

AFRO AMERICAN HISTORICAL
AND GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY
METRO ATLANTA CHAPTER

CEMETERY PROJECT

AN INDEX OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
CHURCH CEMETERIES
IN DEKALB AND FULTON COUNTIES



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*Remember me in the family tree,
--my name, my days, my strife,
Then I'll ride upon the wings of time
And live an endless life.*

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AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORICAL AND GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

The Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS) was founded in 1977 in Washington, DC. AAHGS is a non-profit membership organization committed to the preservation of the history, genealogy and culture of the African-ancestored populations of the local, national and international community.

The AAHGS Metro Atlanta chapter organized in February 2000. The chapter objectives are

- To provide a forum for African Americans in the metro Atlanta area to share historical and genealogical information and research sources and methods.
- To organize workshops and a speakers' forum to meet the needs and interest of the chapter members.
- To research projects that will preserve African American history in the Southeastern United States.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Metro Atlanta Chapter of the Afro American Historical and Genealogy Society wishes to thank the staffs of the Auburn Avenue Research Library, Georgia Department of Archives and History, and Atlanta History Center Archives for their research assistance, and Deacon Lindsey of New Piney Grove Missionary Baptist Church, Deacon Eddie White of Poplar Springs Baptist Church, Mary Thomas and Rhunette Morse, both of New Hope AME church, and Helen Oman, Deacon Frank Porter, and David Lemons, all of Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, for their contributions to this project..

CEMETERY PROJECT

AN INDEX OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH CEMETERIES IN DEKALB AND FULTON COUNTIES

PURPOSE OF PROJECT

The purpose of the cemetery project was to collect and publish information on African American church cemeteries in Dekalb and Fulton counties. Genealogists and family history researchers can use this information to help locate their ancestors through church cemetery records. To enhance the use of this information, a glossary of cemetery terms and a glossary of cemetery symbolism are also included. The information included in this report is not exhaustive; some African American church cemeteries in Dekalb and Fulton counties may not have been included due to lack of available information.

SCOPE OF PROJECT

CHURCH PROFILES

The following information was collected through interviews with church officials and members for five currently active African American churches:

- History, description, and continuing use of the cemetery
- Number of burials and surviving headstones
- Availability of cemetery records
- Surnames of families interred in the cemetery

SLAVE INTERNMENTS

Information regarding two historically White churches with slave internments is included.

INDEXES

Two indexes listing information for additional African American internments are included:

- Index of African American Church Cemeteries in Dekalb and Fulton Counties describing inactive churches where cemeteries are still intact.
- Index of Dekalb and Fulton County Cemeteries with African American Internments describing non-church cemeteries.

OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERIES AND BURIAL PRACTICES

The cemeteries profiled in this study are similar to many African American cemeteries throughout the United States. African American cemeteries typically occupy wooded areas and have natural, relatively unmodified landscapes; the presence or absence of grave markers does not necessarily correspond to the number of interments. Unmarked mounds and depressions indicate burials where markers may have deteriorated or may have been removed, but some graves remain intentionally unmarked. Other graves may have been marked with wooden crosses and boards or encircled with fieldstones or brick. Often a small tree or shrub, typically yucca or cedar, was planted on a grave, or a single fieldstone may have been placed upon it. Over time, wood deteriorates, stones may become dislodged or be removed, and plants may die out and decompose. African American cemeteries still retain numerous plantings of yucca and cedar, though it may be difficult to distinguish specific gravesites. Single fieldstones or piles of fieldstones, though appearing randomly distributed, may actually indicate burial spaces.

