

Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries in the Classroom

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The rediscovery of erased African American cemeteries in Florida reveals difficult histories and complicated contemporary issues shaping ways students and community members view and delineate between the historic past and present. These racialized cultural landscapes highlight complexities in concepts of heritage and identity while presenting new possibilities for student-community collaboration. Critical heritage studies combined with cemetery place-based learning open new paths for inclusive student-community-education problem solving grounded in historical inquiry and experiential learning. This article examines possibilities for student cemetery place-based learning in the evolving rediscovery of erased African American cemeteries in the state of Florida. Experiences from the Donna Genet Mini Teacher Grant funded project *Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries* will be shared to advance conversations surrounding the importance of student exposure and engagement with difficult histories and heritage in secondary social studies education.

Keywords: critical heritage education; contemporary issues; difficult history; African American history; cemetery education

In June of 2019, a local newspaper headline read "Nearly 400 people buried in Tampa are missing. What happened to Zion Cemetery?" (Guzzo, 2019). This was the first of eight African American cemeteries discovered in the span of two years under roads, warehouses, schools, parking lots, and neighborhoods. With each discovery, the fabric of a diverse local community twisted in tension as these erased cultural landscapes whispered hidden histories long removed from the city's identity. There are many explanations as to how a cemetery could disappear from the landscape including abandonment and neglect. Although each cemetery's story is distinctive there is a shared uncomfortable reality exposed by the rediscovery of these eight

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cemeteries. These cemeteries were intentionally erased to remove local African American history.

I began working with the Rose (Hill) Cemetery², the largest intact segregated African American cemetery in Pinellas County, in 2018. While working on a grant for the InsideART program at the University of South Florida I stumbled upon this historic site hidden among tall uncut grass and ancient oaks covered in Spanish mass. Motivated by my experience stumbling across these complex histories at Rose Hill Cemetery, I established the Rose Hill Cemetery Place-Based Learning Project with the goals of engaging students in place-based learning, connecting classrooms with the local community, creating classroom ready lesson plans and curricular material to integrate African American and Afro-Caribbean narratives into secondary social studies, and preserve the rich history of Florida's African American communities. This included embracing the challenge of answering the difficult questions posed by students, "*How could this happen?*" and "*What can we do?*" Recognizing students as community members connected to sites of erasure, the lesson plan *Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries* was developed to integrate student voice and agency into contemporary issues immediately impacting their community, identity, and heritage.

Examining the diversity of local African American history through cemetery cultural landscapes provides students and teachers the opportunity to deconstruct concepts of identity, place, and authenticity of narrative (Gruenewald, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Curricula developed for this project directly connects to state and national standards in American history, world history, anthropology, and geography, allowing teachers to navigate history through local, national, and international scales. In the following pages I hope to demonstrate the importance of incorporating African American cemeteries as heritage spaces to investigate difficult history, diversify historic narratives, embrace local community history, and empower students to engage in contemporary issues relevant to them. Along the way I share my own classroom-cemetery experiences and resources available to K-12 teachers interested in incorporating African American cemeteries into history classrooms.

Why cemeteries? Why now?

Florida has recently awakened to the realities of widespread erasure, abandonment, and neglect of African American cemeteries in communities across the

² The parentheses around "Hill" in the name of Rose Hill Cemetery designate its historic name. The cemetery's name was changed to Rose Cemetery in the 1970s.

state. In the Spring of 2021, the state passed HB 37: Abandoned Cemeteries to establish a task force charged with exploring, recording, and preserving newly discovered African American cemeteries. The central goal of this task force to:

...examine the adequacy of current practices regarding the preservation of unmarked and abandoned African-American cemeteries and burial grounds and identify any challenges unique to African-American cemeteries and burial grounds...Identify locations of unmarked and abandoned African-American cemeteries and burial grounds throughout the state and propose strategies, including any proposed legislation, for the preservation and evaluation of such sites...Make recommendations regarding standards for the creation, placement, and maintenance of a memorial at any identified locations of unmarked and abandoned African-American cemeteries or burial grounds throughout the state. (HB 37, 2021)

Currently, there are no educational components in the bill, leaving school districts and teachers on their own to address complex historical questions surrounding ethnicity, heritage, and community identity revealed by discovered African American cemeteries. Two African American cemeteries, Ridgewood Cemetery and North Greenwood Cemetery, were discovered on the school district properties of Hillsborough County Public Schools and Pinellas County Schools respectively. This created instant connections between students' sense of place and difficult history. Estimates from cemetery experts working with the state task force suggest there are over 3,000 unknown African American cemeteries hidden in communities throughout Florida (Dobson, 2021). The discovery of these cemeteries presents challenges and opportunities for local school districts trying to find meaningful ways to incorporate this difficult history into the classroom and engage students in the important process of memorialization.

