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## Separated by Death and Color: The African American Cemetery of New Philadelphia, Illinois

### ABSTRACT

Residents of New Philadelphia utilized two cemeteries, one which served primarily African American families, and one which served mostly European Americans. Details of grave markers and material culture remains in the cemetery that served African American residents of the town, including members of the McWorter family, were recorded, researched, and analyzed. This study reveals connections between several material items recorded in that cemetery, and the continuing development of particular commemoration traditions related to West African cultures. Broken vessels and animal bones distributed on grave sites, and trees growing in and around the cemetery in a seemingly random fashion, may appear to a casual observer as evidence of a graveyard unkempt. In fact, such placements were often intentional, and involved particular spiritual and symbolic meanings.

### Introduction

Cemeteries and burial grounds manifest historical and cultural characteristics of the dead and those who bury them. Mortuary elements, such as the inscriptions on, and the style and material of grave markers, and the landscapes of graveyards, serve as cultural and historical narratives of the lives and tenets of the dead, their families, and neighbors (Little 1998:3; Clow et al. 2000:449; Foster and Eckert 2003:469). As Clow et al. observed (2000:449): “Simply the presence or absence of certain materials is often symbolic and can lead researchers to possible answers about what activities or beliefs might have been important to an individual or community.”

For enslaved Africans and African Americans, cemeteries held special significance. Burial grounds represented the domain of the departed, and a place to express continuing developments of cultural identities within African diasporas. African American cemeteries throughout the United States manifested cultural links to Africa through mortuary traditions, reverence for the

dead, and a belief in spirit life beyond death (Genovese 1974:197; Vlach 1990:139).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, African American cemeteries represented a combination of African, European, and American customs and traditions melded over more than three centuries. While many mortuary practices combined African with European and American customs, some burial rituals survived as beloved practices, recalling cultural beliefs brought by the enslaved from the societies in Africa from which they were abducted (Center for Historic Preservation 2001; Gundaker and McWillie 2005:187). As art historian M. Ruth Little (1998:269) remarks, “graveyards speak with the accents of the homeland.”

The final resting place of some of New Philadelphia’s African American residents shares traits with other African American cemeteries in the United States, and also exhibits unique characteristics. As in other African American burial grounds of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the cemetery of New Philadelphia reflects the creolization of African, European, and American customs and traditions.

### African American Burial Traditions

The transatlantic slave trade resulted in the largest forced migration in history. Approximately 12 million Africans from various parts of the continent, and with different customs and traditions, were forcibly shipped to exploit natural resources and to settle the Americas. Nearly 40% of the enslaved emanated from West Central Africa (Eltis and Richardson 2003:42; Heuman and Walvin 2003:4).

In the Americas, the enslaved buried their dead according to an array of African customs. Burial traditions were transmitted through generations by continued practice, tales, and songs (Herskovits 1931:68–69; Wright and Hughes 1996:22; Eltis and Richardson 2003:45–46; Walvin 2006:53). The mortality rate among enslaved laborers was staggering; only about 10% of enslaved children survived to the age of 16 years (SCIway 2006b). According to key

belief systems of African societies targeted by the slave trade, particularly those of West and Central Africa, death was not the end of life, but a phase in the cycle termed the “four moments of the sun” (Washington 2005:166–167). The rising sun symbolized birth. The sun’s movement higher in the sky represented adulthood; the setting sun signified death; and midnight, “when the sun is shining on the world of the dead,” marked movement to the spirit realm (Washington 2005:166,170). Melville Herskovits (1958:63) notes that “the funeral is the true climax of life, and no belief drives deeper into the traditions of West African thought ... whatever else has been lost of aboriginal custom, the attitudes toward the dead as manifested in meticulous rituals cast in the mold of West African patterns have survived.” The enslaved may have accepted the inevitability of death, but they mourned the physical loss of family and community members, and manifestations of grief were part of mourning rituals. Burial rites were not taken lightly, for it was believed that the living were responsible for guiding the spirit to the realm of the dead through proper burial rituals and tributes (Morrow 2002:105; Washington 2005:170,174).

