

“Place-Making and Memory at Baltimore’s Historic Laurel Cemetery”

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I. Introduction to the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project

Laurel Cemetery was incorporated in 1852 as a nondenominational cemetery for African Americans of Baltimore, Maryland. In its early years, it was a premier burial site for people across Black Baltimore’s socioeconomic spectrum. However, by the 1930s, the site was overgrown and garbage strewn due to years of improper maintenance by the cemetery’s owners. In response to local neighborhood complaints and economic motivations on the part of the owners, legislation was successfully introduced by a local politician in 1957 to allow the demolition and sale of the property for commercial purposes. Although lot owners and NAACP lawyers petitioned to stop the demolition, the bulldozing proceeded following the removal of a few hundred graves to a new Laurel Cemetery site approximately fifty (50) miles away in Carroll County, Maryland. Today, the Belair-Edison Crossing shopping center occupies the footprint of the old cemetery.

In the case of Baltimore’s Laurel Cemetery, the absence of historical memory and material culture signifying the existence of an important historical site is compelling. Although Baltimore’s history shows the loss of many cemeteries regardless of race or ethnicity (Wilson 1991), the size of the property (22 acres), number of burials, notoriety of individuals, and legal opposition to demolition make the Laurel Cemetery stand out as an important case study with broad implications. In particular, the overall number of burials is an important aspect of the site. The exact number will never be known as cemetery records were lost and Baltimore City death certificates do not start until 1875. Additionally, the property was known to have been used as a burial site for free and enslaved African Americans prior to its formal 1852 incorporation. Despite these blind spots, our review of Baltimore City death certificate has thus far revealed more than 13,000 burials from Laurel Cemetery (after a search of less

than 30% of relevant records). At this point, it is safe to estimate that more than 20,000 burials will be revealed solely from available death certificate records.

Among the burials are many individuals whose achievements in life were impactful to the development of the city. In her testimony from the unsuccessful case (*Kennard v. McKamer* 1960: 486) to stop the demolition of the Laurel Cemetery, NAACP leader Lillie Carroll Jackson, stated:

Laurel Cemetery had some of the finest Baltimoreans and Marylanders as ever put into being. Some of the finest ministers, finest doctors, finest lawyers, finest schoolteachers, men and women who we honor in the City of Baltimore. Men who walked the streets of Baltimore, women who walked the streets of Baltimore with dignity and helped to make Baltimore a better place for us to live today.

Civil Rights activists, military veterans, writers, publishers, businessmen and women, freemasons, mariners, laborers, washerwoman, and many other groups are represented in the cemetery. Relatedly, the exploration of associated biographies affords a significant opportunity for education concerning late nineteenth and early twentieth century life in Baltimore.

This paper presents the work of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project and associated public education, outreach, and collaborative placemaking. Such activities include the creation of a short video and the use of social media, a public symposium, a traveling exhibit, public presentations, outreach to neighborhood associations and other stakeholders, collaborative historical research, and the formation of a Laurel Cemetery Memorial Task Force. Through these community-focused efforts, placemaking has emerged as an important component in changing perceptions of place in relation to the original site of the Laurel Cemetery. In order to engender a broader discussion on site preservation, it is important to re-frame conceptions of the local landscape in the light of its historical use and significance. This new “armature of mental associations” (Fleming 2007: 17) can enrich the narrative associated with an otherwise banal shopping center and provide a deeper mooring of significance for the community within narratives of Baltimore’s historical development.

II. Researching Laurel Cemetery

As professors at neighboring Baltimore universities, Drs. Ron Castanzo and Elgin Klugh were interested in providing students a hands-on research experience in a project with significant potential for archaeological training, community outreach, education, and engagement. Dr. Castanzo noted the existence of Laurel Cemetery while reviewing historical maps to discern previous land uses indicative of sites for possible archaeological investigation. Further investigation revealed occasional mention of the cemetery in local newspapers (The Baltimore Sun and the Afro-American) and one journal article on the subject (Clayton and Moore 1984), but most compelling was the absence of any physical marker and its apparent absence from local memory. Given the cemetery's size and apparent prominence within the late 19th and early 20th century, we viewed this as a viable public anthropology project.

