WHERE HISTORY MEETS TECHNOLOGY:
ATLANTA CEMETERIES IMPLEMENT "AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES" TOURS

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Oakland Cemetery was founded in 1850 on hilly terrain in what is today southeast Atlanta. The cemetery is the final resting place for some of Atlanta’s earliest residents, including mayors, other public officials and clergymen. A brick wall surrounding the cemetery was built in 1896, and inside its grounds lie miles of brick streets and walkways lined by magnolia and chestnut trees. Oakland Cemetery has distinct sections for Confederate, Jewish, paupers and black interments.

In 1852, the black section of the cemetery was established by the City Council on sloping ground in a small section of the original six acres in the northeast part of the cemetery. By the onset of the Civil War, 860 blacks were buried in the black section at Oakland Cemetery. When the City of Atlanta purchased the remaining land totaling 48 acres, black graves were moved to the newer section, while separate from other races. Little is known about the black burials prior to Emancipation. African Americans interred during Reconstruction and the latter part of the 19th century represent the full gamut of Atlanta’s black middle class. They include artisans, citizens, clergymen, educators, statesmen and businessmen.

Oakland Cemetery was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on April 28, 1976. The cemetery is owned by the City of Atlanta and managed by the Bureau of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs. Historic Oakland Foundation is the nonprofit organization that educates visitors about the people who are buried in the cemetery, administers preservation initiatives, and sponsors public programs. Following the disastrous tornado that hit the cemetery and surrounding neighborhoods in March 2008, Historic Oakland Foundation (HOF) received a $30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for damages that were not reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Additional support came from a Save America’s Treasures grant. The $200,000 provided funds to restore and preserve up to 55 mausoleums that were damaged. In December 2009, HOF received a $15,000 Partnership-in-Scholarship grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Partnership-in-Scholarship grant program is a component of the National Trust’s African American Places Initiative and is supported by the Ford Foundation. These grants provide financial support for collaborations involving a nonprofit organization and a university or college that aid the interpretation of an African American historic site and raise awareness of their importance in American history. Four projects nationwide were awarded grants totaling $60,000, and this collaboration was the Georgia winner.

Antoine Graves Sr. is buried in the sole mausoleum in the African American Burial Ground at Oakland Cemetery. Eight family members are interred here. Graves was a principal at the Houston Street School and was a successful real estate broker.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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Historic Oakland Foundation partnered with scholars from Kennesaw State University (KSU) to develop “African American Voices”, an exhibition, cell phone tour, and public preservation program. The project team members were: Drs. Catherine Lewis and Jennifer Dickey, public historians from KSU, and Dr. D.L. Henderson, project director and Oakland Foundation board member. D.L. Henderson is currently a board member of Historic South-View Preservation Foundation, too. The project enhanced interpretive efforts and linked the African American burial site at Oakland to South-View Cemetery, Atlanta’s post-Reconstruction cemetery established by and for blacks in 1886 as “a cemetery of their own.”

The exhibition consists of four outdoor panels that focus on African Americans interred at Oakland and South-View. These were: Geography of Race, a panel that describes slavery and Jim Crow practices that shaped the landscape of Oakland Cemetery; Slave Square, a description of Oakland’s African American interments from 1853-1865; African American Burial Ground, the black section that opened in 1866; and, Historic South-View, a panel that describes the origin and history of the cemetery that was founded by six former slaves resulting in Atlanta’s first African American cemetery.

Cell phone tours were implemented at Oakland and South-View that provide audio summaries of the lives and accomplishments of the African Americans who are buried there. The heritage tourist simply stops by the visitors’ center at Oakland to pick up a rack card with the dial-up access phone number and the corresponding site map. Each stop also includes the phone number and the signage is unobtrusive so that the visitor can clearly view the gravesite and hear the audio presentation that is pertinent to that site. Normal minutes apply to the cell phone user as they tour the stops. Here are some of the persons interred in the African American Burial Ground at Oakland Cemetery:

Jacob McKinley, who was born enslaved in North Carolina, became a successful businessman in Atlanta. He employed 150 workers of both races at his brickyard, wood/coal business, and grocery store, and was one of Atlanta’s wealthiest African Americans. McKinley was one of the founders of South-View Cemetery.