Although burial traditions varied across the African societies impacted by the transatlantic slave trade, those traditions shared a common belief in a spirit life after death. The belief in an afterlife encouraged adherence to the shared tenet that the dead must be interred according to custom, and the conviction that offended spirits could harm the living. Death was the culmination of life, and the burial rite was a ceremony often imbued with particular African beliefs and traditions. African religions typically included a belief that a spiritual element of the deceased continued to exist after death. Historian Robert Farris Thompson (1983:142) refers to this ever-present element as the “flash of the departed spirit.” It was believed that the requirements in the spirit world were the same as the material world. Spirits continued to hunger and thirst, and the living were accountable for satisfying the needs of the spirits or would suffer the consequences of neglect. It was also believed that the spirits were aware of events occurring in the material world and could exert influence over the living (Herskovits 1931:197; Creel 1988:52,316; Joyner 1991:77).

Most printed information about the funerary practices of enslaved African Americans is found in reports about plantation life in the southern states. Thompson (1983:132) observes that in no other place was African influence “on the New World more pronounced, more profound, than in black traditional cemeteries throughout the South of the United States.” Accounts of burial traditions indicate that enslaved African Americans on southern plantations and farms accepted their mandate to help the dying “cross the river” into the spirit world (Washington 2005:170). Once in the spirit world, it was believed, those souls would join departed family members (Joyner 1984:138).

In the southern states, burials of the enslaved took place shortly after death, but sometimes days or weeks passed before a second funeral or commemorative service took place. The custom may have originated in West African traditions, but the delay in time also allowed those in servitude in neighboring areas to attend. A delay was often also required to accumulate an adequate amount of food to feed the mourners (Genovese 1974:198; Washington 2005:174).

Many African American funerals in the southern states took place at night, once the workday was completed. When held without the presence of white surveillance, the occasion fostered a sense of community among the enslaved. As social events, funerals were an integral part of their lives. Burial ceremonies were also an opportunity for enslaved laborers to express their cultural ties to African cultures (Genovese 1974:195,197–198; Goldfield 1991:147).

Friends and family carried the dead to their graves while singing mournful hymns. Once at the burial site, a religious service was conducted. In the South it was often the custom for each of those attending the burial to cast soil into the graves. The exact meaning of the practice is unclear, but is believed to be of African origin. For many Africans, and later, African Americans, grave soil held spiritual significance (Genovese 1974:199–200; Thompson 1983:105).

Some slave owners attempted to control burial ceremonies of the enslaved to limit opportunities for laborers to enhance their own social cohesion and the potential for coordinated actions against plantation owners. Other plantation owners recognized the importance of attempting to

cultivate the loyalty of their enslaved laborers, however, and they therefore took a more permissive approach to such burial practices. In addition, some slaveholders accepted such practices as fulfilling a basic humanitarian responsibility (Genovese 1974:194; Heuman and Walvin 2003:250).

### **Landscapes of Repose**

Graveyards were often located on land deemed too poor to be agriculturally productive (Trinkley 2006). On plantations, burial grounds of the enslaved were sometimes confined to segregated areas on the fringe of family or community graveyards, or on separate plots (Krüger-Kahloula 1994:133–134). Exceptions were occasionally made for favored enslaved laborers who were buried with the white families they served. Krüger-Kahloula interprets this seemingly magnanimous gesture as further subjugation of the enslaved. “Assembling family and servants around the master’s grave projects the latter’s patriarchal image into the beyond” (Krüger-Kahloula 1994:137). By such a spatial claiming of deceased African Americans, white owners attempted to deprive the enslaved community of time-honored expressions of grief, and denied the deceased a traditional burial (Genovese 1974:196).

Formal landscaping was not typical of 19th- and 20th-century African American cemeteries. Graves were often randomly placed, and to maintain tranquility and avoid disturbing the spirits, no attempt was made to control the growth of vegetation. Graves were often unmarked or indicated by handmade markers or stones, while more ornate markers became increasingly common in the 20th century (Center for Historic Preservation 2001). In the early 20th century, flowers, such as lilies, were introduced as grave decorations (Holloway 2005:200).