Recent attempts to link difficult histories associated with race and ethnicity to Critical Race Theory has created new challenges for school districts and teachers in Florida. Attempts to ban critical analysis of race, ethnicity, and sexual identity in the classroom further restricts student understanding and participation in the complex past of Florida (Ali, 2021; Camera, 2021; Huq, 2021). Despite the fact Critical Race Theory is not found in K-12 classrooms, in June of 2021 the Florida state's Board of Education banned the use of Critical Race Theory in K-12 classrooms stating the new rule would, "shield schoolchildren from curricula that could distort historical events" (Calvan, 2021). As it stands, teachers often self-censor difficult histories associated

with racial and ethnic identity fearing the lesson and conversation will be viewed as controversial by students, administrators, parents, and political leaders (Beyer, 2021). Bans enacted by state legislatures throughout the United States equate conversations of race and ethnicity with controversy instead of difficult history elevating teacher fear and limiting the inclusion of difficult histories in the classroom.

The continued portrayal of race as a problem to be addressed has further repositioned racial and ethnic injustices from difficult history to controversial issues allowing the history of racial and ethnic injustice to be sidelined in curriculum development. The inclusion of African American cemeteries into the classroom through place-based learning allows teachers, students, and the community to engage in meaningful conversations about race to help solve contemporary issues impacting their communities. A community-centered approach presents teachers opportunities to connect standards with current issues and community lived experiences. African American cemeteries present difficult truths through student self-exploration of place limiting concerns of theoretical indoctrination. Place-based learning highlights the coexistence of multiple historic truths and differing perspectives requiring students to navigate through this complexity to solve contemporary issues.

What Do We Mean When We Say Heritage?

Approaching heritage through racialized cultural landscapes allows a critical examination of the relationship between ideals of heritage, power structures, and lived experiences. If heritage is understood as a set of attitudes towards and relationships with past materials, peoples, places, and practices endowed with meaning (Harrison, 2013) examining racialized cultural landscapes that might conflict with existing ideals of heritage opens new lines of inquiry for teachers wanting to examine complexities of the past and present. Although heritage is often associated with material remains of the past, Handler (2003) reminds us that culture does not reside in the material itself; it resides in the human activity through which the material emerges. Allowing students to explore racialized cultural landscapes contextualizes material representations of the past and allows for the examination of alternative narratives of place, identity, and history.

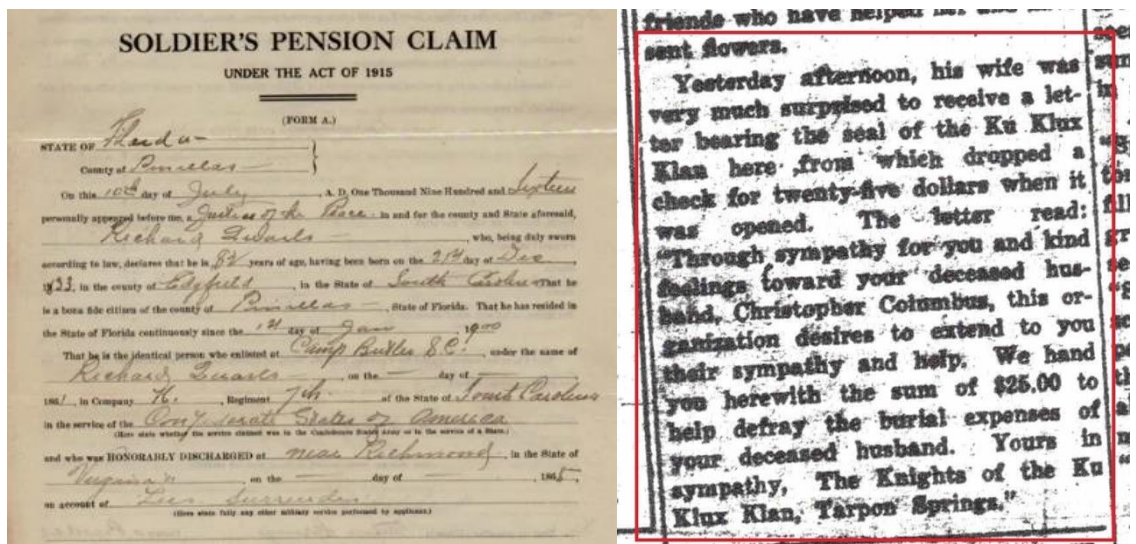
Additionally, examining heritage through racialized cultural landscapes allows for the exploration of difficult and absent heritage through inclusivity. The difficult legacies no one wants to remember or affiliate with (Kobialka, 2019) present opportunities to expose the impact systemic oppression of lived experiences have on

