

**NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE**  
Office of Archives and History  
Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**

**Geer Cemetery**

Durham, Durham County, DH3972, Listed 08/05/2024

Nomination by Jason L. Harpe, Annie McDonald, Ellen Turco, Meagan Ratini, and Maverick Huneycutt,  
Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc.

Photographs by Jason L. Harpe, March 2023



East section of the carriage path within Geer Cemetery, facing north.



Marble headstone for Reverend A. B. Joyner (d. 1926), near the western edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**


## 1. Name of Property

historic name Geer Cemetery  
other names/site number Colored City Cemetery, Old City Cemetery, East Durham Cemetery, Mason Cemetery, Farrell Road Cemetery, North Durham Colored Cemetery

## 2. Location

street & number 800 Colonial Street N/A not for publication  
city or town Durham N/A vicinity  
state North Carolina Code NC county Durham code 063 zip code 27701

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,  
I hereby certify that this X nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.  
In my opinion, the property X meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:  
national statewide X local  
 Date 6/27/24  
Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
North Carolina State Historic Preservation Officer  
Title \_\_\_\_\_ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.  
Signature of commenting official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Title \_\_\_\_\_ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:  
   entered in the National Register    determined eligible for the National Register  
   determined not eligible for the National Register    removed from the National Register  
   other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

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**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
 (Check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
 (Check only **one** box)

**Number of Resources within Property**  
 (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- private
- public - Local
- public - State
- public - Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	Buildings
1	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	<b>Total</b>

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
 (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
 (Enter categories from instructions)

FUNERARY: Cemetery  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
 (Enter categories from instructions)

FUNERARY: Cemetery  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
 (Enter categories from instructions)

No Style  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
 (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation: N/A  
 walls: N/A  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 roof: N/A  
 other: Marble, granite, concrete, brownstone  
 \_\_\_\_\_

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**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

**SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF THE NOMINATED PROPERTY**

Situated at 800 Colonial Street, Geer Cemetery is a flat, wooded burial ground that occupies a roughly square, 3.77-acre parcel of land in a historically residential neighborhood approximately 2 miles north of downtown Durham, Durham County, North Carolina. The historically Black cemetery, in use from its establishment in 1877 until the last interment in 1945, expanded over two phases, in 1887 and 1905, to its current size. Geer Cemetery contains an estimated 1,825 graves densely organized in north-south rows with the graves oriented east-west. The ephemeral nature of wood grave markers, which were extensively used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were documented in period newspaper articles at Geer Cemetery, has left many graves unmarked today. Extant marker types include tab-in-socket and die-on-base headstones, pedestal tombs, and obelisks. Marble, granite, concrete, and slate markers are present throughout the cemetery. A U-shaped gravel path traverses the interior of the cemetery. Geer Cemetery consists of a single contributing site.

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**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION OF THE NOMINATED PROPERTY**

**Setting**

The City of Durham, the county seat of Durham County, is in the east-central part of North Carolina's Piedmont region. Geer Cemetery, addressed at 800 Colonial Street, is Durham's oldest extant community burial ground for African Americans. The 3.77-acre cemetery occupies the southeast corner of the intersection of Camden Avenue and Colonial Street, 0.29 miles south of Interstate 85 in northeast Durham. The cemetery is located approximately 2 miles north of the historic Hayti residential neighborhood and the Parrish Street corridor, historically known as Black Wall Street, the independent Black community in southeast Durham that was the center of city's Black political, cultural, and economic life.<sup>1</sup>

Geer Cemetery is in a primarily residential neighborhood and is surrounded predominantly by one- and two-story houses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that occupy lots of less than 0.25 acre. It is bounded by Camden Avenue to the north (**Photo 1**), Colonial Street to the west (**Photo 2**), and McGill Place to the south (**Photo 3**). A poured concrete curb lines the edge of the cemetery along these three streets. To the east is an asphalt-paved parking lot that is separated from the cemetery by a chain-link fence (**Photo 4**). The parking lot serves a one-story, light-industrial facility operated by Frontier Communications of the Carolinas, which is situated to the southeast of Geer Cemetery. The cemetery does not have dedicated parking for automobiles. Instead, parking occurs on an as-needed basis on the public streets around the cemetery's perimeter.

Established in 1877 and expanded in 1887 and 1905, Geer Cemetery occupies a nearly square parcel that is wooded with mature volunteer trees and sparse, low-lying ground cover interspersed among the graves. A narrow, early twentieth-century carriage path traverses the property. Species present are loblolly pines and hardwoods such as willow, red oak, sweet gum, Norway maple, and tulip poplar. The tree canopy prevents the growth of understory trees and shrubs. Until recently, invasive English ivy covered the ground surface and was growing over grave markers and the low-lying plot boundary markers. The Friends of Geer Cemetery (FOGC), a non-profit organization dedicated to the cemetery's preservation and protection, conducts weekly maintenance days and much of the accumulated vegetation and brush has been removed.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hayti community and Black Wall Street were largely destroyed by urban renewal during the third quarter of the twentieth century. "Hayti," Open Durham, <https://www.opendurham.org/category/neighborhood/hayti>, accessed November 20, 2023.

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**INVENTORY LIST**

**Geer Cemetery (1877–1945), contributing site**

**Topography**

The cemetery is generally flat, but the southern edge slopes steeply down to a concrete curb that lines the north side of McGill Place and descends gently to the curb along the east side of Colonial Street at the property's west edge. For many years, the cemetery floor was covered by heavy leaf litter, downed limbs and trees, ivy, and refuse, but over the past five years, the FOGC and its cadre of volunteers have held regular workdays at the cemetery to remove this ground cover. The City of Durham has contributed support to this project by providing weekly street side collection of leaves, limbs, and refuse. A tall chain-link fence topped by razor wire stretches across the cemetery's eastern edge (see Photo 3). A metal chain-link fence extends along the cemetery's northern boundary and terminates near the property's northwest corner (see Photo 1). The cemetery's western and southern elevations are not enclosed.

**Trees and Plantings**

Interspersed throughout the property are tulip poplars, loblolly pines, southern red oaks, sweetgums, willow oaks, and maples, with smaller scrub located along the chain link fence at the cemetery's eastern boundary.<sup>2</sup> These large deciduous and evergreen trees provide an important canopy that shades the cemetery and prevents the growth of invasive underbrush and weeds. Daffodils and rose bushes have been planted at a few of the burial plots.

**Grave Depressions**

Geer Cemetery, like many African American cemeteries, has an abundance of marked and unmarked topographic (grave) depressions, or sunken areas caused by burials (**Photo 5**). A drone-based Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) mapping survey conducted by Richard Grubb & Associates in 2023 identified between 593 and 1404 potential grave depressions, some barely visible to the eye and some approximately 2 feet deep. The wide range in count reflects the fact that the LiDAR data was not specifically tested in the field to narrow the criteria for the identification of burial depressions. They vary in length between 1.3ft and 7ft, with the smaller depressions suspected to contain the remains of children or infants. Older graves without modern concrete burial vaults can sink over time once the grave shaft fill settles and the coffin collapses. The deeper depressions at Geer Cemetery may represent the collapse of vault structures. Depressions appear in a pattern (mostly in north–south rows) and can indicate an unmarked grave when an associated grave marker is not present. In certain cases, subtle depressions can be observed by patterns of vegetation (i.e., from increased moisture retention) or during the early dawn or dusk when the sun appears at an angle.

**Carriage Path**

The main walkway through the cemetery is known as the carriage path. The carriage path is a U-shaped loop that begins in the cemetery's northwest corner, at the junction of Colonial Street and Camden Avenue, continues south for approximately 300 feet, turns east and runs parallel with McGill Place for about 150 feet (**Photo 6**), and then turns to the north where it follows the east property line (**Photo 7**) before turning again to the west, where it ends at the parcel boundary line near Camden Avenue. It is 822 feet in length and traverses all three historic sections of the cemetery. The carriage path is situated in a slight linear depression that was caused by use over an extended period. As a result, it is deeper than the adjacent grade by a few inches to a few feet. It ranges from 4 feet at its narrowest point to 24 feet at its widest point. The carriage path contains compacted soil with some intermittent gravel. It was the subject of a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey completed by Richard Grubb & Associates in May 2022. The GPR survey identified ground anomalies suggestive of unmarked interments under the carriage path.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Levy, "Tree Care - Conservation Notes: 11.15.2022." Levy made these notes after his meeting with Rickie White of Ellerbe Creek Watershed Association. White identified and assessed some of the trees in Geer Cemetery.

<sup>3</sup> Cayla M. Cannon and Paul J. McEachen, *Final Report, Geophysical Survey Using Ground-Penetrating Radar: Carriage Path, Geer Cemetery (DH3972), 800 Colonial Street, City of Durham, Durham County, North Carolina*, RGA Technical Report #2022-071NC, unpublished report prepared by Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. for Friends of Geer Cemetery, October 19, 2022, 3-6–3-7.

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**Graves**

Geer Cemetery was established in 1877 as a 1-acre burial plot (**Photo 8**). It was expanded first in 1887 and again in 1905 to its current size of 3.77 acres. This last expansion extended the boundaries westward to Colonial Street and south to McGill Place (**Photo 9**). These three sections cannot be identified through aerial imagery or on the ground. The different burial plots, marker types, and materials used are found throughout the cemetery. Approximately 1,800 interments occurred in Geer Cemetery over its 68-year history, with an average of 26.5 burials per year. As a result, the small cemetery was densely packed.

Marked and unmarked burials are arranged from north to south with burials generally oriented east–west. The vast majority of burials in Geer Cemetery are unmarked today due to several factors. Wood was extensively used to mark African American graves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This ephemeral material naturally deteriorated, leaving burials unmarked. In other cases, small fieldstones or concrete blocks may have been used to mark new graves (**Photo 10**). Whether intended to serve as permanent or temporary markers, these more enduring materials often did not last through the decades due to the ease of their relocation. Although inscribed, some simple fieldstone markers hold little clear information about the identity of the decedents (**Photo 11**). The only marker that can be attributed to a maker is that identifying the grave of Mary Dunston (d. 1887), whose grave marker was crafted by stone mason Charles A. Goodwin.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the loss of many grave markers across its 3.77 acres, Geer Cemetery nevertheless retains a significant concentration of large headstones and monuments for individuals and families. Except for the tallest monuments, there is an overall uniformity maintained by grave markers of nearly equal height and an absence of tall fences and enclosures around family plots. The markers are reflective of the types found in African American cemeteries across North Carolina, including tab-in-socket and die-on base headstones, pedestal tombs, and obelisks. The markers are crafted of marble, granite, concrete, and slate. The concrete markers represent both commercially available products as well as folk-made forms. Some graves are marked subtly with metal funeral home markers, concrete blocks, or metal pipes, and a small number of plots for individuals and families have enclosures demarcated by low-lying concrete curbing, cast concrete, or brick. The enclosure for Jennette Brown (d. 1914) and Katie Brown (d. 1914), daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Brown, is the only one made of sandstone. Unmarked and marked footstones exist throughout the cemetery. Many have been displaced from their original locations and are leaning against trees or lying on the ground in front of or behind the corresponding headstones.

