

CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA



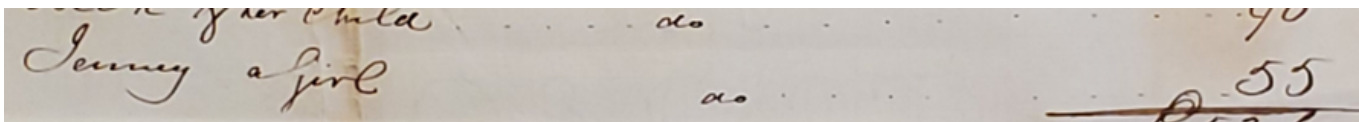
Agenda Date: February 6, 2023
Action Required: None. Update only.
Presenter: Jeffrey Werner, Historic Preservation and Design Planner
Staff Contacts: Jeffrey Werner, Historic Preservation and Design Planner
Title: Gravesites at Pen Park: Update on unmarked burials

Background

The City acquired Pen Park in the 1970s. Pen Park, as it was named by Dr. George Gilmer who acquired the property in 1786, changed ownership several times; however, only three families--the Gilmers (from 1786 to 1812), the Cravens (from 1819 to 1845), and the Hotopps (from 1866 to early 1900s)--established cemeteries there.

In 2019, Council authorized the use of \$9,319 from NDS Small Area Plans to fund the archeological evaluation of possible unmarked graves at Gilmer/Craven/Hotopp Cemetery at Pen Park. (The final project cost was \$6,991.) In July 2020, Rivanna Archeological Services, working with NAEVA Geophysics Inc., conducted an examination using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). Evaluation of the GPR data suggested the likelihood of 43 unmarked and unrecorded graves outside three family plots. Evidence strongly suggests those buried here had been enslaved at Pen Park. The Gilmer and Cravens owned enslaved people. The Hotopp family employed individuals who may have been enslaved at Pen Park, if not elsewhere, and/or possibly related to those enslaved there. [See attached update to Council from November 2, 2020.]

Since early 2021, staff has partnered with the Albemarle Charlottesville Historical Society to research the identities of those enslaved at Pen Park and, when connections can be made, to identify possible living descendants. The Waller family of Charlottesville was the first family staff contacted. That connection began with Jenney, a girl, as she is identified on an 1804 chancery note listing Dr. George Gilmer's slaves.



We now know her as Ginny Rouser, likely born 1800, we cannot be certain where, but she was enslaved at Pen Park and later acquired by Gilmer's son, Peachy, who owned West Leigh, near Ivy. For decades the Wallers have held family reunions at Pen Park, never knowing their deep connection to it. We cannot know if any of the Waller's ancestors are interred here—or the ancestors of any descendants we identify; however, we know they were enslaved here. So, if not buried here, we can

be certain they shared their lives with those who are.

The November 2020 staff report noted Gilmer acquired Pen Park in 1777. Another deed suggests he acquired it in 1786. Staff decided to use the latter date. See page 26 of the RAS report. The 43 anomalies detected by GPR are consistent with human burials; however, it is likely there are additional graves not detected by the GPR and it is likely that some of the detected anomalies are not graves. However, taken together, all of the evidence indicates, without doubt, the presence of multiple unmarked and unrecorded human graves in the area examined.

Discussion

First and foremost, the marked and unmarked burials at Pen Park are family cemeteries. The February 6 presentation will update Council on other family connections made and the ongoing research by the ACHS to identify the enslaved individuals and descendant families. Staff will also review what has been done at the site (for ex. the area of unmarked graves has been roped off and a sign installed), the additional steps planned, and further actions that might be considered.

The City has an obligation to delineate the area with unmarked burials and assure the area is permanently recorded and protected from future disturbance. [Note: Evidence suggests the burials do not extend beyond the area examined in 2020; however, that is not a certainty] Additionally, the City should take appropriate steps should burials extend beyond the area currently roped off. The City should consider ways to interpret and present this site; however, memorialization within the burial area should be left to the descendant families. [For example, while Daughters of Zion Cemetery is a City cemetery, part of Oakwood, a similar arrangement with that descendant group might serve as a template for Pen Park.]

Second, the discovery of the unmarked graves is significant because it reinforces a shared understanding of the presence of and vital role that enslaved African Americans played in the establishment and development of pre-Emancipation Albemarle County and central Virginia. Just as importantly, it is also the beginning of telling an inclusive and more accurate history of the development of the Pen Park plantation, from its late eighteenth-century origins through to the twentieth century. Staff will review suggestions and opportunities for researching, interpreting, and presenting a complete history of Pen Park.

Links to videos related to this work.

Forgotten History of Pen Park, June 22, 2021. City and ACHS staff presentation hosted by the Jefferson-Madison Regional Library

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BY5kU4uqSzl>

Pen Park Update: Forgotten No More, February 9, 2022. City and ACHS staff presentation hosted by the Jefferson-Madison Regional Library

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uD-3Q6nrsKw>

Forgotten no more: Descendants of family enslaved at Pen Park plantations visit their unmarked graves for the first time. By Tamica Jean-Charles. Charlottesville Tomorrow. February 11, 2022, Updated August 3, 2022

Video: <https://youtu.be/lk0hJx9ge7A>

Article: [Charlottesville Tomorrow - Pen Park - Feb and Aug 2022](#)

The Gilmer, Craven, and Hotopp plots remain in use and descendants have a right to access and use their plots. In 1916 was the last burial in the Craven section. In 1991, George Gilmer, Jr. was

interred in his family's plot (his wife's remains will also be placed there). In 2008, Dorothy Hotopp Wilber was buried in her family's plot.

Alignment with City Council's Vision and Strategic Plan

Council's *Vision 2025*:

Charlottesville cherishes and builds programming around the evolving research and interpretation of our *historic heritage and resources*.

City *Strategic Plan*:

Goal 3.5: Protect historic and cultural resources.

Additionally, from the recommendations of the BRC on Race, Memorials, & Public Spaces:

Highlighting and Linking Historic Places: [...] council provide financial and planning support for historic resource surveys of African American, Native American and local labor neighborhoods and sites, seeking National Register listing and zoning and design guideline protection, where appropriate.

Community Engagement

This matter has been reported in the media—locally, nationally, and even internationally. City and ACHS staff continue efforts to contact possible descendants and to circulate this story, with the hope that possible descendants contact us. In fact, this presentation is an opportunity for continued outreach, possibly more so than as an update for Council.

Budgetary Impact

No new funding is necessary for this project.

Recommendation

No immediate action by Council is necessary; however, from this discussion, we anticipate there will be questions that will require follow-up and, likely, corresponding actions and/or decisions.

Alternatives

Attachments

1. December 9, 2019 memo to City Council Approval for usage of Small Area Plan funding for the examination of possible burials near the GilmerCrave
2. November 2, 2022 memo to City Council Update on unmarked burials near the GilmerCravenHotopp Cemetery at Pen Park, including Rivanna Archeologica