

THE LAUREL CEMETERY MEMORIAL PROJECT

UNCOVERING OUR FORGOTTEN PAST

LCMP Newsletter
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1852 – 1958

IN SMALL THINGS FORGOTTEN¹ ORIGINS OF THE LAUREL CEMETERY MEMORIAL PROJECT

/ PAM CHARSHÉE

The Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project now has its own website, a governing board, and active committees dedicated to preserving the historic African American cemetery's legacy. In this inaugural issue of the Newsletter, we take a look back to understand how the Project began. »



Archaeology at the Laurel Cemetery site. Photo by Ronald Castanzo.

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

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Laurel Cemetery was buried so deep in Baltimore's past its existence had become like the proverbial tree falling in the forest. Had it ever really existed at all? In an interview with archaeologist, Ronald Castanzo, Ph.D., now Associate Dean, Yale Gordon College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Baltimore, Prof. Castanzo remembers what triggered his initial interest in this forgotten burial ground, and how this led ultimately to the creation of the Task Force.

In 2015, looking for a way to engage his students in archaeological fieldwork, Castanzo discovered Laurel Cemetery on a historic 1870s map. After visiting the site, now the Belair-Edison Crossing shopping center, it was clear to him, this was the old cemetery site. A fragment of a grave marker was visible at the surface, "We discovered that newspaper articles had been written about Laurel every ten years, or so," he said. One described a Boy Scout Troop's community service project to clear and weed grave sites in a Carroll County cemetery – presumably with the relocated burials from Baltimore's Laurel Cemetery in the 1960s.

Prof. Castanzo remembers the questions that immediately came to mind: "Had Laurel Cemetery been completely destroyed? Were there still actual burials in the original location?" Castanzo reached out to anthropology colleague, Elgin Klugh, Ph.D., at Coppin State University, now chairman of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project, regarding potential student help with the work. A collaboration was soon formed and a public anthropology project was conceived.

Archaeological test excavations at the Belair-Edison site by Castanzo and students soon produced evidence of casket fragments, grave markers, and human bone. These "small things forgotten" were found east of Belair Road on the grassy hillside just below the Food Depot parking lot. Further testing with Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) suggested the majority of the original burials were still intact below the parking lot and the grassy areas. Burials that had been beneath the Food Depot, and before that a Two Guys big box store from 1962, were almost certainly destroyed. Prof. Castanzo believes that, while many monuments were moved to Carroll County, probably only a small number of actual remains were relocated to the Carroll County cemetery. Whether they are with their original markers is another question.

Prof. Castanzo's interest in designing a collaborative anthropology project in 2015, proved very timely. He pointed out the growing national interest in saving and preserving historic African American cemeteries.

In the case of Laurel, Castanzo is happy that, "We were able to establish that human burials were there over a large area, and that most of the burials are still there, although likely in an advanced stage of decomposition. The African American public in Baltimore is largely unaware of this and needs to know they may have ancestors here." »



The owner of the Belair-Edison retail complex that includes all of the original cemetery was supportive of the archaeological efforts from the beginning, despite earlier plans to develop the rest of the property. Since learning of the area's significance as a final resting place for many thousands of people, the owner has been very cooperative.

Next steps in the site's archaeological investigations will be guided by ethical considerations about the treatment of human remains, Castanzo says. Archaeological excavation is destructive, so other tools, like GPR testing may be used over the site's entire footprint to establish the extent and the distribution of human remains. A sister project is being conducted by the Baltimore Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (BAAHGS) to identify these remains through burial records preserved at the Baltimore City Archive. Together these projects could be used to produce a searchable database for the public to find deceased ancestors, said Castanzo.

Today, what began in 2015 as an archaeology project has evolved into a public anthropology project centered on a historic African American burial ground. Now, because of its importance, the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project is a multi-disciplinary one, involving contributions of time and talent from volunteers, scholars, grant writers, archivists, genealogists, architects, and artists. More information about the BAAHGS project can be found in an interview with its Vice President of Genealogy, Glenn Blackwell, in this issue. ★

1. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1977)

Coffin hardware found in excavation.
Photos by Ronald Castanzo.

