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Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
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Download date	2026-06-17 13:53:59
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/23951

Burying the Peculiar Institution: An Analysis of West Tennessee Slave Culture and Religion through Cemeteries

Lora Terry

The cemetery, both for the folklorist and the historian, serves as a window into the artistic, social, and religious pattern of a locality. Cemeteries demonstrate population change and balance; illustrate economic affluence; and reflect traditional values, legal regulation, and religious theory. The formal disposal of the deceased is a universal practice, and thus should be an essential consideration in cultural study. Yet despite the fact that “There can be few other subjects as untouched or as promising as the geographical study of burial practices,” cemeteries, particularly those of the Antebellum South, remains a widely untapped historical resource.¹ Perhaps even more unusual is that throughout the study of slave history, there has been surprisingly little scholarly research directed towards the mortuary practices of slaves, something that would be extremely valuable considering that archaeological data can buttress scholarly speculation.² This lack of research is most likely due to three major reasons. First, sans exhumation, it is difficult to concretely claim that cemeteries do in fact contain the bodies of slaves. This is primarily a result of the unmarked graves slaves most often occupy, which provide no source of identification. Second, urban sprawl has left a limited number of historic cemeteries that can be studied since many have been destroyed. Those that do exist are often in rather remote locations that are seldom visited by researchers. Finally, slave cemeteries often developed into modern day African-American cemeteries, making the

¹ Fred Kniffen, “Geographical Record,” *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3, July, 1957. pp. 426-427.

² Consider, for example, Albert J. Rabateau’s classic text on slave religion and how his claims could be strengthened through a comparison to archaeological findings or mortuary practices.

study of a slave graveyard in its original state difficult. There is, however, a location in West Tennessee where these factors are limited, creating an environment ripe for study.

Purchased in 1901 by Boston tool giant Hobart Ames, the Ames Plantation occupies nearly 20,000 acres of Fayette and Hardeman County land in southwest Tennessee. The landbase lies approximately 6 miles southwest of Hickory Valley, 6.5 miles northwest of LaGrange, and 6 miles northwest of Grand Junction, all rural Tennessee communities. The area contains the archaeological remains of several dozen agricultural complexes of the planter class, and due to the formation of the Hobart Ames Foundation in the 1950s, the land has been relatively undeveloped.³ Today the Plantation is home to the National Field Trial Championship for All-Age Bird Dogs and has approximately 12,000 acres of forest, 2,000 acres of commodity row-crops, and maintains 700 head of Angus beef cattle and 40 horses. The Plantation also provides educational opportunities through its partnerships with the University of Tennessee and Rhodes College, and serves as an agricultural experiment station.⁴ Much research has been compiled regarding the history of the landbase, providing ample background on the families that settled the area beginning in the 1830s, but the cemeteries in which these families buried their dead have yet to be thoroughly examined.

During the 1850s, eight out of ten farm operators in the region owned slaves, and the planters who occupied the Ames Plantation were no exception. Several families on the landbase owned a significant number of slaves, resulting in the presence of a slave cemetery on their property. Today, the lands of at least five planters contain the remains

³ Dan Sumner Allen IV and Glyn D. DuVall, "A Phase I Historic and Archaeological Survey and Limited Testing of Ames Plantation, Fayette and Hardeman Counties, Tennessee," (Franklin, TN: DuVall and Associates, Inc., 1995) 7.

⁴ Jamie Evans, "Mission of the Ames Plantation," http://www.amesplantation.org/footer_links/mission.asp

of what are thought to be slave cemeteries. By examining the Holcombe, McNeill, John Jones, Caleb Jones, and Moody families, information can be gathered not only on specific cemeteries, but on slave religion and the relationship between blacks and whites in nineteenth century West Tennessee. Because this examination took place without any archaeological excavation, data is from a largely historical perspective. Additionally, because there is limited information and background research on slave life in West Tennessee, comparison will rely heavily on studies completed outside the project area. This work will, however, help to create a preliminary understanding of slave culture on the Ames landbase through a careful examination of an understudied cultural resource.

History of the Project Area

The state of Tennessee remained a part of North Carolina until its formation in 1796, which resulted in a relatively late settlement of the western part of the state. There is little information regarding the colonial period in the area, the main inhabitants being the Chickasaw Indians. The first documented settlers arrived ca. 1820, and there is little record of Euro-American inhabitation pre-1818. Most of the area's early settlers were North Carolina citizens who claimed the land by grant or purchase power, although many citizens emigrated from Middle Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. Most were drawn by the fertile lands and thick virgin forests that the area contained, making it an ideal environment for the development of a plantation economy.⁵ Initial owners generally owned large parcels of land, but these were divided during the 1830s and 1840s due to an increase in settlement. Fayette County, which was formed in 1824, had a population of 800 in 1825. In 1830, the population had grown to 8,652 and by 1840 had exceeded

⁵ Allen and DuVall, "Archaeological Survey," 12.

20,000. Although this population increase resulted in parcel division, the western portion of the state sustained the largest plantation economy in Tennessee due to its soil, which belonged to the Brown Loam Tablelands. This belt of soil was extremely fertile due to its proximity to the Mississippi Valley Floodplain, which contained extensive silt deposits.⁶ Located just to the north of the landbase, the north fork of the Wolf River provided an additional floodplain as well as a fresh water source, increasing the land's desirability.

