Take Me Down to the Burial Ground:
Trees as Agents of Spatial and Spiritual Meaning in Nineteenth Century African American Cemeteries

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Abstract

While it can sometimes appear that the landscape of early African American cemeteries is haphazard and disorganized, this paper argues that these are in fact intentionally created spaces purposefully designed to facilitate the unique African American social and cultural practices surrounding funerary rituals which evolved as a direct result of the condition of enslavement. The funerary traditions established during slavery were a unique result of the cultural exchange between the theological beliefs of enslaved workers of African descent and those of the dominant Christian culture. These traditions were embedded in the culture and so continued to be practiced well into the 20th century, especially in rural areas of the South, resulting in unique cultural landscapes that have been largely misunderstood and understudied. The method used is a combined approach, consulting a variety of written and oral narrative sources in tandem with careful examination of available material evidence to examine these dynamic sites in the most complete way possible.

Trees inhabit a unique place in the cultural and theological funerary traditions of enslaved workers of African descent and African Americans. Used as creators of physical and spiritual space, trees were intentionally chosen or placed as keepers of spiritual meaning and creators of a kind of sacred grove, a tradition found in West African theology. They also serve an architectural purpose to define and enclose the sacred cemetery space as well as providing shelter and form for funeral ceremonies. The use of trees in this way has not been properly recognized in previous studies of these historic cultural landscapes, which this thesis seeks to rectify. The first chapter examines historical evidence to understand funeral rituals and the sacred spaces in which they took place beginning with the eighteenth century and tracing them through Emancipation and the early twentieth century. Chapter two discusses the in-depth field work study of five cemetery locations in Albemarle County, Virginia and seeks to understand how the cultural traditions established in chapter one influenced the creation of these sacred spaces. Chapter three focuses on the use of trees as creators of space and meaning in early African American cemeteries, drawing on the oral narrative evidence from chapter one and the material evidence of chapter two. What may appear to be unintentional and disorganized spaces in rural Southern 19th century African American cemeteries were in fact intentionally created utilizing existing landscape features to facilitate the performance of funeral rituals unique to African Americans in the rural South which were developed as a result of the social and theological conditions of enslavement.

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Introduction

In 1991 in New York City, construction work on a new federal building led to the eventual unearthing of what is now known as the New York African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan. Containing the remains of upwards of 15,000 free and enslaved Africans and African Americans, the site had been covered over and built on to allow for city expansion since 1827.[1] The unearthing, excavation, and eventual commemoration of the New York African Burial Ground brought national attention to the previously largely overlooked cultural landscapes of African American cemeteries. Since then, more and more sites like this across the country have been rediscovered and recognized as important pieces of our nation's story. Locally, the University of Virginia African American Burial Ground and the Daughters of Zion Cemetery, both in Charlottesville, Virginia, have gained recent attention and commemoration.

Much of the scholarly research that has been done on early African American cemeteries focuses on the material culture of the burials, linking mortuary customs of enslaved laborers of African descent to theological beliefs originating in West Africa. With enslaved persons being brought to the Americas from multiple regions of Africa, and the inevitable cultural exchange between African and European Americans, it is impossible to say exactly what theological beliefs may have been retained from the places of origin of the enslaved population in America, though some have tried. Historically, the debate surrounding African cultural and religious retentions centered on whether or not there, in fact, were any, and is best embodied by scholars E. Franklin Frazier and Melville J. Herskovits. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argued that the

[1] Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan. *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998. 14.

process of enslavement in America effectively stripped Africans of ability to retain any of the cultural identity of their homeland. Frazier acknowledged that this was not the case in all of the Americas, but that in the United States specifically the range of places of birth, the relatively low number of laborers being imported directly from Africa, and the fact that most enslaved workers lived on farms with few others of African descent combined to create an environment where the vast majority of African customs and beliefs were all but erased with Christianity filling the void that was left.[2] Alternatively, Melville J. Herskovits asserted that there indeed was a continuity of culture from Africa to the Unites States among the enslaved population. Herskovits attempted to define a larger base line of West Africa (rather than individual countries or tribes) from which to determine more subtle cultural parallels between the customs and beliefs in Africa and those of African descent in the United States. His research concluded that the strongest Africanisms were to be found in religion.[3]

The idea of African retentions in religion among the enslaved and free population of African descent in the United States has since been generally accepted, and the conversation has turned to not if, but to what extent and where from. Religious practices among tribes were so vast, varied, and even changing that it becomes very difficult to tease out and trace any singular religious belief from its African origins to the United States. However, when examining West African theological beliefs on a larger scale, as Herskovits did, scholars have found it possible to extract themes that are present within the apparent beliefs and rituals of the enslaved populations in the United States. This is not to say that there were, and are, not significant differences between the many religions of various West African peoples, but that, as Albert J. Raboteau

[2] Franklin E. Frazier, and C. Eric Lincoln. *The Negro Church in America*. Sourcebooks in Negro History. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.
[3] Melville J. Herskovits (Melville Jean). The Myth of the Negro Past. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.

states, "similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual were widespread among different West African religions" allowing for a more general description of the religious heritage of Africans who were enslaved in the United States. [4] This understanding of a shared theological tradition among the enslaved laborers in America has been applied to the ritual and material makeup of African American cemeteries by multiple scholars.

While it is known that remnants of West African spiritual beliefs remained as part of the cultural traditions, Christianity ultimately had a larger influence on the religious experience of enslaved laborers. African Americans had been establishing their own independent churches in the United States since the American Revolution. This included, in Virginia, the First Baptist Church in Petersburg, founded in 1774, and the First African Baptist Church of Richmond, founded in 1841 which counted some enslaved workers among its members. These places of worship were few, however, and most enslaved workers who did attend a formal church did so at those controlled by the white population, allowing for the use of religion and the church as a means of social control.[5] Allowing, or requiring, enslaved individuals to worship at white churches allowed for an additional measure of control over the ways in which they practiced their religion. Largely, the enslaved populations were not permitted to have their own worship services or meetings of any kind. And on the occasions that it was allowed, these services were always under the close supervisory eye of white men. In Virginia, as other Southern states, this was codified in law.[6] These laws ensured that the enslaved were not plotting escape or rebellion

[4] Albert J. Raboteau S*lave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. 7.
[5] John B. Boles. Masters and Slaves In the House of the Lord: Race and Religion In the American South, 1740-1870. Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988. 106-7.
[6] Lynn Rainville. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014.

while meeting and also allowed white men to control the religious narrative that was being preached.

While the law forbade enslaved workers from having their own religious meetings, these events still took place somewhat regularly. The enslaved workers of African descent harmonized Christian theology with their own conception of a High God and religious expression to create their own distinct forms of worship that were practiced in secret free from the watchful eyes of white men. At these clandestine meetings, the enslaved were free to preach their own values and express their religion according to their own preferences. Ex-slave Emily Dixon explained, "Us could go to de white folk's church, but us wanted ter go whar us could sing all de way through, an' hum 'long an' shout – yo'all know, just turn loose lack" [7] expressing the desire of enslaved workers to worship on their own terms, allowing themselves to sing and shout and turn loose in a way that was not possible in a white church. Susan Rhodes echoed this sentiment in her own narrative when she said, "We used to steal off to de woods and have church, like the Spirit moved us – sing and pray to our own liking and soul satisfaction."[8] Even with the option of attending established churches, enslaved Africans and African Americans preferred to worship in their own way with their own culturally rooted traditions.

Firsthand accounts from ex-slave narratives mention time and again the secret religious meetings. Garland Monroe, born in 1848, describes one such example when he explained, "Dey had what dey called a stump preacher; ole man Tucker Coles it was. Dey call him a stump preacher 'cause he used to git up on a stump an' preach to de slaves – you see, up dere 'rounst Monticello ole patterollers would keep away, so de slaves ain't bothered to build a hut an' put

[7] Dwight N. Hopkins, and George C. L. Cummings. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*. Black Theology in the Slave Narratives. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991. 5.
[8] Ibid. 6.

pots all roun' like dey did in some places. Jus' preached right in de open, an' if de patterollers come, dey would jus' run down de mountain side 'long paths dat de patterollers didn't know nothin' 'bout."[9] This example from Albemarle County, Virginia illustrates the ways that enslaved workers were willing to subvert the control of their white masters in order to exercise some form of religious autonomy within a system designed to strip them of it. One of the most important was that enslaved laborers asserted their autonomy over their religious life was through the rituals surrounding the mourning and burial of their dead.

