# Cemeteries as Community Archives: Unconventional Records, Ethics of Care, and Equitable Access

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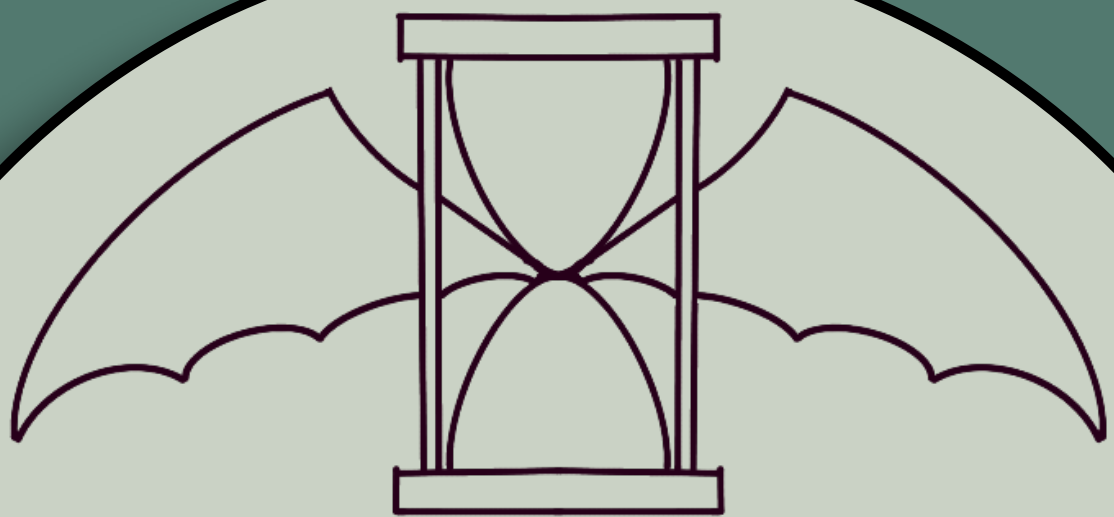
Abstract

Cemeteries, graveyards, and burial grounds in the United States are sites of memorial, celebration, and mourning as well as repositories of histories and information. As institutions of care and memory, it can be argued that these cities of the dead are curated spaces much like modern archives, which preserve, manage, and provide access to acquired personal papers, ephemera, and self-narratives. Inscriptions on headstones, the sizes and shapes of monuments, their proximate locations within the cemetery, who has been afforded burial within specific grounds, and the continued or discontinued existence or recognition of burial sites are all related to elements of an archival record. They exemplify who is permitted eternal, detailed, memory and who is often relegated to historical roles as supporting participants or marginalized to the point of erasure. If cemeteries are to be understood as a form of community archives, what are their institutional obligations regarding accessibility, care, and contextualized presentation of records; and how can archival professionals offer their expertise and experience to these tasks? Several questions this inquiry demands include working definitions of cemeteries and community archives, how are they alike and different, is there enough correlation between the two to consider cemeteries as a form of community archives, and how do the roles and responsibilities of each institution broadly interact and overlap with one another? There are cultural and historical distinctions between cemeteries, graveyards, and burial grounds, and their differences aid in the understanding of culturally recognized sites of burial as communal institutions of memory.

Keywords. Cemeteries, community archives, metadata

Methods of Cemetery Erasure

The Common Council of New York City in the late 18th and early 19th centuries established cemetery laws banning burials south of Canal Street as a means to expand their political power, physical territory, and economic futures. Community health was a concern among citizens, but the aforementioned motives were at the heart of the legal process.[1]

Zion Cemetery (Tampa, FL) was redeveloped after the city annexed the community of Robles Pond Neighborhood to expand its territory in 1923. Zion Cemetery was established as an African and Black American cemetery in 1901, changed hands several times and for the final time in 1926, and was erased by 1929. Recovery efforts (beginning in 2015) led to its reestablishment as a part of the community's history in 2019.[2, 3]

Presently, Historic Mountain Cemeteries (HMCs) are being destroyed, and families denied access to memorial sites, by coal mining companies in West Virginia.[4] Chemical and industrial plants in Louisiana contribute to multihazard risks faced by cemeteries along the Mississippi River. The locations of the plants have been mapped to show a greater impact on Black communities and their cemeteries.[5]

Cemetery Metadata

A variety of schemas are already in use, such as: Discovering England's Burial Spaces (D.E.B.S.) Project, state and historical society methods, and Lynn Rainville's personal system.[6, 7, 8] These methods are localized and often require advanced subject knowledge to accurately capture and preserve information.

Conventional information collected by schemas includes names, dates, marker shapes, religious affiliations, and occupations. Unconventional information consists of locations of burial grounds, locations of markers within a burial ground, relationships across markers, and conditions of cemeteries and individual graves.[9, 10]

The Descriptive Elements for Archival Databases (D.E.A.D.) System was designed as a "unified, community-level, metadata schema" for my MLS capstone. It establishes a method of recording burial marker information in a way that is accessible to academic and non-academic researchers, and is extensible to other, established systems.[11]

Community Archives and Cemeteries

Community archives are collections by, about, and for communities, whether they are cultural, religious, ethnic, or centered around common interests.[12] While professional archivists may be involved, members of the attendant community are central to preservation of the records. Actively including present communities in the archival process creates a more accessible record and can lead to broader engagement.[13, 14]

Burial grounds in modern history have predominantly been established by or for likeminded groups of people; whether through family lots, churchyard burial grounds, religious graveyards, cultural and ethnic cemeteries, war memorials, and even mass graves. These communities may have been chosen by the individuals while alive or conferred upon them after their death.[15, 16] Cemeteries can also illuminate smaller groups of people within larger communities (e.g., rural cemeteries retain sections for diverse religions and cultures).[17] Burial grounds serve as model sites for postcustodial care; unable to remove the "record" to an archive, communities and archivists must work together to preserve these sites of memory.[18, 19]

Cemeteries retain standard archival records in the form of paperwork they require for burials (death certificates, mortuary documents, funeral arrangements, etc.). They also possess a communal collection through burial markers, their locations, and corresponding metadata. Centering subjects and their communities, rather than creators and users of the records, allows for a more inclusive collection.[20, 21, 22] Established cemeteries (such as Green-Wood in Brooklyn, Mount Auburn in Boston, and Laurel Hill in Philadelphia) already possess formal archives of their paper records; however, smaller institutions and abandoned burial grounds need assistance from their communities and professional archivists.[23]

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