

PRESERVATION SNAPSHOT

This monthly feature highlights National Register listings and eligible properties, tax act projects & compliance review success stories, as well as outstanding local efforts in New Jersey's history.

Gethsemane Cemetery **A Window into 19th-Century Life** *Little Ferry, New Jersey*



Gethsemane Cemetery Gate
Credit: Janet Strom

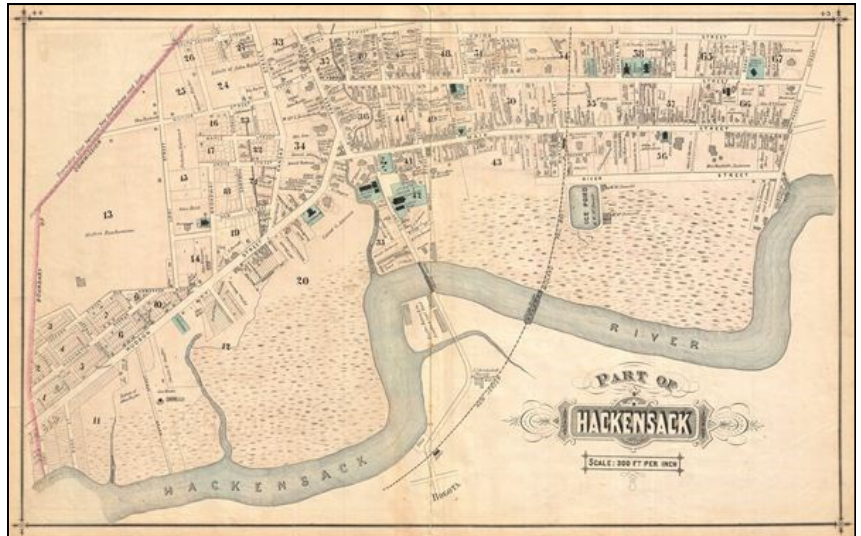
In the mid-19th century, north-eastern New Jersey (present-day Bergen County) was comprised of open farm fields, woods & swampland, interspersed with small villages near the Hudson River. Hackensack, NJ was one of these hamlets. The growing population here included the wealthy & poor, businessmen & laborers; not unlike other communities in the young Mid-Atlantic States.

As with many things at the time, cemeteries were typically segregated by race. While slavery was still legal in New Jersey, the majority of African Americans in this area were free – only 1% were listed as slaves in the 1860 census. Hackensack had several cemeteries in the village proper, all serving the white residents.

Gethsemane Cemetery was an African American cemetery, and the town potter's field, established in 1860 by three white trustees. This small, one-acre parcel in sandy soil was southeast of town, adjacent to the Hackensack River. (It is located in present-day Little Ferry, which was part of Hackensack at that time.)

Gethsemane was a family cemetery for the African Americans. The families buried at Gethsemane were a stable group of hardworking men and women, and all too often, their young children. The men were typically laborers; the women, domestics. Causes of adult deaths are listed from diseases such as tuberculosis and heart attacks.

The Caucasian burials at Gethsemane comprised a disparate group of infants and children, and often, unidentified indigent men.



Map of Hackensack, NJ; Walker Atlas, 1876

Credit: Wikipedia

Gethsemane Cemetery is significant for several reasons. It provides a depth of information about African

Americans during a critical period in our nation's development. Historians have learned about causes of death, ages of death, occupations, and West African burial customs. The cemetery also played a major role in the enactment of New Jersey's early civil rights legislation outlawing burial segregation.

RIGHT OF BURIAL



First Baptist Church, Hackensack, NJ

Original Building

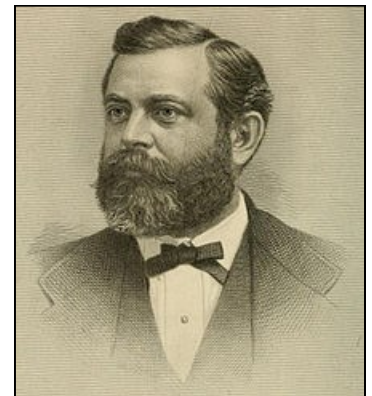
Credit: First Baptist Church

In 1884, Samuel Bass, a highly respected & beloved African American sexton of Hackensack's First Baptist Church passed away suddenly at age 38, after a brief bout with pneumonia. Church officers wanted him buried in town at Hackensack Cemetery, but were refused by cemetery officials at the last minute. Mr. Bass' family subsequently buried him in Gethsemane Cemetery (although his body was later moved to Philadelphia). Public outcry from this emotional situation was immense, and the circumstances of his burial became a catalyst for shaping New Jersey history.

The matter was brought before the NJ State Legislature by the newly-elected governor, Leon Abbett. He proposed a law granting any citizen the right of burial in a public cemetery,

regardless of color. Soon thereafter, New Jersey's "Negro Burial Bill," as it was then titled, was passed, making it a crime in the state for a cemetery to refuse burial to anyone because of race. The penalty was a fine up to \$500 (the modern equivalent of \$12,000).

In actuality, cemetery owners frequently found ways around the new law, commonly restricting black burials in separate areas. However, well-to-do African American businessmen were occasionally interred in a cemetery's nicer sections.



NJ Governor Leon Abbett

Credit: Wikipedia

GETHSEMANE CEMETERY'S NOTABLE BURIALS

Elizabeth Dulfer – born a slave c.1790; freed in 1822; died in 1880. Mrs. Dulfer was one of the area's wealthiest entrepreneurs, owning a successful clay business on land along the Hackensack River which she purchased from her former owner.