The natural landscapes of African American cemeteries may indicate a cultural acceptance of death. No attempt is made to alter the landscape or to romanticize death by creating a heavenly garden on earth. The natural slope of the land and the native foliage are retained, and graves are simply dug into the existing terrain, generally facing east, but oftentimes not. Early African American burial practices may be traceable to West and Central Africa (Vlach, 1990). Especially during the 17th and 18th centuries, African Americans often decorated graves with personal and household goods used by the deceased, or they covered the graves with shells, glass or other shiny objects. By the late 19th century, though many African Americans were adopting European burial practices and using more elaborate headstones featuring Christian or Victorian symbols, the practice of decorating with grave goods persisted well into the 20th century. African American cemeteries today intermingle these traditions, as reflected in objects such as the railroad sign below, found marking a grave in the Mt. Pleasant Baptist cemetery on Porter Road, and the small obelisk erected in Mt. Zion AME cemetery on LaVista Road.



**MT. PLEASANT BAPTIST CHURCH
ESTABLISHED 1849**

**848 Porter Road
Decatur, GA**

- Description of Church Cemetery** 1-acre plot located off Kensington Road near the Dekalb Animal Shelter approximately 4/10 mile from church property between Porter Court and Dove Valley Way. Now encircled by a wooded residential area, the cemetery contains only a few stones widely spaced apart, some broken and sunken, others are unreadable. Many mounds and depressions cover the area.
- Dates/Location of Cemetery Records** Transcription of cemetery listed online at <http://www.prairiebluff.com/aacemetery/mtpleasem-aa.htm>, and <http://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/ga/dekalb/cemeteries/mtplebap.txt>
- Surnames of Oldest Church Families** Porter, Houseworth, Marshall, McGuire
- Summary of Church History** Mt. Pleasant was built on 2 ½ acres donated by Judge Joseph Walker, of historically White Indian Creek Baptist Church, who organized the church members and taught them to conduct their services. He also taught the slaves to read and write. Frank Porter donated the land for the cemetery; descendants of Porter still live adjacent to the cemetery. The church maintains several summaries of the church history as well as published articles.
- Annual Church Events** Homecoming, October; Spring and Winter revivals, months vary.



MT. ZION AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

**2977 LaVista Road
Decatur, GA**

- Description of Church Cemetery** 1-acre plot adjoining church. Contains numerous stone markers, some scattered fieldstones, several graves encircled by fieldstones, bricks, and scalloped stone borders, and funeral home markers, including Cox and Hanley. Includes some fairly elaborate markers such as a metal slab with an arch motif and an Egyptian style obelisk. One grave is adorned with a single conch shell.
- Dates/Location of Cemetery Records** Transcription of headstones listed online at <http://www.prairiebluff.com/aacemetery/mtzioncem-aa.htm>, and <http://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/ga/dekalb/cemeteries/mzioame.txt>
- Surnames of Oldest Church Families** Rowe, Spurley, Steele



NEW HOPE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
ESTABLISHED 1886

3012 Arden Rd. N.W.,
Atlanta, GA 30305
Rev. David R. Bishop, Pastor

- Description of Church Cemetery** Currently a 1-acre lot across the street from church building (original cemetery, no longer used and covered over, was in woods behind church building). Lot contains many headstones, some so worn as to be unreadable. Victorian symbols used in the cemetery include: hand of God and bird in flight carved on headstones. Plantings include yucca and cedar.
- Dates/Location of Cemetery Records** Church members are currently working on compiling cemetery records.
- Surnames of Oldest Church Families** Nelms, Gates, Hutchins, Howells, Wishums, Defoors, Paces, Calhouns, A. Johnson, G. Johnson, Palmers, Cooks, Plasters, Hills, Abrams, Winstons, Barners, Baileys, Hudsons, Treadwells, Maddoxes, Irbys, Dells, Scotts, Simmons, Sanders, Biggs
- Summary of Church History** Two acres of land for a church and a school were deeded to former slaves in the will of Dr. James H. "Whistlin" Smith, dated May 29, 1872, a wealthy white landowner. Before the church building was erected, members met under a large tree that still stands on church property today. The 1st pastor was Rev. Joseph "Joe" Woods. Various articles about New Hope's history are available at the Georgia State Archives. The church's website is located at <http://www.newhopeame.org>.
- Annual Church Events** Camp Meeting, 4th Sunday in August; Revival held week prior to Camp Meeting, Women's Day, October; Men's Day, Black History celebration, February.