FEATURES

FROM TASK FORCE TO MEMORIAL PROJECT, INC.

/ ELGIN KLUGH

In June 2019, the Laurel Cemetery Symposium was held on the Campus of Coppin State University. The symposium provided an opportunity to bring together heritage professionals, historians, descendants, students, Belair-Edison community residents, and other interested parties. The day included presentations on archaeological and ethnohistorical work relative to the site and a panel on the protection of African American burial sites. At the close of the day, several individuals volunteered to form a task force to work toward erecting a memorial.

The first meeting of the Task Force occurred on the campus of Coppin State University in August 2019. Attendees included: Ronald Castanzo, Elgin Klugh, Isaac Shearn, Carencay Bowen, John Carter, Beverly Carter, Bradley Alston, Pam Charshee, Curtis McMeekin, Beverly Cooper, Gloria Porter, Glenn Blackwell, Shakeya Miller, Sharon Haynie, and Donna Hollie.

The group developed the mission statement, and discussed several goals including, but not limited to:

- Plan and erect a memorial on Belair Road
- Create a mural on the side of the shopping center
- Construct a retaining wall to protect human remains from erosion
- Erect historical markers at the three points of entry into the Belair-Edison Shopping Center
- Develop an educational program for K-12 students involving both web-based and classroom content
- Create a traveling exhibit that can be used to educate the community
- Erect a roadside historic marker at the Carroll County Laurel Cemetery site

In the spring of 2020, the LCTF members re-formed the organization as the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project, Inc. (LCMP). Subsequently, the LCMP was notified that it would receive critical site repair funding from the African American Heritage Preservation Program – Administered as a partnership between the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture and the Maryland Historical Trust. The funding will allow for retaining wall construction, the construction of a walkway and memorial plaza, and the creation and installation of wayside signs. ★

First meeting of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Task Force, August 30, 2019.
Photo by Elgin Klugh.



PROFILES

REV. HARVEY JOHNSON AND
AMELIA ETTA HALL JOHNSON

/ DONNA T. HOLLIE

AN EARLY BALTIMORE POWER COUPLE

The Rev. Harvey Johnson (1843-1923) worked tirelessly for the uplift and enhancement of Baltimore's African American community. Born enslaved in Virginia, Rev. Johnson was educated at the Wayland Theological Seminary and at Virginia Union University. He was the pastor of Union Baptist Church for more than fifty years, and used his pulpit to advocate and agitate for equal opportunity for people of African descent. His legacy includes participation in the Niagara Movement from which the NAACP evolved and being a founder of the Mutual United Brotherhood of Liberty, the forerunner of the Baltimore chapter, which became one of the nation's most active and effective NAACP chapters. A proponent of an educated clergy, Johnson founded Clayton-Williams University for the education of ministers and through his mentorship of young clergy, many Baptist churches were established in Baltimore, several of which continue to flourish today. Not only did he file lawsuits when he was personally discriminated against, he encouraged and financially supported members of his church to follow suit. Johnson was the catalyst for Everett J. Waring's successful quest to become the first African American admitted to the Maryland bar. Additionally, Johnson was in large measure responsible for Harry S. Cummings' election as Baltimore's first African American City Councilman.

His wife, Amelia Etta Hall Johnson (1858-1922) used the power of the pen in her fight against inequality. She was born in Toronto, Ontario Canada to freed Maryland parents who fled the USA to avoid the negative repercussions of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. She was educated in Montreal and when slavery ended returned to Maryland with her parents and subsequently married the Rev. Johnson. In addition to raising children and being the wife of the pastor of one of Baltimore's most prominent congregations, she found time to publish a monthly literary journal, five novels and several books of poetry focusing on religious/moral themes. Like her husband she was militant in her belief in the interdependence of African descended people and in her advocacy of racial pride, particularly in the area of the education of children.