This cultural exchange ultimately led to the formation of a unique religious belief system that combined elements of West African theology with traditional Christian beliefs. This process has been closely examined Albert J. Raboteau in his books, *Slave Religion* and *Canaan Land: A Religious History and African Americans* as do Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood in their discussion of the African American religious experience in, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in The American South and British Caribbean to 1830* which explores the mechanisms through which enslaved African born laborers assimilated Christianity into their cultural and community. The result of these dynamic processes was a unique religious belief system born of transatlantic cultural exchange and led to a distinctive understanding and practice of Christianity among African Americans. This resulted in the creation of rituals, including funerals, unique to the African American culture which is reflected in nineteenth century African American cemeteries, especially in the southern states. The African American cultural traditions that developed during slavery combined with the physical and social realities of early postbellum life led to unique funerary rituals and practices in the late nineteenth century that informed the

[9] Charles L. Perdue, Thomas E. Barden and Robert K. Phillips. Weevils In the Wheat: Interviews With Virginia Ex-slaves. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992., 214

choices of cemetery layout and appearance. When judged through the European American lens, early African American cemeteries in the rural South can appear to be haphazard or disorganized, usually attributed to a lack of time or money. However, these cemeteries can also be understood as having been intentionally designed to facilitate the unique African American social and cultural practices surrounding funerary rituals which evolved as a result of the unique religious customs developed as a result of African enslavement

While there is a fair amount of literature that has been written regarding the culturally unique funeral rituals developed by enslaved Africans in the United States and how they evolved and continued into the twentieth century, relatively little attention has been paid to the design of the cemeteries themselves and how the beliefs and rituals surrounding death and burial informed the choices made in the formation of a physical cemetery in the years following Emancipation. The material culture of death and burial has been well written about, but only as it pertains to the burials themselves but often not the larger sacred space of the cemetery in which they are situated. There has been a fair amount written regarding the landscapes of Anglo-American cemeteries from this time period, largely surrounding the rural cemetery movement of the nineteenth century. At this time in the United States there was a nationwide shift in the landscape and location of cemeteries, with the new thought being that these spaces should be moved outside the city, and intentionally designed to create a parklike setting through the use of layout and vegetation.[10] While this may have had some influence on early African American cemeteries in the rural South, these communities were far enough removed from that of middle and upper class Anglo-Americans, that it is crucial to study the landscapes within the lens of their own social and theological culture. I seek to add to the current body of literature by engaging

[10] David Charles Sloan. *The Last Great Necessity*. 44-64.

specifically with the intentional use of space and design in nineteenth century postbellum African American cemeteries in rural Virginia. It is my aim to situate this set of theological beliefs and funeral rituals within the context of rural Virginia and its application in the creation of cemetery spaces, specifically as they apply to the deliberate use of trees as agents of spatial and spiritual meaning in nineteenth century African American cemeteries.

The method for this project consists of a combination of oral histories and firsthand descriptions of funerals and cemeteries, and a careful examination of the current state of nineteenth century African American cemeteries located in Albemarle County, Virginia. This hybrid method of combining material and written cultural record has been laid out by Mark P. Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry in their article, "Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen: An Interpretation of African American Belief Systems Based on the use of Archaeology and Folklore Sources."[11] Combining material culture with oral histories is particularly effective in a situation where there is relatively little of each of these things to work with, such as is the case in early African American cemeteries. Therefore, utilizing multiple types of evidence fosters a more complete understanding of the subject of this study. For this project, I rely largely on narratives relayed by formerly enslaved individuals as well as some other contemporary firsthand accounts for the oral history and folklore portion, and my own fieldwork on cemetery landscapes for the material portion. Chapter One explores the ceremonies and rituals surrounding the funerals of the deceased enslaves as well as the physical properties of the cemeteries in which they were buried. Chapter Two is a study of the field work I undertook for this project. I surveyed five historic African American cemeteries, focusing on the layout and vegetation at the

[11] Mark P. Leone, and Gladys-Marie Fry. "Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen: An Interpretation of African American Belief Systems Based on the Uses of Archaeology and Folklore Sources." 372–403.

sites. I used a GPS locator to mark each burial as well as each planting and tree in the cemeteries. By identifying the species of tree and measuring its circumference I was able to approximate the age of trees in the cemeteries, including only those which are likely to be one hundred years old or older in my discussion of the historic cemetery landscape. Chapter Three seeks to reconcile the traditions and customs present in African American funeral traditions that evolved from the conditions of slavery, with the nineteenth century cemetery landscape and uncover underlying relationship between the spiritual and mortuary beliefs and traditions to the physical landscape while focusing on the deliberate use of trees as creators of spiritual and physical space. In the case of the cemeteries that were included in this study, trees served as agents of spatial and spiritual meaning in the landscape by identifying boundaries and sheltering the sacred spaces, creating defined physical areas within the larger cemetery, and invoking additional layers of spirituality and connection to ancestors.

Chapter One

Cultural Exchange and the Creation of a Unique Funerary Tradition

In order to gain a better understanding of the physical and cultural landscape of early postbellum African American cemeteries, one must first examine the cultural, social, and political conditions under which they were constructed, with a mind to the influence of these factors in the development of the rituals that took place within them and the origins of these rituals. For this purpose, this chapter attempt to provide a basic foundational overview from which to draw connections between funerary ritual practice and the actual physical characteristics of burial grounds and cemeteries of enslaved laborers of African descent in the American South and, later, those of free African Americans after emancipation.

The religious activities of the enslaved populations in the American south varied greatly over time and region. While for this project's fieldwork analysis the focus is placed specifically on cemeteries in rural Virginia, when attempting to identify a cohesive cultural norm surrounding funeral and mourning traditions it is necessary to utilize available evidence from multiple regions of the slaveholding south as records of funerary practices of the enslaved are both sparse and often incomplete. This section attempts to rely more heavily on the evidence available from Virginia and its immediate surroundings, but the overall lack of evidence occasionally necessitates the use of sources from other regions.

The treatment of the deceased enslaved varied greatly by time and place. In some cases, the bodies were placed in hurried graves without allowing family members to properly tend to

and care for the body of the dead or attend the burial. Austin Grant, a former slave, described such a situation when he explained that, "If anybody died, they would tell some of the other slaves to dig the grave and take 'em out there and bury 'em. They jes' put 'em in a box, no preachin' or nothin'. But of course, if it was Sunday the slaves would follow you out there and sing. No, if they didn't die on Sunday, you couldn' go; you went to that field."[12]

Other plantation owners took greater care with the burial of enslaved individuals, at times even treating them with nearly as much respect as those of whites. Virginia Shelton describes the passing of her slave, Lythe, in a letter where she states that the body was neatly laid out and dressed "in a beautiful nightgown" and funeral cap made by Shelton's mother and placed in a coffin that was made of fine cherry, "as neat as any white person's."[13] It appears as though Lythe was likely a particularly beloved member of this plantation's enslaved population, and while this example is most certainly exceptional, other narratives indicate that it was likely common for the bodies of the deceased enslaved to be treated with at least some measure of respect. "There was one thing that the negro greatly insisted upon and that even the most hardhearted master could not deny them. They could never bear that their dead should be put away without a funeral."[14] And Jasper Battle recalled that during his time as an enslaved laborer, "The coffins was just the same for the white folks as it was for their slaves."[15] In this way, it may be said that death had, at times, the ability to break down the strict boundaries of black and white racial lines that were ever-present in life. These narratives illustrate the importance of, and often willingness of plantation owners, to provide a respectful burial and treatment of the deceased among the

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[12] Ibid. 34
[13] Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds. *Death and the American South.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 120.
[14] William E. Hatcher (William Eldridge). *John Jasper, the Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher*. 37.

[15] Friend and Glover, eds. *Death and the American South*. 121.

enslaved population. To the enslaved community, proper care of the dead was an important rite that both asserted the humanity of the enslaved worker while also ensuring that their spirit would be settled after this life.

The best source from which to gain information on the burial and funerary traditions of the enslaved laborers in the antebellum South is primarily through the interviews with ex-slaves conducted by the WPA in the 1930s. While these records do shed some light on the funerary rituals of enslaved populations which took place throughout the south, even among these interviews, it has been noted that many subjects seemed disinclined to go into much detail about funeral rituals and instead preferred to quickly move on to other subjects.[16] By examining these narratives certain consistencies regarding the practices and rituals surrounding funerals and the care of the dead emerge.

It is clear that the actual care given to the burial of an enslaved worker as well as the amount of mourning allowed for varied greatly depending on circumstances, but whether the enslaved were given the opportunity to attend a sanctioned funeral for the deceased or not, it seems consistent among the South that enslaved laborers also chose to celebrate with additional elaborate and performative funerals that were an expression of their cultural and theological belief system. These funerals, or second burials, were important and well attended events that typically took place weeks or months after the actual burial of the body. There were practical as well as cultural reasons for this tradition. It was generally necessary to the body of the deceased within a short period of time due to the threat of deterioration caused by the Southern climate.

[16] McIlwain Charlton D. *Death in Black and White; Death, Ritual, and Family Ecology*. 32.

However, it would take time for friends and family residing on other nearby plantations to be notified and also to wait for a black preacher who would be able to tend to the event.

A description of the funerals of enslaved laborers written in 1908 describes, "Not that they expected, at the time of the burial, to have the funeral service. Indeed, they did not desire it and it was never according to their notions. A funeral to them was a pageant, it was a thing to be arranged for a long time ahead. It was to be marked by the gathering of the kin from far and wide."[17] This account of the second burial tradition indicates that it was indeed a custom that was born out of choice and preference, rather than pure necessity. The tradition of a second burial allowed for a proper funeral where proper respect could be shown to the deceased. The second burial would take place at night, likely because it was the only time that enslaved laborers would not be required to work.[18] A nighttime funeral also allowed for the ritual to take place in secret, which may have been necessary if the plantation owner did not allow for a funeral, or simply because of the desire to mourn freely without the supervision and control of an overseer. By all accounts these nighttime funerals were very well-attended events. A former slave described one such event, "Dey put de coffin on a wagon, and de folks walked to de graveyard. Dere wuz crowds of 'em; dey come from jes' everywhere."[19] Thus the rituals surrounding death often took on a tone of celebration, as this may have been one of the only times that family members and friends living on different plantations got to see each other, creating a family reunion of sorts. One of the few visual representations from the time period of a funeral for an enslaved worker is the painting *A Plantation Burial* by John Antrobus from 1860 (Figure 1). It depicts an expressive

[17] William E. Hatcher (William Eldridge). *John Jasper, the Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher*. 37.
[18] Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. The World the Slaves Made. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
[19] Charlton D. McIlwain. *Death in Black and White; Death, Ritual, and Family Ecology.* 34.

funeral ritual in which a group of mourners are gathered in a grove of trees which serve to enclose and protect the space of the cemetery.

