

THE LAUREL CEMETERY MEMORIAL PROJECT

← UNCOVERING OUR FORGOTTEN PAST →

LCMP Newsletter
Volume ★ 001
Number ★ 002
Fall 2022

1852 – 1958

FOLLOWING A TRAIL OF SOULS TO LAUREL CEMETERY IN ELDERSBURG

/ PAM CHARSHÉE

On Saturday, September 3, a group of Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project (LCMP) members and friends made a pilgrimage to Laurel Cemetery in Eldersburg, Maryland; the location that was established in 1958, when the original cemetery on Belair Road was sold to a developer and demolished. »



The entrance to the Laurel Cemetery site in Eldersburg, MD. Photo by P. Charshee.

The mission of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project (LCMP) is to erect a permanent memorial in recognition of the thousands of African Americans who were laid to rest at the historic Laurel Cemetery, ensure the safety and stability of the site into the foreseeable future, and to educate the public about the rich history of the cemetery and the lives of those buried there.

laurelcemetery.omeka.net

In This Issue

FEATURES

- 1 Following a Trail of Souls to Laurel Cemetery in Eldersburg

PROFILES

- 4 Roberta Sheridan

RESEARCH

- 5 Update on Ground Penetrating Radar

CONNECTIONS

- 6 The National Memorial for Peace and Justice

7 UPDATES

Links Section of the LCMP Website & NEHI Mural

FEATURES

Only a few dozen of its thousands of monuments, and even fewer of its human remains were then removed to Carroll County. Coverage of the details of that story, which are considerable, will be addressed by other members of the LCMP at a later time. Our story in this month's newsletter focuses on the present condition and circumstances of the Eldersburg burial ground.

Taking heavily-travelled Liberty Road (Route 26) northbound to Eldersburg, the road turns abruptly rural as it crosses the bridge over Liberty Reservoir from Baltimore into Carroll County. From there, the landscape changes rapidly from the reservoir's forested watershed, to a few tiny post-war houses dotting the highway, and then to wide expanses of beautifully manicured lawns and large homes along the private road that leads to the cemetery.

Largely hidden on a wooded parcel of roughly two acres, the sacred nature of the property does not immediately announce itself among the pristine lawns. Appearing as a small oasis, surrounded by trees and tangles of thorny vines and undergrowth, its tiny "entrance" trail is not visible from the road. Partially obscured by wildflowers, we learned about the location of the entrance from a neighbor who appeared during our visit, and who offered some information about local volunteer maintenance efforts.

The results of these efforts could be seen from the recently cleared dirt median, approximately seventy-five-feet wide, that extended the entire length of the cemetery, and from the neat piles of brush that had been stacked, but not yet removed. *(photo 1)* The most imposing and historically significant monuments had been placed at intervals along the edges of this central median. *(photo 2)* Among these, was a large, impressive monument for the family of the Reverend Harvey Johnson, his wife Amelia, and her mother, Ellen Hall. *(photo 3)* The renowned Johnson is known informally as "the Martin Luther King of Baltimore", and as the first Pastor of Union Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland. Other stately markers along the median carry the names of the Berkeley, Neal, and Key families, as well as other members of the Johnson family. Among the most notable are separate memorials to Elijah Johnson and Marie Johnson. A beautiful obelisk to the memory of the The Reverend James E. Jones and his wife (unnamed) sits just inside the column of markers along the central median that include the Rev. Harvey Johnson family. *(photo 4)*

These, and every stone, it seemed, carried a poignancy — made all the more intense because of their displacement — that was intended for surviving family, friends, and descendants yet unborn. Now, they are virtually inaccessible except for a handful of neighbors and a few respectful visitors with inside knowledge of the tragedy in 1958. *(photo 5)* A photo from that year, showing the original placement of markers in their new resting place reveals how over slow time the forgotten cemetery was gradually embraced by native undergrowth and a sheltering canopy of trees.