Geer Cemetery lacks a formal landscape design, but its trustees and caretakers established numbered sections of approximately 14 feet by 16 feet for burial plots.<sup>5</sup> Triangular-arched concrete markers with lightly impressed numbers believed to be row markers are located throughout the cemetery. Numbers 50, 58, 88, 128, and 227 are the only row markers which survive (**Photo 12**).

Tab-in-socket and die-on-base headstones are ubiquitous in African American cemeteries and are the most common type of grave marker in Geer Cemetery. Many of the extant headstones installed are of marble, and most of these date to after 1900. Examples include the tab-in-socket double headstone marking the grave of Haywood Purefoy (1863–1923) and his son, Rufus B. Purefoy (1905–1930, **Photo 13**), which features a double-peaked top. Over each side, the pointed cap displays a complex, multi-stepped ogee profile that terminates at a truncated point. The sides have shallow panels with raised lettering for “FATHER” and “SON.” The side displaying the life attributes of Rufus B. Purefoy includes a shallow circle with a hand pointed upward carved in low relief. The side with Haywood Purefoy’s life attributes has the Oddfellows symbol of a three-linked chain with the letters F. L. T. for “Friendship, Love, and Truth.” An excellent example of a marble die-on-base headstone is that of Nettie Burnett (1883?–1915, **Photo 14**), which features sprays of flowers in tall urns that flank her life attributes. Although executed in low relief, the carving is ornate and highly detailed. Among the most unique and exuberant of all the markers in Geer Cemetery is the marble headstone for Reverend A. B. Joyner (d. 1926, **Photo 15**). Its form is highly suggestive of a classical anthemion design, with a tall, central floral motif flanked at its base by scrolled leaves or vines. The outer sides of these scrolled components have been broken off, but the headstone’s essential form and sculptural design remain intact. Reverend Joyner’s life attributes are prominently carved in the five-petaled floral motif. The outer four petals, which are diminutive in size compared to the central petal, are dressed with fluting that radiates from the center of the

<sup>4</sup> Born in 1855, Goodwin’s funerary work also appears in the City Cemetery and Oakwood Cemetery, both of which are in Raleigh, North Carolina.

<sup>5</sup> Five numbered concrete section markers are extant in the cemetery. The burial plot size is specified in deed transactions between the cemetery’s trustees and lot holders in 1908 and 1918.

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anthemion. Interestingly, the fluting on the right side of the grave marker is narrower than the more widely spaced fluting of the left side.

The majority of the extant headstones are of cast concrete and are represented by both handcrafted and commercially produced examples. Most of these markers date to between 1907 and 1928. Common characteristics among the concrete tab-in-socket headstones include an arched profile at the top with a slightly recessed panel featuring a foliate motif raised in low relief above the inscribed life attributes. This foliate motif most often consists of a single horizontally oriented ivy vine and sometimes includes a central anchor (**Photo 16**). Characteristic examples of the tab-in-socket headstones with this foliate motif in Geer Cemetery are those marking the graves of Jennette Brown (d. 1914), Fannie Winston (d. 1920), Sarah Carlton (d. 1924), John Tuten (d. 1925), Wilcon Tuten (d. 1926), and Samuel Barbee (d. 1928). Tab-in-socket headstones that pair the foliate motif with an anchor are best represented by those marking the graves of and Louisa Barbee (d. 1907), Rev. S. A. Simmons (d. 1914), Samuel Ruffin (d. 1916), Bettie McDade (d. 1917), Lillie Bailey (d. 1922, see Photo 16), Mary Lassiter (d. 1924), Frank Ross (d. 1925), and David Jenkins (d. 1928). The unique iconography on Elvin Parham's (d. 1925) headstone made known his involvement in the local African American fire department (**Photo 17**), and Walter Parham's (d. 1928) headstone has clasped hands in low relief.

Cast concrete die-on-base and slant-front grave marker forms are present throughout the cemetery. Most of the cast concrete markers were finished with whitewash when installed, and some retain traces of this original color. These markers tend to be larger and more substantial in appearance than their tab-in-socket counterparts. The best representative examples of the concrete die-on-base grave markers with remnants of whitewash denote the burial locations of the C. B. Evans family, Thomas Lyon (d. 1907, **Photo 18**), Sim Cozart (d. 1920), Mollie Lyon (d. 1922, see Photo 18), Maggie Rogers (d. 1923), Nannie Allen Farrow (d. 1924), and D. C. Coakley (d. 1925). Diminutive slant-front and die-on-base concrete headstones and footstones mark the burials of members of the Clemmons, Evans, and Webb families.

Though far less common than the tab-in-socket and die-on-base headstones that exist throughout Geer Cemetery, also present are several short obelisks or upright monuments of marble or granite. The size, form, and uniqueness of these grave markers suggest increased wealth and social prominence of those whose burials they identify. These markers typically range from 4 to 6 feet in height and may display the names and life attributes of multiple members of a family. Excellent examples of these monuments are those marking the graves of D. B. Green (d. 1910, **Photo 19**) and Dave Hall (d. 1912, see Photo 19). Another marble obelisk stands near the cemetery's northern edge for the S. A. Morris family. Among the largest of the obelisks is the marble monument identifying the Banks family burial grouping (**Photo 20**), near the northwest corner of the cemetery, which includes Judy Banks (1810–1908), Parish Ray (1854–1886), Mose Ray (1865–1912), Grace Banks (1856–?), James W. Banks (1874–1913), and Minnie Banks (1875–1895). Each of their marble footstones with accompanying initials is scattered around the obelisk. A large marble plinth with beveled top on a tall, rounded base near the cemetery's southeast corner stands as a memorial to Durham's African American Odd Fellows members. Its proportions suggest that an obelisk may have originally surmounted the plinth, but it is currently either below ground or no longer extant. Engraved on the plinth is the inscription "Our Brotherhood G.U.O. of O.F. 2970", and the word "RELIABLE" was carved in relief on one side of the base (**Photo 21**). Square, rusticated marble coping posts with chain eyes enclose the Odd Fellows plot, but only a short section of the chain remains.

At least 38 Freemasons were buried in Geer Cemetery, 15 of whom have extant grave markers. These men were associated with Doric Lodge 28, Timothy Lodge 291, and Alpha Lodge 145. Brothers Elijah Lyons (d. 1916), Commilels Swepson (d. 1918), Thomas Burnett (d. 1918), Arthur Edwards (d. 1919), and A. S. Hunter (d. 1926) have the Masonic square, compass, and letter "G" carved in relief at the top of their grave markers. Grave markers for brothers Sandy Warren (d. 1904), D. B. Green (d. 1910), P. W. Dawkins (d. 1913), Samuel M. Ruffin (d. 1916), Joshua McDade (d. 1917), Richmond Allen (d. 1921), Rev. Abraham B. Joyner (d. 1926), Samuel Barbee (d. 1928), and M. H. Christmas (no death date) have no inscribed textual or iconographic references. No Masonic symbols were observed on George W. Macklin's (d. 1907) monument; however, one side of the monument's upper section is currently lying on the ground.

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Geer Cemetery's only government-issued, military-style grave marker is a marble slab with a cross carved in relief for Stanford Anderson Morgan (d. 1920). Known as a "General" type marker, the American white marble slab with a slightly rounded top measures 42 inches long, 13 inches wide, and 4 inches thick.<sup>6</sup>

Small marble remnants and thin concrete tablets, both of which serve as grave markers, are present throughout the cemetery. The size of these markers limited the amount of space the engraver had to inscribe the decedent's attributes, resulting in initials of two or three letters (e.g., J.M.L., J.E., J.M.) or only the decedent's name (e.g., WM/Morris). Ground-supported concrete tablets inscribed "MOTHER" and "FATHER" near the cemetery's eastern edge are the recognition given for the matriarch and patriarch of an unnamed family. The most unique grave marker among this group a pointed-arch headstone upon which is carved vertically the inscriptions "A. D. Dunaga/1888" (**Photo 22**). A few of these stones have no initials engraved on them.

**Plot Enclosures**

The extant plot enclosures for individuals and family plots typically consist of simple, square, and rectangular coping of poured concrete, brick, brick parged with concrete, granite, and brownstone (**Photos 23 and 24**). The most elaborate extant plot enclosure is for R. D. Jones, near the northwest corner of the cemetery (**Photo 25**). Here, decorative cast-iron fencing, much of which is no longer extant, extended across low-lying concrete coping and terminated in two square concrete coping posts that flank the plots original entrance gate and feature inset marble hearts inscribed "R. D." and "Jones," respectively. No headstone or footstones are extant in this enclosure, but one small metal funeral home marker stands at the plot's southwest corner.

Rock-faced granite coping encloses the individual burial plot of Nettie Burnett (d. 1915, see Photo 14) and Lewis Boothe (d. 1907, **Photo 26**), the latter of which surrounds a stout marble upright marker at the western edge of Geer Cemetery. Mary Strayhorn's (d. 1915) burial plot, near the southeast corner of the cemetery, has a cut granite enclosure. An elaborately designed cast concrete plot enclosure surrounds the burial plots of the George W. Pearson (d. 1902) family. A partially polished die-on-base headstone inscribed "Pearson" on the large rock-faced granite base marks Pearson's grave, and small ground-supported tablets flank his marker.

A few of the enclosure plots have single, upright monuments while others have a combination of upright monuments with lawn style markers flush with the ground. Some of the family plot enclosures have coping connected to adjacent family plot enclosures, and others have no visible headstones or footstones.

One of the largest enclosures is for the Grand United Order of the Order of the Odd Fellows near the cemetery's southeast corner. Evenly spaced, low-lying, square, rusticated coping posts with eyelets frame a rectangular plot whose only extant monument is a beveled-top plinth on stacked bases at the plot's northeast corner. A few stretches of the original chain are extant and lying on the ground around the plot. The plinth has the inscription: "In memory of/OUR/BROTHERHOOD/G.U.O. OF O.F./2970."

**Commemorative Markers**

FOGC has made most of the improvements to the cemetery and placed all the commemorative objects throughout the cemetery since the 1980s. During the 1990s, FOGC erected within a wood enclosure a brick and granite marker upon which is engraved "Geer Cemetery/1877-1944" at the property's northeast corner. Around the same time, the organization officially named three sections of the cemetery, marking them with slant-front, granite plaque markers. They recognized these sections, from west to east, as the Margaret Faucette Front Section, Edian Markham Middle Section, and the Augustus Shepard Sunrise

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan registered for the draft after the United States entered World War I in the spring of 1917, and, along with several hundred other African American men of Durham, left on a train for Camp Dix in New Jersey in July 1918. In February 1919, Morgan returned from Brest, France with other members of Depot Company K of the all-Black 70 Infantry. He contracted tuberculosis and died on June 3, 1920. A committee composed of Assistant Secretary of War J. M. Wainwright, Army Chief of Staff General John J. Pershing, and Quartermaster General Harry L. Rogers decided on this style of headstone following World War I, and it was used for all veterans except those who served in the Civil War and Spanish-American War. The General type of marker was the first to have religious emblems: Latin Cross for the Christian faith and the Star of David for the Jewish faith. On the front face of the marker, under the religious emblem, engravers inscribed the soldier's name, rank, regiment, division, date of death, and home state.