With the growth of Fayette County came the formation of towns, notably Grand Junction. Established in 1854, the town was built around the intersection of the Mississippi Central and Memphis and Charleston railroads. These railways provided transportation for the county's citizens and increased the speed at which goods could be shipped to port cities for sale. The presence of railroads in Fayette County pushed farmers towards a cash crop economy, and by the 1850s general economic prosperity across the state emphasized a shift from subsistence to commercial farming. At this time, "approximately nine out of ten farm operators in the region planted cotton and fully eight out of ten owned slaves."⁷ This led to a large African-American population; by the post-bellum period enslaved blacks constituted two-thirds of the county's population.

The prosperity enjoyed by the area's planters from the 1830s to the 1860s ended quickly when the Civil War began in 1861. The Ames landbase was under Federal control for almost the entirety of the war, Grand Junction being especially important because of its railroad connection. Conditions were desolate. An article in the *Cincinnati Commercial* newspaper from October 25, 1862 described the area: "For miles around

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

Grand Junction, Bolivar, and LaGrange, the country speaks of a progressing revolution. Fields are laid bare; fences used up for fuel; corn fields long since appropriated; cotton fields half picked; houses standing here and there surrounded by desolation...”.⁸ At war’s end in 1865, the landscape of West Tennessee had been dramatically changed. A nearly “four-fold increase in farm units between 1860 and 1880 caused median farm size to plummet by two-thirds,” signaling the end of the southern slave labor economy.⁹ The labor system reflected the economic changes that the Civil War brought. Labor systems on the Ames landbase shifted from slave labor to the wage labor system, which was characterized by a legal contract between the planter and the laborer. With the fall of the cash crop economy, many planters began selling their land making it possible for northern outsider Hobart Ames to purchase large tracts of land in 1901.

Prior to his death in 1945, the land operated as Mr. Ames’ personal hunting preserve, livestock operation and cotton plantation. Today the Plantation is owned and operated by the trustees of the Hobart Ames Foundation as successor trustees under the will of the late Julia C. Ames, who died in 1950.

Slave Religion and Burial Practice

An analysis of the cemeteries located on the Ames land base cannot be conducted without a discussion of slave religion and its role in mortuary practice as well as slave culture. The formation of a quasi-African world view began with the Atlantic Slave Trade. As Africans underwent the traumatic journey to America, they often clung to their own religious practice and rejected the Anglican beliefs they were confronted with on the

⁸ *Cincinnati Commercial*, October 25, 1862, as quoted in Allen and DuVall, “Archaeological Survey,” 16.

⁹ Allen and DuVall, “Archaeological Survey,” 16.

eastern seaboard. According to historian Mechal Sobel, as slavery was taking root, whites expressed confusion over African beliefs. “Most white Anglicans did not really want to share their faith with blacks. Their comments on the changes Christian faith wrought in their slaves indicate their sensitivity to the power still inherent in conversion. They did not want to share this spiritual power [...] with their slaves.”¹⁰ Whites also intensely feared the baptism of slaves, as they felt that this could render their chattel free. Southern colonies quickly reassured their citizens that this would not be the case, and urged slave owners to teach their slaves Christianity so that they might become civilized by issuing statements which guaranteed that baptizing slaves would not lead to their freedom.¹¹ As the slave labor economy took root throughout the southern coastal plain, Christianity became a form of labor control as masters often viewed the conversion of their slaves as justification for African enslavement, and many felt that by doing so they were not only fulfilling their duty as benevolent Christians but creating a more obedient and humble workforce. This idea pervaded the planter class and was most likely held by slave owners on the Ames landbase.

By the eve of the Civil War, and at the time the cemeteries on Ames were created, “Christianity had pervaded the slave community. The vast majority of slaves were American-born, and the cultural and linguistic barriers which had impeded the evangelization of African-born slaves was generally no longer a problem.”¹² Though slaves had been “Christianized,” many held fast to African spiritual traditions, creating a

¹⁰ Mechal Sobel, Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to Afro-Baptist Faith, (Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1979) 59.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) 212.

unique form of Afro-Christianity. These religious traditions shaped slaves' views of death, burial, and the afterlife most concretely.

The Afro-Christian religion was held together by Protestant beliefs and traditions, but many slaves held a dual belief in the supernatural. As these folklore statements suggest, they strongly believed in the presence of omens, particularly those that warned of death: "If a dead tree falls when the wind is not blowing it is a sign of death." If you sweep after dark, "you'll sure sweep out some member uv de fam'ly." If you "carry a hoe or a spade on the house, you will dig a grave soon."¹³ Spirits were also thought to be widely present, some of which could cause death. Many slaves believed that "it is not good to answer the first time your name is called. It may be a spirit and if you answer it, you will die shortly." In the 1880s, Mary A. Waring described some African-American's fear of spirits in the *Atlanta Constitution*. She wrote:

the colored people do not exactly fear death; on the contrary, they invest with it the kind of solemn religious exultation, and the majority of them certainly regard the Lord as a warm personal friend [...] This does not, however, prevent him from having a holy horror of ghosts, or 'dead people' as they say. These they do not fancy as tall, shadowy white forms – the orthodox apparition. A little negro girl, on being interrogated as to her beliefs in 'sperrits' replied that they did not walk upright, but came running after people, jumping on their hands and knees like rabbits, having their faces tied up in black cloths.¹⁴

The intense fear of the dead held by slaves most likely came from African religious tradition, in which one could become possessed by evil spirits. This fear was probably also the root of the second funeral, which was performed a few days after the burial of a

¹³Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds. *The Book of Negro Folklore*, (New York, 1958), 195 as quoted in Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 217.

