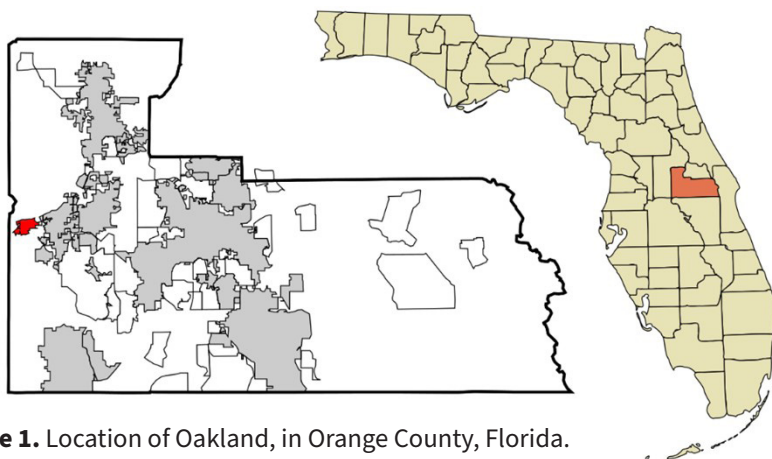


## Seeking Glory in the Land of Demise: An Exploration of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery

Jason B. Wenzel, Gulf Coast State College

*“So the shells upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory and the land of demise.”*

The quote above is from an interview in 1975 with Bessie Jones, a twentieth-century Black artist of St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, recorded by professor and eminent scholar of African and African American art Robert Farris Thompson (1984, 135). It is part of Thompson’s extensive research on African American cemeteries throughout the southeastern United States and their ancestral links of decorative features, including seashells, to African traditions. Seashell symbolism in mortuary contexts illuminates African cultural metaphors of water, which holds a variety of meanings related to the soul’s passage after death among cultures such as the Yoruba and Kongo peoples. The color white, just like water, has cultural meanings related to death, in addition to purification of the soul. These aspects related to seashells, water, and the color white, are reflected in the material culture and landscape of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery that serves as the basis for this study.



**Figure 1.** Location of Oakland, in Orange County, Florida.

In the Town of Oakland, Florida, (Figure 1), located at the far western boundary of Orange County and tucked away from the convergence of three heavily traveled thoroughfares, the Old Oakland African American Cemetery is a resting place for over 70 individuals who were interred here from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. The cemetery was formally established in 1882 when Oakland's founder James Gamble Speer conveyed the property's deed to three Black trustees in 1917; in 2014 the property was transferred to the Town of Oakland (Quesinberry 2021). From the final interments, up to the new millennium, the site had become lost in many of the hearts and minds of the community after a new cemetery was established nearby for Oakland's African American community. This loss, attributed to cessation of burials, community members' migration from the town or death, and inadequate maintenance, resulted in the site's reclamation by vegetation which further stymied its access and compounded its "lost" status. In the year 2002, the site was "rediscovered" through a cultural resource management (CRM) survey in response to a Florida Turnpike expansion project (Almy et al. 2002). The relocation of the cemetery's presence generated interest among the descendent community, the greater Oakland community, and many scholars, including the author and associates.

This "lost" cemetery and particularly the types of grave markers and offerings observed here have allowed us to explore a variety of issues related to African and African American mortuary customs, socioeconomic status, and the local impact of the Pandemic Influenza of 1918–1919. The research I directed at the site from 2008 through 2009 as part of the Valencia College archaeology program was done with support and assistance from members of the local descendent community. Our unobtrusive study of the cemetery involved recording and photographing various attributes of the site's mortuary features and grave offerings.

This research is timely and important as lost, forgotten, or abandoned cemeteries, specifically those of African American affiliation, have been at the forefront of policy at multiple levels. One example is a bill unanimously passed in the U.S. Senate in February 2019 designed to provide official recognition, research funding, and database creation for these places of rest to be used by descendent communities, governing bodies, and developers (Jones 2021). As of this writing, this legislation is headed to the House for a vote. The rediscovery

of several forgotten cemeteries in Florida in the last few years, including three in the Tampa Bay area, and one in Tallahassee, led to the creation of the 10-member Abandoned African-American Cemeteries Task Force in June 2021 to address concerns related to the memorialization and further exploration of these sites (Dobson 2021). Jones (2021) highlights how many of the issues that have negatively impacted African American cemeteries in the United States since the 1940s include misguided efforts of urban renewal that placed highways through urban areas and resulted in not only their emplacement over cemeteries but also the wide scale removal of “homes, schools, parks, and places of worship.”

