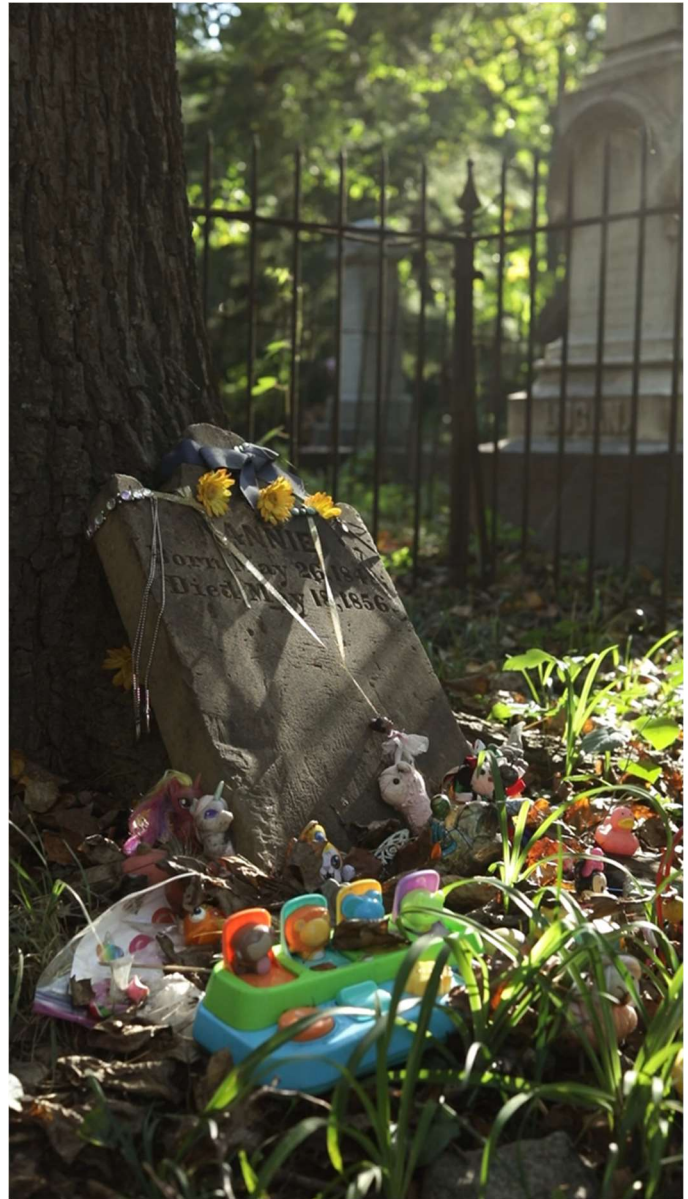


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The New York Times

America's Black Cemeteries and Three Women Trying to Save Them

In Georgia, Texas and Washington, D.C.,
three Black women are working to preserve
desecrated African American burial grounds
and the stories they hold.



Credit... By Brian Palmer For The New York Times



By [Elizabeth Williamson](#)

Reporting from Washington

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The child's headstone is inscribed simply "Nannie," marking the grave of a 7-year-old girl who died on May 18, 1856. She is buried in one of Washington's oldest Black cemeteries, in a neglected corner of Georgetown. For years she has touched visitors who have left toys, dolls and birthday cards at her grave.

This year on Juneteenth, the June 19 holiday commemorating Emancipation, 200 people visited the [Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society](#) cemeteries to see Nannie's grave and others buried there. The crowd was a big one for the long-struggling burial grounds, adjacent to one another and separated by only a battered cyclone fence from the neighboring Oak Hill Cemetery, the premier final address for Washington's largely white elite.

"It was amazing" that such a large, multiracial group had come, said Lisa Fager, the Executive Director of the [Black Georgetown Foundation](#), a nonprofit managing the preservation of the two cemeteries.

