

## CEMETERY COMMUNITY: A BRIEF HISTORY

Cemetery community was one of thousands of post-emancipation rural black communities that once blanketed the South. It takes its name from Stones River National Cemetery. The people who settled here included African American men who had served in the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War and then transitioned to employees of the federal War Department to build and maintain the national cemetery. However, the majority of those who formed this community were freed men and women who chose to stay where they had lived before the war.

By decisively ending the institution of chattel slavery, the Civil War forced a reordering of the South's economy and society. Despite the immensity of that reordering, the changes registered rather subtly on the agrarian landscape. For a time, the Freedmen's Bureau aided the establishment of schools and helped to negotiate equitable labor contracts. Even so, freed men and women began new ways of life primarily by using the resources at hand, namely their physical labor and the creativity borne of necessity. Agriculture was still the economic base, and African Americans initially engaged in agriculture as tenant farmers or hired hands. Gradually, however, they began to acquire land, and the percentage of landowning black farmers in the South steadily increased to a high of about 25 percent in 1910.<sup>1</sup> With this change, slave quarters disappeared, replaced by a more dispersed pattern of farms and farm dwellings and a network of loosely bounded black and white communities clustered around segregated churches and schools.

In 1868, the Tennessee Manual Labor University (TMLU), chartered by the State of Tennessee in 1866, acquired 307 acres of land surrounding Stones River National Cemetery. Directed by Peter Lowery of Nashville, a free black before the war who was educated at Franklin College, the TMLU was founded to provide practical education for African Americans. Although the school was short-lived, its location helped to establish this area as African American space. The 1870 census confirms that the people living near the national cemetery were primarily black, although landownership, except for the TMLU property, remained in the hands of whites.

During the 1870s, Stones River Methodist Church was erected and Evergreen Graveyard was established. Both were located near Old Nashville Highway in an area of Cemetery community known as the Bottom, where a one-room school also was built. Two more churches, Mt. Olivet (also Olive) Missionary Baptist Church and Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church were built in the 1880s. These two churches were located along Van Cleve Lane in the Cedars area of Cemetery community.

Currently, we know more about the people who lived in the Cedars because in 1929 the landowners in this area were forced to sell their property to the U. S. government for the purpose of creating Stones River National Military Park. This taking erased part of the landscape of Cemetery community in order to commemorate the Civil War battle that had taken place on the same land from December 31, 1862, to January 2, 1863. The land acquisition process also created a traceable record of landownership.

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<sup>1</sup> Loren Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 153, 182-84.

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The first two black landowners in the Cedars represent the two strands of community formation. In 1872, Sam Grisham (also Gresham), a blacksmith, purchased 40 acres located north of Wilkinson Pike. His land was situated across the road from the Grisham farm, which was operated with 21 enslaved people in 1860. In 1875, L.S. Doolittle, the superintendent of Stones River National Cemetery, sold three acres adjacent to the Hazen Brigade Monument to William Holland (also Harland, Harlan, and Harlin). Holland, who served with the 111<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T. in the war, may have been in the area as early as 1865, but the 1870 census places him in the household of cemetery superintendent Doolittle.

Black landownership in the Cedars increased gradually, and the community continued to grow in size up to about World War I. In 1910, approximately 80 people lived here in 17 separate households. Thirteen heads of household were farmers, and of them 12 owned property. Deeds and census data help to identify the families with the deepest roots in the Cedars. In addition to those of Sam Grisham and William Holland, they include the families of Andrew and Mary Avent, Ellis and Addie Anderson, Ed and Patsy Howard, George and Martha Hutchinson, John and Callie Mason, Ed and Josephine Orr, and William and Fannie Waller.

In 1920, the community numbered about 65, a population decrease that correlates with the "great migration" of African Americans northward beginning with World War I. In 1929, when the War Department began the process of land acquisition for the national park, the inventory of land and improvements in the Cedars listed 17 houses, three cabins, nine barns, one smokehouse, one chicken shed, 11 miscellaneous sheds, five wells, 730 fruit trees (identified as peach or pear in some instances), 1000 blackberry vines, 200 grape vines, two churches, and one store.

Many of those displaced for the national park moved into Murfreesboro or relocated within Cemetery community. A few are believed to have left the area, continuing the outmigration that began with World War I. The two Baptist churches, Mt. Olivet and Ebenezer, were moved to new locations along Old Nashville Highway in the Bottom.

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