

BURIAL SITES INVENTORY HISTORIC CONTEXT BRIEFING



Description

The Historic Preservation Division will present a briefing on the development of a historic context for the sites on the Burial Sites Inventory. The historic context will be used to inform future amendments to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.



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SUMMARY

Planning Staff will present a briefing on the development of a historic context for sites in the Burial Sites Inventory. The briefing will include a summary of the relationship between the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* and the Burial Sites Inventory, the types of cemeteries and associated historic contexts of burial grounds in the county, and the results of a field survey of selected burial sites. The historic context will be used to inform future amendments to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

Burial Sites Inventory Program

Review Basis

Montgomery County Code Section 33A-17, Chapter 24A

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Figure 1: Hawlings River Chapel of Ease Cemetery

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
Background.....	4
Purpose of Historic Contexts.....	5
BURIAL SITES CONTEXTS	6
Historical Themes.....	6
Cemetery Classification.....	7
CONTEXT SURVEY	9
Site Selection	9
Results.....	11
Next Steps.....	12

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Since 1979, the Historic Preservation staff in the Planning Department have identified and researched historic properties for listing in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. Over the intervening years, Historic Preservation staff have researched properties for addition to the master plan based the criteria listed in Section 24A-3 of the Montgomery County Code. The *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* also contains information related to historical development patterns and general historical themes that are significant to the County's history. These themes are rooted in the historical development of the county and the evolution of settlement patterns and architectural styles associated with them. Additions to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* have generally followed geographically based work program items such as sector plans and other Area Master Plan amendments.

In addition to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*, Montgomery Planning maintains an inventory of burial sites. In 2017, the County Council passed [Section 33A-17](#) of the Montgomery County Code to require the Montgomery County Planning Board to maintain an inventory of burial sites and make it public. The Planning Board adopted the [Montgomery County Burial Sites Inventory and Guidelines](#) on May 16, 2019. The Planning Department makes these data available to the public via the [MCAtlas web portal](#). The inventory does not in and of itself indicate whether or not a cemetery is a significant historical site in the County, nor does it seek to catalogue or assess significance.

The *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* includes a small number of cemeteries included in their own right, usually for association with families significant in the history of the county and a larger number of cemeteries within the environmental setting of larger properties significant for their buildings. There are 9 cemeteries that are listed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* in their own right, 35 within the environmental setting of a master plan individual site, and another 11 cemeteries on the inventory that are within the environmental setting of a Master Plan district. However, there are no historical contexts that have been developed for cemeteries in the county that would provide a framework for understanding significance and associated character-defining features at these places or identifying whether amendments to the Master Plan related to cemeteries are warranted. Table 1 gives a breakdown on how these 55 sites relate to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

Table 1: Burial Sites included in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*

Resource Type	Count
Individually Listed	9
Within Environmental Setting Individual Site	35
Within Master Plan District	11

At present, there is no thematic historic context specific to cemeteries within which to evaluate potential amendments to the Master Plan for cemeteries or that would identify important characteristics of cemeteries that merit preservation. The Historic Preservation Division is enhancing the Montgomery County Burial Sites Inventory by developing such a context. This project will refine our understanding of the cemeteries in our inventory and help us better identify, appreciate, communicate about, and preserve potentially significant features or attributes of these sites.

This effort comprised a literature review, analysis of the existing inventory, and a field survey of selected burial sites conducted by a consultant. The field component of the study focused on cemeteries established after the arrival of colonial settlers and are more than 50 years old. Precolonial Indigenous sites are present in Montgomery County, but would require an entirely different approach than is being employed at post-colonial sites, along with close coordination with Indigenous Maryland tribes before such work could be pursued. We are not pursuing that effort at this time. We also have not begun work on cemeteries that reflect important recent immigration trends or intersect developing historic contexts like the Asian American and Pacific Islander or LGBTQ contexts.

PURPOSE OF HISTORIC CONTEXTS

A historic context for cemeteries will provide a framework for evaluating which cemeteries should be listed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* based on how their physical characteristics convey their connection with the county's historical themes. Historic contexts provide a framework for understanding and evaluating historical significance. The National Park Service has developed an extensive literature for evaluating historic properties as part of their mission to administer the National Register of Historic Places. These include a series of bulletins intended to help historic preservation professionals in their work. National Park Service Bulletin 15, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, describes the role that historic contexts play.

The significance of a historic property can be judged and explained only when it is evaluated within its historic context. Historic contexts are those patterns or trends in history by which a specific occurrence, property, or site is understood and its meaning (and ultimately its significance) within history or prehistory is made clear.

