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ARTICLE

"Let Perpetual Light Shine upon Them": Forgetting and Remembering Segregated Catholic Cemeteries

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Abstract
A recent fluorescence of geophysical and archaeological research in Catholic cemeteries illustrates the benefits and challenges of community-engaged projects. Focusing on four ongoing case studies in coastal Virginia and Maryland (the Chesapeake region)—St. Mary's Basilica (Norfolk, Virginia); Brent Cemetery (Stafford County, Virginia); Sacred Heart Church (Prince George's County, Maryland); and St. Nicholas Cemetery (St. Mary's County, Maryland)—this article explores a variety of archaeological strategies in the context of community engagement. These approaches are shaped by the physical characteristics of cemetery sites, the Catholic diocesan or church communities that oversee them, and the African American descendant communities affected by them. The built environment of cemeteries highlights the way that racism and segregation have shaped both the landscape and public memory of Catholic cemeteries in the Chesapeake region.

Resumen
Un reciente estudio geofísico y arqueológico en cementerios católicos ilustra los beneficios y desafíos de los proyectos con participación comunitaria. Centrándose en cuatro estudios de caso en curso en la costa de Virginia y Maryland (región de Chesapeake): la Basílica de Santa María (Norfolk, Virginia); el Cementerio de Brent (Condado de Stafford, Virginia); la Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón (Condado de Prince George, Maryland); y el Cementerio de San Nicolás (Condado de Santa María, Maryland), este artículo explora diversas estrategias arqueológicas en el contexto de la participación comunitaria. Estos enfoques se ven influenciados por las características físicas de los cementerios, las comunidades diocesanas o eclesiásticas católicas que los gestionan y las comunidades de descendientes afroamericanos que se ven afectadas. El entorno construido de los cementerios pone de relieve cómo el racismo y la segregación han moldeado tanto el paisaje como la memoria pública de los cementerios católicos en la región de Chesapeake.

Keywords: African diaspora; burial; Christianity; descendants; racism

Palabras clave: diáspora africana; entierro; Cristianismo; descendientes; racismo

> Prophesy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Listen! I will make breath enter you so you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put breath into you so you may

come to life [Ezekiel 37:4–5 (New American Bible), read by descendant Lynn Nehemiah at Sacred Heart Chapel on February 25, 2023].

African American burial grounds are frequently developed, vandalized, and then forgotten (Lemke 2020). The process of cemetery abandonment is often a product of historical and contemporary inequalities linked to white supremacy (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020), which affect the location, memorialization, and long-term maintenance of resting sites. These inequalities are often manifested through African American communities' lack of agency to make decisions regarding acts of mortuary care and preservation within current power systems (Ransone 2021). Acknowledging how these painful pasts affect contemporary mortuary landscapes is critical to beginning the process of rectifying historical wrongs and allow reclamation of these spaces for contemporary African American descendant communities.

At present, the limited state and federal resources for maintaining or protecting African American burial grounds hinder such initiatives. Many communities struggle to find ways to prevent the destruction or degradation of these sacred places, especially in urban environments. Amid serious grievances concerning the treatment of African American skeletal individuals by universities and museums (de la Cova et al. 2024; Sholts 2025), movements advocating for the federal protection of African American burial sites have emerged. Notably, the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act (part of H.R. 2617) was signed into law in 2022, providing an expanded grants framework for African American cemetery projects. Other proposed legislation uses the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) as a model for the identification and protection of African American burial grounds in the United States (Domeischel and Neller 2024).

At the same time as they help develop stronger legal protections, archaeologists often work on a pro bono basis with descendant communities to clear, maintain, and document these sacred sites. In this way, archaeological and geophysical work can become a means to help restore dignity for persons buried at neglected and forgotten burial sites. This work is an outgrowth of archaeologists' engagement with communities, which builds on an engaged and activist archaeology theoretical framework (Blakey 2020, 2022; de la Cova et al. 2024; Flewellen et al. 2021).

In recent years, several African American burial areas have been identified within Catholic cemeteries in coastal Virginia and Maryland. They include St. Mary's Basilica (Norfolk, Virginia), Brent Cemetery (Stafford County, Virginia), Sacred Heart Church (Prince George's County, Maryland) and St. Nicholas Cemetery (St. Mary's County, Maryland; Figure 1). These cemeteries are important sites of remembrance for church and descendant communities and have been recently investigated by professional archaeologists. These burial grounds encompass substantial diversity, both in landscape and their connection to contemporary communities. They represent both urban and rural contexts, are located near churches or on former plantations, and evoke different issues and priorities from connected Catholic congregations and other descendant communities. As a result, each burial ground reflects a differing and dynamic approach to burial protection, research, memorialization, education, and community engagement (Table 1).

These cemeteries also reflect a historical reluctance among predominantly European American Catholic communities to confront histories of slavery and segregation. In some cases, such as the Sacred Heart / White Marsh and Brent Cemeteries, economic and demographic changes led congregations to forget and effectively erase the resting places of Black Catholics, a form of structural violence imposed on sacred landscapes (Seidemann and Halling 2019). Until recently, requests to maintain the burials of family members by African American descendants have often been ignored by church administrators (Hendrix 2023).

