



Bella Birch

Growing up, I loved history class, but I noticed that local history was often overlooked. I grew up in Los Angeles, a city full of transplants, and it seemed like most people I spoke to had

very little knowledge of the city they lived in. I became intrigued with local history for this exact reason- I wanted to understand how the physical environment and cultural landscape I interacted with every day came to be. I became obsessed with the buried parts of history: the Battle of Chavez Ravine, the Rape of the Owens Valley, the Watts Riots. I savored the challenge of digging up the past in a city that constantly reinvents itself.

When I started at Duke, I had the privilege of beginning this process all over again. The majority of Duke students are not even from North Carolina, let alone Durham, and there seems to be a general lack of knowledge about the history of the city and the university. Eager to discover Durham's past, I signed up for Archaeology of Durham for my writing 101 course. I have always been interested in archaeology because I find it fascinating how simple material objects can give us a glimpse of what life was like long ago.

The course made me look at Duke and Durham in a completely different way: I better understand the origins of many of the physical and cultural structures that we take for granted in this city. When Professor Tharler told us we would be doing research on cemeteries in Durham, I was especially excited. I am not spooked by graveyards or lonely in them; on the contrary, I find them to be peaceful and reflective places where I can feel the presence of the departed around me. I felt like I finally had my chance to get to know the people of Durham, even the ones who were never written about in history books. I know they lived, loved, and made memories. I hope they can feel me remembering them.

“The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.”

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

I would like to acknowledge my incredible professor, Andrew Tharler, for inspiring my classmates and I to dive deeper into Durham's history and for incorporating this unique research project into our course curriculum. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch and the entire Deliberations editorial board for providing insightful revisions for this paper. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for always encouraging my love of history.

Hope as an Anchor: Optimism for the Afterlife in Geer Cemetery Epitaphs and the Rise of Black Wall Street

Bella Birch

Writing 101: *Archaeology of Durham*

Professor: Andrew Tharler

The voices of the dead can be loud. They speak not through words, but through the stones that mark their graves; each faint epitaph, fading design, and mossy crack tells its own story.

In Durham, North Carolina, cemeteries give valuable insights into the lives of people who may otherwise be overlooked in the historical record. The grave markers examined in this study date from 1877 to 1944, a period of great social and cultural change throughout the United States. They are located at Geer Cemetery, Durham's African American cemetery, and Maplewood, the main cemetery used for White Durhamites during this time period. By comparing the grave markers from Geer and Maplewood, one can track how narratives around death reflect experiences of Durham's Black and White communities. The tendency of Geer Cemetery epitaphs to focus on death as a reward and a victory, as well as the prominence of the anchor symbol on Geer markers, reveal a sense of optimism towards the afterlife within Durham's Black community. This optimism suggests that people of color may have taken comfort in the idea of fairness in death as they confronted the rampant discrimination of the Jim Crow South. Furthermore, the optimistic epitaphs at Geer continued into the early 20th century, coinciding with the rise of Black Wall Street and Hayti (pronounced "HAY-tie"), suggesting that the hope inspired by the progress of Durham's Black business community also may have translated to a hopeful view of death. The Hayti District is a historic African-American community in Durham that was founded by freedmen shortly after the Civil War. An examination of the expansion of the White Rock Baptist Church and of the fan collection from St. Joseph's AME Church exemplifies the connection between economic growth, community, and religious attitudes in early 20th century Hayti.

The research methodology for this investigation consisted of an archaeological survey of Geer Cemetery and a roughly contemporary section of Maplewood Cemetery. The data was collected by Duke University undergraduates via a digital survey form and then mapped in an interactive ArcGIS Dashboard (<https://dukeuniv.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/608c58d57df8432ab7ca65ec5a2848cc>). It is important to note that while the data included in this paper

from Geer Cemetery is representative of the entire cemetery, the data from Maplewood Cemetery represents only a fraction of all Maplewood grave markers. During the survey, we recorded names and dates of birth and death if provided. Next, we indicated if each marker was individual or shared and recorded marker form, condition, shape, material, and design elements. We measured each marker's dimensions and took note of grave orientation and exact location. We transcribed each person's epitaph and the inscription technique. Lastly, we took photos of each grave marker. The survey included 274 grave markers at Geer and 139 grave markers at Maplewood. In order to examine the attitudes towards death expressed at Geer versus Maplewood, I focused on inscriptions, repeated design elements, and dates of birth and death. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I was able to graph and compare the frequency of different symbols on grave markers. I also searched for repeated words and phrases in epitaphs. Lastly, I tracked birth and death date trends within groups that had similar design elements and epitaphs.

