ETHNOGRAPHY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND BURIAL PRACTICES AMONG COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA BLACKS

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Black burial practices, especially in the South Carolina coastal regions, are not particularly well known. This is true more so archaeologically than ethnographically. Recently, the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina conducted some limited archaeological testing which revealed some important data that has lead to a further examination of nineteenth and twentieth century burial practices. Ethnography has provided the stimulus for this little known important aspect of black culture.

The Institute has been intimately involved with the development of the Charles Towne Landing (1670) Site since it was first purchased by the State and the decision was made to create at this location a Tricentennial Park. Stanley South of the Institute staff was the principal investigator of the archaeological work from the fall of 1968 until the fall of 1969. The writer was co-investigator of the initial project and Richard Polhemus, formerly of the Institute staff also has had minor involvement at the site. All members of the staff have been called upon on numerous occasions to "clear" various areas archaeologically prior to further construction activities at the park.

We were all pleased with the purchase the State had made because totally by accident the 250 acre piece of real estate happened to contain, in addition to the Landing Site, an additional 8,000 years of human history! Included was an important Indian ceremonial center, some Revolutionary War fortifications and an old plantation complex ruins as well as the present day plantation buildings and gardens. What could be a more appropriate birthday present to the State on its 300th birthday anniversary than a development of such an historical treasure? The outcome of this tricentennial park is far from being close to what was envisioned by us but on the other hand a considerable amount of scientific data was recovered by the archaeologist including the topic of interest here.

It has already been pointed out that prior to any subsequent earth moving operation at the site the Institute is to be notified. This usually requires that one of us visit the site and do some testing, follow the trenching machine or whatever. Based on the field inspection plus discussion with all of the Institute personnel a decision is made regarding the fate of the area in question. In the spring of 1972 we were called regarding a two or three acre area that was being considered for a "touch and hold" children's zoo. A man was dispatched from the Institute to check out the area and he returned reporting that there didn't appear to be anything there other than some late nineteenth and twentieth junk scattered throughout the area. South and the writer both remembered the area and had written the location off as being late period garbage of no interest. We had, it now seems in retrospect, been "tuned in" to seventeenth and eighteenth century material in 1968. That turned out to be an unwise decision.
FIGURE 1: The remains of the grave goods placed on top of a burial.

FIGURE 2: A modern example of the random layout of grave sites in a coastal cemetery.
The Tricentennial Park continued with its plan for the development of the zoo. A week or so later a young man and his wife visited the Institute and they were both rather perturbed with our decision to allow the zoo in that particular location. Our discussions with them brought into focus that the proposed zoo would be placed right in the center of a Black Cemetery. His observations were, indeed, interesting and it turned out that the existence of the so called "junk" was what gave him the clue to the presence of the cemetery. This young couple was Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Day who were in the area studying Black crafts on a Smithsonian Institution Grant. They had spent almost a year studying the Blacks of the Carolina Coast and had gained a considerable amount of information regarding Black Culture including burial practices.

Based on this informative discussion, the writer and a crew of three visited the proposed children's zoo location for the purpose of authenticating the burial ground and determining its perimeter. Several exploratory trenches 2 feet by 50 to 100 feet in length were excavated. These explorations were designed to locate the grave excavations as well as the extent of the cemetery area. The trenches were shallow, going only to the limit of the surface disturbance. Over 100 grave pit excavations were located by this technique. A considerable amount of this late nineteenth and early twentieth century "junk" was located throughout the exploratory trenching.

In addition to finding as many grave locations as possible we were also interested in examining one of the grave pit features to verify that the features were actually burials. This excavation found the grave fill to contain human bone and grave offerings throughout. Quickly this puzzle was solved when it became apparent that the grave excavation had cut through at least three other graves thus accounting for the human bone and offerings that had extended down through the grave fill. It was also noteworthy that all of the burials intruded on were oriented differently.

The grave pit dimensions were 2.4 feet by 6.7 feet and 4 feet deep. Depth to the top of the coffin was 3.1 feet. The casket was held together with cut nails, possessed iron handles and plated ornaments plus a "bust window". The individual was placed on his back, hands crossed over the pelvis with the head oriented in a westerly direction. Over each eye a penny had been placed, one dating 1870 and the other 1882.

