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## GRAVE MARKERS TIED TO BIRMINGHAM'S PAST: AN OVERVIEW OF CEMETERIES IN THE MAGIC CITY

Sarah Coley

**B**irmingham, Alabama is a post-Civil War town rich in history. While the city proudly displays such historical landmarks as the 4th Avenue Black Business District and the 16th Street Baptist Church, its equally important but decidedly less famous history is often walked or driven past. Birmingham's quiet history lies buried in its graveyards—somber, quiet places that are often upstaged by less remote reminders of the past. Although they may be often overshadowed by modern urban development, these cemeteries nevertheless have important and profound stories to tell us about Birmingham's past. From the city's economic and industrial elite to its first cemeteries for Black residents, each one tells its own story, and each grave marker narrates a moment in Birmingham's history from an often-overlooked perspective. Here follows a survey of Birmingham's four main public cemeteries—Oak Hill, Shadowlawn, Elmwood, and Greenwood—as well as an investigation into the lives of some of the historical figures who rest within them. Personal interviews, visitations to each cemetery site, cemetery records and archives reveal that Birmingham's cemeteries hold important information about who was valued by society at various points in the city's past, and how that value has been reflected in the memorializing and laying to rest of its citizens.

Oak Hill Cemetery was originally intended as a burial ground for Birmingham's elite. This cemetery is the final resting place for prominent individuals involved in Birmingham's founding: Sylvester Steele, Thomas Peters, James Ware, William Nabers, William Mudd, and Alburto Martin. City planner and developer Henry Caldwell, who owned the Elyton Land Company and sold the first <sup>2</sup>1.5 acres to build the cemetery, is also entombed here.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Caldwell, graves for

“ Although they may be often overshadowed by modern urban development, these cemeteries nevertheless have important and profound stories to tell us about Birmingham's past. ”

Birmingham's foremost industrial developers and business owners—Henry DeBardeleben, Edward Tutwiler, and James Sloss—are also located here. Edward Tutwiler was a railroad and mining engineer and developer, Henry DeBardeleben inherited Red Mountain Iron and Coal Company,<sup>2</sup> and James Sloss founded Birmingham's Sloss Furnaces, now a National Historic Landmark and Industrial Museum. These men were crucial to the construction of Birmingham, which was completed after the Civil War to make the city a southern hub for iron production. Caldwell provided the land, Sloss built the iron furnaces, and DeBardeleben's and Tutwiler's businesses provided the coal, iron ore, and limestone required to make iron, as well the rail lines to transport it.

Oak Hill has several other persons of interest residing within it. Kate Duncan Smith, the woman who pioneered the School for Appalachian Children, and Richard Powell McAnnally, the first male child born in Birmingham, are two less elite but still notable persons buried there. Idyl King Sorsby, designer of the flag of Birmingham, has a tomb there, as does Philip Mock, who survived the sinking of the R.M.S. Titanic. Louise Wooster, the famous madam who “saved Birmingham,”<sup>3</sup> has



Mausoleum at Oak Hill Cemetery. Photo by author.

one of the most recognizable graves in Oak Hill. Many of the workers who labored at Sloss are also buried in this cemetery, which also contains a small collection of Freemason and veteran graves.

Some of Birmingham's less prominent citizens are also buried in Oak Hill. In the late 1800s, a small section of the cemetery was partitioned off from the rest. Nicknamed "Potter's Field," this plot section was designated as burial ground for indigent workers until approximately 1890. Standing at the front gate and facing the caretaker's house,

"Potter's Field" is visible in the back left of the cemetery. Prior to the creation of "Potter's Field," Birmingham's less affluent citizens had been buried under what is now the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and the Birmingham City Zoo. Oak Hill is also the final resting place for many of Birmingham's miners and farm workers, who are buried in a plot owned by the Italian Benevolence Society.<sup>4</sup> As it was originally intended for Birmingham's white elite, Oak Hill followed a segregationist policy of white-only burials. Desegregated, or "mixed burials," only occurred in Oak Hill after desegregation was not only codified into federal law, but also finally enforced. Arthur Brown, a prominent Black surgeon, was the first Black man to be buried there, followed by Civil Rights Leader Fred Shuttlesworth.