For the vast majority of enslaved laborers, death was the only way to be truly freed from the life of enslavement, and therefore was less something to be feared than it was simply crossing over into the next, perhaps better, phase of existence. "Perhaps the one essential element common to almost every philosophy about death held by the African people was their definition of the experience of death. In contrast to the dominant beliefs of Europe, African cultures did not view death as a dichotomous experience, wherein a clear line delineated the experiences between life and death. In Africa, death was seen as a part of, or more particularly, a continuation of life itself."[20] This difference in perspective on death would have contributed to the different traditions and rituals that marked it. The funeral was referred to as a "homegoing," a name which implies a more positive connotation than the funeral rituals of European Americans. By most accounts, homegoing rituals were not only very largely attended by family and friends, but also theatrical, performative events filled with unrestrained emotion. One interviewee explained, "When a [slave] died, dey was buried in de graveyard lak dey do now, an' dey shouted an' hollered an' sometime a 'oman she faint an' hab to be tote home."[21]

The funeral rituals of the enslaved South involved varying degrees of performative participation by attendees. This took the form of song, dance, call-and-response style sermons, and some community members taking turns leading the ceremony. Frederick Law Olmsted

[20] Charlton D. McIlwain. *Death in Black and White; Death, Ritual, and Family Ecology.* 27
[21] Ibid, p 35.

describes what appears to be a funeral ritual being conducted by free African Americans in his journal from 1856:[22]

> *Another man had, in the mean time, stepped into the place he had first occupied at the head of the grave; an old negro, with a very singularly distorted face, who raised a hymn, which soon became a confused chant—the leader singing a few words alone, and the company then either repeating them after him or making a response to them, in the manner of sailors heaving at the windlass. I could understand but very few of the words. The music was wild and barbarous, but not without a plaintive melody. A new leader took the place of the old man, when his breath gave out (he had sung very hard, with much bending of the body and gesticulation)*

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that these were free African Americans, Olmsted observed that there was one white man in attendance who was presumably there' "in compliance with the law which requires that a white man shall always be present at any meeting, for religious exercises, of the negroes, to destroy the opportunity of their conspiring to gain their freedom." Even free African Americans at the time did not have the freedom to worship, mourn, or celebrate the lives and deaths of their community members without supervision, suspicion, and some level of control from white men.

The amount of mourning and commemoration permitted for the death of an enslaved worker varied based on the conditions under which the enslaved lived. Some slave owners would allow for a determined amount of time away from work to bury the body, while others allowed only immediate family to participate, and still others did not permit any enslaved laborers to

[22] "Frederick Law Olmsted, 1822-1903. A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy."

participate in any funerary activities that would take time away from their work. Whether funeral rituals were officially permitted not, it seems clear that these nighttime homegoing rituals still took place for family and community members to commemorate the deaths of their loved ones. (Figure 2). Rituals like this were one way for enslaved individuals to assert that their lives had dignity and meaning beyond the definitions set by slavery.

The cemeteries where deceased enslaved workers were buried were typically located in parts of the plantation that could not be made profitable through cultivation. These locations may have been rocky, containing poor soil, wooded, or on steep hills. Often, these locations would be delineated by a circle of trees surrounding the burial ground for the deceased enslaved.[23] There are also references to trees and plants growing in cemeteries by contemporary observers who seemed unimpressed with the state of the burial grounds when they remarked on the cemetery being a, "dilapidated weed-grown graveyard," or that, "the ground was overgrown with weeds and briars."[24] Given the strict time constraints on enslaved workers it is certainly no surprise that cemeteries contained weeds and brush rather than being carefully manicured. However, a number of the plants in the cemeteries may have been intentional. Enslaved workers would not have had access to ornamental varieties of plants, and using what was available, a deliberately planted flower or shrub may have looked like an ordinary weed to an uninformed observer.

Burial markers were primarily plantings such as trees or other vegetation, field stone, wood, or completely absent. Enslaved workers certainly did not have access to the resources with which to make elaborate grave markers. In addition to this, in most parts of the south it was illegal for African Americans, enslaved or free, to learn to read or write. In Virginia, an 1831 law

[23] Lynn Rainville. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. 14.
[24] Ibid. 49.

made it illegal for anyone to teach freedmen or slaves how to read and write.[25] While this law was certainly not always followed and it is well documented that some free and enslaved Africans and African Americans were in fact literate, it would have been a dangerous proposition to reveal that by displaying it on an engraved gravestone. Using plants or trees as grave markers was likely also part of a larger spiritual tradition related to African belief systems. Robert Farris Thompson describes multiple ways in which certain plants and trees were believed to be imbued with special qualities or have connections to the spirit world.[26] In this way, using available plants as grave markers served a practical as well as religious purpose in the burial traditions of enslaved laborers.

Emancipation and the end of the Civil War brought freedom to all enslaved African Americans, but the unfortunate reality was that many aspects of life remained the same for formerly enslaved workers living in the rural South. A variety of laws and Black Codes served the purpose of ensuring that African Americans did not, in practice, have access to financial, social, or political freedom or equality. One example of this is found in the Virginia Vagrancy Act of 1866. This law essentially made it illegal for any man to be without gainful employment. It was, of course, enforced vastly disproportionately against African Americans and the prescribed punishment for "vagrancy" was forced labor, with the permitted use of a ball-and-chain.[27] This law, among others, created a labor environment where African American men had no choice but to work for very low wages or risk being sentenced to a work-camp for several months.

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[25] Ibid. 2.
[26] Robert Farris Thompson. "Bighearted Power" *Keep Your Head to the Sky. Interpreting African American Home Ground.* Ed. Gray Gundaker. 55-9.
[27] "Vagrancy Act of 1866." https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Vagrancy_Act_of_1866

One thing that free African Americans did finally have control over after the Civil War was the way that they practiced religion, and African American communities very quickly began forming their own congregations and churches. This may have legitimized the previously clandestine religious funeral traditions, however it did not necessarily change them. A description of African American funerals written in 1894 echoes many of the accounts of slave funerals in the way that it describes such events, "Many of their funeral observances are almost grotesque. The burial took place at night and a long procession of friends and relatives, bearing lighted torches, escorted the corpse to the graveyard."[28] It seems that in the late nineteenth century African American communities in the rural South, the religious beliefs, traditions, and forms of worship surrounding death and burial remained largely the same as they were before emancipation.

Possibly the most impactful differences between services commemorating the dead after slavery ended were that there were not the regulations or limitations restricting worship, and that family and community members now had the freedom of movement to attend funerals as desired. This resulted in funerals tending to grow larger, longer, and perhaps even more expressive. Family came from all around to participate in the funeral rituals, "We went *home* for a funeral. No questions. Nobody worried about what it cost or what we were doing with jobs or what-not. When somebody died – and I don't care *how* you were related – if you were family you went back home where you were supposed to be."[29] Funerals were an important part of African

[28] "Mortuary Customs and Beliefs of South Carolina Negroes." *The Journal of American Folklore* 7, no. 27 (1894): 318–19, 318.
[29] Karla F. C. Holloway. *Passed on: African American Mourning Stories : A Memorial*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. p 29.

American life, where all members of the community were expected to participate and each knew what was expected of them.

Properly honoring someone upon their death became an important part of African American life. Written in the early 20th century this account, though clearly stereotyping, paints a picture of the importance of funerals in African American culture "The Southern Negro [goes] head over heels into debt to see that he or his relations are laid away in style. No matter what the press of work may be, a funeral is always more important. A funeral is a great occasion with uneducated Negroes – a time for social gatherin, and above all, the Negro loves a crowd."[30] Not only did family members come from far and wide in order to attend the services, but no expense was spared in order to provide the deceased with an impressive funeral celebration. Horse-drawn carriages were hired, new clothes were purchased for the wake and burial, and flowers adorned the home. In many ways, these elaborate funerals served many of the same purposes as those performed during times of slavery. They provided an opportunity for community gathering and celebration and allowed for emotional release as well as strengthening family and community bonds. This process of "intense grieving" has been described as, "a public statement of love and devotion for the deceased, but it also lets the family know that they are not alone in their loss."[31] Perhaps most importantly, the funeral rituals signaled that the deceased's life was important and had meaning. In a world where respect and equality were denied to African Americans in so many ways, the final act of a proper and dignified funeral gave some of that respect back.