### **The Material Culture of African and African American Cemeteries**

Scant investigation and lack of documentation of African and African American burial traditions, such as grave decorations, limit the understanding of many mortuary traditions prior to the 20th century (Foster and Eckert 2003:468–469). Although not completely understood, the practice

of leaving grave offerings is linked to cultures of West and West Central Africa. For example, materials used during the funeral rite were observed on the graves of Angola’s Ovimubundu people. Cultural groups of Africa’s Ivory Coast left food and other provisions on graves for the deceaseds’ use in the spirit world. The Mende people of West Africa also left food at the grave site (Creel 1988:316–318; Davidson 2004a:36). Examining the history of cultures in West Central Africa, Thompson (1983:132) explains the purpose of grave offerings as “decorative objects that, both in Kongo and the Americas, cryptically honor the spirit in the earth, guide it to the other world, and prevent it from wandering or returning to haunt survivors.”

The custom of grave decorating is also linked to members of the BaKongo culture, who comprised a significant proportion of those persons abducted in the transatlantic slave trade (Washington 2005:153). The ethnic group known as the BaKongo originated from “parts of the contemporary countries of Bas-Zaïre, Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and northern Angola” and may have represented as many as 60% of the enslaved who were forcibly transported to British colonies from 1817 to 1843 (Morrow 2002:105,110). The BaKongo people decorated graves with personal items and objects used by the deceased just before death. The objects, it was believed, held remnants of the owner’s power (Thompson 1983:134; Joyner 1991:81).

The practice of grave decorations was observed in the Lower Congo by E. J. Glave (1891:835), associate of British explorer Henry Morgan Stanley, who wrote in 1891 of graves covered with “crockery, old cooking pots, etc. ... which articles are rendered useless by being cracked or perforated with holes.” A similar practice was observed in Gabon in 1904 by Rev. Robert Hamill Nassau (1904:232) who observed graves adorned with ceramics, eating utensils, and pieces of furniture.

The custom of intentionally breaking objects left as grave decorations is interpreted to symbolize destruction of the body, and to prevent the cycle of death from enclosing family members. John Michael Vlach (1990:141) notes that often the base of a vessel was broken, but the shape of the object was retained. Breaking the object would prevent the spirit of the dead from returning in

search of the object and to influence the lives of the living (Genovese 1974:200; Wright and Hughes 1996:20).

The BaKongo people believed that the dead, placated and guided by mortuary practices, joined the spirit domain, metaphorically located beneath bodies of water. White was the favored color of grave decorations, for its association with the world of the spirits and dead. White seashells, symbols of immortality and water, were often left on African American burial sites, along with a variety of other white objects (Creel 1988:319; Vlach 1990:143; Ferguson 1992:114).

The tradition of decorating with seashells carried over to the 20th century in some South Carolina gravesites of Vietnam War veterans (Thompson 1983:135). Graves adorned with shells were also found in North Carolina's Big Rockfish Presbyterian Churchyard and the Hall-Horne Graveyard (Little 1998:240–241). A shell-covered grave can be found in the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Washington, D.C. (Joyner 2003:14). According to Vlach (1990:143), seashells “create an image of a river bottom, the environment in African belief under which the realm of the dead is located.” Some gravesites were outlined with seashells, others were entirely covered. Shells were also used to create designs and decorations.

Although many of the original meanings may have been forgotten over time, the burial traditions carried by the enslaved from their African homelands continued in practice as cherished cultural rituals and traditions. For example, African Americans are still burying their dead with traditional tributes at South Carolina's Coffin Point Cemetery, burial site of a plantation's enslaved laborers, and in the Coosaw Islands (Holloway 2005:201). New designs now used to adorn graves, such as clock faces set at midnight or the time of the individual's death, are modifications of burial traditions, yet maintain the customs of grave offerings. Glass fragments embedded in some modern grave markers are reminiscent of broken glass and ceramic vessels left on burial sites. Although cultural traditions may have been modified, the practices reflect and maintain a link to the heritage of particular African cultures. Creolization of customs perpetuated an element of creed disguised in symbolism (Genovese 1974:197; Vlach 1990:144–145; Davidson 2004a:36).