Historical significance plays an essential role in evaluating properties for inclusion in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. For a property to be listed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* it must meet the designation criteria for significance for history, culture or architectural design established in Chapter 24A-3:

(1) Historical and cultural significance. The historic resource:

- a. Has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the county, state or nation;
- b. Is the site of a significant historic event;

- c. Is identified with a person or a group of persons who influenced society; or
- d. Exemplifies the cultural economic, social, political or historic heritage of the county and its communities.

(2) Architectural and design significance. The historic resource:

- a. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction;
- b. Represents the work of a master;
- c. Possesses high artistic values;
- d. Represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- e. Represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or county due to its singular physical characteristic or landscape. (Ord. No. 9-4, § 1; Ord. No. 11-59.)

To be listed on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*, a property must be found to be historically significant according to these criteria, and it must retain the physical integrity necessary to convey that significance. A property need meet only one criterion to be eligible for designation.

BURIAL SITES CONTEXTS

HISTORICAL THEMES

The Historic Preservation Division began efforts to develop the burial sites historic context by conducting a literature review focused on studies of cemeteries in the region and broad trends in their historical development. This literature review focused on understanding cemeteries as cultural landscapes and identifying potential relationships between them and broader historical themes identified for Maryland and Montgomery County. Topics and themes include early colonial settlement and tobacco cultivation, development of churches and religious denominations in the county, slavery, abolition, beginnings of free communities of color, the history of mining/commercial development, the Civil War, fraternal organizations, early suburbanization, the rural cemetery movement, and post-WWII population growth. Epidemic outbreaks with high mortality in the area such as smallpox 1770-1782, cholera in 1832, influenza in 1918, and HIV/AIDS were also considered. Infant mortality and death during childbirth may also prove relevant to cemetery studies.

Intersections of significant historical events or trends with the design or material attributes of cemeteries provide the basis for developing the burial sites historical context.

Themes that emerged from historical phenomena that appear to have relevance for understanding Montgomery County cemeteries include the following:

- Grief and Mourning
- Evolution of Cemetery Landscape Design
- Mining, Stonemasons and Local Monument Industry
- Epidemic Outbreaks
- Temporal Themes (Colonial Settlement, Early National Period, Antebellum, etc.)
- Church and Denominational Development
- Slavery and Abolition
- Early Free Communities of Color
- Fraternal Societies

CEMETERY CLASSIFICATION

Historic Preservation staff classified the burial sites inventory according to discrete types as they relate to the broader historical themes identified for this study (Table 2). These form the foundation for how individual cemeteries relate to the overall burial sites historic context. One example includes cemeteries associated with African American benevolent societies that developed following the Civil War. These organizations provided crucial community support for new communities, and their associated cemeteries are often the sole surviving physical remains of these places. Another example includes the cemeteries specifically associated with stone cutters and quarry workers employed in the Seneca Sandstone quarries along the Potomac River. Similarly, some cemeteries may be significant for large numbers of particularly fine, locally produced markers made by master stone cutters. Other themes or types include early family cemeteries, enslaved persons' burial grounds, and early rural cemetery movement cemeteries connected to the county's railroad suburbs.

Table 2: Burial Sites Classification

Class	Subclass	Description	Notes
Family	Possibly by socio-economic class	Generally small plots on family farms for immediate family and relatives.	This is the most common type of cemetery: there are 201 sites associated with individual families. These are sometimes expanded into broader community cemeteries if used for multiple generations. Sometimes referenced in deed reservations.
Religious	Possibly by denomination	Burial grounds for churches or other religious institutions.	114 cemeteries in the inventory are associated with places of worship.