The ongoing projects at St. Mary's Basilica and Sacred Heart / White Marsh, Brent, and St. Nicholas Cemeteries represent a turning point in the recognition and treatment of these burial sites. Over the past several years, descendant communities, archaeologists, and parties within the Catholic Church have begun to work together to maintain, document, and memorialize African American burial grounds—and confront associated histories of racism.

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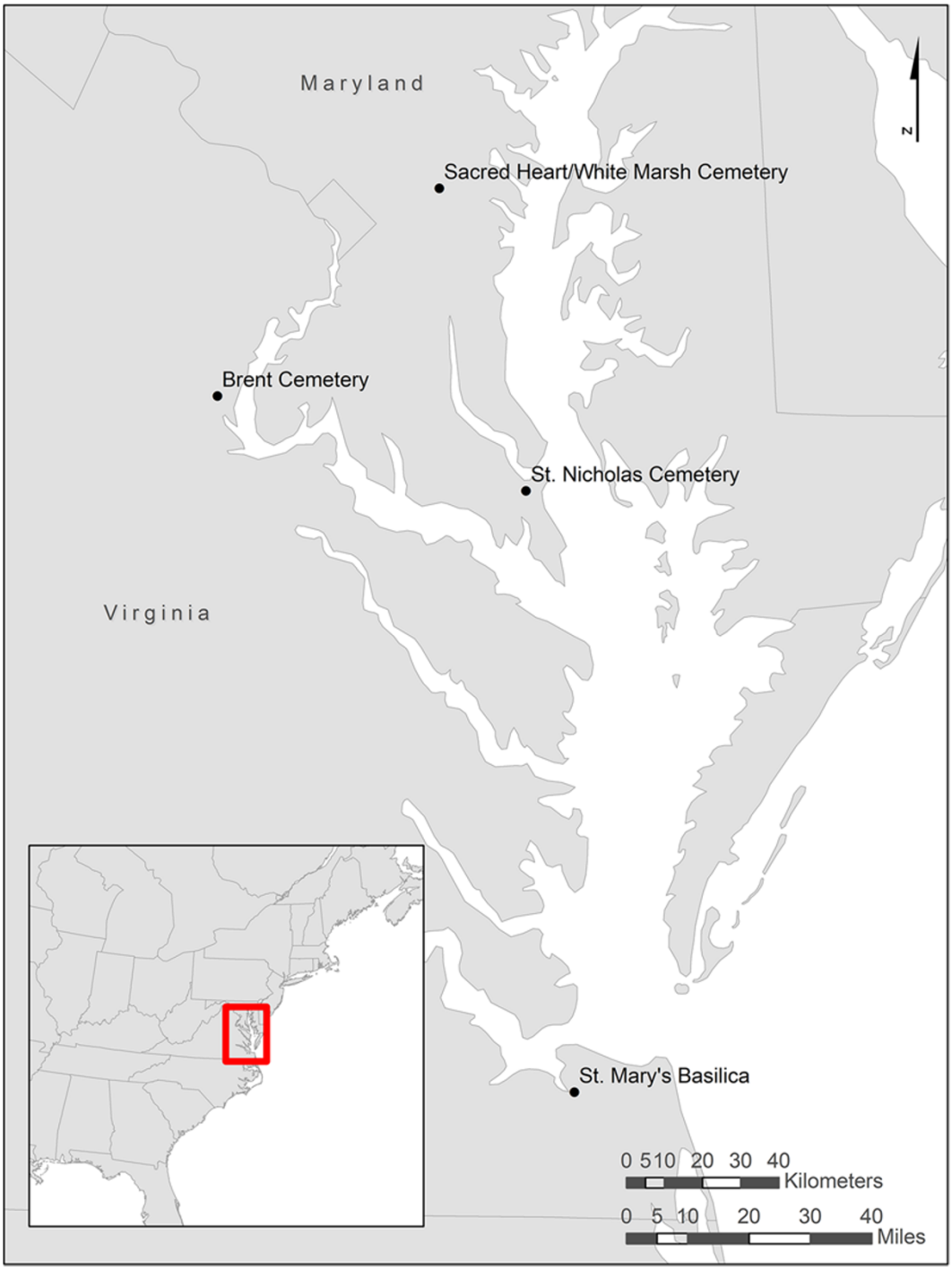

Figure 1. Map of case studies within the Chesapeake Region (image courtesy of Laura E. Masur).

These collaborative projects raise important ethical questions about burial preservation, strategies for community engagement, and bioarchaeological research in pursuit of additional information about the deceased. What are best practices for archaeologists to use when engaging with church and descendant

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Table 1. Summary of Case Studies.

Site Name	Site Number	County, State	Church Date	Cemetery Date (source)	Estimated # Burials (African American)
St. Mary's Basilica of the Immaculate Conception	44NR0066	Norfolk, Virginia	1790s–1856 (St. Patrick), 1858–Present (St. Mary)	ca. 1790–1850 (graves)	27+ (unknown)
Brent Cemetery	44ST130	Stafford, Virginia	Presence of chapel unknown	1685–1796 (grave markers)	93 (unknown)
Sacred Heart / White Marsh Cemetery	18PR36	Prince George's, Maryland	1741–Present	1819–Present (burial register)	2,218+ (875)
St. Nicholas	18ST398	St. Mary's, Maryland	1795–1942	1800–1942 (burial register)	687 (213)

communities and when integrating bioarchaeological and genetic studies in ways that center descendant communities? And when is it ethically acceptable to excavate burials? These questions apply not only to the case studies described here but also extend to contexts in which archaeological individuals are accidentally discovered or disinterred, moved without full consultation with descendant communities, or disinterred to prevent destruction from development.

