



## March 2008 Newsletter

### Social Memory and Plantation Burial Grounds, a Virginian Example

By Lynn Rainville\*

In 2001, I began a project to locate slave cemeteries in the Virginia Piedmont (Rainville 2003). At first, I thought a small sample size would be sufficient to understand the patterns and cultural significance of these mortuary landscapes. But each newly discovered cemetery brought surprises and now, seven years later, I am still learning new perspectives on African-American kinship patterns, mortuary ideologies, and cemetery landscapes. Meanwhile, my sample size has grown to over 100 cemeteries, dating between 1810 and the present. In 2002, I extended my study beyond slave cemeteries, to post-bellum and twentieth-century examples, to have a better context for determining what was unique about the antebellum traditions.

In addition to my study of African-American cemeteries, I began studying the burial grounds used by the slave owners so that I could compare and contrast the two mortuary patterns. In this article I discuss one of my theories, that both enslaved and European-American populations used burial grounds as a stage to display their beliefs about death, kinship, race, and status. To illustrate this thesis, I use five cemetery landscapes to trace two parallel and intertwined communities who lived in Amherst County on the Sweet Briar and Tusculum Plantations (Figure 1). In the post-bellum period, the white owners remained on the plantations, while the freed African Americans created new homes in nearby towns. Using mortuary landscapes, gravestone inscriptions, and archival documents, I trace the “material biographies” of the individuals buried in these cemeteries, demonstrating the intertwined relationships that paradoxically separated and joined these free and enslaved individuals in life and in death.

To contextualize these mortuary landscapes I turned to Pierre Nora’s model of history and memory. Nora (1989: 8) pointed out that “history” and “memory” are opposites because the former is an incomplete reconstruction of something no longer present, while the latter “remains in permanent evolution” and is always open to reinterpretation or deliberate forgetting. As an archaeologist, I would add two additional levels of remembering: the rediscovery and interpretation of the archaeological record and the decision about how to commemorate or memorialize that record. In other words, the contribution of “digging objects up” and “displaying those objects.” For Nora (1996: XVII), physical sites of memory, or *a lieu de mémoire*, become an important symbolic element of the memorial heritage of a community. In the case of cemeteries, these displays of “mortuary memories” are constructed at different moments in time, for and by diverse audiences. In this article I explore how these memories, and alternative narratives are remembered and reified through mortuary landscapes and gravestones. I will discuss the community’s role in manipulating these mortuary landscapes. I will explore

these versions of social memory through the study of ideographic, cartographic, historic and artifactual data.



**Figure 1: Map of the Study Area.** The red outline indicates the border of Amherst County within the state of Virginia, while the pink circle is the study area that includes the former Sweet Briar Plantation and its environs. In 1900 the last owner of the plantation, Indiana Fletcher Williams, deeded the land (and her inheritance) to found a women's college, originally called Sweet Briar Institute, today called Sweet Briar College. Map drawn by the Author.

Cemeteries and mortuary landscapes are particularly well suited for recovering the constructed memories of the past because they are one of the few examples of deliberately placed material culture that is meant to survive. Moreover, while personalized elite material culture often survives (in the form of statues, houses, or curated belongings), most Americans left behind only a few artifacts that correlate with their identity; gravestones are one such example. One caveat is that the dead do not bury themselves. While obvious on the practical level, on the interpretive level this means that the choice of gravestone symbolism, inscription, morphology, and, most likely, personalized epitaph was made by a survivor, be it a relative, a member of a religious institution, or by a stone carver (Rainville 1999: 575). And a second caveat, relevant to the context of the gravestone, is that most cemeteries are evolving landscapes. Studying a snapshot of a burial ground in 2008 is not the same as reconstructing the layout in 1908 or 1808. The examples discussed below illustrate how subsequent generations modify deathscapes to suit their needs.

### Sweet Briar Plantation

The “big house” at Sweet Briar was originally built in the late 18th century and called Locust Ridge. Property ownership changed hands several times until the 1840s when Elijah Fletcher decided to spend his retirement there. Elijah (1789-1858) was born in Ludlow Vermont, one of fifteen children. Sickly as a child, he left the inhospitable New England climate, originally intending to settle in the Carolinas. Instead, a family friend convinced him to apply for a position as a school teacher in New Glasgow, Virginia (today, Clifford, Virginia). During

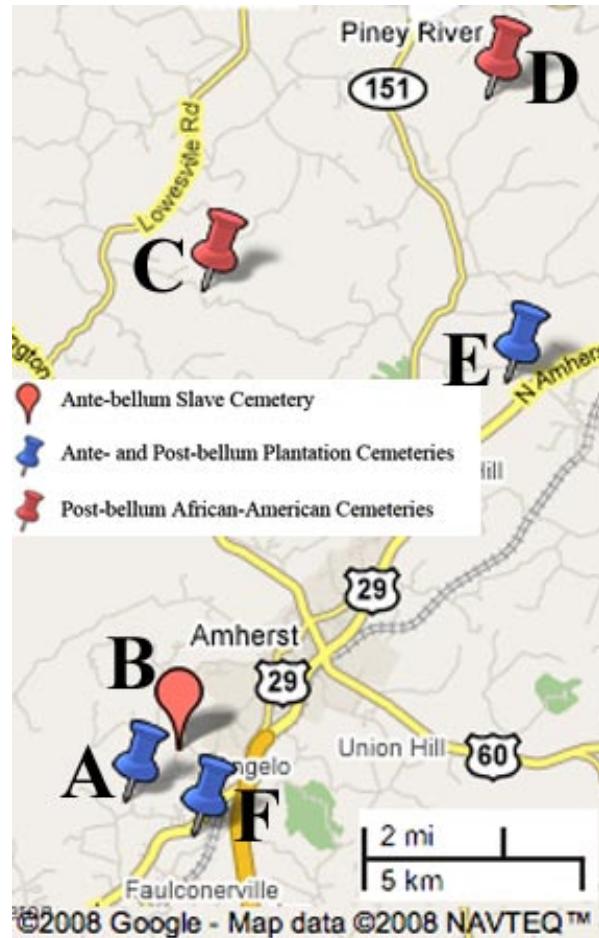
his trip south, Elijah wrote his father, Jesse, expressing his dismay at passing by enslaved populations held in bondage. After he began teaching at his new post, he characterized slavery as “a curse to any country” (from a letter to Jesse Fletcher, Nov 29, 1811; quoted in von Briesen 1965: 45). Despite his initial moral abhorrence, he himself became a slave owner two years later.

In December 1811, Elijah met his future wife, Maria Antoinette, the daughter of a local elite, William Sydney Crawford. They married two years later in April 1813. His father-in-law “gave” the newlyweds two black children, a boy and a girl, as a wedding present. In June, when Elijah wrote home for the first time since his marriage, he observed, “we have black servants enough.” (von Briesen 1965: 74). In the years that followed, he quit teaching, moved to Lynchburg, was active in civic affairs, published a newspaper (between 1825 and 1841), was elected mayor (1831), and, for decades, bought and sold land, collecting interest on loans (in cash and land). When some of the landowners defaulted on their loans, Elijah acquired even more property. One of his acquisitions was land south of the Amherst Court House that he named “Sweetbrier.” In the 1840s, Elijah selected his “Sweetbrier” farm as his preferred recluse from city life and gradually began consolidating his purchases around this plantation. Between 1847 and his death, in 1858, he lived full-time on this large plantation, managing dozens of enslaved individuals.

