

A HISTORY OF THE CEMETERIES AT EVERGREEN

The Evergreen Cemetery Association was formed in 1891 with the express purpose of establishing a cemetery for African Americans that would rival Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery. Hollywood Cemetery was first planned in 1847 by a company formed of Richmond's elite White business leaders with the purpose of developing a "rural decorated cemetery" for the city. Within ten years, Hollywood was fast becoming the most fashionable place for Whites to be buried in the city.¹Rural cemeteries, sometimes called garden cemeteries, became fashionable in the mid-nineteenth century due to overcrowding and the health concerns of urban cemeteries. These rural cemeteries were typically built close to but just outside the city and often contained elaborate monuments, memorials, and mausoleums in a park-like setting with curving roads planned for attractive vistas and elaborate plantings.

In 1892, the Evergreen Cemetery Association purchased forty-six acres of land above Stony Run and Gillie's Creek in eastern Henrico County to establish the cemetery. The property was part of a 333-acre patent issued to Samuel Bridgewater (1637-1704) in 1686. The land was given to Bridgewater in exchange for his payment of the passage for immigrants to the Virginia colony at 50 acres per sponsored person. The 333 acres extended between Stony Run and Gilly creeks and up to the current Nine Mile Road.

While Bridgewater had planned to plant tobacco and wheat on the land, he failed due to the parcel's undulating character, steep ravines, and abundance of trees. Further, the soil was of mixed quality, producing either high yield but low-quality crops, or high quality with low yield crops. The land then changed hands several times during the next 100+ years until it was acquired by Reuben Smith Blakey in 1798. It became known as Blakey's Mill, a name that stuck with the property well into the twentieth century

In 1891, the old Blakey Mill property was owned by Charles Edward Belvin and Dr. Aristides Monteiro (1829-1911). Charles Edward Belvin was a lumber merchant in Richmond. Dr. Aristides Monteiro, the son of a farmer who had been born in Portugal, worked as a physician and had been a surgeon for the Confederacy during the Civil War. That year, the East Richmond Company, a suburban development company managed by David W. Reinhart, was in the process of buying land for a new Richmond suburb called East Richmond Heights and purchased the Blakey's Mill property from Belvin and Monteiro for \$9,400. But the East Richmond Company failed and on April 7, 1892, Belvin and Monteiro bought the property back for \$1,927. Belvin and Monteiro planned to use the land for a cemetery, reflected by a deed agreement between them and neighbor Henry Perry Randolph (1854-1923), an undertaker, for a road easement between their properties for use to serve a cemetery, "colored or white."

When the Evergreen Cemetery Association was founded in 1891, it was managed by a board of directors that included Walter T. Brown, Edward T. Coleman, Payne Ransom, Augustus Phillips, and Lewis Braxton. On June 24, 1892, Belvin and Monteiro sold Lots 4 and 5 of the Blakey's Mill property to the Evergreen Cemetery Association for \$6,000 to be paid in 11 payments over 60 months at 6% interest.

The Evergreen Cemetery Association commissioned the Richmond-based survey and engineering firm of John T. Redd and Sons to design the cemetery. Redd & Sons "graced the cascading hills with concrete walking paths and paved the main road into Evergreen from East Richmond Road with cobblestones to create a memorial park fit for royalty." The cemetery's highest point was designed as a scenic overlook from which to view an old mill pond and Stony Run below. From Stony Run Road, passers-by could look up to see the marble statues, granite obelisks, and elegant monuments that marked the burial places of Richmond's Black elite.

The founding group had envisioned the cemetery to become the burial site for African Americans with one section reserved for "mulattos," Native Americans, and Asians. The cemetery became so popular that many people had their deceased exhumed from other cemeteries and moved to Evergreen. Many families bought large plots that would hold two generations of family members. True to its mission, Evergreen became the final resting place of many of Richmond's leading African American citizens, including businesswoman Maggie Lena Walker, publisher and editor John Mitchell, Jr., funeral home director, Alfred D. Price, and community leader Rev. Andrew J. Bowler.

Despite their initial success, the Evergreen Cemetery Association was struggling to stay afloat by 1899. William H. Kennon of Richmond tried to take the cemetery, possibly by paying back taxes, but was unsuccessful. In 1900, Roderick Randal Beard (1875-1952) purchased the cemetery from the group and remained the owner until 1947. It appears, too, that he had other investors since he is listed as chairing stockholder meetings advertised in 1909

newspapers. Beard also added thirteen more acres to the cemetery in the early 1900s.

It was after Beard's purchase that the two most distinctive family plots were established at a high point in the cemetery. In 1913, Rebecca Mitchell, the mother of John R. Mitchell, editor of the Richmond Daily Planet, died. Mitchell erected a distinctive carved stone atop her grave (see Figure 5). John Mitchell died in 1929 and was also buried in that family plot.