The newly established churches following Emancipation quickly grew, and commemorating the dead through established community ritual was one of the functions of the

[30] Newbell Niles Puckett. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro.* New York: Negro Universities Press. 1926. p 87-88.
[31] Elaine Nichols, Ed. "The Last Miles of the Way: African-American Homegoing Traditions, 1890 - Present." Exhibition dates, June 4, 1989 – December 1, 1989. South Carolina Sate Museum. 1989. p 29.

new churches. However, though African American congregations had sprung up throughout the South, they did not always immediately have the means to purchase land and build an actual church structure. They may have worshipped in a shared building or even outside when the weather permitted.[32] Still, church members passed away and they needed to be buried, and their funerals had to be celebrated. Even when a congregation did have the land and funds to construct a church building, these early African American houses of worship were often quite small and likely not capable of holding the amount of people who would have been in attendance at a funeral based on descriptions of the events. Houses were often even smaller, and so the logical place for these traditions to take place was outside. Figure 3 shows a photograph of a wake or visitation of a deceased African American woman in Charlottesville, Virginia taking place outside of her home. The elaborate funerals held during the time of enslavement also took place outside in wooded cemeteries, and it would make sense for this tradition to continue to some degree after slavery came to an end. A 1953 painting (Figure 4) depicts an African American funeral which is taking place outdoors near a small grove of trees and highlights the extreme emotion being displayed by the attendees. Depictions such as this from the twentieth century showing African American funerals are somewhat reminiscent of the drawings depicting slave funerals and show a level of continuity between the funeral ceremonies from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

Given the social and cultural importance of funeral rituals, it is reasonable to assume that some deliberate thought and planning was put into the design of the spaces where they were held. But while there is a fair amount of documentation regarding the funerals themselves, there

[32] Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*.

is very little, if any, pertaining to the overall design and landscape of the cemeteries or the reasoning behind it.

Chapter Two

Examining the Material: Five Albemarle County Cemeteries

In order to supplement the available descriptions of funeral rituals and cemeteries of the enslaved communities in the South, field work was conducted to further explore the landscape of historic African American cemeteries in rural Virginia. The focus of this fieldwork was to attempt to ascertain any patterns in the layout and vegetation of late nineteenth century African American cemeteries in their current states that could potentially be attributed to their initial design given the dynamic nature of such landscapes. Five sites in Albemarle County, Virginia were chosen; Mt. Calvary Baptist Church Cemetery (1869) in Ivy, Virginia, Mount View Baptist Church Cemetery (pre-1909) in Batesville, Virginia, Union Run Baptist Church Cemetery (1865) in Keswick, Virginia, Chestnut Grove Baptist Church Cemetery (pre-1892) in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Hickory Hill Baptist Church Cemetery in Charlottesville, VA (Figure 5). All of the cemeteries that were chosen are connected to African American churches established in the late nineteenth century shortly after the end of slavery. Cemeteries that were associated with churches were deliberately chosen for two reasons. First, their connection to a church made it easier to find and access the sites; it is relatively common for old cemeteries (especially African American cemeteries) not to appear on modern maps and be difficult to locate. It also seemed that churches would best reflect the mainstream culture and traditions of the community as a whole as compared to smaller family cemeteries that might have their own, more individualized

practices. Additionally, all but one of the cemeteries chosen are associated with churches that are still active and so the sites are all definitively not abandoned or forgotten.

The conscious decision was also made to focus specifically on cemeteries in the county of Albemarle, rather than in the City of Charlottesville. There would possibly be a cultural and lifestyle difference inherent between city and rural life, as well as the obvious limitation of land and landscape use in a city. Additionally, in the city at this time many African Americans were buried in the black sections of segregated city cemeteries, which would have been a very different experience from an exclusively African American community and church-based cemetery, so only cemeteries in rural areas were chosen for this field work. Each of these cemeteries is either still in use or was in use up until the 1980s (the latter includes two of the three locations, both of whose associated churches began using new cemeteries around this time), but the focus here is primarily on the material and layout of the cemetery as it existed from the time immediately following the Civil War to about 1950.

Mt. Calvary Baptist church (Figure 6) was officially founded in 1869 after a group of free African Americans in Ivy, Virginia grew tired of being forced to worship in the local Episcopal church's basement. While the land for the actual church building would not be gifted to the congregation until 1894, it is certainly possible that members of the congregation were buried in the cemetery, about half a mile down the road from the church itself, prior to the building being constructed. The cemetery is situated on a hill, with forest all around, and a small ravine at the base of the hill. The back of the cemetery disappears into the woods, becoming progressively more overgrown, making it difficult if not impossible to tell where the cemetery actually ends.

Upon entering Mt. Calvary Baptist Church Cemetery, one is struck by the number of yucca plants dotting the hill. Plants such as yucca, periwinkle, cedar, holly, and perennial flowers

were all used as grave markers beginning with enslaved laborers. Yucca plants were said to ward off evil spirits with their spear-like fronds, and also symbolize lasting life. Perennial plantings were also thought to symbolize everlasting life, as were cedar, holly and other evergreens. The small periwinkle flowers have associations of friendship and love.[33] While plantings such as these are common in most early African American cemeteries, Mount Calvary has a particularly robust population of yucca and boxwood, more-so than any of the other cemeteries that I surveyed. Most of the evergreen bushes have grown quite large over the years, almost giving the appearance of being wild plants left to their own devices for many years. However, upon closer inspection, many of these bushes have small uninscribed stones or cement blocks hidden beneath the branches clearly indicating that they were planted deliberately to commemorate or further mark a loved one's burial.

Additional indications of graves were found in the form of field stones, iron pipes and fence posts, and small metal funeral home markers. Many graves were not marked at all (or the marker had long ago deteriorated as narratives describe the use of impermanent markers such as wooden crosses) and were only identifiable by the telltale depressions they had left in the ground. The Mount Calvary Cemetery also contains a fair number of more typical modern gravestones of carved marble or granite with names and epitaphs inscribed into the stone; all of these more traditional carved stone grave markers are dated from the 1920s or later.

Near the top of the hill that Mt. Calvary Cemetery lies on, there is a very large stump that looked as if it had been cut in the past several years. This image of a large prominently placed tree brings to mind the few available images depicting nineteenth and early twentieth century

[33] Lynn Rainville. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*.

African American funerals in which trees were a main focal point of the scene and seemed to contain the gatherers as they mourned. The stump was several feet in diameter and would have been the base of a very large tree in an otherwise cleared space which seemed that it would have to have been deliberately left standing when the cemetery was formed. From the vantage point of the stump of this tree, one looks down the hill that makes up the cemetery upon a fairly large cleared and open space that was free of any obvious grave markers, plant or stone. This particular spot seems to be ideally situated for someone to speak (or preach) to a large crowd gathered in the cemetery. A photograph from 2014 shows the cemetery when the tree was still standing, and the trunk splits into a 'V' allowing for the branches to be widely spread out, maximizing protection from the hot sun or inclement weather. (Figure 7). Based on the placement of this tree and the detectable burials nearby it appears that this large tree was deliberately left in place rather than being cleared to create, delineate, and shelter the space in which funerals were held. An aerial map of the cemetery from 1937 (Figure 8) further illustrates the space defining presence of this focal tree, as well as showing how three to four additional trees act in conjunction with the largest to form additional clearly defined spaces within the cemetery. The largest trees are oriented on the west side of the cemetery, situated such that they would provide shade in the afternoon when funerals were likely to be held.

Mount View Baptist Church Cemetery (Figure 9) is also about half a mile down the road from the actual building of its affiliated church; it is unclear exactly when Mount View Baptist Church was established, the earliest record I was able to find was from 1909. The Mount View Cemetery is directly adjacent to a historically white cemetery, Wild Rose, and it may be that the older section of the cemetery predates the formation of the church, who then took the nearby burial site under their care and use for church members. Looking at a current aerial view of the

two cemeteries side-by-side, the difference is striking (Figure 10). Compared to the white cemetery, Mount View appears to lack any sense of formality or organization, and seems as though it could just be a nondescript clearing in the woods. In sharp contrast to Wild Rose Cemetery which has large a large decorative cast iron gate and clearly defined boundaries, Mount View Baptist Church's cemetery is very discreet and not easily noticed. A relatively new wood fence separates the cemetery from the road it is on, but a group of trees completely conceals its location from the main road, requiring visitors to turn onto a smaller side road in order to find the entrance.

The cemetery itself appears to have two distinct phases of burials, on the southwest side is a series of unmarked graves and those marked only by small fieldstones. This area is further from the road and noticeably more wooded than the newer portion, with a number of trees having been left to grow naturally within the space. It also lacks clear boundaries or fences, as is the case in most of the other sites in this study, whereas the more newly cleared section has the modern wood fence and gate bordering the road. This area of the cemetery has carved gravestones dating from the 1930s, but the majority of the more recent burials here are commemorated only by small metal funeral home markers, dating from the 1960s to the 2010s. Again, at first glance the burials seem to be placed haphazardly without any real sense of organization (in sharp contrast to the adjacent European American cemetery). There are several areas with concentrations of multiple graves, but for the most part those which are marked do not indicate that the grouping is necessarily organized by family or relation.

The third cemetery was of a slightly different nature; Union Run Baptist Church (Figure 11) was founded by Robert Hughes, the enslaved worker and blacksmith for Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's grandson. In 1865, Randolph gifted the land that the church and

cemetery occupy to the congregation. Since the land was gifted to the congregation all at once, the Union Run cemetery is situated directly next to the church. The site is also much more similar to typical European American cemeteries than the other cemeteries that are a part of this study. The cemetery itself is arranged within a clearly delineated rectangle and the burials are organized in a recognizable, if not completely strict, linear pattern. The burials are also arranged in clear family plots which is made evident by inscriptions as well as by shape and style. While the typical field stone and vegetation markers are present, as well as some burials with an absence of any currently existing markers, the majority are in fact carved and inscribed stone, beginning even with some of the very earliest nineteenth century burials.

