

The town of Lexington owned two “colored” cemeteries long before it took title to Lexington Presbyterian Cemetery and renamed it for Stonewall Jackson in 1949. The stories passed down about them are a mixture of facts and hearsay.

## ‘Fence Corners of Cultivated Fields’



At the close of Black History Month, the Rockbridge Historical Society concludes its five-part series examining the lives, legacies, and local dimensions of Virginia’s groundbreaking, multiracial election of 1867.

Archived in RHS’ Local Black Histories page at RockbridgeHistory.org, earlier articles examined the new promise of citizenship and the roll-back of voting rights, alongside profiles of economic and educational achievements of those first Black voters and their children.

This final installment bears witness to Lexington’s two historic Black cemeteries, through the next half-century of political and cultural change. All are co-written by RHS Secretary Larry Spurgeon and RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson.

They share particular thanks for the research expertise of the Washington and Lee’s Special Collections Department, and for the support of The News-Gazette staff in helping this series to grow through the last several months.

THIS 1863 MAP by the Confederate Engineer Bureau shows the eastern side of Lexington, including the site of Sarah Winn’s home overlooking the Maury River. Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson’s servant, Jim Lewis, died at that home in 1864 and is considered the most famous person buried in the “old cemetery” for Blacks at the corner of Washington Street and Letcher Avenue (renamed Lewis Street in 1912).

## New Evidence Adds To The Story Of Lexington’s Black Cemeteries

“Death comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes.” - John Donne

This series began with the 1867 election, told the stories about electors in later years, and explored the experiences and achievements of the next generation. And now we come full circle.

A window of hope had opened for the Black electors of Rockbridge, but they had no illusions. About 92 percent of them had been enslaved, deemed personal property under Virginia law, itemized on tax forms next to livestock and furniture. The 13th Amendment legally abolished slavery, but it did not change hearts and minds. Lincoln’s promise of a “new birth of freedom” would remain elusive.

The 1870 census was the first to record the names of the formerly enslaved, though almost half of the electors did not appear. We know they were farmers, laborers, blacksmiths, boatmen, coopers, shoemakers, barbers, bakers, cooks, coachmen, house servants, plasterers, carpenters, butchers, a candy maker, and a minister. Some were teenagers during the war. A few were born in the 1700s, including Jordan Moore of Buffalo, John L. Carter of South River, William Scott of Walkers Creek, Richard Banks, Daniel Crawford, Jacob Ellis, James Johnson, and Hannibal Morris of Lexington. These men lived to witness the end of slavery, and to be the first of their race to vote, alongside, but separate from, the white men of Rockbridge.

Sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, they worked, struggled, experienced joy, endured loss, persevered. And while John Donne’s sermon affirms that “death comes equally to us all,” it



LEXINGTON poet and mechanic Spottswood Styles (seated center) is among three generations of his family in this photo from the 1910s who followed his father, John Styles, an elector in the 1867 election. Along with their wives and more contemporary family members, both father John and son Spottswood are buried with large memorial stones in Evergreen Cemetery. BELOW is a view of Lexington looking west from Green Hill in this Michael Miley photograph from the 1870s.

did not make “all equal when it comes,” for the electors and other Black residents of Rockbridge County over the next century. They would be buried in its “colored” cemeteries - Rising Zion, Cedar Hill, Mt. Lydia, Back Draft and Lexington.

### The Old Cemetery

The town of Lexington owned two “colored” cemeteries long before it took

title to Lexington Presbyterian Cemetery and renamed it for Stonewall Jackson in 1949. The stories passed down about them are a mixture of facts and hearsay. The “real” story is more compelling.

An extraordinary letter in the Lexington Gazette issue of March 16, 1843, sets the stage. Signed “HOWARD,” the writer requested a “little space,” “in behalf of a too much neglected portion of

our population. I mean the poor negro. Where are they buried when they die? - Even echo answers not, for there is no place for them.”

The writer witnessed a procession “through a cultivated field near the town, to a remote corner, where through the liberality of an aged citizen,” several Black people had been buried. “One or two spots under like circumstances are sometimes used. And in every instance,

the fence corners of cultivated fields, are the habitations of the dead negro.”