After the visitors had gone, someone set fire that night to Nannie's grave, scorching her tombstone and destroying its decorations. Ms. Fager, unaware of the damage when she led a tour group to the grave the next morning, [let out a scream upon discovering](#) the charred grass and melted toys.

Georgetown is a moneyed enclave well-monitored by home security cameras and police, but the culprit has not been found. The vandalism of Nannie's grave is a reflection of the decay, destruction and desecration plaguing many of America's Black cemeteries. From tiny, moss-enshrouded plantation plots to sprawling urban sites, tens of thousands of these burial grounds lie in ruins, their history fading or lost.



The Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society Cemetery in Washington.
Credit...Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Three Black women, shocked by the condition of cemeteries in Washington, Georgia and Texas, have turned their anger into action. None have prior experience in historic preservation, landscape architecture or design. But like many others working to save Black cemeteries, they view the work as a sacred trust and payment of a debt to ancestors who led the way.

“We stand on their shoulders,” said Margott Williams, who founded a nonprofit entrusted with the care of Olivewood Cemetery in Houston.

In Washington, Ms. Fager single-handedly took on the city and federal government when work crews dug into the border of the Female Union Band Society cemetery to revamp a bike path. In Midland, Ga., Yamona Pierce demanded that Georgia Power repair the damage from plowing an access path over graves at Pierce Chapel African Cemetery. In Houston, Ms. Williams pushed a lawn mower the mile to and from her home to Olivewood for months, eventually convincing the county to legally entrust her with the overgrown cemetery’s care.

No accurate count exists of how many Black burial grounds survive. Brent Leggs, the director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s [African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund](#), notes that a recent grant competition drew proposals from 5,400 Black cemeteries seeking a total of some \$650 million, more than six times the amount available from private and corporate donors. The trust has begun to map Black burial places, and offers preservation grants. But the work is slow, and the money never enough.

“Within the Black community, there is a deep well of civic needs, and it can be difficult to make the case for preservation,” Mr. Leggs said. “But this is about reminding the nation of its social responsibility to care for its history.”

Washington provides little help. Late last year, Congress passed the [African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act](#), which authorized \$3 million for competitive grants to identify, research and preserve Black cemeteries. Congress has yet to appropriate even that.



Yamona Pierce, center, and her daughters, Hannah, left, and Leah.
Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times

MIDLAND, GA.

Mourning graves 'obliterated'

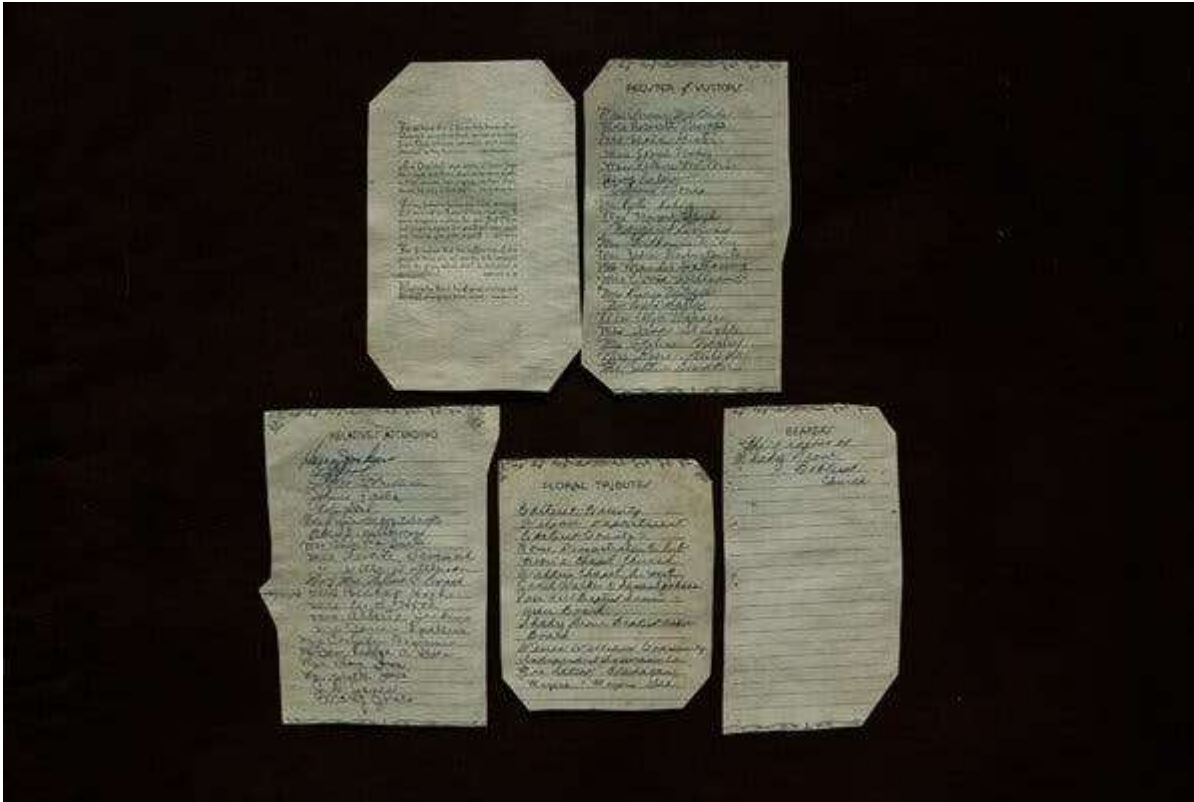
The gate to Pierce Chapel African Cemetery was padlocked and beyond it was a trash-filled, overgrown lot. But Ms. Pierce, who had traveled in August 2019 from Washington, D.C., to Midland, Ga., with her two teenage daughters to find her ancestors' graves, was determined to press on.

