puebla, Mexico," *Environment and Planning A,* vol. 31, pp. 1547-1566, 1999.

[11]   H. K. Yeo and S. M. Han, "Heritage conservation as urban regeneration policy in globalizing cities: social exclusion and gentrification at the vicinity of the Jongmyo World Heritage site in Seoul, Korea," presented at the Proceedings of the ICOMOS Scientific Symposium, Dublin, Ireland, 2010.

[12]   S. B. Frank, ""If We Own the Story, We Own the Place": Cultural Heritage, Historic Preservation, and the Gentrification on U Street," M.A., Department of American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park, 2005.

[13]   S. Zukin, "Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core," *Annual Review of Sociology,* vol. 13, pp. 129-147, 1987.

[14]   D. Listokin, B. Listokin, and M. Lahr, "The Contributions of Historic Preservation to Housing and Economic Development," *Housing Policy Debate,* vol. 9, pp. 431-478, 1998.

[15]   N. E. Coulson and R. M. Leichenko, "Historic Preservation and Neighbourhood Change," *Urban Studies,* vol. 41, pp. 1587-1600, 2004.

[16]   L. Rainville, "Protecting Our Shared Heritage in African-American Cemeteries," *Journal of Field Archaeology,* vol. 34, pp. 196-206, 2009.

[17]   G. Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

[18]   M. Mack and J. Dunnavant, "Resurrecting the Memory of the Colored Union Benevolent Association in the Public Mind," presented at the Windows from the Present to the Past: Africa and the African Diaspora, Washington, D.C., 2010.

[19]   E. Becker, "Lucille St. Hoyme Examines Human Skulls from former Cemetery at Walter Pierce Park," ed. Washington, D.C., 1997, p. 24:08.

---

[i] For a brief discussion of this debate see:

Lawrence, Charles William. 2010 New Neighbors In Old Neighborhoods: Explaining the Role of Heritage Conservation in Sociocultural Sustainability and Gentrification, Department of Historic Preservation, University of Pennsylvania.