For additional information about the Johnsons, see the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Task Force website (laurelcemetery.omeka.net/people) and *A Brotherhood of Liberty: Black Reconstruction and Its Legacies in Baltimore, 1865-1920* by Dennis Patrick Halpin.



TOP: The unveiling of the monument to Dr. Harvey Johnson.

BOTTOM: The Harvey Johnson Memorial Stone removed to the New Laurel Cemetery site in Carroll County. This site is unkempt and overgrown with vegetation. Photo by Elgin Klugh.

RESEARCH

DEATH CERTIFICATE TRANSCRIPTION PROJECT

/ PAM CHARSHÉE

Glenn Blackwell is the Vice President of Genealogy for the Baltimore Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (BAAHGS – pronounced “Bogs”), and a member of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project (LCMP). He recalls first learning of Laurel Cemetery when relatives told him his grandfather was buried there. He once asked an uncle, who simply said, “*It’s gone.*”

Many years later, Glenn attended a friend’s memorial service at a church on Belair Road. The church was adjacent to Laurel’s former location, but Glenn saw nothing there. Yet, from its size and shape, Glenn believed it must have been Laurel Cemetery. More and more stories of Glenn’s relatives interred at Laurel began to come to light: his great grandfather Royston Blackwell, who was a member of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (predecessor to the U.S. Coast Guard) and a deacon and lay preacher at Union Baptist Church immediately prior to Reverend Harvey Johnson’s fifty-year service; and infant Billy Scott, a first cousin.

Connecting with his family legacy, and as he calls it, “the thrill of the hunt”, led Glenn to BAAHGS, where he is now the unofficial volunteer coordinator for the Laurel Cemetery Death Certificate Transcription Project. Volunteers must receive some training at the Baltimore City Archives on how to search through digital Baltimore City Death Certificate “reels” for Laurel Cemetery burials and how to record them in a consistent manner. Volunteers then may choose to work remotely at home. Glenn acknowledges that the poignant stories contained in these records are a compelling reason for why he and many volunteers have committed themselves to this research.

He describes finding death certificates for: “John the Baptist,” a six-month-old baby; 101-year-old Isabella Alice, who had been born in Africa; Hester Presbury, a woman from Harford County, said to be 125 years old; a Buffalo Soldier, struck by an “Indian arrow”, who died slowly of an abscess; and the Reverend Harvey Johnson of Union Baptist Church. These are a few of the stories that inspire the volunteers’ work. And, as Glenn points out, “The records are the culmination of the cycle of many lives, showing important aspects of the community’s history and their places in it.”

Retired Chief Archivist of the Maryland State Archives, Ed Papenfuse, helped LCMP coordinate access to death certificate reels at the Baltimore City Archives. Each contains about 3,000 certificates. From the cemetery’s founding in 1852 up to 1875, there are only a handful of records. The current record search by LCMP transcription volunteers is concentrated on the 50-year period beginning with 1875, when Baltimore City began requiring a death certificate for every decedent. From 1875 to 1880, there were about one thousand burials a year. During the mid-1870s, Glenn says, “Of the total burials per year in Baltimore City, about 12-14% went to Laurel.” Glenn estimates that he and his volunteers, at this point, have transcribed about 26% of the 1875-1950 reel series. As of May 2022, they have identified over 17,000 burials. At the current transcription rate, Glenn believes the project volunteers may document as many as 40,000 burials at Laurel.

Through the combined efforts of LCMP’s Death Certificate Transcription Project and the Archaeology Project, the goal of creating a “searchable database” for locating lost relatives is steadily becoming realizable – the result of the efforts of many people over many years to honor the memory of their loved ones and of many unknown.

Anyone interested in learning more about volunteering for the Death Certificate Transcription Project may contact Glenn Blackwell at glennblackwell@verizon.net. Having a computer system that has storage space for 350 MB and a pdf file reader is recommended. ★



Volunteers researching Baltimore City death certificate records at the Baltimore City Archives.
Photo by Glenn Blackwell.

Board of Health, City of Baltimore,
OFFICE OF REGISTRAR OF VITAL STATISTICS.