collective heritage and identity. An example of engaging students in difficult heritage can be found through the story of Richard Quarls, a resident of the Rose (Hill) Cemetery in Tarpon Springs, Florida.

Richard Quarls was born enslaved on a South Carolina plantation in 1833. Mr. Quarls served in the 7th Regiment of South Carolina's K Company during the Civil War with his master's son and fought several battles against the Union Army. In 1910 Richard Quarls changed his name to Christopher Columbus to obscure his Confederate service and moved to Tarpon Springs with his second wife and child. Mr. Quarls became a respected businessman who owned a horse and carriage service and chicken farm. He reported on African American community events for the local paper. Documents show he received a Confederate pension from the State of Florida beginning in 1916. (see Figure 1.) When he died, the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan paid for a portion of his funeral. (see Figure 1.) Richard Quarls's original headstone disappeared sometime during the mid-20th century. However, in 2003 the Sons of Confederate Veterans and Daughters of the Confederacy petitioned to place a Confederate memorial at his grave site. At a ceremony attended by four generations of his descendants and the Confederate Honor Guard, a new headstone marked by a beveled top edge and the Confederate seal was installed.

Figure 1

Documents about Richard Quarls



Note. Primary Source documents highlighting the complexity of Richard Quarls' African American identity (Tarpon Springs Historical Society, 2019).

Here, in a segregated African American cemetery, is a Confederate memorial placed on the grave of a former enslaved man, Richard Quarls. In response, local community members consistently place and replace conch shells as grave offerings to highlight his African heritage. On Memorial Day, 2021, a Confederate flag was placed at the memorial. The contradiction and material tension stirred emotion within the community. The following day, the Confederate flag was replaced with an American flag. (Figure 2)

Figure 2

Grave of Christopher Columbus



Note. The grave of Richard Quarls, also known as Christopher Columbus.

Through this site, students engage in a battle of historic interpretation and perspective as difficult history collides.³ Students investigate circumstances surrounding the forced enlistment of enslaved African Americans in the Confederate forces, the Confederate viewpoints towards the use of enslaved African Americans to support the Confederate military through primary sources, and the dependency of the Confederacy on enslaved labor to fight against the Union, putting to rest the false revisionist Confederate narrative that enslaved African Americans “supported” the efforts of the Confederacy. The story of Richard Quarls is one of many examples

³ Teachers may access a lesson plan for investigating the story of Richard Quarls at www.rosehillcemeteryproject.com. The lesson plan developed for students, *The Story of Christopher Columbus: An African American Confederate Veteran*, entangles students in conflicting documents, material culture, and interpretations of the past, exposing tension between differing historical narratives and memories.

highlighting ways African American cemeteries in Florida can make visible conflicting narratives of the past, the impact of systemic oppression on the lived experiences of African American communities, and historiography. The heritage incorporated in African American cemeteries unearth hidden histories long silent in K-12 classrooms.

What Can We Learn From The Erased And Unknown?

Although many graves are known in the Rose (Hill) Cemetery, Ground Penetrating Radar at the cemetery has revealed approximately 300 unknown burials. While it may seem that cemeteries are only useful in the classroom if students can interact with the material remains, erased burials and cemeteries uniquely address the process of historic silencing. Erased cultural landscapes allow students to investigate historiography while critically examining question concerning heritage, history, and identity. When paired with place-based learning, a powerful model for engaging students in critical historical analysis of becoming known takes shape.