**NEW PINEY GROVE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
ESTABLISHED 1901**

**2580 Snapfinger Road
Decatur, GA 30034
Rev. Dexter O. Roland Sr., Pastor**

**Description of Church
Cemetery**

Approximately 1/2 acre lot bordered on one side by the original sanctuary of the historically White Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church and cemetery, on another side by Snapfinger road, and on the other by the Snapfinger YMCA and a wooded area. A thin barrier of pine trees, brambles and underbrush separates the graves from the rear of the White cemetery. The area appears to be approximately 2/3 full of graves, but looks may be deceiving. Many stones are readable, but there are many unmarked mounds and fieldstones, funeral home headstones, and stones with "handwritten" inscriptions. The most recent interment was in 1989; since that time church members are buried elsewhere. It is easy to overlook this cemetery, which appears to be an empty wooded area from the vantage point of the rear of the Wesley Chapel cemetery.

**Dates/Location of
Cemetery Records**

Unknown

**Surnames of Oldest
Church Families**

Hoke, Davis, Martin, Middlebrooks

**Summary of Church
History**

Previously located on Covington Highway, the original Piney Grove church building was constructed on land deeded to church trustees in 1904 for the sum of \$1.00 by a white landowner, Robert J. Kelly. The church history has been compiled and is available on the church's website:
<http://www.newpineygrove.com>.

Annual Church Events

Homecoming, 1st Sunday in August; Annual Revival, 1st week in August; Church Anniversary, June; Pastor's Appreciation, 1st Sunday in November; Spring Revival, April.



**POPLAR SPRINGS MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
ESTABLISHED 1871**

**3796 River Road
Ellenwood, GA
Rev. Ulysses Ponder, Pastor**

- Description of Church Cemetery** 1-acre lot adjacent to church. Contains approximately 126 headstones; some headstones are missing, and some stones have been destroyed. There are more than 200 deceased church members interred in the cemetery. Several yucca plants are clustered within the cemetery.
- Dates/Location of Cemetery Records** No cemetery records are currently available, but the church has begun a cemetery project to collect information from current church members regarding family buried in the cemetery.
- Surnames of Oldest Church Families** Shepherd, Jackson, White, Rice
- Summary of Church History** Poplar Springs has been located on the same acreage in Dekalb County since it's founding. Initially, neighbors, family, and friends gathered to worship in a forest of poplar trees near a spring, hence the name of the church. The first church building was erected on land given to the founding members by a neighboring white landholder. The first pastor of the church was Willie Floyd. Poplar Springs has published a booklet for church members listing the pastors and major events in the church's history.
- Annual Church Events** Homecoming, 4th Sunday in July; Church Anniversary, 4th Sunday in May; and Pastor's Anniversary, mid to late April.



SLAVE INTERNMENTS IN HISTORICALLY WHITE CHURCH CEMETERIES

OWL ROCK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH 5800 CAMPBELLTON ROAD, S.E.

Description of Church Cemetery	½ acre lot adjacent to church building; two markers designating “Several Unknown Slave Graves” and “Hasseltine Bell, Slave Matriarch” are near the front corner of the cemetery closest to the church building.
Dates/Location of Cemetery Records	Cemetery records are available from Campbell County Historical Society and online at www.rootsweb.com/~gacampbe/Owl_Rock.htm .
Summary of Church History	Historically White Owl Rock Church was founded in 1828.



PINEY GROVE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH 834 CANTERBURY ROAD

Description of Church Cemetery	Contains slave graves.
Dates/Location of Cemetery Records	The earliest burial date now identifiable is 1889.
Summary of Church History	Historically White Piney Grove Church is located on land purchased by the church in 1826.

