

106 SUCCESS STORY

Rediscovery of 19th Century Slave Cemetery Leads to Reunion

Bibb County, Georgia



“The descendants knew nothing about the cemetery’s existence. They became partners in the project and held a reunion at the burial ground on Memorial Day 2010.”

— CHAD CARLSON
Historian,
Georgia Department of Transportation



THE STORY

Beginning in the 1820s, rich soil and accessible transportation along the Ocmulgee River supported a cotton economy based on slave labor in the area around Macon, Georgia. It was common for enslaved African Americans to be buried on plantations, sometimes with grave markers, sometimes not. Although not recorded on deeds or maps, local lore held that a small, wooded area adjacent to the former McArthur Plantation, south of Macon, was an African American cemetery from the antebellum era.

THE PROJECT

The rediscovery of the unmarked Avondale Burial Place began when a local landowner notified the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) of a slave cemetery within the Federal Highway Administration’s (FHWA’s) proposed new interchange in the area of the former McArthur Plantation.

THE 106 PROCESS

The FHWA, the federal agency funding the highway project, was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires federal agencies to identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on these properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of the property when adverse effects are likely to ensue.

The GDOT had previously conducted an identification survey that did not locate the cemetery; however, once alerted to a burial ground by a landowner, the GDOT reinvestigated the area. After locating the cemetery, FHWA determined it was eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places for its association with

Photos: Above, Reverend Herman “Skip” Mason takes earth from original burials and adds it to the top of the burials at the new site; Right, archaeology at the McArthur Cemetery excavation site; New South Associates Head Mortuary Archaeologist Hugh “Matt” Matternes walks at the Avondale Burial Place, Bethel A.M.E. Church, Byron, Georgia. (photos courtesy GDOT)

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Photos: Left, New South Associates Archaeologist Lain Graham and Barton family (photo courtesy GDOT); Right, Ellen Barton Wicker, member of the Barton family and former slave, on McArthur Plantation (photo courtesy Herman "Skip" Mason)



economic and agricultural development of Bibb County, Georgia, and African American burial practices in the early 1800s.

FHWA consulted with interested parties and proposed mitigation that would become key components of the project—to disinter, relocate burials, and commemorate the new cemetery as “the Avondale Burial Place.”

THE SUCCESS

The Avondale Burial Place showcases successful public involvement as evidenced through the use of innovative outreach to direct descendants of those interred at the cemetery and the gathering of information from the local community. Initially expected to contain eight burials, a total of 101 human remains were located at the cemetery site, and the descendants of the slave-owning family and the enslaved were identified through posting on a popular genealogical Web site, all conducted as part of the Section 106 consultation. In addition, research expanded the knowledge about Georgia’s 19th century burial practices. In the end, the human remains were respectfully disinterred and relocated to a nearby cemetery.

As further evidence of its success, the project received the 2012 FHWA Exemplary Human Environment Initiative Award for developing a comprehensive strategy to educate the public on the discovery of a historic cemetery. In addition, the documentary film produced for the project, “I Remember, I Believe,” was an official selection and won awards for Best Script and Best Music at the 2013 International Archaeology Film Festival in Eugene, Oregon.

For the related descendants, the cemetery was an unknown part of their shared pasts which led to a shared present experience of participation in the Avondale Burial project.

Consulting Parties:

Federal Highway Administration
 Georgia Department of Transportation
 Georgia State Historic Preservation Officer
 New South Associates, Inc.
 Georgia Public Broadcasting
 Thomas Family
 Barton Family
 McArthur Family
 Ryder Family

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

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