Archaeology

Given the relative strengths of our professional training, we designed the overall project occurring within the context of two stages. The first stage consisted of Archaeological investigation to determine if burials still exist at the site. In this work we introduced students to archeological research methods, including magnetometry, ground penetrating radar (GPR), surveying, and excavation (archaeologist, Dr. Isaac Shearn joined us at this time). As we expected, indications from GPR survey in the parking lot and the 1.2-acre greenspace in the northwest corner of the former cemetery grounds (a grassy lot between the parking lot and the main street) reflected a pattern indicative of a burial ground. Additionally, Artifacts found during excavation (focused on the 1.2-acre greenspace) include human skeletal remains, caskets and casket handles, gravestone fragments, and early to mid-20th century household items reflecting a period when people began dumping garbage at the site.

We expected such findings because there was nothing substantial, beyond acidic soil, to make us think otherwise. Numerous public accounts, including statements from government officials and the funeral home charged with moving the graveyard, were published in 1958 claiming that all of the bodies

and gravestones were removed from the original Laurel Cemetery location. However, later interviews of the individual who dug the graves at the Carroll county site, Norman Collins Jr., indicate that only a small number of actual bodies were exhumed and relocated, and that only headstones (approximately 300) were moved: “Collins figures eight to 12 full bodies were moved from Belair Road to Carroll County... Many tombstones at the new cemetery mark nothing at all but memories: the ground beneath them is empty, Collins says” (Schoettler, 1991: A7). This claim is supported by discrepancies in the estimated costs of removing the bodies. Whereas the Baltimore City Government estimated that it would cost over \$300,000, the now defunct Ellsworth Armacost funeral home accomplished the task for \$15,500. A series of unpublished photographs in the Baltimore Sun archives taken during the demolition of the cemetery in 1958 confirm the haphazard way headstones were removed, damaged, and trucked off, as well as the lack of any careful excavation to exhume burials.

Historical and Archival Research

The primary goals of stage 2 (ongoing) are to (1) educate the public about the existence of burials at the site, (2) collect historical documents and information about individuals buried at the site, and (3) collaboratively work with stakeholders to erect a historical marker at the site. These goals are being accomplished; however, in very good and productive ways, this second stage has grown to entail much more than initially anticipated. This is due to both the depth of information being uncovered and the large amount of interest in the project.

Initial conversations quickly revealed that very few individuals knew about the Laurel Cemetery, and even fewer were knowledgeable about any significant aspect of its history. Thus, public education about the project emerged as an early priority for our efforts. To reach a large audience, Dr. Klugh and a student created a short video about the site and its significance. We utilized YouTube to post the video and provided the link to Facebook groups related to Baltimore history. This brought about contacts from local politicians, media, heritage professionals, descendants, and historians.

One of the most significant developments of the initial publicity was a connection with the Baltimore African American Historical and Genealogical Society (BAAHGS). Members of this organization were already familiar with Laurel Cemetery and were planning a long-term project to identify Laurel Cemetery burials reported through Baltimore City death certificate records. As our efforts aligned, BAAHGS researchers immediately became valued collaborators, providing both expertise and manpower to accomplish research that we would likely have had to otherwise forego. Beyond identifying burials, BAAHGS volunteers are also engaged in researching and writing biographies for individuals buried at Laurel Cemetery and identifying living descendants.

BAAHGS research into the Laurel Cemetery is spearheaded by Glenn Blackwell, BAAHGS Vice-president for Genealogy, Agnes Kane Callum (Baltimore) Chapter. Because the original list of burials was lost or destroyed during the 1950s cemetery bankruptcy proceedings, the only method to reconstruct this information is to complete an exhaustive search of Baltimore City death certificates. Working with archivists at the Baltimore City Archives and the Maryland State Archives, Blackwell coordinates a team of volunteers to search and extract up to 21 categories of information for each individual who died in Baltimore and was buried at Laurel Cemetery.