Permit No. 38954

The Physician who attended any person in a last illness is responsible for the presentation of this Certificate, accurately filled out, to the undertaker or other person superintending the burial, within twenty-four hours after the death of said deceased, or sooner, if requested so to do, under penalty of law.

NO PERMIT FOR BURIAL CAN BE OBTAINED WITHOUT A PROPER CERTIFICATE

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

Date of Death, April 7th 1880

Full Name of Deceased, { Write legibly and spell correctly. If an infant not named, give names of parents. } Daniel Newman

Sex, Male or Female, { Cross out the word not required in this line. } Male

Age, 31 Years, 4 Months, 14 Days.

Color, Colored Sex, Male

Married, Single, Widow or Widower, { Cross out the words not required in this line. } Single

Occupation, U. S. Soldier since which time about 4 years disabled

Birthplace, { State or country (and how long in the United States, if of foreign birth.) } Baltimore Md.

Duration of Residence in the City of Baltimore, about 26 years

Place of Death, { Give street and number. } no 46 Sarah Ann st Baltimore Md

Cause of Death, { First (Primary,) Shrapnel from an Indian arrow in left side
Second (Immediate,) Consumption or Nocturnal

Duration of Last Sickness, about 4 years

All the above information should be furnished by the Physician.

Place of Burial, Laurel Cemetery

Date of Burial, April 10 1880

{ Undertaker, J. W. Chase
Place of Business, 198 E. Howard St

Address

J. W. Chase M. D.
Medical Attendant.

Extract from Regulations of the Board of Health to secure a full and correct record of Vital Statistics in the City of Baltimore.

SECTION 2. And it be further enacted and ordained, That whenever any person shall die in the said city, it shall be the duty of the Physician who attended during his or her last sickness, or the Coroner, when the case comes under his notice, to furnish within forty-eight hours after the death, to the Undertaker or other person or persons superintending the burial, a Certificate setting forth, as far as the same can be ascertained, the full name, sex, age and condition (whether married or single) of the person deceased, and the cause and date of death, except in cases of births and deaths of illegitimate children.

[OVER.]

An example of a death certificate from the archives.

Daniel Newman: U.S. Soldier. Died at age 31 on April 7th, 1879. Primary cause of death – Injury caused by an Indian arrow.

RESEARCH

An example of a death certificate from the archives.

Isabella Alice: Servant. Died at age 101 on September 27th, 1879. Born in Africa.

Board of Health, City of Baltimore,

OFFICE OF REGISTRAR OF VITAL STATISTICS.

Permit No. 35787

The Physician who attended any person in a last illness is responsible for the presentation of this Certificate, *accurately filled out*, to the Undertaker or other person superintending the burial, within *twenty-four hours* after the death of said deceased, or sooner, if requested so to do, under penalty of law.

NO PERMIT FOR BURIAL CAN BE OBTAINED WITHOUT A PROPER CERTIFICATE.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

Date of Death, Sept 27th 1879

Full Name of Deceased, { Write legibly and spell correctly. If an infant not named, give names of parents. } Isabella Alice

Sex, Male or Female, { cross out the word not required in this line. }

Age, 101 Years, 6 Months, Days.

Color, Colored

~~Married~~, Single, ~~Widow or Widower~~, { Cross out the word not required in this line. }

Occupation, Servant

Birthplace, { State or country, (and how long in the United States. If of foreign birth. } Africa

Duration of Residence in the City of Baltimore, 65 years

Place of Death, { Give street and number } 146 N Howard St.

Cause of Death { First, (Primary) } old age
 { Second, (Immediate.) }

Duration of last Sickness,
 All the above information should be furnished by the Physician.

Place of Burial, Laurel Cemetery

Date of Burial, Sept 29 1879

{ Undertaker, S. W. Lehn

{ Place of Business, 190 S Howard St Address, 87 Greene St.