There is little information regarding the evolution of slave religion in Tennessee, however, because most of the planters who settled in the area came from the old slave states (North and South Carolina, Virginia) it can be assumed that West Tennessee slaves held similar beliefs and practices to those which are more heavily documented.

¹⁴ "Mortuary Customs and Beliefs of South Carolina Negroes," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 7, No. 27. (Oct.-Dec., 1894), pp. 318-319.

slave's body. The second funeral was conducted in order to make the soul "lie easy" so it would not come back to haunt family and friends. Mourners would talk to the spirit of their loved one fully believing that they were in direct communication with the soul of the recently deceased. It was assumed that the spirit could respond to the living, and signs and portents were carefully watched at this time: "mishaps on the way to burial were considered indications of the disquiet of the departing soul and storms were very ominous."¹⁵ The second funeral was far more elaborate than the actual burial, "had the trappings of a pageant" and could continue for many weeks, although specific practices varied by region.

Along with spirits, witches and hags were greatly feared, as they could ride through the night bringing illness that could lead to death because "Dey's done sold deir soul ter de debbil...an' ole Satan gi' dem pow'r ter change ter anything dey wants."¹⁶ Again, this fear may have been rooted in African beliefs, and could have developed from the tradition of the African medicine man. Despite a belief in and fear of witches and omens, Christian teachings prevailed in slave religion. As a hymn demonstrates, Jesus could overcome all evil powers:

*Ole Satan's camp aroun' my house,
An's a stumblin' block in my way,
But Jesus is my bosom friend,
He moved it all away*¹⁷

¹⁵ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 198.

¹⁶ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926) 152.

¹⁷ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," *Atlantic Monthly* 19 (June, 1867), as cited in Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 218.

Although slave owners condoned and encouraged their slaves to adopt Christian beliefs and practices, they dismissed the Afro-Christian beliefs in the supernatural and strictly monitored religion on their plantations.

In his landmark study of slave religion, Albert Raboteau detailed the “invisible institution” of the antebellum south. He explained that slaves were often moved to hold their own religious ceremonies “out of disgust for the vitiated Gospel preached by their masters’ preachers.”¹⁸ Slaves were constantly subjected to sermons that spread a reiterating message such as this: “Serve your masters. Don’t steal your master’s turkey. Don’t steal your master’s hawgs. Don’t steal your master’s chickens. Don’t steal your master’s meat. Do whatsoever your master tells you to do.”¹⁹ Tired of receiving a doctored Gospel and being under the constant watch of a master or overseer in religious ceremonies, slaves held secret prayer meetings in which they could sing and pray as they desired. Slaves faced severe punishment if they were caught attending secret prayer meetings, so they devised several ways to avoid detection from their masters and overseers. One practice was to establish secluded meeting places in woods, gullies, or ravines, which were aptly called “hush harbors.”²⁰ It was during these meetings that “the slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials of the past week, exclaiming, ‘Thank God, I shall not live here always!’”²¹

The powerful exclamation of “Thank God, I shall not live here always” represented a core principle in slave belief – that of freedom. Praying preaching, singing, and developing communal support consoled slaves in their times of distress and allowed

¹⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 213.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 215.

²¹ Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life, or Illustrations of the Peculiar Institution*, (Boston: 1855) pp. 30-31, as quoted in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 217.

them to imagine their lives in a different context. Anderson Edwards, a man born in slavery, spoke of a song which illustrates both the hope of freedom and the caution slaves took when praising God:

We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us. We didn't have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs and when we sing them at night it jus' whispering so nobody hear us. One went like this:

My knee bones am aching,
My body's rackin' with pain.
I'lieve I'm a chile of God,
And this ain't my home,
'Cause Heaven's my aim.²²

Slaves were forbidden by their masters to pray from freedom, yet as they retreated to their hush harbors, it was the idea of freedom that was most often at the center of worship. Former slave George Womble recalled that "slaves would go to the woods at night where they sang and prayed," and some would say, "I know that some day we'll be free and if I die before that time our children will live to see it." One slave's father would pray every night of "the time which he predicted would come, that is, the time of freedom when the children [would] be their own masters and mistresses."²³

Although slaves prayed for the day that they would become free, the majority of the South's slave population died in bondage. It was thus through death that they attained freedom. The funeral practices of slaves seemed to reflect this thought. Mary Waring continued her article in the *Atlanta Constitution* by describing a slave funeral: "In former times, the burial took place at night, and a long procession of friends and relatives,

²² George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 5, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972) pt. 2, pp. 6-7, as cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 218. Rawick's *American Slave* is the published version of sixteen typescript interviews conducted with ex-slaves that was prepared by the Federal Writer's Project from 1936 to 1938. Full interviews are available through the Library of Congress at the website: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.

