# Rediscovering Slave Burial Sites

A new project catalogs the locations of long-forgotten slave cemeteries.

SANDRA ARNOLD STOOD in the middle of a Tennessee cottonfield. For years, she'd heard about a slave burial site beneath the soil. Her great-aunt, now 100 years old, had told stories about Arnold's great-grandfather Ben Harmon, born into slavery, and his wife Ethel, born free. Both were buried here, in the middle of a field. Standing there, Arnold says, the story of slavery hit home. "This wasn't Roots," she says, referring to Alex Haley's best-selling book. "This was my story, my family's story, not someone else's."

Arnold was lucky, says Lynn Rainville, humanities professor at Sweet Briar College in Virginia. "Her family knew where their ancestors were buried. That's not often the case." Rainville has spent much of her career studying unknown burial grounds, with a recent focus on slave cemeteries. "Most slave cemeteries are off the beaten path and tend to be hidden," she says.

Arnold, a history student in the School of Professional and Continuing Studies at Fordham University, noticed the same thing. After her trip to Tennessee, she began researching slave cemeteries in earnest. She contacted administrators at slave-owning Founding Fathers' historic homes—Mount Vernon (George Washington), Monticello (Thomas Jefferson), the Hermitage (Andrew Jackson); and Montpelier (James Madison)—for information on slave cemeteries on their grounds. "My research opened up doors to other cemeteries," she says, and she soon discovered that many were unmarked and undocumented, the long-dead inhabitants
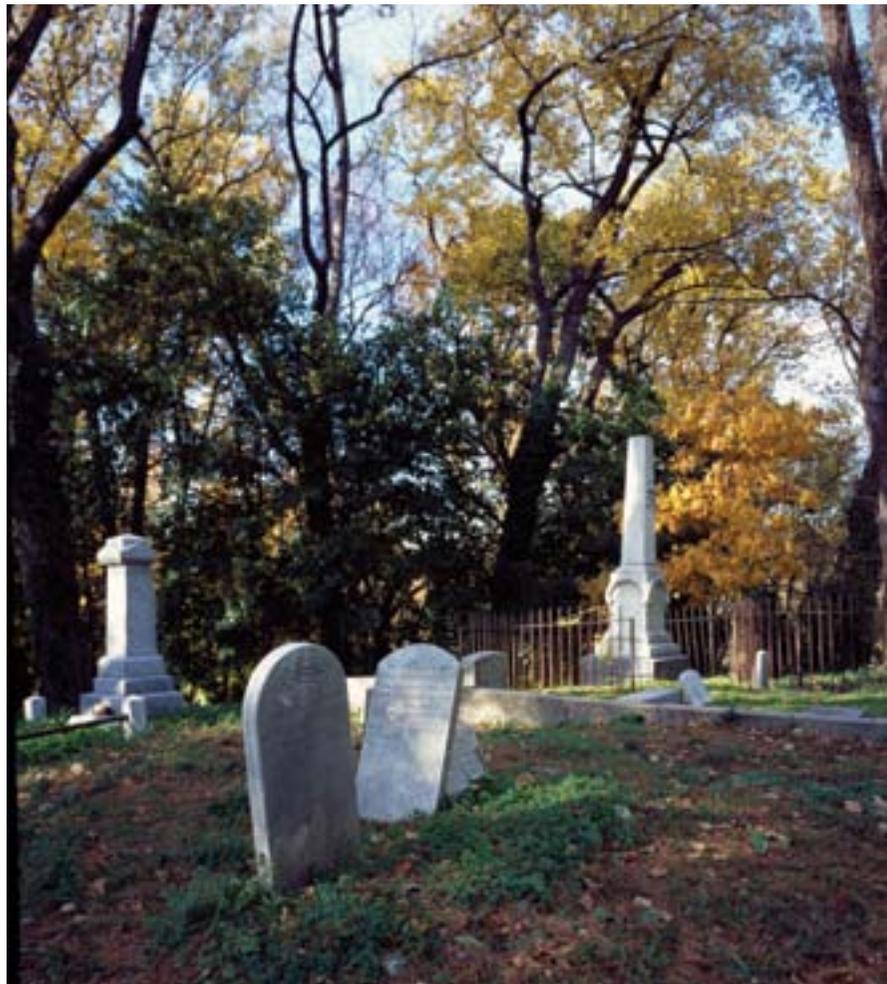

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unremembered. "There's an entire population of forgotten people out there," Arnold says.