Structural Violence, Community-Engaged Research, and Antiracism

Each of the cemeteries discussed here has witnessed structural violence; that is, "unequal treatment—often unintentionally and unwittingly—of minorities, the poor, and the otherwise disenfranchised by the established order" (Seidemann and Halling 2019:671). The unintentional character of structural violence is particularly salient in these contexts. Systematic inequalities in a community may remain unspoken and unwritten but are reinforced through everyday actions, including where someone may be buried according to their perceived race.

The use of violence against sacred burial sites, characterized by Seidemann and Halling (2019:669) as "landscape structural violence," results in the deliberate or unintentional destruction of a cemetery without consulting the descendant community, thus reinforcing social prejudices. Seidemann and Halling acknowledge hallmark examples of cemetery erasure, such as the New York African Burial Ground (NYABG) and several examples in New Orleans.

Although the ordained order that perpetuates structural violence is most often associated with governments, here we consider the institutional power of the Catholic Church, which is upheld through its practices as (in principle) a unified moral community (sensu Durkheim 1995). In practice, structural violence—through slavery, segregation, and racism—has historically led to fractures in Catholic church communities. These fractures are evident in the uneven memorialization of resting places.

Community is a complex concept, and archaeological efforts to collaborate with communities is a complex practice (La Salle 2010). Put simply, a community can be any group brought together through a shared connection and that is continually constructed through time (Agbe-Davies 2010). In practice, archaeologists often seek to work in collaboration with descendant communities, which are defined by their social, ethnic, or historical connection to archaeological sites, or in the context of burial places to deceased individuals (see Blakey 2022:13; de la Cova et al. 2024:6). The composition of African American descendant communities can vary widely by project, from African American residents of a city, descendants of those enslaved on a plantation, members of a church community, to lineal descendants of individuals interred in a cemetery. The more diffuse archaeological definition of descendants described earlier can be contrasted with legal approaches that require biological descent to ensure legal protections for cemeteries (Hong 2017:81).

Working with African American descendant communities using the "ethical client" model in archaeological or bioarchaeological work, as identified by Michael Blakey (2022), is one means of countering

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structural violence against African Americans. As Blakey points out, "All stakeholders are not equal" (2022:12). Carlina de la Cova and colleagues (2024:6) offer "communities of practice" as a way of describing nondescendant stakeholder groups that have interest in a project. Here, we distinguish between "church communities," members of a Catholic congregation or parish who have traditionally held the right and responsibility to manage cemeteries, and "descendant communities" whose ethical rights must now be acknowledged both by archaeologists and church communities through the process of community-engaged research.

Community-based participatory research, as outlined by Atalay (2012), involves collaborative research between archaeologists and communities as equal partners. Communities and archaeologists work together to set research parameters, acknowledging community members' rights, the applicability of knowledge to real-world problems, and the mutually beneficial nature of ongoing dialogues (Colwell 2016:116). Activism also runs through contemporary community-engaged research in archaeology, as do dialogues about power and decision making (Blakey 2022:13).

The character of the involved communities shapes the trajectory of community-engaged research projects. Indigenous archaeology is focused worldwide on orienting archaeological methods to decolonization, sovereignty, control of cultural patrimony, and acknowledgment of the politics of heritage among Indigenous communities (Bruchac et al. 2016). These efforts—particularly those focused on respect for and reburial of archaeological individuals—have been ongoing since before the passage of NAGPRA in 1990. Applications are diverse and multifaceted. Recent efforts have been made to combine methods from geophysical surveys and Indigenous knowledge to recover unmarked burials and tell the stories of ancestors and landscapes (Wadsworth et al. 2021).

In contrast, Black archaeology focuses on the past and present of people of African descent; its practitioners engage as activists in political dialogues about reparations for archaeology's harms against African Americans. Although monetary reparations for slavery continue to be advocated by descendant groups—for example, the Descendants of Jesuit Enslavement Historical & Genealogical Society (2024)—approaches centering on apology, memorialization, and symbolic justice are increasingly common (Hong 2017:100). Developing an explicitly antiracist archaeology involves four stages: (1) dismantling dominant and oppressive practices in archaeology, (2) inviting Black scholars to a central role in archaeological dialogues, (3) building an antiracist foundation for future work through the wisdom of Black literature, and (4) mentoring Black archaeologists (Flewellen et al. 2021). This work often involves community engagement, building and reestablishing trust and consent, and an openness to reshaping practices (de la Cova et al. 2024:6).