Realistically, it may take years to completely search all relevant Baltimore City death certificates. The volunteers are searching through two series of reels of Baltimore City death certificates: (1) CM1132 which runs from Jan 1875 to Jan 1950 and consists of 248 reels averaging more than 3,000 death certificates per reel, and (2) series CE502 which runs from Jan 1950 to Dec 1957 (the last recorded burial at Laurel) and consists of 202 reels not exceeding 500 death certs per reel. The group has completed the first nine reels, CM1132-001 thru CM1132-009, which cover Jan 1875 through Oct 1878. There were 4,117 Laurel burials during that period, an average of more than 1,000 burials per year. As of March 2020, death certificates recorded from the completed reels, and additional portions of reels searched, report over 13,000 Laurel Cemetery burials. Given the very large number of

death certificates remaining to be searched, it is very likely that the total number of death certificates reporting burials at Laurel Cemetery will be over 37,000, based on a trend analysis of the currently available data. Additionally, it must be taken into account that for the years 1852-1874, there were no death certificates while these were likely among the most active years for the cemetery.

To formally present our findings, we were awarded Maryland Humanities funding to hold the “Laurel Cemetery Project Symposium” in June 2019. The symposium provided an opportunity to bring together heritage professionals, historians, descendants, students, Belair-Edison community residents, and other interested parties. The day included presentations on archaeological and ethnohistorical work relative to the site and a panel on the protection of African American burial sites. Additionally, the forum served to debut the Laurel Cemetery Timeline Exhibit. This exhibit displays important dates related to the operation of the cemetery, biographical sketches of individuals buried there, issues related to its demolition and partial relocation, and present day concerns for preservation at the main site in East Baltimore, and the site in Carroll County where a fraction of the graves were moved.

A major goal of the symposium was to create a forum wherein a wide array of stakeholders could discuss how to permanently memorialize the site. To accomplish this goal, the final portion of the symposium was reserved for a facilitated discussion about how to preserve and permanently memorialize the site. As a result, several individuals volunteered to form a task force to work toward erecting a memorial at the site.

Public Engagement and the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Task Force

The Laurel Cemetery Task Force held its first meeting in August 2019. The twenty members represent descendants, BAAHGS volunteers, academia (a professor of Historical Architecture, two archaeologists and one applied cultural anthropologist), community residents, and local heritage organizations. Although I serve as the chair of the Task Force for organizational purposes, the group works collaboratively, drawing on the considerable talents and experience of its membership.

In the spirit of collaboration, the first meeting was devoted to developing the mission and goals of the Task Force:

Mission: We endeavor to erect a permanent memorial in recognition of the several thousand African Americans interred at Historic Laurel Cemetery, ensure the safety and stability of the site into the foreseeable future, and to educate the public about the rich history of the cemetery and the lives of those buried there.

Goals:

1. Plan and erect a memorial on Belair Road
2. Create a mural on the side of the shopping center
3. Erect historical markers at the three points of entry into the Belair-Edison Shopping Center
4. Construct a retaining wall to protect human remains from erosion.
5. Develop an educational program for k-12 students involving both web-based and classroom content.
6. Create a traveling exhibit that can be used to educate the community
7. Erect a roadside historic marker at the Carroll County Laurel Cemetery site

To accomplish the work of the Task Force, we formed committees for our various endeavors: (1) Education, (2) Architecture and Design, (3) Fundraising and Grants, and (4) Archival Research.

The charge of the Education Committee includes efforts relating to public presentations, the Timeline Exhibit, the website, and the goal of creating k-12 curricular content. Public presentations are intended as community outreach efforts to educate about the history and significance of the cemetery, and the efforts of the Task Force. For these presentations we have focused on libraries and churches. These venues provide for ease of accessibility, and several older Baltimore churches have early leaders and parishioners who were buried in Laurel Cemetery. As the Timeline Exhibit is mobile, it accompanies the public presentations. At the time of this writing the exhibit is being prepared for display in the exhibit hall of the Maryland Historical Society.

