

A few short days ago, I had the pleasure of participating in an African American burial grounds workshop in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was eager to join colleagues and constituents as we engaged in a day of education here [referencing slide]: Biddleville Cemetery. Biddleville Cemetery was established in the late nineteenth century as a private burial ground for African Americans.

Early surveys revealed a small number of burial sites and markers on the property—just over a dozen. As is the case for many historic African American burial grounds, what meets the eye is rarely revelatory of the truth. A comprehensive survey of Biddleville Cemetery, which included the use of ground penetrating radar (GPR) technology revealed this: [referencing slide] hundreds of unmarked graves that lay beneath the surface of this plot of land. This likely would not have not been revealed without some of the very actions the African American Burial Grounds Network Act calls for. Namely: identification of African American burial grounds; thorough efforts made to record gravesites; and technical assistance to support community-led preservation efforts. The work that has been achieved at Biddleville Cemetery is just one example of what this bill has the power to yield; and why the work is critical now.

Historically, African American burial practices have been severely restricted. For some enslaved African Americans, burying their dead was a privilege; others, an act of resistance; and still, others, a hope unrealized. Various power structures—from the law to “plantation politics”—shaped how, when and where African Americans were buried. When able, enslaved African Americans often marked sites with what dominant groups might consider non-traditional materials—fieldstones; wooden materials; plant life; and cultural ephemera. Things that might disintegrate or appear as insignificant to an untrained eye. In the era of legal segregation, African Americans buried their dead in segregated cemeteries connected with churches; on public property in African American communities; and even on private family lands. Additionally, untold numbers of African Americans have migrated from one end of the country to another; their family homes and family lands have changed hands over time; African American community landscapes have also changed drastically over time—whether via “urban renewal” of the past, or more contemporary “gentrification.” Consider my own family cemetery, located off of a rural highway in Tarboro, North Carolina. Sixteen of my relatives are buried here. Some of their graves are marked by headstones; others, by simple tin plaques. Many of these graves are not marked at all. This cemetery is not maintained consistently, as a trusted caretaker in not in proximity. It is also undocumented, and therefore, fairly unprotected. This example is not an outlier. African American cemeteries are often left under-resourced, under-documented and without consistent care on remote properties or within marginalized communities. This adversely affects decision-makers on a national scale.

As cities continue to grow and evolve at a rapid rate in this country, a comprehensive, streamlined and clear strategy for identifying and documenting African American burial grounds is critical. Ultimately, African American burial grounds will continue to be disturbed by construction projects, infrastructure improvements and land development (in urban and rural centers) as long as they remain undocumented. This is detrimental to communities—as this forces these projects to halt—and descendants—as these occurrences are traumatic. These occurrences—including recent incidents in Pennsylvania and Georgia—are ever-present in the American record. Consider New York City in the early 1990s; where, as construction work for a federal building was initiated, the remains of over 400 Africans, free and enslaved, were discovered. A national monument now exists on this site; but these incidents continue today. Consider Charlotte, North Carolina in 2017—where planned development of a Top Golf recreation facility paused amid the “discovery” of a site where enslaved African Americans were buried; or the even more recent revelations of burial sites on property owned by the University of Pennsylvania and a small college in Georgia. The database proposed by the African American Burial Grounds Network Act will play a key role in mitigating against this, ultimately leveraging community-based technical assistance to better inform development decisions and future community planning.

I will also note that the proposed Act responds directly to the needs of constituents across the nation. In fact, the most frequent constituent requests I receive in my work with the North Carolina African American Heritage

Commission relate to documenting, preserving and researching African American burial grounds across the state. In the last four weeks alone, I have fielded four requests: one related to providing research support to a cemetery in Asheville; one related to offering preservation support to a community cemetery with Gullah Geechee roots in Southport; another requesting cleaning, maintenance and preservation support for a cemetery in Milton; and still another requesting documentation support for a small family cemetery in Farmville. The requests here are so consistent that we are partnering with the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology to develop cemetery preservation and education workshops in African American communities across the State of North Carolina. Other states have limited response strategies in place, including Florida, Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia. However, a streamlined strategy with a national focus would enable constituent needs to be met on a greater and more thorough scale.

It is for these reasons, among others, that the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, along with grassroots groups, non-profits and government agencies across the United States have offered their support for the African American Burial Grounds Network Act. I urge you to do the same. I thank you for having me; and thank you in advance for your commitment towards identifying, documenting and preserving these sacred spaces.