Acknowledging White racism—within and outside archaeology—is central to this work (Blakey 2020). European-descended communities must make active choices to break down traditional barriers to ensure racial justice, particularly in cemetery projects. Flewellen and colleagues (2021:234) distinguish the role of "accomplices" who serve as advocates for the equality of historically oppressed groups from that of "allies" who remain gatekeepers within existing systems of power. They argue that although allies may stand in solidarity with non-European-descended communities, their power nonetheless comes from their membership in a privileged group. To become accomplices, they must work actively toward substantive change and antiracism, even when doing so conflicts with their own interests.

Rather than take offense at White complicity with structural violence and consider racism as the domain of "bad" people, accomplices must approach projects with a mindset of service, humility, collaboration, and active inquiry (DiAngelo 2018:2–3; Hong 2017:83; Little 2023:4–5). In many cases, this can be achieved through structural parity: descendant community representation and power within all levels of an institution (National Summit on Teaching Slavery 2019:10). The formal organization of descendant communities and their role within organizational power structures play important roles in advocacy.

Although there are numerous excellent community-engaged and antiracist cemetery projects, the Anson Street African Burial Ground (ASABG) Project in Charleston, South Carolina, shows best how archaeological, bioarchaeological, and molecular research can be pursued in an ethical manner. The project developed from the advocacy efforts of a community grassroots organization, the Gullah Society, to protect African American burial grounds in the peninsula and surrounding areas (Gilmore et al.

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2024). When 36 burials were identified during renovations of the Gaillard Center Auditorium in 2013, Ade Ofunniyin and the Gullah Society worked to ensure that these Ancestors would be reburied with honor and respect. As part of this process, they organized a series of community engagement initiatives to understand the priorities and questions of the Charleston African American community. The result was a multimethod research initiative involving archaeological, osteological, isotopic, and aDNA research to understand the lives, histories, and personhood of the 36 Anson Street Ancestors (Fleskes et al. 2021, 2023; Gilmore et al. 2024).

Antiracist approaches have reverberated through anthropology and museums since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, resulting in an "ethical awakening" (Sholts 2025) that seeks ways to counter the structural violence of racism (de la Cova et al. 2024; Flewellen et al. 2021; Franklin et al. 2020; Sholts 2025). As in the past, projects have moved forward because they "finally suited the interests of those in power" (Hong 2017:102). We see the projects discussed here as the echoes of antiracist social movements within the Catholic Church—an institution that historically perpetrated structural violence against numerous groups, including Black Catholics.

In this context, we offer a note on terminology. When referring to deceased persons in archaeological contexts, we explicitly chose language that "affirms personhood," such as "deceased individuals," "individuals," and "people" (de la Cova et al. 2024:8). The terms "Black," "African American," "White," and "European American" are also used in this article. We use "African American" and "European American" to refer to a person's ancestral background. Where appropriate, however, we consciously use identity-related terms that elevate the "Black authorial voice" (Blakey 2020:S194), such as "Black Catholic" (Davis 1990) or "Black archaeology" (Flewellen et al. 2021), and refer to group-identified racial (racist) categories or ideologies such as "White" or "white supremacy" (Blakey 2020). We acknowledge the complex roles of ancestry and identity at these sites, including the poorly documented and poorly understood roles of Indigenous persons within Catholic communities in the region.

Black Catholics in the United States

The roots of Catholic institutions in the Anglophone United States originate in the seventeenth-century settlements of Catholics in Maryland. The British colony of Maryland was founded in 1634 by Catholic proprietor Cecil Calvert, who envisioned it as a refuge for Catholics and a model for religious toleration (Krugler 2004). Subsequent Catholic settlements were established along the Potomac River in Virginia within the next several decades and ultimately into eastern and central Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century, expanding the reach of Catholicism in the British colonies.

Catholics were often disenfranchised, especially in the wake of political events like the Glorious Revolution (1688) and the French and Indian War (1754–1763). Their populations were also small, with just over 25,000 documented Catholics across Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York in 1763. These numbers grew little in subsequent decades (Farrelly 2015:7–8; Pyne 2008:19). In fact, the Catholic Church in the United States was not formally recognized until 1789, the year after the US Constitution was ratified.

Many of Maryland and Virginia's wealthy Catholic landowners—including the Society of Jesus (Jesuits)—were enslavers. Based on the earliest surviving baptism and marriage records from Maryland, English Catholic enslavers and missionaries encouraged the conversion of people of African descent. Free and enslaved Marylanders were both understood as persons with souls, whose spiritual lives should be fostered through prayers and sacraments such as baptism, marriage, confession, and the eucharist (Hardy 2003:7–15). West Africans may also have been exposed to Christianity in their homelands or observed similarities between Catholic rituals and West African spiritual traditions (Davis 1990:16–18; Dewulf 2022; Hardy 2003:20–22).

Frequently documented in these records were persons enslaved by Jesuits and other Catholic landowners, who comprised a large proportion of the membership of rural Catholic congregations. On the eastern shore of Maryland, most Catholic baptisms and marriages took place among African Americans during the 1760s and 1770s (Hardy 2003:9). African Americans enslaved by the Jesuits were part of eighteenth-century Maryland congregations (Masur 2021:6–7; Peterman 2004:116–117).

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African Americans continued to play an important role in Catholic congregations after the American Revolution. Multiethnic urban Catholic communities in Baltimore, Charleston, St. Augustine, St. Louis, and New Orleans—among other cities—included large constituencies of free and enslaved African Americans. As in rural Maryland, sacramental connections played an important role in forging ties of kinship and community (Krebsbach 2007; Leumas 2023; Schmidt 2019).