Members of LCMP had an informal mission for the visit: to do whatever clean-up, weeding, pruning, and documentation of the site as was feasible over several hours. With that in mind, I would say it was a very successful visit, with everyone pitching in to do whatever job they felt best suited for. One of these, overseen by Curtis McMeekin, was to try to document the boundaries of the property by photographing strategic markers along the periphery. We noted, sadly but not surprisingly, that many of these markers had never been properly anchored, but merely laid flat on the ground with the names and dates of those memorialized facing downward. In addition to documenting the markers and other site conditions, we also began to draw up a list of possible objectives for LCMP to consider related to future management and upkeep. If anything, the day's project revealed a complex undertaking that will require a considerable planning effort.

For everyone's wonderful work on Saturday, very special thanks to LCMP members: Inez Haynie Dodson, Sharon Haynie, our Chairman Elgin Klugh, and Curtis McMeekin. Other friends who contributed their time and considerable talents to making the pilgrimage a success, and to supporting LCMP's ongoing efforts to honor the memory of those we will never forget, were Jesse Bennett, Volunteer Research Coordinator, Mount Auburn Cemetery; Nancy Goldring of Historic East Towson; Nancy Sheads, State of Maryland Archivist and Research Assistant (Ret.); and Rován Wernsdorfer, an amateur historian of Baltimore. *(photo 6)* ★



PROFILES

SEGREGATION BY CHOICE?

/ DONNA T. HOLLIE

On December 4, 1879 a meeting was held at Baltimore's Bethel A.M.E. Church where one of the featured speakers was Frederick Douglass. Throughout his career he made many visits to the city of his childhood and spoke on a variety of subjects of interest to the African American community. The focus of the December 4th meeting was the hiring of African American teachers in African American schools, with Douglass making the argument that the refusal to hire African American teachers was not in the interest of justice, equality and fair play.

In addition to the reasons stated by Douglass, there were other reasons why the community had long lobbied for the hiring of African American teachers in their public schools. Not only were they promoting economic parity, they believed that white teachers, who doubted the intellectual ability of African American children, would not challenge them to aspire to reach their full potential. Thus, in recognition that racial integration was not a two way street ... that African American teachers could not teach white children ... and in their own self-interest, they organized and lobbied for what they thought would be most beneficial for students and the African American community. After eighteen years of lobbying and protesting, the goal was reached and in autumn of 1888, **Roberta Sheridan (1864-1918)**

became the first person of African descent hired to teach in Baltimore City's public schools.

Sheridan was born in Baltimore County to Daniel and Arietta Sheridan, who were free prior to the end of the Civil War. She was a graduate of Baltimore's Colored High School, which was later renamed in honor of Frederick Douglass. Sheridan, an experienced educator at the time she was hired, resigned her position as principal of a Pikesville school to teach in Baltimore.

She was briefly married to George W. Biddle, a co-worker, and they were the parents of one child, a daughter. Throughout her life Sheridan lived with and cared for her parents. While fulfilling her responsibilities as a daughter, mother and teacher, she participated in a variety of community activities. A member of Bethel A.M.E., Sheridan taught Sunday School there and at St. John's A.M.E. An ardent supporter of the temperance movement, she also raised funds to equip a playground on Carey Street for African American children and served as the director of the playground. In addition she was Secretary of the Colored Parent Teacher Association.

At the time of her death, Sheridan was a resident of the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. Both Sheridan and her father were interred at Laurel Cemetery, also a segregated facility.

Colored School #9 at the corner of Carrollton and Riggs Aves. is one of the two schools at which Sheridan taught. The school was named for Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a poet and abolitionist who spent her formative years in Baltimore. (Photo is courtesy of the Baltimore City Archives.)



RESEARCH

UPDATE ON GROUND PENETRATING RADAR AT LAUREL CEMETERY

/ ISAAC SHEARN & RONALD CASTANZO

On August 5th, 2022, Dr. Matthew McKnight, Chief Archaeologist, and Dr. Zachary Singer, State Terrestrial Archaeologist of the Maryland Historical Trust (MHT), conducted Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) in the approximately half-acre green space along Belair Road. (*photo 1*) This area, the site of the planned “Laurel Cemetery Memorial Park,” is where we intend to install the Laurel Cemetery memorial, and historic signage. The work that these state-employed archaeologists conducted may have cost thousands of dollars if we were to hire technicians to perform this work.