Place-based learning is a pedagogical approach that grounds student learning in the context of place and space. Drawing upon ideas of John Dewey (1903, 1916), place-based learning expands the notion that curriculum and learning is a lived experience. Removing learning from the classroom and recentering learning in the context of community places and spaces allows students to participate in participatory democratic citizenship as place-based learning works within the community to solve local issues through a multidisciplinary, experiential, and integrated approach (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Place, particularly erased cultural landscapes, uniquely foreground local and regional political, economic, and cultural attitudes that highlight the particularities of a local community (Gruenenwald, 2008). This learning environment encourages critical thinking as student-community members investigate local community issues and spaces through culturally relevant and critical place pedagogical methods. Studying place as a living narrative encourages students to participate in critical examination of the historic constructs associated with ideals of heritage and identity.

Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries

The lesson plan *Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries* employs arts-based learning, place-based learning, and anthropology to provide students the opportunity to critically examine historic processes of the past, reflect on ways the past actively engages the present, and consider the co-constructed

nature of cultural landscapes and understandings of the past. Nine high schools in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties jointly participated in the lesson plan in February 2021. Over four hundred students, fourteen teachers, and local community leaders connected with three local African American cemeteries and the unknown local difficult history leading to cemetery and burial erasures.

Learning objectives for the classroom ready lesson plan asks students to identify and analyze common signs and symbol associated with African American cemeteries, to reflect on the many ways communities remember the past, to analyze ways the past can become unknown, and create public art plaques to memorialize graves with no identification (see Figures 3-5.). To accomplish these learning objectives students examined Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) data, explored historical documents, analyzed headstone photographs of signs and symbols found at Rose (Hill) Cemetery, and heard local oral histories from descendants. While comparing these diverse resources students discovered the approximate 400 unknown burials hidden in the potter's field, under roads, and the nearby park. This unique multidisciplinary approach, blending STEAM and social studies, empowered students to create concrete memorial plaques that transformed invisible history into visible history. Students were asked to incorporate historical signs and symbols into their artwork. In a plaque dedication ceremony, the unknown buried in Ridgewood Cemetery, Whispering Souls Cemetery, and Rose (Hill) Cemetery, were remembered and memorialized.

Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries connected teachers, students, and community leaders in open dialogue exposing students to the emotional connections between heritage, identity, history, and place. In small group classroom discussions students expressed an emotional relationship between the art they produced and the history they were trying to reflect. Students discussed the meaning behind symbols and motifs often found in cemeteries with the desire to incorporate elements that reflected positive and uplifting messages. Sayings including, *"you are not forgotten"*, *"you are loved"* and *"we remember"* convey interaction between past and present action. Student comments like, *"it's not every day you can make a difference"* and *"I hope people can go to these graves and look at this art and think maybe it will be ok"* suggests student awareness of the connectivity between the art, the place, the past, and the people.

Local grassroots community leaders expressed new emotional connections while working with students. Dialogue of possibilities extended the reach of the past into the future through student engagement. Community leaders expressed optimism

and hope that preservation work and site recognition would continue through students' connection with the identity of the history and place. When asked "What

Figure 3

Making Memorial Plaques



Note. Students create memorial plaques for unknown souls placed at the historic Rose (Hill) Cemetery, Tarpon Springs, Florida.

Figure 4

Students Placing Plaques



Note. Student created plaques are placed by a cemetery descendent at the Whispering Souls Cemetery, Safety Harbor, Florida.

would you like students to know about the community and history associated with local African American cemeteries?" a long-term cemetery activist explained, *"I'd like today's students to understand the regrettable circumstances in our history that created segregated cemeteries and - in some cases - erased those cemeteries. Not to foment guilt or anger, but, rather, to instill understanding and create a climate and possibilities to make things right"* (L. Claudio, personal communication, May 5, 2021). Other cemetery leaders agreed stating, *"We don't benefit our students sweeping uncomfortable truths under the rug. I think projects like these cemetery plaques help give young people an opportunity to learn and help repair...to be a part of the solution"* (Q. Jackson, personal communication, April 22, 2021). Reflexive commentary from this classroom project highlights openings in the classroom for

teachers and students to transition from fixed historic narratives of the past to evolving possibilities of community identity and historic interpretation in the future.

