

I serve as the director of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission. In my work, I help constituents navigate an array of heritage-related matters, including issues on African American burial grounds, like the one that you see here: Biddleville Cemetery. This historic cemetery served as a private burial ground for African Americans, and 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 the cemetery revealed this: hundreds of unmarked graves that lay beneath the surface of this plot of land.

Historically, African American burial practices have been severely restricted. Everything from “plantation politics” to legal restrictions have played a role in shaping how, when and where African Americans were buried. 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. Thus, these cemeteries are often left under-resourced, under-documented and without consistent care on remote properties or within marginalized communities.

As cities continue to evolve at a rapid rate in this country, a comprehensive, streamlined, and clear strategy for documenting and preserving African American burial grounds is critical. These spaces will continue to be disturbed by construction projects, infrastructure improvements and land development if they remain undocumented. The program proposed by the African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act presents a pathway; a pathway away from the challenges I have described, and towards expansive, meaningful, and reparative work.

The actions the Act calls for are feasible, and I see them often in my work across North Carolina. Consider Unity Cemetery in Edgecombe County: here, municipal officials have approved \$1.5 million to preserve the cemetery in phases over a period of five years. In Southport, years of descendant-led maintenance, preservation, and documentation have led to new protections and engagement opportunities at John N. Smith Cemetery. The cemetery is a recent listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and an outdoor museum opened last fall, inviting visitors to this well-traveled coastal community to learn about the cemetery’s ties to Gullah Geechee culture. This interpretation practice is something that has yielded great success elsewhere, like Geer Cemetery in Durham. Elizabeth City State University students are transforming classroom learning into community practice after researching and documenting Oak Grove Cemetery, the resting place of the university’s founder.

Thus, when I consider the African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act, I am excited by the opportunity to transform possibilities like those I have just offered you, into best practice across our nation. The Act will respond to the needs of descendants, advocates and those that work in solidarity with them. Also, while several states, including North Carolina, Florida, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia have limited strategies in place to respond to the needs of those descendants and groups advocating for African American burial grounds, a streamlined strategy with a national focus would offer provision 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 Preservation Act. I urge you to do the same. I thank you for having me; and thank you in advance for your commitment towards preserving these sacred spaces.