To locate and memorialize those forgotten Americans, Arnold began compiling a database of slave cemetery locations and where possible, the names of those buried. She teamed up with Irma Watkins-Owens, a Fordham associate professor of history and Afri-can-American studies, who now serves as the project's co-director. In addition to Rainville, Arnold has also gathered a team of advisors from the College of William and Mary, Yale and Emory as well as Rainville and other researchers in the field.

The Burial Database Project of African-American cemeteries <www.vanishinghistory.org> launched earlier
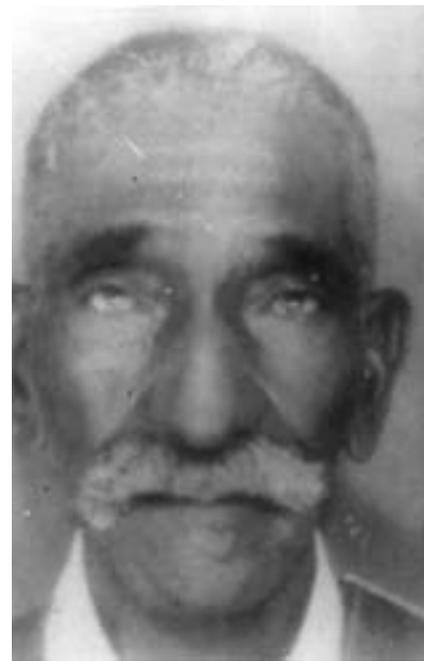
Some cemeteries, like this one in Washington, DC (far left), contain graves of both whites and African-American slaves or former slaves. Sandra Arnold's visit to the unmarked burial site of her great-grandparents—Ben Harmon, a former slave (left), and his wife Ethel (below left)—inspired her quest to catalog locations of other slave cemeteries.

documentation later," Arnold says. In that phase, the team will delve into plantation and county records to verify identified sites and determine who might be buried there. Arnold's goal is to set up an online registry for researchers, historians and genealogists.

"It's an ambitious project," says Rainville. "There were 6 million Africans taken from Africa for the purpose of slavery. Not all of them came to the United States, of course, but you're still talking about millions of people and their descendents."

She has tips for locating burial grounds you may have heard local lore about. "First, look on old maps for the sites of plantations," she says. Visit the area and climb the highest hill, she adds, becuase most cemeteries are built on high ground. (On private property, you'll need permission from the property owner—most states require them to allow reasonable access to cemeteries on their land.) Then look around for an old fence or tombstones. If you find them, you've likely located the white cemetery. "Slaves were sometimes buried just outside," Rainville says. If all else fails, look for a patch of periwinkle. Periwinkle was among the most common wildflower brought to slave grave-sites.

this year to gather information about obscure slave cemeteries and burial grounds. "I'd say maybe 30 to 40 percent of them are still visible," says Rainville, "and finding them can be a time-consuming project."

"Right now, we're simply looking for locations. An oral history of a cemetery often exists in families, and that's fine with us. We'll get involved with

The team hopes communities will pitch in to preserve slave cemeteries. "I hope the registry becomes an inclusive work, one that allows the descendents of plantation owners and the descendents of slaves to work together and share information. I think, in that sense, a registry like this can be healing."

» **Karen Edwards**

Cemetery Stories

Prejudice, neglect and development conceal the burial sites of many enslaved African-Americans. Local lore, old deeds and maps can help reveal their locations, as in these three cases:

■ Local lore in Newnan, Ga., told of a slave cemetery, but only when the city planned to build a walking trail on the site did black and white community members join to preserve it. An 1828 map shows a burial ground adjacent to the land of a slaveowner; at least 249 slaves are believed to be buried there.

■ Descendants of local families restoring a Hudson Valley settler's cemetery, now part of the Nature Conservancy's Neversink River Preserve, believe that one of its three burial grounds is a slave graveyard alluded to in a deed. New York outlawed slavery in stages, making it possible that landholders owned slaves there.

■ Warren County, Ky., officials are reviewing a developer's plans to relocate at least 12 graves believed to be those of slaves, according to the *Herald-Dispatch* newspaper. Deeds show the land once belonged to a slave-owning family. The graves' location across the road from the family cemetery, as well as the use of stones rather than carved markers, indicate slaves may be buried there.

» **Diane Haddad**