There seemed to this writer to be many unusual aspects to this cemetery and the individual burials, at least when compared to Native American and White burials. First of all there were the grave goods which were placed on top of the grave as well as the nature of the items chosen (Fig. 1). Also, the graves themselves seemed to be placed throughout the cemetery with no order and many of the graves intruded through burials previously interred (Fig. 2). There were also questions pertaining to marking and care of the graves and cemetery.
FIGURE 3: Grave offerings recovered from an excavated burial from Charles Towne Landing.
None of these graves was marked or if they were the markers had not survived.

At this point further consultation with the ethnographer provided a number of answers. The burial area is a special place of utmost importance to the Black community that is controlled by many spirits. These spirits are readily available and an individual may communicate with them at some particular place in the home or perhaps in the woods. One must, for example, obtain permission to enter the grave yard and to enter without it would be unthinkable. The most important aspect of the burial area or for that matter the whole burial phenomenon is the importance attributed to the final resting place of the deceased spirit. It is imperative that the deceased be buried with the spirits of the other members of the family. The penalty for not being interred with the family spirits is, indeed, serious and results in a wandering spirit having no final resting place. There is not one other thing more important in one's life than to insure one's place in the family cemetery. During the nineteenth century and early twentieth, the burial areas were not associated with church yards. Later, when the proper conditions were met and the cemetery was transferred to the church yard the fear of being banished from the family final resting place gave the clergyman a tremendous hold on his parishioners.

What we see then is an emphasis on the burial area as a final resting place for the family spirits of the deceased. Perpetual care was not significant nor was a carefully laid out arrangement of graves. In fact, this investigation at the Charles Town Landing Site (and since then elsewhere) illustrated clearly that even intruding a new grave into others was acceptable and may well have been desired. Mr. Day also pointed out that small structures used for prayer may have been associated with the cemetery complex.

Typical of most all early Black graves in Coastal South Carolina and in the interior as well is the wide assortment of grave offerings that may be seen on top of and around the grave (Fig. 3). This material consists mainly of cups, saucers, bowls, dishes, tumblers, kerosene lamps, clocks, medicine bottles, pitchers, various cut glass pieces and just about any other household item imaginable plus coins. There also may be many pretty sand shells with the conch being the most popular displayed around the grave. Near the turn of the century when concrete became accessible some of the grave offerings were pressed into homemade monuments prior to its hardening (Fig. 4). The same was done in the slabs that were sometimes poured over the grave. Parsons (1923) has an excellent observation from South Carolina regarding burials:

... the cup and saucer used in the last sickness should be placed on the grave. The medicine—bottles are placed there, too; and if any medicine is left in the bottle, the bottle should be turned upside down, and the cork loosened, "so
FIGURE 4: A homemade monument with a grave offering (plate) pressed into the concrete.

FIGURE 5: Two inhumations marked with stakes or boards.
med'cine suck up de grave". On most graves a cup or piece of cut glass, bottles, and quite often a lamp, may be seen. According to some, it is "somet'in de bes' in de house, not partikler belong to dead," which is placed on the grave. On the grave, too will be placed cut flowers, and conch-shell, "jes' a dressin' up de grave." ... anything in the house, "what have glass, cover up or tu'n back on the wall; an' stop de clock from runnin'". Not to take these measures is bad luck.

... graves scattered without symmetry, and often without head-stones or head boards, or sticks, but invariably dug east and west, the head to the west (Parsons 1923: 214-15).

Items recovered from the burial at the Charles Towne Landing Site may be seen in Figure 3. Medicine bottles are very common including one favorite item, Carters Little Liver Pill containers. Regarding how the various items are chosen for placement on the grave, Mrs. Day provided an unusual story. She reported that the mother of a deceased girl had told her that after the funeral she thought all was done properly at the grave but for several nights she was restless and was unable to sleep. Finally, her daughter came to her in a dream and said everything was OK but that she had forgotten to leave her hand lotion on the grave and she needed it. The mother then hurriedly took care of this overlooked item by placing the lotion on the grave. That solved the problem, thus putting an end to her insomnia. There are numerous other stories that could be told to illustrate the importance of the spirit world.