## Burial Grounds at the Sweet Briar Plantation

I began this research with a question: how do surviving family members use cemetery landscapes to illustrate kinship relationships? To look at the intricacies of these correlations, I focused on the Sweet Briar Plantation and its multiple burial grounds. Between 2002 and 2004, I conducted a pedestrian survey on the Sweet Briar campus (today, approximately 3100 acres in size) and discovered several cemeteries. In 2002, I began a second project to locate and map historic African-American cemeteries in Amherst County. These two projects enabled me to contribute contextual examples to the long-known “Fletcher/Williams Cemetery” (Figure 2a) and the more recently re-recognized “Sweet Briar Plantation Burial Ground” (Figure 2b) that contains the remains of the African Americans once enslaved on the Sweet Briar Plantation. I will compare these two cemeteries (located at Sweet Briar), to cemeteries used by freed slaves and their descendants after emancipation (the Fletcher Family Cemetery, Figure 2c, and the Broady Family Cemetery, Figure 2d) and a second plantation cemetery used by members of the white Fletcher family (located at the Tusculum Plantation, Figure 2e). A third Elijah Fletcher family plantation, Mt San Angelo, is also relevant to the discussion of these communities (Figure 2f). The archaeological data is supplemented by archival sources, including the letters of Elijah Fletcher (compiled into an edited volume by a Sweet Briar alumnae, von Briesen 1965), wills, court documents, census figures, and historic maps. Together, these sources allow us to build a model of kinship and mortuary commemorations among black and white communities. As we will see, the cemeteries reveal complex social, marital, and kinship ties both during life and after death. Many of the burials contradict social norms: a wife is not buried with her husband, two brothers receive drastically different inscriptions, a young girl receives the most lavish of monuments, while her wealthy father selects a large, but plain obelisk, and interracial unions are hidden from view.

A note on given names and surnames used throughout this paper. Because I will be discussing white and black “Fletchers,” it is not productive to use the more formal term “Mr. Fletcher.” Instead, I will use first names in the majority of the examples to clarify which of the many Fletchers I am referring to.



**Figure 2: Map of the Five Cemeteries discussed in this article. The map is modified from a Google map.**

### Fletcher/Williams Cemetery

The Elijah Fletcher family cemetery is located on a prominent hilltop, about one mile from the plantation house. A survey of the preserved graves reveals that this cemetery pre-dates the Sweet Briar Plantation and has a rather complex history. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the graveyard was called “Woodruff’s mound.” In the past, plantation owners frequently built private, family graveyards on their land. Very often, as is the case here, the plantation cemetery was placed on a high spot (preferably a hilltop) as a symbolic reference to Jerusalem (God’s “city” and “holy hill” in Daniel 9:16) and the nearby Mount Zion (the shortened term “Zion” was used later to refer to the city of Jerusalem). In the Old Testament, hilltop locations were valued as the site of sermons and revelations. More recently, in the seventeenth century,

Puritans used the metaphor to describe congregations of the faithful (e.g., John Winthrop's 1630 sermon titled, "A Model of Christian Charity," where he suggested that "we shall be as a city upon a hill"). Beyond symbolic considerations, hilltop burials solved the practical concern of burying above the water table. In keeping with these Judeo-Christian beliefs and hydraulic matters, David Woodruff selected a large, thousand foot high mound for his final resting place.

Within the cemetery we find two Woodruff burials, one commemorating David (who died 1814) and the other for Judith (who died in 1844) (Figure 3). Deed research revealed that David Woodruff purchased a "mountain lot" in 1784 that contained the land that was later used as a cemetery. Sometime after his death, his family sold this parcel and retained a smaller, non-contiguous portion to the south (Ambers et al. 2006: 57). Three decades later, his daughter-in-law Judith (1786-1844) was buried alongside him. Surprisingly, her husband, David, Jr. (who died in the early 1830s), does not have a stone in the cemetery. This may be due to an unpreserved stone or, perhaps, he was buried in a nearby town or church cemetery.



**Figure 3: The Earliest Gravestones at Sweet Briar: the Woodruff/Woodroof Family Plot . (A) Modern replacement stone for an eroded marble one. The modern inscription reads "David Woodruff, 1762-1814." (B) "In Memory of, Judith, wife of David Woodroof, Died June 3, 1844, Aged 58 Years." Photos by the Author.**

After purchasing the land, Elijah Fletcher continued the tradition of burials on the mound. Perhaps understandably, it is only after Elijah's death in 1858 that the cemetery's name is changed on county maps to "Fletcher's Monument" (Figure 4a). A century later, the United States Geodetic Survey (USGS) maps refer to the hilltop as the "Williams Cemetery" (Figure 4b). The different surnames and adjectives, ranging from "Woodruff's Mound" to "Fletcher's Monument" to the "Williams' Cemetery" reflect changing ideas about death as well as a new way to define Fletcher kinship. First, the euphemistic term, "cemetery" (from the Late Latin

coemeterium and the Greek koimeterion which simply means “sleeping place”) only became popular in America after 1831 (when the Mt Auburn Cemetery was founded, Linden-Ward 1989). Before this, the more explicit reference to “graves” (i.e., “graveyards”) or, in this case, “mounds,” was more common. Second, re-naming the cemetery after Elijah’s daughter’s married name, Williams, reveals a changing focus to the founder of the college, instead of the plantation. In the next section, I use the gravestones to map one version of the Fletcher/Crawford family tree.



**Figure 4: Cartographic Evidence for the Name of the Plantation Cemetery.** (A) “Fletcher’s Monument,” as depicted on an 1860s Civil War Map, made by Lt. C.S. Dwight. If you look very closely you can see the surname “Mosby” at the bottom of the map. This was Elizabeth Fletcher Mosby’s home at Mt San Angelo. Accessed on-line from the Library of Congress Collections. Digital ID: g3883n cwh00049 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3883n.cwh00049>. (B) The “Williams Cem.” Detail from a contemporary USGS map of Sweet Briar College, circa 1984.

### The Material Remains of Kinship in the Fletcher/Williams Cemetery

Studying the Fletcher/Williams Cemetery reveals a complex picture of kinship. The cemetery landscape highlights the social hierarchy within the family (seen in Figure 5a). Elijah’s 20-foot high marble obelisk (Figure 5b) is seen prominently, with the Williams family monument (topped by an angel) just behind it. Each of the Williams’ family members has an

associated footstone, arranged around the monument. In contrast, Elizabeth is buried under a horizontal slab of marble that is flush to the ground (Figure 5c).

The gravestones within this landscape illustrate a modified family tree. First, let us review who *is* buried in the Fletcher/Williams Cemetery: the patriarch, Elijah (but not his wife Maria who pre-deceased him by 5 years), and two of his four children, his daughters, Indiana (1828-1900) and Elizabeth (1830-1895). We find Indiana's nuclear family: her husband, James Henry Williams (1832-1889), and her daughter Maria Georgiana (1867-1884). But we lack Elizabeth's husband, William Hamilton Mosby (they were married in 1859; he died in 1879).