Howard believed “our moral and social obligations ought to teach us better - our holy religion does teach us better,” and they should “not build any more Churches, or set up false pretensions to Christianity or moral obligation, until this foul shame is wiped out.

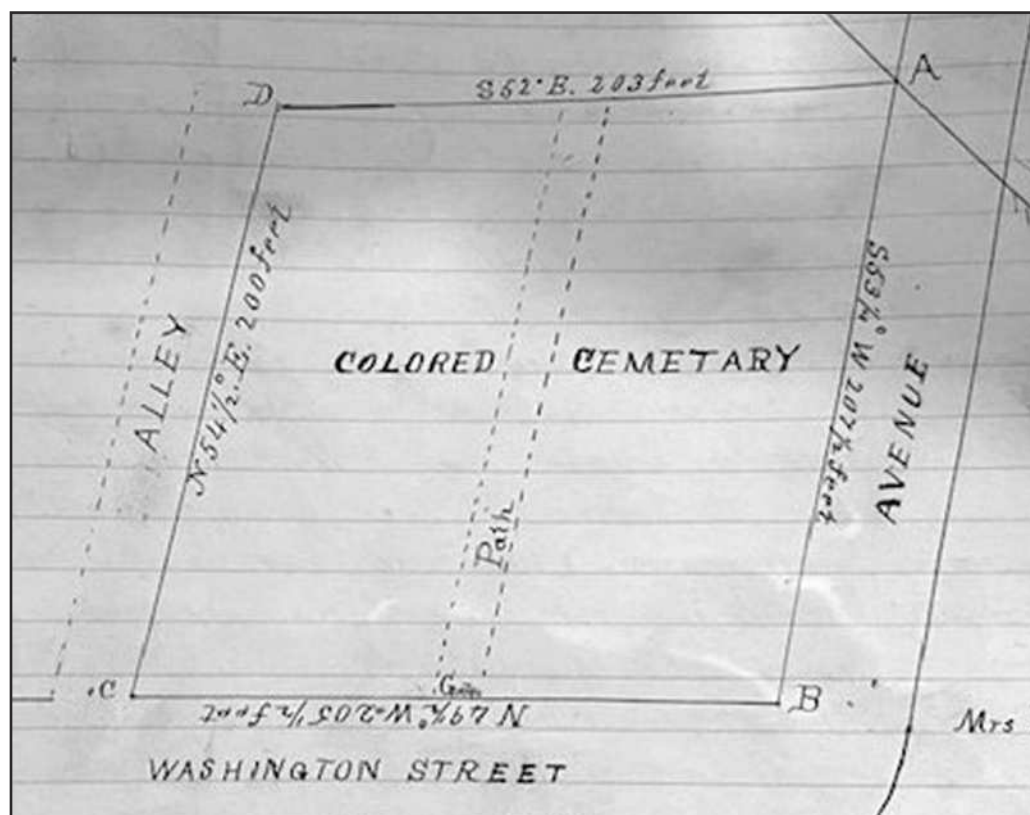
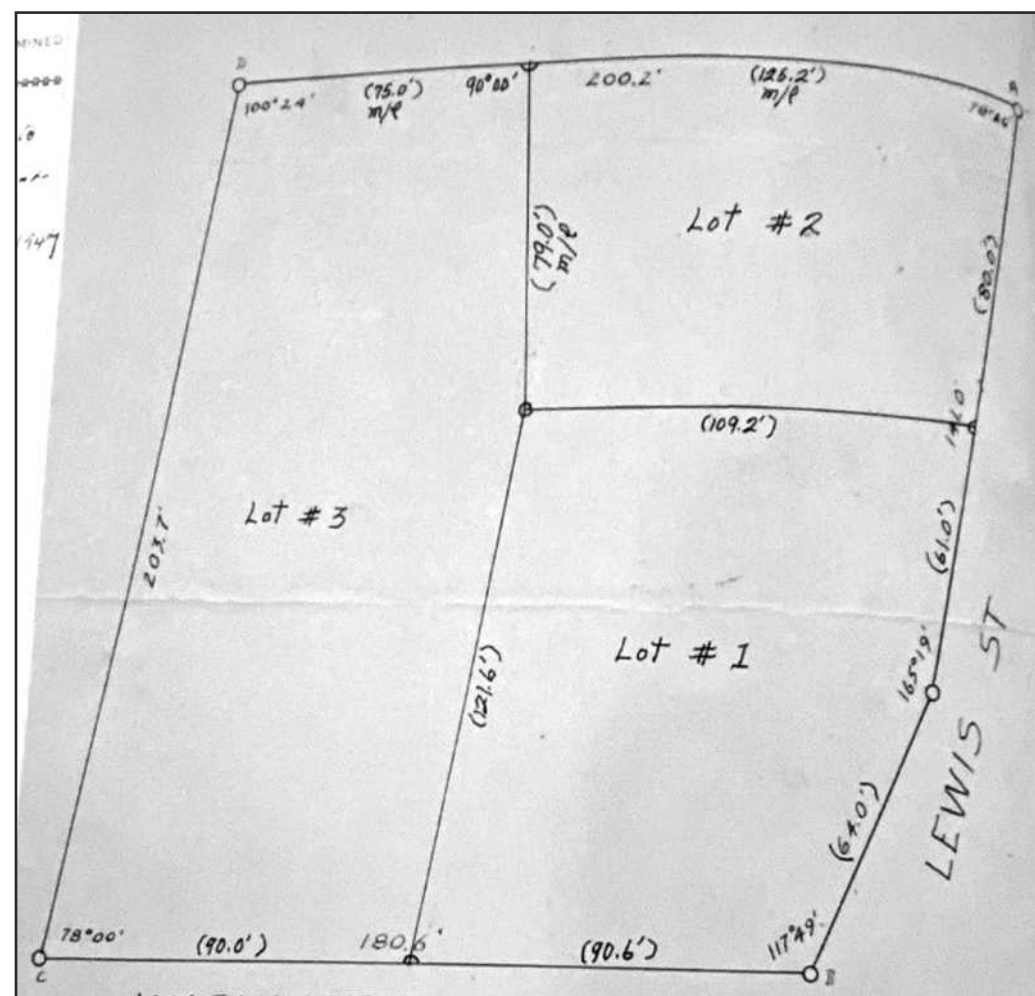
“Is it right that one or two individuals should furnish a burial place for a whole community?” It would take only \$100 to “purchase and inclose” a “convenient burying ground for the poor negro - and the poor negro will pay it back in blessings and in labor.”