One possible explanation for this striking difference in layout is that the congregation at Union Run may have had a desire to set themselves apart from other African American congregations and they displayed this by creating a cemetery which spoke of wealth, aspiration, and conformity to the dominant white culture. It is certainly possible that the congregation did, in fact, have more wealth or prestige than other rural African American churches, which may have been due to its founding members' association with Thomas Jefferson and the Hemmings family. This congregation may have felt itself to be of a higher status than other local African American churches and elected to communicate that through their cemetery, and likely their church building, the most obvious outward representations of their congregation to neighboring communities.

Another noticeable difference between Union Run and the previous cemeteries is that there was a greater number of large, older trees present here than the others. They were almost all concentrated in the half of the space furthest from the church building, which is also the part of the cemetery containing all of the newest (post 1920s) grave markers. Delineating the physical

point at which this shift seems to occur, the two largest and oldest trees in the cemetery, about ten feet apart, are situated at approximately the longitudinal center of the cemetery, and dominate the space by literally towering over the cemetery graves. It is unclear whether they were intentionally planted or simply left uncleared when the cemetery was created, but similar to the previous two cemeteries, these trees are situated at the highest relative point of the cemetery (which in this case is not much different from the lowest) and at the top of a clear space free of major vegetation or burial markers and serve to create a distinct visual and physical space. Like Mt. Calvary Cemetery, these trees are oriented on the west side of the cemetery.

Based on the pattern of dates on the headstones, it seems likely that these trees were initially situated at the far end of the original 1865 cemetery which was later expanded further back away from the church building to create more space, where more trees were left uncleared or allowed to grow naturally. These trees may not have been more fully cleared due to the fact that the funeral space was already created by the existing trees, or perhaps by this time in the congregation's trajectory funerary practices were changing and, like the cemetery layout and grave markers, veering more towards traditional European American practices. Whatever the reason, it is clear that a very intentional choice was made for the two large trees to remain in the center of the older portion of the cemetery in order to create a strong visual and spatial presence.

The Hickory Hill cemetery (Figure 12) is the only one of the five whose parent church is no longer active in the original location. However, there is a different congregation that currently occupies the building and so there is still some care being taken to maintain the cemetery area. This site is somewhat different from the others in that it has become much more wooded and overgrown throughout most of the cemetery, making it difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly where the cemetery ends and the adjoining forest which surrounds it on three sides

begins. The forested nature of the site also makes it difficult to identify burials which may have utilized plants as burial markers, aside from the occasional distinctive yucca plants that dot the area. The overgrowth and reforestation occurring in the cemetery is primarily in the area with the older burials (based on what grave markers are dated) and the area in the northwest of the cemetery which has the newest grave markers is well cleared. The cemetery is located on a relatively steep hill, at the top of which stands the modest cinderblock church building. Also at the top of the hill, situated between the church building and the cemetery, are the largest and oldest oak trees (Figure 13). The most prominent of these trees stands in the northwest corner of the landscape, near the entrance to the cemetery at the top of the hill and adjacent to the older burials at the site, creating an ideal space for outdoor gatherings.

The Chestnut Grove Baptist Church cemetery (Figure 14) was one of only two sites that is still in use and also one of the oldest, with the earliest legible grave marker being from 1892. It is located immediately behind the church building from the main road. The burials are not arranged in a linear pattern, but as is typical appear are more haphazard. All are roughly facing East, though the exact angle at which they do so varies depending on the area of the cemetery, which is not uncommon in older African American cemeteries such as this one.[34] As with the other sites, yucca is the most prevalent planting followed by boxwoods and other evergreen shrubs. Of all the sites looked at for this study, Chestnut Grove has the highest percentage of fieldstone grave markers. This is likely due to the cemetery's age, as fieldstones became significantly less popular as the process of carving marble and then granite headstones was mechanized and therefore much more affordable.

[34] Lynn Rainville. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*.

Like the other cemeteries that were surveyed for this project, there is a lack of clear boundaries or fences at the Chestnut Grove cemetery. One side is bordered by the church building and another by a road, but the other two cemetery boundaries are somewhat ambiguous. The westernmost side fades into an area of new growth forest that then becomes a residential property and the southern end is also bordered by trees. The way that it is arranged within the property leaves space for future burials and expansion if need. Erecting a fence around the relatively large space would be costly, and perhaps need to be moved at some point and so perhaps the lack of one is a practical choice based on cost and function.

The largest and oldest trees in the Chestnut Grove Baptist Church cemetery are concentrated in the oldest section nearest to the church building. As is the case with the other sites, the oldest grave markers are found closest to the church building and there is a prevalence of plant and shrub vegetation used to decorate or commemorate the gravesites. There is also a pattern of large historic trees present in the landscape that appear to have been left deliberately in order to mark the space and use of the cemetery. There is one large tree tucked in the relatively small space between the church and where the cemetery begins. This may have originally served to indicate the entrance to the cemetery, most often entered after the short walk upon exiting the church. There are four other similarly aged trees, judging by their size, that appear to mark the boundaries of what may have been the original cemetery based on the age of the headstones. Two on each side of the east and west roughly mirror each other in placement to create the oblong rectangular shape of this portion of the cemetery (Figure 15). In this case the trees appear to have been left uncleared to create an entrance and the four corners of the cemetery space, acting as the visual envelope inside which the burials sit.

The Chestnut Grove cemetery is unique in the fact that several of the newer burials are elaborately decorated with both common objects and a variety of plantings. They share the characteristics of being bordered by bricks or stones with objects placed on top of the grave including figurines or statues and crosses as well as fabric flowers, all of which are placed with great care. They also have multiple plantings on the graves including the more traditional yucca, but also rose bushes and small pine trees. In addition to carefully placed decorations and plantings that speak to a modernized version of more traditional burial practices, they also have modern granite headstones and epitaphs, blending new and old burial ways.

The five cemetery landscapes revealed several patterns that were consistent with both contemporary descriptions found in written and oral histories, as well as more recent studies of the cemeteries of enslaved laborers and free African Americans in the nineteenth century. Lynn Rainville in her book *Hidden Histories* describes in detail the physical appearance of these landscapes in Albemarle County. Her research is largely centered on the burial markers, plantings, and organization of the cemeteries[35], the results of which my own field work were consistent. However, the conclusions below have been derived entirely from my own field work for this study based on the five cemeteries discussed in this chapter.

1. They are located on otherwise undesirable land, often on a hill or uneven ground.

2. There is a lack of distinct boundaries or fences.

3. There is a seeming lack of orthogonal organization; burials appear to be arranged haphazardly.

[35] Rainville. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*.

4. Burial markers tend to be uninscribed, impermanent (including plants), or unmarked.

5. They are likely to be overgrown or have the appearance of not being cared for.

6. There is abundant vegetation including large trees.

7. Trees serve as space defining features.

The cemeteries in Albemarle County seemed to lack the typical grid-like organization of burials which is associated with Anglo-American cemeteries, with burials arranged in a more haphazard way and often without clear family plots. There was also a relatively large percentage of burials which were either unmarked or marked only with uninscribed fieldstones. Less permanent markers were also common, most frequently small metal funeral home markers and various forms of vegetation. Plants were a very common form of burial marker at these sites, with yucca being the most prevalent, but also many marked with bushes such as boxwoods, roses, or small trees. In some cases, the amount of commemorative and marker plants have led to an appearance of being overgrown, and in others the sites have indeed become overgrown with new forest growth making its way into the sacred space of the cemetery.

It was clear, however, that each cemetery contained at least a few trees which were large and old enough to be considered as part of the original design and landscape of the space and certain patterns emerged for the placement of these trees. This suggests an element of intentionality, where trees were deliberately used to give spatial meaning to the cemeteries that was consistent among multiple sites. At two of the sites, trees were placed near what would likely have been the original entrance to the cemetery, perhaps delineating the shift from secular to sacred space and marking the boundary of the cemetery. There was also evidence of these

trees being placed, or left uncleared, at the outer boundaries of the oldest sections of the cemeteries. Of the three cemeteries which were located on hills, all had a tree placed at the highest point of the hill within the cemetery boundaries. There was also a consistent lack of burials immediately surrounding these trees, suggesting the possibility that they were located with the intention to create and maintain a gathering space within the cemetery with the tree serving as both focal point and a provider of shelter when funerals were held outdoors.

Chapter Three

The Significance of Trees as Agents of Spatial and Spiritual Meaning

Based on the findings from surveying five cemeteries in Albemarle County, Virginia, perhaps the most prominent pattern to emerge was the use of trees to create and define space within these historic landscapes. This was done in two ways. One was using trees as boundary markers for the sites. Fences were largely not used to enclose the cemeteries, but it was common for at least two sides to be delineated by a boundary made of trees. In some cases, this boundary was ambiguous as the graves faded into a wooded area without a an easily determined borderline, and in others a tree line clearly indicated the boundaries of the cemetery. The other way that trees are used in these sites is within the cemetery itself. This was done either with one prominent tree visually and spatially dominating the landscape, or an arrangement of multiple trees that define a specified area within the larger landscape of the sacred cemetery space.