**Figure 5: The Fletcher/Williams Cemetery at Sweet Briar. (A, above left) Historic photograph, undated. Courtesy of the Sweet Briar Museum Collections. (B, above right) Elijah Fletcher's marble obelisk, 2004. (C, right) The horizontal marble slab that reads “In Memory of our Sister, Elizabeth, Daughter of Elijah & Maria A.C. Fletcher. At rest.” Notice the absence of her married status in the inscription. Photos by the Author.**



More to the point, her married name appears nowhere on her monument (even though she continued to be listed as “Elizabeth Mosby” in the census and on other official documents). Combining this physical testament to kinship ties with a lack of references to William Hamilton in the family letters and wills (or, in the case of Indiana’s Will a reference to her “abhorrence” of him), it appears that the family did not approve of this union. Not surprisingly, they divorced sometime after the Civil War. When Elizabeth died, several decades later, she was identified on her gravestone as a “Fletcher,” a “sister,” and a “daughter,” but not a wife.

A second example of how the Fletchers codified their version of social memory in stone is provided by the grave for Indiana’s only child, Maria Georgiana Williams, more commonly called “Daisy.” When she died, suddenly at age 16 in 1884, her mother and father were devastated. They built the large granite monument (see in Figure 5a) in her memory, inscribing the name “Williams” at the bottom of the stone so Indiana and her husband, James Henry Williams, could use it later as a family memorial. In addition to the expensive, polished gray granite, a larger-than-life statue of an angel stands on top of the marker. She may be a metaphor for “faith,” “justice,” or an angel of mercy. The monument exceeds even the standard Victorian melodrama over a child’s death. It was, however, common to include individual headstones (or sometimes footstones) around a family monument. This they did, but instead of a simple marker, they chose an elaborate, shroud-draped pile of rocks, with a young cherub holding on to a pillar (Figure 6a). The complex symbolism of a broken pillar (for Daisy’s short life, ended before her time), a cherub, drapery, and a possible reference to the “rock of ages” is more elaborate than the more common lambs, doves, and unopened flowers found on nineteenth-century children’s gravestones. This ostentatious stone was vandalized at some point in the



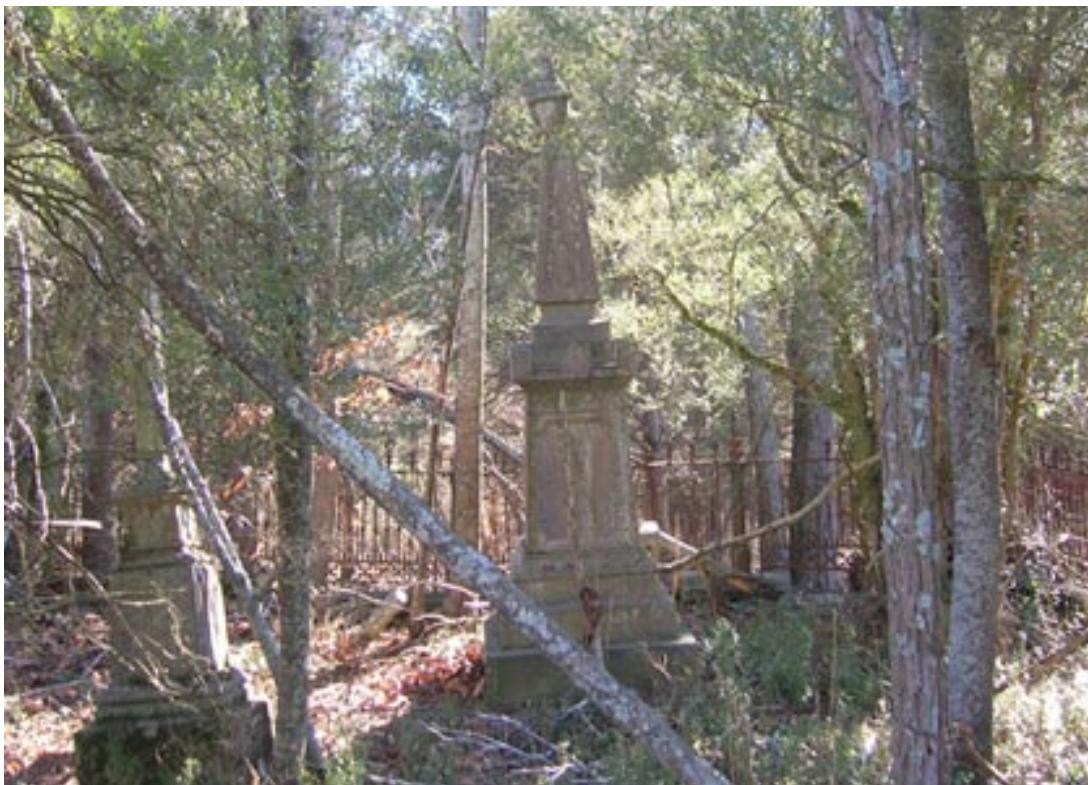
**Figure 6: Monuments that Commemorate Daisy Williams (1867-1884). (A)** Nineteenth-century photograph that illustrates her original, in-situ “footstone,” lying at the base of the Williams Family Monument. Courtesy of the Sweet Briar Museum Collections. **(B)** The same footstone today, vandalized sometime in the late nineteenth century. **(C)** Daisy’s replacement marker. Photos by the Author.

decade after Daisy’s death. Today the remains of the stone have been removed to the courtyard of the college museum for safety (Figure 6b). Family legend blames Lucian Fletcher, Daisy’s

uncle, who was bitter when his own heirs were disinherited. This event has not been verified. The replacement stone is a simple, scroll-like plaque, almost flush with the ground (Figure 6c). It still contains grief-filled language, stating that her “sorrowing parents” erected it.

### Tusculum Burials: The Crawford Family Cemetery

To locate the second half of the Fletcher family we turn to Elijah’s wife’s ancestral home: Tusculum (located about eight miles north of Sweet Briar). The cemetery is located on a very small hill, at the edge of the field, about 300 yards from the plantation house (Figure 7). This cemetery contains the remains of Maria Antoinette Crawford Fletcher (1792-1853), their two boys, Sidney (1821-1898) and Lucian 1824-1895), and members of the earlier generation, including William Sidney Crawford (1760-1815) the patriarch (Maria’s father) who died unexpectedly at age 55 and willed Tusculum to Elijah and his descendants.



**Figure 7: The Crawford Family Cemetery at Tusculum. Photo by the Author.**

It is unusual that Maria was not buried next to her husband in the Fletcher/Williams Cemetery. Taken in isolation, it suggests closer ties to her parents and their estate. But if we combine it with occasional cryptic statements in Elijah’s letters, it suggests that Elijah and Maria had a rather distant marriage that included many months of separation (e.g., when Maria took a year-long trip between 1840 and 1841 to Kentucky to visit her widowed mother, von Briesen

1965: 175). Six months before her death, Maria was “in town” (i.e., Lynchburg, presumably at their town house), while “the girls” were with their father at Sweet Briar. This seemed to be a common occurrence; it appears that Maria did not much enjoy life in the country. Because of the frequent trips away from home, Maria may have died while away from Sweet Briar. In fact, oral history suggests that she was visiting her son Sidney at Tusculum when she fell ill (von Briesen 1965: 245), which might explain her separation from her husband in death. Elijah’s own words (written to his brother Calvin) on the loss of his wife were rather pithy and did not mention her by name: “We have had mourning and affliction in our Family since I wrote you last. Death has laid a heavy hand and made a great raid in our social circle . . .” (von Briesen 1965: 245). In comparison to the many emotional paragraphs that he wrote upon the death of his father and mother, he appeared to handle his wife’s death without undue grief.