²³ *Ibid.*, Rawick, vol. 8, pt. 1, as cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 218.

bearing lighted torches, escorted the corpse to the graveyard.”²⁴ Then, describing a specific burial, “A young female house servant died on one of the plantations. Her coffin was brought out into the back yard at sunset and placed upon trestles before the cabin door. At dusk the negro children joined hands and went round it in a kind of dance, singing all the time.”²⁵ The funerals that Waring described seem to have followed a normal pattern of slave burial. Many funerals took place at night, and were “impressive, eerie ceremonies” that did not interrupt the work day. Singing and dancing, a tradition carried over from Africa, was also common. Funerals were a time of “sadness and consolation” as the deceased had, for some, returned home to Africa, and for others gone to heaven, “where bondage is never known.”²⁶

Slave funerals were generally attended by both blacks and whites, and when permission was granted, slaves from neighboring plantations could pay last respects. The funeral service was often held weeks and even months after burial, and sometimes several funerals were preached at once. It is unknown whether this practice reflected African tradition or was necessary due to the uncertainty and lack of time available for slaves to attend such services. Funerals were the last cycle of ceremonies in the lives of slaves, and were a special time which asserted that their lives had dignity and meaning beyond the definitions bondage created.²⁷ Historically, rural southern cemeteries followed the Christian tradition in regards to burial. Individuals were aligned with their heads to the west and feet to the east, “so de daid won’t hab ter tu’n ironun’ when Gabr’l blows the risi’ trumpet in de east.” Those who committed unforgivable sins, such as suicide, were often

²⁴ “Mortuary Customs and Beliefs of South Carolina Negroes,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 7, No. 27. (Oct.-Dec., 1894), pp. 318-319.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 230.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

aligned north to south as punishment or were placed face-down in their coffin.²⁸ After burial, graves were decorated with trinkets, usually sea shells and broken pots or bottles. On large graves there could be found “broken pitchers, soap-dishes, lamp chimneys, tureens, coffee-cups, sirup jugs, all sorts of ornamental vases.” Ernest Ingersoll wrote to the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1892 with a description of graves he had seen, and offered a possible explanation for the practice:

The negroes themselves hardly know how to account for this custom. They say it is an ‘old fashion’...What the significance of so many cracked pitchers and jugs I do not know. They are found on graves of all ages. Surely the Negro of Colombia does not regard this particular earthenware with special admiration or affection. Can it have any allusion to the proverb that the pitcher that goes often to the well shall at last be broken? or better be memory to the prophet’s line ‘and the golden bowl shall be broken’?²⁹

Ingersoll’s remark considering the “old fashion” grave decorating gives insight into the history of this practice. For slaves in the Antebellum South, the scattering of shells and pottery onto graves probably held little significance besides the fact that it had always been done, yet significance varied between slave communities.

The Afro-Christian religion that slaves practiced shaped their views of both death and the afterlife, which in turn influenced funeral and mortuary practice. Through the study of slave cemeteries, these practices can be observed concretely, furthering scholarship in the areas of both slave religion and culture.

Information Derived From Cemetery Study

²⁸ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 198; Alexandra Bybee, “Bioanthropological Investigations of Historic Cemeteries: What can we learn from Biological, Cultural, and Mortuary Remains?” paper presented at the 5th annual Council for West Virginia Archaeology Spring Workshop, Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc., Lexington, Kentucky.

²⁹ Ernest Ingersoll, “Decoration of Negro Graves,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 5, No. 16, (Jan.-Mar. 1892) pp. 68-69.

The information recovered from cemeteries helps to fill in the gaps that historical scholarship leaves behind. The graves of the past present an un-biased view of life, both on an individual and communal level. In her paper “Bioanthropological Investigations of Historic Cemeteries,” Alexandra Bybee presents three main types of data that can be collected from the excavation and analysis of historic gravesites. First, biological data consists of sex, gender, race, cause of death, and general health - in sum, any information that can be derived from human remains. Cultural information includes the ideologies a population had towards its dead, which could be specific to the time period, race or class or the community being studied. This would include items interred with the body, such as clothing and jewelry, grave decoration and orientation, and the placement of the body within the coffin. Finally, mortuary practices comprised anything associated with the grave itself, such as head and footstones, grave shaft construction, the use of a vault or coffin, and the coffin hardware, wood, and other such embellishments.³⁰ These three elements combine to give archaeologists and historians a clear picture of life at any point in time while eliminating historical memory, bias, and misinterpretation.

One of the most noteworthy cemetery excavations to take place was conducted in Barbados, where one-hundred and one bodies of former slaves were exhumed and studied in the early 1980s. This population constituted the largest group of African slaves excavated from any archeological site in the New World.³¹ The Barbados study focused largely on biological data, which showed that the Barbados slave population was

³⁰ Alexandra Bybee, “Bioanthropological Investigations of Historic Cemeteries: What can we Learn from Biological, Cultural, and Mortuary Remains?” paper presented at the 5th annual Council for West Virginia Archaeology Spring Workshop, Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc., Lexington, Kentucky

³¹ Jerome S. Handler and Robert S. Corruccini, “Plantation Slaves Life in Barbados: A Physical and Anthropological Analysis,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 14, No. 1. (Summer, 1983), pp. 65-90.

undernourished. Culturally, this population valued tobacco, as there was heavy evidence of pipe smoking, and some practiced tooth mutilation. Through dental traits, researchers were also able to determine that family units were often buried together or in close proximity of one another.³² This survey was certainly important to the study of early slavery and helped to lay the ground work for future cemetery excavation, although it probably does not mirror slave life at Ames.