In this article I provide a brief outline of the research history of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery, my team’s research methodology, and key insights derived within the context of Oakland’s history and research on African and African American mortuary culture.

### **Research History**

The research history of the cemetery was obtained through an examination of the Florida Master Site File (FMSF) entry for the Old Oakland African American Cemetery, site 80R9567. The cemetery was first recorded in 2002 by Archaeological Consultants, Inc. as part of a cultural resource survey assessing potential impacts from a highway widening project (Almy et al. 2002). The firm noted the cemetery’s unmaintained condition and the lack of ownership listed with the Orange County Property Appraiser. The surveyors estimated the presence of at least 40 marked graves and potentially several others unmarked in depressed areas of the ground. They found the earliest legible marking with a death date of 1921 and the most recent with 1949 out of the 10 headstones of concrete and marble they encountered. Other grave markers they observed included metal paper card holders, with only one document present and in a poor state of preservation. They concluded that the cemetery had “lost its integrity (structural)” due to the deteriorated markers and the overgrown landscaping, and as a result, it was deemed ineligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) (Almy et al. 2002).

In 2003, Janus Research, a private company, reevaluated the cemetery through another cultural resources assessment survey and concluded the

cemetery has the unique potential to yield information regarding the earliest members of the area's African American communities due to the limited amount of historic documentation of these minority communities in Oakland and surrounding areas (Janus Research 2003). The authors suggested future research regarding the identity, health, demography, and burial practices of this community and a call to demarcate the boundaries of the cemetery (Janus Research 2003). Further, they wrote that the site would be of value to the descendent community as well as those wishing to conduct non-invasive research of this important community resource. They determined the cemetery to be eligible for listing on the NRHP. The authors concluded that due to changes in a proposed highway intersection, the cemetery would no longer be impacted by any anticipated adverse effects. Another study of the cemetery took place in 2004 by Lochrane Engineering that involved historic research and interviews as well as a metal detector survey to ascertain the site's boundaries (Leavell 2004). Based on the survey's results, a chain-link metal fence was installed around the newly demarcated area.

Three additional studies of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery used ground penetrating radar (GPR) to locate unmarked burials. The first of these efforts took place in 2007 by Christopher Chilton who utilized the site to test the application of GPR technologies to multiple soil orders in Florida. He estimated the presence of seven suspected grave markers after a three-day survey (Chilton 2007). Following the work of Chilton, and the research my team completed in 2009, Dyer, Riddle, Mills, and Precourt, Inc. conducted a GPR survey, but it was later deemed inconclusive due to the unsystematic conditions the firm employed (Chambless 2010). In 2010, a third GPR survey was conducted by Southeastern Archaeological Research, Inc. and found no unmarked burials outside of the temporary chain-link fence erected in 2004 (Chambless 2010).

In 2021, the Town of Oakland was awarded a \$25,000 Florida Historic Preservation Grant to help protect the site and develop a management plan for it (Quesinberry 2021). This matching grant from the state's Division of Historical Resources was the top-ranking project out of 58 proposals received statewide for this year (Quesinberry 2021). The grant enabled the Town to hire the cultural resource management firm Cardno to do the following:

assist the Town government with site clean-up, conduct historical background research, create a maintenance schedule, and develop public interpretation that integrates the history of the cemetery in educational curriculum (Rebecca O'Sullivan, personal communication to author, October 22, 2021).

### Methodology

The investigation that I directed of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery was part of a larger program that I developed in Oakland to make archaeological research opportunities available to local college-level anthropology students while working with the greater community in furnishing insights into the town's cultural history absent in the written record (Wenzel 2008). To date, the cemetery is one of five historical sites in the town investigated through my program. One of these sites is the Oakland Cemetery, a predominately white cemetery dating back to 1874 that underwent similar unobtrusive recording of extant grave markers in 2011 (Wenzel et al. 2011). The other three Oakland sites are properties associated with historic homes where archaeological investigations were conducted (Wenzel 2008; 2010; 2011). Given that these four sites were affiliated with white residents, the study of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery provided an opportunity to render the program more representative of Oakland's racial diversity. This is especially important given that much of Oakland's African American history



**Figure 2-** Project personnel at first site visit to the Old Oakland African American Cemetery with Deacon Irvin Moore and Betty Wade, April 10, 2008. Photograph by author.

has been neglected in print sources, including Eve Bacon's (1974) *Oakland: The Early Years*. Bacon, an historian and author, was born in Oakland in 1905.