The graves at Tusculum illustrate a second interesting kinship pattern, seen in the marker for Sidney, Elijah and Maria’s eldest, and favored, son (Figure 8b). Sidney graduated from Yale University in 1841, briefly attended medical lectures, and returned to Amherst in 1842. Sidney decided that his medical degree transformed him from “a good farmer into a shabby gentleman” and soon returned to farming (von Briesen 1965: 179; quoted from a letter from Sidney to his uncle, February 15, 1842). Sidney never married, despite the fact that he would have been a very eligible and wealthy bachelor. A thorough search of census records and wills suggests an answer to this conundrum. In the 1880 Federal Census Sidney’s Tusculum household included Thomas Turner (a 67-year old black widower), Harriet Edwards (a 24-year old mulatto woman), Andrew Edwards (16 years old, also listed as mulatto and Harriet’s brother), and two young children, Leslie Edwards (age 3) and Ernest Edwards (age 2). In 1883, Sidney deeded 70 adjacent acres to Harriet and her two sons. In comparison, he left only \$150 to two of his black servants (recorded in his 1898 Will, Will Book p. 443). The land gift to the Edwards, coupled together



**Figure 8: Elijah’s Sons’ Gravestones.** (A) “Lucian Fletcher, Born January 11, 1824, Died March 1895.” (B) “In Loving Remembrance of Sidney Fletcher, departed this life, April 12, 1898, At Rest.” Photos by the Author.

with the living arrangements and Amherst gossip, suggest that Harriet was Sidney's common-law-wife and they had at least two children. However, none of Edwards are buried in the family cemetery. On one hand, they probably outlived Sidney and perhaps, by the time they died, they chose to be buried in a nearby church cemetery. But it is also possible that surviving members of the Crawford family restricted access to the Crawford Cemetery. Another option is that the Edwards were buried in a separate cemetery on their 70 acres which has not yet been located. In either case, unlike Indiana and James Henry Williams, Harriet Edwards and Sidney Fletcher were not buried together as husband/wife.

We find a similarly incomplete plot for Lucian's descendants. The historic record is filled with colorful stories about his misdeeds, including attempted murders and wild behavior. A number of historic sources, plus family letters, reveal that his siblings feared him and Indiana and Elizabeth disowned him. In her will, Indiana referred to Lucian's children as "bastards" and described Lucian himself as a "thorn" (Court Papers: 19) in Elijah's side and a "reprobate" (Court Papers: 303). In response to these accusations, Lucian's heirs claimed that Indiana had an "insane aversion" to them (Court Papers: 6). Despite this social distance, the family provided Lucian with a gravestone, albeit a plain one (Figure 8a). Perhaps more telling, his inscription lacks the flowery, emotional language that characterized those of his siblings. Instead he received a marble stone, equal in size and decoration to his brother, that read simply, "Born, 1824" and "Died, 1895." In contrast, his brother's inscription read, "In loving memory," and instead of "dying," he "departed this life." Neither Lucian's descendants (more than ten children) nor his wives (his first was an escaped slave, his second a white woman) were buried in the Crawford Cemetery with him.

In the end, only Sidney and Lucian left heirs. Elizabeth never had children and Indiana's only daughter died as a child in 1884. But neither Sidney nor Lucian is buried alongside their spouse or children. It is worth considering whether the Crawford Cemetery would have included Sidney's wife if she had been white. Conversely, it is surprising that Sidney allowed Lucian to be buried on his plantation, given the lengthy estrangement between Lucian and his family. Both the absence and presence of ancestors within the cemetery hint at larger, social issues. On one hand, the family tried to ignore a mixed race relationship and, at the same time they tried to hide a disturbing family history by including an otherwise disinherited sibling in the family graveyard.

### **Gravestone Symbols, Inscriptions, and Morphologies**

Archaeologists map social memories through material culture, such as artifacts used in everyday life, stylistic elements that convey symbolic ideas, or, in this case, gravestones. What does the gravestone design in the Fletcher/Williams Cemetery convey about social identity or status? First, we have to contextualize these stones within broader American ideas about death. During the nineteenth century, American gravestones reveal diachronic beliefs about death, changing from grim, skeletal death's head to sweetly smiling cherubs, and, later, from bright marble stones (often decorated with roses, urns, or columns) to grey granite family markers (Rainville 1999). In the last half of the century, children were frequently commemorated with two and three-dimensional baby animals (such as lambs) or unopened flower buds (to symbolize the end of their short lives). In addition to symbolism, Americans began using euphemisms,

replacing the word “dead” with “rest” or “sleep.” This emphasis is illustrated in each of the Williams’ Family stones, where they “rest in peace” or “depart this life,” instead of “dying” (Figure 9).



**Figure 9: The Williams Family Inscriptions.** (A) “In Loving Remembrance of Daisy. Only Child of I.F. & J.H. Williams. Born in Sweet Briar, Sept 10, 1867. Died Jan 22, 1884. “Blessed are the good in heart for they shall see God.” (B) “In Loving Remembrance of, James Henry Williams, died April 25, 1889. Eternal Trust Given unto him O Lord.” (C) “In Grateful Remembrance of Indiana Fletcher Williams. Founder of Sweet Briar Institute. Died at Sweet Briar, October 29, 1900. Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.” Photos by the Author.

In the Fletcher/Williams Cemetery, the preserved gravestones date between the 1810s and 1900, providing a century of inscriptions that document changing attitudes towards death. For example, each of the inscriptions on the Williams' family monument encouraged the audience to “remember” them (see Figure 9). This desire was widely shared in the late nineteenth century when Americans frequently added “In Memory of” or “Sacred to the Memory of” to their stones. Another common nineteenth-century pattern was memorializing kinship through the use of pronouns, such as “father of” “sister of” or “child of.”

Another documented pattern in American gravestones is an effort to mask social inequality. In other words, downplaying ones’ status in death by selecting a plain gravestone. Morphologically, this is not the case with the Fletchers and Crawfords who frequently selected tall monuments. On the other hand, for such a wealthy and socially prominent family it is surprising how little biographic information is provided. Thomas Jefferson, a contemporary Virginian, provides a stark contrast: “Here lies buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, & Father of the University of Virginia.” Although Elijah Fletcher was not a former president, he was an important political and social figure within Lynchburg and Amherst society. Instead of emphasizing his contributions, his epitaph read “Sacred to the Memory of Our Father Elijah Fletcher. Born in Ludlow, Vt. Departed this life...” Similarly, Indiana’s epitaph was brief and to the point, “In Grateful Remembrance of Indiana Fletcher Williams. Founder of Sweet Briar Institute.”

Gravestone epitaphs occasionally hint at the survivor who selected the verse, such as James’ and Maria’s stones that include the adjective “loving” before “remembrance.” These adjectives were most likely chosen by their grieving children. Maria’s inscription goes one

emotional step further and explains that she was the “only Child of I.F. & J.H. Williams.” Her parents inscribed the epitaph on the monument that she shares with her parents, but on a separate statue they wrote “Dedicated in Love to the Sweet Remembrance of Dear Daisy by her sorrowing parents, James Henry & India Fletcher WILLIAMS. Requiescat in Pace.” Keep in mind, as with any text, survivors can choose to represent feelings and emotions that they never felt. I do not think this applies here, to the grieving parents, but we should not assume that gravestones inscriptions are immune from propaganda.