The results show that the epitaphs recorded at Geer Cemetery portray death as a hard-won victory, suggesting that Durham's Black community viewed the afterlife with optimism compared to the challenges of life on earth. The language used in Geer epitaphs renders life as a grueling and difficult journey. For example, the inscription on Mary Harris's (1859-1919) Geer headstone states, "Having finished life's duty / She now sweetly rests" (fig. 1a). The word "duty" connotes that life is an unpleasant task but a necessary stepping stone to reach the ideal state of "sweet rest." This idea that one endures the troubles of life to earn the reward of death appears repeatedly at Geer. The epitaph on the shared Geer headstone of Commilels Swepson (1841-1918) and Woodson Mitchell (1823-1891) implies that a peaceful death is the prize for enduring their difficult lives: "Thy trials ended, / Thy rest is won" (fig. 1b). Similarly, Granston McAdams' (1843-1910) epitaph explains, "His toils are past, / his work is done; / He fought the fight, / the victory won" and Reverend S.A. Simmons' epitaph proclaims "Now his labor's done! / Now, now, the goal is won" (fig. 1c and fig. 1d). It is worth noting that four out of five of the deceased with the aforementioned epitaphs were born before the Civil War, and three of them would have been men between the ages of 18 and 50 during the time of the war, so they likely experienced the extreme "trials" and "toils" of slavery. Furthermore, the repetition of the word "won" demonstrates the importance of the idea of victory in Geer epitaphs. The use of these words could have had added significance for Durham's Black community as it alluded to both the Civil War and the metaphorical battle of living in a segregated America. The idea of victory would be especially potent for the men who had experienced slavery and then freedom after the Civil War. The Orange County freedman's marriage records, for example, indicate that Woodson Mitchell immediately took advantage of his new ability to legally marry in 1866 (Orange County, North Carolina, Freedman's Marriage Record).

In contrast, the Maplewood epitaphs do not display any strong or consistent tone. An absence of words describing life as challenging and a lack of focus on the afterlife demonstrate that the White community did not have noticeable optimism towards death. Not once in the epitaphs surveyed at Maplewood is life ever described with the words "duty," "trials," "toils," or "labor." Though the people buried in Maplewood surely had individual struggles in their lives, their epitaphs, unlike those in Geer, do not give a sense of collective struggle or assume that life was challenging. Additionally, the idea of death being a victory is not prominent at Maplewood. Christian doctrine holds that one must constantly fight against sin through avoidance and repentance, so it makes sense that death is a victory for someone who has overcome sin and died as one of the blessed. Though Durham's White community was predominantly Christian, there is not a single occurrence of



Fig. 1a-d: The grave markers of Mary Harris, Commilels Swepson and Woodson Mitchell, Granston McAdams, and Reverend S.A. Simmons





the words “victory” or “won” in the Maplewood epitaphs. In general, the Maplewood epitaphs mention death and the afterlife less than those at Geer, many times leaving these topics out of the equation completely and focusing instead on remembrance of life achievements. For example, Susan E. Richardson’s epitaph reads “AS A WIFE DIVORCED / AS A MOTHER AFFECTIONATE / AS A FRIEND EVER / KIND AND TRUE,” and Fred A. Green’s epitaph reads “Elected Attorney for the City / of Durham May 8 1895.” These epitaphs tend to highlight the lives of the deceased rather than describe their resurrection and afterlife. No pattern of repeated phrases or imagery surfaced in the examination of Maplewood epitaphs. On the contrary, Geer Cemetery epitaphs clearly depict death as a positive and even triumphant state.

The Black community’s evocation of death as a type of victory is also found in the repeated use of the Bible verse 1 Corinthians 15:5 at Geer Cemetery, supporting the view that death was not seen as a painful end, but as an end to all pain. The verse reads, “O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory?” (King James Bible, 1 Corinthians 15:55). These words serve as the epitaph of three graves (Samuel Barbee, Amelia Walker, and William Markham) at Geer Cemetery and none at Maplewood. Out of all the text in the Bible, why is this specific verse the one that occurs exclusively and more than once in Geer cemetery? This verse’s popularity can be attributed to the fact that it epitomizes the attitude of victory over death expressed by the Geer epitaphs. Once again, the epitaphs personify death as a force one must physically fight against, and in this verse, death has lost the battle because it does not cause pain with its “sting.” In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul reveals a truth of the gospels to the Corinthians (“1 Corinthians 15:55 Meaning”) when he announces joyous news about what will happen during the Second Coming: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed” and “the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51-2). This passage emphasizes death as an active state and a form of rebirth rather than a miserable ending. The Geer epitaphs that describe the trials of the deceased make it clear that the “sting” of life made death a welcome reward.