GPR is a remote sensing technique that uses the transmission of electromagnetic radiation to detect subsurface objects or deposits of various kinds,¹ even those under pavement.² The GPR apparatus’s transmitting antenna propagates high frequency radio waves into the ground.³ Depending on the nature of the subsurface material, a certain amount of the transmitted energy is absorbed; pulses travel through certain kinds of deposits, while other types of materials prevent the passing of this radiation.⁴ GPR works well with materials such as dry sand, granite, snow, and ice; soils with high clay content present problems.⁵

As this energy travels down into the ground, it is dispersed and attenuated; when this energy encounters an impermeable material, waves are reflected back toward the surface and can be detected

by a receiving antenna.⁶ As electromagnetic waves travel through materials of differing electrical properties (rooted in characteristics such as water content, density, etc.), their velocity changes. As the differences in the electrical properties of intervening materials increases, the amplitudes of the reflections generated by the radio waves increase.⁷ Using the time it takes for waves to be detected, distance beneath the surface can be determined.⁸ Subterranean spaces, such as burials (for which it has proven quite effective), can produce substantial echoes.⁹

This image (*photo 2*) shows a GPR amplitude time-slice map corresponding to 40 to 100 cm below the ground surface. The approximately 200 black rectangular anomalies each may represent an in-tact burial shaft. These results not only confirm what we have long expected—that countless human remains are still in their original graves beneath the shopping center and its grounds—but will also permit us to direct our construction efforts in a way that will not impact any remaining in-tact burials. ★

1. David J. Daniels, “Ground Penetrating Radar,” in *Encyclopedia of Rf and Microwave Engineering*, ed. Kai Chang (Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 1833.

2. Miller, “Disturbances in the Soil: Finding Buried Bodies and Other Evidence Using Ground Penetrating Radar,” 652.

3. Alastair Ruffell, “Searching for the Ira ‘Disappeared’: Ground-Penetrating Radar Investigation of a Churchyard Burial Site, Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Forensic Science* 50, no. 6 (2005): 2-3.

4. Daniels, “Ground Penetrating Radar,” 1833.

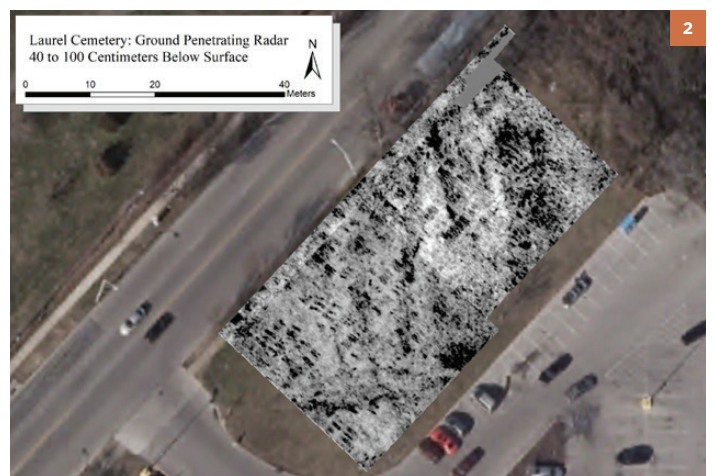
5. James S Mellett, “Location of Human Remains with Ground-Penetrating Radar” (paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Ground Penetrating Radar, 1992), 363.

6. Conyers, *Ground-Penetrating Radar: An Introduction for Archaeologists*, 12-13, 51.

7. *Ibid.*, 27-28.

8. Ruffell, “Searching for the Ira ‘Disappeared’: Ground-Penetrating Radar Investigation of a Churchyard Burial Site, Northern Ireland,” 2.

9. Conyers, *Ground-Penetrating Radar: An Introduction for Archaeologists*, 12-13, 23.



CONNECTIONS

THE NATIONAL MEMORIAL FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

/ ELGIN KLUGH

On June 29th 2022, I had the opportunity to visit **The National Memorial for Peace and Justice** in Montgomery, Alabama. This memorial opened in 2018 and is our country's first memorial "dedicated to the legacy of enslaved Black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence" (museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial). The memorial contains over 800 six-foot steel monuments. There is one for each county where a racial terror lynching took place, with the names of victims engraved on the relevant county monuments. This was truly a moving experience.