Ms. Pierce — there is no known relation between her last name and that of the cemetery — inquired at the Pierce Chapel United Methodist Church across the road. Soon a young man in a pickup truck met her, her daughters and two cousins at the cemetery's entrance. Founded around 1828, the cemetery was a burying place for at least 500 people enslaved on nearby plantations in Harris County.

Relatives of Ms. Pierce's, by then well into their 90s, had long told her that her great-great-great grandparents were buried there. They recalled cleaning their graves in a cemetery whose stones, pottery and plantings of yucca and periwinkle were a window into ancestral burial practices.



Relatives of Ms. Pierce's had long told her that her great-great-great grandparents were buried at the Pierce Chapel African Cemetery. *Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times*



Pieces of Ms. Pierce's family memorial guest book. *Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times*

The young man, who said he was a descendant of one of the original landowners, questioned Ms. Pierce about her connection to the cemetery, then agreed to let the group in.

Soon they were picking their way over downed branches to a few sagging gravestones. Standing aghast in a scrub forest, humiliated that the young man had treated her like a trespasser, Ms. Pierce could barely look at her girls.

"I had no words for them," she said. "I felt the pain and hurt that my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother must have felt — the reason they never took us out there."

On a subsequent trip, she found a forlorn stone that tore at her heart. No bigger than a book, it was inscribed simply "LUCY." She did not find any of her own family tombstones.



Credit...By Kenny Holston For The New York Times

Returning home to a comfortable life in Washington, “I took to my bed and cried for days,” Ms. Pierce, 53, recalled.

Although she had volunteered at her daughters’ private school and worked for a foundation related to her husband’s work as an intellectual property lawyer, she had no preparation for restoring a deteriorating cemetery more than 700 miles away.

Still, “I couldn’t coexist with that or ignore it and pretend like we didn’t see it and it never happened,” she said. “I thought about all of these women in that cemetery who blazed a trail for me to be here and my daughters to be here, and all of the love that I remember in my home and in my family. But my daughters said it best: ‘Mama, we cannot let our family be buried in a trash dump like that.’”

The following year, Ms. Pierce formed the nonprofit [Hamilton Hood Foundation](#), named for two of her enslaved ancestors, Jane Hamilton and Owen Hood, to educate the public about the historical significance of the cemetery and to raise money for restoring it. She soon discovered something that infuriated her: Part of the cemetery had been destroyed decades before to make way for nearby utility poles used by Georgia Power and the cable provider Mediacom.