As grave offerings, ordinary objects took on new significance based on shared experiences, combining African cultural traditions with non-African objects. As observed by John McCarthy (1997:379), “material culture is not a passive product but gives agency to individuals in the creation of meaning in a social and cultural environment.” For the enslaved, the cemetery was one of the few places where African identities could be expressed (Vlach 1991:109). The nature of grave offerings often caused archaeologists unfamiliar with African and African American burial customs to misinterpret the decorations as merely discarded objects. “Far from being garbage, these heaps of objects are offerings or sanctified testimonies; they are material messages of the living intended to placate the potential fury of the deceased” (Vlach 1991:44).

#### **Archaeological Investigations of African American Cemeteries**

Many 18th- and 19th-century African American cemeteries have gone undetected, and few have been investigated archaeologically (SCIway 2006a). The “oldest (late 1600s to 1796) and largest (five to six acres) African descendant cemetery excavated in North America to date” (*Encyclopedia of New York State* 2005) was uncovered in 1991 during the construction of a federal office building in New York City's Lower Manhattan. Between 10,000 and 20,000 free and enslaved individuals of African descent were interred in New York City's African Burial Ground. Archaeological investigations recovered the remains of 419 individuals. Most were found to have been buried in wooden coffins facing east, and many were shrouded with white cloth fastened with copper pins, a practice traced to several African regions. Physical anthropologists reported that skeletal remains showed evidence of severe strain and strenuous work (Joyner 2003:27–28; *Encyclopedia of New York State* 2005; Howson et al. 2005:73–74).

South Carolina's African American Mount Pleasant Cemetery was discovered during the construction of a motel. Forensic anthropologists identified the remains of 36 individuals, and dated the burials to the years between 1840 and 1870. Like those found at New York City's African Burial Ground, the skeletal remains in

South Carolina bore evidence of intense physical labor (SCIway 2006a).

Development of a commuter tunnel through Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1980 exposed a burial ground determined through historical investigation to be the free cemetery of the First African Baptist Church. The church was established in 1809, and interments in the burial ground occurred until the 1840s (Parrington and Wideman 1986:55–56). More than 140 burials were excavated. In some burials, a single coin was found inside the coffin, near the individual's head. Parrington and Wideman (1986:61) speculate that the coins represented payment to return the spirit of the deceased to Africa. McCarthy (1997:374) also reported that the tradition was common in West African burials to fund the deceased's entry to the spirit world. Single shoes were found on the coffin lids of six individuals. Enclosing a shoe within the burial may signify the journey to the spirit world, or an attempt to impede the spirit's return to the world of the living (Parrington and Wideman 1986:61).

A variety of glass and ceramics were found on graves in African American cemeteries, such as the Ox Bottom Road, the Isle Rest, and the Bethlehem African Methodist Episcopal Church cemeteries, all located in Tallahassee, Florida (Morrow 2002:111). In the African American cemetery at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Texas, “[b]ottles, ceramics, knives, plow parts, car parts, and tractor parts were identified as having been placed on top of or within the graves” (Brown 2001:106). African American graves decorated with ceramics and shell were also noted in cemeteries in southern and southern coastal states (Joyner 1991:76). Freedman's Cemetery, where the majority of the deceased from the African-derived population of Dallas, Texas was buried between 1869 and 1907, also reflected evidence of the practice as late as 30 years after the last burials took place. Disruption caused by highway construction and years of neglect dislocated many of the grave decorations (Davidson 2000:233, 2004a:22, 2004b:293).

Although more numerous in the South, African American burial grounds found in New York and Pennsylvania are evidence that Africans and African Americans were buried according to African American traditions in community and church graveyards throughout the United States

(Wright and Hughes 1996:121–122). One such African American burial ground is located in western Illinois, near the site of a once vibrant 19th- and early-20th-century town known as New Philadelphia.

### **The Cemeteries of New Philadelphia**

It was in 1836, during a time of high racial tension in the United States that Frank McWorter, a freedman, mapped out and founded a town on 42 acres of Illinois frontier. McWorter called his town Philadelphia, and sold lots to black, white, and mulatto settlers alike, intending to use the funds to buy family members out of bondage. New Philadelphia, as it came to be known, offered residents fertile, moderately priced land, and economic opportunities (Walker 1983:101–110,118; King 2006a).