The cemetery's architecture displays wealth and luxury in both the materials selected and the design features utilized. The caretaker's building is the main building on site and exhibits the Tudor Revival style of architecture. Oak Hill has no fewer than three large mausoleums, all of which are intricately detailed. Headstones and markers within the cemetery display the best materials available for gravestones and reflect a high degree of professional craftsmanship. None of the monuments, gravestones, markers, or headstones in Oak Hill are handmade or homemade, and even the oldest markers, although significantly worn, show signs of highly skilled craftsmanship.

In contrast to the well-kept grounds of Oak Hill, Shadowlawn Cemetery has been in a perpetual state of financial hardship since its construction in 1889. As a result, its grounds are less well maintained and its cemetery records more disorganized. Cemetery records, which keep a record of burial rosters and plot assignments, are missing from Shadowlawn, and current caretakers believe that they were either never generated or simply misplaced and forgotten over time.<sup>5</sup> John Lanier,

a representative of the Shadow Lawn Memorial Gardens Maintenance and Perpetual Care Society, helps with the daily upkeep of Shadowlawn and works to restore the hillside cemetery to honor those who rest there. Mr. Lanier explains to guests who visit that he feels a personal responsibility to Shadowlawn as his family has a plot there. Even though many of the paper records have been lost to time, Mr. Lanier works extensively to provide information to the public about the cemetery's history.<sup>6</sup>



Shadowlawn Cemetery. Photo by author.

Unlike Oak Hill's acreage, which came from the Elyton Land Company holdings, the land upon which Shadowlawn sits was

originally privately owned by an individual: William Mims, a Confederate soldier. Those familiar with Shadowlawn believe that it is possible that Mims was actually Major William J. Mims, member of the 43rd Alabama Infantry Regiment and an officer in Moody's Battalion.<sup>7</sup> The 43rd Regiment faced some of the worst conditions and participated in some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. Civil War records recount that the 43rd survived the winter in Cumberland Gap, fought at Chickamauga, lost the majority of their men at Saylor's [Sailors] Creek, and were on the battlefield at Appomattox when General Lee surrendered.<sup>8</sup> During the course of the war, Major Mims commanded both Black and white soldiers who fought and died together. Those familiar with Shadowlawn believe that Major Mims's wartime experiences likely influenced the direction his life would take after the war.

Upon his return to Alabama in 1865, and perhaps reflecting on his experiences as the commanding officer of both Black and white soldiers, Mims realized that former slaves and soldiers who lived in Alabama had nowhere they could be properly buried. In 1889, he deeded part of the land he owned for \$1. To ensure that his wishes were followed, the sale deed specifically designated the land as a "colored" burial ground. Shadowlawn thus became Birmingham's first cemetery dedicated for the burial of Black people.<sup>9</sup> The particulars of the deed allocated an original thirty acres of land for Shadowlawn with an additional ten acres to be annexed later. Although Mims is believed to be buried in Oak Hill or Elmwood rather than in Shadowlawn, several other families and individuals integral to the development of Birmingham are buried in in the cemetery he helped found.