The Architecture and Design Committee is charged with developing plans for the permanent memorial and plans for site preservation. In at least one portion of the property erosion threatens possible exposure of burials. Thus, our plans for the memorial include a retaining wall feature to assure

the integrity of the site. Relatedly, the Fundraising and Grants Committee is charged with finding financial resources to make designs a reality.

The work of the Archival Committee includes the review of Baltimore City death certificates—a monumental task that will probably take at least two years to complete—genealogical research to identify descendants, and the drafting of biographies about notable individuals buried at Laurel Cemetery. Committee members are exploring the significance of masonic organizations, churches, burial societies, businesses, the military, healthcare, and workers trade organizations in the lives of late nineteenth and early twentieth century African Americans in Baltimore. As more individuals learn about the project, individuals continue to come forward with information concerning their ancestors or other individuals who buried at Laurel Cemetery. We intend to make as much of this information as possible available on the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project website.

When realized, the work of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Task Force will ensure the history and memory of the Laurel Cemetery achieves a permanent seat in discussions of Baltimore history. This obscured and forgotten site will be retooled as a locus for education and a cultural anchor within the Belair Edison community. Due to the impact of this site on the physical and intangible features within the community, this project represents a case study in placemaking.

III. Placemaking

In order to begin discussions about memorialization and preservation of the Laurel Cemetery site, it is important to inform the broader community about its history and significance. This allows for perspectives animated by heritage to compete with the current ahistorical interpretations of the site's use and value. This more complex and dynamic conception of place acknowledges interactions between the past and the present, and demands an accounting of how the present came to be shaped by the events of the past.

Highlighting the story of Laurel Cemetery within the landscape of the shopping center presents a unique set of challenges. The cemetery space is historically significant due to the role it played in Baltimore's early African American history, and, to many, a sacred space due to what remains there. However, it is also a politically charged and emotionally challenging space due to events surrounding its demolition. Revelation of the existence of thousands of burials under a shopping center parking lot presents a kind of uncanny base for potential emotions as individuals are forced to reconcile the supposed sacredness and solemnity of a burial ground with the very active, yet mundane, activities of a shopping center. This will present challenges and stir unpleasant emotions for many, but it is a reality that must be faced.

In her writing about the Boot Hill Cemetery site associated with Florida's Industrial School for Boys (more popularly known by a later name—the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys), Jackson (2016:158) uses Freud's concept of "the uncanny" (Freud 2003 [1919]) as a framework for discussing "things that surface when one recovers human remains or in some way revisits the site of a past, perhaps longhidden, traumatic event." Jackson was member of a University of South Florida research project involving the exhumation and identification the bodies of individuals who died in questionable and problematic circumstances. As an applied cultural anthropologist, her link to the project was through "engagement with the living" and the complexities of addressing the "feelings, fears, meaning, and memories of living people, families, and communities engaged in confronting their relationship to the past with each recovered body" (2016:160-161). Her work also addressed political, social, and cultural concerns of various stakeholders (2016: 170).

The notion of the "uncanny" has relevance for discussions of Laurel Cemetery. Although there is no exhumation as part of the current archaeological goals, research revealing thousands of names will undoubtedly link many living individuals to the site, prompting many to reflect upon the site and to confront feelings about its current uses and obscurity. Our outreach strategy must address the concerns

of all constituencies, including descendants, local community residents, business owners, shopping center patrons, and the greater Baltimore community, while maintaining a level of respect and reverence for the interred. Done properly, there is opportunity for education, reconciliation, healing, and community enhancement.