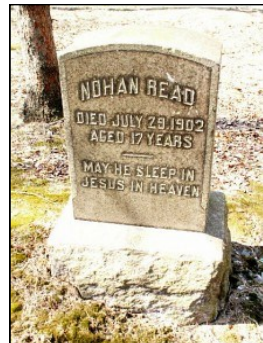
Susan Smith – is the oldest person known to be buried at Gethsemane. According to her death certificate, Mrs. Smith died at age 108 on March 11, 1888.

Peter Billings & Silas Carpenter – two Civil War Veterans who both served in the "29th Connecticut Colored Infantry Regiment" of the Union Army. Billings was born in New Jersey; Carpenter in Connecticut. Billings' grave was marked, until the 1980s, by a military marker that has since disappeared. While no marker has survived for Carpenter, it is assumed his was as well.

Louis Swinney – is the cemetery's last recorded burial, occurring in 1924. Mr. Swinney was an African American who died from chronic kidney disease at the age of 45.

GETHSEMANE TODAY

Gethsemane Cemetery was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994 under two distinct criteria. Criterion A for the role it played in enactment of early civil rights legislation; and Criterion D for the information it has yielded important to the development of Bergen County, and the condition of urban blacks living there during that time.



Left: Tombstone of Karen Mattleen, age 23

Right: Tombstone of Nohan Read, age 17

Credit: Lawrence Walker Foundation

Today, only 28 gravestones survive – all mark African-American internments. It is evident that vandalism has taken a toll over the past century. One sandstone obelisque also remains. While not associated with a burial, it may have marked the original entrance to the cemetery.

A ground-penetrating radar survey in the 1990s suggests the presence of 238 burials. Historic research documents a minimum of 496 burials: 77% are African American; 20% Caucasian; and 4% unidentified as to race.

Few artifacts have been recovered from the cemetery, despite two archaeological surveys. However some terra cotta drain pipe fragments remain, possibly used as grave markers, suggesting a link to West African burial traditions typically found in southern US cemeteries. Mollusk & clam shell fragments are also noteworthy, as they too are undoubtedly remnants of grave markers framing the outside of burial plots, or covering the entire mound.



Gethsemane Cemetery

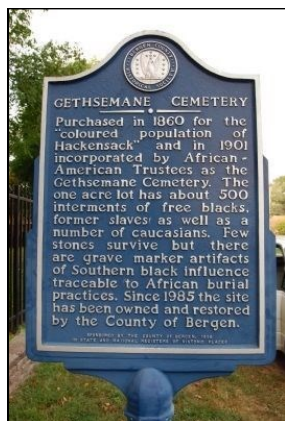
Credit: Janet Strom

There is also a variety of coffin hardware, and some metal chain with a metal tassel that would have been attached to stone plot markers to define a plot. In addition, three nickel-plated spoons may be artifacts associated with African American burial customs, as frequently, the last utensils used by the deceased are placed on their grave.

According to the National Register nomination, “If nothing were known about this site, these fragmented artifacts would reveal its cemetery function, and suggest its African American association.”



Gethsemane Cemetery Gates
 Credit: meadowblog.net



Historic Marker
 Credit: Janet Strom

Gethsemane Cemetery is now owned by Bergen County, who dedicated it as a historic site in 1985.

In 2003, a restoration was undertaken. Improvements included:

- Creating new meditation areas
- Installation of three interpretive panels listing the names of interments
- Installation of a grand gated entrance
- Restoration of the remaining headstones.



Gethsemane Cemetery Meditation Areas & Interpretive Panels
 Credit: Jerrye Klotz

The cemetery is open periodically for guided tours, often in association with Juneteenth – the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States.



Gethsemane Cemetery Guided Tour
 Credit: Janet Strom

“We have finally honored our ancestors, whose shoulders we all stand on,” said Arnold Brown, leader of the Gethsemane Cemetery restoration project. *(NYT 11.2.2003)*

Additional Sources: US Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, “Gethsemane Cemetery;” “In Brief: Heritage; Cemetery Dedicated,” Robert Hanley, New York Times, 11-2-03; “Gethsemane Cemetery, Little Ferry, NJ” 9-10-12, oldgraveyards.com; “Gethsemane Cemetery” Bergen County New Jersey; “Gethsemane Cemetery” Wikipedia; “Leon Abbett” Wikipedia; “Black History Month: Parted in Death,” Kathleen O’Brien, 2-11-11, NJ Advance Media for NJ.com.



Gethsemane Cemetery Veteran’s Tombstone

Credit: meadowblog.net

(Preservation Snapshot Archive links appear on the next page.)

PRESERVATION SNAPSHOT ARCHIVE

2016

- Radium Girls, Orange, NJ March/April 2016
- Trenton's Pottery Industry, Trenton, NJ February 2016

2015

- Buildings in the Battles of Trenton, Trenton, NJ December 2015
- Hinchliffe Stadium in The Silk City, Paterson, NJ November 2015
- Harleigh Cemetery and its Famous "Residents," Camden, NJ October 2015
- School's Out at the Boylan Street School, Newark, NJ September 2015
- Catboats ... Jersey Cats ... A-Cats, Barnegat Bay, NJ August 2015
- Lucy, the Elephant, Margate, NJ July 2015
- Mount Tabor Historic District, Parsippany-Troy Hills, NJ June 2015

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[New Jersey 350 Archive](#)