The Pierce Chapel United Methodist Church is across the road from the Pierce Chapel African Cemetery.

Credit...Kenny Holston For The New York Times



Small pink flags represent where archaeologists have identified burials, and white flags represent material artifacts.

Credit...Kenny Holston For The New York Times

“They cut a road through the middle of the cemetery,” Ms. Pierce said. “They bulldozed or obliterated everything.”

John Kraft, a Georgia Power spokesman, disputed Ms. Pierce’s characterization of the construction as a road. He called it a utility right-of-way, said the work occurred some 80 years ago, and that “the property was not well known or marked as a cemetery.”

Thomas Larsen, a senior official at Mediacom, said a company later bought by Mediacom installed its lines on Georgia Power’s poles some 30 years ago, and did not damage what he said looked at the time like a junkyard.



Credit...By Kenny Holston/The New York Times

But under pressure from Ms. Pierce and a council of descendants she organized, the companies removed the lines in 2021. They acknowledge they did not ask any descendants of people buried there for permission to do the work. That is required by state law, Ms. Pierce said.

Still, neither company has repaired the damage. Mediacom offered the foundation \$2,500 in exchange for a waiver of future claims, an amount Ms. Pierce rejected as insultingly small.

Georgia Power told Ms. Pierce that the Hamilton Hood Foundation had to own the property before it would consider paying for improvements. The landowner, Sara Bankhead, said in an interview last month she is considering selling or donating the cemetery to the foundation, but has not made a decision.

The foundation has in the meantime spent thousands of dollars on restoration, including archaeological studies, cadaver dogs and ground penetrating radar to find bulldozed and lost graves. Ms. Pierce herself has spent countless hours working the grounds on numerous trips to Georgia.

Sometimes she sees families carrying flowers and balloons to the well-tended graveyard across the road, where the white landowners are buried. Someday, she said, "I want my daughters to do the same thing" at Pierce Chapel.

This year the National Trust placed the cemetery on its list of 11 most endangered historic places in America.



"There are times when I sit by my grandfather's headstone and say, 'I can't do this,'" Margott Williams said. *Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times*

HOUSTON

Black history, threatened by floods

Ms. Williams founded the [Descendants of Olivewood](#) in Houston 20 years ago, and since then the work of restoring a cemetery of 4,000 of the city's earliest Black residents, including a dozen of her ancestors, has been an exhilarating, exhausting journey of highs and lows. Her work is now so well known that Black people call her from all over Texas, asking what to do about family gravesites used as dumps or trampled by cattle.

"I always tell them, it takes blood, sweat and tears, literally," Ms. Williams said, growing emotional in an interview. "There are times when I sit by my grandfather's headstone and say, 'I can't do this. It's killing me.'"

Ms. Williams, 60, first learned of Olivewood's condition in 1999, when her grandmother died and Ms. Williams thought the family might bury her in a family plot there. She was shocked by what she found. Out-of-control vines and weeds obscured every family marker, including a regal angel on a tomb at the property's center.

Her grandmother was interred elsewhere, but Ms. Williams could not stop thinking about Olivewood. The cemetery was the final resting place for many of Houston's Black religious leaders, wealthy merchants, veterans of both world wars and at least one of the [Buffalo Soldiers](#), the Black U.S. Army regiments founded in 1866 to serve on the American frontier.



The cemetery was the final resting place for many of Houston's Black religious leaders, wealthy merchants and veterans of both world wars. *Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times*



Ms. Williams founded the Descendants of Olivewood in Houston 20 years ago.
Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

Lucy F. Farrow, who was instrumental in the development of American Pentecostalism and was the niece of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, is buried there, as is Richard Allen, a Republican state legislator who in 1878 became the first African American Texan to campaign for statewide office in an unsuccessful run for lieutenant governor.

