

OWL & SPADE

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Spirits in the Absence of Stones:

Restoring Western North Carolina's Oldest Public African American Cemetery

MELISSA RAY DAVIS '02 ■ photography by REGGIE TIDWELL

There are 2,000 graves in the two-acre wooded lot, but only 98 have gravestones. Some stones, roughly hand-carved and without names, have only clues: "Mother." Fieldstones or bricks or even trees mark some graves, but most burials are not marked at all. Thirty years ago, the South Asheville Cemetery could not be distinguished from the surrounding forest; its few gravestones were wholly consumed by undergrowth and brambles. Were it not for decades of persistent and painstaking efforts by hundreds of volunteers—many of them Warren Wilson College students, staff, faculty, and alumni—the rich history of the place may have been forever lost.

THE DEAD RAISE QUESTIONS

South Asheville Cemetery, tucked away in the woods behind St. John "A" Baptist Church in the Kenilworth neighborhood, is the oldest public African American cemetery in Western North Carolina. The cemetery and many of the first slaves buried in it were owned by Confederate Major William Wallace McDowell, one of the largest slave owners in the region. The McDowells collected fees for other slaves to be buried there as well.

George Avery, one of McDowell's slaves, kept the cemetery and dug the graves. As the Civil War neared its end, McDowell urged Avery to join the Union Army. Despite his loyalties, McDowell could see that the Confederacy was losing the war, and he felt that Avery would need a pension once he was free. After the war, Avery came back to work for his former owners as the South Asheville Cemetery's caretaker, digging graves for many fellow freed slaves and their children, born free. Avery himself was buried in the cemetery when he died at age 96 in 1942.

The cemetery closed shortly after Avery's death. In the aftermath of the war, the McDowells lost their fortune and their land, and the cemetery was split into several deeds. No one maintained it. The church had no claim to it. Over the decades, the forest consumed it in a tangle of downed trees, blackberry brambles, and multi-floral rose. By 1980, the cemetery was



indistinguishable from the surrounding forest. George Avery's headstone, one of very few, could not be seen in the chest-high undergrowth.

Avery's former owner William Wallace McDowell's grave, by contrast, still stood with an impressive marker, cataloged and carefully maintained in the manicured grounds of Montford's Riverside Cemetery—resting place of Confederate generals and famous authors, with pristinely-kept rolling hills and impressive monuments and statues.

"The invisibility of African Americans in history is compounded by the invisibility of so many of these cemeteries, and how many of them are overgrown. There's a real dimension of social justice in all of this work," Global Studies professor

Dr. Jeffrey Keith said. "Who were these people? Why did this cemetery need such attention? How did it fall into such disrepair? What does it tell us about the history of racial inequality, economic disparity? When I take students to the South Asheville Cemetery, they naturally carry it from those simple, concrete questions to harder, giant questions about how society works and *doesn't* work."

The popular mythology of Appalachia falsely professes that there were not many slaves in the mountains. Over time, Appalachia has become demographically more white, which has only reinforced that myth.

"The history of Appalachia is actually a story of struggle and diversity that

requires us to carefully think about issues like colonialism, as well as racial subjugation and slavery,” Keith said. “Slavery existed in every county of Appalachia. That is at odds with the public imagination about Appalachia, which suggests that slavery did not exist here because people in the mountains were poorer. The cemetery is an important corrective to that false understanding of the mountains.”

OUT OF THE WOODS AND ONTO THE MAP

Dr. David Moore, professor of Archeology, remembers the day in 1982 when Lawyer Kimbrough of Asheville’s Arrows Project brought him to look at the wooded lot in Kenilworth, with undergrowth up to their necks and not a gravestone in sight. “He said, ‘What do I do?’” Moore recalls. “And I said, ‘I don’t have a clue.’” Moore worked at the time for the Office of State Archeology and researched what it would take to locate the graves. But with no funding, the project stagnated.

Years passed. Moore started teaching archaeology classes at Warren Wilson, where he had tools, resources, eager students, and a community engagement commitment built into everything they did. In the late 1990s, he got a call from Eula Shaw, who was determined to form a group to restore the South Asheville Cemetery. Shaw, Moore, community volunteers, and members of the St. John “A” Baptist Church formed the South Asheville Cemetery Association and committed to clearing the cemetery and locating the graves.

As the daunting task of clearing slowly progressed, Moore’s archeology classes and crew started the painstaking archeological work of locating and marking the graves. They carefully measured the cemetery into a grid and then meticulously measured out every grave and noted it on the map they created.

Because the people buried there were poor or enslaved, they were buried in simple pine boxes, wicker baskets, or even just blankets. “The depressions were obvious,” Moore said. “They were depressions in the ground that were anywhere from six inches deep to two feet deep.” They could not use ground-penetrating radar for the site, but used

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various probing techniques with metal rods to test soil density. They located nearly 2,000 tightly-packed graves, and they knew there were likely even more.