J. M. Melles M. D.
 Medical Attendant.

Extract from Regulations of the Board of Health to secure a full and correct record of Vital Statistics in the City of Baltimore

SECTION 2. And be it further enacted and ordained. That whenever any person shall die in the said city, it shall be the duty of the Physician who attended during his or her last sickness, or the Coroner, when the case comes under his notice, to furnish within forty-eight hours after the death to the Undertaker or other persons superintending the burial, a Certificate setting forth as far as the same can be ascertained, the full name, sex, age and condition (whether married or single) of the person deceased, and the cause and date of death, except in cases of births and deaths of illegitimate children.

WM. J. C. DELANY & CO. CITY PRINTERS AND STATIONERS.

[OVER.]

CONNECTIONS

PRESENTATIONS JANUARY 2021 – MAY 2022

We have been working diligently to spread the word about the Laurel Cemetery.

For a deeper dive into the history of Laurel Cemetery, the following three presentations are accessible online:

1. Baltimore Heritage

Virtual History

April 1, 2022

youtu.be/HDYdOreNMt0

2. Johns Hopkins University

Department of Anthropology

Fall Colloquium

October 5, 2021

anthropology.jhu.edu/event/jhu-department-of-anthropology-fall-2021-colloquium-presents-the-laurel-cemetery-memorial-project

3. Enoch Pratt Free Library

Lunch & Learn Series

September 9, 2021

ne-np.facebook.com/theprattlibrary/videos/lunch-and-learn-researching-baltimores-historic-laurel-cemetery/250826796920037

Other presentations have included:

1. WYNPR Radio: On the Record with Sheilah Kast

May 20, 2022

wyprr.org/show/on-the-record/2022-05-20/paying-respect-laurel-cemeterys-past

2. Johns Hopkins University course, “Commemoration,

Mourning, and Race: The Stories of Mount Auburn Cemetery,” taught by Dr. Gabrielle Dean with co-instructors Jesse Bennett and Nancy Shead

February 10, 2022

3. The Perils and Challenges of African American Cemeteries in Maryland (Conference)

September 18, 2021

4. American Anthropological Association (Conference)

November 20, 2021

5. Belair Edison Neighborhood Earth Day Celebration

April 18, 2021

6. Society for Applied Anthropology (Conference)

March 27, 2021

7. Baltimore Heritage 5-Minute History Video

March 2021

<https://youtu.be/CvvVaQq3XAc>

8. Civic Works, Baltimore

January 18, 2021

CONNECTIONS

RICHMOND'S AFRICAN AMERICAN BURIAL GROUND

/ ELGIN KLUGH

On May 14th 2022, I had the opportunity to visit the site of the African American Burial Ground and Lumpkin Slave Jail in Richmond, VA. The preservation is profiled in the video, “Meet me in the Bottom: The Struggle to Reclaim Richmond’s African American Burial Ground.” This site has been preserved as hallowed ground, replete with a memorial and historic interpretive signage. This site is opposite of I-95 from the main campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. ★

vimeo.com/14947210

BELOW: This site has been preserved as hallowed ground, replete with a memorial and historic interpretive signage. This site is opposite of I-95 from the main campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. Photos by Elgin Klugh.

Check out these additional sites profiling efforts to preserve African American burial grounds:

African American Cemetery Alliance of Tampa Bay
aacatb.org

Black Cemetery Network
blackcemeterynetwork.org

Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition
bethesdaafricancemeterycoalition.net

Anson Street Burial Ground Project
asabgproject.com



UPDATES

THE LAUREL CEMETERY TIMELINE EXHIBIT

As of May 25, 2022, the Laurel Cemetery Timeline is on display in the ground floor lobby of One N. Charles Center in downtown Baltimore. This display is made possible by the Baltimore chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Baltimore Architectural Foundation, and Baltimore Heritage, Inc. The exhibit will be viewable at this location through July 2022. ★



The Laurel Cemetery Timeline Exhibit currently on display in the Ground Floor lobby at One N. Charles Center.
Photos by Elgin Klugh.

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 meets on the 4th Friday of the month at 3:00pm. 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*