



September 30, 2025

W. Tim Walker, Executive Director
Metro Historical Commission
1113 Kirkwood Ave
Nashville, TN 37204

Re: DCCS Supplement on African American Burial Grounds

Dear Mr. Walker:

New South Associates (NSA) has completed four phases of cemetery survey toward building the data to create a county-wide cemetery preservation plan. As a supplement to the survey data and management summaries previously submitted, we would like to provide you with a snapshot of the current state of African American burying grounds and our existing knowledge of them. We also hope to provide a broader context for understanding African American cemeteries and burying grounds in Middle Tennessee based on scholarly literature and existing comparable projects.

During the four completed phases of the Davidson County Cemetery Survey (DCCS) from 2021-2025, NSA and Metro Historical Commission (MHC) have documented 531 total cemeteries county-wide. Forty-three (43) of those documented so far are known to have been used exclusively by African American families, churches, or communities. An additional 20 cemeteries are known or believed to include African American burials based on community knowledge. These include nineteenth century white cemeteries that are known and believed to include enslaved burials; adjacent, related African American and white burying grounds; and post-segregation cemeteries. Notably, many other cemeteries generally classified as white dating to the nineteenth century may have adjacent or nearby burials belonging to enslaved populations, especially those associated with large landowning families. While researching the exact number of those is beyond the scope of this memo, it would be an appropriate line of inquiry for a phase dedicated to the exploration of African American burial grounds in Davidson County. An additional 50 cemeteries throughout the county are of unknown affiliation and require additional research.

CONDITIONS

All cemeteries surveyed fell into one of five general usage categories: family, community, corporate, institutional and religious/church affiliated. Family cemeteries represented the largest grouping of usage type with 15 surveyed, all of which were vernacular or informal in nature. Community cemeteries, which included multiple families but were not associated with a church or other institution, and church cemeteries were each represented by 10 surveyed sites. Three (3) of the surveyed cemeteries were

GEORGIA
HEADQUARTERS
6150 East Ponce de Leon Ave
Stone Mountain, GA 30083
770-498-4155

565 North Millidge Ave
Athens, GA 30601
770-498-4155

SOUTH CAROLINA
1819 Hampton St.
Columbia, SC 29201
803-771-7083

NORTH CAROLINA
1006 Yanceyville St.
Greensboro, NC 27405
336-379-0433

TENNESSEE
1629 Fatherland St.
Nashville, TN 37206
615-262-4326

VIRGINIA
3975 University Dr., Suite 120.
Fairfax, VA 22030
703-219-8301

associated with an institution or non-church entity, including the Old Central State Hospital Cemetery (Segregated African American) and cemeteries associated with benevolent organizations (Benevolent Society #16 and #79). One cemetery, Greenwood, is under corporate or for-profit management, and an additional three cemeteries are of unknown association due to lack of information. Community cemeteries included those that may have been associated with an enslaved community, such as Edmondson Cemetery in Antioch and the Hermitage enslaved cemetery at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage.

When compared to cemeteries associated with Anglo-American or white families, communities, and churches, African American cemeteries in Davidson County were generally disproportionately displayed lack of maintenance and disrepair based on data gathered during survey. All of the African American cemeteries visited were recorded as in need of repairs. In five cases, cemeteries either previously known to the DCCS or identified for survey by community members were found to be unrecognizable at the time of survey. In some cases, like that of the Old Central State Hospital cemetery, those cemeteries recorded as unrecognizable were preserved in state, but lacked any identifiable grave markings or depressions. In other cases, such as the Edmondson Cemetery in Antioch, the location of the cemetery was known to community members but due to its unrecognizable status may be endangered by future development.

In addition to those that were classified as unrecognizable, 13 African American cemeteries surveyed were found to be in poor condition, with heavy vegetative overgrowth, extensive damage, and deferred maintenance issues such as sunken stones. Sixteen (16) cemeteries are considered to be in fair condition. For instance Bryanttown Cemetery (Donelson vicinity) includes an area of active burial activity that is well maintained, while the historical sections of the cemetery, including the monument for community namesake Sherrod Bryant, who died in 1854, and dozens of graves marked by fieldstones, is engulfed in heavy vegetative overgrowth, which extends to the right-of-way for Interstate 40.

