



Evergreen Cemetery Study

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The main purpose of this cemetery study is to document the creation of an African-American community in Central Florida through research on Evergreen Cemetery in Casselberry Florida. I also aim to understand some of the social organizations the deceased were involved in and have a glimpse into and a basic understanding of what life was like during their time.

The data for this project was collected primarily by interviewing Alton Williams, gathering information from books at the Museum of Seminole County History, and by studying the gravestones and recording their information.

I. History

The area in which Evergreen Cemetery is located began to be settled in around 1875. Winter visitors to the region started buying land nearby and invested in the citrus groves and other agricultural endeavors. Many of the first residents and entrepreneurs were from the Boston area. African Americans, many of who were former slaves, soon also came to the area and provided much of the labor for these plantations, farms, and nurseries. At that time blacks were not allowed to be buried in the same graveyards with whites. In 1890 William and Laura Brawner donated 16 acres of land to be set-aside as a burial place for Negro fernery workers. The majority of African Americans who were buried there were former slaves and worked in the local fernery business started by Gordon J. Barnett located in

Fern Park Estates.



Figure – Workers in front of one of Barnette's Fernery's

For many years, workers were allowed to live on the cemetery property as well. They lived in rows of “shotgun” houses, which were small, square houses that got their name from the fact that a bullet could go through the front door and out the back without hitting any other walls. In one area of the cemetery there is a small piece of brick

foundation that the trustees

believe to be a remnant of one of these houses. In 1903, the cemetery was incorporated with a board of trustees. In the late 20th century, however, the cemetery fell into neglect and disrepair and became overgrown for many years. In 1998 Alton Williams, a local resident who grew up in the community, took over the chairmanship of the cemetery's board of trustees and has overseen its restoration and refurbishment to this day. Over the years, the cemetery lost its name of "Evergreen" and had been known as Altamonte Colored Cemetery, Fern Park Cemetery, and Altamonte-Fern Park Community Cemetery. The work done by Alton Williams restored the Cemetery to its original name in 2007.

In his efforts to restore Evergreen Cemetery, one thing Mr. Williams has discovered is that the original platting of the cemetery does not match its present boundaries. At some point, part of the cemetery had been annexed by the city of Casselberry, and cemetery trustees are currently seeking to have it restored. There is a building on the disputed portion and a partially-dug retention pond. At present, it is not known whether there are bodies buried in the section that has been annexed.

II. Economic Setting

The generally low socio-economic situation of the African Americans in this community, which was later known as Winwood, is evident in many ways. Alton Williams reports that he has discovered over 600 graves that are not marked at all, which they have identified with wooden sticks. Other graves have only the most modest markers, and the inscriptions on several older gravestones are hand carved. Alton informed me that he uncovered a wooden marker that had the name burned into it. One

severely weathered domed

tablet style stone marker, standing barely 18 inches high and 7 inches wide, has etched on it the words:

Henry Murphy

Mar 1905

May 49

The inscriber did not even write “1949” in full. Another gravestone composed of concrete is in the shape of a cross, standing about 26 inches high. It bears only the hand-carved inscription “Mr. T. B. Smith” with no dates at all.

Alton was able to recover many of the names of people buried in Evergreen when he discovered them in a shoebox under the bed of one of the trustees who is now buried there, Mr. Ziegler. Most of them were written on brown paper bags, grocery bags, or old recipe books. This shows how impoverished this community was, as there were no official records kept and people would use old household scraps of paper to record a burial.

Several graves are marked only by small aluminum signs measuring about 8 inches by 4 inches, like that of Frank Littles (1920-1986). These signs were evidently supplied by the mortuaries involved with the burial, as Mr. Littles's sign also bears the name "Mitchell Funeral Home". Several headstones have absolutely no markings on them at all, like an old cracked one that rises about 12 inches out of the ground and is 4 inches wide. But the most unusual marker I observed was a simple piece of old rusted plumbing pipe sticking up out of the ground near a tree. Alton informed me that it probably dated back to the 1940's or 1950's. This is also evidence that the survivors of whoever was buried here had

very little means and simply

used what they had available as a marker for the deceased.



Figure - An old pipe grave marker

The most imposing of the grave markers are cement boxes which look like caskets sitting above the ground. Alton Williams explained to me that these containers held the actual bodies of the people and were not made to sit above ground, but were

supposed to be buried. Over time these containers, composed of fiberglass and concrete, may deteriorate to the point of exposing the contents to moisture and air, etc. The fact that the people apparently did not know this is probably a sign of their educational and economic state. They may not have been able to read and therefore follow burial instructions, or perhaps they couldn't afford to bury these stone caskets. Alton has begun the process of having them lowered into re-dug graves.

