

Black Baptists Discover Lost Cemetery in Virginia

African American church graveyards are disappearing. Can they be saved before it's too late?

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Image: Matthew S. Gunby / AP Images

They needed a John Deere Gator to reach the perimeter. Then, in the forested area behind a power plant in Williamsburg, Virginia, Colette Roots and her small expedition had to jump over ditches full of rainwater, where they could see tadpoles and mosquito eggs. They went in. The plot of land belonged to a Black congregation in the 1940s. The historic church, Oak Grove Baptist, is still active. Roots grew up in the congregation, and as a child, she helped her mother maintain the graves at the church's main cemetery—a much larger plot roughly a mile from this one, with about 150 graves.

The church lost access to this smaller graveyard decades ago, thanks in part to a massive land seizure by the federal government. By the summer of 2021, most everyone who knew the exact whereabouts of the Christians buried back here had died themselves.

Hidden away like this, in the trees and brush, the graves remind Roots of the Sunday school song about hiding your light under a bushel. When she saw them that day, she had the same reaction: *No*.

There were a dozen markers, some lying flat and others standing upright. The inscriptions showed that most of the deceased were children, and at least three were related to Roots by marriage. For a moment she was overcome with grief.

The dead needed to be taken care of. They belonged with the other deceased saints at the main burial grounds.

Everyone at Oak Grove agreed with her. But this left them with a conundrum. With an aging congregation, just a fraction of its former size, Oak Grove Baptist has struggled just to pay its utility bills. Relocating a cemetery is not in its budget.

The congregation's dilemma is not unusual for Black churches. Recently, 26 potential graves were [identified beneath a paved road](#) near a Baptist church cemetery in Georgia. In the Tampa area, multiple Black cemeteries have been [discovered since 2019](#), including [one beneath a high school](#) and [another below an Air Force base](#).

Across the country, hundreds or thousands of Black cemeteries are in severe enough disrepair that they could be erased altogether. History is being lost. A record of the spiritual heritage of the men and women who persevered by faith through incredible hardship is disappearing. It's not clear that anything can be done in time to save them.

The dispossession of Oak Grove

Dispossession has been a theme in the history of Oak Grove Baptist.

The church has its origins in Magruder, a cluster of smaller neighborhoods that no longer exists. [Brian Palmer](#), a veteran journalist who has family ties to the area, and his wife, journalist Erin Hollaway Palmer, have done extensive research on the neighborhood's history. Brian Palmer says that before the Civil War, the area consisted mostly of large plantations but also included small tracts of land owned by free Black families.

During and after Reconstruction, freed people who had lived on the plantations stayed in the region, and more Black families settled there and bought land. In the Jim Crow era, Magruder was a place where African Americans could retain some degree of economic independence. Many made their living by farming and oystering.

Oak Grove Baptist was founded by former parishioners of First Baptist Church, Williamsburg's original Black house of worship, which had been established before the American revolution. The Magruder residents couldn't walk the three miles downtown every week for services. They began holding services independently around 1887.

A half century later, Magruder was destroyed by the federal government. When the US entered World War II, in 1941, the military rapidly built training camps for its new recruits. One of the

locations it zeroed in on was the Virginia Peninsula, where it planned to build the Navy post that became Camp Peary (which is now a [CIA training facility](#) known as “The Farm”).

Magruder was appealing, the Associated Press [reported at the time](#), because of “the wild nature of the country. Officials “thought the “rough terrain of hills, fields, woods, dense brush, swamp and beach” would be ideal for training activities. Government officials also cited Magruder’s railroad access, its water supply, and its flat ground among its assets. Property owners, both Black and white, fought the land seizures but couldn’t stop them.

In the end, [several hundred families were displaced](#) by Camp Peary. The residents scattered in all directions, with some exiles settling locally and others leaving the state. Oak Grove Baptist was forced to vacate its building on East Rochambeau Drive, leaving behind a large cemetery. The church trustees took the matter to court, demanding a higher payment for the church property. According to documents Palmer obtained, they ultimately received \$1,150 (the equivalent of \$10,700 now). While this lawsuit was going on, Roots says, they bought a new plot of land for burials. This was when the little cemetery with the children’s graves was established.

The church leaders erected a new building on Waller Mill Road, in the neighborhood known as Cooketown. Then that land was seized for a highway and a new water plant and the congregation was forced to relocate again.

Roots was born in 1959. Despite the disruptions, the church thrived while she was growing up. At its peak, Roots estimates, the church had 300–400 people attending regularly. The children of the generation that had been displaced from Magruder were becoming teachers and doctors and lawyers. Many of them lived in other parts of the county, but they still came back to Oak Grove, and many weekends they had cookouts in the area.

Four times each year, Roots and her mother went to the main cemetery to pay respects and help with maintenance. In 1981, Roots married her high school sweetheart, whose grandparents had also lived in Magruder. Her husband enlisted in the Army, and the young couple left for Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, where they lived for a dozen years. As the ’80s gave way to the ’90s, she watched Oak Grove’s congregation start to dwindle. Elderly parishioners were dying, and younger families were moving farther away. The church cycled through a number of pastors who were only in Williamsburg temporarily and didn’t have strong ties.