Augustus Thompson owned a blacksmith shop in downtown Atlanta. He organized the St. James Lodge, the first African American lodge in the city. Thompson was an Odd Fellow, a fraternal organization that provided financial assistance with burials.

Bishop Wesley John Gaines wanted to preach from an early age, and was the second pastor of Big Bethel A.M.E. Church, founded in 1847. He founded a school in the basement of Big Bethel in 1881 that would become Morris Brown College.

Carrie Steele Logan was born enslaved and was orphaned as a child. When she...
was freed, she began working as a maid at Union Station where she often saw abandoned children. In 1886, she began to take these children home at night, and began fundraising for a larger facility. Though she died in 1900, the Carrie Steele-Pitts Home, Georgia’s first African American orphanage, still operates today. Carrie Steele Logan was inducted into Georgia Women of Achievement for her humanitarian contributions to women’s history in the state.

William Finch was born enslaved in Wilkes County, and, at the age of 15, was an apprentice to a tailor. He opened a tailor shop in Atlanta, and became active in Atlanta politics. He and George Graham, a South-View Cemetery founder, were the first African Americans to serve on the Atlanta City Council in 1870. While a councilman, he fought for public schools and universal education.

The project team formed focus groups that provided input on the inaugural cell phone tour and the exhibition panels. Additionally, they hosted launch parties and volunteer workdays at the cemeteries. A subsequent Reflections article will explore the stops on the cell phone tour at South-View Cemetery, where African American Atlantans have been interred for 125 years. Visit these historic cemeteries and learn more through your cell phone about African Americans who shaped the history of Atlanta. ■

THE GATE CITY AS A HUB FOR MEDICAL SERVICES: HEALTHCARE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS IN ATLANTA

Joy Melton, MHP

Atlanta was a hub for medical services, education and facilities for African Americans in Georgia in the 19th and 20th centuries. This article is the last of three consecutive Reflections articles about healthcare for African Americans in Georgia. Several prominent physicians, hospitals and schools emerged in Atlanta to serve, educate and make a positive impact on African American communities in spite of obstacles imposed in the segregated south.

Gate City Drugstore, heralded as the first Negro drugstore in Georgia, was located on the corner of Auburn Avenue and Bell Street in the Odd Fellows building. The complex also housed the Colored Auditorium, Masonic Lodge and other businesses. The Odd Fellows Building and Auditorium were listed in the National Register of Historic Places on May 2, 1975. Image courtesy of the Atlanta Time Machine

Dr. Roderick Badger is buried at Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

As early as 1859, Dr. Roderick D. Badger (1834-1890) was practicing dentistry in Atlanta as the first African American dentist. Badger was the son of an enslaved mother and a white dentist in DeKalb County. Roderick Badger learned dentistry from J.D. Badger, his father and owner. In a December 1864 account to Governor Joseph Brown, Roderick and his brother Bob Badger are mentioned. They were assistant professors who were educating African American students at a local black church in the aftermath of the Civil War. Roderick became so popular among whites and blacks that white dentists

The gravestone of William Finch is an open archway that represents the soul’s passage from earth into heaven. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

The gravestone of Bishop Wesley John Gaines is planted with rosemary, a Victorian symbol of remembrance. He was a leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Carrie Steele Logan’s grave bears an inscription that reads “mother of orphans, she has done what she could.” She founded the first orphanage in Georgia for African American children. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Bishop Wesley John Gaines' gravesite is planted with rosemary, a Victorian symbol of remembrance. He was a leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

Dr. Roderick Badger is buried at Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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