

SundayReview | OPINION

Why Slaves' Graves Matter

By SANDRA A. ARNOLD APRIL 2, 2016

I GREW up in a small rural town in West Tennessee. My family is rooted in that region, where my ancestors were once enslaved. In the 1970s, when I was a teenager, we regularly attended an old country church that was located in the curve of a gravel road and surrounded by undeveloped Southern land. The church had rustic wooden floors, handmade pews and a piano that was often missing an accompanist. The congregation didn't mind though; they made their own music, tapping the pews and the floor as they sang.

A short distance away, at the dead end of a dirt path, was the church's cemetery. According to local oral history, it was established sometime during the 1840s. Most of its burials had headstones with names, dates and sometimes epitaphs. However, the cemetery also contained an area with graves marked only by plain rocks of various sizes. I would eventually discover that the rocks marked the graves of people who had lived and died in the community over the years, including those who had been enslaved.

Very few, if any, members of the church knew their identities. Nonetheless, on Decoration Day each May, church members would place flowers not only on the graves of their loved ones, but also on the rocks. Afterward, they would paint the rocks bright colors to prevent them from being mistaken for common field rocks. I

once asked an older relative if she knew who was buried there. She said “no,” as she resolutely placed bouquets on every rock.

My great-grandfather, Ben Harmon, was born into slavery around 1855. He died in 1946 and is buried under a headstone in a plantation cemetery not far from that church. His grave and that of my great-grandmother were visited often by older members of my family, but I had never done so, until a few years ago. Before then, I had only ever thought of him as a distant ancestor who had been a slave. I felt no personal connection. However, after I began visiting his grave, that changed. People who had the privilege of knowing my great-grandfather never referred to him as someone who was “born a slave.” He was simply “Grandpa Ben” or “Papa.” Now he is “Grandpa Ben” to me as well, someone whom I now *feel* as a member of my family.

Memorialization keeps us connected to what is most significant about those who are no longer with us. So what does it mean that the grave sites of countless enslaved Americans have not been afforded this recognition?

Since the emancipation of enslaved Americans, their public memory has become abstract. Cemeteries, graveyards and memorials are visual reminders for us. They exist because we desire to memorialize those buried there. By gracing the sacred spaces of enslaved Americans with that same intention, we can give humanity and dignity to their memory.

This is what propelled me to create the **National Burial Database of Enslaved Americans**. When the database is completed, it will be the first national repository of information on the grave sites of individuals who died while enslaved or after they were emancipated. Anyone who comes to the website will eventually be able to submit information about these places and conduct searches.

I am now processing preliminary submissions. It is painful to read about burial grounds that should be revered spaces but instead are covered by playgrounds and apartment complexes. I have learned that many grave sites of formerly enslaved Americans are abandoned, undocumented, desecrated by the asphalt of “development,” and lack any type of memorialization or recognition. The burial grounds are often found incidentally by developers under parks and office buildings, and for many of the sites, oral history is their only source of documentation. (This

was the case for my family as well. Grandpa Ben's daughter, my great-aunt, directed me to his burial site before she died in 2014, at the age of 101.)

Equally distressing are the struggles to save burial grounds that are in danger of being lost. For example, a community in Shelby County, Ala., is trying to rescue a cemetery of enslaved Americans and their descendants from a quarry company that acquired the land it is on. In Queens, N.Y., a church congregation is seeking to reinter the remains of a 19th-century woman who was unearthed in 2011 by a developer digging in what turned out to be a burial ground founded by enslaved Americans.

In addition to the ethical arguments for preservation, there are also more pragmatic ones. Burial grounds are valuable resources for scholars and historians, serving as road maps for genealogical and historical research.

Finally, community preservation initiatives can contribute to healing, understanding and potentially even reconciliation.

John F. Baker Jr. submitted information to the database on more than 600 formerly enslaved Americans buried in cemeteries and graveyards throughout Robertson County, Tenn. Mr. Baker's family had been enslaved on the Wessyngton Plantation. He, along with other descendants of the enslaved and those of the plantation owner, erected a monument to the African-American cemetery on the plantation property. The memorial, which was paid for by the descendants of the plantation owner, is inscribed with the names of 446 people who were enslaved at Wessyngton from 1796 to 1865; among them are men who served in the United States Colored Troops. Mr. Baker says he was "honored to see so many descendants of the enslaved and plantation owner come together to honor our ancestors."

The town of Portsmouth, N.H., had a similar experience when a burial ground with the remains of enslaved Americans was found under a downtown street in 2003 during a municipal construction project. Last year, the city established the African Burying Ground Memorial Park on the site. The park's opening included a reburial ceremony and overnight "Ancestral Vigil." During this time of music, prayer and readings, the community kept vigil with the remains. Vernis Miller Jackson, a retired teacher, worked with city officials to organize the service. What she found most

moving “was the unity and collaboration of the community. It showed they cared,” she said.

Our country should explore ways to preserve the public memory of enslaved Americans. Their overlooked lives are an inextricable part of the historical narrative of our country — and not simply because they were the “beneficiaries” of the 13th Amendment. We should remember enslaved Americans for the same reason we remember anyone; because they were fathers, mothers, siblings and grandparents who made great contributions to our nation. Regardless of our country’s history or our ambivalence about the memory of slavery, we can choose to remember the enslaved — the forgotten. They offer our contemporary society examples of resilience and humanity. Preserving their memory contributes to our own humanity.

Correction: April 3, 2016

An earlier version of the photo caption with this article incorrectly described the statue. It is in honor of a woman who was born into slavery; it is not a statue of that woman. Sandra A. Arnold is the founder of the Periwinkle Initiative and the National Burial Database of Enslaved Americans.

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