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A Counter to Confederate Monuments, Black Cemeteries Tell a Fuller Story of the South

Many have fallen into disrepair, the victims of mismanagement, political strife or abandonment. Now there's an effort to restore and protect them.

The gravesite of Maggie L. Walker, one of the first Black American women to run a bank, at Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond, Va.

By Kirk Johnson
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Maggie L. Walker, one of the first Black American women to run a bank, is buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond, Va. So is John Mitchell Jr., editor of The Richmond Planet, a crusading newspaper founded by former slaves. Benjamin Franklin Randolph, a South Carolina state senator gunned down amid the white backlash against Reconstruction in 1868, lies in the Black cemetery named for him in Columbia.

In the late 19th century, as statues, monuments and government buildings were being dedicated to Robert E. Lee and other leaders of the Confederacy, a powerful and countervailing force of memory was unfolding, in many cases right across town: Black communities were building cemeteries to honor a first wave of soldiers, politicians and business leaders after the end of slavery.

Now, as Americans rethink Confederate monuments across the country, historians and community activists are working to restore and protect historic Black cemeteries,

many of which have fallen into disrepair, the victims of mismanagement, political strife or abandonment.

“You have monuments to Black southerners and monuments to white southerners, and you can’t understand one without understanding the other,” said Ryan K. Smith, a professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University. “The humanity expressed in the cemeteries was an answer to the Lost Cause/New South efforts to excise African-American history.”

The Rev. Leroy Williams is on the front lines of the struggle to save one of these places, called Magnolia, in rural eastern Arkansas. Wild boars and snakes make it hazardous up in the hilly, wooded portion of the cemetery, established after the Civil War. But Mr. Williams, who is 76 — 50 of those years spent behind the pulpit of local Baptist churches — worries even more about what will happen when he is gone.

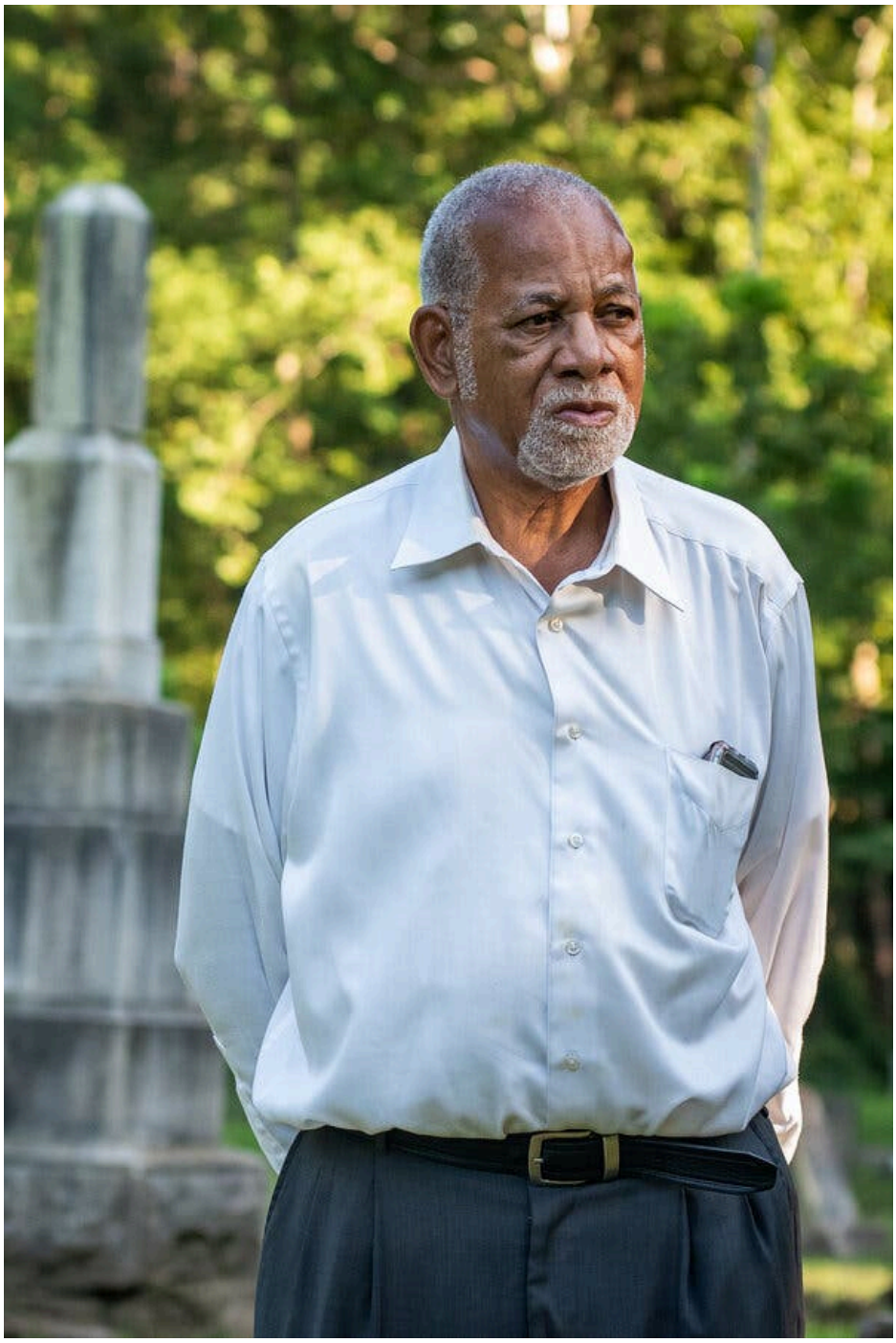
Black people fled his corner of the South for decades to escape racial prejudice, he said, or for better jobs and education, and he now looks after the 36-acre cemetery pretty much by himself.

