

**UNEARTHING BLACK HISTORY IN BROOKLYN:  
GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY'S FREEDOM LOTS**

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

**VANESSA:** When I want to get away from the hustle and bustle of New York City, I go to Greenwood Cemetery. I make the pilgrimage about once a season, no matter the weather.

*VANESSA: OK and it's not too cold, for a winter's day in January.*

**VANESSA:** I walk to the subway, take two trains —

*[SOUNDS OF GOING DOWN STAIRS, SUBWAY ANNOUNCEMENT]*

*VANESSA: Woo here comes my R train! [SOUNDS OF TRAIN ARRIVING]*

**VANESSA:** And then I'm pretty much there.

*All righty here I am in Brooklyn.*

*[SOUND of MOTORCYCLE] And yeah it's loud.*

*I see Greenwood, I just have to cross this busy street and then I am there. #*

**VANESSA:** Once past the towering gothic gates, you enter a whole other world, an oasis ker-plunked in the middle of this huge metropolis. For me, there's so much to love about this place. First of all, it's quiet.

*VANESSA: I'm struck by the fact that I can hear my feet walking on pine needles.*

*[SOUNDS OF NEEDLES CRUNCHING]*

**VANESSA:** Secondly, in Greenwood, you're up close and personal with nature.

*UH. so many knots in this tree. I'm just gonna touch them. Wow.*

**DEQAH:** Vanessa. Not to interrupt your story here, but you are so into this tree.

**VANESSA:** Dude, that's not even the beginning of how nerdy I got out there.

*Oh my god i think that's a hawk. I just saw a hawk. Wooow. OK nerdy birding over.*

*[LAUGHS]*

**DEQAH:** [LAUGHS] Vanessa, you know you can see nature in a lot of places, right?

**VANESSA:** I know I know, but it's special there.

**DEQAH:** Yeah, I get that. What's amazing to *me* about greenwood is all the Gothic architecture and graves.

**VANESSA:** Oh completely. When I'm there I love exploring and finding all the angels on pedestals, the obelisks, and all these intricate mausolea with serious Notre Dame vibes.

**DEQAH:** beyond the killer Gothic architecture there, the fact that there's a whole lot dedicated to African Americans there is pretty extraordinary.

**VANESSA:** Wait wait - tell me more. Because I've heard you mention that before, but I haven't come across it, any of the times I've been to Greenwood.

**DEQAH:** Well, you might have missed them. See, the grander graves and mausolea, those are PRIVATE lots. But there are also Public lots. That's where the cemetery's African Americans are buried.

**VANESSA:** Huh so how can I tell the difference between the private and public lots?

**DEQAH:** I could tell you dude, but honestly, there is someone at Greenwood who should just show you instead.

**VANESSA:** I guess I'm going back to Greenwood! But this time I'm driving.

[BEAT]

**VANESSA:** I realize I left my windows open, no one's coming down here, right? No.

**NEELA:** If you ever need a parking spot, this is the place to find it.

**VANESSA:** Just to kick us off, would you mind, would you mind introducing yourself?

**NEELA:** So, I'm Neela Wickremesinghe. I am the Director of Restoration and Preservation here at the Green-Wood Cemetery.

**VANESSA:** Neela described the difference between the area where we were standing, the public lots, and the area across the way, the private lots.

**NEELA:** You can see that on this side. It's very sparse, and also the monuments are small.

**VANESSA:** They're like little gravestones.

**NEELA:** Right. And you can look across the street and you see larger granite headstones or obelisks. So, it's just like any other rule of real estate, right? You wanna be up on a nice hill, you want to be where you can have your family next to you -- but if you want to be in Green-Wood and you want to take the most affordable route, you can be buried in a public lot.

**DEQAH:** Back in the 1850s, a private lot would have cost you around \$100, or about \$3000 in today's money. But a public lot, which allowed for several burials at different depths, went for only \$5, about \$160 in today's money.

**VANESSA:** Greenwood recently inventoried their lots and found that about a third of the people buried at Green-Wood are in public lots. But Unlike the private lots, which tend to be well-preserved and more thoroughly documented, the graves on public lots are more run down and more of a mystery.

**NEELA:** You know big mausoleums, big obelisks, those are easy to recognize, right. It takes a little bit more time and effort to look down and read a headstone that's small...but that doesn't mean there isn't information to be gleaned.

**DEQAH:** Neela tries to tackle public lots whenever she gets the chance. And in 2017, she asked a colleague of hers to recommend a section of the public lots badly in need of preservation.