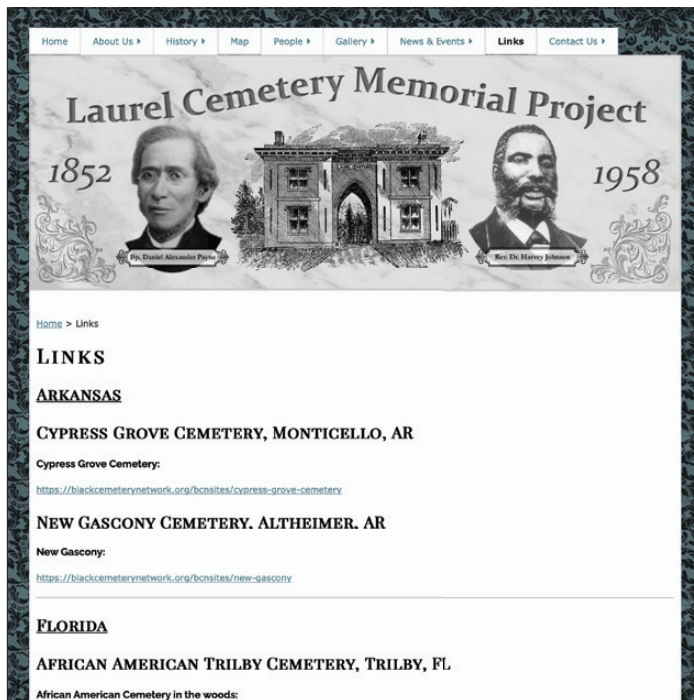
Relatedly, it is important for us all to become aware of **The Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) Community Remembrance Project** (eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project). Through this project, EJI (creator of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and The Legacy Museum) supports and encourages "communities across the nation to enter an era of truth-telling about racial injustice and their own local histories" (museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial). Here in Maryland, this work is being accomplished by the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project (mdlynchingmemorial.org), The Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission (msa.maryland.gov/lynching-truth-reconciliation), and several county level initiatives.



UPDATES

LINKS SECTION AT LAURELCEMETERY.OMEKA.NET/LINKS

Check out the new “Links” section of our website (<https://laurelcemetery.omeka.net/links>). Over this past summer, Cobi Williams, a Computer Science major at Towson University, searched the web for information on African American cemetery preservation efforts. The results included newspaper articles, documentaries, websites, and various other media on projects in several states. This information is available in the Links section of the website and represents a sample of the growing body of work regarding African American cemeteries. ★



A NEW MURAL IN BELAIR-EDISON

When in the Belair-Edison area, check out the new mural located on Elmley Avenue, between Catholic High School and the Forman Mills store. This mural was commissioned by the North East Housing Initiative (NEHI) (<https://www.nehihomes.org>) and completed in summer 2022. The mural is adjacent to a space that NEHI will develop as a park and community garden. The artist, Justin Nether, was inspired by the story and proximity of Laurel Cemetery and included depictions of Rev. Harvey Johnson, a U.S.C.T. soldier, and Lillie Carroll Jackson (known for her advocacy in trying stop the cemetery’s demolition). For a complete description of the mural project, please visit: <https://linktr.ee/nehihomes> ★



ABOVE: The new NEHI mural by Justin Nether. Mural Photo by Christina Delgado.

OPPOSITE TOP: The updated Links section of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Cobi Williams at Towson University.

5487 Halflight Garth
Columbia, Maryland 21045

laurelcemetery.omeka.net

DONATIONS

To donate to the project, please send a check or money order to:

Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project, Inc.

5487 Halflight Garth

Columbia, Maryland 21045

INQUIRIES

Questions about the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project?

Email rememberlaurelcemetery@yahoo.com

MEETINGS

The Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project meetings are on the 3rd Friday of the month at 3:00pm (in months with 5 Fridays we will meet on the 4th Friday). Since the start of the Pandemic, all meetings have been virtual, via Zoom.

For information about meetings and/or volunteering, please contact rememberlaurelcemetery@yahoo.com or visit laurelcemetery.omeka.net.



LCMP OFFICERS

Elgin L. Klugh, *Chair*

Molly Ricks, *Secretary*

Deidre Ferron, *Treasurer*