**INDEX OF INACTIVE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES WITH
EXTANT CEMETERIES IN DEKALB AND FULTON COUNTIES**

Church	Location	Cemetery Notes
Macedonia Baptist	Pharr Road, Atlanta	Between 1945 and 1952, Fulton County condemned then bought the Black neighborhood called Bagley Park where Macedonia church and cemetery was located, but sales terms stipulated by the sellers required that the land only be used for a park. It is now Frankie Allen park.
Mount Olive Methodist Episcopal	Pharr Road, Atlanta	Early 1900s. Mount Olive was also part of the Bagley park community. The cemetery remains in a corner of the park near the entrance. Several headstones still stand among the trees. Several stones have fallen and most are unreadable.
Mt. Moriah Baptist Church	Mt. Mariah (sic) Drive, Atlanta	North Druid Hills Rd. Transcription of cemetery listed online at http://www.prairiebluff.com/aacemetery/masoncem-aa.htm and http://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/ga/dekalb/cemeteries/masonbap.txt
St. Paul Baptist Church	Wilson Road, Tucker	1/2 acre; single marker with name of cemetery; transcription of cemetery listed online at http://www.prairiebluff.com/aacemetery/stpaulcem-aa.htm and http://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/ga/dekalb/cemeteries/stpaulbc.txt

**INDEX OF NON RELIGIOUS DEKALB AND FULTON COUNTY
CEMETERIES WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN INTERNMENTS**

Cemetery	Location	Notes
Albert-McGuire Family Cemetery	Giles Road	Listed online at http://www.prairiebluff.com/aacemetery/almcquirecem-aa.htm
Chestnut Hill Cemetery Association	2002 Moreland Ave., Atlanta	Established in 1919. Associated with South View Cemetery. Contact South View for interment records.
Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery	2275 Simpson Road, Atlanta	Established in 1927. Contact Lincoln for interment records.
Monte Vista Biblical Gardens	2275 Simpson Road, Atlanta	Associated with Lincoln Cemetery. Contact Lincoln for interment records.
Oakland Cemetery – Black Section	248 Oakland Avenue, Atlanta	Established in 1850. Refer to the website at http://www.oaklandcemetery.com for general information about Oakland and a list of well-known African Americans buried there.
South-View Cemetery Association	1900 Jonesboro Rd. SE, Atlanta	Established in 1886. Organized by African Americans in response to segregation at Oakland cemetery. Contact Southview for interment records.
Westview Cemetery	1680 Westview Dr., Atlanta	Established in 1884. Contact Westview for interment records.

GLOSSARY OF CEMETERY TERMS

Cemetery - a burial ground. The term is derived from the Greek koimeterion, literally a "sleeping place" or "dormitory".

Cenotaph - literally "an empty tomb". A memorial in honor of a deceased person who is interred elsewhere.

Columbarium - A columbarium was originally a dovecote. Modern morticians gave the name to a building with hundreds of little niches in the wall for urns holding cremated remains.

Cremains - descriptive word for cremated human remains.

Cremation- a process which reduces the body by heat to small bone fragments. When the fragments are pulverized, they are reduced to the consistency of coarse sand or crushed seashells.

Crematory - a building with a furnace called a retort which is used to cremate human remains (or the furnace/retort itself)

Crypt - a concrete enclosure for interment. Mausoleum crypts are generally above ground and in buildings. Crypts in garden mausoleums also are usually above ground but are open to the outside rather than being in an enclosed building. Types of crypts are: mausoleum crypt, interior; garden crypt, exterior; lawn crypt, below ground.

Disinterment - the process whereby a burial vault containing a casketed body is removed from the grave.

Epitaph - Originally a funeral oration (in Latin, epitaphium) that, being a speech made by the living, was said "over the tomb". A commemorative inscription on a memorial marker or monument.

Footstone - A stone marking the foot of a grave

Gravestone - A stone that marks a grave

Headstone - A memorial stone set at the head of a grave

Inter -To bury or put a dead body into a grave

Interment – the act of burial

Inscription – what is actually written on the grave marker

Inurement - the placing of the ashes of one cremated in an urn.