The town grew from a small hamlet of 58 residents in 1850 to a community of 160 individuals by 1865, but in 1869 the new Hannibal to Naples railroad bypassed the multiracial town and signaled the demise of New Philadelphia. By 1885, state census enumerators recorded the names of only 87 residents (King 2006a).

According to some reports, New Philadelphia was a racially unbiased community. Yet, the town's dead lie buried in cemeteries separated by racial categories. Many of the community's white residents are buried in the 19th-century Johnson Cemetery, sometimes called the New Philadelphia Cemetery, about a half mile southeast of the New Philadelphia town site (Matteson 1964:21; Cemetery Records of Pike County, Illinois 1979:143–145; Burdick 1992a:20).

New Philadelphia's African American burial ground, also referred to as the McWorter Cemetery or Old Cemetery, occupies a rise above Kiser Creek, about three-quarters of a mile southeast of the town site. Solomon McWorter, son of the town's founder, owned the land on which this cemetery was established. In selecting the site, he may have been influenced by the heritage of West African cultural traditions and a related belief that bodies of water symbolically separate the living world from the realm of the spirits (Ferguson 1992:114). The McWorter family and New Philadelphia's African American townsfolk may also have been aware of beliefs that water guided spirits to peaceful repose, and perhaps

to the realm of African homelands (Matteson 1964:21; Gundaker and McWillie 2005:40; Huttes 2005:7.9).

Helen McWorter Simpson, great-granddaughter of the town's founder, made an excursion to the cemetery with several local residents in the spring of 1964 to find the graves of her ancestors. Mrs. Simpson and her group noted that many of the gravestones lay toppled and broken on the ground. The group recorded headstone inscriptions of 16 individuals, including Frank McWorter, his wife Lucy, seven of their children, and seven others who were residents of New Philadelphia (Matteson 1964:31–34; Simpson 1981:9–10) (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. AN INTERIOR VIEW OF THE NEW PHILADELPHIA AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERY, 2005. (PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM)

Mrs. Simpson (1981:9–10) lamented that accumulated leaves covered the burial ground and obscured gravesites, and she noted little in the way of decorative items on gravesites. Foliage and spring plant growth most likely obscured the many grave decorations, which could have reflected West African burial traditions, including broken ceramics, glass, animal bone, and shells scattered throughout the burial ground (Simpson 1981:9–10). According to a cemetery inventory compiled in 1979, the earliest burial occurred in 1851 (Cemetery Records of Pike County, Illinois 1979:146) with the death of Francis McWorter, son of the town's founder. He was the older brother of Solomon, owner of the land at the

time. James Washington, a McWorter family member who died in 1950, is reported to be the last individual interred in the cemetery. Mrs. Simpson reported that the group found Mr. Washington's grave located close to the cemetery's entrance; his name does not appear on the cemetery inventory, however (Cemetery Records of Pike County, Illinois 1979:146; Simpson 1981:9; Walker 1983:168; Burdick 1992b:4) (Table 1). In 1988, the gravesite of Frank McWorter was placed on the National Register of Historic places by Juliet E. K. Walker, his great-great-granddaughter (Free Frank: New Philadelphia Historic Preservation Foundation 2005).

Michael Hargrave of the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Construction Engineering Research Laboratory, conducted a geophysical survey in the African American cemetery near New Philadelphia in March 2006 to confirm the locations of graves marked by headstones or footstones, and to locate unmarked burial sites (Hargrave, this volume). He used a Geoscan Research FM256 fluxgate gradiometer to record magnetic readings, and a Geoscan Research RM 15 resistance meter was used to detect subsurface features that contain ferrous metal. A metal fence surrounding the site, and the variable effects of large tree roots on moisture retained in the soil impacted the reliability of the geophysical results (Hargrave 2006:1).

Electrical resistance survey suggests the presence of 22 graves (Hargrave 2006:1,3–5). There is a slight discrepancy between the geophysical survey indicating the presence of 22 graves, and the cemetery inventory. According to the inventory, 24 individuals are interred in the burial ground (Cemetery Records of Pike County, Illinois 1979).