Of the African American cemeteries surveyed, seven (7) were actively maintained at the time of survey. Apart from the Watson Family Cemetery (African American) in the Antioch vicinity, those in the best condition were associated with an active organization with the ability to fundraise and/or provide maintenance collectively, such as a church or benevolent organization, or are under management of a for-profit entity, such as Greenwood Cemetery. The issues facing African American family cemeteries in Davidson County share much in common with those affecting white cemeteries, but the region's history of racial economic inequality and the impacts thereof contribute to additional pressures on available maintenance resources.

HISTORY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Davidson County's African American population is historically connected to the institution of slavery in the region, with the earliest burying grounds representing a predominantly enslaved population of African-descended people. By 1860, Davidson County's enslaved population reached nearly 15,000, while its free Black population was just over 1,200. Nashville City Cemetery's records indicate that in the city's early days, both white and African American residents were buried within the same cemetery in separate areas of the site. However, outside of Nashville, it is unknown where most of Davidson County's African American residents were buried prior to the end of slavery, and the only known cemetery documented by the DCCS to include pre-emancipation free African American burials is Bryanttown. Bryanttown is associated with free Black slaveholder Sherrod Bryant, whose property holdings included 22 enslaved people in 1850. In 1854, he died and was buried on his property, marked with an inscribed obelisk, in what is now Bryanttown Cemetery.

Considering the number of African American people known to have historically lived in Davidson County during and after slavery, the number of known early African American cemeteries included in the survey is statistically low. Further research and community engagement is needed in order to gain a greater understanding of where additional African American burial grounds may have been and whether any additional cemeteries can be located and targeted for preservation efforts. A starting place for research could include an examination of cemeteries identified as white but dating to the antebellum and Reconstruction eras. Using census records, researchers would identify cemeteries associated with wealthy slaveholding families and using the known record of existing enslaved cemeteries, including the recently discovered burial ground at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage (National Historic Landmark, 1960), attempt to build a model of where a cemetery for the enslaved community of a known plantation site might be located. Additionally, some previously surveyed white cemeteries surveyed are known or believed to include enslaved burials either mixed in with or adjacent to family burying grounds, such as the John G. Briley Cemetery in Cane Ridge. Further research on individual free African Americans of antebellum Davidson County and their residence locations or church affiliations would be needed in order to estimate where associated burial grounds might be located.

After Emancipation took effect in Middle Tennessee following the Civil War, African Americans began forming communities, often centered around churches and/or schools. The DCCS has already identified at least six (6) cemeteries known or believed to have been established during the first two decades following emancipation. An additional 13 African American cemeteries surveyed do not have definitive known use dates or starting dates and require additional research. For both of the above cases, it is possible that they include pre-Emancipation interments, as African American oral tradition indicates high levels of continuity of association in the initial years following the Civil War.

Based on known earliest interments, the preponderance of surveyed African American cemeteries were founded between 1880 and 1930, during the New South era of Davidson County's history. The New South era represented a time when the African American population underwent a local and national shift, with African Americans moving out of the rural southern countryside into cities in both the South and the North. As the Great Migration of the twentieth century took place, communities gradually eroded, leaving few remaining residents to tend to the cemeteries left behind or to carry on their memory. Similar to Reconstruction-era cemeteries, the earliest known interments may not be the oldest burials within the cemetery grounds, as a high number of burials were marked with temporary or organic markers. While churches and other organizations charged with the care of historic cemeteries may have the benefit of some level of historical record-keeping to provide a higher level of certainty about a cemetery's active usage period, the majority of African American family and community cemeteries are more informal in nature with no single source of public records to provide further insight into their use. A combination of newspaper research, comprehensive historic map review, property records, death listings and certificates in state and county vital records, and community outreach is needed in order to learn more about the cemeteries of both the Reconstruction and New South eras. Maps dating to the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century provide indications of African American churches and schools, which can help narrow down potential locations of additional research. Combined with community outreach and other records, these maps can help provide a geospatial basis for understanding African American cemeteries as traces of historical communities in Davidson County.

While African American cemeteries of Davidson County share many overlapping characteristics with white cemeteries, some features present in both are more common in African American cemeteries. Fieldstones, for instance, are present in 166 out of 345 white cemeteries, or around 48 percent, while they were noted in 25 out of 43 African American cemeteries surveyed, comprising 58 percent of the total. Fieldstones

were also commonly found in plantation cemeteries (containing both white and African American burials) as they were frequently used to mark enslaved burials.

