

African American Graveyards and Cemeteries

By Emma Jackson

In my pre-teen years my family moved to a new home far from the paved highway. The community was called Bakers' Bottom.

Bakers' Bottom had a graveyard called Bakers' Graveyard, a family plot housing graves of the Baker Family of many years gone by. It would not be recognized from the dirt passage road were it not for a glimpse of broken headstones among bushes, vines, weeds, and discarded trash.

My first introduction to burial places for the deceased was called a graveyard. Though often used interchangeably, cemetery and graveyard are not synonymous in history, especially Black or African American History. Graveyards historically, were often associated with churches. It was a specific area of property next to a church where only members of the church are buried. Cemeteries were not associated with churches, but were private and commercial endeavors for the selling of burial plots to families.

The first church of my family's had the graveyard across the road from the church, now unusable and closed for years. I have ancestors buried there. Other communities had church-graveyard associated properties. None of these graveyards survived and are used today. However, there are those who have developed their family cemetery on their property with headstone and other artifacts, following governmental mandated law requirements.

Growing up there was, and still is, a cemetery along highway 20 west bordering Decatur, our small town. It's called Steers Cemetery, privately, owned by an economically rich family. It is beautiful and well-kept. There are tall granite and stone headstones that can be seen from the highway. Only whites were buried there. It is well maintenance. It has been reported that Blacks can be buried there. I know of none.

There is one cemetery for sale of burial plots of Blacks, privately owned and operated by the economically advantaged Black Sykes family. Sykes Cemetery was operational until recently but closed due to lack of maintenance, wide destruction and disrepair. I have family buried there but it is condemned to visitors. Most of the Sykes have passed on.

The adjoining property to the Steers Cemetery mentioned above was purchased by the City of Decatur. This property, known as Decatur Cemetery, is sold in plots for Blacks to bury their deceased. My family rest there. Each year my trip home includes a visit to the cemetery to see family graves, conditions of headstones and to see who has been added that I may know. Decatur Cemetery is maintained by the City of Decatur and there are some restrictions by management. Hopefully this prevents destructive closure anytime soon.

Clarence B. Jones, wrote in 2017: "Throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th African Americans were segregated, even in death, often buried in off-the-beaten-path Black cemeteries that, over the years, received little funding and fell into disrepair."

Cemeteries are holders of family history, family legacies and other information that maintain knowledge of family lineage. However, as family members die, the historical linkage also dies.

And with death of the linkage comes death of the interest in Black cemetery preservation.

From current observations, it is assumed that current generations in my family have little interest in family history. I don't know if preservation of African American Cemeteries is worth the effort and money for historical purposes.