The landscape itself holds potential as a physical place of reconciliation between the site's history and current uses. Currently, this landscape is devoid of any connection to the history and memory of the Laurel Cemetery. This sense of a discarding of heritage and denial of history is perceived locally as a kind of injury when confronted with the site's significance, and has provoked intensely emotional responses among those with whom we have interacted thus far. It is, indeed, hurtful to find that in the midst of the "Monumental City," the grave of someone as impactful as Reverend Harvey Johnson is not venerated, but instead is effectively exiled to a nearly undetectable pocket of woods fifty miles outside of the city. In tandem with this exile, an amnesia (whether purposeful or simply a product of socio-structural forces) appears to be advancing with regard to the names, legacies, and very existence of many individuals buried at the Laurel Cemetery site.

In his critical analysis of America's historic sites, Loewen (1999: 4) writes, "All across America, the landscape suffers from amnesia, not about everything, but about many crucial events and issues from our past." He further goes on to quote poet Muriel Rukeyser's line, "Pay attention to what they tell you to forget." With regard to race, this amnesia takes on a heightened significance. In particular, African American struggles for rights and recognition have been met with a multitude of attempts to deny, hide, obscure, and downplay historic roles in American history. Twentieth century advancements in Civil Rights, and coinciding social progress in the academy, have now resulted in a long tradition of critically engaging mischaracterizations and omissions of African Americans and other historically disenfranchised groups, but much work remains.

As Loewen (1999) points out, a critical platform for much of the remaining work is the reevaluation of how we recognize our historic landscapes. His work compels review of our monuments, memorials, interpretive materials, historical narratives, and choices regarding what is preserved. Since his writing, many have reflected critically on monuments and memorials that spin false narratives, tell one-sided stories, or glorify dishonorable acts. This has led, in several cases, to the removal and relocation of monuments and statues from places of honor (Wood and Cox 2017; Nirappil 2017; Landrieu 2018). In such cases this reflection has also sparked debates and analysis concerning the context in which monuments were created, and the various constituencies and perspectives that they represent.

Beyond the reevaluation of existing monuments, historic sites, and narratives, there is the important work of re-centering forgotten histories within landscapes and building the monuments that should exist. Within the white supremacist context of the segregation era, omission, erasure, and even exile of African American heritage were important tools to maintain historical narratives supporting the status quo. Thus, there is fertile ground to engage in the work of discovery. The Laurel Cemetery Memorial Task Force finds its mission situated with this broader context.

The first three Task Force goals are intended to effectuate a landscape that identifies, respects, and teaches the Laurel Cemetery story. These include the creation of murals, a memorial, and interpretive markers. Additional inclusions relate to site preservation and environmental concerns. Considerable planning and organizing are underway to carry out the vision of the Task Force, which will re-center the Laurel Cemetery story within the landscape

Murals

We have chosen murals as an early strategy for redefining place and furthering public education. Our specific goals for the mural project are to:

- 1) Engender a sense of place that connects to the historical landscape and activities that

occurred at the site

- 2) Educate about African American history and notable achievements / prominent individuals in various sectors (religious, politics, business, military, trades, ...)
- 3) Make an aesthetically pleasing contribution that uplifts the community

Our intention is to create murals that serve as artistic landmarks in the community. In particular, the mural on the main street side of the shopping center can serve a kind of gateway function for northbound traffic entering the community on Belair Rd. It will be a large and prominent feature that should catch the attention of all passersby.

Such a project done in collaboration with community members is more likely to have an enduring presence. Expounding on this idea, Fleming (2007: 96) reports that “the mural-making process can create interest in place and a sense of community proprietorship by turning the actual walls of the community into valued works of art.” Although we are working collaboratively with interested community leaders, we do not assume complete homogeneity concerning ideal conceptions of community or, relatedly, 100% support of the advancement of the Laurel Cemetery historical narrative associated with the site. In these potential concerns, we take further counsel from Fleming (2007: 103) where he writes:

No mural can represent everyone in the community, and perhaps it should not. Instead, it is useful to think of a mural as a visual record of a collaboration between a group in the community and an artist. The mural is, indeed, evidence of consensus among a group of people who bring their efforts together to make the art a reality, through social activism, finding funding support, or merely seeking permission to impose an image on a wall. Without consensus, there is no mural.