This optimism about the afterlife was a way for Black Durhamites to cope with earthly struggle, a sentiment also reflected in the prominence of the anchor symbol at Geer Cemetery. The anchor appears twenty-one times as a marker decoration at Geer Cemetery, always shown with leaves in the background (fig. 2). Though the section of Maplewood that was surveyed dates from roughly the same time period as Geer, there are zero instances of the anchor design in the Maplewood survey. What accounts for this remarkable discrepancy? In Christian symbology, anchors represent steadfast belief and hope: Hebrews 6:19 states, “*hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.” Additionally, the shape of the anchor acts as a disguised form of the cross. The anchor symbol was especially important for early Christians in the Roman Empire and is likewise found frequently in their tombs in the catacombs (“An Anchor”). Because Christians living under Roman rule were not allowed to openly practice their faith, they used the anchor symbol as a secret code to convey their beliefs to other Christians (“An Anchor”). This seemingly small act of resistance is comparable to the everyday acts of resistance performed by enslaved people before the Civil War and by African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Perhaps these common themes of quiet resistance and strength in faith made the anchor symbol especially appealing to members of Durham’s Black community. The anchor can be seen as a beacon of comfort that reminded people that everyone would be judged fairly in God’s eyes after death. The evil nature of those who preached racism and inequality would ultimately be revealed; they would be punished and those they had mistreated would go to heaven. In this way, the anchor acts as a symbol of not only hope for eternal life, but also vengeance towards

those who were abusive on Earth.

The optimistic symbols and epitaphs found at Geer are driven by hope for the afterlife, but the growing frequency of these symbols in the early 20th century suggests that this optimism may also be linked to the success of Black businesses in Durham. All the anchor symbols, allusions to 1 Corinthians inscriptions, and epitaphs describing death as a victory appear on gravestones dating to the same twenty-year period, 1907-1927. This period coincides with the golden age of Durham's Black Wall Street. Despite the many obstacles created by Jim Crow segregation, Durham's Black community was growing economically prosperous and fostering a culture of pride and progress (Magnus et al.). The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, the largest Black-owned company in the US for most of the 20th century, moved their headquarters to Parrish Street in 1906, and other Black-owned businesses followed suit (Anderson 218). Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois visited Durham in 1910 and 1912, respectively, and both commented on the impressive level of Black entrepreneurship and the thriving industry on Parrish Street, which became known as Black Wall Street ("Durham's 'Black Wall Street'"). Every year, Emancipation Day was celebrated with parades (Anderson 217). The Hayti neighborhood grew more affluent, and one of the neighborhood's landmarks, the White Rock Baptist Church, became a communal gathering place for African Americans. In many ways, the expansion of the White Rock Baptist Church during this period represents the attitude of hope and mobility that emerged from the economic success of Black Wall Street. Indeed, this economic success directly benefited the church because congregant Aaron Moore, one of the founders of North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, donated the money that enabled White Rock to build a Sunday school and establish the Durham Colored Library in the church basement in 1918 ("White Rock"). James E. Shepard, one of the pastors at White Rock, was the founder of the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua for the Colored Race, which was opened in 1910 in the Hayti District. This school would grow to be the respected, historically Black liberal arts institution that is now known as North Carolina Central University (Anderson 219-220). The economic strength of Durham's Black community and the efforts by leaders like Moore and Shepard to create infrastructure and educational opportunities gave Black Durhamites hope for the future and pride in their community's ability to overcome barriers.

The sense of optimism that followed the success of Black Wall Street is further expressed in the fan collection from St. Joseph's AME church, now located at Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library. These paper fans used by churchgoers in the 1940s have color prints on one side and advertisements on the other side for businesses mostly located on Parrish Street or Fayetteville Street in Hayti. Though the fans date from slightly after the twenty-year period mentioned above, they still capture the attitudes of the Hayti community in its prime, shortly before urban renewal devastated the neighborhood. The prints depict pleasant scenes of middle-class life: children praying in their pajamas before bedtime, smiling girls watering flowers in a windowsill, a woman carrying a basket of peaches, a woman sitting with a dog on her lap (fig. 3). These images suggest a certain level of affluence in Hayti, which is reflected by all the advertisements for specialty and luxury shops such as a pie bakery, a beauty shop, a fish market, and a shoe repair shop. One can imagine that as the congregation sat fanning themselves while listening to a sermon on a hot summer day, they might have both consciously and subconsciously connected messages about the ability to overcome and keep faith in Christ with the success



Fig. 2: The grave marker of William Markham, which includes the anchor design and 1 Corinthians 15:55.

of all the Black-owned businesses (many of which were a short walk from the church doors) advertised on their fans. Moreover, these businesses directly sponsored the religious messages on the backside of the fans. An advertisement for Duncan's Garage features a guide on "How to use the Bible when you need help," which recommends 1 Corinthians 15:20-58, the exact verse that appears on grave markers at Geer Cemetery, for times of mourning (fig. 4). Therefore, not only did these businesses indirectly affect attitudes towards

death by creating an atmosphere of growth and positivity, but they also directly promoted messages of religious positivity via their connections with the churches. Racist policies and ideas were still a daily burden for African Americans in Durham, but there was a sense of potential for positive change and the possibility that Black Durham was entering into a prosperous new era. This spirit of hope and belief in upward mobility may be the reason why the grave markers from this period have such enthusiasm for the afterlife.