**VANESSA:** Neela's colleague told her that there was a part of the cemetery known as the Colored Lots.

**NEELA:** You know, I'm sure there's some work that needs to be done there. And I was like, great.

**DEQAH:** She went to check out the site, and was discouraged by what she saw. Over the past 170 years, the gravestones in these seven lots had sunk into the ground, broken, or disappeared completely.

**VANESSA:** In some ways, Neela was too late. But, if she was lucky, she thought, there could be some information that could still be gleaned, some headstones that could still be saved, some stories that could still be uncovered.

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**DEQAH:** Welcome to Urban Roots, a podcast from Urbanist Media that takes a deep dive into little known stories from urban history. We're your hosts. I'm historic preservationist Deqah Hussein-Wetzel.

**VANESSA:** And I'm Vanessa Quirk, a cities journalist.

**DEQAH:** And in today's episode we're going to go past the well-known, kempt grounds of Green-Wood's private lots, and take you to the public Lots.

**VANESSA:** We'll talk about the ways in which Green-Wood has begun to preserve the memories of the people of color buried there.

**DEQAH:** But before we can get there, and truly understand why this new focus represents a paradigm shift in preservation, we first need to know more about Green-Wood cemetery — and how it came to be.

[BEAT]

**JEFF:** New York City has been famous as: "if you don't like the architecture, just wait 20 years and it will be gone, This is the 19<sup>th</sup> century city of New York here"

**DEQAH:** That's Jeff Richman, the historian at Green-Wood Cemetery.

**VANESSA:** Jeff literally wrote the book on Green-Wood. It's called *Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, New York's Buried Treasure*.

**DEQAH:** Greenwood's story starts at the turn of the 19th century.

**VANESSA:** It's the early 1800s, and New York City is growing — fast. In a matter of decades, it goes from being a relative backwater, to a city in its own right.

**DEQAH:** If you moved to NYC in 1820, you would have seen the city's population triple, from 123,000 to 312,000, in just twenty years.

**VANESSA:** Around this same time, you'd also be getting hit with waves of pandemics, diseases like Yellow Fever and Cholera.

**DEQAH:** In those days, the bodies of the deceased were buried in churchyards, **close** to where people lived and worked.

[BEAT]

**VANESSA:** Jeff explained to us that scientists around this time were starting to catch on to the fact that leaving diseased corpses in the middle of cities was **not** the best idea from a public health perspective.

**JEFF:** And so you're getting this huge jump in the number of people living in the city, and you get the concomitant need for dealing with more and more bodies of the deceased. And, so how do you do that?

**DEQAH:** In Europe, cities had come up with a solution: they started to set up cemeteries in the rural areas **outside** of city limits.

**VANESSA:** The first so-called "rural cemetery" was Pere Lachaise, in Paris in 1804. The next one was in England.

**JEFF:** And then, that idea comes to America in 1831 – Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts, servicing the city of Boston.

**DEQAH:** But the idea wasn't just to keep the living safe from the dead. It was also to keep the dead safe from the living.

**VANESSA:** Here's Jeff reading part of a speech given at Mount Auburn's dedication ceremony which encapsulates the thinking of the time:

**JEFF:** *Why should we expose our burying grounds #to the unfeeling gaze of the idler, to the noisy press of business, to the scordent shouts of merriment or the baleful visitations of the dissolent.*

And so the impetus there is very much the idea of separating out and honoring the dead and not allowing them to be part of the hubbub, the commercialization, the noise, the urban problems; and get them out into a different space. //

**DEQAH:** A few years after Boston got its first rural cemetery, Henry Evelyn Pierrepont, a businessman from a wealthy family in Brooklyn, decided he would create New York City's first rural cemetery.

**VANESSA:** In 1838, he purchased 175 acres just south of what today are the Prospect Park and Park Slope neighborhoods. At the time, of course, they weren't really neighborhoods at all — just woods and grazing land.

**DEQAH:** And because Pierrepont wanted Greenwood to serve the public of Brooklyn he, from the beginning, set aside some land in the cemetery for Public lots.

**VANESSA:** He also wanted this to be a truly unique destination, one that would draw people not just from Brooklyn but across New York City and the world. So he hired the creme de la creme of his time.

**DEQAH:** For example he hired Richard Upjohn, the architect famous for designing Trinity Church in downtown Manhattan, who created Green-Wood's main gatehouse in his signature Gothic revival Style.

**VANESSA:** He also hired David Bates Douglass to design the cemetery's landscape with artfully meandering pathways and lush vegetation. Remember, at the time there was no Central Park, no Prospect Park. When it opened, Greenwood was one of the very few public places Manhattanites could go to escape the city and be in nature.

**DEQAH:**At first, attendance was slow. But over time, more and more famous people began to be buried at Green-Wood, politicians, celebrities and socialites -- Once people started visiting, they loved it.