Through the nineteenth century, Catholic churches were often racially integrated in both rural and urban areas. Contemporary accounts and oral histories indicate that these policies were not universal, however, and segregation played a central role in both church seating and the design of cemeteries, especially in the South (Hartfield 1993:44–45; Krebsbach 2007:157; Masur 2021:14). The formation of numerous historically Black Catholic churches took place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, either as a conscious act of segregation during the Jim Crow era (Collum 2006) or at the impetus of African Americans who sought to establish more egalitarian communities (MacGregor 1999).

Within both integrated and segregated parishes, Catholicism served as an important foundation for African American communities. These communities gathered for Sunday masses and festivals, provided mutual aid, and educated children at Catholic schools in southern Maryland (Masur 2021:11–12). In particular, urban Catholic communities grew during the era of the Great Migration (around 1910–1970), which was also a major period of conversion for African Americans migrating to US cities (Cressler 2017; Davis 1990:238–259; DuCros 2016). These urban Black Catholic communities were centers of activism during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Hayes 2023).

Case Studies

St. Mary's Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (Norfolk, Virginia)

The Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception is the only Roman Catholic basilica in the eastern United States with a predominantly African American congregation. It is located adjacent to the site of an earlier Catholic church, St. Patrick's, which held services for both Black and White parishioners starting in the early 1790s. An 1802–1803 frame chapel was replaced by a brick church in 1831 and a by larger brick church in 1842 (Pollard 2017:11). In 1856, St. Patrick's was destroyed by a fire. The fire was likely set by members of the Know Nothing Party, an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant group that sought to turn public sentiment against Catholics. The presence of Black Catholics within the congregation may also have motivated this act of arson (Pollard 2017:11–12).

Two churches were constructed near the ruins of St. Patrick's in the nineteenth century. The first, St. Mary's, was built from 1857 to 1858 directly on the church's former burial ground (Pollard 2017:4). Nearby, St. Joseph's was constructed in 1889 to serve Norfolk's Black Catholic community. In 1961, St. Mary's and St. Joseph's congregations merged, creating a multiracial Catholic congregation in Norfolk (Pollard 2017:13). Later, in 1991, St. Mary's was formally declared a minor basilica (Pollard 2017:2).

In 2019, renovations to the interior of the church were undertaken to improve the sanctuary for continued use; they included adding two ADA-compliant bathrooms within the narthex underneath the balcony. During these renovations, contractors discovered a vaulted brick drainage tunnel. Given the known presence of burials to the north of the building, church leadership engaged DATA Investigations, a local cultural resource management firm, to submit an anticipatory burial permit to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) and conduct on-site monitoring whenever ground disturbance was necessary.

While monitoring construction at the proposed location of the new bathrooms, DATA Investigations found evidence of historic burials (Figure 2). Initial archaeological analyses of the burial materials indicated that the interments likely dated to the early to mid-nineteenth century, predating the 1857/1858 church. Given the positions of the graves, the individuals buried in them likely belonged to St. Patrick's congregation and were interred between 1790 and 1856. No fewer than 27 burials were identified during the project, within and immediately outside the basilica. Ground-penetrating radar (GPR) analysis by Jamestown Rediscovery focused on the area within the church immediately east of the excavation area and found evidence for "a honeycomb network of crypts" (David Givens, personal communication 2020) representing dozens of additional interments.

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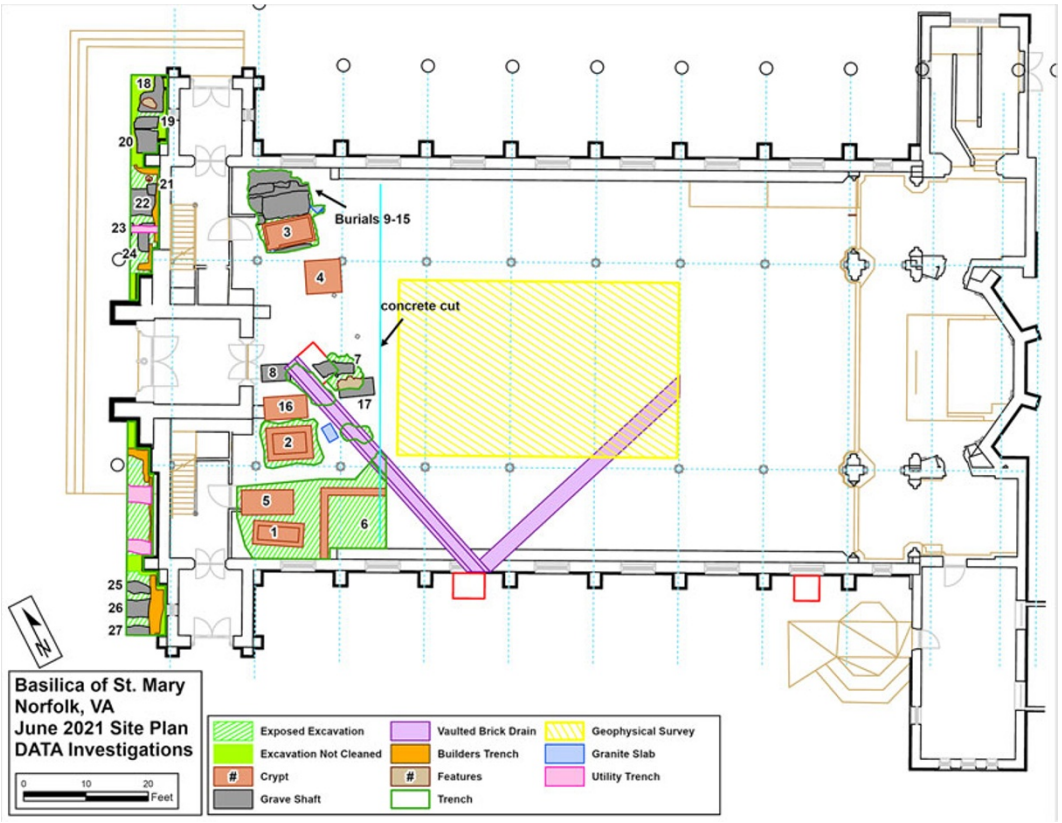