Within the Southeastern United States, there have been relatively few studies of slave cemeteries. One of the most complete of these, “Gone to a Better Land,” examines the rural black cemetery of Cedar Grove, a post-reconstruction site in Arkansas.³³ Although the earliest burials at this site probably occurred in the 1880s and 1890s, it is important to remember that many if not most African-American slave cemeteries were used for burial after the collapse of the slave labor system. Between emancipation and 1900 a shift occurred towards collective cemeteries in church yards and burial societies as blacks either developed congregations, obtained land and constructed church buildings, or rented space to use for church and benevolent social collective meetings.³⁴ Thus the burial practices employed by African-Americans at Cedar Grove were probably similar to those on the Ames Plantation.

When conducting the excavation process at Cedar Grove, the following steps were conducted: “Each grave was to be probed for depth and a backhoe would remove the overburden to within 30cm of the casket. Two excavation teams composed of three

³² Ibid.

³³ Jerome C. Rose, ed., “Gone to a Better Land: A Biohistory of a Rural Black Cemetery in the Post-Reconstruction South,” (Fayetteville, AR: Arkansas Archaeological Survey, 1985), 26.

³⁴ Personal email correspondence with Dan S. Allen, July 20, 2006.

persons would expose the artifactual material and skeleton using hand tools.”³⁵ After this process had been repeated 115 times, valuable information had been gathered from the cemetery at Cedar Grove. Coffins were made of wood and in a rectangular or diamond shape. All of the graves were aligned in an east-west direction, although due to the layout of the site many were tilted in a northwest-southeast direction. Most caskets were held together by nails, and few had handles. Many pieces of broken glass and ceramic objects were recovered from the gravesites, suggesting that Arkansas freedmen were still practicing the tradition of grave decoration. Few grave markers were recovered, although several metal plaques reading “At Rest” were found. Researchers grouped the deceased by age categories: infant, children, adolescents, young adult, middle aged adult, and old adult. Infants comprised the largest number of burials, with thirty-two graves. The prevalence of infant death was reflected in burial practice, as “With one exception, infants have no casket hardware or personal goods which suggests low status. This phenomenon is often found in cultures where infant mortality is high and little emotional investment is made until they reach survival age.”³⁶ Middle age adults (age 30-50 years) had the second largest number of burials, with twenty-four graves. This age group received full mortuary treatment and also contained the highest frequency of personal goods, such as jewelry, beads, and combs.

One of the most important findings in the Cedar Grove study helped to illustrate the poor quality of life and unstable conditions experienced by rural blacks in the post-Reconstruction South. The Cedar Grove population was extremely undernourished and many suffered from extensive anemia due to a diet lacking in red meat. An examination

³⁵ Rose, “Gone to a Better Land,” 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

of the disease patterns showed that blacks suffered a higher mortality rate than whites from all diseases except cancer. Using a cross section of skeletal samples, researchers determined that African-Americans in rural Arkansas had “a mortality rate of 2.8%; an infant mortality rate of 27.5%; a stillbirth rate of 6.2%; and a life expectancy at birth of 14 years.”³⁷ Comparing these findings to a sample slave population, such as the one available on the Ames landbase, would provide valuable information regarding the period of transition between slavery and freedom.

A comparative study between completed archaeological surveys and a cemetery on the Ames landbase would be a phenomenal resource both for historians and archaeologists. Much work, however, needs to be completed at Ames before this can occur. Because the Plantation’s cemeteries are in the first phases of research, it is important that background information on specific sites is gathered. By researching specific families who once lived on the landbase, the first steps towards more extensive research can be taken.

The Beverly LaFayette Holcombe Family

Born May 3, 1806 in Amelia County, Virginia, Beverly LaFayette Holcombe was the youngest child of Major Philemon Holcombe, Jr. and his wife Lucy Maria Anderson Holcombe. Beverly was “handsome, very erect, weight 156. Six feet high, brave, manly, generous, polite and courteous to all.”³⁸ In 1829 the family, allegedly drawn by the rich, fertile soil, moved to LaGrange, Tennessee. It is unclear where the Philemon Holcombes resided, but in 1834, after marrying Eugenia Dorothea Vaughan Hunt, Beverly L.

³⁷ Ibid., 150-154.

³⁸ Jack Thorndyke Greer, Leaves From a Family Album, “The Diary of Eugenia Dorothea Hunt Holcombe,” (Waco, Texas: Library Binding Company, 1975) 15.

Holcombe purchased a tract of land from North Carolina speculator Samuel Dickens for the “sum of five thousand eight hundred and eighty eight dollars.”³⁹ This land grew into a nine-hundred acre piece of property called *Woodstock*, located in the eastern half of the Ames land base (see appendix A). In an 1839 journal entry, Mrs. Eugenia Holcombe described the plantation, writing, “I am now living on our beautiful farm called Woodstock containing nine hundred acres of the most valued land in the county valued at 20 dollars per acre, a fine spring of excellent water, and everything comfortable around me.”⁴⁰ As Eugenia Holcombe’s diary indicates, the B.L. Holcombe family enjoyed the aristocratic lifestyle associated with southern planters.