“They opened the doors for me in so many ways,” Ms. Williams said.

Her grandfather founded a civic club in the historically black Houston neighborhood where Ms. Williams grew up, and her father was a precinct watcher on voting days. “My dad loved this community, my grandfather loved this community, so it just trickled down,” she said.

Over the years, in between caring for her daughter, Ms. Williams has worked in a day care center, at a bank, and as a crossing guard. She said she was particularly inspired by the stories of the women buried in Olivewood.

“They established schools for music and art, foundations and societies for people coming out of Emancipation,” she said. “Even in those difficult times they still found the energy for their families and their communities and to make them what they were. Those women, they drove me.”



Olivewood's biggest threat is uncontrolled flooding. *Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times*



No accurate count exists of how many Black burial grounds survive.

Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

When Ms. Williams appealed to local government for help clearing the cemetery, she was told to do it herself. For six months in 2003 she used a borrowed lawn mower, sickle and rake to clear weeds, which drew the notice, and help, from the county historic commission. Ms. Williams created the foundation that same year. By 2008, the Descendants of Olivewood had gained stewardship of the cemetery, and help from the surrounding community to maintain it.

As with many old burial grounds, Olivewood's biggest threat is water. Uncontrolled flooding from the adjacent bayou made worse by nearby development has been washing graves into the adjoining ravine. Recently, a troop of Boy Scouts clearing brush there found a human skull and teeth. They now rest in a storage unit, along with other bones awaiting reburial on higher ground.

"In Houston we're not in love with preservation. We're in love with development and what brings in the cash," Ms. Williams said. Olivewood has been recognized as a historic site [by UNESCO](#) and the state of Texas. But those honors do not pay to maintain the 7.5-acre site, which receives no government money. Ms. Williams recalls a city official telling her, "Those people are dead. They don't pay any taxes, so why should we worry about them?"

Near the beginning of her quest to save Olivewood, Ms. Williams had to prove her familial connection to the site in court. She dug through family papers, and eventually found a ledger recording the \$2 her grandmother had paid for her grandfather's plot.

"I said, well good night, sweet Irene!" she recalled. "How do you get off with paying two dollars to maintain a plot? That would not even buy a weed-eater twine!"



Lisa Fager took on the government when work crews dug into the border of the Female Union Band Society cemetery to revamp a bike path. *Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times*

WASHINGTON

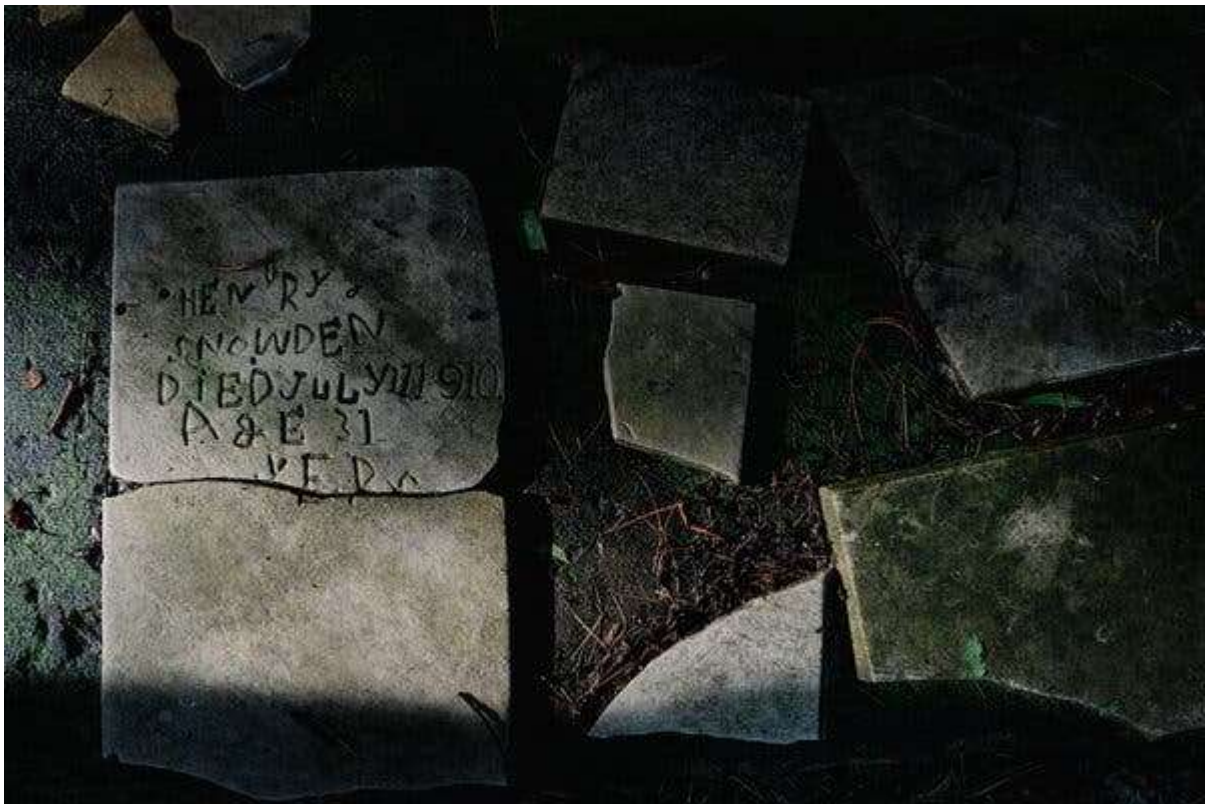
‘I’m good at making noise’