Marker - A monument or memorial to mark the place of burial.

Mausoleum - Named for Mausolus, King of Caria, whose wife, Artemisia, built his tomb, which became one of the Seven Wonders of the World. A building that houses crypts for burial. A permanent resting place above ground for the dead.

Necrology - a notice of the death of a person; obituary; a list or record of people who have died within a certain period of time; in either sense there may or may not be biographical information included

GLOSSARY OF CEMETERY TERMS, CONT.

Niche - A shell-like space in a wall made for the placing of urns containing cremated remains, or inside a building for this purpose, which is called a columbarium. Urns are placed in these niches as a final resting place for cremated remains.

Placophobia - fear of tombstones. Other notable cemetery dreads include taphephobia (fear of being buried alive) and necrophobia (fear of dead things). See also taphophile.

Plat/plot - an individual burial space. A specific area of ground in a cemetery owned by a family or individual. A plot usually contains two or more graves.

Sexton - the office of the person or persons who are in charge of the cemetery.

Slab - a rectangular piece of cement, granite, or marble that is in the shape of the grave and lies over the grave indicating the approximate shape and size of the grave.

Potters' field - a cemetery for paupers. The term comes from Matthew 27:7 when the chief priests determined what to do with the thirty pieces of silver returned by Judas: "So they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field [the field where the potters dug their clay], to bury strangers in."

Taphophile - one who loves cemeteries and funerals. Taphophiles show an interest in the trappings of death: See also placophobia.

Tomb - the Greeks called the swollen ground or mound which marked gravesites a tumulus. Tombs take many forms and the word is now synonymous with grave.

Transcription - the act or process of copying the inscriptions from grave markers; the resulting listing of cemetery internments from the information contained on the grave markers.

Vault - cemetery vaults are underground tombs. The word comes from the Latin volvere, which suggests a turning, referring in the case of vaults to the curving roof of the structure.

Vigil - A Roman Catholic religious service held on the eve of the funeral service.

Wake - a watch kept over the deceased, sometimes lasting the entire night the Irish practice of watching over the body by candlelight the night before the funeral and the often wild feasting which follows. This may have developed simply because mistakes sometimes happened. The purpose of the wake, therefore, was to ensure that the deceased was truly dead.

GLOSSARY OF CEMETERY SYMBOLS

Anchor - Christian symbol of hope found as funerary symbolism in the art of the catacombs. Often set amongst rocks. It can also be an occupational symbol in sea-faring areas.

Angels - are shown in all types of poses with different symbolism. They may be shown carrying the departed soul as a child in their arms, or as a Guardian embracing the dead. Many of them gathered together within the clouds and with light represent heaven. They may be shown blowing a trumpet (or even two trumpets) representing the Day of Judgment. The "messengers of god" often shown escorting the deceased to heaven or mourning untimely death.

Bird - eternal life; **Birds in flight** - These are symbolic of the "winged soul." The representation of the soul by a bird goes back to ancient Egypt. Some older burial art features only wings to convey the symbol of divine mission.

Book - a prayer, or knowledge or even memory (where it has a dog-eared page). It may represent the Book of Life and is often shown as a bible. A popular form is the book as a double page spread.

Broken Column - life cut short too soon. May be encircled by a garland.

Broken Flower - a life terminated.

Butterfly - short lived or early death.

Cacoon - the soul or resurrection

Cedar – often planted in cemeteries, thought to symbolizes immortality because it is evergreen

Chain with a broken link - symbolizes the death of a family member.

Cherub's Head - the soul.

Clasped Hands - unity and affection or devotion even after death. With a heart they represent Charity.

Cross - faith and resurrection; considered the perfect symbol of Christ's sacrifice in the Christian religion.

Cross and Crown - sovereignty of the Lord.

Crown - immortality, symbolic of honor or glory. May be shown being offered to those on Earth by Angels.

Dove - Divine Spirit. When shown with an Olive Sprig it means Hope or Promise.