One such family, the Shortridges, funded several of the Children's Marches during the Civil Rights Movement, and repeatedly bonded Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. out of jail.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Shortridge was a World War II veteran, held a degree in finance, and owned at least two businesses. Birmingham

historians believe that both of Mr. Shortridge's businesses were located in Birmingham's 4th Avenue Black Business District. In addition to the Shortridges, other notable Shadowlawn residents include Lucinda Robey, a former NAACP board member and high school principal, and Adolphus Theodore Shields—better known in life as D.T. Shields, grandfather of Michelle Robinson, better known as the former First Lady Michelle Obama.<sup>11</sup>

While those familiar with Shadowlawn and its history know that the cemetery played a central role in Birmingham history, the non-profit tasked with its upkeep has only received a small grant from the city of Birmingham and the city has never fully subsidized the cemetery's care. Much of the cemetery is overgrown, and several of the markers are broken—many of those markers read 'gone but not forgotten.' Intent on not allowing them to be forgotten, the Shadowlawn Memorial Gardens Maintenance and Perpetual Care Society recognizes the importance of Shadowlawn and works hard to secure funding and remembrance from the greater Birmingham community, both of which are needed to rehabilitate and maintain the cemetery. Currently, the non-profit relies solely on volunteer donations and labor to care for the cemetery; they are always seeking assistance and appreciate anyone from the community who volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

“ Three of the four victims of the 1963 bombing attack on the 16th Street Baptist Church rest in Greenwood Cemetery—Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins. ”

Along with Shadowlawn, Greenwood Cemetery has also struggled with incomplete records and neglect, caused by a fire<sup>13</sup> and by the bankruptcy of the cemetery's primary caretaker, Poole Funeral Home, in 1986.<sup>14</sup> Even without detailed records, those familiar with Greenwood know of Poole Funeral Home's complicated history with the cemetery. Prior to 1986, Poole Funeral Home owned acreage in the cemetery and served as its primary caretaker.<sup>15</sup> Records from Poole date from 1936 even though many grave markers date to the earlier 1900s,<sup>16</sup> and several legal complaints pertaining to grave recycling and neglect were brought against the business. Most of the complaints brought against Poole Funeral Home were settled, and the others were withdrawn.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, after all the litigation settled, Poole Funeral Home was bankrupt, and Greenwood was neglected. The graves and the people entombed at Greenwood remained without any caretakers to tend their final resting place until the city of Birmingham assumed responsibility for the cemetery's maintenance in 1990.

Three of the four victims of the 1963 bombing attack on the 16th Street Baptist Church rest in Greenwood Cemetery—Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins. As a result of Greenwood's circumstances, Sarah Collins Rudolph wanted to relocate her sister, Addie Mae, to a different cemetery. Sarah Collins Rudolph was the fifth little girl trapped in the 16th Street Baptist Church during the bombing attack, which she survived. When Rudolph had her sister's casket exhumed, she received devastating news. Examination of the casket revealed that instead of fourteen-year-old Addie Mae's body, the casket held a stranger's body wearing dentures.<sup>18</sup> Rudolph was shocked and began the search for her sister's remains but discovered that the records that could have helped her locate Addie Mae were destroyed by the cemetery's fire. Rudolph was ultimately unable to locate Addie Mae's remains for nineteen years. In 2017, *ABC 33/40* stepped

in to assist Rudolph with her investigation. Through the use of ground sensing equipment, Randy Fields and Mike Mattingly from Advanced Radar Technologies located a child sized casket on the other side of Addie Mae's original tombstone. Rather than being buried in front of her grave marker, Addie Mae had been laid to rest behind it, alongside her friend, Cynthia Wesley.<sup>19</sup> Upon learning of the location of her sister's remains, Rudolph decided to leave Addie Mae at peace next to Cynthia in Greenwood.



Monument to the four little girls killed in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, Greenwood Cemetery. Photo by author.

In addition to the three girls who were murdered in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, Greenwood is also the final resting place for several veterans. The veterans are located towards the back edge of the cemetery. Most of their graves are arranged in rows and their grave markers mirror those found in Arlington National Cemetery—stark white markers with a dark engraved cross centered at the top, the service members' names, rank, and the name of the conflict they served in flank a small, paved ceremonial promenade. Although Shadowlawn and Oak Hill have similar veteran markers randomly placed throughout their grounds, Greenwood is the only cemetery to have a formally arranged promenade. The promenade has a 21-step entrance flagged by stones. There are eight poles in total on each side of the promenade entrance which traditionally should fly flags. Similarly, wreaths should be placed on certain tombstones but those are also missing. Although Greenwood is unique among Birmingham's public cemeteries in displaying a formal promenade, it lacks the full traditional regalia.