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Section. The Margaret Faucette fronts on Colonial Street and is divided from the middle section by the gravel carriage path that runs north–south, loops near the cemetery’s southern edges, and divides the middle section from the sunrise section. The markers memorialize deceased cemetery stewards and community leaders. The memorial marker near the property’s northwest corner has the following inscription:

The Margaret Faucette Front Section  
of Geer Cemetery  
Honoring the Organizer of  
White Rock Baptist Church

The second granite plaque marker is set near the property’s southern edge, on the east side of the carriage path and is inscribed:

The Edian Markham Middle Section  
Of Geer Cemetery  
Honoring the Founder of  
St. Joseph’s AME Church and  
Organizer, Hayti Business District

FOGC’s stewards set the third granite plaque marker near the property’s eastern edge, on the east side of the carriage path where it bends and runs north. This plaque is inscribed:

The Augustus Shepard Sunrise Section  
of Geer Cemetery  
Oxford Central Children’s Orphanage  
And Father of  
James E. Shepard of NCCU

Around 2010, FOGC erected a wood kiosk at the south end of the carriage path on which they post information on the history of the cemetery and its decedents, as well as notices about future cleanup days.

**INTEGRITY ASSESSMENT**

Overall, Geer Cemetery retains a high degree of integrity of location, setting, design, association, and feeling and sufficient integrity of materials and workmanship to convey its historic associations with social history and Black ethnic heritage during the Period of Significance from 1877 to 1945.

**Location and Setting**

Geer Cemetery occupies the 3.77 acres that encompass the original 1-acre tract acquired in 1877, with subsequent land acquisitions in 1887 and 1905. The cemetery retains its historic boundaries and thus retains integrity of location. Residential dwellings and an industrial complex at the cemetery’s south and west elevations, respectively, were built after the cemetery’s period of significance, but are only visible at the west end of McGill Place. The setting to the north and east remains intact. The setting within Geer Cemetery, including the wooded landscape and circular carriage path, remain intact. Thus, the property retains integrity of setting.

**Design, Materials, and Workmanship**

The cemetery’s overall informal layout remains intact, with rows of grave markers, plot enclosures, and marked and unmarked grave depressions arranged north–south and burials facing east–west. Many graves are unmarked due to the ephemeral nature of wood grave markers used in abundance at Geer as early as 1897. Grave markers made of more permanent materials, such as marble, concrete, and slate, are extant throughout the cemetery. They display a wide range of marker types common during the

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Period of Significance. Despite the loss of some markers, the cemetery retains an overall integrity of design, with slightly diminished integrity of materials and workmanship.

**Association and Feeling**

Although it is no longer used for interments, Geer Cemetery remains a historically African American burial ground whose associations with Durham's Black community from 1877 through 1945 are clearly evident. Geer Cemetery retains strong integrity of association and, through integrity of location, setting, and design, retains strong integrity of feeling. While some may associate the absence of grave markers and the profusion of collapsed grave shafts as evidence of neglect or loss, these attributes were present by 1900, and are a constituent part of the historic appearance of the cemetery.

**STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

Geer Cemetery is closely related to the surrounding environment and landscape. Archaeological features produced by former fence lines, paths, and plantings, as well as materials that have accumulated through use of the cemetery, can provide information valuable to the understanding and interpretation of the property. Therefore, archaeological remains may well be an important component of the significance of the cemetery and landscape, and these potential remains should be considered in any future improvements to the property.

Archaeological mapping activities done by Richard Grubb & Associates in 2023 have identified nearly 2,000 graves in Geer Cemetery. Important information also may be gained through archaeological analysis of cemetery features. The grave markers and potential grave markers can provide information about the socioeconomic evolution of the Durham African American community. A material culture analysis of the surviving markers, along with archaeological investigations to identify graveside offerings and subsurface features associated with wood- and plant-marked plots and graves, can contribute to the broader understanding of African American funerary traditions over time, consumer behavior, and community networks. These objects and features may possess characteristics that illustrate pre- and post-emancipation African American cultural practices and traditions. Other aspects of cemeteries documented as having information potential include the location and grouping of graves, details of vernacular grave marker production, and specific characteristics of graves including burial container hardware, grave goods, clothing, and the human remains themselves.

In addition to having the potential to yield important information about the past, cemeteries and unmarked graves are protected by North Carolina General Statutes 65 and 70, and this should be considered in any future archaeological research, landscaping, or restoration activities in the cemetery.

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**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** N/A

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black

SOCIAL HISTORY

**Period of Significance**

1877–1945

**Significant Dates**

1887, 1905

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Charles A. Goodwin, stonemason

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria)

Geer Cemetery  
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## SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Established in 1877, Geer Cemetery is Durham's oldest and largest extant community cemetery for the city's people of color.<sup>7</sup> Established and managed by an all-Black Board of Trustees, Geer Cemetery was the principal burial site for Durham's people of color until the establishment of Beechwood Cemetery in the late 1920s. Geer remained in use after Beechwood was created, and at least 1,825 individuals were ultimately interred here. In its organization, property acquisition, and self-governance, Geer Cemetery represents the self-reliance and self-determination of Black Durhamites in caring for their deceased loved ones during a period of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation during the Jim Crow era, when Durham's white citizens were able to purchase burial plots in the segregated city-owned Maplewood Cemetery. Geer Cemetery serves as the final resting place for many prominent African Americans who were highly influential in the social and economic development of Durham, leading W. E. B. Du Bois to describe the group as "perhaps more striking than that of any similar group in the nation."<sup>8</sup> Resting in marked and unmarked graves are highly skilled craftsmen, religious and fraternal leaders, educators, tobacco factory workers, barbers, firemen, and businessmen and women. The last interment occurred in 1945.

Geer Cemetery was one of three burial grounds created to serve as community cemeteries for people of color in and around Durham in the late 1800s through the mid-1900s. The late nineteenth-century New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery, located west of Durham, and the 1908 Violet Park Cemetery, on the south side of the city, were removed during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Burials in the Violet Park Cemetery were disinterred in the early 1970s to accommodate the construction of St. Titus Episcopal Church and reinterred in Beechwood Cemetery. Following a lengthy period of public opposition and legal battle, the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery was relocated in 1983 for the construction of the East-West Expressway. Other smaller cemeteries for Black Durhamites, such as the Henderson and Fitzgerald cemeteries adjacent to Maplewood Cemetery, served as *de facto* community cemeteries but were substantially smaller, and lacked the organizational structure and publicly accessible character of Geer Cemetery. Beechwood Cemetery, established in 1926 by the City of Durham but not placed into service until 1928, remains in use as a community cemetery but does not possess Geer Cemetery's historical associations with Black Durham's early settlement. Geer Cemetery stands out as the last extant community-organized and -operated cemetery with broad historical associations with Durham's people of color beginning in the late nineteenth century.

Geer Cemetery is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the areas of Social History and Black Ethnic Heritage as the oldest extant community burial ground for African Americans in Durham. Its Period of Significance begins in 1877, the year in which the Board of Trustees acquired the first 2 acres of land from white farmer Jesse Geer for use as a community cemetery for Durham's people of color. It ends in 1945, when the last burial occurred in the cemetery.

### Criteria Consideration

Geer Cemetery meets National Register Criteria Consideration D for cemeteries. Its significance is derived from its historic associations under Criterion A in the areas of social history and Black ethnic heritage as the first formally established burial ground for Durham's Black citizens established in 1877.

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<sup>7</sup> Geer Cemetery has had many unofficial names throughout its history that are no longer recognized locally. Geer Cemetery was selected as the historic name because it was in use during the end of the Period of Significance and has been referred to locally by this name for at least the past 80 years. Additionally, the cemetery was established on property that Jesse Geer sold to the cemetery's trustees in 1877. Geer Cemetery was the name used in the obituary of Amey Husband, the last person interred at the cemetery, on April 23, 1944.

<sup>8</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Upbuilding of Black Durham: The Success of the Negroes and Their Value to a Tolerant and Helpful Southern City," *World's Work* 23 (January 1912), 334.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance)

**HISTORIC BACKGROUND AND NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

**Antebellum Establishment of Durham and Settlement of Emancipated People of Color Following the Civil War**

In 1849, Bartlett S. Durham donated a parcel of land along the North Carolina Railroad for the construction of a railroad depot, from which the small community of Durham Station grew over the next twenty years. Then part of Orange County, the Town of Durham was incorporated in 1869, with the corporate limits 1 mile square and the depot at the center of the town.<sup>9</sup> By that time, the town boasted a lumber company, two tobacco factories, and a hotel.<sup>10</sup> Within one year, the community added three cotton gins, a wool carding factory, hat maker, a smut machine and screening works, and wagon works. The community grew rapidly, and within twenty years of its founding as a railroad stop, had six general stores and numerous mills supplying flour, meal, and sawed lumber.<sup>11</sup> By 1870, Durham was a small hamlet of 256 people among 30 families. Surrounded by cotton and tobacco farms, the town's four factories provided jobs, and Methodist and Baptist churches responded to the community's spiritual needs.<sup>12</sup>

At the close of the Civil War, more than 330,000 enslaved people of color were emancipated across North Carolina. Among them were nearly 1,000 people who had been enslaved by the Cameron family across its extensive landholdings in the region. The Camerons were among the state's wealthiest families and owned more than 30,000 acres in Orange, Person, Granville, and Wake counties.<sup>13</sup> The Cameron family's Stagville plantation was situated between the Flat and Little rivers roughly 8 miles north of Durham.<sup>14</sup>

As newly emancipated Africans and African Americans found freedom from slavery, they settled in small communities across the county, primarily outside the corporate limits of Durham. One community was established around the "Bottoms" on the west side of Durham, while another was Braggtown, located north of Durham in an unincorporated area. By 1870, Orange County's Black population totaled 6,824. During the Reconstruction Era, white residents of Durham first used church graveyards for their burials. As the city's leadership shifted to focus on public health and welfare, the Durham City Commissioners created a Board of Public Health and, in 1874, acquired 5.0 acres for use as a segregated, whites-only city cemetery in the West End neighborhood. City leaders made no similar accommodation for the city's Black citizens, who were thus forced to bury their deceased loved ones in small family cemeteries, such as the Henderson and Fitzgerald family cemeteries in the West End neighborhood.