We have consensus among a varied group of stakeholders, including the property owners and local politicians, about the significance of the Laurel Cemetery site and the importance of finding ways to honor its existence. Specific disagreement over a particular mural design could emerge, but the aim is to strike a respectful and aesthetically uplifting tone. Our hope is that the community has a sense of ownership for the mural and is spurred to maintain and protect it in years to come. Additionally, interpretation

associated with the mural (an instructive key to explain featured individuals, events, and items) will assist the educative function that the mural can provide.

Memorial

The erection of a memorial will help to solidify memory and interpretation of the site. This more permanent material symbol will serve as an anchor for reflection and a palpable affirmation of the site's significance. Such a feature will likely constitute the most arduous efforts of the Task Force and carry a sustaining impact.

Precedents for this kind of activity in identifying forgotten and/or unrecognized African American cemeteries include the following sites.

1. Contrabands & Freedmen Cemetery Memorial (large memorial)
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial>
2. Hurricane of 1928 African-American Mass Burial Site (stone memorial)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_of_1928_African-American_Mass_Burial_Site
3. The Walter Pierce Park Cemeteries (markers)
<https://walterpierceparkcemeteries.org>
4. African Burial Ground, Richmond, Virginia (markers)
<https://www.richmondcemeteries.org/africanburialground/>
5. African Burial Ground, New York, NY (large memorial and museum)
<https://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>

In each of these cases, concerned individuals formed coalitions and worked with political and nonprofit groups to advocate for site recognition and preservation. Although each project is unique, a review of these, and others, reveals a pattern of loss and recovery. Loss occurred within the context of the segregation era, when “the exclusion of African Americans from the national consciousness was an active process that was reinforced through written symbols, material symbols, and commemoration” (Shackel 2004: 4). Recovery of lost, forgotten, and unrecognized histories has occurred largely since social, economic, political, advancements of the latter twentieth century (Kook 1998).

Concerning memorials, it is important to note that even stone memorials do not always have the permanence that one might expect. In fact, the Laurel Cemetery was once filled with stone memorials, each commissioned and placed by individuals who likely expected them never to be moved. In the midst of these were some that represented larger collective undertakings. One such example was the monument for Rev. Daniel Alexander Payne, a Senior Bishop of the African American Episcopal Church. In 1894, the Payne Monument Association was incorporated by fellow clergy “for the purpose of collecting funds to erect a monument in his honor.” The dedication of this monument was a celebrated occasion with three noted orators—one of whom was the Hon. Frederick Douglass, LL.D (Wayman 1894). Unfortunately, the tall obelisk that was installed now sits broken and obscured by a chain link fence, feet away from a busy street in another cemetery lot. The same condition also characterizes the similar monument that was installed in memory of Rev. Alexander Walker Wayman, one of the clergy central in the formation of the Payne Monument Association. Thus, it is important that the installation of a memorial for Laurel Cemetery also includes a plan to ensure its existence in perpetuity.

Interpretive Markers

Interpretive markers represent an opportunity for on-site interpretation. These will be a means to convey as much information as possible and appropriate. Although a more thorough learning experience is available on the website, dynamic on-site interpretative markers can allow for a more meaningful experience for site visitors. In this case, it also constitutes an ideal way to provide this information to the local community.

Fleming (2007: 210) urges the usage of creativity in interpretation. He writes:

We usually think of interpretation as a bit part in the drama; it is associated in our minds with historic markers and signs, with plaques on buildings and inserts in pavement with or without written information. However, the bit parts can sometimes have some power. We can experience a chorus of historic makers lyrically formed, carrying poetic messages, and crafted in handsome materials, but interpretation is usually the straight man: didactic, unassuming.

