

Raine Shakti

Dr. Kami Fletcher

African American Deathways

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Cemetery Answers

Question 1

Eden Cemetery, Collingdale, PA

From the 18th through the early 20th centuries, enslaved and free Blacks were controlled and restricted in where burying their dead could occur. Explain how the barriers of racism and segregation was obliterated with the Black burial grounds at Eden Cemetery.

The evidence does not show that the “barriers of racism and segregation” were obliterated with the black burial grounds at Eden Cemetery. Eden Cemetery was founded in 1902 (Eden Cemetery), six years after the U.S. Supreme Court Decision in Plessy v. Ferguson made separate but equal the law of the land in the United States (United States Supreme Court, 1896). Despite the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, by 1902, Pennsylvania had passed many laws banning segregation. These included an 1867 law that forbade segregation on public carriers (Lemmon, 1953, p. 175) and an 1887 law banning segregation in public accommodations (Brown, 1961, p. 56)

Although there were laws passed banning segregation, PA was still very much segregated in 1902 and reason that Eden Cemetery was developed in Collinwood is that new laws in the city of Philadelphia, prohibited the establishment of African American cemeteries and the existing African American cemeteries had recently closed (Eden Cemetery). Additionally, the first burial at Eden Cemetery was delayed by hours after White residents of Collinwood blocked the entrance to the cemetery because they did not want an African American cemetery in their neighborhood. A news report from August 15, **1902**, reports that the burial of Mrs. C.M. Cromwell was delayed for 36 hours while a legal battle over the cemetery founders and the town was waged. Mrs. Cromwell’s body was eventually buried under protest (Delaware County Daily Times, 1902). Eventually the two sides solved the larger issues and the cemetery was able to open to not only bury the newly deceased, but also to rebury the dead from other African American cemeteries (Eden Cemetery)

Although Eden Cemetery did not obliterate the barriers of racism and segregation as that would have required the cemetery to have been welcomed into the community and for it to be an integrated cemetery, it did succeed in providing a place where African Americans could be buried

with dignity and respect. Additionally, despite its rocky beginnings, the cemetery did become a place of pride for the African American Community and one of the reasons is that it has named sections of the cemetery after famous African Americans including John Brown. The cemetery is part of the National Park Service's Underground Railroad to Network to Freedom, and on the National Registry of Historic Places (Eden Cemetery)

Question 2

Eden Cemetery, Collingdale, PA

The Black Cemetery Network and other digitalized database websites have become invaluable assets in conducting research and protecting historical records for preserving memory and cultural continuity of Black burial spaces. Describe the history and actions implemented by Eden Cemetery that have contributed to the preservation of African American memory.

Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, PA, similar to North Queen Cemetery, 148 miles to the West, was created as a place to bury African American bodies that were unwanted in White cemeteries. Today both are places of pride and history for African Americans, however the paths they took were very different. North Queen Cemetery fell into disrepair in the first part of the 20th century but was rescued and restored in the 1960s by a group of young people who have continued to care for the cemetery and its successor cemetery Locust Grove for decades. And while African Americans were originally buried in North Queen Cemetery because of racist policies, now it is now a point of pride for African Americans to be buried in the Locust Grove Cemetery, which is connected to the North Queen Cemetery, near their loved ones (Burg, 2010).

In contrast to North Queen Cemetery which is a story of renewal, Edens Cemetery is a story of preservation and perseverance. The cemetery was founded in 1902 when existing Philadelphia African American cemeteries were out of space and the city of Philadelphia barred African American cemeteries within its borders. Throughout its history, the cemetery board and community have taken pride in the cemetery being a place of pride, respect, and history. One way that the cemetery has

done this is by designating sections, such as the John Brown and the Octavius C. Catto section to help people learn about African American luminaries (Friends of Eden Cemetery, 2021).

The cemetery also works to actively preserve the past by being part of organizations such as the National Park Service Underground Railroad to Network to Freedom, the Pennsylvania Hallowed Grounds, being on the National Register of Historic Places, and being a member of the Association of the Study of African American Life and History (Eden Cemetery). Eden Cemetery has a section on their Website for Virtual Tours and currently has a tour in partnership with The Woodlands called Parallel Lives about Women’s Fight for Suffrage and will be adding a section highlighting residents of the cemetery (Eden Cemetery). Edens Cemetery also contains paper records dating back to the 18th and 19th and is working to digitize these records. This effort will be covered in the answer to the next question.

Question 3

Eden Cemetery, Collingdale, PA

Based on the reading assignments, it is my impression that the United States government has not always assumed a proactive position in the battle of preserving and respecting African American burial landscapes. Individual city and state authorities as well as focus and preservation activist groups decided what was important, whether to move forward on projects that will erase, destroy, forget, or memorialize the rich historical legacy of black burial spaces and the body remains resting there. How does Eden Cemetery’s website indicate its role in activism and archival preservation of these sacred places?

The history of Black cemeteries in the United States is a story of forgotten graves, neglect, and restoration. African American graves from the 1700s and 1800s were often not marked and few records were kept of who was buried where. Finding the graves of both enslaved and free people is often challenging and requires looking for physical clues and searching through census and other records to locate graves (Rainville, 2014). Unfortunately, when people do find the graves of their ancestors, the cemeteries are often in disrepair leaving family members and others to clean them up (Dantes, 2021). Until recently, funding from the federal government was not consistent. This changed

recently as in December 2022, the US Government Passed the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act (Preservation, 2022).

