



# In Death, New Life

The discovery of unknown graves at the University of Virginia reveals the institution's brush with slavery

**T**he University of Virginia got a surprise while investigating the suitability of land to expand north of its on-campus cemetery and Columbarium in Charlottesville: It found more graves—those of 67 African-American children and adults, possibly dating back to the late antebellum period. “We have no information on the actual individuals who were buried there,” said Benjamin P. Ford, Ph.D., of Rivanna Archaeological Services in Charlottesville, Va. “We do believe that the cemetery is a grave for enslaved African-Americans and potentially post-Emancipation blacks.”

A one-foot-thick sand barrier rests atop the site, and university officials said they plan to further “preserve the site and memorialize it” in some fashion. “It’s a wonderful discovery,” said Dearing Johns, M.D., chair of the University of Virginia Cemetery Committee and a member of the Gravesite Commemoration Committee.

**Some graves** are thought to be those of slaves who helped build Thomas Jefferson’s “academical village.” The “father” of the University of Virginia spent the last year of his life trying to transform a rocky ridge three miles east of his Monticello home into an educational utopia. His architectural masterpiece, a Rotunda for reading and revelry, would sit at the head of a horseshoe-enclosed quadrangle, lined with a colonnade to protect professors and students from the elements. Some slaves worked on the construction of these buildings, and others served faculty and students.

Two months after the university opened its doors on March 7, 1825, it purchased 153 acres for access to a reservoir via underground pipes. The land served no other purpose until 1828 when a typhoid epidemic struck, killing hundreds



and giving birth to the University of Virginia Cemetery.

The cemetery rapidly expanded during the Civil War when the university doubled as a place of higher learning and a place of healing. The Rotunda, other buildings and tents dotting the grounds were used to treat nearly 3,000 Confederate troops who were transported to the area after the Battles of Bull Run and Port Republic in the summer of 1861. More than 1,000 of those soldiers who did not survive their injuries are buried in a section of the cemetery once known as the Confederate Cemetery.

**The last available** gravesite was sold in the mid-1960s, and the cemetery began accepting cremated remains in 1987.

To meet the continuing demand, the university hired Ford’s firm last spring to conduct an archeological survey on a plant nursery abutting the cemetery to

Archeologist Benjamin Ford (center) works with his team on the site north of the University of Virginia Cemetery, where 67 African-American graves were accidentally discovered. University officials said the school plans to preserve and memorialize the site in some fashion.

the north where it hoped to add 192 graves and 125 niches in a new columbarium wall. The area seemed perfect for expansion until the second phase of development revealed the new graves. “What surprises me is how this got lost to modern memory,” said Lynn Rainville, Ph.D., a humanities professor at Sweet Briar College in Virginia, who has conducted research on more than 150 historic black cemeteries. Typically, for every white cemetery there is a black one, she says. “Just as people were segregated in life, they were also segregated in death.”

Ford’s team found 12 fence posts at

eight-foot intervals, fieldstones and the broken-off bases of two white, quarried sandstone markers. They initially dug about a dozen holes, two feet deep and 1½ feet in diameter. “We wanted to get down to the point of historic grade,” Ford said. “What we saw was a discoloration in the soil.”

Lining the red Albemarle clay were “grave stains,” indicating that bodies had been buried below in clusters that might represent families. Graves shorter than four feet are assumed to be those of children. The graves extended 50 feet beyond the original expansion area, hidden by excess dirt dumped by gravediggers working in the cemetery over the years.

**When historic graves** are discovered, the question of whether to exhume can be thorny. Johns says UVA has no plans to exhume the remains, but others in the local community disagree with that strategy. “I think that’s wrong-sighted,” says M. Rick Turner, president of the NAACP Albemarle-Charlottesville



branch and retired dean of African-American Affairs at UVA. Institutions shouldn’t automatically think that “to leave them intact, they’re doing the African-American

community a favor,” he said. Conversely, Eugene Williams, former president of the local NAACP, said, “I feel that the graveyard site should not be disturbed. It should be engraved or fenced off so research can continue.”

Nails (and other hardware on coffins), buttons and other artifacts can help to pinpoint dates. The chemical composition of bones and other DNA can provide insight on health, nutrition and the cause of death. The consensus is that the acidic clay probably hastened decay of the remains, lessening the research value of an excavation. “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust is a very true statement,” said Rainville.

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