Class	Subclass	Description	Notes
Community		Graveyards developed to serve specific communities of people. Communities can be geographic or membership-based.	45 cemeteries are currently classified as “community” burial grounds.
	Neighborhood/extended families	Graveyards for specific areas.	May sometimes develop out of family or extended family plots.
	Quarry Workers	Burial grounds located on large estates involved in quarrying.	Examples appear to include Clipper, Hill Farm, and Aqueduct/Rayner burial grounds. Each of those appears to include quarry workers and stonecutters.
	Military	Places for the burial of soldiers.	The region has several formal military cemeteries. None are in Montgomery County, but there are at least two places where Union soldiers were buried next to Civil War encampments or battlefield sites that were not used for burial places otherwise.
	Benevolent Societies	Established by benevolent societies to provide burial services for their members. All are African American, many closely associated with churches and schools.	6 sites, 5 classified currently as community cemeteries, 1 (Mt. Pleasant) classed as a church cemetery.
Enslaved Persons		Separate burial areas within farms/plantations for the burial of people enslaved in that place.	Possibly including those enslaved by multiple enslavers. The “Negro Burial Ground” in Chevy Chase might be such a place since its ownership changed, but the use as a burial ground was to be continued.
Pet Cemeteries		Institutional or commercial grounds for interring pets and their human owners	Aspin Hill and Sugarloaf Pet Gardens are examples.
Potter’s Field		Place designated by local government for the interment of the indigent poor	Poor Farm Cemetery is the sole example in the county
Commercial Perpetual		19 th to 21 st -century secular commercial establishments.	Sometimes founded as such, sometimes develop out of

Class	Subclass	Description	Notes
Care Cemeteries			earlier religious cemeteries such as Rockville or Monocacy.

CONTEXT SURVEY

SITE SELECTION

Historic Preservation staff engaged a consultant to survey individual cemeteries to help illustrate and elaborate the draft historical context. Cemeteries were selected to provide examples that crosscut the identified cemetery types and themes. The analysis focused on notable characteristics associated with the types of cemeteries and how these characteristics can be used to evaluate a cemetery's historical significance and physical integrity to determine potential eligibility for the Montgomery County *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* or the National Register of Historic Places. The intent of surveying individual sites in detail was to help identify which physical features and characteristics of cemeteries help convey their significance. The types of design elements and features may convey historical significance will vary by cemetery type and historic context.

Staff selected approximately 40 sites for possible field survey including a sample of the different burial site classes. In addition to creating a cross sample of different cemetery types, sites were selected based on a variety of other considerations including types of cemetery features preserved, design style, size, location, and associated themes. The sites include some already listed on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* as well as others not on the Master Plan. Once candidate sites were identified, staff contacted property owners and managers to obtain permission to access the sites. Ultimately, 20 were selected, of which permission for access was granted by property owners for 19 (Table 3, Figure 2).

Table 3: Burial Sites Selected for Survey

Name	Description	HP Master Plan Status
Aspin Hill	Pet (and human) Cemetery	Individual
Awkard Family Cemetery	19 th -Century African American Family	No
Bethesda Meeting House	19 th -Century Religious	No
Bowie	19 th -Century Family	Individual
Button	Possible Enslaved Persons Burial Ground	Individual
Chilton Dyer	19 th -Century family	Locational Atlas
Cooke	19 th -Century family	No
Crabb Family	19 th -Century Family	Individual
Griffith (Edge Hill)	19 th -Century Family	Individual
Hawlings River Chapel of Ease	19 th -Century Church	No
Hill Farm	Antebellum Quarry Workers	No

Name	Description	HP Master Plan Status
Howard Chapel	Post Civil War African American Church and Community	Individual
Jerusalem Mount Pleasant	Post Civil War African American Fraternal Society	No
Monocacy	Large Early 19 th -Century Religious and Community	District
Ricketts Family Cemetery	19 th -Century Family with all Fieldstone Markers	No
Sandy Spring Friends	Large 19 th -Century Religious	Individual
St. Paul Community Church	Post Civil War African American Church	Individual
St. Rose of Lima	Large 19 th -Century Religious	Partly Individual
Triadelphia	19 th -Century Community	Individual