Another point of interest to the archaeologist is the concern with sympathetic magic, particularly with respect to hair, nail clippings, teeth and possibly severed fingers, limbs, etc. All of these items were considered representative of the individual (Herkovits 1941: 238). The face-down burial, especially among children, is another phenomenon the archaeologist might have trouble interpreting. Burying an infant face-down is a technique of tricking malevolent spirits. Among the Geechee Negroes of Georgia it is believed that "if you cannot raise your children, bury on its face the last one to die and those coming after will live" (Herkovits 1941: 189).

The writer has observed several dozen Black burial locations during the past two years ranging from large heavily used cemeteries to small forgotten plots now almost taken over by the woods. All of those observed exhibit the traits discussed earlier in the paper. Many of these practices are no longer carried out, however the evidence for them having been done usually shows up if the area is given a careful scrutiny.
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Many of these practices clearly have African origins which is in itself of interest but an area already studied extensively most notably by Herskovits. The emphasis here has been primarily with the archaeological aspect. It is also of interest that in many areas today in the Carolina Coastal regions these old burial practices are still very much alive. For example, within the present city limits of Charleston, South Carolina exists a Black cemetery located in a Black community in which all of the discussed traits are still being observed. Grave offerings not excluding coins remain undisturbed by the community including the children.

It is also of significance that the practices appear to be persisting much longer along the sea coast regions than they have in the interior regions. Driving inland from the coast it appears that the further one gets from the sea the older these practices become. Many of the cemeteries that can be seen today that are in church yards and are near a white cemetery tend to take on the characteristics of the latter. It is difficult to distinguish between the two - no grave offerings, no shell decorations - and there is order to the arrangement of graves as well as grass and perpetual care to some degree. These cemeteries with the "new look" are usually the result of a clean up and if the grounds are carefully examined, deep in the grass may be found an occasional medicine bottle, shell or fragment of cut glass. With a little more effort one can look near the edge of the cemetery at the piles of old floral arrangements, jars, and other related paraphernalia and find deep in these heaps the broken remains of the former grave offerings that have been raked away.

Along with the floral decorations now placed on the burial it appears as if styrofoam objects may be taking over to a degree. It is not uncommon to see clocks and an occasional guitar dressing up the grave.

Monuments or grave markers vary considerably. Some had none, stakes and boards were common (Figs. 5 & 6) but may not last and the most recent innovation has been the ones hand-made from concrete with the inscription put in with a stick or the finger before the concrete hardens. Occasionally commercially-made monuments of granite are seen. In graves from early in this century it was common to see grave pits lined with brick then covered over with a concrete slab forming a subterranean vault with the name of the deceased written in the concrete along with shell ornamentation. It is also common to see grave offerings placed in the concrete. One was located near the coast that had made use of a discarded toilet tank for a monument (Fig. 7). Another example from Georgia included the use of a toilet bowl placed on the grave as a planter (Wightman and Cate 1955: 22). The possibilities are unlimited and seem to vary regionally.

This brief encounter with Black burials has pointed up several things the archaeologist working in the Southeast should be aware of. Nineteenth and twentieth century "junk" found scattered in the woods may be an indi-
FIGURE 6: The remains of a carved wooden head marker from an early grave site.

FIGURE 7: An inverted toilet tank used as a grave monument.
cation of a burial location. There need not be markers but even if there were and they were only stakes they can still be found if searched for. The graves will not have regular orientation and intrusion into one another is common. While excavating, location of isolated teeth or appendages may well be attributed to a substitute burial and a face down burial was probably done to trick a malevolent spirit. It is also possible to find the remains of a small prayer structure associated with the cemetery.

The Black burial complex is extremely important to the archaeologist. Being able to recognize the clues which indicate a cemetery have already been used by this investigator. Further study of these practices will add considerably to our understanding of the plantation era and Black history in general. This is also a classic example of how ethnography can be used by the archaeologist to interpret cultural phenomena.

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