Further investigations, such as manually locating additional grave markers currently concealed in the earth, and recording and analyzing the locations of ground depressions that could be unmarked graves, were recommended. Exposing grave markers concealed in the earth; documenting and recording the epitaphs of inscribed grave markers, some of which were severely distorted by the effects of nature; and matching marked graves and grave depressions detected through geophysical investigation with cemetery records to identify burial locations, could provide further details about New Philadelphia residents buried in the African American cemetery.

TABLE 1  
NEW PHILADELPHIA CEMETERY INVENTORY (TRANSCRIBED FROM THE CEMETERY  
RECORDS OF PIKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS 1979:146)

Name	Date of Birth	Date of Death
Judy Armstead	13 May, 1800	12 March, 1906
Tom Clark	-----	-----
Martin Kimbo	-----	20 November, 1907
Aphelia McWorter	-----	31 July, 1915
Commodore McWorter	-----	15 March, 1855
Franke McWorter	-----	7 September, 1854
Francis McWorter	-----	21 June, 1851
Lucy McWorter	1771	25 August, 1870
Lucy McWorter	1888	15 May, 1913
Sarah McWorter	-----	22 March, 1891
Solomon McWorter	-----	7 January, 1879
Squire McWorter	-----	18 December, 1855
Lucy Ann Vond	22 September, 1825	17 April, 1902
Lucretia Vond	4 August, 1864	6 October, 1875
Moses Wagner	22 August, 1815	9 March, 1880
Lettie Walker	-----	28 May, 1862
Louisa Walker	11 February, 1846	1 January, 1875
Oregon Walker	-----	17 September, 1906
Mary Washington	-----	9 January, 1922
Ruby Zenobia Washington	-----	31 July, 1916
Wilbur E. Washington	-----	21 May, 1910
Christena Watts	21 April, 1892	15 February, 1916

A walkover survey was also conducted in March 2006 to locate and record cemetery artifacts. No invasive archaeological excavation occurred. The artifacts were left in place, and their locations were mapped and recorded using an electronic total station (a Nikon DTM 352 and TDS Recon data collector). During the walkover survey, artifacts were found scattered throughout the site, their original locations disturbed through years of human and probable animal activity, as well as acts of nature. While the cemetery appeared to be untended, the condition of the site may be related to an African American tradition of burying the dead in a natural setting (Center for Historic Preservation 2001).

No complete vessels were found at the site, but many of the numerous glass fragments found throughout the burial ground appeared to be containers and food preservation jars manufactured in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, evidenced by the presence of mechanically produced mold seams and suction scars on some of the glass vessels. The presence of peach- and purple-

colored glass fragments corresponds to Vlach's (1991:112) report of finding colored glass on graves of the enslaved on a Georgia plantation. The numerous glass fragments found at New Philadelphia are consistent with those found in Freedman's Cemetery of Dallas, Texas (Clow et al. 2000:450).

Light reflecting objects, such as glass, mirrors, and porcelain, believed to represent the spirit of the deceased, are associated with a BaKongo tradition that favored luminescent white grave decorations, associating the color with the spirit world (Vlach 1991:45; Morrow 2002:105–106). Two white porcelain sherds were noted in New Philadelphia's cemetery (King 2006b). The base of a milk glass vessel embossed with a relief swirl design found at the site (King 2006b) is reminiscent of milk glass fragments found in other African American burial grounds (Clow et al. 2000:453; Morrow 2002:106). Such findings may reflect the continuing development of West African traditions. As Morrow (2002:106) remarks, "the gleaming whiteness of milk glass,

the sparkle of broken edges of clear glass in the sun ... remind the visitor of the spark of the ever-present spirit.”

A broken, amber-colored glass vessel impressed with a sunburst design present in the cemetery (King 2006b) may be associated with another West African tradition passed through generations from the enslaved who brought it from their homeland. In the BaKongo culture, the setting sun symbolized death, and the rising sun rebirth, indicating that life was an unbroken circle that did not end with death (Creel 1988:52,308–309).