Our team's first visit to the Old Oakland African American Cemetery took place on April 10, 2008, where I was accompanied by a group of Valencia College students including assistant investigator Jena Skinner, and members of the Central Florida Anthropological Society (Figure 2). We were led into the grounds by community members Betty Wade, who served as our project's key consultant, and the cemetery's caretaker, local church deacon, Irvin Moore. Wade, a long-time community member, has a special connection to both Oakland and the cemetery as her grandfather, James W. Walker, is buried here. Walker was one of the town's earliest African American residents and his occupational affiliation as a mason is inscribed on the top of his head stone that marks where he was laid to rest in 1918 at the age of 37 (Figure 3). His death was attributed to the Pandemic Influenza of 1918. Prior to this, he was employed by Joe Petris, a local station agent manager for the Orange Belt Railway. The Petris family home was the subject of archaeological investigations I directed in 2007 through 2008 (Wenzel 2008).



Wade and Moore guided us through the cemetery grounds while recalling valuable information that we recorded related to the site's history, their personal connections to the deceased, and other important contextual information about the community. According to Wade, the cemetery had not been attended to for about sixty years, from the discontinuation of burials around

**Figure 3-** Key consultant and descendent community member Betty Wade stands behind the concrete upright grave marker of her grandfather, James W. Walker, April 10, 2008. Photograph by Jena Skinner.



1950 up until ACT's survey in 2002. They directed us to a variety of material features including grave markers and surface offerings that they graciously permitted us to photograph and document. We began recording information from the site's extant grave markers on paper forms starting with the largest and most prominent grave in the cemetery, an above-ground vault (Figure 4). On each form, a grave identification number was assigned in sequential order, along with recording any legible engravings including names, birth and death dates, epitaphs, and kin and occupational affiliations. In addition, grave marker material, shape, iconography, and condition were noted (Figure 5).

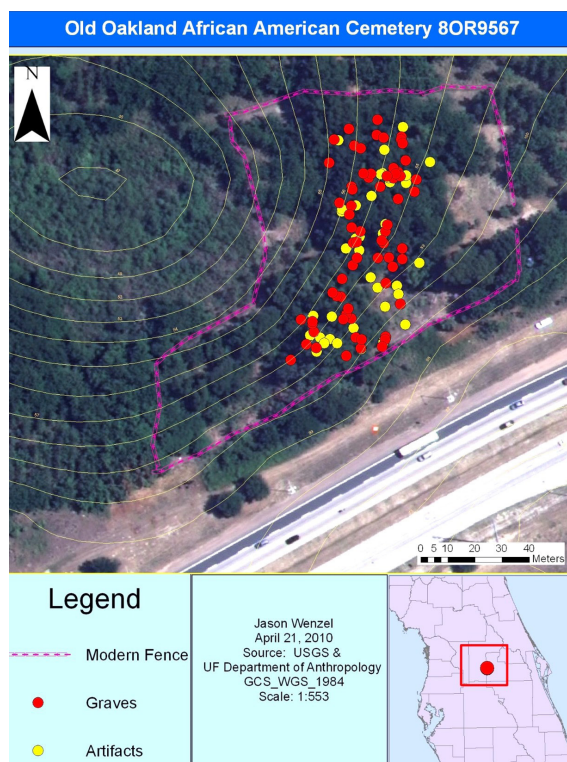


**Figure 4-** Deacon Irvin Moore clearing off above-ground vault, April 10, 2008. Photograph by author.



**Figure 5-** Valencia College student Merita Felts assisting with grave marker recording, April 10, 2008. Photograph by author.