Notable of Davidson County's African American cemeteries are grave markers carved by renowned Nashville sculptor William Edmondson (1874-1951). Edmondson, whose sculptural talents can be seen in pieces on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is known to have provided funerary carvings for friends and family in Nashville. Several African American cemeteries surveyed included known or likely Edmondson carvings. As previously noted by local nonprofit preservation group Historic Nashville, Inc., Edmondson's work is a recommended subject for systematic identification and targeted preservation efforts. However, Edmondson was not the only master carver whose work can be seen in African American cemeteries. The Collier-Harris Cemetery (AN-45), for instance, is characterized by deeply hand-chiseled limestone fieldstones dating from 1909 through the 1960s. Census records indicate that Andrew Briley, one of the individuals known to be buried at this site, was a stonemason and limestone worker by occupation. Briley died in 1951, well before the last hand-carved stones were placed, so it is unclear whether he was responsible for the carvings within the cemetery, but his occupation as a stonemason and limestone worker provides a path of inquiry into the family and its local connections. Census research, newspapers, and community outreach could be used to gain more knowledge about the artisan responsible for the carvings in the Collier-Harris Cemetery.

SUMMARY

The topics outlined above are intended to provide an extensive but not exhaustive discussion of the current state of knowledge about African American cemeteries that can be elucidated from the DCCS data set and existing related historical records, as well as suggestions for future lines of inquiry. Future work in this area should focus on primary document research and intensive community outreach and engagement. Due to the diaspora of the southern African American population during and after the Great Migration, community memory of cemetery sites may be limited in some areas of the county, especially in more rural areas, requiring significant supplementary primary resource investigation. However, many known historic local African American communities, such as Lake Providence and Bryanttown, have active community and descendant groups who should be invited to participate in any further research and survey activities as community partners with MHC.

Attached please find a table of identified African American cemeteries (Attachment A), a list of suggested case studies (Attachment B), a list of identified local groups who may be able to provide partnership resources (Attachment C), and an annotated bibliography of relevant studies and similar projects that should be consulted for further understanding of the history and landscape of African American cemeteries (Attachment D).

Sincerely,

NEW SOUTH ASSOCIATES, INC.



Lydia Simpson, PhD

Senior Historian

Attachment A: African American Cemeteries in the DCCS

Cemetery Name	Date Range	Type	Est. Burial #	Condition
Benevolent 16	1884-2021	Community	200	Fair
Benevolent 79	1911–2012	Community	100	Fair
Briarville	1884-2021	Community	50	Poor
Bryanttown	1854-2023	Community	500+	Fair
Calhoun	1935-1979	Community	100	Poor
Dry Creek/Sons of Ham	1869-2025	Community	300	Good
Edmondson	Unknown	Community	70	Unrecognizable
Hermitage – Enslaved	Circa 1830	Community	30	Fair
Ingleside and Cleveland Hall	2006*	Community	60	Reinterred
Kidd	Unknown	Community	200+	Fair
Mt. Ararat	1869-1996	Community	14,000	Fair
Vaughn’s Gap	Circa 1900	Community	200+	Fair
White	Pre-1900-2023	Community	20+	Fair
Greenwood (Original)	1887-2025	Corporate	19,000	Good
Greenwood West	1899-2025	Corporate	2,000	Good
Adams-Kimball	1878-1941	Family	20	Poor
Alfred Jackson	1901	Family	1	Good
Aunt Easter’s/Nightingale	Unknown-1962	Family	10	Poor
Benjamin F. Rucker	1923-1980	Family	20	Fair
Collier-Harris	Unknown-2012	Family	20	Fair
Ensley	Unknown	Family	3	Unrecognizable
Gray-Kinnard	1866-1957	Family	6	Poor
Joe E. Brown	1918	Family	5	Unrecognizable
Longnett	1875-Unknown	Family	40+	Poor
Mayes	Unknown-1984	Family	20	Poor
May-Hadley	Unknown	Family	10	Poor
Tolbert-Carney	1864-2024	Family	65	Fair
Watson	1917-2018	Family	20	Good
Webber	Unknown	Family	Unknown	Unrecognizable
Old Central State Hospital	1857-1963	Institutional	140+	Unrecognizable
Benevolent Society Church (Restful Acres)	1940-2021	Religious	35	Fair
Cedar Grove Baptist	1889-2011	Religious	65	Fair
Evans Hill	Unknown	Religious	75	Poor
First Baptist Church Hopewell	1949-2024	Religious	75	Good
Hall Chapel	1889-2016	Religious	50	Good
Maple Grove Church	Circa 1900	Religious	75	Poor
Mt. Gilliam MBC	1952-1975	Religious	50	Poor
Mt. Pisgah UMC	1919-2022	Religious	100	Fair
Olive Branch Baptist Church	1900-1997	Religious	75	Fair
Scott’s Hollow AME	1917-2024	Religious	250	Fair
Stateland	1918-2025	Religious	75	Good
Allen	1927	Unknown	Unknown	Poor
Unknown African American	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unrecognizable