It pains Ms. Fager when neighbors in Georgetown express dismay at the Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society cemeteries’ disrepair but do not help maintain them, particularly given the largess expended on the cemetery next door.

That is Oak Hill, a rolling 15-acre site with a lake, fountain and curving walkways lined with 19th-century monuments — the final resting place of, among others, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson as well as Katharine Graham, the former publisher of The Washington Post, and Ben Bradlee, The Post’s legendary executive editor. The cemetery is raising money to restore its 160-year-old “Bigelow Iron Fence,” named for its [renowned designer](#), Jacob Bigelow. The \$1.8 million project will be funded entirely with private money.

In contrast, the Black Georgetown Foundation, the nonprofit caring for the two cemeteries, has \$55,000 in the bank. “I get paid when we’re able to pay me,” Ms. Fager, 53, said. The National Trust stepped in earlier in this year and [gave the foundation a \\$100,000 grant](#) to help with her salary. Ms. Fager was diagnosed with cancer last year; she pays for her treatment partly through a GoFundMe campaign.

Ms. Fager has overseen Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society since 2019 after working in the recording industry, consulting for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and starting a nonprofit called Industry Ears, which called out broadcasters for stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in music and media. “I’m good at making noise,” Ms. Fager said.



The cemeteries are in a formerly Black enclave known from the mid-19th century through the 1930s as Herring Hill. The area was also home to the capital's Black elite: merchants, doctors, lawyers and clergy. *Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times*