Eden Cemetery has a collection of burial records related to not only burials in Eden Cemetery, but also previous African American cemeteries. This collection consists of interment books and burial cards, deed and certificate books, section books, financial records, and legal papers that document the burials and lot sales at Eden Cemetery from its inception in 1902 to the present (Philadelphia Area Archives). These records are used frequently by researchers as well as family members searching for graves and the years of use and less than perfect storage conditions have led to deterioration. The cemetery received grants in 2020 and launched a Go Fundme to help with assessing and preserving the records (Friends of Eden Cemetery, 2021). The goal of this archival effort is to protect the records by moving them into safe and secure storage and to preserve them by stabilizing them so they can be used without further damage. Additionally, the cemetery plans to digitize and transcribe the documents so that they can be accessed without further physical damage (Eden Cemetery)

The steps that Eden Cemetery is taking to protect their digital archives is laudable and will help future generations of researchers and family genealogists access the records; however, one immediate step that the cemetery could take to help current researchers is to provide a link to a site such as FindAGrave to help people locate their loved ones more immediately.

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Question 4

Mount Peace Cemetery, Lawnside, New Jersey

Our reading assignments in this course have been informative about how history from Black burial landscapes become hidden and lost as the result of lack of knowledge, apathy from white people, new construction of buildings, highways, parks, etc. It is well known via maps, lack of written records, and nonacceptance of oral histories that evidence of black burial grounds and their stories have been eliminated, overlooked, or memories dismissed as meaningless. Prior to Mount Eden, Mount Peace was solely created to provide a place for Black people to be buried with dignity and respect. During interviews via Resource Links on Mount Peace Cemetery's website, Dollie Marshall, an activist, and Trustee of Mount Peace Cemetery discusses the importance of preserving African American cemeteries and how telling the stories of individuals buried within them can inform and inspire new

generations. Why is it important to preserve these hidden histories? Explain why it matters or will it make a difference for anyone?

Dollie Marshall, an activist and trustee at the Mount Peace Cemetery, said in an interview “If you don’t know your past, you don’t know your future” (Rohrer, 2021). From a personal perspective, Marshall has learned more about her relatives since being involved with the Mount Peace Cemetery organization. She learned from her research that one of her uncles once owned a barbor shop that was included in the green book, a list of places that were safe for African Americans to patronize (Rohrer, 2021). Learning about her past has helped her to better understand her own history. It has also helped her to learn about the history of others who are buried in the cemetery including civil war veterans and other activists.

Learning about the past and those who have gone before us can also serve as a motivator and an inspiration. In 1981, college sophomore Barack Obama gave an anti-apartheid speech at Occidental College in Los Angeles in an effort to move the trustees of his college to divest itself of South African holdings. In that speech and in later speeches, he cited the example of Nelson Mandela as motivating him to political action (Tranquada, 2013). In 2016, former president Barack Obama delivered the 16th Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture and according to his speech writer, he considered this speech to be the most important he had given since leaving office (WAXMAN, 2017). In publicizing the history of some of the more famous residents of Mount Peace Cemetery may inspire other young people to achieve greatness. The luminaries of Mount Peace Cemetery John Lawson, who was the first African American to be awarded a Naval Medal of Honor (Trethan, 2022), and Alexander Heritage Newton, an abolitionist who helped enslaved people escape via the Underground Railroad and who served in the Civil War (Trethan, 2022).

Question 5

Mount Peace Cemetery, Lawnside, New Jersey

On the home page for Mount Peace, established in 1900, there is an image of overgrown weeds and trees along with a crane. Although Mount Peace is no longer an active burying ground, it is a National and Historical Landmark. It also has ties to the Underground Railroad. It is the final resting place of 7,000 people, including freedom seekers, 135 United States Colored Troop Civil War veterans, and Reverend Alexander Heritage, a well-known freedom seeker. Describe what you think is the meaning and significance of the slogan for Mount Peace Cemetery, “Uncovering Hidden History One Stone at a Time

During the Antebellum Era, the graves of enslaved people were often hidden far from the main house, in groves of trees, or along fence lines (Rainville, 2014). Their grave markers, if they had them, were moved at the convenience of slaveholders or future owners of the property. In some instances, the only markers were designed not to memorialize the men, women, and children buried in the cemeteries, but to remind gravediggers that the plot was taken (Fletcher, 2020). Even after the Civil War, Jim Crow laws made it difficult for African Americans to bury their dead with dignity.

Although current day African Americans still face systematic racism and oppression, it has become easier for them to bury their dead and to discover their buried ancestors. The slogan “Uncovering Hidden History One Stone at a Time” is significant because so much of African American History is hidden from view and it takes patience and perseverance to uncover the history of the enslaved and free people who are buried in these cemeteries. Even in cemeteries like Eden Cemetery where there are records to uncover, the records may not be complete or may be so fragile that it is difficult to review them. Mount Peace’s slogan reminds us that uncovering the hidden history is important as it can **inspire** people, as noted in the answer to Question 4, and that it requires patience and should be taken one stone (or person) at a time.

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