The reasons for the use of trees in historic African American cemeteries is likely multifaceted. In many West African theological and cultural tradition, trees hold a sacred place in the belief system, and there is a rich tradition of sacred groves having deep spiritual significance.[36] This heritage of groves of trees having sacred meaning may also have contributed to the fact that, based on available evidence, most slave cemeteries were located in wooded areas or surrounded by trees. In a tradition that was first observed through the European lens around the turn of the seventeenth century, sacred groves serve multiple social, religious, and political

[36] Michael J. Sheridan and Celia Nyamweru. "African Sacred Groves." Sacred groves, Forest conservation, Social aspects. Ecological Dynamics & Social Change. Oxford, Athens, OH, Pretoria: James Currey, Ohio University Press, Unisa Press, 2008.

purposes throughout West Africa. These sites can host a wide variety of cults and ceremonies, and there is no hard and fast rule as to how they are used and are places where secret societies meet, political events take place, medicine is practiced, and even the dead are sometimes buried.[37] Sacred groves continue to be a prevalent and vital part of West African culture. Acknowledging this importance, UNESCO has begun to consider these sacred groves of enough significance for them to be deemed cultural heritage sites. [38] These sites were and are ubiquitous in West Africa and a necessary part of any village, "In Benin, the foundation of a new village was always accompanied with the foundation of new sacred places settled near a special tree…or inside a grove."[39] Not only did sacred groves held special spiritual meaning, but the meaning imbued to individual trees was an important part of the theology of much of West African in multiple ways, "they were a common motif in African creation stories, some Africans believed them to be the dwelling place of spirits, and their seed, growth, and death stood as a metaphor to the rhythms of the human lifecycle."[40] Given the meaning that trees and sacred groves played in daily life and the collective importance that the sites had to people all over West Africa, it is certain that enslaved Africans in America would have felt the importance of trees and groves, and possibly even sought to recreate some form of the traditional sacred grove in the new landscape in which they found themselves.

The trees also serve to conceal, to some extent, the space of the cemetery. The ambiguous boundaries that blend into wooded areas and tree lined borders obscure the cemetery space, allowed for increased privacy during burial and funeral services, as well as provided a measure

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[37] Jan Woudstra and Colin Roth, eds. *A History of Groves*. 120-121.
[38] Allison Ormsby. "Cultural and Conservation Values in Sacred Forests of Ghana." *Sacred Species and Sites: Advances In Biocultural Conservation.*
[39] Jan Woudstra and Colin Roth, eds. *A History of Groves.*123.
[40] Edward E. Andrews. "Creatures of Mimic and Imitation: The Liberty Tree, Black Elections, and the Politicization of African Ceremonial Space in Revolutionary Newport, Rhode Island." 4.

of protection to the cemetery itself and the bodies buried within. Another function served by the trees is the practical purpose of creating shelter and space in which to bury and mourn the dead. The church buildings themselves were quite small, and with the importance placed on funeral attendance, it is likely that at least some of the funeral would have taken place outside due to the necessities of space limitation. In such cases a large oak would provide a known gathering place, a visual and physical focal point, and the practical benefits of shelter or shade. In some cases, two or more trees may even act as architecture by creating a defined space within the cemetery for these activities to take place, as was the case at Union Run and Mt. Calvary cemeteries in Albemarle County.

Due to the fact that enslaved laborers were compelled to worship in secret, they often found themselves creating their own sacred spaces in places unseen. This sometimes included clandestine meetings in an appointed cabin with people designated to keep watch, utilizing an existing building on the outskirts of the plantation, or it meant meeting at a predetermined location in the woods. Sometimes makeshift shelters were constructed out of shrubs and branches, as explained by former slave Arthur Greene, "We jes made er bush arbor by cutin' bushes dat was full of green leaves an' puttin' em on top of four poles reachin' from pole to pole. Den sometimes we'd have dem bushes put roun' to kiver de sides an' back from der bottom to der top. All us get together in dis arbor for de meetin'"[41] These bush arbors, also called hush arbors or hush harbors, were sites for religious meetings that were made out of the trees and bushes of the forest. As a shelter was not always able to be constructed, a particular spot in the forest could also serve as a place of worship, perhaps marked by a certain tree or group of trees.[42]

[41] Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*. 6.
[42] Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*.

This repeated use of a known and specifically chosen location in the forest for religious meetings is in itself the creation of a type of sacred grove that held special meaning because of its connection to worship and spiritual use.

The layering of spiritual meaning onto a tree or group of trees is also echoed in the use of specific prayer grounds by enslaved laborers. In an interview about his experience, Richard Carruthers said, "Us niggers used to have a prayin' ground down in the hollow." Andrew Moses also remembered this practice as well as a specific tree that had special spiritual significance to his mother, "Us colored folks had prayer grounds. My Mammy's was a old twisted thick-rooted muscadine bush."[43] This example shows the importance that could be placed on one particular tree which seemed to create a special spiritual connection for an individual. The description of the bush as twisted and thick rooted speaks to the West African association between twisted roots and branches with the presence of the spirit and guarding of houses.[44] Certain wooded areas or specific trees or bushes may have been chosen as places to pray and worship due to their special characteristics that demonstrate a greater connection to the spiritual or the sacred

Similarly, the cemeteries where the bodies of deceased enslaved workers were laid to rest were often wooded or surrounded by trees. Lynn Rainville describes her experiences searching for previously unlocated or undocumented slave cemeteries and the landscape features which she came to learn were often indicative of a burial ground, one of which was the presence of a ring of large trees.[45] It is likely that the enslaved community living on a plantation did not have much choice in what land was used to bury their dead and would have been given unproductive or difficult to farm land for this use. This landscape anomaly could also occur for multiple reasons;

[43] Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*. 6.
[44] Grey Gundaker and Tynes Cowan. *Keep Your Head to the Sky*. 38.
[45] Lynn Rainville. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. 14.

either trees were cleared from an already wooded area to create the space for the cemetery leaving a border of trees around it, the trees were planted deliberately in an unwooded area, or if given the choice, it could indicate a preference to use wooded areas as burial grounds. In the case of the latter two, this action would strongly to the creation of an adapted type of sacred grove for the purpose of acting out important funerary rituals and burying the dead.

Of the cemeteries that were surveyed for this project, a common thread was the fact that the boundaries were defined primarily by trees. The Hickory Hill, Mount Calvary, and Mt. View cemeteries were sheltered within a boundary of trees and forest growth. In the cases of these three cemeteries the boundaries were indistinct enough in some places that it was difficult to tell where the cemetery ended and the bordering woods began. Kami Fletcher speaks to nineteenth century African American cemeteries as spaces of intentional separatism where they were free to celebrate the dead in the way that they chose and bury them without the forced segregation in city cemeteries of the time.[46] Surrounding the space with the barrier of trees could have added an additional physical as well as spiritual boundary, claiming the space as their own, independent of the hostile and dehumanizing world of the nineteenth century south. These trees can serve as a barrier to protect the spiritual space of the cemetery and the sacred rituals that took place within it, as well as protecting the graves themselves from dangers of the outside world.

These dangers included both vandalism and the very real threat of bodies being stolen by grave robbers to use in medical schools. As anatomical research became increasingly important to medical schools in the nineteenth century, a shortage of corpses on which to study resulted in the common practice of grave robbing to acquire bodies to dissect and study. Not surprisingly,

[46] Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher eds. *Till Death Do Us Part*. 150.

African American graves were at a disproportionate risk of being vandalized in this way. By camouflaging their cemeteries, African American communities may have provided some measure of protection from vandalism and desecration. Kirt Von Daacke describes a culture at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville where students at the medical school went to great lengths to obtain bodies to use as cadavers, often specifically targeting the remains of African Americans. This practice was generally accepted by the University and condoned by professors, and while laws were passed to prevent stealing bodies after burial, they were often not applied when those bodies were African American.[47] Because of this, the threat of the remains of deceased loved ones from their burial sites was a real one in African American communities surrounding the University of Virginia. This threat was so real, in fact, that an antebellum black newspaper, Freedman's Journal, even included in an 1827 issue burial instructions for deterring potential grave robbers from stealing the body of the deceased, "As soon as the corpse is deposited in the grave, let a truss of long wheaten straw be opened and distributed in layers, as equally as may be with every layer of earth, until the while is filled up. By this method the corpse will be very effectually secured."[48] Given this history, it is no wonder that the protection of the bodies of their kin would be important to African Americans even after the end of slavery. Natural burial markers such as field stones or vegetation and the intentionally discreet presence of cemeteries that blended into the landscape may have provided some measure of protection against would-be grave robbers and other potential vandals.

In addition to being bordered by trees or woods, the majority of the cemetery landscapes surveyed for this study contained some measure of seemingly unrestrained vegetation growth

[47] Maurie Dee McInnis and Louis P. Nelson. *Educated In Tyranny: Slavery At Thomas Jefferson's University*. 180-9.
[48] Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds. *Death and the American South*. 126.

within the cemetery itself. Hickory Hill Cemetery was largely overgrown with new forest, most of the graves being set within a landscape of trees, dense vines, and shrubs. Similarly, the older portion of Mt. View Cemetery was obscured by new growth trees and ground cover. The intentional commemorative plantings of boxwood, dogwood, and yucca and been left largely unmanicured giving the appearance of natural and wild growth scattered throughout the space. While this type of growth within a cemetery is sometimes interpreted as neglect through the Anglo-American lens, it can also have other meanings specific to the African American cultural values and belief system.