The design could also be interpreted to represent spokes of a wheel. Objects symbolizing travel, such as wheels depicted on a 20th-century grave monument, can be interpreted as a means to speed the soul of the deceased to the spirit world (Thompson 1983:139). Wheels are also alluded to in the spiritual hymn “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot!” (Perkins 1922:237):

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Comin’ for to carry me home!  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Comin’ for to carry me home!

Grey Gundaker and Judith McWillie (2005:195) point out that other spiritual hymns imply an additional meaning for the wheel. Some traditional African American spirituals equate the absolution of sin to the turning of the wheel, such as “Roll, Jordan, Roll” and the refrain in “Mary Wore Three Lengths of Chain.”

Three large mussel shells, from freshwater mussels present in nearby rivers, were also found in New Philadelphia’s cemetery. These may correspond to African American traditions of decorating graves with seashells. For many captive Africans and African Americans on North American plantations, sea shells were associated with symbols of the realm of spirits. According to tradition, shells enclosed the presence of the spirit (Vlach 1990:143; Thompson 2005:312). Placing shells on graves is also reported to symbolize the “middle passage” that brought the enslaved from Africa, and may represent a longing to return to Africa (Creel 1988:319). For African descendants born into American slavery, the romantic ideal of returning to Africa may instead have represented a yearning for

freedom and a release from bondage (Brighton 2006, pers. comm.).

Since a number of West African traditions held that spirits continued to hunger and thirst after death, water was often poured on graves during dry spells, and food was often left on graves. Sometimes burial rites included animal offerings. These practices were also carried out in some African American cemeteries. White chickens were a favored tribute for the color’s association with the spirit world. According to some African traditions, the sacrifice, food, and water served to satisfy the spirits and encourage them to remain in repose (Creel 1988:316; Vlach 1990:144; Washington 2005:176).

A number of animal bones were found in New Philadelphia’s burial ground, including those of a fetal or newborn hoofed animal, perhaps a lamb (Martin 2006, pers. comm.). The presence of a lamb bone could be interpreted as an acceptance of Christianity and reference to the Lamb of God (Shackel, 2006 pers. comm.). Other faunal remains that may have been placed in the cemetery included those of an adult hoofed animal, and eastern cottontail rabbit (Martin 2006, pers. comm.). It is not known if the animal remains were intentionally left as grave offerings, or if the remains are associated with another activity, however.

The custom of burying the dead to face east, practiced in many African American burial grounds, is attributed to West African traditions that burials should follow the path of the rising sun, and the Christian tenet that individuals should face east to witness Christ’s coming on Judgment Day (Creel 1988:320; McCarthy 1997:374). Contrary to that practice, New Philadelphia’s burials appear to face west, since headstone inscriptions face that direction. The grave markers may be directed west toward the cemetery’s entrance and the path into the site most likely followed by town residents. The nearby Johnson cemetery, which contains graves of a number of European Americans associated with New Philadelphia, also has a west entrance and many grave epitaphs facing that west-side entranceway (Fennell, 2007 pers. comm.).

The direction of interments in New Philadelphia’s African American cemetery may be attributed to the continuing development of certain African beliefs about, and practices of



orienting burials toward a body of water, in this instance, toward Kiser Creek, less than a quarter mile away. Similarly, a few interments in the African American Midland Cemetery in Pennsylvania are also oriented to the west, toward the Susquehanna River. Some African American traditions also linked this belief and practice to a concept that water guided the spirit back to Africa (Afrolumens Project 2006).

Star-shaped metal grave decorations inscribed “Veteran 61–65” found in the African American cemetery near New Philadelphia were placed by the Grand Army of the Republic, a group of Civil War veterans active from 1866 until 1949. They are reminders that several New Philadelphia residents were military veterans (Figure 2). For example, Squire McWorter, grandson of the town’s founder, served in the 38th Regiment of

the United States Colored Infantry during the Civil War (Walker 1983:164; Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System 2006; Knight 2006).

