Sacred Places

Inspirng History

African American Cemeteries in Florida

Florida Archaeology Month

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FLORIDA ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH

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“Look to the past to inform the future.”

The bird and heart symbols at right represent the concept of “Seedwork” from the Alafia people of West Africa. The bird moves forward while looking back to grab an egg that represents the wisdom of the past. In the same way learning from history can help inform a positive present and bright future, Florida’s African American cemeteries are sacred spaces where families can memorialize their loved ones, but also places full of history to inspire and engage younger generations.

African American cemeteries, whether in the past or today, are at risk due to legacies of Segregation-Era policies. Landowners at the State and Federal levels are increasingly aware of these cemeteries and are working legislatively to applaud and protect these cemeteries. The strategies, protections, however, come from the local level. It is incumbent on government officials and researchers alike to work with descendants and local communities to ensure their stories of these sacred places are brought forth in a way that preserves them in place for generations to come.

In 2017, the National Park Service and The University of Florida launched a Florida African American Cemetery Project. This project is dedicated to the understanding of the history and culture of African American heritage through the study and preservation of African American cemeteries across Florida. This is the first step to understanding and preserving the history and culture of African American heritage in Florida.

By these Hands, Vernacular Archaeologies

Created by local artists and craftspeople to commemorate their loved ones, vernacular headstones made of easily accessible materials can be found in early 20th century African American cemeteries across Florida. Vernacular markers connect individuals, ancestors, and ideas to the cultural and physical landscapes of the community in very personal ways. They represent love, thoughtfulness, respect, and bond of community. By these Hands was a community partnership created in 2015 to commemorate and highlight these back-bench markers in Pensacola’s Historic African American cemetery. This project was part of the ongoing University of West Florida Archaeology Institute historic cemetery research and public outreach initiatives.

COMING TOGETHER AT BETHLEHEM METHODIST EPISCOPAL CEMETERY, ACHMER

Cemeteries can be difficult to maintain over the generations, but when communities come together great things can happen. Established by freedmen around 1875, the Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Cemetery has served the local African American community for over 100 years. Today the peninsula Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Cemetery Restoration Organization has worked to preserve the cemetery and partnered with the City of Achmer and the Humanities Preservation Program at the University of Florida to continue these efforts. Restoration and creation of a cemetery preservation plan is ongoing funded in part through Keep-Atchison County Beautiful and State of Florida grants.

Rediscovering Florida’s Lost African American Cemeteries

The legacy of Segregation and Jim Crow has left its mark on the landscape of Florida, and especially on each community’s historic cemeteries. This injustice and racial hatred led to the deterioration and ultimate the demise of multiple historic African American cemeteries across the State. Pushed by descendants and community leaders, historians, researchers, and archaeologists have begun to help relocate and re-memorialize these sacred spaces.

In 2019 the City of Deerfield Beach opened the Brandon Robert-Bowman Memorial Park on the site of a rediscovered African American cemetery. This site had previously been eligible for development but descendants came forward with their memories of the cemetery and the work was hailed.

Sawing History at Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery, Miami

Lincoln Memorial Cemetery in Miami, founded around 1923, is the final resting place for as many as thirty thousand people. The above ground walls and Bahamian style of burial speak to the history of the local African American community. They are also the final resting place for footage figure Sue D.A. Dorsey, the first African American millionaire in Miami Great Cherry, the first African American woman to serve in the Florida legislature; Henry Chamberlain, the first African American to be elected a Black-owned newspaper; the “Miami Times”; as well as veterans, business owners, and everybody people alike. Its re-use in a progress led by her mother Jeanie Williams, Cantonier Arthur Kennedy, a dedicated group of community volunteers, and assistance from staff of the Coral Gables Museum.

Key West

Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in Key West (where she lived and worked along the City of Key West’s historic Sunset Cemetery) is a visit to her and her work. Her grave, a small corner rectangle with little else, is surrounded by a cross of 46 people buried in a slave cemetery now located on a golf course in Tallahassee.

In the Tampa Bay area, investigative reporting by the Tampa Bay Times has led to the discovery of the unused African American cemeteries in Hillsborough County. Zora Neale Hurston was a frequent visitor to the Tampa area, and the African American burial grounds, was the first to come to light and has led to a renewed push to locate, document, and re-memorialise these cemeteries through community consultation using non-destructive methods.

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Desceendants of people interred at the site now learn about the cemetery by capturing the large group at Key West’s Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery. The University of Florida’s Historic Cemetery Research Initiative.

Kingly Plantation, Jacksonville

In 2011, archaeologists working at Kingly Plantation near Jacksonville located six graves of enslaved people. The grave markers date to the site in the early 1800s. The cemetery had long been rumored to exist, but its location was a mystery. The Timucuan Ecological and Historical Preservation worked closely with descendants to craft interpretation and create space for visitors to appreciate their ancestors final resting place.

At the re-consecration ceremony for the cemetery, descendants and Director of the Timucuan Ecological and Historical Preservation worked closely with descendants to craft interpretation and create space for visitors to appreciate their ancestors final resting place.

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