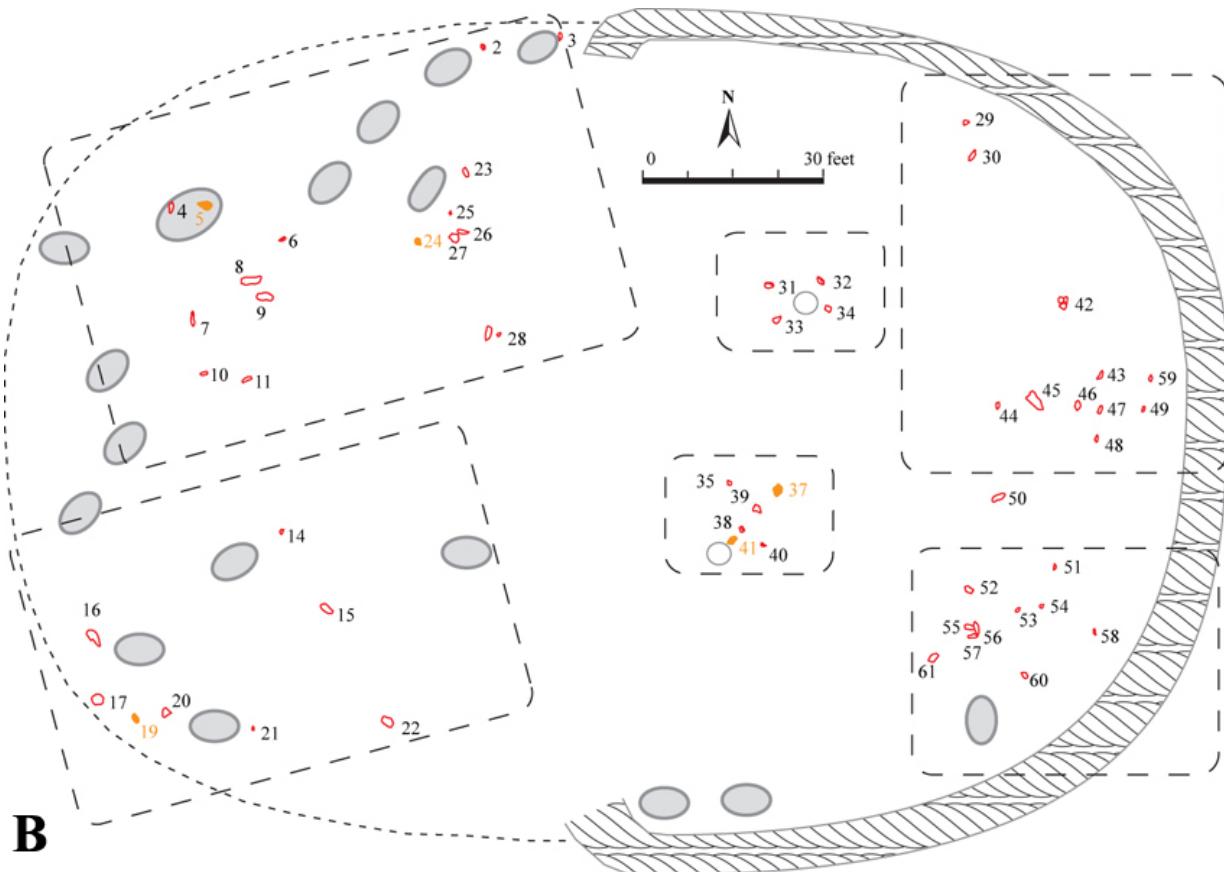
Indiana’s immediate family members all included Bible inscriptions on their stones. Maria’s read: “Blessed are the good in heart for they shall see God” (see Figure 9a). The most common translation of this quote, from Matthew 5:8, The Sermon on the Mount, is “blessed are the *pure* in heart.” They paraphrased James Henry’s quote, “Eternal Trust Given unto him O Lord,” evoking, but not directly quoting the Bible (see Figure 9b). Indiana’s inscriptions was taken from the same source as her daughter’s, Matthew 5:4: “Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted” (see Figure 9c). This choice sounds very appropriate for a widow and mother who lost her only daughter, raising the interesting question: who selected her quote ? Did she request it in advance of her death? Or did her grieving friends choose it?

### The Slave Cemetery at Sweet Briar

In addition to the plantation cemeteries that were used by the owner and his family, Sweet Briar and, presumably Tusculum, contained graveyards for the dozens of enslaved individuals who died prior to emancipation. The Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery does not contain inscribed gravestones, so we cannot equate individuals with their stones. Instead, I discuss patterns in stone selection and morphology and compare it to the Fletcher/Crawford cemeteries and to the post-bellum examples of cemeteries used by the descendants of the enslaved community. In a separate article I address the broad patterns in mortuary markers and landscapes within slave cemeteries (Rainville, in progress). I use the perspective that I have gained from studying dozens of slave cemeteries to summarize the patterns found in the slave cemetery on the Sweet Briar Plantation.

The Slave Cemetery at Sweet Briar contains sixty un-inscribed, locally available stones, predominantly fieldstones (n=55), with the occasional pink or white quartz (n=5) (Figure 10a). I converted the map from meters to feet to better visualize the dimensions that the nineteenth-century, American audience would have been using, e.g., burying someone “six feet deep.” Only a handful of the stones are shaped, most are simply set into the ground, unmodified. There are dozens of unmarked depressions throughout the cemetery, some from tree pits, while others correlate with head- or footstones. The depressions are more visible at the western side of the cemetery, suggesting differential soil texture, drainage, or perhaps burial during a different season (which led to more pronounced depressions from natural forces). A little more than half of the stones appear to have associated head and footstones. As with contemporary white cemeteries, the practice of placing two stones, to mark the head and the feet of the corpse, changes in popularity over the course of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, without stone dates we cannot be certain that each burial contained both. This, combined with the lack of any names, initials, or dates on the stones, makes it difficult to determine exactly how many individuals are buried here.

**Figure 10: The Slave Cemetery at the Sweet Briar Plantation, recently re-named the “Sweet Briar Plantation Burial Ground.”** (A, right) A cluster of gravestones, numbers 31 through 34 on the accompanying map. Photo by the Author. (B, below) Map of the preserved stones and unmarked depressions (highlighted in gray ovals). The outlines of the stones are drawn in plan-view and inked in red. The quartz stones are highlighted and numbered in orange. Each stone was numbered. A few numbers are missing because it was determined afterwards that they were not gravestones. The dotted lines illustrate possible clusters, grouped either by family ties, seasonal alignment, or chronological era. A modern path loops around the eastern half of the cemetery. Drawn by the author.

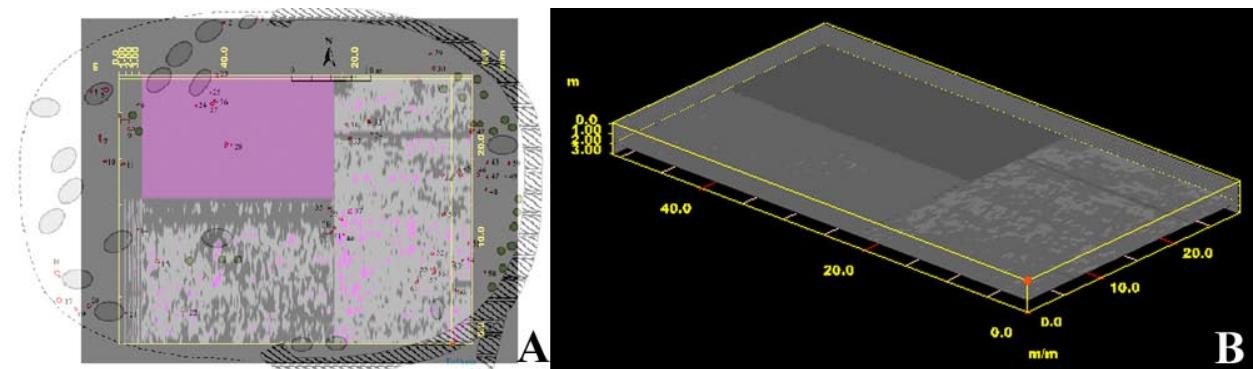


To estimate the number of graves, I combined the irregular evidence for depressions, headstones, and alignments. This technique does not take into account unmarked graves or

unpreserved stones that lack depressions; in other words, I did not count a burial that lacks any preserved, above-ground remains because I am not certain that the entire space was used. There may have been deliberate spaces left between groups. For an example of a different calculation for burial density see the report published on one of the slave cemeteries at Monticello (Bon-Harper et al. 2003: 17-18).