In 1836, the family owned twenty one slaves. Information from the 1840 Fayette County census indicates that the family had house servants living with them, one female aged 20-30, and two males, one 20-30 and one 30-40 years old. It is unclear whether these persons were all house servants or if some were family members, but they were all household residents in 1840. The female was most likely the children’s mammy, who was mentioned in Eugenia’s diary. The family had four children, Anna Eliza (b. December 29, 1830), Lucy (b. 1830-1835), Theodore, (b. 1830-1835), and Philemon (b. 1835-1840). In December, 1839 the Holcombes, like many nineteenth century families, lost a three year old daughter, Martha Maria Edgeworth, whom they called “Tinker.” Her mother wrote of her death, saying, “On Wednesday she was taken hoarse with pain in her chest, on Sunday she threw her arms around my neck kissed me tried to weep for me closed her eyes without a groan or struggle. They laid her in the garden her little body,

³⁹ Land Deed, “Samuel Dickens to Beverly Holcombe,” Fayette County Tenn. Deed Book D, pg. 410, Fayette County Tenn. Library microfilm roll no. 37.

⁴⁰ Greer, *Family Album*, 15.

but the soul the dear living part is gone, and I her poor desolate mother remain.”⁴¹ Just four years after the death of their daughter, the Holcombe family encountered another tragedy. Beverly had gone in on the note of a friend for a large sum of money, offering most of his land as collateral, and sold his land to John W. Jones when the friend was unable to pay. In order to make a fresh start, the family moved to Marshall, Texas around 1842. Here, after recovering from financial distress, Beverly built *Wyalucing*, a plantation comparable to his Tennessee home. Beverly Holcombe died on November 16th, 1864 in Marshall. He is buried in a family mausoleum on the site of the Wyalucing Plantation.⁴²

Because Holcombe and his family moved to Texas, there is no family plot on his land. There is, however, a sizable cemetery located approximately 800 yards to the southwest of the site of the Woodstock manor house. The cemetery lies 350 yards northwest from the location of the supposed slave quarters. Its proximity to the slave quarters and large number of graves that do not belong to members of the Holcombe family are clear indications that this cemetery was used for the burial of slaves. The layout of the plantation allowed Holcombe to keep a close watch on his slaves and seems to be a rather common configuration. Sitting atop a hill, the plantation house had an almost direct view of both the slave cabins and cemetery. Today, the cemetery is covered in periwinkle, a common plant that was used for grave decoration (see Appendix C, figures 1 and 2). There are no visible grave markers, as they were most likely made of wood and have since deteriorated. Ground indentations are the only evidence of graves (see fig. 2, Appendix C). From preliminary observation, the cemetery probably covers

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² Ibid.

from a quarter to half of an acre; the number of graves is unknown. This cemetery was most likely a typical slave cemetery, and upon excavation one would expect to find several items. Slave caskets were held together by nails and most probably did not have decorative handles or plaques. The slaves would be buried with personal belongings, but these items would most likely be combs or trinkets rather than jewelry. Holcombe's move to Texas in the 1840s eliminates his presence in the Fayette County agricultural census, so it is impossible to know if his slaves could have received generous food rations. If they did, the skeletons exhumed from the cemetery would indicate relative good health. This would be easy to determine because the skeletons should be well preserved. The site does not lie in an area of heavy watershed and has been preserved for many years. Currently, the cemetery is fenced and in a lightly wooded area just outside a cattle pasture.

The Alexander McNeill Family

Alexander McNeill was born in North Carolina in 1794 and moved to Fayette County in 1834. He purchased a tract of land on the Ames landbase in 1836 from land speculator Lewis C. Trezevant, and owned the land until his death in 1857. Alexander amassed a considerable amount of land during his lifetime, and in 1850 owned 1,100 acres, making his plantation one of the largest in the area. McNeill and his wife, Martha, had seven children: John Charles, Malcom James, I. Alexander, Martha Jane, Julia Ann, Sarah E., and Sarah M. Both Sarah E. and Sarah M. died in early childhood. In 1850, the McNeill family owned fifty-eight slaves, nineteen male and thirty-eight female. The oldest was a sixty year old female and the youngest a one year old female. Alexander

willed both his property and slaves to his wife and children. Today, descendants of the McNeill family still reside in Fayette County and continue to play an active role in the community.⁴³

The McNeills, unlike the Holcombes, stayed on their land long enough to create a small family cemetery that is 211 yards from the plantation house site (see Appendix B and C). Besides the family plot, there is a large cemetery located 265 yards from the house site. This cemetery continued to be a traditionally African-American burial site until the mid-twentieth century, making this cemetery almost certainly a former slave burial ground. The cemetery is located on a remote forested ridge that overlooks the floodplain of Jones Creek, serving as a prime location for skeletal preservation.⁴⁴

Remains of the McNeill slaves would most likely be similar to those of the Holcombe slaves, and burial patterns would be similar. It could also be expected that the slaves on the McNeill plantation were in relatively good health. According to the 1850 Fayette County Agricultural Census, the McNeills had ten asses and mules, one-hundred swine, and fourteen milk cows. Their farm produced 2500 bushels of Indian corn, 500 bushels of oats, one-hundred bales of ginned cotton, one-hundred bushels of sweet potatoes, and four-hundred units of butter. It would only be through further study and testing that the health of McNeill's slaves could be determined, and an interesting study could be conducted regarding the health of slaves from neighboring plantations on the Ames landbase.