Figure 2. Archaeological site map of the St. Mary's Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, 2021 (image courtesy of DATA Investigations). (Color online)

This discovery was of great interest to the congregation and spurred them to learn more about the early history of the basilica and its connection to St. Patrick's; they viewed these congregations as intrinsically linked. The congregation requested that DATA Investigations secure a burial recovery permit to excavate several of the burials. Simultaneously, the congregation's leadership abandoned the plan to add bathrooms, thereby avoiding additional impact on the remaining burials. Staff of DATA Investigations and the Commonwealth Preservation Group met with church leadership, the congregation, and members of the surrounding community to solicit their thoughts regarding the treatment of the archaeological individuals to be disinterred.

Questions about whether these individuals should be excavated, studied, or both were discussed in a series of in-person and virtual community forums starting in 2019. During these forums, both members of the congregation and the surrounding community discussed the future treatment of the individuals buried beneath St. Mary's. Archaeologists from DATA Investigations shared the benefits and limitations of studying archaeological individuals, including what could be learned from osteological, genetic, and isotopic analyses, while noting the invasive or destructive nature of these methods. Previous archival research suggested that the vast majority of the interred individuals were likely of European descent, and these findings were shared with congregation members.

After this series of discussions, community members decided they wanted to learn more about the earlier members of their church congregation using these kinds of scientific methods. During these forums, all parties agreed that, following excavation and study, the archaeological individuals would be reburied in the nearby St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery.

After DHR approved the burial permit, DATA Investigations moved forward with excavations in March 2020. The excavation area covered the western third of the basilica, which encompassed the area

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Figure 3. Excavation of Crypt 1 at St. Mary's Basilica of the Immaculate Conception by (*left to right*) Keenan Javon Hurdle, Raquel Fleskes, Michael Clem, David Brown, and Joanna Wilson Green, 2020 (photo used with permission of Brian Palmer [brianpalmer.photos]). (Color online)

between the entrance and the nave underneath the rear balcony. Although the goal of the project was not to identify all burials within the removed section of the floor, excavations confirmed the presence of no fewer than 17 burials, including seven brick-lined crypts.

Of these crypts, three were excavated by archaeologists from DATA Investigations with assistance from DHR staff (Figure 3). The crypts were organized in roughly two rows that extended the width of the basilica, with each facing east to west. The construction of the vaults and manufacture of the bricks suggested two periods of interment. Vaults of handmade brick were likely built in the first half of the cemetery's existence (1790s–1820s; Crypt 3), whereas those using machine-made brick dated to the second half (1820s–1856; Crypts 1 and 2).

A vaulted brick drain tunnel ran diagonally in a southeast–northwest direction beneath the western end of the church. Portions of the tunnel were destroyed by the foundation of the basilica, confirming it predated the 1857/1858 building. Test excavations at a collapsed section of the tunnel further identified three hand-dug burials, two of which were excavated. Tunnel construction affected these interments and Crypt 16, confirming that the tunnel was dug through the existing cemetery.

In contrast to the brick-lined crypts, the hand-dug burials did not contain evidence of brick or coffin hardware. Instead, impressions of wood grain in the surrounding clay suggested that the three individuals recovered from them (two in Burial 7) were interred in wood coffins. Although coffin nails were recovered, manufacturing techniques could not be determined given the extensive corrosion of the metal objects. These burials also faced an east–west direction and fell roughly in line with the orientation of the crypts.

Osteologist Dana Kollmann and anthropological geneticists Raquel Fleskes and Theodore Schurr were brought into the project to carry out their respective analyses. A community meeting was organized at the basilica in September 2022, during which Kollmann presented the results of the osteological analysis and answered questions from the community. Fleskes and Schurr then presented an overview

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of what could be learned from ancient DNA (aDNA) testing. These presentations were then shared on Facebook Live and through the congregation's Zoom channel. Given the destructive nature of aDNA analysis, the researchers decided to conduct a series of virtual community updates, using both written letters and video summaries describing the progress of the genetic analysis in real time. These updates were also shared on social media, including St. Mary's and the Fairfield Foundation's Facebook and Twitter platforms.