Our next visit to the cemetery occurred on January 31, 2009, where approximately a dozen personnel continued the recording process began the previous summer. In addition, we collected Global Positioning System (GPS) points of the site's boundary (chain-link fence) with a total station and used a handheld GPS unit to georeference, or collect geographical data for each individual grave marker. The following month we continued recording grave markers in addition to surface artifacts, or funerary offerings. For the surface artifacts, we assigned each item an artifact identification number in sequential order, and recorded provenience, material type, color, form, and any textual detail such as print labeling on ceramics and embossing on glass bottles. We left all artifacts in place after carefully inspecting and photographing each one. For some of the vessels, we were able to discern the date and/or source of production. In July 2008, we completed work at the site by removing vegetation and brushing away sand and debris to take a complete photographic inventory of the grave markers with each one accompanied by a photo board and photo scale for curatorial reference.

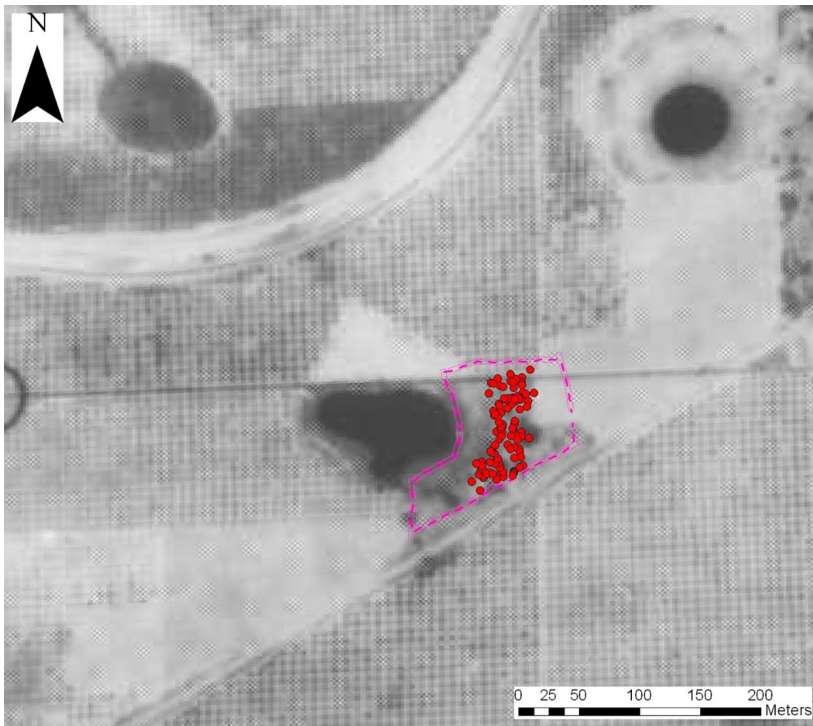


**Figure 6-** Location of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery showing the distribution of graves and artifacts, topography, and proximity to State Road 50. Map by author.



## Results

We recorded 115 features including 69 grave markers and 46 artifacts. Figure 6 shows an aerial view of the location of the graves and artifacts in the cemetery, their proximity to State Road 50, and their relation to the site's topography. In addition, the contour lines show an area of decreasing elevation to the west in a circular form. During our visit, this area was dry and according to Wade and Moore has been thought of as a dry sinkhole over the years. However, oral history suggests this was once a lake, as another community member, Deacon Julius Mosby, Sr., recalled fishing there as a young boy in the 1920s to 1930s (personal communication to author, January 31, 2009). An examination of historic aerial photographs from 1939, 1947, and 1958 confirms this and shows a decreasing lake level which eventually became dry towards the end of the twentieth century. Figure 7 shows the site's historic features overlaying a 1939 aerial image. The sinkhole appears to contain water during this time.



**Figure 7-** Cemetery features and modern fence overlaying 1939 aerial image of the Old Oakland African American Cemetery. Map by author.

We recorded 69 individual grave markers with the earliest death date of 1917 and the most recent as 1949. We were able to estimate the average age at death for 15 individuals at 36 years. We believe a minimum of at least 70 individuals are represented in the burial population, as one of these markers is shared by two individuals. Of the site's markers, the majority (59.4%, n=41) are some type of staked metal card holder with a glass lens intended to cover a temporary paper tag. One of these was placed next to a concrete foot stone. Only two of these temporary markers contained traces of the original paper card and one was conjoined with a metal flower pot (Figures 8 & 9). Another metal marker is a Ford Model T rear axle painted white (Figure 10).