The McNeill cemetery differs from others at Ames due to the fact that it remained an African-American burial ground well into the 1960s. As previously mentioned, the

⁴³ "Will of Alexander McNeill," Fayette County Will Book B, p. 41-42; Fayette County Tennessee Library, microfilm roll #34.

⁴⁴ Jamie Evans, "Alexander McNeill Family Cemetery," www.amesplantation.org.

use of slave cemeteries was often continued after the demise of slavery, and this burial ground clearly illustrates that phenomenon as there are several modern grave markers located in the cemetery that mark the graves of African-Americans. Due to its location this site did not develop into a church graveyard and is currently not in use.

The John Walker Jones Family

After moving to Fayette County from Alabama in 1826, John Walker Jones became the largest slaveholder and one of the most affluent landowners in the county. Jones acquired his original parcel of 740 acres from his father-in-law, Micajah C. Moorman and named his farm “Cedar Grove.” He quickly amassed a large tract of land, and in 1842, purchased B.L. Holcombe’s Woodstock Plantation. At its height, Cedar Grove encompassed over four-thousand acres and was home to 240 slaves. The 1850 Agricultural Census shows Jones operating on 2200 improved acres and 1820 unimproved acres, with farming implements valued at \$2000. He owned fifty-six asses and mules, five-hundred swine and twenty-five milk cows, and the farm produced 875 ginned bales of cotton weighing four-hundred pounds each. The value of animals slaughtered was \$1800. Amazingly, Jones was able to keep his fortune through the economic depression caused by the Civil War and the end of slavery by subscribing to the tenant / sharecropping system. Jones was not only able to keep his landholdings throughout Reconstruction, but continued to purchase the land of neighboring farms. By 1870, he operated on 3,000 improved and 9,000 wooded acres valued at \$180,000, with

the total value of production for that year placed at \$53,269. Jones's plantation house remains the center of the Ames Plantation today.⁴⁵

At his death in 1879, John Jones subdivided the land base of Cedar Grove between his sons, Caleb Baker Jones and Robert A. Jones, and his second wife, Martha B. Jones. John Jones's daughter, Walker Moorman Jones and her husband Thomas G. McLellan controlled most of the original Cedar Jones land base at the turn of the century. The Jones heirs, however, were unsuccessful in managing the plantation and it became subdivided into several smaller pieces before being offered for sale in 1900. The Jones family continued to occupy the plantation house and the surrounding 500 acres until it was purchased in 1901 by Hobart Ames.

Like the McNeill plantation, the Jones family established a family cemetery on their property. The family plot is located 70 yards from the main house. Here nearly all members of the Jones family are buried. There is also a large cemetery located 650 yards from the plantation house and 510 yards from the Jones slave quarters which is thought to be a slave cemetery. This hypothesis is further evidenced by the fact that a modern grave marker commemorating the life of Eddie Stewart, a black man who died in 1909, was placed in the cemetery in the late twentieth century, probably between 1960 and 1980. The Stewarts are an African-American family that still reside in Fayette County, and their knowledge of the Jones cemetery suggests that it served as a slave burial ground and continued to be used by blacks into the Reconstruction era. Another interesting aspect of the Cedar Grove cemetery was the discovery of fresh water mussel shells and glass

⁴⁵ Dan S. Allen, "1999 Historical and Archaeological Investigations of the Postbellum Tenant Plantation Phenomena as expressed on the Ames Plantation, Fayette and Hardeman Counties, Tennessee," (Franklin, TN: DuVall and Associates, 1999). 58-59.

bottles exposed on top of a grave indentation (see Appendix C, fig. 7). This concretely illustrates that grave decoration took place in West Tennessee.

Further archaeological analysis of this burial ground would be most interesting. Again, the plot is well preserved and is located on a wooded ridge that has not been developed or planted. Because this cemetery was in use from slavery to reconstruction, the transition could be traced in one location. Did blacks, like in Arkansas' Cedar Grove Cemetery, experience a decline in health after emancipation, or did these former slaves immediately begin tenant farming for their former master and thus maintain a relatively stable level of health? Due to the large number of slaves that lived on the Jones plantation, this cemetery would also make an excellent location for a comparative study of the lives of slaves from larger and smaller plantations. For example, were slaves at Cedar Grove in better health than those who resided on smaller farms or were they malnourished due to their large numbers? Did the Jones slaves experience a higher rate of injury (bone fractures and lesions) than the Holcombe or McNeill slaves? Again, these questions can only be answered through a significant amount of field work and analysis, but conditions are ripe for study.

The Caleb Baker Jones Family

Caleb Baker Jones was the son of John Walker Jones and Martha Williams Moorman. Born in Alabama, Caleb moved to Fayette County with his parents, and like his father, ran a sizable framing operation. His landholdings most likely began with land furnished by John Jones, and in 1850 Caleb was a 23-year old head of house hold owning thirty-three slaves. He and his wife, Mariah Thomas Bass, whom he married in Alabama,

had eight children, yet only four survived into adulthood: Martha W. Jones (1850-1872), Caleb baker Jones, Jr. (1857-1929), John Walker Jones (1859-1937), and Thomas Bass Jones (1860-19--). By 1860 Caleb's slave population had increased to forty-six and he began to increase his landholdings through a series of transactions, eventually accumulating 1600 acres in the southeastern portion of the Ames land base. Caleb B. Jones enlisted in the Confederate Army on March 8, 1862 in the town of La Grange, and served as captain in the L Company, Thirteenth Regiment, of the Tennessee Infantry. Captain Joes was wounded at Murfreesboro but survived the war and resigned his commission in April 1863, when he returned to his family and plantation. After emancipation, Caleb, like his father, operated his plantation through the use of tenant farmers for an undetermined time before moving to Memphis, where he died at the age of 67. His death was announced in Memphis newspapers.⁴⁶