Sociocultural anthropologist Mark Auslander described an event in rural Georgia pertaining to one such overgrown African American cemetery. In the town's old cemetery, the historic segregated portion occupied by African American burials had been overgrown with new growth trees, bushes, and vines. When a pine pulp dealer razed the wooded area, the descendants of those buried here deeply grieved for the loss of the trees which had held a special meaning to them as a crucial part of the cemetery and years later still spoke of missing the presence of the trees. "For Mrs. Neuman trees evoke proper family remembrance and continuity, signaling productive linkages to ascendent generations. Cemetery trees, in particular, remind her of her mother, her mother's sisters, grandmothers, and great aunts, the women who taught her how to 'go by the trees' in finding gravesites."[49] In this example, the trees served as way finders to locate and connect with the graves of ancestors as well as providing an additional, individual, layer for spatial understanding of the sacred cemetery landscape.

[49] Mark Auslander. "Going by the Trees: Death and Regeneration in Georgia's Haunted Landscape." 194-5.

Trees planted intentionally at the heads of, sometimes, otherwise unmarked graves to commemorate the deceased would certainly have special meaning as well. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet A. Jacobs describes going to the cemetery where her parents are buried before running away from enslavement. When she visits, she sits at the graves of her parents, where a tree was planted at the head of her mother's grave. She describes kissing the tree, praying for guidance, and feeling renewed strength in her faith and her connection to her parents by that "prayer among the graves."[50] For Jacobs, communing with the tree planted at her mother's grave provided her with a deeper connection to her ancestors as well as to her faith. Folklore also tells us that some believed that the trees bordering graves or burial grounds inhabited the spirits of the dead and it was forbidden to burn the wood from these trees.[51] In these examples, the trees are not ornamental landscaping features, but tangible representations of the spirits of the deceased as well as a connection to God. This emphasizes the meaning attributed to the trees and their relationships to faith and ancestors.

Diane Jones argues that "The naturalistic design, random appearance, and pattern of graves and monuments in cemeteries overlaid by African-American culture are often viewed as a sign of neglect as compared to the mowed lawns and tidy rows of graves seen in Euro-American Cemeteries. This view often negates the value to culture and environment held in these places. These cemeteries express the importance of ritual and ceremony over form and related Euro-American concepts of perpetual maintenance."[52] To her, a superficial reading of historic African American cemeteries overlooks the actual meaning imbedded within these landscapes. This concept can be seen in several of the historic African American cemeteries in Albemarle county

[50] Harriet A. Jacobs (Harriet Ann). *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl.*
[51] Newbell Niles Puckett. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro.* 97.
[52] Diane Jones. "The City of the Dead: The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery." 235.

that display similar characteristics of a seemingly random appearance and natural vegetation. The Daughters of Zion Cemetery in Charlottesville, Virginia had an appearance similar to that described above, as Bernadette Whitsett-Hammond recalled from her childhood, before it was largely cleared by the city in the 1970s. Whitsett-Hammond spoke fondly of visiting the cemetery in her youth when it was full of trees and plants like rose bushes, stating that it, "Gave a sense of security. It was covered by the trees, and shady and breezy and a really nice place to be."[53]

Trees can also serve a more practical purpose in the cemetery landscape. Trees of a certain size or particular appearance may have been used to signal where a cemetery was located. Searching for an old slave cemetery, a descendant of enslaved laborers hunted on the former plantation's land looking to the trees to find the location of the burial ground, "Deep in the forest, he pointed out an old, gnarled oak that he was convinced marked the outer boundary of the graveyard."[54] A different type of wayfinding device from the trees growing within the cemetery, this tree signaled the location of the burial ground and acted as a marker to the site's boundary. This is reiterated in the use of trees at the Chestnut Grove Baptist Church cemetery where five particularly large trees seem to announce the cemetery's entrance and boundaries. Additionally, trees had the ability to provide a focal point and gathering place, offer shelter for funeral ceremonies, and to define spaces within the cemetery landscape. The presence of one to a few very large trees, likely over one hundred years old, within the cemetery boundaries was a noticeable constant among each cemetery landscape that I surveyed.

[53] Bernadette Whitsett-Hammond. Personal Interview. April 2021.
[54] Mark Auslander. "Going by the Trees: Death and Regeneration in Georgia's Haunted Landscape." 1.

The practice of using trees as meeting places under which to gather or conduct ceremonies and rituals has a precedence in the social and cultural history of enslaved Africans in America. In the eighteenth century in Newport, Rhode Island, the local enslaved population held what were known as "black elections" at a specific, particularly large and recognizable, tree at the same time each year for over a decade. The black elections were, "important ceremonies where Africans would celebrate, share stories, engage in feats of strength, elect a black 'king' or 'governor' and process through the streets when the day was done."[55] In the case of the Newport black elections, the tree served as the known gathering place and venue for an annual ceremony that held important cultural value and meaning for the enslaved Africans living in the city.

Trees continued to be used as meeting places and locations of other ceremonies, especially religious meetings, and notably as locations for funerals. A manuscript detailing the life and career of a popular African American reverend in nineteenth century Virginia talks about the enslaved community insisting on having him officiate at a deceased's funeral. When the reverend is in town and the funeral takes place, he preaches the service from under a large old oak tree.[56] A similar scene is shown in the photograph of an early twentieth century African American funeral (Figure 16), with a crowd gathered beneath a large tree where the funeral service is taking place. The practice of conducting funeral ceremonies under trees is both practical, a tree's branches provide shelter from the sun or rain and can act as a known gathering place, but can serve other purposes as well. When trees operate as a metaphor for the human lifecycle and impart a closeness to faith and ancestors, they imbue an additional layer of spiritual meaning to the funeral ritual.

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[55] Edward E. Andrews. "Creatures of Mimic and Imitation: The Liberty Tree, Black Elections, and the Politicization of African Ceremonial Space in Revolutionary Newport, Rhode Island." 2.
[56] William E. Hatcher (William Eldridge). *John Jasper, the Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher.*

Four out of the five Albemarle County cemeteries that were surveyed for my fieldwork had at least one tree old enough to be original to the site, located in a position that suggests it could likely have been an intentionally placed tree, or one left intentionally uncleared when creating the cemetery, for the purpose of providing spatial definition for funeral gatherings. Perhaps the most striking example of this, Mt. Calvary cemetery had the remains of a very large tree at nearly the highest point in the cemetery on a hill, relatively near the entrance. The space beneath it was largely unobstructed and left open, allowing for a crowd to gather, the tree providing an ideal place from which to lead a funeral ceremony. Chestnut Grove cemetery and Hickory Hill cemetery, both had historic trees near the entrance of the cemeteries between the church building and the actual burial ground, a practical and logical place to hold a funeral service. Ywone D. Edwards has argued that within the material culture of the enslaved, "improvisation, not poverty was the hallmark of slave culture."[57] In other words, the enslaved found ways to repurpose found or easily acquired objects that seemingly had no real value, but layered new meanings and values onto those objects through the novel ways that they used and incorporated them into their lives. This concept can also be applied to the way that historic African American cemeteries utilized existing trees and topography to create a new landscape layered with practical and spiritual meaning.

In the landscape of historic African American cemeteries, trees can serve multiple functions that may not be immediately apparent when viewed through the lens of the dominant Euro American cemetery aesthetic. Maintaining a boundary of trees around a cemetery provided an element of privacy and protection to the living who mourned at the cemetery as well as the bodies of the deceased within. The abundance of vegetation in the landscape, including grave

[57] Grey, Gundaker and Tynes Cowan. *Keep Your Head to the Sky*. 251.

marker trees, can imbue the cemetery with greater connections to the spirits of the deceased and to God through the trees' ties to the ancestors and to faith. The naturally occurring trees that reforest a site overtime can be used as wayfinding devices to navigate the cemetery landscape, create additional ties to ancestors and even create a form of sacred grove, speaking to the theological beliefs common in many parts of West Africa. Particularly distinctive trees may have been used to signal the location or boundary of a cemetery. And the trees inside the cemetery can act as a type of architectural device within the landscape to create a physical and visual presence, a gathering place to conduct funeral ceremonies, and provide shelter from the elements.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: John Antrobus, A Plantation Burial, 1860.

Figure 2: A Negro Funeral. 1869. Harper's New Monthly Magazine

Figure 3: “Wake of Miss Gertrude White.” January 4, 1919. Rufus Holsinger.