**Establishment and Early History of Geer Cemetery**

Situated on the northeast side of Durham, Geer Cemetery originated with a deed executed on March 28, 1877, between white farmer Jesse B. Geer and prominent members of the Durham's African American community.<sup>15</sup> Geer sold 2.0 acres of land "to be used as a cemetery for the colored people" to three Black men: Willis Moore, President, John W. O'Daniel, Secretary, and Nelson Mitchell, Assistant Secretary, for \$50.<sup>16</sup> Although the deed identified the three as officers without specifying an organizational affiliation, the men likely formed a cemetery association because there was no public burying ground for African Americans in Durham. Moore was born circa 1847 and worked as a carpenter in Hillsborough before relocating to

<sup>9</sup> Levi Branson, *Directory of the Business and Citizens of Durham City for 1887* (Raleigh, NC: Levi Branson, Publishers, 1887), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Levi Branson, *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, for 1867-8* (Raleigh: Branson & Jones, Publishers, 1868), 87.

<sup>11</sup> Levi Branson, *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, for 1869* (Raleigh: R. A. Jones, Publishers), 124.

<sup>12</sup> "Durham," *Raleigh Christian Advocate*, October 5, 1870, 2; see also "Opportunity Knocked," *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC), April 11, 2000, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Durham County was formed from parts of Wake and Orange counties in 1881.

<sup>14</sup> "True Inclusion—Historic Stagville," North Carolina Historic Sites, <https://historicsites.nc.gov/trueinclusion-historic-stagville>, accessed November 16, 2023. Stagville is now a state-owned historic site.

<sup>15</sup> Numerous writers have propagated a story that the cemetery started in 1876 when the son of a tenant farmer on Jesse Geer's property died after being dragged behind a rambunctious mule, and Geer allowed the family to bury the body on his property. There is no documentation to substantiate this story.

<sup>16</sup> Orange County Register of Deeds, March 28, 1877, Deed Book 45, 89.

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Durham by the late 1870s. An 1877 Orange County deed listed him as a trustee of the Colored Missionary Baptist Church.<sup>17</sup> O'Daniel served on the first board of trustees of Lincoln Hospital in Durham. According to an article in *The Durham Sun* on September 3, 1902, O'Daniel had been the custodian of Julian Carr's estate for 28 years.<sup>18</sup> Mitchell lived in the Hayti community and worked as a house carpenter.

Geer Cemetery's importance to the African American community in and around Durham was evinced by the need to expand its borders twice within its first 20 years. After the creation of Durham County in 1881, with Durham as the county seat, Geer Cemetery remained critically important to the area's Black citizens. The first expansion occurred in 1887, when Frederick C. Geer, son of Jesse Geer, sold to Henry Hall, Nelson Mitchell, Rufus Jones, Daniel Goodloe, John O'Daniel, Essie Sparkman, and Thomas Morgan, Trustees of the "Colored Cemetery," 0.96 of an acre on the east, south, and west sides of the cemetery on March 25, 1887.<sup>19</sup> Despite the lack of direct supporting evidence, burials in Geer Cemetery certainly occurred during the late 1870s and 1880s.<sup>20</sup> Although State Board of Health publication from 1886 reported that the City of Durham did not keep death records for burials at Geer Cemetery, it is clear that numerous burials occurred through the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Riley Murphy Gilmer's death on April 3, 1889, was documented in the 1938 inventory of Geer Cemetery by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Parish Ray's and Isabella Vicks' deaths in February 1886 and April 1887, respectively, are engraved on their headstones. Obituaries printed in the 1890s documented some Black men and women who were interred in Geer Cemetery during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Burials from this period are represented by extant grave markers or documented in the WPA inventory. These burials include Minerva Lipscomb (d. 1891), Woodson Mitchell (d. 1891), Isaac Sparkman (d. 1891), Cora L. Brandon, (d. 1891), Caroline Lyon (d. 1895), John W. Cleg (d. 1895), Susan Whitted (d. 1896), Fannie Letlow (d. 1896), Sylvia Banks (d. 1898), John Lanier (d. 1899), Ben Gattis (d. 1899), and Dilcie Brasher (d. 1899).

A June 28, 1897, article in *The Durham Sun* painted a vivid picture of the landscape at the Geer Cemetery. The two reporters arrived at the Geer Cemetery after "continuing on around the Belt Line, when the bridge near the residence of F. C. Geer was reached." About the Geer Cemetery, they wrote:

Many graves are there and they are close together, too. Out of several hundred of them, only two or three marble tombstones can be seen. Wooden head and foot boards are used. Some of these bear inscriptions upon them. One the writer copies as follows: "Little John Pursie Morgan, died May 30th, 1892, aged 11 yrs., 5 mos., 3 days. One more soul at rest. Little John Morgan." Many of the boards that were placed at the graves have fallen down<sup>22</sup>

An equally descriptive article was printed in the January 15, 1900, edition of *The Durham Sun*. The author focused on the cemetery's "poor" condition but provided additional details that drew a more complete picture of the landscape and one possible reason why the cemetery retains few of its original grave markers.

The colored burying grounds, or cemetery, just beyond Mr. F. C. Geer's, out on the Roxboro road, is in rather bad shape. Numbers of the graves have sunken in, and in some instances not a thing can be seen to even indicate exactly where some of the graves are located. There are traces of where fire has recently burned the grass and straw over a portion of the burying ground, and several of the pine boards at the head and foot of the graves

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<sup>17</sup> "Moore Street," Museum of Durham History, <https://museumofdurhamhistory.org/beneathourfeet/streets/MooreStreet>, accessed November 21, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> "General Carr Talks," *The Durham Sun*, September 3, 1902, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Orange County Register of Deeds, March 25, 1887, Deed Book 7, 355.

<sup>20</sup> Obituaries for decedents interred during this period have not been located in Durham newspapers. There are no death certificates for Durham County until 1908, and North Carolina did not mandate filing death certificates until 1914. Although the city commission's Board of Public Health reported the number of White and Black deceased on a monthly basis, the number of Black family cemeteries in and near Durham precludes identifying the final resting place for each individual.

<sup>21</sup> "Durham's Health," *The Tobacco Plant* (Durham, NC), July 13, 1887, 2.

<sup>22</sup> "Around The Belt Line," *The Durham Sun*, June 28, 1897, 1. This article is the only documentation for John Pursie Morgan's death and burial at Geer Cemetery.

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were burned, destroying all mark to show where the graves were. A gentleman tells us that not very long ago, on one of the head boards he noticed that some vandal had written some very unbecoming words. As soon as the gentleman saw it, he very properly set about to erase them and succeeded in doing so. A person, be he white or colored, that would stop to such a despicable act, is not entitled to the respect of decent people. The burying ground certainly needs attention. Interments are still being made there, some having taken place during the month of December. A year or so ago we mentioned the burying ground should be attended to, but nothing has been done, and in consequence it is rapidly going to ruin.<sup>23</sup>

The cemetery's trustees began discussions about the need for additional acreage in 1902. At its meeting on April 20, 1903, the Durham Board of Alderman briefly addressed Geer Cemetery. The board referred the matter of aid to the cemetery to the Cemetery Committee.<sup>24</sup> The matter of acquiring additional ground for Geer Cemetery was continued at the Board of Aldermen's February 15, 1904, meeting, when the Cemetery Committee was unable to provide an update.<sup>25</sup> At the May 3, 1904, Board of Aldermen meeting, Alderman Proctor reported that "the special committee appointed some time ago to purchase additional lands for the colored cemetery recommended the purchasing of the lands of J. B. Mason, for which the sum of \$1,600 is to be paid."<sup>26</sup>

Although the committee recommended acquiring additional property for Geer Cemetery, the board took no action on the proposal to purchase the Mason property. Over the next eight months, the board abandoned the idea of expanding the cemetery. Facing the city's continued inaction to accommodate the end-of-life needs of Black Durhamites, the Trustees of Geer Cemetery once again took the initiative to act on their own behalf. On January 28, 1905, J. B. Mason and wife Augusta S. Mason sold 1 acre adjoining the cemetery property to Nathan Goodloe and Riley M. Gilmer, Trustees of "North Durham Colored Cemetery."<sup>27</sup> This second transaction expanded the cemetery to its current 3.77 acres.

P. H. Smith spoke before Durham's Board of Alderman on April 7, 1913, on the matter of Geer Cemetery, and stated that the property was exposed and inquired about the City's willingness to pay for a wooden fence to be erected around the cemetery. The board referred the matter to the Cemetery Committee. The board decided at the April 21 meeting to erect a "board fence at the Colored Cemetery along Ferrell Road" and the cemetery's other three boundaries would be enclosed by a wire fence.<sup>28</sup> The *Durham Morning Herald* reported on May 8, 1913, that the "board of trustees of the negro cemetery attended the meeting of the board at night and requested that a wire fence be placed around the cemetery ... the request was granted and the work ordered."<sup>29</sup>

Despite the Trustees' addition of land and such maintenance improvements as the erection of a fence around its perimeter, the condition of Geer cemetery deteriorated with continued burials. Disease epidemics such as pellagra, beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the Spanish Flu, from 1918 to 1919, disproportionately affected Black citizens. *De jure* and *de facto* segregation, combined with systemic racial inequities, resulted in diminished environmental conditions in the historically Black neighborhoods and inequitable healthcare at the Black hospital in Durham. These conditions led to an

<sup>23</sup> "In Bad Shape: Colored Burying Ground North of City Need Attention," *The Durham Sun*, January 15, 1900, 4.

<sup>24</sup> "Meeting of the Board," *The Durham Sun*, April 21, 1903, 1.

<sup>25</sup> "Aldermen's Meeting," *The Durham Sun*, February 16, 1904, 1.

<sup>26</sup> "What City Dad's Did," *The Durham Sun*, May 3, 1904, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Durham County Register of Deeds, January 28, 1905, Deed Book 32, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Present-day Ferrell Road lies northeast of Geer Cemetery. Durham has an extended history of renaming roads, and a reference in the Board of Aldermen minutes for May 18, 1942, refers to the "colored cemetery on Ferrell Road or Trinity Avenue extended." If extended to the east, present-day Trinity Avenue would pass close to the south side of Geer Cemetery. Thus, the Black cemetery along Ferrell Road referenced in the historical record is understood to be Geer Cemetery.

<sup>29</sup> "Old Board Passed Out," *Durham Morning Herald*, May 8, 1913, 6; P. H. Smith was likely Peyton H. Smith (1858–1928), who was a captain of the Durham colored volunteers (Company H, 3rd N.C. Volunteer Infantry) during the Spanish-American War; Durham businessman; a mason and contractor; and member of Patriarchy Lodge No. 217, Grand United Order of the Odd Fellows in Durham. He was buried at Violet Park Cemetery. Clement Richardson, "What are Negroes doing in Durham," *Southern Workman* (Hampton, VA, : Vol. 42, no. 7), July 1, 1913, 386–93.