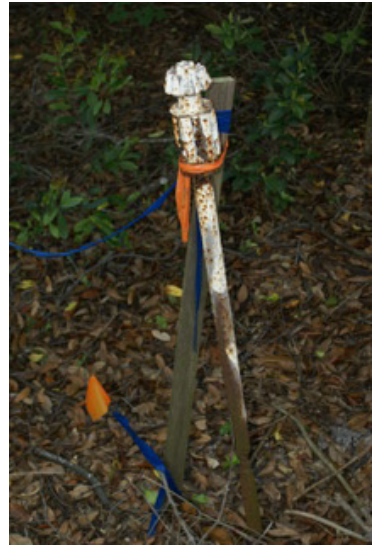


**Figure 8 & 9-** Temporary metal grave markers with traces of paper cards. July 19, 2008. Photographs by Jena Skinner.



The more permanent 26 grave markers were stone (marble, granite) or concrete, manufactured in both standard and vernacular forms. The most common were concrete (n=14), followed by marble (n=5), and granite (n=2). Three markers were constructed of concrete but decorated with seashells, and two other markers were recorded as “unidentified stone,” either granite or marble.

In terms of grave marker form, slightly over half were upright (51.9%, n=14), while the remainder may be described as ground marker (n=4), vernacular (n=3), vault (n=2), cube (n=1), and obelisk (n=1). The grave markers were shaped, carved, and decorated in a variety of ways with flat, curved, and beveled tops, and engraved with doves in flight (n=3), gesturing hands (n=3), angels (n=2), masonic symbols (n=2), and wreaths (n=2). One ground marker was military issued. Many of the markers included epithets inscribed such as “At Rest” or “Gone to Rest.” Figure 11 shows the grave of Carry Coleman, who died at the age of 2 in 1921, and is marked by an upright marble headstone. The marker is engraved with “The Lord is My Sheppard” and “Gone to a Better Land” and is accompanied by lamb, cross, and shepherd icons.



**Figure 10-** Ford Model T rear axle painted white, July 19, 2008. Photograph by Jena Skinner.



**Figure 11-** Grave of Carry Coleman marked by an upright marble marker, July 19, 2008. Photograph by author.

The three vernacular markers are all short concrete domes impressed with common cockle seashells. These markers have received the most attention and interest from the community at large, and their possible cultural meanings are discussed below.

Regarding the 46 surface artifacts, the majority were glass jars, vases, or bottles (63%, n=29). Most of the glass artifacts were colorless jars, and many were completely intact at the time of our visit. Other glass specimens were decorative in nature including one with a grape leaf pressed pattern. We recorded ten ceramic artifacts and most of these were some type of white-bodied kitchen tableware, such as saucers, plates, and bowls, as well as funerary items (vases, fountain). In addition, the artifact assemblage consisted of seven metal items, mostly buckets, pots, and pans. Dates of manufacture were obtained by examining plant codes and makers' marks on the bottom of 14 different glass and ceramic specimens respectively. The dates of these items ranged from 1850 through 2009, although most were produced from the 1910s through the 1950s. Several of the items (jars and plates) had production spans past 1950, indicating that visitation did not entirely cease after onsite burial was discontinued here.

### Insights

By integrating archaeological, archival, and ethnographic data from the cemetery, insights related to the lives of Oakland's early African American residents and their mortuary traditions are illuminated. The cemetery's layout, with burials emplaced around a former lake, serves as an organizing point of discussion for African and African American cultural traditions where water is sacred, and is symbolic of the passages experienced by both the living and the dead. This is reflected in not only burial location but in some of the associated material culture, in particular the seashell decorated graves, jars, and