Only one year later, on June 20, 1914, the son of renowned Richmond businesswoman and teacher, Maggie L. Walker, Russell, accidentally shot and killed his father, Armstead, having mistaken him for a burglar. Maggie Walker buried him in their family plot and erected an enormous stone cross at its center. Mrs. Walker died in 1934 and was also buried in the family plot.

Despite its initial popularity among Richmond's Black elite, within ten years of Walker's death in 1934, the cemetery was becoming overgrown and neglected. In 1947, Beard sold the cemetery to H.E. Hicks of Washington, DC. Hicks had the existing drives in the New Loop area regraded, creating the curvilinear form existing today. He had also planned to modernize services and institute a perpetual care program, but these plans were never realized. The older portions of the cemetery became overgrown and were starting to be used as an illegal dumping site. There was even a petition to relocate Maggie Walker's grave, but it proved too expensive. By 1964, the City of Richmond had taken possession of the cemetery property. Many families abandoned their family plots or moved their loved ones to newer cemeteries that had perpetual care programs. This was possible because of new laws prohibiting segregation of cemeteries. Alfred Price's family moved his body to another cemetery but left behind his grave monument as a memorial to him.

In 1970, Metropolitan Memorial Services, Inc., acquired the cemetery. Maintenance by the company was haphazard, and some new burials even placed under roads and paths. Metropolitan was also accused of having set fire to the cemetery offices to destroy records. At the time, the office contained all but two of the cemetery's ledger books, including records for Evergreen prior to 1929, and interment cards for the adjacent East End Cemetery, all of which were lost.

By 1973, Metropolitan Memorial Services had gone bankrupt, so the cemetery was put up for auction. It was purchased by the U.K. Corporation, which had been originally chartered in 1971 by three Richmond funeral directors: Oliver Purcell Chiles, Sr., Willie Saunders Watkins, and Oscar Franklin Howard. Isaiah E. Entzminger was the group's secretary. In 1978, Oliver Purcell Chiles, Sr., died, leaving his partners to operate the cemetery.

In 1979, U.K. Corporation dissolved, but then appealed for reinstatement. It is believed that it was during the 1970s and 1980s that the Braxton mausoleum, the cemetery's only building, was vandalized. It was broken into at least three times and the coffin of a woman interred in 1927 was opened, but nothing was done to repair the building. In the late 1970s, the coffin of another woman, interred in 1941, was removed and the remains set afire. Eventually, the owner of the cemetery used concrete blocks to close the entrance, but this did not deter vandals, who simply battered a hole in the wall to continue the damage. In 1981, U.K. Corporation dissolved again due to failure to pay franchise taxes. During this time, the cemetery remained neglected and overgrown, leaving the bereaved to hold funerals close to piles of junk, overgrown grass, and potholed roads. In 2001, Isaiah Entzminger purchased the shares of his three partners in Metropolitan Memorial Services and continued to run the cemetery until it was purchased in 2017 by The Enrichmond Foundation.

Despite neglect by its owners, the families and supporters of Evergreen Cemetery began to organize volunteer days, starting in 1999. Some of the volunteers included National Park Service staff and members of non-profit groups in the Richmond area. These included the Virginia Foundation for the Preservation of Historic Black Cemeteries, started by James "Jim" Bell in 2000; this group was disbanded by 2007. Another group, Virginia Roots, Inc., was started in 2010 by Veronica A. Davis, author of "Here I Lay My Burdens Down: A History of the Black Cemeteries of Richmond, Virginia." That group, however, has also been disbanded. A third group, Friends of Evergreen, also coordinated volunteer efforts.

In 2016, the Commonwealth of Virginia committed state support to the restoration effort when the Virginia Outdoors Foundation provided \$400,000 to the permanent protection of Evergreen and the adjacent East End Cemetery. The foundation also helped to craft legislation that provides annual state funding for these and other historic African American cemeteries.

In 2017, The Enrichmond Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to supporting grassroots efforts to preserve and create equal access to the city's public spaces, purchased Evergreen Cemetery and committed itself to facilitating its

restoration. In 2018, Enrichmond organized the advisory group, the Executive Planning and Review Team (ExPRT), comprised of descendant family members and representatives from the local Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia, the Elegba Folklore Society, the African American Historical and Genealogical Society, and the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site. Enrichmond and the advisory team hired Pond & Company to create an initial project work plan with the aim of executing a master plan for Evergreen Cemetery; at the same time, the Virginia Department of Forestry developed a forest management plan for the cemetery. In 2019, Enrichmond purchased the adjacent East End Cemetery and committed to preserving that cemetery and working with the community to restore it.

In June 2019, UNESCO awarded Evergreen Cemetery the designation of “Site of Memory associated with the Slave Route Project.”