Dr. Keith moved to Asheville in 2009 to teach Global Studies at Warren Wilson College. One afternoon that year, he followed the “Civil War Trail” signs through his neighborhood down Dalton Street to the Private George Avery historical marker behind St. John “A” Baptist Church. Keith immediately felt compelled to bring students to the cemetery for service work and a powerful lesson on the consequences of inequity. “What an incredible opportunity to make history come alive for students,” Keith thought. He quickly learned from David Quinn, friend of the College and member of the South Asheville Cemetery Association, that Warren Wilson was already deeply involved.

Keith believes the cemetery project is a great fit for the College’s unique strengths and resources: “a flexible administration, a robust work program, and a community engagement model that’s second to none.” Keith brought his students to the cemetery for frequent service days, and he built its history into his curriculum—even creating the Appalachian Semester, which focused on the cemetery. He enlisted many other faculty, staff, students, and crews. Supervisors Tom LaMuraglia, John Odell, and Shawn Swartz brought the Landscaping, Tree, and Forestry crews out several times to help with clearing.

The Horse Crew came out with the draft horses to remove downed trees, since motorized vehicles cannot be used in the cemetery.

In 2014, Keith started what he calls “the big push.” Inspired by the indomitable spirit of his students and funded by Warren Wilson grants and donations, Keith bought tools, fencing supplies, and grass seed. Appalachian Semester students and an army of volunteers from both the College and other local organizations put in hundreds of hours every week to finish clearing the rest of the cemetery.

With the help of Doug Bradley and the Carpentry Crew, the students built a fence—the cemetery now had a clear perimeter of defense against the pernicious invasives that in earlier years had turned it back into impenetrable forest after previous clearing efforts. Students also planted creeping red fescue, a shade-tolerant grass that doesn’t need mowing and will keep the weeds at bay.

Dr. David Abernathy’s Global Information Systems (GIS) students and alumni helped as well. Keith hired alumnus Linden Blasius ’11 to modernize the map created by archaeology students in the 1990s. After a few visits to the cemetery to verify the geographic location of a few landmarks and gravestones, Blasius was able to use the grave locations that archeology students had precisely measured two

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decades before to create a modern, accurate, GIS map of all of the known graves. His project also cataloged information known about each grave: type of marker, if any, and inscriptions or known identities.

Just this past fall, current student Clarke Williams '20 took Blasius' data, cleaned it up, and put it all into a Google fusion table for a GIS final project. Using Google Earth, the map could now be used at the cemetery, on a phone, to walk amongst the graves and see just how densely they are packed, or pull further information about a grave.

Williams explained that, while being able to see the graves on screen was fascinating, what most excited him was how Google integration allows for community participation. Family members can do genealogical research or even upload photos or information about the deceased.

LIVING MEMORIES OF SLAVES

"We actually just uncovered some new graves a few weekends ago. That was my job, one of them," Megan Carey '18 said. Carey just finished her final extended service project working with the South Asheville Cemetery. Unmarked graves located outside the property boundaries are still being discovered.

As newly discovered graves are added to the map, the South Asheville Cemetery Association works with the neighboring property owners. "So far, every one of them has agreed to give us an easement or move the fence, to accommodate," Moore explained. The association is in the process of having the two current deeds for the cemetery property legally combined into one so that the future of the cemetery is more secure.

"What we hope to do is, for future generations, make it part of that collective memory, a community memory, that there were people in Asheville who helped build Asheville from the beginnings, from the very beginnings, who are rarely recognized," Moore said.

For Carey, the cemetery has become exactly that. "I know people working there who knew people who are buried



there," Carey said. "We'd like to think that slavery and the Civil War were so long ago, but then we have people who have living memories of people who were slaves. They built Asheville unwillingly, and we reap the benefits of their labor every day, so I think that making this space a place for the community to talk about education and organization, about community building and the history that we have and share, is a great opportunity to learn from the past, improve the future, and build community now."

In his classroom, Keith assigns students to read the Slave Narrative of Sarah Gudger, who was a slave in Swannanoa. They go with him to Dalton Street to see the house where she lived at the end of her life after she was freed. They walk down the street to the church, where they meet George Gibson, a member of the South Asheville Cemetery Association, who, when he was young, knew both Gudger and Avery. The students slip behind the church, through the fence, and into the woods where they see George Avery's gravestone among the few; but they do not see Sarah Gudger's—she may be there, but if so, her grave is unmarked.

"That kind of lesson makes things real for Warren Wilson students in a way that really matches their inclination to do something about what they are learning," Keith said. The lesson ends with several hours of work clearing

brush, hauling fallen branches, raking leaves, planting grass, or fixing the fence to keep the cemetery tidy.

"History is a discipline that is often thought of as existing mostly in books," Keith said. "What I like about the cemetery is that it shows students how to get engaged in public history by making sure that the public has a place and a way to remember the more complicated narratives of the past. Working in the cemetery is an act of engaging with history through sweat and effort. It is very different from book learning. It can be even more profound in terms of how it connects the discipline of history with the community of Asheville and beyond."



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To learn more about the South Asheville Cemetery, use the Google map, listen to the Slave Narrative of Sarah Gudger, or to donate to support more experiential learning like this, please visit: www.warren-wilson.edu/2018owlandspade