**Figure 12-** Seashell decorated grave marker, April 10, 2008. Photograph by Jena Skinner.



various water containers. It was the opinion of the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) that the cemetery was eligible for listing on the NHRP due to the uniqueness of these shell-decorated features (Chambless 2010). These features in the cemetery are akin to the shrine of the head (*ilé ori*) which often appears in the form of pointed, crown-like vessels, covered with shells that in essence represent riches associated with a good head, or character (Thompson 1984). Among the Kongo people, seashells were symbolic in closing the soul's presence, and water acted as a carrier since the sea was the place where the dead rested (Thompson 1984). For West African cultures, the color white represents purification (Thompson 1984) and thus bleached shells symbolize whiteness and the watery character of death (Jordan 1982). In addition to the seashell-decorated grave markers, the presence of a high-tension electrical insulator repurposed as a fountain (Figure 13) and at least nine glass jars that function as containers may also reflect sacred beliefs about water (Figure 14). Assistant investigator Jena Skinner recreated one of the seashell-decorated grave markers (Figures 15, 16, 17) as a way to better understand the labor investment needed in their production. This grave marker recreation was donated to the Oakland Nature Preserve's museum, and its presence there will further support educational efforts regarding the cemetery and town's cultural history.



**Figure 13-** High-tension electrical insulator repurposed as a fountain, April 10, 2008. Photograph by Jena Skinner.

The presence of the jars, as well as other items such as the ceramic dishes and metal pots, could represent the last object touched by the deceased—as well as efforts of the living to rid any items that may have been charged with potentially harmful emanations of the spirit (Thompson 1984). Careful deposition of items of this nature would keep the spirit grounded to the gravesite and thus arrest any chances for harming the living (Thompson 1984). The glass containers could also represent medicine bottles used prior to death (Jordan 1982).





**Figure 14-** Examples of jars associated with grave markers. Photographs by author.



**Figure 15-** Seashell decorated grave marker, April 10, 2008. Photograph by Jena Skinner.



**Figure 16 & 17-** Jena Skinner constructing a replica of seashell decorated grave marker and the final product on display at the museum of the Oakland Nature Preserve.

The white-bodied ceramics, along with upturned pots on graves, may reflect other African cultural traditions. Among the Kongo people, to be upside down means to die, and the inversion of vessels such as white basins, may symbolize strength, perdurance, and a visual connection to entering the realm of the ancestors (Thompson 1984). In a study of African American cemeteries in Texas, Jordan (1992) argues that broken ceramics at grave sites symbolize the shattered lives Africans endured when forcibly transferred from their homelands to the United States. Further, breaking the dish may sever the chain of sickness to avoid contagion to surviving family members. Broken vessels reflect ritually “killing” an object to release a spirit (Jordan 1992). The Model T Ford rear axle is also a curiosity. Thompson (1984) found examples of graves in the Kongo and in the American South decorated with automotive and aviation parts and icons that might have been used symbolically to move, or expedite, the spirit’s passage to heaven. The automotive part could also have been employed due to its resemblance to a pipe, as Thompson (1984) finds tube-like items placed over graves also represent a form of movement or passage through smoke or water.



▲ **Figure 18-** Examples of white-bodied ceramics over graves, February 21, 2009. Photographs by author.



**Figure 19-** Upturned pot over grave, February 21, 2009. Photograph by author.

Graves decorated with items such as seashells, ceramic vessels, and other personal items are noteworthy in African American burial grounds (Baugher and Veit 2014). But not all of the cemetery's symbols are necessarily African-specific. For example, vessels such as vases and jars for holding flowers appear over graves for other racial and ethnic groups as well as water features in and around cemeteries, including seashells (Jordan 1992). It is also possible that over time some of the pots could have been inverted unintentionally through some site disturbance, such as flooding or by human contact.

In addition to identifying potential African cultural symbolism, this study provides insights into the socioeconomic and health status of the community. Most grave markers were temporary metal paper card holders with the possibility of additional graves on site unmarked by any immediately observable material feature. Further, the more permanent grave markers are primarily constructed of concrete in standard and vernacular forms, where only a few stone (marble and granite) markers exist. Concrete grave markers throughout the period of interment at the cemetery were much less costly than those made of stone (Barber 1994). This speaks to the socioeconomic status of the community as many of the individuals in the cemetery worked in citrus farming or in some other local service job. According to Wade, during the cemetery's use, many families took care of their loved one's mortuary needs given the lack of funeral parlors in the area.