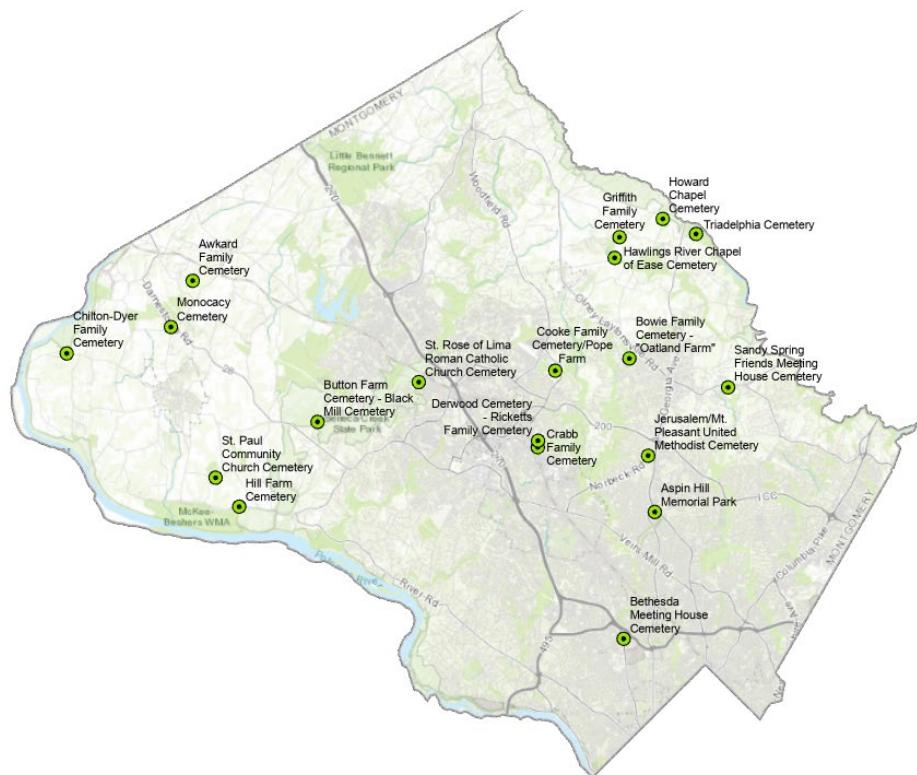


Figure 2: Sites selected for field survey as part of the burial sites context study

Field documentation included a cemetery map, photographs, and where feasible, an inventory of markers and landscape features. Marker inventories included the material of the stone, a description of the marker style, and inscription. The consultant completed the fieldwork in the summer of 2025, and the technical report in December 2025. With the knowledge gained from the detailed surveys, staff are elaborating the associated historical themes into a historic context

RESULTS

The field survey of selected burial grounds was intended to help collect finer details about the cemeteries in the Inventory. The existing burial sites inventory forms were completed primarily by volunteers. They include some photographs and basic descriptive information, but they do not include cemetery maps nor detailed descriptions of potentially relevant features and stylistic elements. The survey results help make the connection between the themes and contexts developed and the material aspects of individual sites that may convey significance within those themes and contexts.

The survey found that the burial grounds inventoried exhibited a range of stylistic influences, including simple vernacular styles as well as influences from the mid-19th-century rural cemetery movement, and the later lawn park plans that followed in the 20th century. Cemeteries in use for long periods of time appear to exhibit stylistic evolution, such as at Monocacy cemetery, which began as a simple vernacular church yard, and later incorporated elements of the rural cemetery movement.

Some family burial grounds were found to differ based on the number of generations present. Small family cemeteries may include only members of a single family, such as the Awkard Cemetery, holding the remains of Elijah Awkard, his wife, and three sons. Other cemeteries include multiple generations, and those which expanded to include multiple extended families appear to have evolved into informal community cemeteries. The survey was also able to identify specific family groupings at church yards. This information has the potential to link burial grounds to their surrounding communities and the social history of which they were a part.

The field survey identified types of potentially significant marker and landscape features:

- Marker styles
- Plantings
- Pathways
- Walls and fences
- Family groupings

Markers were found to include locally obtained and relatively unmodified fieldstones, homemade markers, professionally carved markers using stone from the region, and after the introduction of the railroad, professionally carved stones imported from out-of-state. Professionally carved stones demonstrated a range of styles popular in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most markers were found to be made from stone, including local sandstone, slate and schist, as well as imported marble and granite likely from outside the county, but within Maryland. The popularity of granite markers imported from out-of-state was facilitated by the spread of railroads, the development of new mechanical carving techniques, and the proliferation of mail order catalog companies such as Sears & Roebuck. There was also one elaborate zinc memorial at the Bethesda Meetinghouse cemetery. Most markers in the county are upright, but there are some cemeteries that have ledger style markers, such as at the

Bowie Family Cemetery. The survey also noted the presence of landscape features such as pathways, section markers, tree and shrub plantings, along with fences and walls.

The prevalence and distribution of common or unusually distinctive features will help identify which burial grounds may be significant for these attributes. Generally, the larger the cemetery and the longer it was in use, the more types of landscape elements may be present. Short-term use family cemeteries tend to be very simple.

NEXT STEPS

Staff anticipate presenting the work to date to County Council later this year. The Historic Preservation Division will use the information from the consultant report to assist in preparation of a Scope of Work for a countywide Burial Sites Amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. This work program item is scheduled to begin in FY27 per the Planning Board's proposed work program and budget that was transmitted to the County Council in January 2026.