These urgings from Fleming (2007) prompted thinking on the integration and artfulness of interpretive markers at the Laurel Cemetery site—on how to link state historical markers, interpretive signs and panels, the mural, and the monument into a “poetic” and effective message.

A combination of markers (interpretive signs and panels and formal state markers) linked within a trail system (physical and online) can provide a cohesive learning experience. We envision three interpretive signs, one at each of the three main entrances to the shopping center (pedestrian and automobile traffic), a state historical marker by the main road, murals (with some type of explanatory key or panel), and the stone memorial. Other elements, such as an engraved brick walkway, may be added later.

Beyond the original site, the trail system can include other locations where Laurel Cemetery burials were relocated. These are the new Laurel Cemetery site in Carroll County, Maryland, Mt. Zion A.M.E. Cemetery in Lansdowne, MD, Arbutus Cemetery in Arbutus, MD, and if possible, the Loudon Park National Cemetery. At least one of the markers at the original site would also provide a contextual overview of Laurel Cemetery as one of the several cemeteries in the Clifton Park area—three of which have “vanished” (Wilson 1991: 101).

Site Preservation

Of the approximate 15 acres remaining of the cemetery in 1958, approximately 1.2 acres remains of open green space in the northwest corner of the cemetery at nearly the same grade as the original ground surface. This rectangular plot of green space gently grades toward the sidewalk and Belair Road. To stop erosion onto the sidewalk, a 4 ft high wood retaining wall runs for about 100 ft between the green space and the sidewalk. This wall is presently deteriorating and does not extend far enough in length to stem the problem of erosion.

As a component of our work on the site, we plan to build a retaining wall that will stop erosion. Concrete is currently the material of choice, however, a final decision will be based on fitness and cost.

Additionally, the Task Force is planning to seek funding to establish a rain garden in this area to further prevent erosion. Beyond these immediate concerns, the Task Force is also discussing a strategy to ensure the long-term preservation of the site. As the property may change hands, we would like to ensure that future owners inflict no further damage to the site.

Long term preservation is crucial for this overall project. Interest in the preservation of certain histories can ebb and flow as associated neighborhood demographics and land valuations change over time. We plan to preserve the memory of Laurel Cemetery through research that will be stored in permanent archives and made widely accessible, and through on-site public education available by way of visible placemakers (public art, interpretive markers, memorial) at the site. We understand that our efforts have political implications within broader discussions of African American historical representation, and we see this as important motivation for our work.

IV. The Politics of Memory at Laurel Cemetery

“How we choose to build history into or eradicate history from our cities and towns shapes our understandings of identity, community, and responsibility. In short, how we attend to the past through the medium of the built environment has political implications for our future.” (Farrar 2011:723).

Our research has uncovered a sordid tale regarding the condemnation and demolition of the Laurel Cemetery. In ultimately legal, but unethical, ways, politicians and city officials plotted not only to demolish Laurel Cemetery, but also to make enormous personal profits from the sale of the land. These individuals were able to pursue specific legislation enabling the condemnation of Laurel Cemetery (House Bill 594), access a value of \$100 for the property, and then purchase the property through a company that they created expressly for this purpose (Clayton and Moore 1984: 10). Following the removal of the headstones to Carroll County, the land was re-zoned for commercial development and valued at \$250,000, whereupon it was leased for \$38,000/year to Two Guys (T.G.) Stores Incorporated, a subsidiary of Vornado Incorporated, with the first right of refusal to purchase the land by 1976 for

\$633,333.33. The deed filed in the Baltimore City Land Records (Liber 3421 Page 201) on December 1, 1976 shows that this purchase did occur, and that the same individuals still owned the land until that point and were the sole parties to profit from the transfer. Nowhere in the lease agreement or in the deed is there any mention that the land had formerly been, and continued to be, the location of thousands of human burials.