One field used for burials, as Doug Harwood has noted, was owned by William Willson, likely the “aged citizen,” and became the first town cemetery. Nothing is known about other sites, though a reference to a “grave yard,” found in an 1830 memorandum by James McDowell, later governor and congressman, concerning upgrades to “Col Alto,” now the Hampton Inn, is intriguing.

Willson died in debt in 1840, accused of financial improprieties, some related to his service as treasurer for Washington College. In 1845 the chancery court ordered commissioner William C. Lewis to sell Willson’s real estate. The auction was held Sept. 10 at the courthouse, for several properties including two Main Street houses (one being the Willson-Walker house), and a four-acre parcel 1/8 mile east of the courthouse that Willson owned by 1817. Dr. John W. Paine purchased one half of the four-acre parcel for \$126. The other half was purchased for \$120 by Matthew White,

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ABOVE is the 1877 plat with the deed from Simon Ramsey to Lexington, recorded 32 years after the sale, of the old "colored cemetery" on Washington Street. This was three years before the town acquired the land that became Evergreen Cemetery. A footpath ran down the middle, and the alley on the west border no longer exists. AT LEFT is a plat from the 1946 deed for the town of Lexington's sale of three lots next to the old cemetery to a couple for development. A 1947 deed for the sale of one of those lots stated the property could not be sold or leased to anyone "other than those of the white race." The U. S. Supreme Court held these types of covenants were unconstitutional in the 1948 case of Shelley v. Kraemer.

## Cemeteries

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agent for the town of Lexington, "for a Negro Grave Yard."

