The Third Death: Oakland Cemetery's Rebirth in Racial Justice

By Isobel Robinson-Ortiz

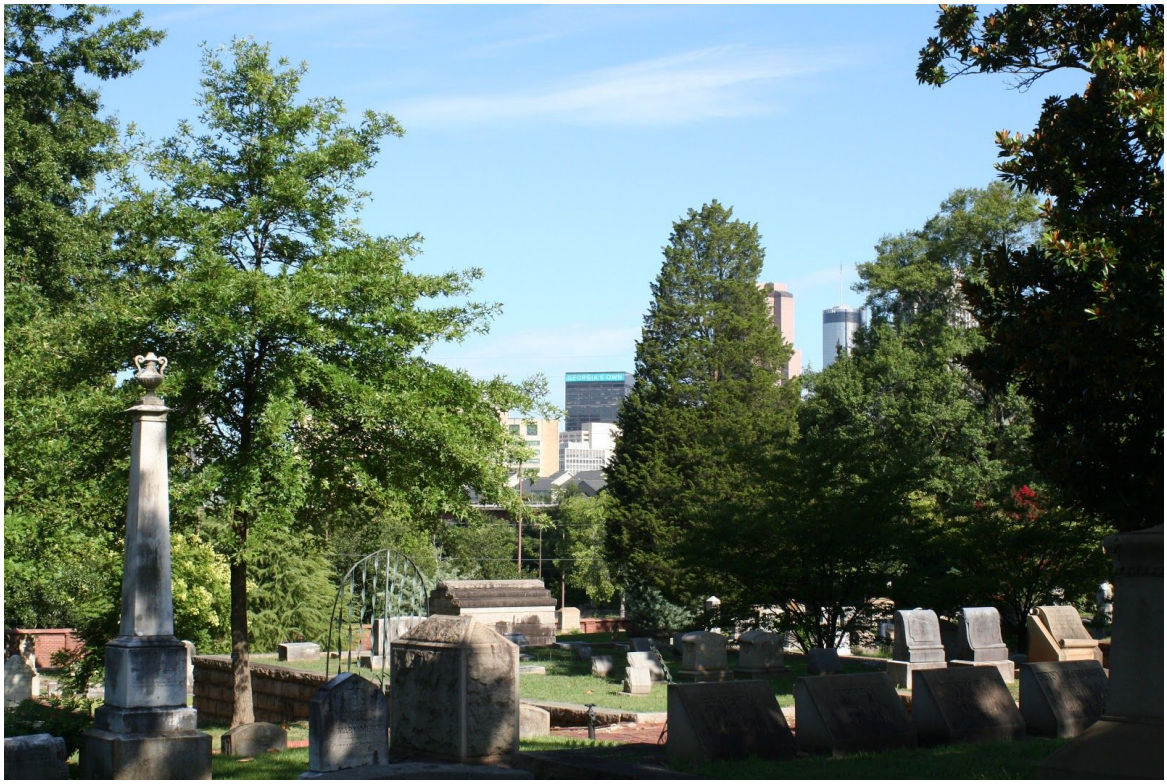
"They say that everyone dies three deaths," our tour guide called back to us as we walked up the hill, trying to catch up to her. "One, when our heart stops beating; again when we're put in the ground, and the third time is when your name is spoken for the last time."

Our guide just started giving guided tours of Oakland Cemetery in the spring after four months of training, and her enthusiasm is infectious. She laughs easily, her eyes crinkling behind her glasses. She keeps a brisk pace, dressed for the warm weather in shorts, a Historic Oakland Foundation t-shirt, and well-worn sneakers. Every question is patiently answered— are there Union soldiers buried in the Confederate section? (There used to be, but they were moved to the military cemetery in Marietta.) What does the pitcher and bowl signify when seen on headstones in the Jewish sections? (The person in question is/was a Levite.) Why is Maynard Jackson's grave not facing east to west, like all the others? (He was placed so that his grave could have the best view of his beloved city's skyline.)

We (her group of three attendees) were starting to feel the effects of the sun beating down on us as we walked through Oakland's 48 acres, bordering Cabbagetown, Grant Park, Summerhill and Old Fourth Ward. I wondered how she was still walking so quickly. We had seen two mayors, three millionaires, four Georgia Women of Excellence, and at least two inspirations for characters from Woman of Excellence Margaret Mitchell's magnum opus, *Gone with the Wind*.

The guide's long blond ponytail swayed from side to side with each step of her sneakers, as we tried to keep up. "Here at Oakland," she says, "We want to tell everyone's story. We

don’t want anyone to be forgotten.”



Above: Atlanta’s skyline overlooks Oakland Cemetery.