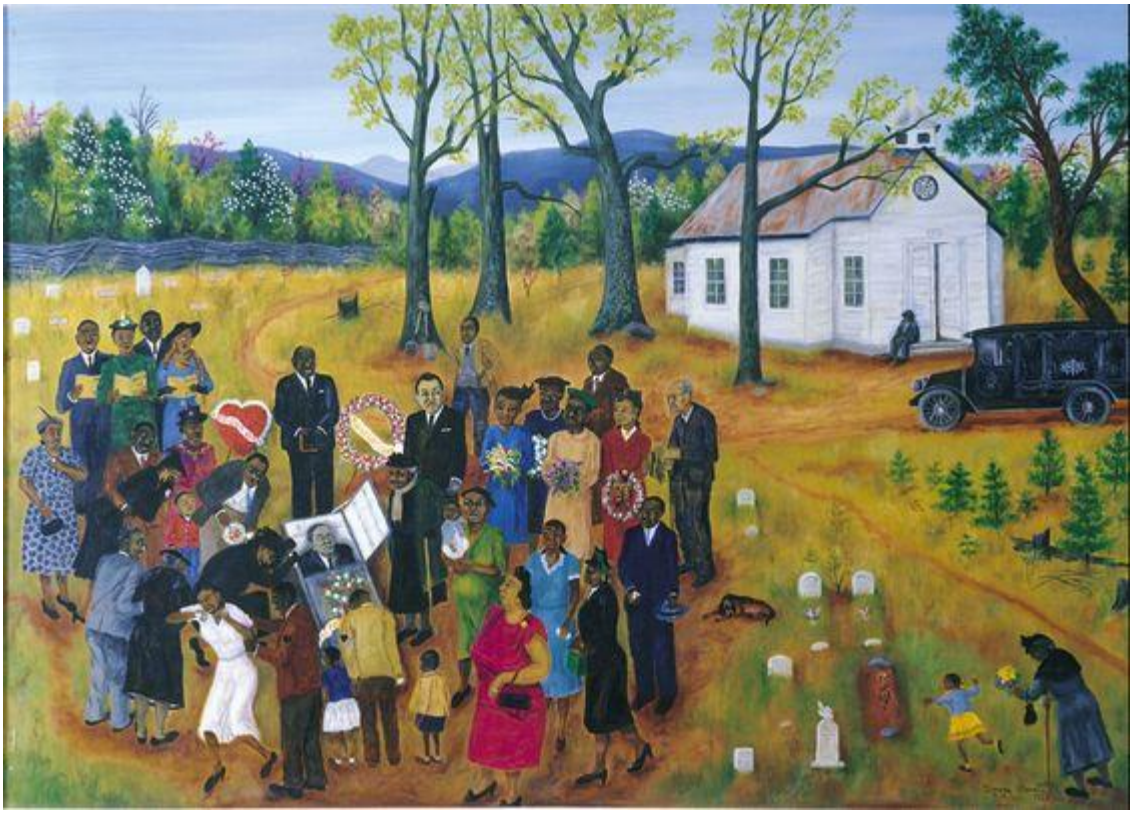

Figure 4: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, 1953. Queena Stovall.

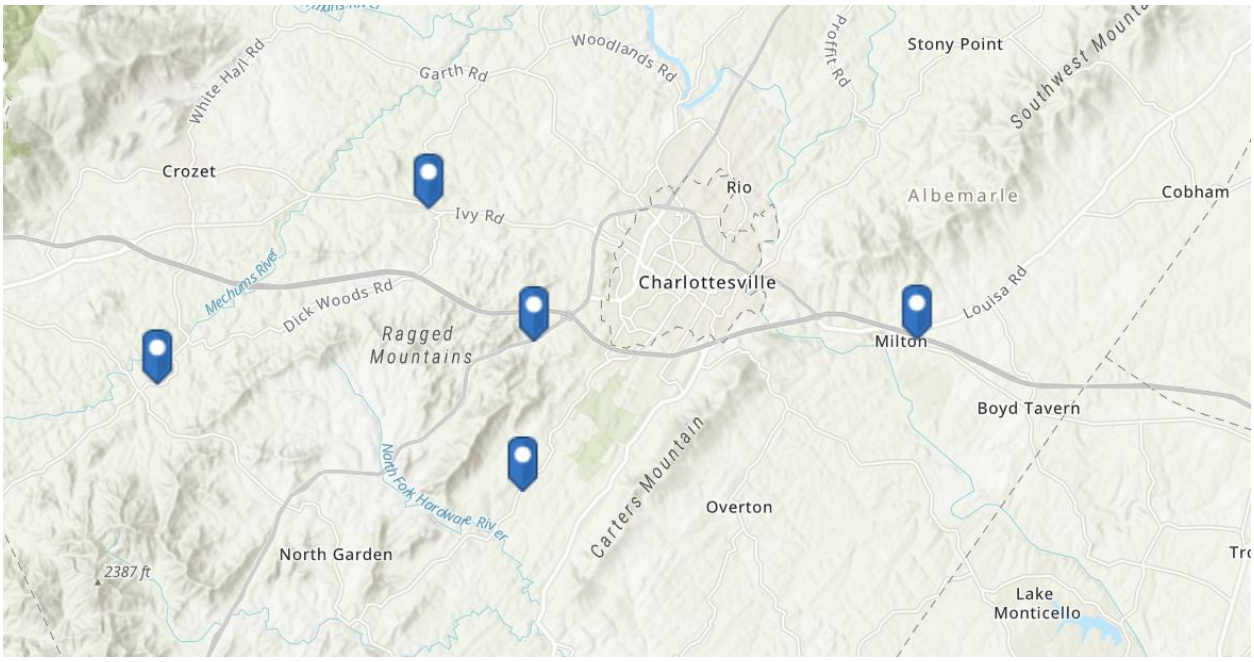

Figure 5: Map showing the locations of the cemeteries included in the fieldwork in Albemarle County, Virginia.

Figure 6: Mount Calvary Baptist Church Cemetery. Photo by author, 2020.

Figure 7: Mount Calvary Baptist Church Cemetery. Photo by Brian Gallagher, 2014.

Figure 8: Mount Calvary Baptist Church Cemetery aerial view, 1937.

Figure 9: Mount View Baptist Church Cemetery. Photo by author, 2020.

Figure 10: Mount View Baptist Church Cemetery, aerial view. Google Maps 2018

Figure 11: Union Run Baptist Church Cemetery. Photo by author, 2020.

Figure 12: Hickory Hill Cemetery. Photo by author, 2020.

Figure 13: Hickory Hill Church and Cemetery. Photo by author, 2020.

Figure 14: Chestnut Grove Baptist Church and Cemetery. Photo by author, 2020.

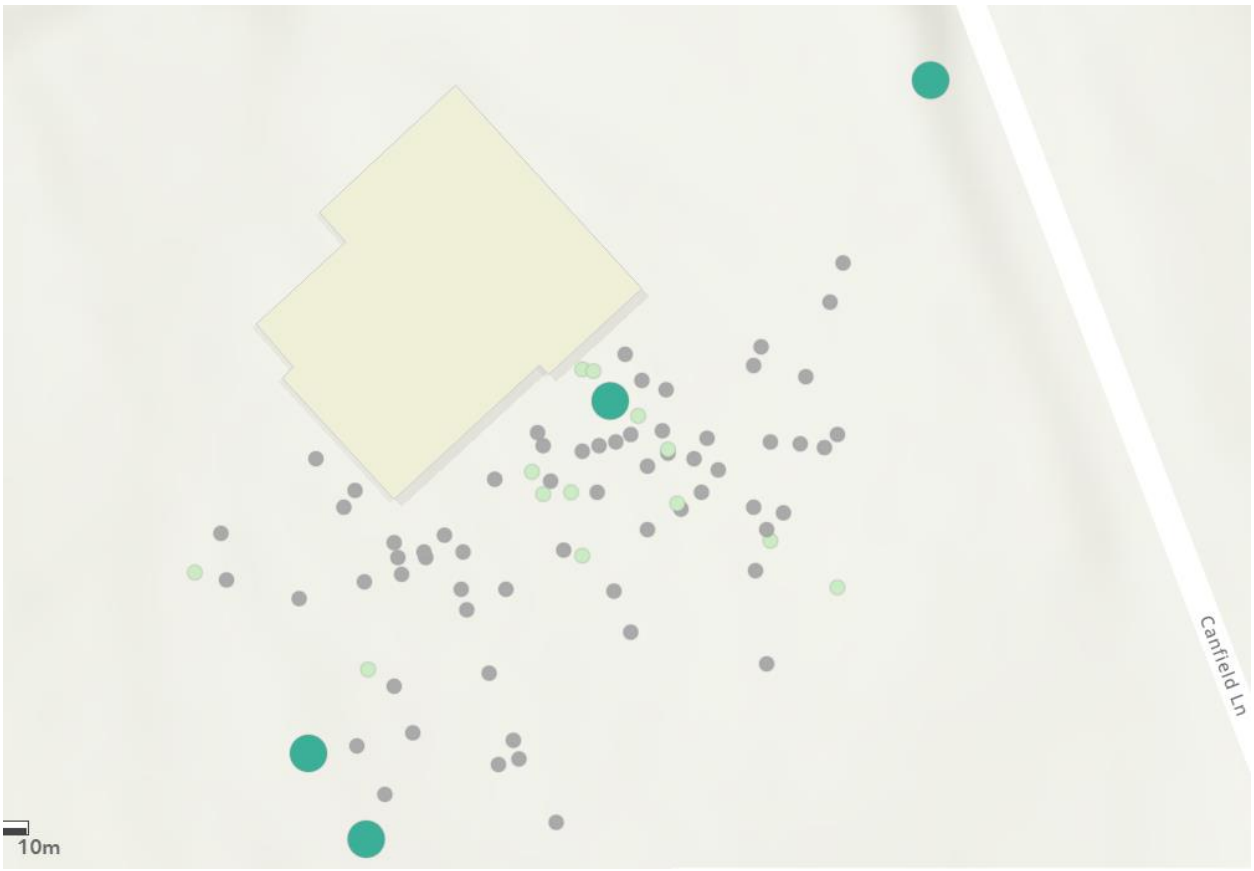

Figure 15: Digital map of Chestnut Grove Baptist Church Cemetery. Modern burials and additions to the landscape have been removed to show how it may have appeared prior to 1950. Created by author using ArcGIS.

Figure 16: Early twentieth century funeral in South Carolina. Photograph by Richard Roberts,