This demolition was motivated by greed but fueled by the attitudes and privileges of a predominately white power-elite with influence in both the public and private spheres. The closing of the cemetery and the memorial we intend to construct is a reminder and source of resistance to the structural disenfranchisement of African Americans from the political decision-making process directly affecting their history and community. The closing of Laurel Cemetery was a highly politicized maneuver organized rather clearly along lines of race and class, and this served to erase African American history and identity from the landscape of Baltimore, whose moniker the “Monumental City,” further exacerbates the loss felt in the community by the absence of African American Monuments. Because Laurel Cemetery was privately owned—and established in a time when African Americans were not legally allowed to own shares of such corporations—there was a divide between the private interests of the cemetery owners and the African American Community whose ancestors were buried there. The powerlessness of the African American Community to protect their past in the lawsuits that followed the destruction of the cemetery would have been painful at the time, but are amplified in future generations as the consequences of forgetting the past became coupled with other racist policies in Baltimore such as redlining and gentrification.

In this research, answering the call of Little (2007:1-2), we aim to actively involve the affected communities and descendants in creating a “useable, broadly conceived past that is civically engaging, that calls a citizenry to participate in debates and decisions about preservation and development, but also, more importantly, to appreciate the worthiness of all people’s histories and to become aware of

historical roots and present-day manifestations of contemporary social justice issues.” We hope that bringing the history of the cemetery into public view and commemorating the space with a permanent memorial at the original site will serve to right some of the wrongs that were done to the African American community when this sacred space was appropriated and demolished.

V. Conclusions

Archaeological investigations demonstrated the continued existence of burials at the original Laurel Cemetery site. Ongoing archival research indicates that the total number of burials interred at Laurel cemetery exceeds 30,000. The site’s current function as a shopping center, the general lack of public memory about the cemetery, and the false narrative that the cemetery had been completely removed in the 1950’s, all present challenges for preservation of the site and for re-establishing the Laurel Cemetery narrative within the landscape.

At its root this began as an archaeology project; however, we acknowledged that the bulk of our efforts would concentrate on historical and archival analyses, public education, and collaborative work with constituent communities. Given these factors, we find strength in the combination of skillsets specific to our trainings in archaeology and applied cultural anthropology. This kind of methodological synthesis, is suggested by Chambers (2007:207) where he identifies contemporary challenges faced by archaeologists as requiring “new skills and areas of specialization, some of which can be provided by their cultural colleagues.” In turn, he also recognizes that many applied cultural anthropologists are increasingly working in the area of heritage and can benefit from the field of archaeology.

The Laurel Cemetery Task Force was developed as a collaborative means to reconcile the concerns of descendants, local community residents, business owners, shopping center patrons, and the greater Baltimore community. Its goals are to use placemaking strategies to effectuate a landscape that identifies, respects, and teaches the Laurel Cemetery story. These include the creation of murals, a

memorial, and interpretive markers. Additional efforts relate to site preservation and environmental concerns.

The work of the Task Force finds context within larger efforts to reevaluate what is recognized in our nation's historic landscapes—and what we've been 'told' to forget (Loewen 1999: 4). Related efforts to discover and center diverse heritage sites (those associated with African Americans and other minority groups) within "official public memory" gained broader acceptance as a result of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Shackel 2004: 4). Yet, much work remains as these sites remain underrepresented in resources such as the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places (Kaufman 2009). Such representation has implications for how people conceive of themselves as fitting into the narrative of this country. Accordingly, a focus on Laurel Cemetery will augment conceptions of African Americans within Baltimore's historical narrative.

We intend that our collective efforts have enduring legacies in the collective memory of existing and future generations. The current outreach and educational efforts of the Task Force (public presentation, mobile Timeline Exhibit, website, k-12 curriculum development) will build a base of collective knowledge that will be reinforced through enduring material symbols. Additional research and publication will concretize the memory of Laurel Cemetery for posterity—moving the memory of Laurel Cemetery from a periodically re-discovered phenomenon to a permanent seat in discussions of Baltimore history.

Works Cited

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