From the preserved head and footstones, we can tell that the heads (which used larger stones) were placed in the west, perhaps to allow the corpse to face east towards the rising sun. Using this logic, combined with the expected six-foot (or longer) grave shaft (which corresponds to the size of many of the unmarked depressions), I estimated the number of possible burials at 54. The alignment of burials seems to shift from the east side to west, making it difficult to determine how many of the graves shared a head and footstone. A clearer pattern is the presence of stone clusters (indicated on Figure 10b). Although only suggestive (and possibly biased by preservation factors), there seems to be six or more clusters. One interpretation is that these are family groups, reunited in death. Another possibility is that the cemetery was in use by different populations (e.g., the Locust Ridge slaves, Elijah's slaves, Indiana's slaves, and possibly, the post-bellum family descendants). Each generation may have decided to burying their dead in a new location, each with slightly different alignments. Another possible explanation is the use of the sun, as opposed to a compass, to orient the graves. Using this technique to orient graves would have resulted in changing angles throughout the seasons. Unfortunately, the stones do not exhibit other stylistic or morphological patterns, so it is hard to narrow down the possibilities.

To produce a more accurate map of the below-ground burials, I turned to Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). I worked with the Archaeological Research Laboratory at the University of Tennessee and enlisted the assistance of doctoral student, Palmyra A. Moore, to conduct a GPR study of the cemetery. The GPR unit had a 400 mHz antenna, with a range of 60 nS, and was attached to a GSSI SIR-300 computer, using RADAN 6.0 software. From the beginning, I was committed to not disturbing the human remains in this cemetery, so GPR was an ideal, non-invasive technique. We surveyed an area 29 meters wide by 49 meters long (on the south side) and 19 meters long (on the north side). Interpreting the results was difficult. In the



**Figure 11: Results from a Ground Penetrating Radar Study of the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery. (A) Results from a depth of 9.84 feet (3 meters), overlaid on top of the map of the stones used in Figure 10b. (B) Results from a depth of 5.35 feet (1.63 meters).**

east, there were regular, oblong disturbances, lying roughly north/south at about 5.35 feet deep (Figure 11b), but in the west the pattern of grave-like disturbances did not occur until a depth of almost 9.84 feet (Figure 11a). If these are indeed grave shafts, perhaps the two parts of the cemetery were used in different generations and thus the shafts differentially eroded over time. Or, the anomalies may be tree roots that obscure the more subtle grave shafts. We might have better success using a 900 Mhz antenna and .25m intervals.

Next we tried using a gradiometer, to see if we could locate coffin hardware or buried, metal markers (e.g., the ones used by funeral homes in the early twentieth century). The gradiometer we used was a GeoScan FM-36 Fluxgate Gradiometer, running GeoPlot software. We laid out a 19 by 20 meter grid in the northeast corner of the cemetery, but we found only one strong metal anomaly. This suggests that only a handful of the burials included coffins (with their attendant, metal nails, screws, and handles), or that this technique does not work well in this soil type.

### **Post-Bellum Cemeteries Used by the Descendants of the Enslaved Community**

To better understand the patterning of gravestones in the slave cemetery at Sweet Briar, I studied two post-bellum cemeteries used by one family who descended from the enslaved community. Assuming that the people who lived at the Sweet Briar Plantation used the slave cemetery, it would have been in use between roughly 1840 (when Elijah started spending more of his time and resources on the plantation) and the 1870s (an estimate for when the former slaves may have stopped using the cemetery). In other words, two or three generations buried their dead here. We can compare these decades of mortuary commemoration to the next several generations of post-bellum and twentieth-century gravestones. Here I focus on one group of descendants, the African-American Fletchers. They are not related to Elijah and his family, rather they selected that surname after emancipation. They set aside land in Amherst for two family cemeteries: the Fletcher Family Cemetery and the Broady Family Cemetery.

#### **African-American Fletcher Family Cemetery**

I first learned about the Fletcher descendants while working on a rededication ceremony for the Slave Cemetery. A colleague began calling “Fletchers” from the small, local phone book in the hopes of locating someone connected to the enslaved descendants. She was successful and I conducted an oral history with the man she located, long-time Amherst resident, Jasper “Eddie” Fletcher (to avoid confusion between “Elijah Fletcher” and “Jasper Fletcher,” I will use the latter’s given name for identification purposes). Born and raised about 8 miles from the Sweet Briar plantation, Jasper graciously shared some of his family history with me and later we toured two of his family cemeteries, one containing his paternal relatives, the Fletchers, and the other with his maternal relatives, the Broadys. Both families include individuals who were once enslaved on the Sweet Briar Plantation. Presumably some of these ancestors died and were buried during the ante-bellum period in the slave cemetery. For example, neither of Jasper’s great-great grandparents, James Fletcher (born in 1835) nor Lavinia (also born in 1835) has an inscribed stone in the Fletcher Family Cemetery. While they may be buried under an un-

inscribed fieldstone, another possibility is that they were buried in the plantation cemetery, even if they died after 1865. I think it likely that in the first decade or so after emancipation many families had to decide whether to bury aged parents or spouses alongside their relatives within plantation cemeteries or set out new family plots within African-American churches or family cemeteries located in newly purchased lands outside of the plantation.

It has been an archival challenge to document family relationships among enslaved families on the Sweet Briar Plantation. The existing studies from other enslaved communities reveal a diversity of adaptations, from stable familial relations to frequent disruptions from sales or separations. These models range from Frazier's 1939 thesis that the black family was a matriarchy and fragile, to Gutman's 1976 model of two-parent households, to the studies by Blassingame 1972 and Genovese 1974 that documented family traditions found in slave narratives, to the more recent critiques such as Malone 1992 and Stevenson 1997. At Sweet Briar, Elijah bought and sold some slaves, but he relied more heavily on natural population growth. In an 1852 version of his will, he grouped some of the enslaved individuals into families when calculating his "property." For example, Ned and Pramelia were listed as a couple, along with their seven children. Unfortunately, surnames were only mentioned in a handful of cases and even those useful leads have not yet correlated with individuals (or their descendants) in the 1870 Federal Census. Earlier, in 1810 when Elijah first arrived in Virginia, he noted "The negroes pretend to have wives and husbands, but they have no ceremony in marriage" (von Briesen 1965: 23). His observations are hardly that of an expert, but his interest in the matter may have prompted him to record family groups many decades later. Moreover, there may have been marriage rituals that Elijah was unaware of and his choice of the adjective "pretend" may simply indicate that the law prohibited such formal unions.