Once the aDNA results were finalized, Fleskes and Schurr gave an in-person presentation describing these results to the community. The collaborative team also discussed how their findings would be publicly disseminated. The description of this research has been developed in direct collaboration and consultation with the local church community.

Sacred Heart / White Marsh Cemetery (Prince George's County, Maryland)

Sacred Heart Chapel was established by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1741. Located on the White Marsh plantation, the chapel served surrounding communities, including those of local enslaved and free African Americans. In 1853, a fire destroyed the chapel and rectory. Although they were both later rebuilt, the fire destroyed most of the primary documents about the associated communities (*Weekly National Intelligencer*, May 21, 1853:1).

In the 1890s, the Jesuits established two nearby churches: Ascension in northern Bowie and Holy Family in Mitchellville. Although Holy Family was created for Black communities in the area and Ascension was understood to be a "White" church, burial records indicate that both parishes were partly integrated (*Democratic Advocate*, November 4, 1893:3). The Jesuits moved to Ascension in 1903 and passed Sacred Heart and Ascension as "missions" to the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1933; these churches subsequently became part of the newly created Archdiocese of Washington. Sacred Heart was established as a parish in 1965 (*Washington Post*, May 22, 1965:C43), and a new church was completed in 1969 to accommodate the suburban growth of Bowie.

A large cemetery is located immediately at the top of a hill to the north of the original Sacred Heart chapel (Figure 4). The site's earliest (unmarked[1]) burials of free and enslaved persons probably date to the mid-eighteenth century. The first documented burial in the cemetery was dated to 1819 and the earliest grave marker to 1836 (Archives of the Maryland Province, 1818–1897, White Marsh Sacramental Register Records of the Houses, Box 131 Folder 4, Georgetown University Manuscripts Repository, Washington, DC). It was the formal burial ground for Ascension until 1908 and for Holy Family into the 1930s. Interments at White Marsh / Sacred Heart continue through the present day.

The cemetery remained active and was maintained by families of the deceased after the Jesuits' departure in 1903. The site became wooded and overgrown; in the 1970s it was cleared and expanded to accommodate the growing parish. Over time the institutional memory about the full extent of the cemetery faded. Members of the parish community were aware that additional gravestones were in the woods north of the cemetery but knew little of their history.

In October 2022, Sacred Heart Parish began to clear heavy underbrush in the woods surrounding the cemetery. When it became apparent that the cemetery extended throughout this wooded area, a GPR survey was conducted. This survey revealed 175 graves in the study area, half of which were associated with fieldstone markers (Figure 5). Other GPR anomalies were completely unmarked. Representatives of Sacred Heart met in November 2022 with Laura Masur and two members of the descendant community to assess the cemetery.[2] Members of the church, descendant, and wider communities continued to clear heavy undergrowth in the cemetery along a heavily sloped hillside to the north of the maintained cemetery at the top of the hill.

The project received significant media attention in early 2023 (Hendrix 2023), which helped researchers build connections with additional members of the descendant community and increase volunteer participation. A forum for community dialogue was held on February 25, 2023, at which dozens of community members met with the archbishops of Washington and Baltimore and the provincial of the Jesuit's East Province, followed by a prayer service in the cemetery. Formal mapping and documentation of grave markers using a real-time kinematic (RTK) GPS began in December 2022 and

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Figure 4. Map of formal grave markers and fieldstones ("potential grave markers") at Sacred Heart / White Marsh Cemetery, 2024 (image courtesy of Laura E. Masur).

continued through April 2024. Members of the parish history committee and other community members contributed to a database of burials, which was based on parish burial records and public death certificates.

Currently, there are documented interments of 2,218 persons. Based on burial records, genealogies, and a community-derived list of African American surnames, 875 of these decedents are likely to be African American. The resting places of 952 persons are known, with most being marked by formal gravestones. Additionally, more than 1,000 uninscribed potential fieldstone grave markers are located at the top of the hill and along the adjacent hillside. Clearly, hundreds of grave locations remain undetected.

European Americans interred before 1970 are primarily buried in two areas at the top of the hill close to the chapel, whereas African American persons (a small sample size of about 20) are buried on the outskirts of these areas and along a ridge in the woods (Figure 5). We suspect that uninscribed fieldstones mark the burials of both African and European Americans and that their use is a marker of poverty, rather than race alone. Overall, the cemetery covers more than 3 ha.

The diversity of community members is both a strength and a challenge for the project. Members of the (largely European American) Sacred Heart community have mobilized as volunteers to clear and maintain the cemetery, research its burial history, address erosion and preservation, and reach out to broader communities. Members of the descendant community have also joined these efforts as part of the Sacred Heart Cemetery Committee, which is codirected by a parishioner and a descendant (Lynn Nehemiah). Spurred in part by work related to the cemetery, descendants formed the White Marsh Historical Society in 2023. This nonprofit organization is focused on research and education about the Ancestors who were enslaved at White Marsh plantation.