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increased mortality rate among the city's communities of color. Lacking city leadership in the establishment, growth, and maintenance of a cemetery for Black residents, Geer cemetery understandably became overcrowded.

**The Establishment of Beechwood and Decline of Geer Cemetery**

A July 29, 1925, article in Durham's *The Herald-Sun* featured the city manager's opinion that "the colored people are entitled to consideration by the city, as much so as the white." In 1925, there were five African American cemeteries in Durham, and, according to the city manager, there was little formal governance in their operations. On July 3, 1926, Durham attorney J. Lathrop Morehead appeared before the Durham City Council on behalf of several petitioners who were prominent within the local African American community. He presented a petition that requested Durham's leaders take over management of Geer cemetery and acquire additional acreage adjacent to it or elsewhere in the city to be used as a burial ground for Black citizens.<sup>30</sup>

The petitioners' preference was to locate the new cemetery in the "Hayti section, where it will be convenient to the colored people for funerals and where they can conveniently look after it."<sup>31</sup> On September 20, 1926, attorney Morehead again addressed the Board of Aldermen on behalf of Black Durhamites with a request for the city to take over administration of Geer Cemetery and "beautifying same with permanent upkeep."<sup>32</sup> In usual fashion, the city council referred the matter to the Cemetery Committee, which was then investigating the conditions of the city's Black cemeteries.<sup>33</sup> W. G. Pearson, S. L. Warren, T. J. Russell, W. Gomez, and W. H. Wilson, representatives appointed by the Durham Branch of the National Negro Business League, were also present at the meeting and made another appeal to city officials "to take over and maintain the walks and driveways in the old cemeteries; and to purchase or otherwise acquire and maintain a new cemetery for the burial of our colored citizens."<sup>34</sup> This petition was countered by a petition signed and submitted by several white residents who lived in the area around Geer Cemetery, who requested that it not be expanded by the purchase of additional land. The white petitioners did not object to the city maintaining the cemetery with no expansion of the property.<sup>35</sup>

Durham's Negro Business League favored purchasing land adjacent to Geer Cemetery, but city officials pointed out that it was located "in a white settlement" and that a new cemetery would better serve Black residents.<sup>36</sup> City officials outlined to members of Durham's African American community at a meeting with the local branch of the National Negro Business League their plans for improvements to serve Black Durhamites. Among the proposed improvements were the extension of the sewer system into the African American neighborhoods, the paving of all streets for which proper petitions were prepared, the purchase of land for a new African American cemetery to be located on Fayetteville Street, and maintenance of the old African American cemetery.<sup>37</sup> At the city council meeting on October 18, 1926, the city manager read to council members the following recommendations of the cemetery committee:

Whereas it appears that land owned by R. L. McDougald, et al, gives evidence of being a proper sight as well as land sufficiently free from rock to make a burying ground, this committee recommends that option for 24.79 acres of land now obtained be take up as soon as funds are available and that an ordinance be prepared and presented at the next meeting of the Council authorizing bonds sufficient to buy the land and develope [sic] the same for colored cemetery purposes. It is further recommended that the city manager proceed as soon

<sup>30</sup> "Negro Cemetery for City is Considered Possibility," *The Herald-Sun*, July 29, 1925, 2. The five cemeteries were Violet Park, Geer Cemetery, Henderson Cemetery, Fitzgerald Cemetery, and the New Bethel Baptist Church/Hickstown Cemetery. It is not presently known why the Henderson Family Cemetery, which functioned as a community burial ground for African Americans adjacent to the all-white Maplewood Cemetery, was not included among them. It is possible that, due to their proximity, the Fitzgerald and Henderson family cemeteries were considered a single burial ground.

<sup>31</sup> "Meeting Called by Negro League: New Negro Cemetery to Be Considered at Meeting Next Tuesday Night," *The Herald-Sun*, September 5, 1926, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Durham City Council Minutes, September 20, 1926, Record Book Q, 42-43. Durham City Hall, Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>33</sup> Durham City Council Minutes, September 20, 1926, Record Book Q, 42-43

<sup>34</sup> Durham City Council Minutes, September 20, 1926, Record Book Q, 42-43

<sup>35</sup> Durham City Council Minutes, September 20, 1926, Record Book Q, 42-43

<sup>36</sup> "New Negro Cemetery Ready for Use Soon," *The Herald-Sun*, March 7, 1928, 11.

<sup>37</sup> "City Administration Endorsed by Negroes in a Recent Meeting," *The Herald-Sun*, May 1, 1927, 15.



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as the land is purchased to work out rules and regulations which will fit the conditions [sic] incident to the operation of such a cemetery and present them to this council as soon thereafter as possible.<sup>38</sup>

On December 8, 1926, the City of Durham purchased 24.79 acres on Fayetteville Road from R. L. and Mattie Louis McDougald and E. D. and Dora Green, two prominent African American couples in Durham, for approximately \$9,600.<sup>39</sup> The new African American cemetery was named Beechwood.

Even with the necessary property secured for the new African American cemetery, the city's extensive survey and preparation work moved at a snail's pace over the next two years and Beechwood Cemetery was not available for burials until late 1928. Local officials never formally announced the cemetery's opening, but local newspapers provided updates to the public throughout 1928. A January 8, 1928, *Durham Morning-Herald* article explained that "city officials are planning to open the new cemetery for people at an early date, probably by February 1," and "a number of conferences between officials and representative colored citizens have been held the past week in regard to the new burial ground and the details have about all been worked out."<sup>40</sup> On March 7, the newspaper assured the public that the cemetery was "virtually completed" and would "supplant the one now in use on the Ferrell Road, which is located in a white settlement."<sup>41</sup> The Durham City Manager justified further the need for Beechwood Cemetery being closer to the Hayti Community by stating that "the new one will be better adapted to use by the Negro race."<sup>42</sup>

The local newspaper recorded the first interment at Beechwood cemetery as that for Albert L. Leathers, who died on December 11, 1927; however, no grave marker survives for him.<sup>43</sup> Another of the first burials at Beechwood was for Martha Allen, who died on November 1, 1929.<sup>44</sup> Throughout Beechwood Cemetery's history, graves from other sites were disinterred and reburied in Beechwood. Included among those who were originally buried in Geer Cemetery but reinterred at Beechwood Cemetery were John W. O'Daniel (d. 1917), Sr., one of Geer Cemetery's earliest trustees; Dr. George W. Adams (d. 1918); Sarah J. Amey (d. 1921) and her husband, Cornelius T. Amey (d. 1924); and A. S. Hunter (d. 1926). The 1938 WPA survey of Geer Cemetery documented Azale McCoy's (d. 1925) grave marker, but it is now at Beechwood Cemetery, suggesting that McCoy's grave was reinterred at Beechwood after 1938.<sup>45</sup> In the early 1970s, the graves from Violet Park Cemetery were removed and reinterred at Beechwood to make way for construction of St. Titus Episcopal Church and, later, paving of the parking lot.

The mass relocation of burials from such places as Violet Park Cemetery fits within the late twentieth-century context of private development and Urban Renewal in Durham. The motivation for reinterment of individual burials into Beechwood Cemetery is not immediately clear. It is likely that a combination of factors influenced individuals' and families' decisions for

<sup>38</sup> Durham City Council Minutes, October 18, 1926, Record Book Q, 53. Durham City Hall, Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>39</sup> Durham County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 85, 53; see also "Negro Cemetery Site Will Be Bought Soon," *The Herald-Sun*, December 3, 1926, 11; see also "Numerous Deeds Filed for Record Wednesday; Several Tracts of Land Were Transferred to City of Durham," *The Herald-Sun*, February 3, 1927, 12.

<sup>40</sup> "Cemetery for Colored People Be Opened Soon," *Durham Morning-Herald*, January 8, 1928, 32.

<sup>41</sup> "New Negro Cemetery Ready for use Soon: Fayetteville Street Burying Ground to be Opened," *Durham Morning Herald*, March 7, 1928, 11.

<sup>42</sup> "New Negro Cemetery Ready," 11.

<sup>43</sup> "Negro to be Buried in Hayti Cemetery," *The Herald-Sun*, December 14, 1927, 5.

<sup>44</sup> "Martha Lyon Allen," Find-A-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/46940311/martha-allen>, accessed 4 February 2023.

<sup>45</sup> "Dr. George W. Adams," Find-A-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/160943303/george-w-adams>, accessed 4 February 2023. Dr. Adams' grave marker was documented in the 1938 WPA Survey of Geer Cemetery. The grave marker for Annie Allen, who died on January 15, 1915, also predates the establishment of Beechwood Cemetery. Matthew Christmas's wife, Candace, was buried at Geer Cemetery after her death on August 29, 1938, but no grave marker for her is extant. The surname Escoffery on Matthew Christmas's grave marker may be a reference to his daughter Sadie's (1885–1964) married name. She married Phillip Escoffery on March 27, 1943, in Durham County, North Carolina. Ancestry, Find A Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/memorial/155366318>, accessed 10 April 2023, Matthew H. Christmas (1859–1925), Beechwood Cemetery, Durham, Durham County, North Carolina; gravestone photograph by Robert Klink, Find A Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/memorial/47305255>, accessed 10 April 2023; Sadie Christmas Escoffery (1885–1964), Beechwood Cemetery, Durham, Durham County, North Carolina; gravestone photograph by Robert Klink.

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such action. Given Geer Cemetery's small size and overcrowded conditions, it is probable that the families of some individuals who died before the opening of Beechwood Cemetery chose to relocate their loved ones into larger family plots. The proximity of Beechwood to the large Hayti community, combined with the fact that Geer's surroundings consisted of a growing white neighborhood, was another likely factor. In other cases, the relocation of graves to Beechwood Cemetery may have been due to the decreasing level of care that Geer Cemetery received through the early to mid-twentieth century, leading it to become overgrown, with sunken graves and lost markers.

Another significant factor in the decline of Geer Cemetery's condition was the apparent implementation of inappropriate or unethical burial practices. Likely due to the lack of space, graves were sometimes dug very close together. In other instances, burials occurred too close to the road. At least one eyewitness reported that the cemetery was so overcrowded that gravediggers removed the skeletons in earlier burials in order to make room for new interments.<sup>46</sup> In February 1928, J. H. Epperson, Superintendent of the Durham Health Department, stated that the regulations governing use of Beechwood Cemetery would address these issues in Geer Cemetery by eliminating the need for future burials there.<sup>47</sup> These conditions may have further compelled individuals and families to rebury their departed in Beechwood Cemetery.