**JEFF:** Green-Wood becomes this great attraction where people can get out of the urban center and commune with nature, enjoy grass and trees, and in turn have a religious experience, as you're communing with nature you are communing with God at the same time.

By the 1850s Green-Wood is attracting half a million people a year.

**VANESSA:** It was the nation's second most popular tourist destination, trailing only behind Niagara Falls. It earned its spot in the history books.

**DEQAH:** In those history books, Green-Wood is described as a shining example of the Rural Cemetery Movement.

**VANESSA:** A resting place for the famous, the powerful, and the rich. But its long history of providing public, affordable lots is merely a footnote.

**DEQAH:** That includes the Colored Lots. Which means that the histories of the vast majority of the African Americans buried in Green-Wood are in danger of being forgotten.

**VANESSA:** Which takes us back to Neela.

[BEAT]

**VANESSA:** When Neela was offered the support of eight high school interns, all students of color, in 2017, she gave them a mission: to find out everything they could about the so-called "Colored Lots."

**DEQAH:** One of those students was Darryl Jones.

**DARRYL:** So hello people. I'm Darryl Jones. I'm from Brooklyn, New York.

**VANESSA:** Darryl is now a young preservation professional about to start working at Greenwood full time. But back in 2017, he was a high school sophomore. I met him at the cemetery so he could tell me more about that summer.

**VANESSA:** Uh, coming back here, are any memories coming back to you right now?

**DARRYL:** I remember some of the pop music that came on and the radio / I still remember the train horn. I love the train horn in the-- right there. Yeah. Yeah. I love that sound. / You know, it brings me back

**DEQAH:** Darryl's connections to Greenwood actually go back quite a bit further than 2017.

**DARRYL:** Also a funny story. Um, my father's job is actually right across the street.

**VANESSA:** Oh wow.

**DARRYL:** So that's his job to the right. And so I knew from going when I was little. / Oh, this is Greenwood cemetery, so / over, across the street, such a contrast. Well, all like the industry, all the mechanics and stuff like that inside the Depot. In here, I get to experience / all the nature and even more than that all the history.

**VANESSA:** When Darryl arrived for his summer internship, he was eager to dive into all that history. He and his fellow interns started in Greenwood's archives.

**DEQAH:** While the records didn't specify race, they did have some information -- people's names, country of birth, what they did for a living, where they died, and what they died from.

**DARRYL:** it began our introduction to all the diseases they suffer from back then that affected the daily lives, like dysentery/ tuberculosis, namely. / Not just that, but / how they live back then, and, um, / Many people were very, very busy. Some were veterans, some were housekeepers. / some people were handymen.

**VANESSA:** Neela and the students also had survey maps from the 1910s that showed what markers and headstones should be there.

**DEQAH:** But when Darryl and his fellow interns arrived on site, they found the real life situation wasn't as neat and tidy as the maps had made them believe.

**DARRYL:** It looked like a stereotypical Halloween scene because // most of the place was in shambles, um, there was bird waste on headstones, many of them were chipped, and broken.

**VANESSA:** So they got to work. First up was cleaning and fixing the headstones they could see.

**DARRYL:** I do remember this narrow one. Looks like a very narrow tree stump we filled in with mortar all the cracks and crevices here so as to look more presentable

**VANESSA:** What did it look like when you found it before?

**DARRYL:** So before it looked like it was literally about to fall apart. So we tried the best we could to prevent that./ we cleaned it a little bit very carefully. We sprayed all the headstones here with a thing called dettol spray, which cleans off / lichen and moss and stuff like that and bird waste. And we wash it down with a hose and we carefully brush it away as well.

**DEQAH:** Then came the trickier task. Digging and probing for the markers and gravestones that they couldn't see. Here's Neela again.

**NEELA:** Digging things up out of the earth in a cemetery...it was, it's like fun. That's the fun part. But sometimes, you know, we did come across headstones that we knew where they were supposed to be, we would probe, we felt something, and then we just found pieces, you know? And that — having to explain that — i hate as a conservator having to say -- I can't fix something, right? Because that's my main job, right, to fix things that are broken.

**VANESSA:** Darryl still remembers the day when they searched for the grave of Rufus Cliff, a young Black man who died of consumption at the age of 17.

**DARRYL:** The map said, Hey, somebody's monument is here. And / we dig, we found it, that's the only good part, we found it, but it was all, nothing but pieces,/ Um, it was a feeling of almost like overwhelming dread. / So what we had to do, we dug it back into the ground, very respectfully and very carefully. We tried to piece it back together the best we could. I believe we got vaguely to the shape that it was, but definitely not what it was originally what-it was very shattered, it was a shocking experience to see that.