Attachment B: List of Potential Case Studies

Cemetery Name	Date Range	Type	Est. Burial #	Condition
Bryanttown	1854-2023	Community	500+	Fair
Calhoun	1935-1979	Community	100	Poor
Kidd	Unknown	Community	200+	Fair
Mt. Ararat	1869-1996	Community	14,000	Fair
Adams-Kimball	1878-1951	Family	20	Fair
Benjamin F. Rucker	1923-1980	Family	20	Fair
Collier-Harris	Unkn-2012	Family	20	Fair
Gray-Kinnard	1866-1957	Family	6	Poor
Evans Hill	Unknown	Religious	75	Poor
Scott's Hollow AME	1917-2024	Religious	250	Fair

Attachment C: Local Partnership Opportunities

Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society

https://www.aahgs.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=623005&module_id=653817

Builders and Defenders: Fort Negley Descendants

<https://www.buildersanddefenders.org/descendants>

Jefferson Street Sound Museum

<https://www.jeffersonstreetsound.com/>

North Nashville Heritage Project

<https://www.tnstate.edu/nnhp/>

Attachment D: Annotated List of African American Cemetery Resources and Projects

National Initiatives

African American Cultural Heritage Fund, National Trust for Historic Preservation

<https://savingplaces.org/african-american-cultural-heritage>

The National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) created the African American Cultural Heritage Fund in 2017 to help preserve African American cultural heritage sites. Since its launch, the Action fund has supported nearly 400 projects with an investment of over \$44 million.

Black Cemetery Network

<https://blackcemeterynetwork.org/>

The Black Cemetery Network is based out of the University of South Florida's Heritage Research Lab. It serves as an advocacy network to fight the erasure of Black cemeteries.

Black Craftspeople Digital Archives

<https://blackcraftspeople.org/>

The Black Craftspeople Digital Archive is a partnership initiative that builds on the work of Dr. Tiffany Momon, University of the South, on Black craftspeople in the South. The goal of the project is to build a database to recognize Black craftspeople, to build educational initiatives around their work and existence, and connect Black craftspeople to place. The partnership includes support from the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation, the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, the Decorative Arts Trust, and the Chipstone Foundation.

Statewide Initiatives

Historic African American Cemetery Project, Maryland

<https://africanamerican.maryland.gov/historic-african-american-cemetery-project/>

In 2021, the Maryland General Assembly passed the *Historic African American Cemeteries Preservation Fund and Study* (HB 1099) requiring a study of the issues facing historic Black cemeteries. The state also created a grant fund to assist with the identification, preservation, and commemoration of historic African American burying grounds. The core study, issued 2022, may provide a model for other governmental entities to follow in preserving historic African American cemeteries.

Saving Tennessee's Black Cemeteries – The Citizenship Project, Nashville Public Television

https://www.pbs.org/video/last-rites-saving-tennessees-black-cemeteries-iewueo/?_gl=1*b9g9pm*_gcl_au*MTgwMDYzNzEzOS4xNzU4NiQ2NDE5

The Citizenship Project, a Nashville Public Television (NPT) project funded in part by the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, is a long-running documentary series focused on the fight for inclusive citizenship that took place between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement. One of the latest installments of the series, *Last Rites: Saving Tennessee's Black Cemeteries* focused on individual efforts throughout the state to preserve cemeteries.

“Discovering African American Communities in the Nashville Globe” in *Trials, Triumphs, and Transformations: Tennesseans’ Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity* – MTSU Center for Historic Preservation and Walker Library

<https://walker.mtsu.edu/trials/dsi.mtsu.edu/trials/globemap.html>

Researchers searched the issues of the African American *Nashville Globe* newspaper, published between 1906 and 1960, in search of community names and locations. The project’s findings are published on a story map housed through the MTSU Walker Library.

Landscape of Liberation, Tennessee Civil War GIS

<https://tnmap.tn.gov/civilwar/freedmen/>

Landscape of Liberation is a partnership project between the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA), the Fullerton Geospatial Research Lab at MTSU, the State of Tennessee STS-GIS department, and the Tennessee State Museum with funding from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area. Researchers used primary document resources to geolocate sites of African American activity in Tennessee during and following the Civil War. The results are published as a web-based mapping application hosted by TSLA.