As Sunday attendance went down, so did the condition of the main cemetery. Trees toppled, headstones started cracking, and some of the graves sank due to erosion.

Roots and her husband moved back to Williamsburg in 1994, after spending time in Alaska and Tennessee. At first Roots was reluctant to take on much responsibility at Oak Grove Baptist. She worked as a shop steward at the College of William & Mary, leading the union of housekeepers and other wage workers. But after her mother’s death, she felt compelled to get Oak Grove’s main cemetery fixed up.

Colonial Williamsburg, the foundation that runs a living history museum downtown, offered to help. It paid for a new fence and parking lot and used radar technology to check for unmarked graves. Roots [described](#) it to the *Virginia Gazette* as a “miracle.”

Small cemetery rediscovered

Amid this restoration project, one of Roots’s cousins reminded her that Oak Grove had another cemetery as well. “She said, ‘Don’t know where it’s at, but there’s one out there,’” Roots recalls. Over the years, as property around the second cemetery had been sold and developed, the congregation had lost its access route. Then in 2021, Roots received a call from a municipal worker who knew about the restoration work she’d been doing. He said a logger had felled some trees in the old Magruder area, and a set of gravestones was now [visible](#) in the woods.

Since the day of the expedition, the congregation [has made big strides](#) in repairing and restoring the church building in the last year. But the cemetery project has been more difficult. Much of the surrounding land, where the grandparents and great-grandparents of church members once lived, is now being developed into an upscale subdivision. Moving the graves is a priority. But a local funeral home estimates it will cost around \$3,300 per grave (or nearly \$40,000 altogether), and the community is still searching for a source of funding. Let Freedom Ring, a foundation associated with First Baptist (Oak Grove’s old parent church), has also been looking for a solution, and Monty Mason, a state senator representing Williamsburg, has offered to help. From Roots’s perspective, the most just outcome would be for the federal government to pay a substantial portion of the cost. After all, the US military created the problem in the first place, when it broke up Magruder and seized the church’s main cemetery.

There is a bill pending in the legislature, the African American Burial Grounds Network Study Act, that would take up this call. Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) introduced the bill in 2019, and in December 2020, it was passed unanimously by the US Senate. (A companion bill was introduced in the House by Representatives Donald McEachin, D-Va., and Alma Adams, D-N.C., also in 2019.)

If the legislation passes, the National Park Service will be tasked with putting together a database of every historic Black cemetery in the country, or at least as many as can be identified. The Park Service would then establish grants for local organizations—likely including churches, preservation groups, and other nonprofits—to help them research and restore these sites.

Brown’s office says about \$3 million would be allocated to create the network, but other funding sources would be needed for restoration work, which is expensive—often running to tens of thousands of dollars at even a small cemetery.

In the case of Oak Grove, it’s easy to picture how a program like this could help. If it were already in place, perhaps the little cemetery near the power plant would have been identified earlier. And the community wouldn’t have to scrounge for funds to move the graves.

‘Another and another and another and another’

On a national scale, the project's potential impact would be enormous. Since there's no comprehensive database of these cemeteries right now, there's no way to estimate how many are in danger. Hannah Rosen, a historian at the College of William & Mary, who has done extensive research on Black burial grounds, thinks the figure has to be over 1,000 and is likely much higher.

"I don't think there's a Southern community that doesn't have multiple struggling Black burial grounds—and the North is probably full of them too," Rosen said. "Everywhere you turn, there's another and another and another and another."

On one level, the significance of these sites is obvious: Like all cemeteries, they hold the remains of the deceased, so it's natural to think of them as a kind of sacred ground. Connie Harshaw, the director of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, who has been working closely with Roots, argues that cemeteries have a particular importance in Black church culture, where respect for ancestors is paramount.

"We stand on their shoulders, and we pay homage as often as we can," Harshaw said. "We know that if not for them, we could not be where we are now."

There is another way to think about their significance, too. Monuments from African American history are relatively scarce. In the Jim Crow era, Southern cities rarely put up statues of Black leaders. At the same time, rural Black communities were often forced to use cheap materials to build houses, schools, and churches, because these were all they could afford—and as a result, many of those buildings have not withstood the elements.

To some extent, cemeteries have been an exception to this trend. By their nature, they're more durable than wood-frame buildings. In some cases, they are the only sites left of abandoned Black towns. In this way, they're testaments to the history of American racism, as Rosen points out. But they can also be taken as symbols of the resiliency of communities like Oak Grove Baptist.

This is the part that resonates most for Roots. The hymn "This Little Light of Mine" has become her anthem as she works to preserve the church's landmarks.

"No matter where this church has been—displaced, relocated, relocated, displaced again—and still struggling—the light is gonna shine," she said. "It represents what Oak Grove stands for; it represents the gospel. That song represents everything. And it's telling us history will be told."