**DEQAH:** Neela told us that, for **all** the students, the work wasn't just physical, but emotional.

**NEELA:** You know, I had a student who was crying...it's tough, you know, because we were really excited to try to -- who knows what we were going to uncover? And every time we would uncover something that we could read...we went back to the lot book, found that person's name and # checked the Census and see...'Where did they live? Where did they live in Brooklyn? Did they live in Brooklyn? Did they live in manhattan? How did they get here?'

**VANESSA:** Yeah! Is there a story that you remember of, like, one gravestone or marker or monument in particular that you, kind of, looked up and...

**NEELA:** So, I remember this one -- this is one that we found...

**VANESSA:** Mmhmm. So, this was underground before?

**NEELA:** Yeah, tiny headstone. Right?

**VANESSA:** Yeah, it's really small, I'm getting on the ground to see it.

**NEELA:** It's maybe 13-inches high, right...but, I have the names of one--two--three-four--five people, Right? So, this is a mother, a father, and three children. So, even though this is such a small thing, it had a lot of information. We had five names that we could put through the Census.

**VANESSA:** Would you mind reading the names?

**NEELA:** Uh, let's see, let's see...we have John B. Wilson and Mary Jane Gardner, parents of Zeebe, Z-E-E-B-E,

**VANESSA:** Uh huh, that's a cute name.

**NEELA:** Thede, and Jimmy K.

**VANESSA:** And there's a date there too, right?

**NEELA:** There is, and I think one is 1861, 1862, 1863.... --

**VANESSA:** Woah, they died in quick succession.

**NEELA:** That tells you these were all infants, right? We also talked about infant mortality and why women were dying in childbirth. These are the kinds of discussions that are important to have because I don't actually have to say much -- this historic document, the monument, tells that story without me really having to say much. Because it can be really apparent. Also a wonderful thing about this is that...this was something like three feet in the ground, and it came out looking pretty good. You know, I can still read all the names, umm which is not the case on most marble headstones. So, sometimes, things are in the ground and then you can sort of discover them later.

**VANESSA:** As Neela and the interns found names, they would return to the archives, looking for more clues. And, over and over again, they kept coming across a specific organization, one that owned many of the public lots in the area: The Colored Orphans Asylum.

[BEAT]

**DARRYL:** The association for the benefit of colored orphans served to house, educate and care for African-American youth who had lost their parents, whose parents could not care for them.

**DEQAH:** It was founded in 1836 by three white philanthropists.

**VANESSA:** We're lucky to know much at all about the Asylum at all. Why? Let's go back to 1863. The country's in the midst of the Civil War, the Union is desperate for soldiers, and President Lincoln decides to instate a draft lottery.

**DEQAH:** you could buy your way out of the lottery by paying \$300 -- an amount equivalent to a **whole year's** salary for working White men at the time.

**VANESSA:** Riots break out in New York City. It is mayhem in the streets for four days. People home from war literally pull out artillery cannons that they had just been using against Confederate soldiers.

**DEQAH:** But these mobs of working class white men did not take out their fury on the wealthy. No, instead, they targeted another population that was exempt from the draft: African Americans, who were exempt only because they weren't considered citizens at all.

**VANESSA:** And one of the mobs — about 500 white men, women, and children — go after the Colored Orphans Asylum



**DEQAH:** They beat down the front door with an axe, and then proceed to set the building on fire.

**VANESSA:** Thankfully, while the mob was at the front gates, the caretakers were able to sneak all 233 children out the back.

**DEQAH:** They were lucky. The riots resulted in the deaths of at least 119 people, but historians now suspect that the number is more likely in the thousands.

**VANESSA:** Today, there aren't many records left about the Colored Orphans Asylum — except at Greenwood. So, I asked Neela if she could take me to one of their graves. She walked me to a big gravestone a few feet from Thebe, Zebe, and Jimmy K. .

**NEELA:** So, here it says, 'In memory of Mary Stockdale'.

**VANESSA:** This is a way bigger size...

**NEELA:** Way bigger, way bigger.

**VANESSA:** Mary Stockdale was a white woman who worked at the Asylum. Although dozens of black people had been buried here over the years, the only clearly marked grave that remains is Mary's. It was hard for the students to process.

**NEELA:** And they're like 'what do you mean there's no monuments for any of these children and the only one that's there is for a white woman? Which is hard. Without those archival pieces it's hard to really flesh out this story and thankfully we have those supporting documents to fill in the rest, right? Because here there's no such thing as an unmarked grave, because there's a stack of paperwork in our archives that really allow us to know what was going on even though we might not have a monument in front of us

**DEQAH:** Neela and the interns did the research they could to uncover the stories of some of the other African Americans buried in these lots.

