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Work continues to honor the history of Carlisle's Lincoln Cemetery

Maddie Seiler Oct 5, 2022 Updated Nov 10, 2022

Upon entering Lincoln Cemetery in Carlisle, if one looks to the right of the archway, they might notice a small new plaque.

The plaque notes the site's spot on the Cumberland County Register of Historical Places — another step to mark the site's importance for Black history in Carlisle.

Andrea Crouse, Carlisle Borough's director of parks and recreation, said maintenance crews installed the sign on Aug. 1, a little over a year after the site joined the register.

Lincoln Cemetery was added to the register in June 2021, said Cara Curtis, the Cumberland County Historical Society's archives and library director.

“Lincoln Cemetery is important for many reasons: for being the oldest historic Black Cemetery in Carlisle, because of who is buried there, and in this case, what happened to the cemetery,” she said. “As it was closed in 1905, this is the final resting space of people that never saw a desegregated Carlisle school system, people [who] were enslaved locally or in the South, freedom seekers and Civil War veterans. These families created a vibrant community in spite of the racism and other issues that they had to deal with on a daily basis.”

Curtis said she's part of a group comprised of descendants of those buried in Lincoln Cemetery, the Historical Society, the borough and other community members working to tell the story of the cemetery and ensure that it's remembered.

“After ... researching the site, it was clear to me that this hallowed ground should be included on the registry,” she said.

Cemetery history

A [2020 Sentinel article](#) said the Penn family deeded the ground that became Lincoln Cemetery to the Black people of Carlisle when the town was laid out. Originally it was supposed to be equivalent in size to South Street's Old Graveyard, where white people were buried, but Lincoln Cemetery ultimately measured 100 by 300 feet.

The borough said at least 650 Black residents of Carlisle are buried there, including U.S. Colored Troop members and Civil War veterans.

However, the article described the cemetery as a "victim of poor upkeep," and said the site was turned into Memorial Park in 1972.

A [2019 Sentinel article](#) said the tombstones were removed and while there is speculation that they were taken to a train station on the other side of the park or moved to Union Cemetery on Franklin Street, no one knows for sure where they are.

One tombstone, however, remains. A Jordan family tombstone was retained after Fleta Jordan entered a "legal fight" to resist the borough's efforts to remove the grave markers, and for nearly 50 years the stone served as the sole reminder of the cemetery's existence, the [Sentinel said in 2021](#).

"This remains the burial location of hundreds of members of our community," Curtis said. "If one looks at the surnames of those buried in the cemetery, there are many ties to those that still live in the area."

The borough said work began in 2019 to restore the site as a sacred place, and borough council passed a [resolution](#) apologizing in 2020 for the removal of the tombstones. Curtis said the site was rededicated as a cemetery last year.

She said the mural that occupies a portion of the site will be refreshed in the spring and efforts will continue to determine how to permanently memorialize the space.

“The history of this hallowed ground is still being written,” Curtis said. “I cannot wait to see how the space will continue to transform.”

Registration process

According to David Smith who serves as the coordinator of the Historical Society’s preservation efforts, the process adding a site to the county’s register is modeled after that of the national register. The site was required to meet three criteria outlined in one of [Smith’s articles on the Historical Society’s website](#):

- a location associated with a significant historical event(s)
- a location associated with a significant historical person(s)
- a location with unique architectural characteristics

Curtis believes Lincoln Cemetery was eligible for both historical events and historical persons.

“For the cemetery you would prove its [importance] by documenting what it was used for, who was buried there and why that was significant,” Smith said.

He said this information could come through cemetery records, newspaper obituaries of those buried in the cemetery or other sources.

Smith said the time necessary to add a site to the register depends on the length of the research process and that it can be as short as two to three months or it can take much more time.

Curtis said that in the case of Lincoln Cemetery, the process didn’t take long at all.

“We had been working on the history of Lincoln Cemetery for several years,” she said. “We were able to put together the application form within a month.”

From there, the county registry committee approved the cemetery’s addition, and the society’s board gave its final approval last year, Curtis said.

Smith said a site's addition to the register doesn't protect it from being disturbed; that is accomplished through municipal ordinances. However being on the register can help with grant applications for preservation, he said.

Curtis said the cemetery's place on the register means that it is listed in the county registry book published by the Historical Society and can be found on a virtual map of these locations, helping to make the site's history more visible.

"People should know the history of this space," Curtis said. "When I and my former colleague, Lindsay Varner, started the Historical Society's part of this project, one of our biggest fears was that people would forget. One of the questions we asked was, how many more years/generations would pass before people forgot that it was hallowed ground? I grew up outside of Carlisle and had no idea that it was a cemetery until I was in my early 20s. We want everyone to know what the space is, what happened there and ... what is happening there."