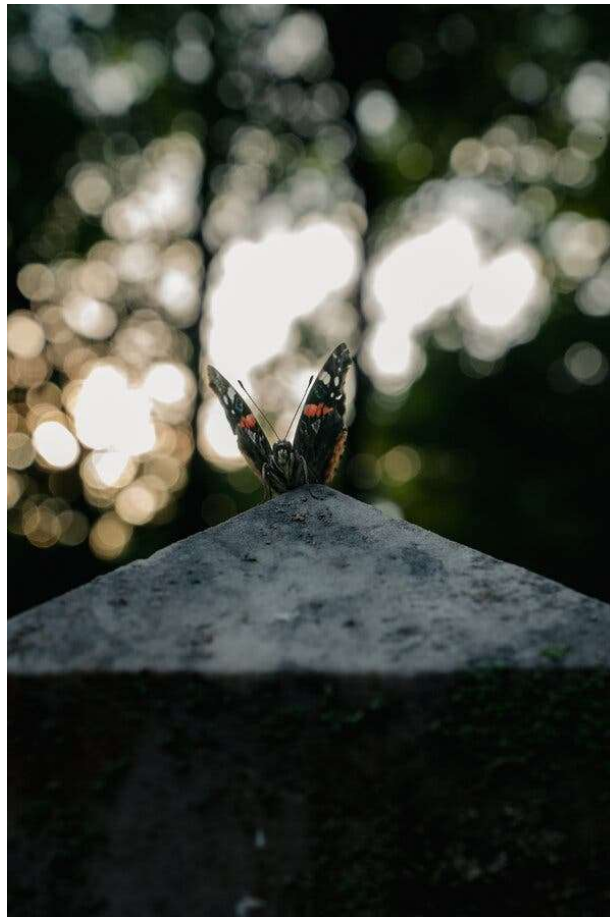


Last year the D.C. government allocated \$1.6 million for managing flooding at the cemeteries. *Credit...Brian Palmer for The New York Times*

Mount Zion, formerly the Methodist Burying Ground, was founded in 1808 as a cemetery for white and Black people who attended Montgomery Street Methodist Church. The Female Union Band Society cemetery opened adjacent to Mount Zion in 1842, founded by free women of color [committed to caring for one another “in sickness and in death.”](#) Despite a widely held misconception, the sites are not, Ms. Fager said, cemeteries only for enslaved people, but are also the resting places of an estimated 10,000 members of Washington’s free Black community. A vault on the site was used as a hiding place for people escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad.

The cemeteries are in a formerly Black enclave known from the mid-19th century through the 1930s as [Herring Hill](#), where residents fished for the once-plentiful herring in nearby Rock Creek. The area was also home to the capital’s Black elite: merchants, doctors, lawyers and clergy.

In 1849, Oak Hill was built for whites only, marking the beginning of the end for the Black cemeteries next door. White families with relatives buried at Mount Zion moved their remains to Oak Hill. Herring Hill’s Black residents began moving away, replaced by wealthy white homeowners. In 1950, Mary Logan Jennings, a former Female Union Band Society president, was laid to rest in the society’s cemetery, one of the graveyard’s final burials before it was condemned by the city for its disrepair, and closed to further interments. Two decades later the cemetery fought off developers, and in 1975 was listed on the National Register for Historic Places.



Late last year, Congress passed the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act.
Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times



For years visitors have left toys, dolls and birthday cards for a child's headstone inscribed "Nannie," marking the grave of a 7-year-old girl who died on May 18, 1856.
Credit...Shuran Huang for The New York Times

But it has been a continuing struggle. In late 2021, Ms. Fager discovered a D.C. Department of Transportation work crew digging on the Female Union Band cemetery's northern border to fix a bike path. Enraged, she photographed the work and got it stopped, and the National Park Service, which now owns the section, conducted extensive archaeological studies before continuing.

"It boiled my blood, the dismissiveness of it all," Ms. Fager said. "I didn't even know which rules had been violated at the time. I just knew in my bones it was wrong."

Paul Williams, Oak Hill's superintendent, said that the cemetery plans to offer its struggling neighbors help with fund-raising and cleanup. Last year, after years of pleading by the foundation, the D.C. government [allocated \\$1.6 million](#) for managing flooding at the cemeteries, which the City Council noted "have suffered perpetual, systemic neglect."

The work will soon begin, allowing Ms. Fager more room for researching the lives of the people interred in the cemeteries. "I don't want to keep trying to save the land, I want to save the people and their stories," she said.

"As someone going through cancer you think about death, and what you want to leave behind," Ms. Fager added. "It's important to get this history to the next generation."



Credit...By Brian Palmer For The New York Times

[Elizabeth Williamson](#) is a feature writer in the Washington bureau. She has worked for the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post, and is the author of “Sandy Hook: An American Tragedy and the Battle for Truth.” [More about Elizabeth Williamson](#)

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