**VANESSA:** People like Rufus Cliff, the young man whose gravestone had shattered into tiny pieces.

**DEQAH:** Like Lucinda Williams, who was a devoted member of the Bridge Street African Methodist Episcopal Church, a church with a long history of fighting for Black rights, ever since the days of the Underground Railroad.

**VANESSA:** And John Munroe, a carpenter. When Darryl and I were at Greenwood, he walked me to John Munroe's grave to tell me about his life.

**DARRYL:** So this is it right here. This little area here. / so John Monroe, / he served in the thirty-fifth regiment of the United States colored troops during the American civil war / he was also a member of the bridge street, African Methodist Episcopal church for 47 years. So that's quite a time.

**VANESSA:** Neela told me that as she and the interns learned about the people buried in these lots — the more they wanted to commemorate them.

\*\*\*MUSIC ENDS\*\*\*

**DEQAH:** So they created an interactive website that weaves together archival maps and photographs to better contextualize the information they gathered and tell a fuller, more holistic story of the Lots.

**VANESSA:** They also asked the staff at Green-Wood if they could rename the Colored Lots. Here's Darryl again.

**DARRYL:** It didn't sound good. It was sort of racist and brought you back to unpleasant times socially.

**DARRYL:** We all decided on the Freedom Lots because these people are not just free from many of the agonies of many of which they faced, / but also, / they're just free, ~~as~~ free spirits and free in the universe, that they are not held down anymore.

**VANESSA:** But the students' work to commemorate these folks wasn't done yet .

**NEELA:** So at the end of our project, I said, "okay, we're done," and then they were like "yo, we have got to do flowers." And I was like "of course, I'm sorry,"...so we spent a day at the florist and every single headstone got something, a planting to make it feel a little bit more visited. We did bulbs, so every year it would show a little something. To make that monument through greenery, through horticulture, also has a really powerful impact.

**VANESSA:** With the headstones cleaned, the flowers planted, and the website finished, Neela suggested one last touch. A sign.

**DARRYL:** We have this we placed here as well.

**VANESSA:** Can you tell me about that?

**DARRYL:** Yeah, so I'm looking at my picture right now. It's surreal that I'm here. Yeah.

**VANESSA:** Wait, where are you in the picture?

**DARRYL:** That's me right there.

**VANESSA:** Oh you look different!

**DARRYL:** Yeah yeah yeah, that's me. So Neela decided to make this board. And it was all a team effort, to memorialize it, we have the sign right here, so everybody knows the history of what happened here and what we did in 2017 to make their lives more noticed and know that these people, they were people that walked the earth, they were loved, they were acknowledged. So their lives, even though you may not see all their stones, or they're in great disrepair, isn't less significant than the lives or the stones or monuments of anybody else in the cemetery. So their lives are just as important as anybody else.

\*\*\*MUSIC STARTS\*\*\*

**VANESSA:** If these people hadn't been buried at Green-Wood, their stories could very well have been forgotten. And for Jeff and Neela and Darryl, that's exactly what their work is about.

**NEELA:** The stories are here, we just have to start looking for them. // 42: 11 That's the exciting part, is that we are just starting to look deeper— into other aspects of our history that might include people who we have not really known much about in the past.

[BEAT]

**DEQAH:** Thank you for listening to Urban Roots, brought to you by Urbanist Media. Your hosts are me, Deqah Hussein-Wetzal and Vanessa Quirk.

**VANESSA:** Our music is by Adaam James Levin-Areddy, you can check Adaam's band, Lost Amsterdam, at [amsterdamlost.com](http://amsterdamlost.com).

**VANESSA:** If you liked this episode, make sure to subscribe to us on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. And please take the time to give us a good rating — it really helps to keep our show going!

**DEQAH:** This episode wouldn't have been possible without the support of our listeners and those who have donated to our fundly fundraising campaign.

**VANESSA:** This episode was edited by me and Connor Lynch. Special thanks to Jeff, Neela, and Darryl from Green-Wood. And also Andrew Callaway, who not only mixed this episode but also helped me pull off a socially-distanced recording at the Freedom Lots during the pandemic.

**DEQAH:** Thank you to the interns who worked with Neela to preserve the stories that we shared today. To learn more about their work and the history of the Freedom Lots, you can find a link to their interactive online content in our episode notes.

**DEQAH:** And thanks to you for listening to Urban Roots, and helping us unearth these little-known, yet significant stories, of urban history.

\*\*\* MUSIC ENDS\*\*\*

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