When we turn to the post-bellum family groups commemorated in the Fletcher Family Cemetery we find a complex system of kinship relations. Demonstrating similarities with the stones in the Slave Cemetery, only nine of the 37 grave markers are inscribed, the remainder are un-inscribed fieldstones, similar to the slave graves discussed above. The identified individuals were born between 1868 and 1941 and died between 1926 and 1996. The mean age is 55.5, the median is 59. None were born enslaved, but some of the unmarked stones may commemorate the earlier generation.

The stones illustrate a much greater morphological diversity than the plantation cemeteries. The markers range from un-carved fieldstones to white quartz obelisks, metal funeral home markers to hand-carved soapstone slabs, and marble veteran stones to flush granite markers (Figure 12). This pattern corresponds to the twentieth-century trends of increased choices in funerary monuments (enabled by mail order catalogs, standardized and often cheaper production techniques, and changing technologies that allowed carvers to shape a greater range of stones). The pattern also charts the cyclic economic fortunes of the Fletcher family. The hand-carved and unmodified fieldstones are less expensive, while the granite marker and metal ones indicate the paid use of professionals (a funeral home and a stone carver). Studying post-bellum cemeteries can help us better understand patterns in the ante-bellum period. For example, the use of quartz as a gravemarker is proved by the association of a quartz stone with a more formal,



**Figure 12: Gravestone Diversity in the Fletcher Family Cemetery.** (A) Un-inscribed, shaped stone. (B) Hand-carved, “Mrs. J. L. Fletcher, Born Oct 12, 1868, Died Mar 20, 1926.” (C) Funeral Home Marker, “Mrs Fannie Rose Fletcher, Born March 5, 1906, Died July 29, 1996, Age 90.” (D) A marble stone provided by the government for veterans, “Lilbert Fletcher, PVT, US Army, Aug 26, 1894, May 5, 1977.” (E) Flush, granite marker, “Chestean Fletcher, Aug. 18, 1934, Mar. 29, 1994. Our Loving Father.” Photos by the Author.

metal Funeral Home marker. Unfortunately, neither is inscribed, but it helps us identify the use of quartz as a gravemarker in the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery. The most interesting stone in the Fletcher Family Cemetery is a white quartz obelisk (Figure 13). Lafayette Fletcher (1913-1958) selected this one-foot high stone for his grave years before he died. His brother, Jasper, followed his wishes and used that stone for a marker. Unfortunately, other inscriptions were recorded on pieces of paper, mounted under glass and are no longer legible today. A complete list of the gravestones and individuals buried here is available on-line in an African American cemetery database hosted at: [www.virginia.edu/woodson/projects/aacaac/db/cemetery/details/FLR](http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/projects/aacaac/db/cemetery/details/FLR).



**Figure 13: Lafayette Fletcher (1913-1958) Gravestone.** Photo by the Author.

Sometimes it is difficult to find proof for family traditions. In the case of the Fletcher family, Jasper recalled a story about an Isaiah Fletcher who was enslaved on the Sweet Briar Plantation. Oral history maintains that Isaiah was a trained stone mason, often hired out to other plantation owners because of his skills. Unfortunately, he is not recorded in the 1870 census, nor on a gravestone. This account highlights the importance of recording family traditions in a more permanent manner so that this perspective is included along with other sources.

### Broady Family Cemetery

Jasper's maternal relatives are buried in a different cemetery, the Broady Family Cemetery, located several miles away off Rose Mill Road. Eighteen individuals are buried here. While many of the stones have inscriptions, both hand-carved and professional, several graves are marked with unmodified rocks. Jasper was able to identify several of these individuals from memory, including an empty space reserved for a still living individual who is 104 years' old this year (in 2008). Jasper's mother (Julia Fletcher, 1912-1997) and father (Patrick Henry Fletcher, Jr., 1910-1979) are buried here, as are several of his maternal relatives. Members of the Broady and Rose family once owned land near the cemetery. Today the descendants no longer own the cemetery; instead it sits on the corner of a house lot, with no visible boundary to delineate the cemetery from the surrounding land. The new landowners had originally selected a house site close to the cemetery but on the first day of construction, a worker uncovered a bone, which was, presumably, human. Work halted and the house was built further away. This incident highlights the importance of mapping and protecting these sites (Rainville, forthcoming).

The Broady Family Cemetery contains several generations, born between 1812 and 1920, and dying between 1896 and 1997. The mean age of the deceased is 55.5 (median is 59.5), with only a handful of children and many older individuals buried here. Given the high death rates among children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, it is likely that more children are buried here under unmarked or un-inscribed stones. Coincidentally, the Fletcher Family Cemetery had an almost identical mean and median age at death. The Broady Family Cemetery contains several granite memorials, decorated with popular twentieth century motifs such as flowers and hearts. In addition, several stones are hand-carved (Figure 14). In the future, Jasper would like to move his parents to the Fletcher Family Cemetery (his paternal relatives). This behavior, based on the desire to unite family members, may have occurred in the past as well, reminding us that mortuary landscapes are not always stable.

These two post-bellum cemeteries contrast with the white, plantation cemeteries. First, only a small percentage of Jasper's family members are buried in one of these two cemeteries. For example, Jasper's father had 12 siblings, but only three are buried in the Fletcher Family Cemetery and Jasper's own father was buried in his wife's family cemetery, the Broady Cemetery. A second difference is a lack of a fence or enclosure around the African-American cemeteries, whereas both Sweet Briar and Tusculum contain stone and iron fencing, respectively. Third, economic status is illustrated by the occasional use of hand-carved inscriptions in the Fletcher/Broady cemeteries, in contrast to the professionally carved marble and granite stones in the plantation graveyards.



**Figure 14: Gravestones in the Broady Family Cemetery.** (A) Granite marker for “Patrick H. Fletcher, Jr., April 5, 1910 - August 23, 1979.” (B) Unpreserved, metal marker. Jasper Fletcher recalled that Robert Lee was buried here (died 1961). (C) Marble marker for “R.K. Broady, Born May 30, 1895, Died June 19, 1904. Our Loved One.” (D) The reverse of a marker inscribed, “In Memory of, Laura Rose, born 1884, died 1913.” Note the secondary, perhaps original, unmodified gravestone at the base of the inscribed marker. (E) An unmodified stone. (F) Hand-carved stone for “Annie Broady, Born 1855, Died 1939.” Photos by the Author.

Despite these differences, all of the cemeteries discussed here illustrate shared American mortuary beliefs: hilltop locations for cemeteries, marked head- and footstones (depending on the time period), curved headstones (found in the majority of the modified markers), and similar types of biographic information (when inscribed): first, maiden, and surname; birth and death dates; and occasional references to kinship ties (e.g., “our father”). In sum, mortuary practices highlights similarities and differences between the socio-economic identities of these inextricably related communities.

### What is Missing from the Archaeological Record: Funerals, Mourning, Visits

Having discussed what material culture remains in the cemeteries, we must consider what has changed since these memorials were erected. These post-depositional forces include both removals and additions. First, I consider the altered archaeological record. For example, at the Sweet Briar Cemetery, late twentieth century stones replaced early nineteenth century ones (that were made of marble and eroding). This is why David Woodruff’s early nineteenth-century stone is in the form of a twentieth-century, metal, funeral home marker (see Figure 3). Next, I consider what is missing from these cemeteries. In the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery there are a dozen or more unmarked depressions that may have once contained wooden or floral markers. And finally, a much broader category of missing remains are the funerary rituals that never left a material record. In the case of mortuary traditions and kinship patterns, it is almost overwhelming how little preserves. We cannot directly excavate a funeral, the grieving process, or the emotions connected with kinship relations. Instead, we turn to the archival record for first-person and descriptive accounts of white and black mortuary patterns and family organization.