Interest in Geer Cemetery's maintenance and safekeeping arose in the early as the 1920s, likely driven by the same circumstances that later instigated the call for a new burial ground. One of the challenges Geer Cemetery presented was in the structure of its oversight organization. It appears the Board of Trustees was not responsible for perpetual maintenance of the burial plots. This responsibility fell to owners of individual plots and the families of those interred. Personal circumstances may well have precluded many individuals from engaging in regular upkeep. Furthermore, the historical record suggests that the Board of Trustees had dissolved by the late 1920s.<sup>48</sup> A May 29, 1927, article in *The Herald-Sun* explained that owners of lots in Geer Cemetery, "desirous of beautifying their cemetery," had created a new organization focused on the property's upkeep. At that time, the cemetery lacked adequate walkways and drives and was out of reach of city water lines. Although the organization intended to approach the Durham City Council for aid in maintaining Geer Cemetery, it does not appear as though this occurred.<sup>49</sup>

On April 30, 1937, cemetery surveyor A. K. Summerlin recorded the site as the Ferrell Road Cemetery as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Historic Records survey of North Carolina. Summerlin recorded 264 grave markers for decedents who died between 1882 and 1936.<sup>50</sup> The disparity between the known number of burials and the number of extant markers in 1937 suggests that many individuals were buried with ephemeral markers of wood or other temporary identifiers, such as rocks, and that permanent headstones may never have existed for a majority of those interred.

**The Closure of Geer Cemetery**

Despite the fact that the Durham Public Health Department officially suspended interments at Geer Cemetery in 1939, some burials continued to occur into the 1940s.<sup>51</sup> In its August 2, 1941, edition, *The Carolina Times*, Durham's African American newspaper, published an editorial titled "Respect For Our Dead," that exhorted the city to either close Geer Cemetery for good or maintain it like the city's white cemeteries. The article drew parallels between the city's complacency toward Geer Cemetery and its general dismissal of the African American community.<sup>52</sup> For at least a short time in the 1940s, a custodian had some modicum of responsibility for overseeing Geer Cemetery. On May 18, 1942, custodian Caleb W. Morgan appealed

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<sup>46</sup> Roberta Hughes Wright and Wilbur B. Hughes, III, *Lay Body Down: Living History in African American Cemeteries* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1996), 131.

<sup>47</sup> Untitled article, *Durham Morning Herald*, February 6, 1928, 29.

<sup>48</sup> No documentation was found on the creation or dissolution of an organization to oversee Geer Cemetery.

<sup>49</sup> "Negroes To Make Plans On Cemetery," *The Herald-Sun*, May 29, 1927, 16.

<sup>50</sup> A. K. Summerlin, "Ferrell Road Cemetery, Durham, Durham County, N.C.," compiled by the Historical Records Survey of North Carolina, April 30, 1937, <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p15012coll1/id/32680/rec/1>, accessed November 22, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> The reason for continued interments in Geer Cemetery for so long after the 1928 opening of Beechwood Cemetery and the 1939 closing of Geer by the city is unknown. It may be due to some individuals' desire to be buried near departed loved ones or to make use of burial plots that had already been paid for.

<sup>52</sup> "Respect For Our Dead," *The Carolina Times*, August 2, 1941, 2.

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to the council for assistance in cleaning up the cemetery.<sup>53</sup> The last burials at Geer cemetery were William Cameron (d. 02/09/1945), Abner Jordan (d. 05/27/1945), and David M. Cameron (d. 11/16/1945).<sup>54</sup>

After World War II, public health considerations led to greater emphasis on sanitary burial practices and the employment of staff to oversee interments. Superintendent Epperson explained in October 1951 that the local statutes required each cemetery to have a qualified sexton overseeing proper burials and maintenance and to register all burials with the Health Department. The statute required decedents to be buried no less than 30 inches apart, with graves dug to a depth of no less than 5 feet. Likely because the segregated Maplewood and Beechwood cemeteries were maintained by the city according to the statutes, Epperson directed his comments to the “more than 200 burial plots and family graveyards,” specifically noting the poor condition of Geer Cemetery.<sup>55</sup>

**Geer Cemetery in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries**

Geer Cemetery’s condition continued to deteriorate through the late twentieth century and into the early 2000s. In private ownership and lacking a perpetual care fund, there were no provisions for maintenance of the roughly 1,800 graves dating from 1877 to 1945. Additionally, many descendants of those buried in Geer Cemetery left Durham, leaving privately maintained plots to become overgrown. The continued loss of grave markers due to natural forces and vandalism further disconnected remaining descendants from their ancestors.

After decades of neglect, local organizations publicized the need for and instigated interest in Geer cemetery’s preservation. In a 1985 letter to the editor of *The Durham Morning Herald*, Jean B. Anderson, former Durham historian and trustee of the Historic Preservation Society of Durham, focused on the history of Durham’s Hayti community and the importance of recognizing and caring for Geer Cemetery. Anderson stated, “as long as the trees and underbrush grow unchecked, we are sure to lose not only the cemetery but the history it holds.”<sup>56</sup> She recommended placing a fence around the cemetery and erecting a monument commemorating it as the burial location of Edian Markam, founder of St. Joseph’s Church and the Hayti Community. Anderson’s compelling article had little effect, and Geer Cemetery’s condition continued to decline.

On March 16, 1988, *The Herald-Sun* published an article written by Patricia S. Dickinson, then president of the Historic Preservation Society of Durham, on the Geer Cemetery and efforts to document the site. Dickinson explained that the Society’s Cemetery Committee had surveyed 248 cemeteries and recorded over 12,500 graves in Durham County, adding that the Geer Cemetery had been reported, but not fully documented because the canvassers were deterred by the “thick overgrowth of vines and brush” that covered the site.<sup>57</sup> She explained further that people had brought the cemetery’s condition to the attention of local officials, private individuals, churches, and members of the African American community, with no clear results. Alice Eley Jones, a former preservation society member and history professor at North Carolina Central University, stepped forward to champion the cause of Geer Cemetery’s preservation. Jones, along with Jean Anderson, Cynthia Smith, and Frank Alston, developed a pragmatic plan that included historical research and removing cleared brush and vines.

In 1991, the Durham Service Corps, a work-study program for young people, won a contract with the City of Durham to clean up the cemetery and received a \$5,000 grant from the Greater Triangle Foundation to write a social studies-based curriculum focusing on the cemetery’s historic and cultural significance.<sup>58</sup> Titled “Reclaiming Yesterday,” the curriculum highlighted African American pioneers buried at the Geer Cemetery such as Edian Markham, founder of St. Joseph’s African

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<sup>53</sup> Durham City Council minutes for May 18, 1942. It is not presently known if the City Council responded positively to Morgan’s request.

<sup>54</sup> These burials took place after the Durham Health Department officially closed the cemetery. The FOGC has documented these burials with death certificates. Grave markers for these three people are not extant.

<sup>55</sup> “Epperson Hits Some County Burial Plots,” *Durham Morning-Herald*, October 31, 1951, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Jean Bradley Anderson, “Historic Black Cemetery Needs Restoration,” *Durham Morning Herald*, 28 February 1985, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Dickinson, Patricia S., “Help Restore Cemetery,” *The Herald-Sun*, March 16, 1988, 4.

<sup>58</sup> “Preservation Society honors five Durham projects,” *The Herald-Sun*, May 3, 1992, F3. The Durham Service Corps provided education and employment opportunities for disadvantaged young people between the ages of 18 and 23; see also “Business Notes,” *The Herald-Sun*, May 21, 1992, B9.

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Methodist Episcopal Church; Margaret Ruffin Faucette, founder of White Rock Baptist Church; and, the Reverend Dr. Augustus Shepard, father of North Carolina Central University's founder, Dr. James E. Shepard. The project also included a list of 117 individuals buried at the cemetery and an interview with Willis Carpenter, who lived near the intersection of Colonial and McGill Streets in the 1920s.<sup>59</sup> In 1992, the Historic Preservation Society of Durham recognized the preservation effort at the Geer Cemetery and attendant educational initiative with a Citation for Architectural Conservation at its annual meeting.

In July 2003, a newspaper article again highlighted Geer Cemetery's condition and the lack of action since 1991. The article featured an interview with R. Kelly Bryant, a retired executive with North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, and Jesse Eustice, who lived across the street from Geer Cemetery and who tried reviving interest in the cemetery's preservation.<sup>60</sup> Influenced in part by the article, a coalition of interested citizens formed the Friends of Geer Cemetery (FOGC) in 2003. The FOGC advocated for the cemetery's preservation and undertook cleanup of the property, restoration of headstones, identification of graves, researching the history of those interred, and engaging with descendant communities. In January 2004, the Durham City Council approved a one-time \$14,000 expenditure to assist with the restoration of Geer Cemetery. The City Council further agreed to allocate \$850 every three months in 2004 with the stipulation that the FOGC had to identify other funding sources after 2004.<sup>61</sup>

On December 21, 2004, *The Herald-Sun* provided an update on the cemetery's condition after the Durham City Council's commitment earlier in the year. The cemetery's once "almost impenetrable tangle of vines" was "transformed into a stand of open woodland, studded here and there with pale-gray headstones."<sup>62</sup> The article highlighted FOGC's plans to install a permanent sign, add gravel to the existing carriage path, install a gate, continue cleanup efforts, and provide for regular maintenance.<sup>63</sup>

The FOGC received support from various organizations in the Durham area during the 2000s. While the FOGC was meeting to discuss the construction and placement of a new sign at the cemetery entrance, groups like the Triage Thunder Cruisers, a local car club, worked to restore cemetery's grounds.<sup>64</sup> The organization decided to adopt the cemetery as a community project after Beverly B. Thompson, spokeswoman for the City of Durham, said that "although city workers have done some maintenance out here, Geer Cemetery is not public property, and the city isn't responsible for its upkeep."<sup>65</sup> The car club cleaned up the cemetery and reset some of the displaced grave markers.

In 2022, the cultural resources management consulting firm Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. conducted a geophysical survey using GPR at Geer Cemetery. The GPR survey focused on the footprint of a narrow, U-shaped carriage path in the cemetery. The accessible portions of the carriage path were surveyed to identify the location of potential unmarked burials to inform future preservation planning efforts. The survey identified 17 potential burials. Of these, 10 potential burials appeared to lie within the carriage path footprint. Additional burials may be present that were not identified due to ground disturbance.<sup>66</sup>

**Geer Cemetery Within the Context of Black Burial Grounds across Durham**

Geer Cemetery was the only extant community burying ground for Durham's African American population through the early twentieth century. Unlike smaller family cemeteries that served as *de facto* community burial grounds, such as those maintained by the Henderson and Fitzgerald families in the West End neighborhood, Geer Cemetery was formally organized and managed by a Board of Trustees whose oversight was documented in records and newspapers throughout its history. The other large community cemeteries were the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery in the Hickstown/Crest Street Community, which was established in the late nineteenth century, and Violet Park Cemetery, which dated to 1910. These independently

<sup>59</sup> "Neglected Cemetery Begins to Generate Lively Interest," *The Herald-Sun*, July 6, 2003, C1.

<sup>60</sup> "Neglected Cemetery," C1.

<sup>61</sup> "Editorials: Week's end," *The Herald-Sun*, January 24, 2004, C1.

