



Terra Cotta Cemetery Tour

This self-guided cemetery tour, adapted from Friends of Terra Cotta Cemetery, was created to use as you are walking through the cemetery to learn about the Terra Cotta Community and some history of the cemetery and graves. As different graves are mentioned, see if you can find them in the cemetery.

Cemeteries do more than just honor the dead. They can provide an insight into the past that cannot be found in a census or a book. By combing the information historians have found through oral histories, newspapers, and other sources including cemeteries we are able to fill in the gaps of history.

Today, you will approach the Terra Cotta Cemetery in three different ways. First, take a closer look at the gravestones themselves. What can they teach us? What do the symbols and other things mean? Second, learn about the Terra Cotta community and living memory. Third, meet some of the veterans buried in the cemetery.

Background Information

What is Terra Cotta? In 1886 the Pomona Terra Cotta Manufacturing Company was founded by a W. C. Boren, J Van Lindley, and John Logan . The factory created clay pipes, predominantly for the sewer system. The Pomona Company, at its peak, was the largest pipe company in the South, but also produced products like roof tiles and chimney liners. Like many factories in the 1800s, the owners constructed homes for their workers to live in. These towns are referred to as 'company towns', and usually include a company store and other amenities. The community continued to grow and flourish. At the community's peak, there were almost 600 residents, making Terra Cotta one of the most prominent African American communities in Greensboro at the time.

As time passed, the residents of the Terra Cotta community needed somewhere to bury their loved ones. The Borens owned quite a bit of land in the area, so Mr. W.C. Boren gave this plot to the community to serve as their cemetery. There's roughly 100 people buried in this section of the cemetery. Cedar Grove Tabernacle Praise Church and Swift St AME Church "own" the cemetery.

William C. Tipps was buried by Swift Street AME Zion Church, and Herbert Hughes was buried by Cedar Grove Baptist Church. See if you can find these gravestones in the cemetery.

Background Information cont.

It is very unusual for two churches to share a cemetery. What is even more unusual, is that these churches not only shared a cemetery, but they shared a church building as well. When the Terra Cotta community was getting started, there was only one church building, but two different denominations. The different services were held on alternate Sundays – one church had the first and third Sunday, and the other church would hold services on the second and fourth Sunday. However, everyone attended church every week. While the churches own the cemetery, they did not design the layout of the cemetery-- the residents did. Half of the headstones are facing one direction, and half of them are facing the opposite direction because the front of the cemetery was never established. The cemetery was so close to the Raleigh Crossroads Cemetery (the larger cemetery next to you) that obituaries and newspapers often called the Terra Cotta Cemetery the Raleigh Crossroads Cemetery. However, a few years ago, the Raleigh Crossroads cemetery put up a fence around the cemetery, making a clear distinction between their cemetery and the Terra Cotta Cemetery.

Cemetery Fact

The first person buried in the cemetery was Earnest Strain

Symbols

Visual symbols in cemeteries have been present as long as we have been burying our loved ones. The type of material used and symbols on the gravestones can tell us a lot about the person buried, the relationship they have with their loved ones, and about the culture of a specific community.

Headstones can tell us about socioeconomic status. For example, Miss Mary Pressley's headstone is made of terracotta clay. Her loved ones molded the headstone, wrote on it, and baked it. They used the materials they had, and did what they could, to ensure their loved ones were commemorated and honored.

Additionally, symbols such as plants and flowers are often seen on headstones. In general, flowers are a reminder of the beauty and brevity of life. Flowers have always been used to memorialize the dead. Flower 'symbolism' began during the Victorian era.

Perry and Josephine Attaway - Perry and Josephine Attaway have "leaves" on their headstones. They appear to be ivy leaves. Ivy is associated with immortality since the leaves are eternally green. Furthermore, since ivy clings to a support, it signifies an attachment to a friend or other loved one. The three pointed leaf is also believed to signify the trinity, making it a religious symbol as well.

Curtis Attaway - The symbol on Curtis Attaway's headstone means his heart, his thoughts and feelings, were open to the world and to God.

Symbols cont.

Leomarie Gambrell - Leomarie Gambrell is the second youngest person in the cemetery, she died at 3 months old. The fern on her headstone symbolizes humility, frankness, and sincerity.

The use of the cross is very common on headstones in America. The use of the cross is associated with Christianity. Prior to Christianity's adoption of the cross it was used by pagans to symbolize the separation of heaven and earth.

John H. Thomas - John H. Thomas has both an inscription and a cross. His cross is known as a "Greek Cross." The "Latin" cross is most commonly used now. There is no specific meaning behind either cross, it comes down to preference. They both symbolize a strong relationship with the Lord. Can you see any other Greek crosses?

Can you find these symbols on other graves in the cemetery? You may look for Marina Peoples Glover, Bertha Bailer, and Hannah Henry.

Cemetery Fact

Thomas Anderson Watkins is the oldest person in the cemetery, he lived to be 93 years old.