The land Caleb Jones resided on included what was formerly owned by Binbury Walton, who in 1836 owned eight slaves (see Appendix A). The Jones slaves may have continued to use a Walton cemetery for burial, but there is no evidence that this occurred. The burial ground is located 265 yards from the suspected location of the plantation home. The location of the slave quarters is unknown. The Caleb Jones cemetery lies on a wooded ridge and next to a natural ravine caused by water runoff. This location may have resulted in the erosion of some graves, although most seem to have been preserved. Like the John Jones slave cemetery, this burial ground was probably used through the Reconstruction era. The grave marker of an African-American woman named Hattie Elrod was erected at the time of her death in 1906, illustrating this idea (see Appendix C,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75-77.

fig. 10). Apart from the cemetery's location and the presence of the 1906 headstone, little is known about the Caleb Jones cemetery.

The Benjamin Moody Family

Benjamin Moody owned a smaller plantation in the western portion of the Ames land base from ca. 1835 until his death in 1864. Moody was born on May 20, 1782 in Southampton County, Virginia and married his first wife, Elizabeth Hill, in 1811 in Brunswick County, Virginia. It is unclear whether Elizabeth died in Virginia or if she moved to Tennessee with her husband in the late 1830s, but it is clear that Moody moved to Fayette County as a road surveyor. There is evidence to suggest that he also practiced this profession in Virginia with his brother-in-law. Benjamin and Elizabeth had six children together, four of which survived to adulthood. The names of all Moody family members were recorded in the family Bible of John Anderson Moody, the son of Benjamin. The Bible was a gift from father to son received on March 8, 1861 and serves as an important piece of family history.⁴⁷ After Elizabeth's death, Benjamin married Susan W. (last name unknown) and they lived together on the plantation until their deaths in 1862 and 1864. Benjamin and Susan had four children, three surviving to adulthood.

The Will of Benjamin Moody gives valuable insight into his life and burial. He stated, "I most devoutly commit my soul to God who gave it and desire that my body be decently interred in the graveyard on my premises."⁴⁸ He continued with the following:

I set aside, will and bequeath unto my beloved wife, Susan W. Moody, the sum of five thousand dollars and a negro woman, Lizzy, during her natural life. My will and intention is that my wife shall be well provided, both as regards to support

⁴⁷ Patsy T. Johnson, "The Family of Benjamin Moody," (Baskerville, VA), personal papers. A copy of the Moody family Bible is on file at the Ames Plantation along with a transcription of entries.

⁴⁸ "Will of Benjamin Moody," as transcribed in Johnson, "The Family of Benjamin Moody," 2.

and attention. I therefore wish and desire that my wife, Susan W. Moody, put the above named five thousand dollars out at interest and live as she may think proper with Lizzy...⁴⁹

Moody's Will highlights two facts: first, he was relatively wealthy. The \$5,000 he bequeathed to his wife translates to approximately \$80,000 in today's market, and it is interesting that he requests that she loan out the money at interest. Secondly, Moody's Will gives concrete evidence that he was buried on his property. This means that his gravestone, and most likely those of other family members are on the site, probably covered with a layer of dirt. A simple ground probing could determine the location of the markers and excavation could restore the family plot.

The Moody cemetery, which is located 140 yards from the plantation home site, is one of the most curious on the Ames land base. According to oral tradition, this cemetery contains both the bodies of the Moody family and their slaves. Although it is thought that graves are separated by race, they nevertheless are interred in the same location.⁵⁰ The anomalous nature of this cemetery would make it an excellent site for further study. The Moody family is relatively well documented and the cemetery is easily accessible. This site would also make for an excellent comparative study with those cemeteries already discussed, specifically on the health and bone structure of the Moody slaves. At this time it is unknown whether this cemetery is biracial due to necessity or choice, but perhaps through a more intensive investigation of both the burial ground and Moody's farming operation this could be determined.

Conclusions

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ This information comes from a personal interview Ames Plantation manager Jamie Evans conducted with Fayette County resident Haywood Scott. Mr. Scott grew up near the Moody plantation and remembers the cemetery well. Scott still lives in the area and is in his nineties.

The Ames Plantation represents a microcosm of life in the Antebellum South. Not only for the historian, but for the archaeologist as well, this area represents a research field in the making. The studies that can be conducted on this land base are indefinite. Material culture of both slaves and planters can be examined and easily compared to life on plantations of varying sizes. Practices of slave religion and mortuary customs in West Tennessee can be concretely documented, and slave health and diet can be catalogued and compared to areas around the country. By outlining the lives of the Holcombe, McNeill, Jones, and Moody families, evidence concerning plantation layout and burial practice has been collected, but much more needs to be done. By researching this area, the gaps historical speculation has left in antebellum scholarship can be filled with concrete fact and a clear picture of life in the slave-labor south can be rendered.