Many of the individuals buried in the cemetery are believed to have maintained a more permanent residence outside of Oakland, whether elsewhere in Florida or out of state. According to Chilton's (2007) review of the 1920 U.S. Census, most of those buried in the cemetery were from the Carolinas or Georgia. The dominance of temporary grave markers may be explained by the transient nature of the community. In addition, only four distinct family burial plots were identified in this study, and this is in contrast to what the author generally has observed in contemporaneous African American cemeteries where family plots often dominate the burial grounds. Caretaker Moore believes that a large portion of the cemetery's population would have been attracted to work in citrus and were brought to Oakland through the railroad. Geospatial analysis of burial features shows that both temporary and permanent grave markers are intermixed throughout the cemetery indicating those receiving different types of markers were not buried

in separate areas. The transient status of the cemetery's population might help explain the process of forgetting that resulted in the site's abandonment given the possible lack of family ties to the area.

In addition, Wade and Moore believe that burials were ceased in the 1940s due to several factors including difficulty in access due to the soft sands or a decreasing amount of space to receive burials. A new African American cemetery was established around 1948 with the first recorded burial and is in use to this day.



**Figure 20-** Temporary metal paper card holders marking graves. Photographs by author.

The results also raise questions about the health status of Oakland's African American community during the period of internment. At least one confirmed death attributed to the Pandemic Influenza of 1918, Betty's grandfather, James W. Walker, is in the cemetery. Five other burials dated to this time are in proximity raising questions about the impact of this illness to the community. Based on the results of excavations of the homestead associated with Joseph Petris, employer of James W. Walker, a high proportion of medicine bottles dating to around this time were recovered suggesting possible treatment of



this illness. In addition, the average age of death based on a sample of 15 individuals in the Old Oakland African American Cemetery is 36. It is difficult to assess mortality patterns, given the small sample size with deaths occurring over a 30-year period.

## **Conclusion**

The Old Oakland African American Cemetery Project, as part of an overall research program focused on the historic Town of Oakland, provided many opportunities. First and foremost, it helped improve the project's representation of the community's diversity by illuminating a part of Oakland's forgotten past. The project also provided Valencia College students with an opportunity to engage in real-life anthropological field research in a meaningful and genuine way. Most importantly, the project provided a service to the local descendent community by providing them with an expansive record of this cultural resource.

Future research should compare data and insights from this cemetery to others in order to better understand the mortuary customs, cultural traditions, socioeconomic status, and quality of health of the population that the Old Oakland African American Cemetery represents. A comparison of data from contemporaneous dated burials in the predominately white Oakland Cemetery would help ascertain how the community's racial dynamics shaped the patterns regarding mortuary culture, social status, and health. Further, comparisons with other early through mid-twentieth century African American cemeteries would help broaden our understanding of the site's overall context.

It is our goal that data from this project will be of benefit to additional studies of the cemetery, including the current work being undertaken by Cardno. We hope that future research through oral history and archival sources as well as non-obtrusive field methods such as GPR can help account for any unmarked graves in the cemetery's burial population. This is crucial given the lacuna between the cemetery's establishment in 1882 and the earliest visible engraved death date of 1917 in the extant material culture. The Old Oakland African American Cemetery is important for the community as it is a physical manifestation of the community's early heritage and contains not only the remains of the deceased, but a rich composition of items imbued with African cultural traditions that reflects the African American experience. Richard Veit (2021) writes, "grave markers play an important role in the ongoing process,



cementing relationships between the living and the dead, and reflecting shared cultural values.” From the cemetery’s placement around a lake, to the grave decorations and offerings associated with water, the deceased were assisted by the living to make their final journey. Memories associated with the horrors of the Middle Passage as well as the movement to Florida during their own lifetimes, the Old Oakland African American Cemetery, became a resting place following demise, where many, whose names and stories have been lost to history, achieved glory.

### **Acknowledgments**

The study of Oakland’s cultural heritage is a longtime endeavor I began in 2007 and continues to this day. I thank the descendent community, specifically key consultant Betty Wade and caretaker the late Deacon Irvin Moore (who passed away in 2011) for allowing us to complete the research. I also thank students from Valencia College, the University of Central Florida, the University of Florida, and Rollins College as well as members of the Central Florida Anthropological Society who assisted with the study. Further acknowledgment is provided for the support from the Town of Oakland government, the Oakland Nature Preserve, Inc., and Valencia College’s Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences on this endeavor. Recognition is also given to Edward González-Tennant and Diana González-Tennant for assisting with geospatial data collection. All shortcomings in this paper are my responsibility.

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