Through oversight, a deed was not recorded for Lexington's purchase. A few months later White sold one of the town's two acres to Paine. An 1868 survey in Paine's estate case described a "certain lot of ground in the town of Lexington, adjoining the negro burying ground," and a plat marked his three acres as lots "No. I, No. II, and No. III." Someone eventually learned of the missing deed, and in 1876, the mayor and council petitioned the court to appoint a new commissioner for Willson's estate. Simon Ramsey was ordered to "convey the grave yard lot," and the deed, recorded Feb. 9, 1877, included a plat showing the cemetery lot bordered on the south by Washington Street and on the east by "The Avenue," later Letcher Avenue, and in 1912 renamed Lewis Street.

### James Alexander, aka "Jim Lewis"

The most famous person buried in the old cemetery was a man known as "Jim Lewis," a "servant" to Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson during the war. Iconic to Civil War buffs, he was a featured character in the book and movie "Gods and Generals."

Little was known about Jim outside of the war, except, as Jackson biographer James I. Robertson Jr. observed, he was Black and from Lexington. It was not even known whether he was free or enslaved, though entries in Jackson's wartime account book referred to payments to William C. Lewis for the "hire of Jim."

An anonymous letter from a veteran of Jackson's command appeared in the Lexington Gazette in 1875. His purpose was to seek contributions for a tombstone for "Jim Lewis," who "lies in a neglected grave in the Colored Cemetery at Lexington, without a Stone to record his

deathless devotion to the General."

Last year, a newspaper article about Jim was discovered. Originally published in the Lexington Gazette, and republished in national newspapers in 1878, it contained several new facts. First, he was referred to as "James Alexander, or Lewis, Mr. William Lewis of Lexington, being his owner." Second, Jim "died at the house of Mrs. Winn during the winter of 1864." First-hand accounts mentioned that Jim died in Lexington that year, but the precise location was not known. Third, his "wife, whose name was Adaline, now lives in Philadelphia." No wife or family member has been associated with him before.

Research has confirmed these details. The death record for James Alexander, found at the Rockbridge County Courthouse, reported that he died in August 1864 of pleurisy, age 40, and that his "consort" was "Addaline." His occupation was "house servant," and William C. Lewis was described as his "employer."

Sarah Winn was the widow of Joseph Winn, whose sister Lucy was married to John Jordan. Sarah reported the births of two children of an enslaved woman named Adeline — an infant in 1857 who died the same day, and Emma, born in 1858. In 1870, Adeline, Emma and two other children lived with Margaret McDowell, the widowed sister-in-law of William C. Lewis. Adeline Alexander, widow of James, was listed in Philadelphia city directories from 1876 to 1881, and there the trail goes cold.

The August death date is incorrect. Henry Kyd Douglas, an aide to Jackson, wrote that after the death of Col. Sandie Pendleton in September 1864, Jim was sent to Lexington to deliver letters and Sandie's personal effects to his family. The anonymous veteran, in his 1875 letter, described seeing Jim on the road, despondent, and "a few days afterwards we passed his corpse



THIS BROKEN stone at Evergreen Cemetery marks the grave of Samuel Harper, an 1867 elector.

going to the cemetery." James Alexander died in early October, at the Winn home across the Valley Road from Stono, the Jordans' house, in the care of his enslaved wife Adeline, and was buried in an unmarked grave. An extended article about James Alexander is posted on the RHS website.

### Evergreen

In February 1880 the town council discussed a proposal to purchase "additional grounds for a cemetery for the colored people of the Town." A cemetery committee later contracted with John and Julia Tutwiler to purchase a three-acre lot to the east of the old cemetery, near the Sigma Nu fraternity today.

For unexplained reasons the full council decided in May to find "another suitable lot," and, for the present, "the Tutwiler lot be not used for the burial of the dead."

Over the summer a new committee arranged for a land exchange at another location. For reasons not explained in the minutes, the Black citizens of the community presented a petition to the council in August, "asking that the proposed exchange of the lots for the cemetery purposes be not made." The petition was tabled, and in September was tabled again. The committee was instructed to "close the contract

for the exchange of lots at once and make the deed."

Two deeds for the exchange were recorded Sept. 8. The first was a conveyance by Judge William McLaughlin to the town for a six-acre parcel, the second from the town to McLaughlin for the three acre "Tutwiler lot." The council instructed the cemetery committee to "employ the services of an engineer in defining the limits of the lot," and to construct an enclosure for the cemetery and a "suitable entrance." The committee was instructed in October to "prepare at once a portion of the grounds in the new colored cemetery for the interment of the dead." A motion was approved to discontinue "the further burial of the dead in the old colored cemetery."