In 2012, a National Institutes of Health study found that poverty, urban living, and race were inversely related to the amount of greenspace a given community has access to, and poor urban communities of color are affected the worst. These communities often face the most erasure when historical perspectives are retold: time passes, neighborhoods gentrify, and when the shiny new plaques go up, white ancestors are honored first, and contributions from people of color are often ignored.

Oakland Cemetery has the solution to both problems: creating a community greenspace where everyone’s story is told.

Founded in 1850, Oakland was *the* place to bury and be buried in Victorian Atlanta. Currently it hosts over 70,000 deceased Atlantans, including author Mitchell, Mayor Jackson, golf legend and Augusta National Club founder Bobby Jones, and over 30 former mayors and governors. In some ways, Victorian cemeteries were the original urban greenspaces: designed in the rural garden style, they often used by local families as places

to stroll, picnic and play. They were purposefully designed to be spacious and airy, in direct contrast to the cramped, crowded cities they served.

However, interments had slowed to a trickle by the 1970s— plots sold out by the late 1800s, after all. For a while, Oakland found itself in a state of benign neglect, most of its few visitors relatives of the deceased, with the odd tourist mixed in.

Marcy Breffle's first experience with Oakland Cemetery came during this time period. As a youngster, her family had traveled down from Dunwoody to treat her dad to a special Father's Day dinner at Six Feet Under. While they waited for a table at the packed restaurant, Marcy's father suggested they take a walk in the cemetery just across the street. Marcy wasn't very enthused, and her glossy brown hair swished and bounced around as she told me the story years later.

"He goes, 'Let's go over to Oakland beforehand, walk around, and go see Bobby Jones,' and I was [thinking], *Ugh, cemetery, no! Boring!*," Breffle recounted, laughing. "I think I just couldn't appreciate it then."

But by the time Breffle had finished her BA and MA in history at the University of Georgia and Georgia State respectively, her opinion had changed.

"When I was getting to graduation, I went to a conference of students and there I met the executive director of Historic Oakland, and was hearing all about the cool things that Oakland was doing," said Breffle. "They mentioned that an education position was going to come available, and it would be the first educator position that they had at the cemetery.

"The opportunity to create something of my own was very, very exciting."

The chance was too good to pass up. Marcy, once an unwilling visitor, would become Oakland's first Education Manager.

Since then, Oakland has repaired and rebuilt itself to offer a host of educational programming to the surrounding neighborhoods and the community at large, putting on events like concerts, interactive art installations, and elaborate costumed tours during the holidays. These events help tell the story of some of Oakland's less famous, more marginalized residents, as Oakland prepares to restore their final resting places and welcome the community to use the park as their ancestors once did.

They don't shy away from the uglier stories, either: they make a point not to. On our tour, our guide pointed out the area known historically as 'Slave Square,' where African-Americans were buried during Oakland's earliest years— segregated from the white burials, of course. However, in 1877, the city council decided that the 900-odd

residents of Slave Square would be unceremoniously moved to the back of the cemetery so the plots could be resold to whites. This story was originally not a part of the tour, but that's changed now, thanks to Marcy.

"We always want to be a truth-telling organization, and [...] trying to figure out how that story is being told in our tours," Breffle said. "When I came in and [was] able to update our tour, I made sure that we were going to put [Slave Square] on there, because it's not an easy story to tell, but it's an important story to tell.

"There is that history of segregation in the cemetery that we don't want to shy away from telling."

Oakland also finds ways to tell these difficult stories through art. This past May, Oakland's interactive evening art exhibition *Illumine* even included an installation dedicated to the story of Slave Square in the physical space itself. In the brick walkway that bordered the Confederate section, illuminated kiosks displayed handwritten records of burials, including names, dates, and causes of death of its residents, segregated even in death. It is a quiet but powerful way to connect Oakland's past with its present.

"I want [my tour attendees] to walk away with a better understanding of some of the highlights of Atlanta history," said tour guide Paige Sullivan, when asked about what she wanted guests to learn from her tours. "Things like our political history, the impact of the Civil War, and, of course, how race and racial disparities have shaped Atlanta over time."