Eye of God - symbolizes the omnipresence of God. The eye of God enclosed in a triangle represents the Trinity.

Five-pointed star - symbolic of the life of Christ and may also represent the five wounds of Christ.

Flowers - Daisy: innocence. Lily: symbolizes purity. Often associated with the Virgin Mary and resurrection. A calla lily particularly symbolizes marriage and the lily of the valley is associated with purity and humility. Pansy: symbolizes remembrance and humility. Poppy: sleep. Rose: associated with the Virgin Mary, the "rose without thorns." Roses may also represent youth and beauty.

GLOSSARY OF CEMETERY SYMBOLS, CONT.

Hands - a hand with the index finger pointing upwards symbolizes the hope of heaven, pointing downward - mortality or sudden death or possibly a depiction of a secret Masonic handshake. Hands holding a chain with a broken link symbolize the death of a family member. The hand of God plucking a link of the chain represents God bringing a soul unto himself. A hand holding a heart is a symbol of the Lodge of Oddfellows.

Heart - traditionally a symbol of love, courage and intelligence, the flaming heart signifies extreme ardor. The heart encircled with thorns symbolizes the suffering of Christ. A heart pierced by a sword symbolizes the Virgin Mary, harkening to Simeon's prophecy to Mary at the birth of Christ, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul." It can also be used to represent charity.

Hourglass - attribute of death and Father Time, represents the passage of time and the shortness of life.

Lamb - Christ in his sacrificial role and personifies innocence, gentleness and humility.

Lamp - the immortality of the spirit, knowledge and a love of learning.

Oak - the Oak was looked upon as the tree from which the cross was made and became a symbol of Christ.

Obelisk - 19th century Egyptian revival decoration universally associated with commemoration.

Palm - a symbol of Christ's victory of death as associated with Easter.

Serpent - shown swallowing its own tail it represents Eternity.

Sheaf of Wheat - the divine harvest

Seashell - John the Baptist is said to have baptized Jesus using a shell, but the use of shells in burials is pre-Christian and pre-dates even Egyptian burial practices. Symbolic of fertility, resurrection, and pilgrimage.

Torch - the inverted torch symbolizes death, the upright torch Life.

Tree - verdant Life. The Tree of Life.

Trumpets - Victory and Resurrection

Urn - originating as a repository for the ashes of the dead in ancient times, the urn became a popular symbol of mourning. Urns are often draped with a cloth or decorated with a wreath or garland.

Urn or Vessel with flame - the eternal flame or the eternal spirit of man.

Weeping willow - a symbol of earthly sorrow and mourning.

Wreath - originating as an ancient symbol of victory, it was adopted into the Christian religion as a symbol of the victory of the redemption. It is now a common memorial symbol.

Yucca - traditionally planted in cemeteries; according to folklore the plants frighten away evil spirits who fear becoming entangled on the spiked leaves.

RESOURCES

Books

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- Strangstad, Lynette. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1988.

Online Resources

- African-American Cemeteries: Philosophy of African American Death and Burial*.
<http://www.mtsu.edu/~then/Cemetery/page7.html>
- African American Cemeteries Online* <http://www.prairiebluff.com/aacemetery/>
- Association for Gravestone Studies*, 278 Main St., Suite 207, Greenfield, MA, 01301.
<http://www.gravestonestudies.org/>
- Georgia Cemetery Records*. <http://www.idreamof.com/cemetery/ga.html>
- Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries*, Chicora Foundation, Inc., Box 8664, Columbia, SC 29202-8664. <http://www.sciway.net/hist/chicora/gravematters.html>
- Tombstone Transcription Project: Georgia* <http://www.rootsweb.com/~cemetery/georgia.html>
- Resources on Cemetery History and Preservation (Larry Kestenbaum)* <http://www.potifos.com/cemeteries.html>
- Dekalb County Georgia Cemetery Inscriptions*. <http://www.idreamof.com/cemetery/ga/dekalb.html>