Texas Freedom Colonies Project – Texas African American Cemetery Registry

<https://www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/cemetery-registry>

The Texas African American Cemetery Registry is a voluntary crowd-sourced database operated by the Texas Freedom Colonies Project, currently affiliated with the University of Virginia. Funded by the NTHP African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, the registry provides a clearinghouse for stewards, visitors, and stakeholders to record data about African American cemeteries of Texas in one place. Users can report on conditions as well as upload photos and documents. The project is Survey123-based and is a component of data collection for the Texas Freedom Colonies Project.

African American Cemeteries and Graves Fund, Virginia Department of Historic Resources

<https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/blog-posts/grave-matters-the-african-american-cemetery-graves-fund/>

Virginia’s African American Cemeteries and Graves Fund provides grants to support maintenance and care of African American cemeteries and interments established prior to 1948. The fund accepts applications from property owners, charitable organizations, and local governments. Proof of interments must be provided using headstone inscriptions, vital and church records, newspapers, or other sources, and GPR results are also accepted. The grant provides funding at a rate of \$5 per grave for initial grants. The program is funded at \$400,000 for the 2025-2026 fiscal year and has provided over \$100,000 in grants to date.

Local Initiatives

East End Cemetery, Richmond, Virginia

<https://eastendcemeteryva.com/>

<https://friendsofeastend.com/>

East End Cemetery is a preservation success story. Following years of neglect due to lack of state resources available for African American cemeteries, a substantial volunteer effort began in 2013 to restore the site and preserve its history.

MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida (NSA project)

The Tampa Bay History Center notified MacDill Air Force Base of a possibly cemetery on its campus in 2019. The base command worked with the community to identify the location of the cemetery and undertook non-invasive archaeological survey to locate burials. Over 120 probable and possible burials were discovered by 2024.

Rutherford County Cemetery Survey, Rutherford County, Tennessee

<https://rutherfordtnhistory.org/rutherford-county-historic-cemetery-survey/>
<https://rcgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=e055c9ad47564cb5a33538346648bb1e>

In 2014, the Rutherford County Archives embarked on an effort to document all of the cemeteries in Rutherford County. The initial effort was based on a twentieth century survey conducted by white members of the Rutherford County Historical Society, which included a limited number of African American cemeteries. In the process of the survey, archives staff engaged in community outreach to identify additional Black cemeteries. To date, through active community input the Rutherford County Cemetery Survey has added 91 African American cemeteries to the 12 previously recorded by earlier surveyors.

Mapping Charleston's Black Burial Grounds, Charleston, South Carolina

<https://www.preservationsociety.org/programs-resources/mapping-charlestons-black-burial-grounds/>

Mapping Charleston's Black Burial Grounds is a multi-partner project with funding support from the National Park Service African American Civil Rights Grant program. Local partners include the Preservation Society of Charleston (PSC), the Anson Street African Burial Ground Project (ASABG), and the City of Charleston Department of Planning & Preservation. Additional support was provided by the International African American Museum. Building on the Chicora Foundation's 2010 report "The Silence of the Dead: Giving Charleston Cemeteries a Voice," Mapping Black Burial Grounds utilized community input gathered between 2022 and 2024 to build a map of known or suspected African American cemetery sites. Research is ongoing.

Maps

1898 Map of Davidson County, Edwin M. Gardner

<https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll23/id/10663/>

1900 Map of Davidson County, W.H. Lyle

<https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll23/id/10814/rec/53>

The 1898 and 1900 maps of Davidson County includes the location of African American schools that were operating at that time. Schools often served as important hubs within African American communities, and researching the areas around those sites might provide valuable information to help locate previously undocumented community and family cemeteries.

Secondary Sources

- Chicora Foundation, Inc. *Grave Matters: The Preservation of African American Cemeteries*. Columbia, South Carolina. Chicora Foundation: 1996.
- Gaffney, Austyn. "The Fight to Save America's Black Cemeteries." *National Geographic*. August 19, 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/historic-black-cemeteries-at-risk-can-they-be-preserved/>. Accessed September 23, 2025.
- Jones, Diane. "The City of the Dead: The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery." *Landscape Journal* 30 no. 2. 2011. 226-240.
- Rainville, Lynn. *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. Charlottesville, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.