About ten miles away, on the west side of Birmingham, the eternal residents of Elmwood Cemetery enjoy regularly manicured, well-kept grounds; Elmwood is also the final resting place for several notable individuals. One of the most famous is William Paul Bryant Sr., best known in the state of Alabama as Paul 'Bear' Bryant, recognized for his 25-year tenure as the head football coach at the University of Alabama. While Bryant left his mark as a cultural icon, another Elmwood resident played an iconic role in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1970, seven years after the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, Army Corporal Bill Henry Terry Jr. sacrificed his life in Vietnam; to save his fellow soldiers, he dove on a grenade, bodily absorbing the impact and projectiles from the blast.<sup>20</sup> After his body was flown back home to Birmingham, his widow and mother sought a burial plot for him in Elmwood Cemetery. Elmwood, however, refused to sell them a plot. A

representative from the cemetery told them that only white families purchased plots from Elmwood, with contracts specifically stipulating the “prohibition of Negro burials.”<sup>21</sup> With Corporal Terry’s primary choice of burial denied him, his family buried him in Shadowlawn instead, yet they also resisted this discriminatory practice. Terry’s widow and mother reached out to their white pastor, Father Farrell, for help. In retaliation, the KKK targeted the Terry family with acts of terror and vandalism.

After many marches, petitions, offers of plot donations from families who owned Elmwood plots, and a ruling from 11th Federal Circuit Court Judge Seybourn Lynne, Corporal Terry’s family was finally allowed to legally move his remains from Shadowlawn to Elmwood. Following a long procession from Shadowlawn to Elmwood, Corporal Terry’s brothers in arms, family, and friends laid him to rest in Elmwood with full military honors. The Terry family’s fight to end discriminatory burial practices opened a pathway for others. Thirty-seven years later, in 2007, this time without a fight and without having to endure acts of violence, another family moved their loved ones remains from Shadowlawn to Elmwood. Denise McNair, one of the four victims of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, who had been buried in Shadowlawn, was moved in a quiet family ceremony to Elmwood, where she currently rests.

The architecture of each cemetery reflects the social and economic inequalities at the time of its founding, imparting important information about who is buried within and how those individuals were viewed by the society of their time. In addition to sometimes sharing or housing relocated residents, Greenwood and Shadowlawn share similar tomb architecture. Both contain artisanal tombstones or markers, and several instances of homemade or handmade styles of markers. The latter are made of cement, cement and tile, wood, or

wood and cardboard. While it is clear that the handmade or homemade grave markers were made with love and attention to detail, the handmade architectural style is a significant and notable deviation from the tomb architecture of Oak Hill and Elmwood. In both Oak Hill and Elmwood there is a predominance of luxury headstone or tombstone material and an emphasis on professional craftsmanship. This deviation reflects the social and economic gaps at the time and is also evidence of historically discriminatory burial practices.

Cemeteries reflect social reality at the time of their construction, and even though the history they reflect has long since passed, there is still much to learn from the lives of the individuals buried within them. Careful examination of each public cemetery in Birmingham imparts a unique understanding of their respective histories. For much of Birmingham’s history, Black and white residents were unable to share burial grounds, and it was not until the construction of Shadowlawn that Birmingham’s Black residents were given a space dedicated specifically for the memorializing and laying to rest of their citizens. In the architecture, grounds, and upkeep of each cemetery is revealed the socially determined nature of how a city cares for its deceased. Understanding this history, and the lives of those who eternally rest within these cemeteries, thus provides a rich perspective that complements the many other historical markers in Birmingham. A survey of these cemeteries takes the viewer on a journey through memorable, painful, inspiring, and challenging moments in the history of the ‘Magic City.’

## ENDNOTES

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