“They just leave and they don’t come back,” Mr. Williams said. “I’m the lone ranger.”

In Richmond, two cemeteries that experienced decades of decline and neglect — much of it deliberately inflicted in the past, descendant families said, by a hostile white government — now have a clear future under a nonprofit group that recently acquired the land. But the group, which has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants and public money for an ambitious recovery plan for Evergreen and the adjoining East End Cemetery, has been criticized by some historians and volunteers who say political connections trumped the vision of residents and descendants who have been working there for years, clearing and cleaning.

In Columbia, three words sum up the plight of Randolph Cemetery. “Out of money,” said Staci Richey, who came as a volunteer years ago and never left.

The debate over how to remember General Lee and other Southern icons, and whether the statues and monuments in their honor represent historical memory or racist propaganda, has exposed a raw scar in American society. But many Black cemeteries — established as statements of pride, but also out of necessity in segregated times — are deeply scarred themselves, starved for money and marred in many cases by vandalism, the encroachment of nature and feuds over how to preserve them.



The Rev. Leroy Williams said he looked after the Magnolia Cemetery in Helena, Ark., pretty much by himself.

A broken headstone at Magnolia Cemetery.

No firm accounting exists of how many Black cemeteries there are, or how many have disappeared to urban development and highway construction, but historians say that in the flowering of Black life after Emancipation, just about every community in the South had at least one. A bill introduced in the Senate last year would require the National Park Service to begin building a database and network of where the old burial grounds are, or were.

To be sure, some Black cemeteries managed to hold on through the years of Jim Crow and the Great Migration, as about six million Black people moved out of the South to places in the Northeast, West and Midwest and could no longer tend to or visit the old family plots. Laurel Grove South Cemetery in Savannah, Ga., one of the biggest cemeteries in the South for free Black people before the end of slavery, is now operated by the city. At South-View Cemetery in Atlanta, chartered in 1886 by nine Black businessmen, current board members and staff are descendants of the founders. Representative John Lewis was recently buried there.

And in many cases, researchers and volunteers said, their success can be attributed to the passion of memory and meaning that these places evoked. At Magnolia in Helena, Ark., a schoolteacher named Para Conner, who died a few years ago at 98, was for decades the cemetery's guiding light.

"She was the backbone," Mr. Williams said.

Sometimes, however, the reliance on a few steadfast believers has resulted in dysfunction. At Randolph, a struggle over access to old cemetery records dragged on for years. Without proper burial records, Ms. Richey said, chaos sometimes ensued, with families buying plots and digging graves, only to find unmarked bones already there.

At Richmond's twinned Black cemeteries, Evergreen and East End, questions of control have divided the community.

Viola Baskerville's great-grandmother Jane Gentry Johnson, who was born a slave in about 1840 and died around World War I, is buried in Evergreen, though after 15 years of searching, Ms. Baskerville has still not found the grave.

Jarene Fleming, whose family has also been in the Richmond area for generations, has multiple ancestors in both Evergreen and East End.

But for all that the two women might seem to have in common, they find themselves at odds, with sharply differing views of the plan for bringing the cemeteries back, worked out by a nonprofit group called the Enrichmond Foundation, which has been affiliated with the city's Parks Department on other projects.

Enrichmond's plan, which its executive director, John Sydnor, said was developed with the guidance of a group of descendant families, would in many ways make it a kind of Black history memorial park, with more than $18 million of proposed work on the 76-acre site, including a visitor center, walking trails and a contemplation meadow for the unknown dead. Working with another nonprofit group in Seattle called City Forest Credits, Enrichmond is also one of the first urban conservation groups in the nation to deploy a climate tool — raising money and locking in tree preservation by selling carbon offsets on the open market, essentially monetizing the carbon absorption of forest lands.

An overgrown gravesite at Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond.

Questions of control over two Black cemeteries in Richmond have divided the community.

Ms. Baskerville, a former state legislator and secretary of administration in the cabinet of former Gov. Tim Kaine of Virginia, who is now a senator, worked on Enrichmond's master planning committee and supports the plan.

Ms. Fleming was also involved but quit several years ago. She worries that the group's vision could seem disrespectful, with its potential appeal to tourists, history buffs and people out for a bike ride. "I don't want to see it Disneyfied," she said.

At Friends of East End, a volunteer group that has worked for years to restore and clean up the once overgrown, refuse-strewn property, some members said they felt they had been pushed aside by the new owner and ignored by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, a state agency that backed Enrichmond's proposal.

"The whole Enrichmond takeover was engineered," said Brian Palmer, a photographer and writer who volunteers with the group.

Mr. Sydnor said some conflict was probably inevitable because taking responsibility for the cemeteries also meant putting policies in place for operation and management. "The difficulty lies in the fact that no policies or guidelines have been in place for at least 50 years," he said in an email.

What a rebuilt historic Black cemetery should be, and what story it should tell, is a complicated thing. One anthropologist who has studied African-American outdoor spaces across the South, Grey Gundaker, a professor at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., said the imprint of ancient African practices echoed in some places more than others. In some cemeteries, the dead were honored with piles of old broken crockery or glassware, symbolizing the idea that things broken in this world

are mended in the next. But many cemeteries in the 1800s, both for white and Black people, were also treated as de facto parks.

“They would have been places to go to stroll,” she said. “It was a Sunday afternoon thing; you went in your fine clothes.”

For Ms. Baskerville the ultimate question is whether the stories are remembered from what she called “freedom’s first generation.”

“We put up these Confederate monuments in public squares as a homage to a lost cause that was really a lie,” she said. “But the real builders of the cities and the states and the nation, their narrative is still not told.”

Kirk Johnson is a national correspondent who has covered the American West for more than a decade.