It is not yet clear where Squire McWorter is buried, but according to the 1979 inventory, Martin Kimbo, identified as an “old soldier,” and Thomas Clark, noted as a Civil War veteran, are buried in New Philadelphia’s African American Cemetery. Research continues for information about Martin Kimbo, but it is known that Thomas Clark, like Squire McWorter, served in the 38th Regiment of the U.S. Colored Infantry. Clark was a member of the Quincy chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic. He died in the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Home in Quincy, Illinois, 2 May, 1907 (Cemetery Records of Pike County, Illinois 1979:146; Northcott and Brooks 2003).

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources analyzed the plant life of New Philadelphia’s African American cemetery in August 2001. Natural heritage biologists identified 79 different species. The daisy, rose, and grass families were most prevalent, and are also the most common plant families found in the state of Illinois. Many of the plants in the cemetery were noted to be typical cultivated graveyard plants, such as lily of the valley, daylily, blackberry lily, and peony. No endangered species were found (Corgiat 2001:1–12). According to some African American traditions, aromatic flowers were planted to coax spirits to remain in repose within the burial grounds (Morrow 2002:107).

Trees often also held spiritual meaning in African American cemeteries. One belief held that tree roots anchored the spiritual world beneath the earth to the material world above ground. In many regions in Africa, trees planted on graves symbolized the spirit’s journey to the domain of the dead below ground, and represent the ever-present spirit of the dead. According to BaKongo beliefs, trees were planted on graves as a tribute, to shelter the final resting place of the dead, and as a symbol of immortality (Morrow 2002:107; Thompson 2005:139,311). Trees in New Philadelphia’s graveyard include red cedar, various types of oak, Ohio buckeye, hickory, black cherry, apple, and elm (Corgiat 2001:1–12). Cedars are among trees frequently found in African American cemeteries (Wright and Hughes 1996:261).



FIGURE 2. GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC CIVIL WAR MARKER LOCATED IN THE NEW PHILADELPHIA AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERY, 2005. (PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM.)

## Conclusion

New Philadelphia's African American cemetery is historically significant as the final resting place of Frank McWorter, founder of the first town platted and registered by an African American (Walker 1983:101–107; King 2006a). This burial ground appears to contain material culture and a landscape shaped by the heritage of African beliefs and practices, as well as by European influences.

Kiser Creek separates the cemetery from the town site of New Philadelphia, and the graveyard's location may be in keeping with an African American tradition of locating burial grounds near bodies of water (Gundaker and McWillie 2005:40). Contrary to some conventions, burials in the cemetery appear to face west instead of east, and this may be attributed to the custom of burying the dead facing toward water, which was believed to separate the living world from the realm of the dead, and guide the spirit back to Africa (Gundaker and McWillie 2005:40).

Fragments of glass and ceramics found throughout the cemetery are consistent with grave decorations found in other African American burial grounds, particularly in the southern United States. As in other African American burial grounds, porcelain and milk glass fragments are present in New Philadelphia's cemetery (Joyner 1991:76; Brown 2001:106; Morrow 2002:106, 111). An amber base impressed with a sunburst or wheel design found in the burial ground may be a symbol of immortality, forgiveness of sin, or travel to the spirit world (Thompson 1983:139; Creel 1988:52,308–309; Gundaker and McWillie 2005:195). Shells, symbolizing immortality and a spiritual return to Africa, which decorate many African American graves, are also found in New Philadelphia's cemetery (Creel 1988:319; Thompson 2005:312). The presence of animal bones may be associated with evolving traditions associated with certain African beliefs and practices of leaving food to nourish the spirits (Creel 1988:316; Vlach 1990:144).

The final resting place of New Philadelphia's African American townsfolk reflects aspects of vibrant and evolving traditions related to the heritage of African cultures impacted by the transatlantic slave trade. This burial ground also exhibits the influences of European and American

customs integrated over time, creating its own unique character. As Joyner (1984:143) explains, such developments and combinations of particular African customs with new cultural practices represent African Americans' "creative response" to a social environment in which they adapted and responded to the contingencies of Christianity, slavery, and racism. Despite merging old and new burial customs and traditions, New Philadelphia's burial ground, like other African American cemeteries, reflects aspects of African beliefs of a spirit life beyond death, and the tenet that, as Herskovits (1958:197) observed, "life must have a proper ending."

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