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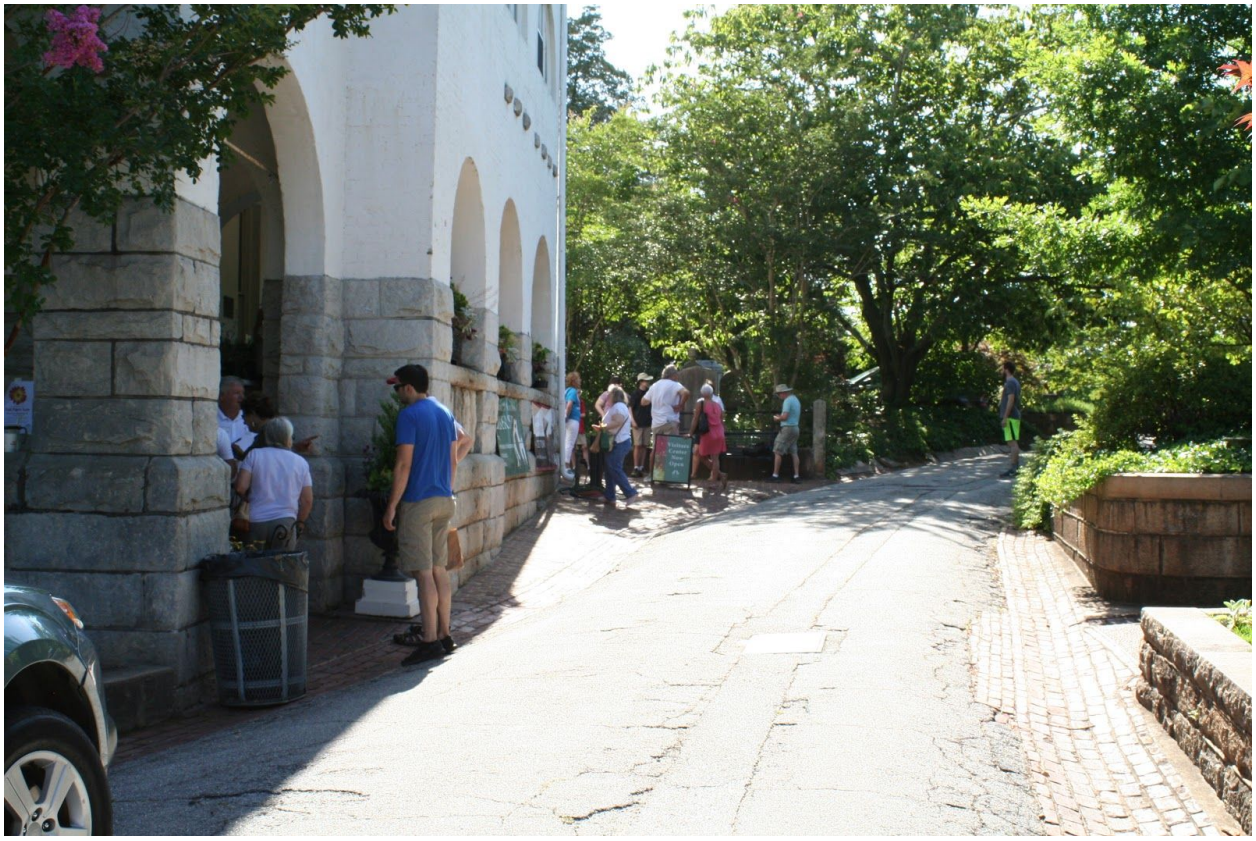
On a Saturday morning, even as the thermometer inched its way skyward, Oakland is abustle with (live) Atlantans. There are joggers pacing up and down MLK Jr. Drive, flanked by the Confederate and Jewish sections on either side. People are walking their dogs, gently tugging at leashes. I noticed gardeners carrying potted plants from the greenhouse sale, taking "a little piece of Oakland home with them," as Marcy said. And at the Bell Tower, a line of would-be tour-goers stretched out the gift shop door and around the corner. Nearly

all the patrons I saw were white.



As you can imagine, it's hard to argue with historic preservation. But it should be worth noting that the neighborhoods bordering Oakland have all experienced gentrification in the years leading up to Oakland's renaissance. Across the street, Six Feet Under, once considered something of a dive, has been joined by trendy eateries, pricey condos, and a cat cafe. Perhaps Oakland's revitalization is just a part of that economic tidal wave that has swept so many Atlanta neighborhoods. Is this postmortem form of racial justice simply just a way to assuage the anxiety and guilt of nearby gentrifiers?

It's entirely possible. Even so, it cannot be denied that what Oakland is doing is unique in the state of Georgia. Other comparable historic cemeteries in the state still tend to focus on the rich or famous white men that rest within them— Johnny Mercer and Conrad Aiken in Savannah's Bonaventure, or the Allman Brothers in Macon's Rose Hill. But in Oakland, the focus isn't quite so narrow: nothing is being displaced or ignored, but rather, unearthed.

As Marcy Breffle said: "When folks see a space where they're telling stories [like Oakland, and] they see themselves in those stories, they're going to take more of an interest."

Oakland is staving off that third death for all of its residents, not just a privileged few. And in that retelling, there's a place for everyone.

Above: The newly-restored African-American Grounds.