A persistent story over the years was that most remains in the old cemetery were relocated to Evergreen, but that is unlikely. The February proposal had been to purchase "additional grounds" for a cemetery, and the opening of a new cemetery would not require relocating bodies. The expense would have been substantial, and many graves were unmarked. A few gravestones in Evergreen predate 1880, suggesting some remains were later moved by families, but the number was small.

Evidence that most graves remained undisturbed comes from two articles in the Lexington Gazette. The first, dated March 9, 1898, described a proposal at a town council meeting to sell the "cemetery of the colored people on Washington Street." It "was referred to the street committee for further consideration," and "Great opposition to the sale of this old burying ground is heard."

The Gazette writer added that "it seems a sacrilege that the dust of faithful servants should be disturbed, and that their graves should be desecrated by being trampled upon and destroyed." No opposition would have been voiced if all the bodies had been removed.

The second article, on Aug. 11, 1909, reported that "Dr. A. W. Pleasants and others appeared before the Council in the interest of the colored people of Lexington with the request that proper steps be taken to turn over to them the old colored cemetery on Washington Street, and that it may be properly cared for and beautified. The matter was continued for further investigation." That request would not have been made if the bodies had been relocated to Evergreen.

It is not clear when the Evergreen name was adopted. A newspaper article in 1908 described a Memorial Day ceremony of the "colored Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and Courts of Calanthe," that marched in regalia from Drummond's Hall to the Randolph Street M. E. Church, and then to the "colored cemetery," to lay flowers on the graves. The name was in use by 1928 when Judge Henry Holt appointed trustees for "Evergreen Cemetery, Lexington's colored cemetery." The trustees were Harry L. Walker, Hugh A. Williams, Urquhart Poindexter, William L. Price, and Johnston A. Pettigrew.

### The Old Cemetery Is Sold

Abandoned and poorly maintained, the old cemetery remained under town ownership until 1946. The council called a joint meeting with Evergreen's trustees in September to consider a proposal to sell the lot. Town attorney C. S. Glasgow "pointed out that he had investigated the matter thoroughly and believed that all of the bodies had been removed from this lot and reinterred in the Evergreen Cemetery." What "evidence" Glasgow relied upon is unknown, but he added that the vacant lot was a "liability to the Town," needed to be cleaned up, and there was a "current demand for building lots."

The proposal was approved unanimously, and the resolution provided that "at the time of the establishment of Evergreen

Cemetery over sixty-five years ago, so far as known, all of the relics of those who had been interred on this land were removed and placed in Evergreen Cemetery."

Revealing some hesitation, the resolution added a caveat: that if any bodies were found in the future, the mayor would "forthwith place the same under the direction and care of the local morticians," to be reinterred at Evergreen, "with the solemn courtesy and respect due our dead at the expense of the Town of Lexington."

Two months later the Town sold the one-acre cemetery lot to a married couple for \$3,500. A diagram included with the deed shows the parcel platted into three lots. Several dwellings were constructed on the lots over the next few years.

### In Remembrance ...

On a crisp January day we took a walk through Evergreen, sharing stories about the people buried there we have come to know. An elderly woman, walking with a cane, asked if we were repairing the gravestones. She had promised her mother to keep up the graves in the family plot. Several of the stones were broken, and she hoped to find someone to restore them. Earlier we had turned over one of those very stones to read the inscription: "Samuel Harper, died March 2, 1889."

Most of the markers for the electors are long gone, but a few remain. This community, that values its history and progress, can here commemorate that historic event and the men of '67 by recognizing Samuel Harper and his fellow electors buried in Evergreen: Peyton Barclay, Archy Brice, Lilburn Downing, Sr., William Drummond, Samuel Edmondson, Levi Gilmore, Charles C. Hance, Harrison Henderson, James Jackson, Horace Lewis, Isaac Moore, Alfred W. Pettigrew, Robert H. Price, Jefferson Shields, John Styles, and William Washington.

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