<sup>62</sup> Jim Wise, "Bold Brave Cold to See Old," *The Herald-Sun*, December 21, 2004, C1.

<sup>63</sup> Wise, "Bold," C1.

<sup>64</sup> John McCann, "Car Club Fixes up Cemetery," *The Herald-Sun*, May 5, 2008, B1.

<sup>65</sup> McCann, "Car Club," B1.

<sup>66</sup> Cannon and McEachen, *Geophysical Survey*.

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managed community cemeteries served Durham's Black citizens until—and even after—the establishment of Beechwood Cemetery in the late 1920s.

The area around Crest Street in west Durham was largely owned by Hawkins Hicks, a White woman who gained title to the land in the mid-1860s. As emancipation freed Blacks from enslavement, many settled in this area, which came to be known, and eventually incorporated, as Hickstown. Organized in 1879, New Bethel Baptist Church was the spiritual and organizational heart of Hickstown. The community burial ground was alternately known as the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery and the Hickstown Cemetery.<sup>67</sup> Local tradition holds that the cemetery was established in the late nineteenth century as a burial place for poor Black workers at the Erwin Mill, a textile manufacturer a few blocks to the east. As Durham's population exploded through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery grew in response to serve the Crest Street community. The New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery ultimately held more than 1,000 graves. In the late 1950s, on the heels of the Interstate Highways Act of 1956, the North Carolina Department of Transportation began work with Durham's city leaders to design an east–west expressway across the city. In 1959, planners identified the Crest Street community as one of the areas in the path of the new highway. They met with strong, well-organized opposition from the Crest Street community that delayed construction for more than 20 years as community leaders pressed for fair and equitable treatment. In 1972, highway opponents filed a restraining order in federal court to block the project from continuing. The new expressway not only displaced hundreds of Black Durhamites, it also necessitated the relocation of the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery from the south side of the expressway to New Bethel Memorial Gardens, which is situated to the north of the expressway off West Pettigrew Street. More than 1,000 burials were reinterred in New Bethel Memorial Gardens beginning in early May 1983, with 50 graves relocated per week. The site of the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery has been subsumed by the Duke Manor Apartments, a large multi-family housing development erected in the mid-1980s.<sup>68</sup>

Established in 1910 on Concord Street between Moline and Dupree Streets, the Violet Park Cemetery was named for the mother of John Merrick, founder of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. For roughly 30 years, the Violet Park Cemetery received the burials of nearly 2,000 of Durham's Black citizens. Around 1940, property maintenance dwindled as the cemetery was abandoned and overgrown. In 1965, the City of Durham gained title to the property following foreclosure proceedings that resulted from non-payment of assessments for street improvements. By the 1970s, only about 75 graves had identifiable markers. In that year, the city deeded the three parcels comprising Violet Park Cemetery to the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina for the purpose of constructing a new edifice for St. Titus' Episcopal Church after its original building was destroyed by fire in 1967. The matter was the subject of a lawsuit ultimately heard by Superior Court, who ruled that the church could proceed with its plans for the property.<sup>69</sup> The new church building, situated on the northeast corner of Concord and Moline Streets, was completed by the summer of 1972. The remainder of the parcel to the north of the church was paved for parking.<sup>70</sup>

Contemporary family cemeteries were typically smaller in size with fewer burials. The Fitzgerald Cemetery was established at least as early as 1886 with the burial of Richard S. Fitzgerald, the four-year-old son of Richard Burton and Sally Fitzgerald.<sup>71</sup> Richard Burton and Robert Fitzgerald, the bi-racial sons of Thomas Fitzgerald and Sally Ann Fitzgerald, were Union veterans

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<sup>67</sup>Although newspapers refer to the cemetery using both names, there is a marked prevalence of the name New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery.

<sup>68</sup>“Expressway Land Purchase Has Started, Officials Say,” *The Durham Sun*, January 11, 1983, 2; see also “Crest Street graves to be moved for road,” *The Durham Sun*, April 27, 1983, 1; see also “New Bethel Memorial Gardens,” Open Durham, <https://www.opendurham.org/buildings/new-bethel-memorial-gardens>, accessed October 24, 2023; “Hickstown/Crest Street,” Open Durham, <https://www.opendurham.org/buildings/hickstown-crest-street>, October 24, 2023; “Durham's Anti-Expressway Organizing,” Southern Oral History Program, <https://sohp.org/exhibit/crest-street-community-history-project/>, accessed October 24, 2023.

<sup>69</sup>“To Restudy Cemetery Action: City County Sets Meeting,” *The Durham Sun*, February 4, 1970, B1”; see also “Court Clears Way for Church Here,” *The Durham Sun*, March 7, 1970, 9.

<sup>70</sup>“Porter Assuming Howard U. Post,” *The Herald-Sun*, July 15, 1972, 5.

<sup>71</sup>The earliest grave marker in the Fitzgerald Cemetery is that of Daniel J. Fitzgerald, the son of the Richard Burton and Sally Fitzgerald, who died in 1872 at only 17 days old. The Fitzgerald family did not own the property on which the cemetery was located until 1879, when Richard Burton Fitzgerald acquired 37.4 acres of land on which the cemetery is located. It is possible that the grave of Daniel J. Fitzgerald was reinterred here after 1879, or that the headstone was simply relocated as a memorial to their infant son.

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of the Civil War who moved to North Carolina during the Reconstruction era. Richard was a brick maker and Robert, whose war injuries ultimately left him blind, was a teacher in a Freedman school. In 1879, Richard Fitzgerald acquired 37.4 acres that included the land on which the Fitzgerald Cemetery was established. Known as Lots 29 and 32 of a plat of Fitzgerald's land, the cemetery originally covered roughly 0.5 acres of the family's property, which also included his brick manufacturing company. The Fitzgerald Cemetery contains 111 known graves, and an archaeological assessment employing ground-penetrating radar conducted in 2023 confirmed the presence of burials lacking markers. At least 65 family surnames were represented in the cemetery, including Alston, Clegg, Jenkins, and Smith, with 42 individuals being the only member of their families to be buried there. Thirty-seven of the known burials were for children two years old or younger. Most of the interments in the cemetery occurred between 1922 and 1930. The last known burial in the Fitzgerald Cemetery was in 1941. The property remained in the family's ownership until the late 1900s, when the City of Durham acquired the property. In the 1990s, the City sold property on the north side of Maplewood Cemetery to Habitat for Humanity for the construction of affordably priced single-family dwellings. The sale included the Fitzgerald Cemetery. Due to lack of extant markers denoting the location of graves across Lot 32, Habitat for Humanity subsequently developed more than half of Lot 32, substantially reducing the size of this section of the cemetery. During the late twentieth century, the city erected a chain-link fence separating the Fitzgerald Cemetery from Maplewood Cemetery, which lies adjacent to the south just west of Kent Street. The section of the Fitzgerald Cemetery on Lot 29 of the Fitzgerald property remains largely intact with a tree canopy cleared of undergrowth to make the few extant grave markers visible. The remaining section of the cemetery that occupies Lot 32 sits lower than Maplewood Cemetery, and the property is marked by a light covering of underbrush below the heavy tree canopy. A total of 12 markers remain.

The Henderson Cemetery was established in 1898 by the family of Dempsey and Emma Henderson, who settled in the West End neighborhood following their emancipation from the Cameron family's Stagville Plantation to the north of Durham. The Hendersons acquired 93 acres of land from industrialist Robert M. Morris. Dempsey Henderson died on September 22, 1898, making his the first burial in the family cemetery. In addition to Dempsey and Emma Henderson, many of their children and near relatives are also buried there. Although 63 other family surnames are represented in the Henderson Cemetery, including several members of the Baldwin, Norwood, Stroud, and Thompson families, many of the burials are for only a single member of a family. Interestingly, of the 94 known graves, 45 are for infants and children under two years old. Most of the known burials in the Henderson Cemetery occurred between 1912 and 1921. The actual number of graves is unknown, as is the number and type of grave markers that historically identified burials. Only two original grave markers remain extant. The first is for Jane Henderson Jones (03/29/1871–07/26/1910) and her husband, Frank Melvin Jones (11/12/1859–02/25/1911).<sup>72</sup> They were the daughter and son-in-law of Dempsey and Emma Henderson. The second marker is for Reverend Wesley Henderson, the son of Dempsey and Emma Henderson, who died March 2, 1928, at 74 years old. Both extant markers are die-on-base marble headstones. The last known burial in the Henderson Cemetery occurred in 1933. The property remained in the family's ownership until it was acquired by the City of Durham in the mid-1930s. It is situated at the northeast corner of and adjacent to the historically segregated Maplewood cemetery, which was established in 1874. The Henderson Family Cemetery became heavily overgrown due to the city's lack of maintenance. The city erected a chain-link fence around its perimeter with only a single gate for access. Through the late 1900s and early 2000s, deterioration led to neglect and the loss of most headstones. Cleanup efforts by Aseelah Ameen-Henderson, a descendant of Dempsey and Emma Henderson, have resulted in a cleared property whose terrain slopes down to the northeast from the Maplewood Cemetery into a shallow creek valley.

Geer Cemetery would likely have been similar to the New Bethel Baptist Church Cemetery and the Violet Park Cemetery in size, organization, burial, and marker types. Both the New Bethel and Violet Park cemeteries served as community cemeteries in their respective communities outside downtown Durham. Unlike Geer Cemetery, both New Bethel and Violet Park were situated in historically Black neighborhoods. The location of Geer within an increasingly white residential enclave northeast of downtown Durham presented administrative challenges for the Board of Trustees, which was unable to expand the property as demand necessitated during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Although not officially community cemeteries, the Fitzgerald and Henderson family cemeteries served as such due to *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation that precluded the burial of people of color in white cemeteries. Geer, however, differs from these two burial grounds in that it was managed by a

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<sup>72</sup> The grave marker has the incorrect birth year for Jane Henderson Jones. Based on census data for the year 1870, it should be inscribed 1869 rather than 1871.

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Board of Trustees and acknowledged as a community cemetery in public records. The Fitzgerald and Henderson cemeteries, by contrast, were owned by their respective families until acquisition by the City of Durham, under whose ownership their conditions declined dramatically.

**SUMMARY**

Geer Cemetery stands out as highly significant among Durham's Black cemeteries because it is the only extant community cemetery that was owned and managed by a Board of Trustees, thus representing self-determination and governance among Durham's African American community within the tight constraints of a racially segregated society.