I do not have space here to thoroughly review nineteenth-century southern mortuary practices, but a representative example of the stages of death and dying will give us a perspective on what we might be missing from the archaeological record at Sweet Briar. Unfortunately, we

have only scattered references to deaths in the letters and diaries associated with the Sweet Briar Plantation. In the case of Fletcher, his private letters indicate a degree of pre-planning, requesting both the marble for his gravestone and that his children care for the cemetery upkeep in perpetuity.

“I have picked out my final resting place on the round top of Woodroofs Mound. I used to converse with Sidney about it, how I wanted an area enclosed and a plain White marble obelisk 20 feet high. And this enclosure I would like cultivate in fine Trees and shrubs and flowers and that all of my children should meet there once a year and prune and trim and cultivate it.” (quoted from a letter written to his children while they were on a trip to Europe, dated August 21, 1846; von Briesen 1965: 202).

Ironically, in the next paragraph Elijah realized that the southern side of the hill would also “make a good grapery.” A concern with the cemetery upkeep was not limited to Elijah. Indiana’s will specified that the newly appointed trustees of the Sweet Briar Institute were responsible for maintaining the cemetery (Court Papers: 5 and 595).

Elijah had much less to say about the mortuary practices of the enslaved population. Instead, he notes the passing of slaves in succinct words, such as an 1825 letter that mentions, “I had a Negro Boy about 10 or 12 years old die last week. He had been sick some time” (July 23, 1825; von Briesen 1965: 97). Hopefully future research among descendants or references in family bibles will supplement this sparse data.

If we turn to other ante-bellum records, we learn more about the stages of commemoration within enslaved communities. For example, a farmer in North Carolina recalled a funeral that was held for a boy who died in a wagon accident. The first evening after the death, the family held a wake, described by the farmer (then a young boy himself):

“Late into the night the voices of those who were keeping watch over the dead could be heard singing their mournful songs...Next morning Virgil and Jim, the carpenters, were ordered to make a coffin , while Uncle Suwarro gave orders for opening the grave in the little ‘God’s Acre,’ appropriated to the burial of the servants.”  
(Avierett 1901: 129)

This quote illustrates the ritual of holding a wake, a funeral, and burying slaves in a separate cemetery. Note, the term “God’s Acre” is used by both Moravians and African Americans to refer to cemeteries. At Sweet Briar we have not located any records that mention whether sermons were preached over the graves. Instead, I offer an example of a sermon preached for “Sister Dicey” at a southern plantation:

“I commit your body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, But on that Great getting up Morning, when the

“trumpet of God shall sound, We will meet you in the skies and join the hosts of saints who will go marching in.” (Roediger 1981: 171)

Subsequent visits to the cemetery by the enslaved community may have been somewhat limited by their workload.

In the case of Sweet Briar’s African-American community, we do not know how frequently they were allowed (or found the time) to visit the cemetery. The only suggestive piece of evidence for visits comes from a much later photograph, dating to the 1930s and published in the student yearbook in an article titled, “Our Colored Folks.” The caption simply reads ‘Miss Charlotte Wright,’ but her clothing suggests a wimple and mourning attire and the setting is clearly outdoors (Figure 15). One possible interpretation of the scene is that she is visiting the graves of her relatives at the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery. The article does not provide any additional information, but a search of the Amherst County Census revealed that she was born in either 1860 or 1870 (the 1920 Census lists the latter, while the 1910 Census lists the former). If she is indeed visiting the cemetery, she might have been there to mourn a parent or sibling who died during the ante-bellum period.

**Figure 15:** Charlotte Wright, circa. 1930s. The photograph was published in the 1935 *Sweet Briar Alumnae Magazine* in an article entitled, “Our Colored Folks.” The article did not explain the context for the photograph, but she appears to be standing outdoors and there may be a stone at her feet. Courtesy of the Fannie B. Fletcher Archives at Sweet Briar College.



## Commemorations Today

The patterns discussed above prove that mortuary memorials can be deliberately fabricated or redesigned to mask, ignore, or obscure an historic event. In addition to shaping memories in the past, these mnemonic place holders continue as contemporary remembrances. For example, the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery plays an increasingly important role in the college's efforts to face their ante-bellum past. In 2003, a boulder with a metal plaque was placed in the slave cemetery at Sweet Briar. The plaque reads: "Sweet Briar Plantation Burial Ground: Sacred resting place of unknown founders who labored to build what has become Sweet Briar College. We are in their debt" (Figure 16). This quote highlights the twenty-first century decision to re-name the cemetery, avoiding any mention of slavery or African Americans. The inscription also hints at the large amount of forced labor obtained from the enslaved population that helped the plantation become economically successful.



**Figure 16: Memorial Plaque Placed at the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery in 2003. Photo by the Author.**

Old photographs suggest that throughout most of the twentieth century, trees, most likely planted deliberately in lieu of a fence or stone wall, ringed the burial ground. In the 1970s and 80s, after the college ceased most of its farming practices, the hilltop grew over with shrubs and trees (Figure 17). Thanks to hundreds of donated hours by the Sweet Briar groundskeepers, the cemetery has been rescued from the overgrowth. This work marks the beginning of efforts to

commemorate the lives of these individuals. Plans are currently underway to re-landscape the site in a chronologically and culturally appropriate way.



**Figure 17: The Altered Landscape of the Sweet Briar Slave Cemetery.** (A) Location of the Slave Cemetery on a hilltop. (B) The former “big house,” today the residence of the Sweet Briar President. (C) A twentieth-century lake, for reference. The aerial photograph on the left was taken circa 1960; the one on the right is a modified Google photograph, circa 2007.

### Conclusions: Mortuary Ideology, American Kinship, and Race

Genealogists use gravestone inscriptions to build family trees or to cross check information that they collect from other sources. I use cemetery landscapes and gravestones to map social relationships as well as “blood and soil” kin. At a symbolic level, we can also study these landscapes to understand nineteenth century conceptions of race, identity, and gender. In this case the distribution of white family gravestones, divided between two cemeteries, maps nineteenth century efforts to manipulate the family tree, or at least the memories, of the Fletcher Family. What are the implications for defining and modeling nineteenth-century American kinship, when some family members were duly recorded in family bibles and buried in family plots, while others were rarely discussed and separated in death? As Schneider (1980: 21-23) suggested decades ago, we cannot rely on what Americans “say” about kinship but rather we must consider which attributes they use in defining a person as a relative, be it “blood ties,” marriage, shared household residence, adoption (or its opposite, disowning), or still other ties.

For a college, Sweet Briar has an unusual and complicated past, involving the lives of slave owners, enslaved individuals, and the descendants of both of these communities. One window into these complicated, and often tragic, human relationships is the patterning of the mortuary landscapes where kinship ties are severed and created in stone. These gravestone inscriptions and designed landscapes illustrate the interrelationships between the privileged and the disenfranchised on a Virginian plantation. Both black and white audiences manipulated the

physical memorials of their family trees, altering narratives to suit different eras. Today Sweet Briar is beginning to reflect on its plantation past and re-memorialize aspects of this troubling history. In the end, cemetery landscapes provide multiple versions of these remembrances, illustrating changing attitudes towards death, the family, and race.

## Note

\* Dr. Lynn Rainville teaches anthropology and archaeology at Sweet Briar College.

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