Fig. 3: Fans from the St. Joseph's AME Church fan collection.



The epitaphs and anchor symbols from early 20th century Geer emphasize the hardships of life and the glories of death in a way that is completely absent in Maplewood. The deep sense of victory and positivity for the afterlife at Geer Cemetery acts as a window into a time of great change and a rise in Black entrepreneurship in Durham. While books about Durham's history give readers an overview of events, including an understanding of their causes and effects, they do not capture the feeling of the times or the attitudes of individuals. This examination of Geer Cemetery

gives a powerful glimpse into the optimism that residents had for the future of Hayti and contributes to our understanding of how much was lost when urban renewal destroyed the neighborhood and displaced the community just a few decades later.

Cemeteries have the unique ability to tell these otherwise untold stories. The voices of the dead do speak loudly, and by listening, one can appreciate the struggles and achievements of those who laid the foundations of modern-day Durham.

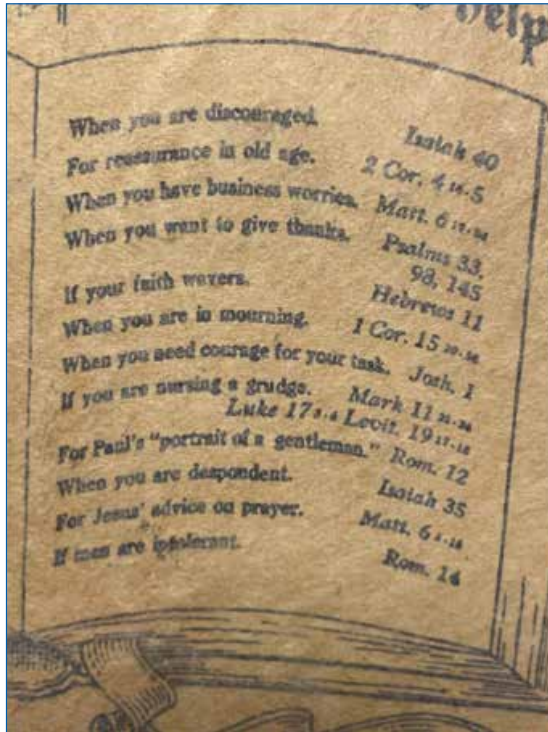


Fig. 4: Fan from the St. Joseph's AME collection recommending 1 Corinthians 15:55 for mourning.

Works Cited

"An Anchor - Potent Christian Symbol." *Early Church History*, edited by Sandra Sweeny Silver, earlychurchhistory.org/christian-symbols/anchor-potent-christian-symbol/. Accessed 6 Nov. 2021.

Anderson, Jean Bradley. *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina*. Second ed., Duke University Press, 2011.

"White Rock Baptist Church." *And Justice for All: Durham County Courthouse Art Wall*, Durham County Library, andjusticeforall.dconnc.gov/gallery_images/white-rock-baptist-church-2/. Accessed 6 Nov. 2021.

"Durham's 'Black Wall Street.'" *Anchor: A North Carolina History Online Resource*, NCPedia, 2003, www.ncpedia.org/anchor/durhams-black-wall-street. Accessed 6 Nov. 2021.

King James Bible Online. Cambridge ed., 2007.

Magnus, Amanda, Terry, Dana, and Frank Stasio. "The Past, Present and Future of Durham's Black Wall Street." *WUNC 91.5*, North Carolina Public Radio, 7 June 2019, www.wunc.org/race-demographics/2019-06-07/the-past-present-and-future-of-durhams-black-wall-street. Accessed 6 Nov. 2021.

"1 Corinthians 15:55 Meaning of Oh Death Where Is Your Sting." *ConnectUS*, ConnectUsFund, 8 Jan. 2020, <https://connectusfund.org/1-corinthians-15-55-meaning-of-oh-death-where-is-your-sting>

Orange County, North Carolina, Freedman's Marriage Record, page 237, no. 752, marriage record of Woodson and Matilda Mitchell, 9th August 1866.

St. Joseph African Methodist Episcopal Church fan collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.