Despite the low economic condition of the majority of those buried at Evergreen, the headstones of one family tell a different story. John D. Merritt was born in 1858 and died in 1944. His domed tablet headstone is about three feet tall, thin, and worn out, and his name is scratched into the stone in a vertical line.



Figure - Merritt's headstone

Alton told me that

Merritt's wife, Maggie (1863-1957), who is buried beside John in the cemetery, was white. One of their descendants, Condor E. Merritt, became one of Central Florida's most influential African Americans. After World War II, with money he made from picking fruit, he helped to develop the Winwood community of Altamonte Springs. He opened a number of business establishments, including two nightclubs. Condor then paid for the education of one of his nephews, Winwood native Alcee Hastings, who went on to become the first African American to become a federal judge and is currently serving the 23rd district of Florida as a congressman in the U. S. House of Representatives.

One of the pioneer trustees of Evergreen Cemetery was K. G. Gray. It seemed odd that there was no grave marker for him in the cemetery. But earlier this year Alton was walking through the cemetery and suddenly tripped on a stone sticking out of the ground. He dug around this stone and found that it was part of a fairly elaborate grave marker of Mr. Gray that had sunk below the ground.



Figure - Me observing Mr. Gray's grave marker

III. Social Community

Another aspect of this cemetery that I focused on was social organization. Perhaps the most important institutions for community and social identity were the churches.

Many of the gravestones are engraved with crosses, doves, praying hands, or with words

reflecting a religious

orientation, such as “Asleep in Jesus.” Many gravestones are also in the shape of a cross. More than one mentions the church office held by the deceased: “Deacon”. One of these, Deacon Edward Doe, is featured on the cemetery’s website. His profile ends with these words: “Deacon Doe loved his church and his community as evidenced by his desire to remain active as long as his health would allow. His death followed a brief critical illness. His last request was for his Bible to be brought to him.”

Since Evergreen Cemetery’s establishment, five local churches have shared responsibility for maintaining it: Freewill Baptist Church, New Bethel AME Church, St. Johns Missionary Baptist Church, William Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, and a sanctified church which is now known as Church of God in Christ Love Tabernacle Church. Obviously, community involvement and service projects were important to these churches.

A significant number of people buried in Evergreen were part of the Armed Services. There are 46 servicemen buried there, which include two veterans of World War I and 27 from World War II.

Several people in this cemetery also engaged in fraternal organizations. At least four gravestones in this cemetery have the sign of the Freemasons etched into them, like one that reads:

Deacon

Clozell Wings

Wilder

Oct 14, 1931 – Oct 20, 1999

Deacon Wilder was probably a

member of “Prince Hall” Masonry, a Lodge of African Americans. In 1775 the first African Grand Lodge of masons was formed in Boston, but both American and British white Masonic lodges did not recognize it. Today, however, most Masonic Lodges do.

One of the most interesting gravestones is that of John W. Ford. Mr. Ford, who was one of Evergreen’s original trustees, died in 1920 at the age of 66, so it is likely he was born into slavery.



Figure - John Ford's gravestone

His rectangular gravestone is about four feet high, made of concrete, and bears the symbol of the Freemasons and another symbol consisting of three chain links. Alton Williams informed me that he believed this was a symbol placed on the headstones of former slaves. However, it turns out that these chain links are the symbol of the Odd Fellows. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows was formed in Maryland in the early 19th century for the purpose of helping the needy and conducting various other service

projects. It is most likely that

Mr. Ford belonged not to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, however, but to the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, which was the black counterpart founded in 1843 with a charter from the Grand Lodge in Manchester, England. In 1904 white leaders of three fraternal orders tried to force their black counterparts out of existence. The move ultimately failed, and the national, state, and local organizations strengthened the African American legal and civil right situation and led the way for the work of the NAACP.

In recent years Evergreen Cemetery, perhaps because of the low rates it charges, has attracted people who are not of African American heritage. A group of plots contains Hispanic names such as Sanchez, Ortiz, Mauras, and Guerra. There are also a few recent gravestones with the symbol of the Jewish Star of David, such as Julio Sanchez's gravestone (1936-2005) in which the Star of David is overlapped by a cross and a dove.

Evergreen Cemetery reveals the history of a mainly African American community in Central Florida. Through this cemetery and its story one gains a better understanding of how a group of people outside the mainstream of society built a life and a community, through social organizations over time. I learned a great deal of local history through this project and I learned the story of how Alton Williams restored Evergreen cemetery to its proper conditions and is still ardently fighting to gain back the rest of its rightful land. For future research, I would try to find out more about the original settlers of the Casselberry area and how and why they came to the region. I would also further research the Masons and Odd fellows and the African American versions of these organizations.

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Several other unpublished sources were consulted at **The Museum of Seminole County History, located at:** 300 Bush Boulevard, Sanford, FL 32773.