Family and Community

Many of the residents of the Terra Cotta community expressed that they felt a strong connection with one another – regardless of whether they were related or not. In this section we are going to explore some of the prominent family names, and the importance of commemorating them.

How many gravestones can you find with the same last names? Many of these families lived and worked in Terra Cotta for years, and have generations buried in this cemetery.

Rafe and Minnie Wooley – Rafe was a kiln fireman for the Pomona Manufacturing Company, and he cooked for the Borens on the weekend. Minnie was a midwife, and had nine children of their own. Their daughter Mae Ruth recalled the family having a garden to grow corn, peas, cabbage, collard greens, and potatoes to feed the family and share with their community.

Larry Waddell - Larry died at age 12, he drowned in "Terra Cotta Lake" in 1954. His headstone has seashells on it because his uncle, P.D. Waddell (also buried in the cemetery) made his headstone. P.D. Waddell loved going to the beach, so he collected seashells, and made Larry's headstone with them to commemorate his nephew's life.

Family and Community cont.

Herbert Hughes Jr. – Herbert was a veteran of the Korean War, and is just one of the many veterans buried in the cemetery. His sister, Wilhelmina Waddell, also grew up in the community. Their father, Herbert Sr., worked for the pipe factory as a foreman. Their mother was known as ‘Grandma Sadie’ by the kids of the community, who would go to their house after school for food and play. Their mother eventually went to work for the cotton mill.

George and Carrie Lyles – George worked for the Terra Cotta Company and later, his son, George Jr. also worked there. However, two of George Jr.’s daughters, Christina and Jackie, remember their father left the company to go to school. The Lyles sisters feel that his determination to go a different path “paved the way” for younger generations to go to school instead of going to work for the company.

Rev. Joseph W. Hedrick – Rev. Hedrick was the pastor of multiple churches in the area, including the Cedar Grove church. Rev. Hedrick did many of the funerals for those also buried in the church, such as Lawrence Johnson and Herbert Hughes.

Reverend Willie Butler Sr. – Rev. Butler also worked at the Cedar Grove Baptist church until he died in the factory explosion of 1962. His grandson Larry Butler was able to go to college and avoid going to Vietnam because of his grandfather’s settlement money after the explosion. The daffodils on his (and his wife’s) headstone mean triumph of the divine love and sacrifice over vanity and selfishness.

Cemetery Fact

The youngest person buried in the cemetery is “Baby Boy Calvin”, son of Curtis and Helen B. August, who died at 2 days old in August of 1973.

Veterans

Veterans make up roughly 15% of those buried in the cemetery. It’s important to discuss the veteran in the cemetery for two reasons. One, they are veterans and deserve to be recognized for their service to our country. Two, during the Terra Cotta community’s peak segregation was still very prominent in the South. Like many young African American men during wartime, some enlisted because they wanted to prove they were equal and that they were prepared to fight and die for their country.

Lawrence Johnson – Lawrence Johnson served as a Private in the US Army during WWI; he enlisted in June of 1917. Ana “Annie” Johnson is also buried in cemetery, slightly behind Lawrence.



Veterans cont.

Elliot Jack Raleigh – Elliot Raliegh died in 1971 after serving as a medical corpsman in the Army from 1945-1947. He entered the military December 5, 1945 and was honorably discharged January 20, 1947. According to his report of separation, Raleigh received three medals while in the service.

Peter Williams - Another veteran, Peter Williams enlisted in the army during WWII in February 1942. He was stationed at Ft. Bragg and served as a Warrant officer.

Of the veterans, we know for certain that Williams attended James B. Dudley High School. This is significant because Dudley was the first all black high school in Guilford County. This was the only school the Terra Cotta residents could attend in high school. In fact, all of the Terra Cotta residents that attended high school went to Dudley since it was the only all black high school in the area. Dudley is still open, and serves a large part of the Greensboro community.

Johnnie W. Farrington – Johnnie Farrington enlisted November 19, 1943 and was stationed at Ft. Bragg. He served as a long horseman, which means he loaded and unloaded military equipment. At the time of his death, he was working as a janitor. His sister, Wynona Farrington Wooley is also buried in the cemetery, along with his wife, Josephine Henry, and parents Ernst Farrington and Nora Johnson

Cemetery Fact

The last burial in the cemetery was William Clyde Tipps, who served in the US Army during the First World War.

Conclusion

Not everyone buried in the cemetery has a well recorded history. We can search through the census, books, and other sources, but without combining this research with what we can learn from a cemetery, a large part of that history can be lost. The Terra Cotta community fits into Greensboro's history – we see this through Dudley High School, and the Pomona Terra Cotta Pipe Factory's contributions to Greensboro's growth. The community also fits into the national narrative – not just through the stories of the brave veterans who served in many different wars, but the struggle to find accurate genealogical and historical information about African Americans. Without these conversations, we are at risk of losing an important community.

What are you doing to keep your community's memory alive?