Jim Crow and African-American Cemeteries and Burial Practices

In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes removed federal troops commissioned in the South to aide the newly freed Americans in their transition toward self-determination. This political move signaled the end of the Reconstruction Era, and ushered in the era of Jim Crow that would last until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Jim Crow was a systematic set of laws that established and enforced a racial class system intended to create and support the ideology that African Americans were to always be considered second class citizens and an inferior race to their white American counterparts. The custom of racial segregation and discrimination towards African Americans was not a new concept, but Jim Crow legally validated this system of oppression and created a du jour structure of economic slavery and political disempowerment. Practiced heavily in southern states, the horrors of Jim Crow were not exclusive to this region, but nationwide. Most public spaces, even cemeteries, were separated by racialized laws and social customs. Jim Crow laws were not only an attempt to continue the economic, social and political structure of the institution of American slavery pre-Civil War, but also an attempt to solidify in the psyche of white and black Americans a justification for white supremacy.

During slavery, most plantation owners required the racial segregation of cemeteries on their property, and slaves were often allowed to bury their own dead. In many of these instances, the enslaved were able to incorporate traditional African practices into the burial procedures. The ability to acknowledge and honor the burial practices and faiths of their ancestors provided the opportunity to pass rich cultural tradition from generation to generation. Many of these burial traditions can be attributed to West Central-African cultures like the Bakongo, who left items that belonged to the deceased at the gravesite. Practices such as this, along with traditional singing and dancing, and positioning graves in certain directions, are a legacy that also reaches back to West Central-African cultures. Over generations, many of these practices have been infused with elements of the Christian faith, and have continued to remain a part of African-American burial and cemetery traditions.

The Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1897 began the legal institution of the Jim Crow “separate but equal” ideology within the United States. Racially segregated cemeteries were not a new concept, but now all aspects of death and burial practices became legally divided by race. During this era, the role of the African-American undertaker/funeral director evolved into a pillar of the African-American community. In addition to funeral services, the undertaker would often allow the funeral home to serve as a meeting place for church services, weddings and civil rights discussions. The cemetery became the final resting place for loved ones who were now thought to be free of the cruelties of racism and injustice. Although segregated, African Americans were able to bury their loved ones with dignity, as they openly participated in traditional African-American burial customs.

Unfortunately, many of the African-American cemeteries created during this era, such as Washington Park, have declined in upkeep over time due to a variety of reasons. Weeds and greenery have overtaken the land, and gravesites are hard to find. Graves have been disturbed for industrial developments, such as buildings and highways. Although the Jim Crow Era is viewed as a distant memory of this nation’s past, its effects remain evident on these sacred landscapes. The devastating appearance of these burial grounds support the notion that many of those interred have been long forgotten, and deemed irrelevant to the historic fabric of American society. Even in death, the deceased are forced to encounter the discrimination and racism they faced in life. Sadly, they have still been treated as second-class citizens.

Text by Terri Williams, Higher Ground research assistant and graduate student in American Culture Studies, Washington University in St. Louis.

References