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been Requested)  
 previously listed in the National Register  
 previously determined eligible by the National Register  
 designated a National Historic Landmark  
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

State Historic Preservation Office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other  
Name of repository: Office of Archives & History

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): DH3972

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property** 3.77 acres  
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage)

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates**

Datum, if other than WGS

<b>A.</b> <u>36.010274</u> Latitude	<u>-78.884045</u> Longitude	<b>B.</b> _____ Latitude	_____ Longitude
<b>C.</b> _____ Latitude	_____ Longitude	<b>D.</b> _____ Latitude	_____ Longitude

**Verbal Boundary Description** (describe the boundaries of the property)

The National Register boundary of the Geer Cemetery is highlighted by the heavy black lines on the attached “National Register Boundary and Coordinates Map” created by David Strohmeier and Annie McDonald on December 8, 2023, using the online GIS tax parcel viewer. The cemetery’s boundary encompasses 3.77 acres on Durham County tax parcel identification number 0832423614. On the north and east sides of the property, the boundary follows the tax parcel line. On the west and south sides of the property, the boundary extends slightly beyond the tax parcel line and follows the edge of pavement along the adjacent streets. The nominated property is bordered on the north by residential buildings that date to the cemetery’s period of significance, on the east by a large parking lot that serves an industrial complex, on the south by McGill Place, and on the west by Colonial Street.

**Boundary Justification** (explain why the boundaries were selected)

The boundaries encompass 3.77 acres, which includes all the acreage historically associated with Geer Cemetery. This acreage includes the original 1-acre purchased by trustees of Geer Cemetery from Jesse Geer on March 28, 1877; the 0.77-acre purchase from F. C. Geer on March 25, 1887; and the 1-acre parcel from J. B. Mason on January 28, 1905. It includes all the known burials from Geer Cemetery’s founding in 1877 through the last interment in 1945 and all the extant grave markers and other landscape features.

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Jason L. Harpe, Annie McDonald, Ellen Turco, Meagan Ratini, and Maverick Huneycutt  
organization Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. date 22 March 2024  
street & number 525 Wait Avenue telephone \_\_\_\_\_  
city or town Wake Forest state NC zip code 27587  
e-mail jharpe@rgaincorporated.com

**Geer Cemetery**

Name of Property

**Durham County, North Carolina**

County and State

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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
  
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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**Photographs:**

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Submit clear and descriptive black and white photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

**Name of Property:** Geer Cemetery

**City or Vicinity:** Durham

**County:** Durham County

**State:** North Carolina

**Photographer:** Jason Harpe, Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc.

**Date Photographed:** March 2023

**Description of Photograph(s) and number:**

**Photo 1 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0001)

North edge of Geer Cemetery, along Camden Avenue, facing east from the intersection with Colonial Street.

**Photo 2 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0002)

West edge of Geer Cemetery, along Colonial Street, facing south from the intersection with Camden Avenue.

**Photo 3 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0003)

South edge of Geer Cemetery, along McGill Place, facing west from the east property line.

**Photo 4 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0004)

East edge of Geer Cemetery, showing the chain-link fence along the east property line, facing north.

**Photo 5 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0005)

Representative marked and unmarked grave depressions near the middle of Geer Cemetery, facing south.

**Photo 6 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0006)

South section of the carriage path within Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 7 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0007)

East section of the carriage path within Geer Cemetery, facing north.

**Photo 8 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0008)

North end of the original 1877 section of Geer Cemetery, showing Camden Avenue to the right, facing west.

**Geer Cemetery**

Name of Property

**Durham County, North Carolina**

County and State

**Photo 9 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0009)

Southwest corner of Geer Cemetery, showing the 1905 expansion area, viewed facing northeast from the intersection of Colonial Street (left) and McGill Place (foreground).

**Photo 10 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0010)

Unmarked fieldstone near the middle of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 11 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0011)

Headstone of unidentified decedent near the eastern edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 12 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0012)

Concrete row marker identifying Row 88, at the western edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 13 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_013)

Marble tab-in-socket headstone for Haywood Purefoy (1863–1923) and his son Rufus B. Purefoy (1905–1930), near the western edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 14 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_014)

Marble die on base with granite plot enclosure of Nettie Burnett (1883 (?)-1915), at the western edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 15 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_015)

Marble headstone for Reverend A. B. Joyner (d. 1926), near the western edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 16 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_016)

Cast concrete tab-in-socket headstone for Lillie Bailey (d. 1922), showing the common foliate motif at the top, near the northwest corner of Geer Cemetery, facing west.

**Photo 17 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0017)

Cast concrete tab-in-socket headstone for Elvin Parham (d. 1925), showing unique iconography conveying his involvement in the local African American fire department, near the northern edge of Geer Cemetery, facing southeast.

**Photo 18 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0018)

Cast concrete die-on-base headstone for Thomas Lyon (1885–1907) and Mollie Lyon (1864–1922), in the western portion of Geer Cemetery, facing west.

**Photo 19 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0019)

Marble obelisks marking the graves of D. B. Green (d. 1910), left foreground, and Dave Hall (d. 1912, right background), near the southwest corner of Geer Cemetery, facing southeast.

**Photo 20 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0020)

Marble obelisk marking the graves of the Banks family, near the northwest corner of Geer Cemetery, facing northeast.

**Photo 21 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0021)

Memorial marker for Grand United Order of Odd Fellows 2970, near the southeast corner of Geer Cemetery, facing south.

**Photo 22 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0022)

Headstone marking the grave of A. D. Dunaga (d. 1888), near the eastern edge of Geer Cemetery, facing east.

**Photo 23 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0023)

Brick plot enclosure for George Goines (d. 1935) and family, near the center of Geer Cemetery, facing west.

**Geer Cemetery**

Name of Property

**Durham County, North Carolina**

County and State

**Photo 24 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0024)

Brownstone plot enclosure near the southeast corner of Geer Cemetery, facing northwest.

**Photo 25 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0025)

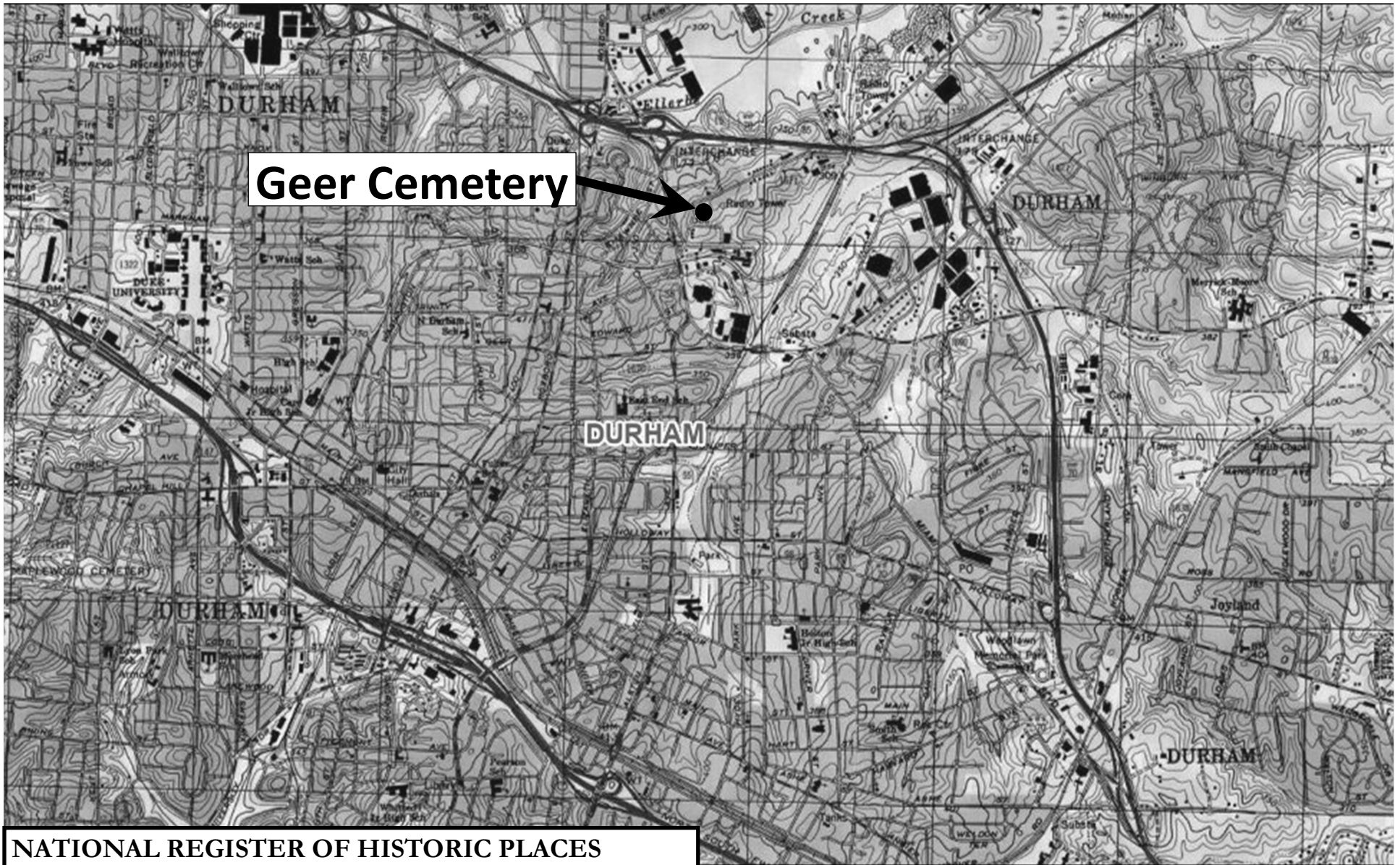
Plot enclosure for R. D. Jones, near the northwest corner of Geer Cemetery, facing northwest.

**Photo 26 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0026)

Marble grave marker and rock-faced granite plot enclosure around the grave of Lewis Boothe (d. 1907), at the western edge of Geer Cemetery, facing northwest.

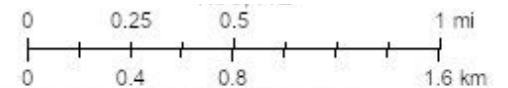
**Photo 27 of 27** (NC\_Durham\_GeerCemetery\_0027)

Slant-front granite marker for "The Edian Markham Middle Section of Geer Cemetery," near the southwest corner of Geer Cemetery, facing east.



**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
LOCATION MAP**  
**Geer Cemetery, 800 Colonial Street  
Durham, Durham County, North Carolina**

Map created by Annie McDonald, February 27, 2024  
Basemap: USGS 7.5-minute series topographic map  
Quadrangle: Northwest Durham, NC





**COORDINATES**

**A**      LATITUDE      LONGITUDE  
36.010274, -78.884045



**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
BOUNDARY & COORDINATES MAP**

**Geer Cemetery, 800 Colonial Street  
Durham, Durham County, North Carolina**

 National Register Historic District Boundary  
 Tax Parcel Lines



Map created by Dave Strohmeier and Annie McDonald, December 8, 2023  
Basemap: Durham County Tax Parcel Viewer, 2023



**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
SITE PLAN & PHOTO KEY (not to scale)**

**Geer Cemetery**  
800 Colonial Street  
Durham, Durham County, North Carolina

1 Photo number and direction