Figure 5

Students' plaques in Rose (Hill) Cemetery



Impact on Student Learning

As more cemeteries are discovered across the state of Florida, students bring news of these discoveries into the classroom. Increase desire to participate in community issues and social activism has led students to continuously engage in local cemetery spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic and post their engagements on social media with the hashtags #floridacemeteries #gravesmatter and #blackgravesmatter. Since the creation of the Rose Hill Cemetery Place-Based Learning Project students have established student cleaning crews to help local communities maintain cemetery spaces, visited African American cemeteries with their families while traveling, and returned to local African American cemeteries to leave grave offering and tokens of respect. An example can be found at the grave of "Grits", buried at the Rose (Hill) Cemetery. Grits, a die-hard Tampa Bay Buccaneers fan, passed away shortly before the 2020 Superbowl. Students, who met family members of Grits during a previous cemetery session, returned to Grit's grave on Superbowl Sunday to decorate his grave with Buccaneer grave goods (see Figure 6.). Student moments like these suggest lessons learned during cemetery studies extend student engagement beyond the limited time of a classroom lesson. Students form personal bonds and connections connecting the past and present turning history into something more than facts to be memorized.

Resources Available for Infusing African American Cemeteries into the Classroom

In addition to the resources and lesson plans available through the Rose Hill Cemetery Place-Based Learning Project, there are several organizations that offer classroom

resources for teachers interested in infusing African American cemeteries into the classroom. The National Park Services Teaching Through Historic Places (National Park Service, 2021) offers lesson plans and historic contextualization for students to critically analyze colonial slavery through the investigation of archaeological and forensics discoveries at the African American Burial Grounds of New York. Although several other cemeteries are available for study through this program, the African American Burial Grounds curricular material moves past simplistic stone rubbings and cemetery “treasure hunt” activities and directly connects students to difficult histories of the past.

Figure 6

Student decorations at Grit's grave



The Veteran Affairs Legacy Program and Arlington National Cemetery Education Department (National Cemetery Administration, 2021) additionally addresses difficult histories associated with race through national cemeteries. Lesson plans and educational resource materials available for teachers offer historic contextualization to African American service members' experiences both abroad and at home. They do so, however, through individual biographical sketches instead of the examination of racialized cultural landscapes.

The Chicora Foundation, a South Carolina, public, non-profit heritage preservation organization, offers extensive online resources for teachers interested in integrating archaeology and cemeteries into the classroom. Their publication *Graves matters: The preservation of African American cemeteries* (Chicora Foundation, 1996), is one of the few student friendly pamphlets available specifically addressing African American burial traditions, cemetery histories, and issues surrounding cemetery abandonment, neglect, and erasure. The “Actions you can take to help preserve African American graveyards” section actively encourages students and communities to engage in social justice action to further preserve and protect African American cemeteries. However, there are few classroom-ready lesson plans connected directly to standards available through this organization.

In addition to the resources mentioned about, there are two Florida organization able to assist teachers with incorporating local African American cemeteries into the classroom. The African American Cemetery Alliance of Tampa Bay (AACATB) is an organization that brings together researchers, policymakers, and communities to preserve, memorialize, and recenter African American cemeteries. The organization actively works with school districts interested in learning more about erased cemeteries in their community and assists with the development of classroom curricular materials.⁴ Additionally, teacher can request researchers and cemetery community leaders as guest speakers allowing students to learn directly from the individuals working to preserve and protect the cemetery sites.

The Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN) serves as a statewide resource with regional offices connecting teachers and students with archaeologists working on the discovery and recovery of erased African American cemeteries.⁵ The FPAN organization offers Ground Penetrating Radar experiences for students and preservation workshops for teachers and community members. Additionally, the website offers a wide variety of lesson plans and educational resources for teachers interested in incorporating archaeology into the classroom

Conclusions

Engaging students in heritage education fosters dialogue and centers the historic past in the present allowing students to apply historic knowledge to contemporary issues. Florida will continue to uncover erased, abandoned, or neglected African American cemeteries. Difficult histories will be exposed through these racialized cultural landscapes challenging perceptions of heritage and local community identities.

The Rose Hill Cemetery Place-Based Learning Project serves as one possible model for opportunities in meaningful experiential heritage education for the state of Florida. The *Unknown: Memorializing African American Cemeteries* lesson plan was able to bring together students and teachers from neighboring districts striving to find meaningful ways to navigate difficult histories related to erased African American cemeteries in their neighborhoods. Interacting with racialized cultural landscapes provides students with meaningful opportunities to explore complexities of race, heritage, and place through inclusive community collaboration. Embracing challenging racialized cultural landscapes in the classroom can provide teachers with

⁴ Teachers may contact the AACATB through their website, www.aacatb.org

⁵ Teachers may contact the FPAN organization through their website, <https://www.flpublicarchaeology.org/>

opportunities to explore contemporary issues in a way that is inclusive while recentring Florida's past into the present.

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