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Figure 5. Examples of fieldstone, concrete, and stone grave markers at Sacred Heart / White Marsh Cemetery, 2024. Grave markers are associated with known or likely African American burials (image courtesy of Laura E. Masur). (Color online)

Integrating the communities and building relationships are long-term priorities for both groups and are being facilitated by regular meetings and community clean-up events. Ongoing plans include an environmental assessment of the hillside's steep terrain to prevent further erosion, a full GPR survey of the cemetery, and the development of long-term plans for preservation and memorialization—which include making burial data fully accessible to the broader community. Discussion of visions and goals for the cemetery and White Marsh property are in the early stages as the groups coordinate plans for research, communication, and decision-making.

Brent Cemetery (Stafford County, Virginia)

Known as the Aquia or Brent Cemetery, this small family burial ground was located on a plantation belonging to George Brent (about 1640–1700), who was among the first Catholic settlers in the colony of Virginia. Brent's Uncle Giles (1600–1672) and Aunt Margaret (about 1601–1671) were political leaders in Maryland's early decades and later established a refuge for Catholics near Aquia Creek in Stafford County, Virginia. George Brent's plantation, Woodstock, was established around 1670 and served as his family's residence until his death before 1700. Brent, his first wife Elizabeth Greene (d. 1686), his second wife Mary Sewall Chandler (d. 1694), and at least two children were interred in the cemetery, along with additional burials (Colonial Encounters 2022; Hardy 2020; Williams 2017).

The Brent cemetery is located adjacent to the domestic site (and possible chapel) of the Brent family and lies near a Late Woodland (late precontact) or early colonial Virginia Indian campsite. A series of

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archaeological excavations conducted from 1995 to 2002 suggest that the Brents' occupation of the site occurred during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. After this time, the core of the Brent plantation moved elsewhere (Colonial Encounters 2022; Williams 2017).

The property was subsequently passed on to several unrelated landowners, and the cemetery parcel was ultimately purchased by the Diocese of Richmond in 1924. This purchase was spurred by the rediscovery of the graves of the Brent family and their connection to early Catholicism in colonial Virginia. Efforts were made by both the Diocese of Richmond and lay groups to create a space for outdoor worship and to celebrate the Brent family for their contributions to the Catholic faith. In 1932, a brick wall was built around the cemetery, and an altar was installed on the southern interior of the wall. A Catholic mass was held in the cemetery annually in the fall until 2019. The cemetery was transferred to the Diocese of Arlington after the diocese was established in 1974.

In recent years, information about the burial of an enslaved woman named Flora (d. 1697) came to the attention of the Diocese of Arlington. Flora is described by name, along with 24 other enslaved persons, in the 1694 will of George Brent. Her inscribed tombstone was also noted in two separate reports (Heflin and Mires 1937; Sargeant Memorial Collection, 1922–1929, Aquia Freestone Photographs, George Washington Stone Corporation, MSS 0000-108 Norfolk Public Library, Norfolk, Virginia; see Figure 6). It is believed that her gravestone was moved to accommodate the mass, and its original and current locations are unknown.

In 2020, the Diocese of Arlington began an initiative to clean up and learn more about the property. A sloped area west of the brick wall was cleared in June 2020 to evaluate the locations of possible burials, several of which were identified archaeologically by Williams's team between 1995 and 2002. The diocese contracted Timothy Horsley to conduct a magnetometry and GPR survey to identify the extent of the historic burial ground. Horsley identified 60 potential burials but also noted that the possible presence of up to 88 burials was indicated by additional fieldstone grave markers (Figure 7). Although some of these burials were identified within the area enclosed by the brick wall, many were located along the sloped hillside west of the enclosure. These largely unmarked burials are likely the resting place of persons enslaved by the Brent family. Horsley (2022) also identified several probable domestic features, including a likely structure inside the brick wall.

An archaeological project directed by Masur began in early 2025. Overall, excavations will be focused on confirming the presence of grave shafts, ensuring their preservation in light of erosion, and obtaining a better understanding of the archaeological features located near the cemetery. While the goal of the 2025 field season was to investigate a potential domestic feature, excavations instead indicated the presence of additional fieldstone grave markers and depressions within the brick wall, which had been buried by a flood deposit. Excavation ended when it became clear that features were funerary rather than domestic.

Under the auspices of the Diocese of Arlington, led by Chancery offices including the Archives, parishioners at nearby Saint William of York (Stafford) and All Saints (Manassas) churches have been volunteering to clean up and provide security for the cemetery. Progress reports are shared with the Diocese of Richmond Catholic Women's Club, the ministry that raised the funds to build the altar, brick enclosure, and a crucifix that sits nearby along Highway Route 1. The diocese is also seeking ways to engage with relevant descendant communities, although this effort has been challenging, given the cemetery's long time span. The main goal of this project is to gain a better understanding of all persons who lived and are buried at the site. In addition, it seeks to correct misinformation about its history, such as oral traditions that connect the site to an early Jesuit mission.

St. Nicholas Cemetery (St. Mary's County, Maryland)

In 1795, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) constructed a frame chapel at Cedar Point in St. Mary's County, Maryland. Named St. Nicholas, the church hosted a mixed Black and White congregation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Masur 2021). Described as "a decaying frame building, half whitewashed and without a cross" (Scully 1904:40), the original church was replaced with a rusticated concrete structure in 1916 (Figure 8).

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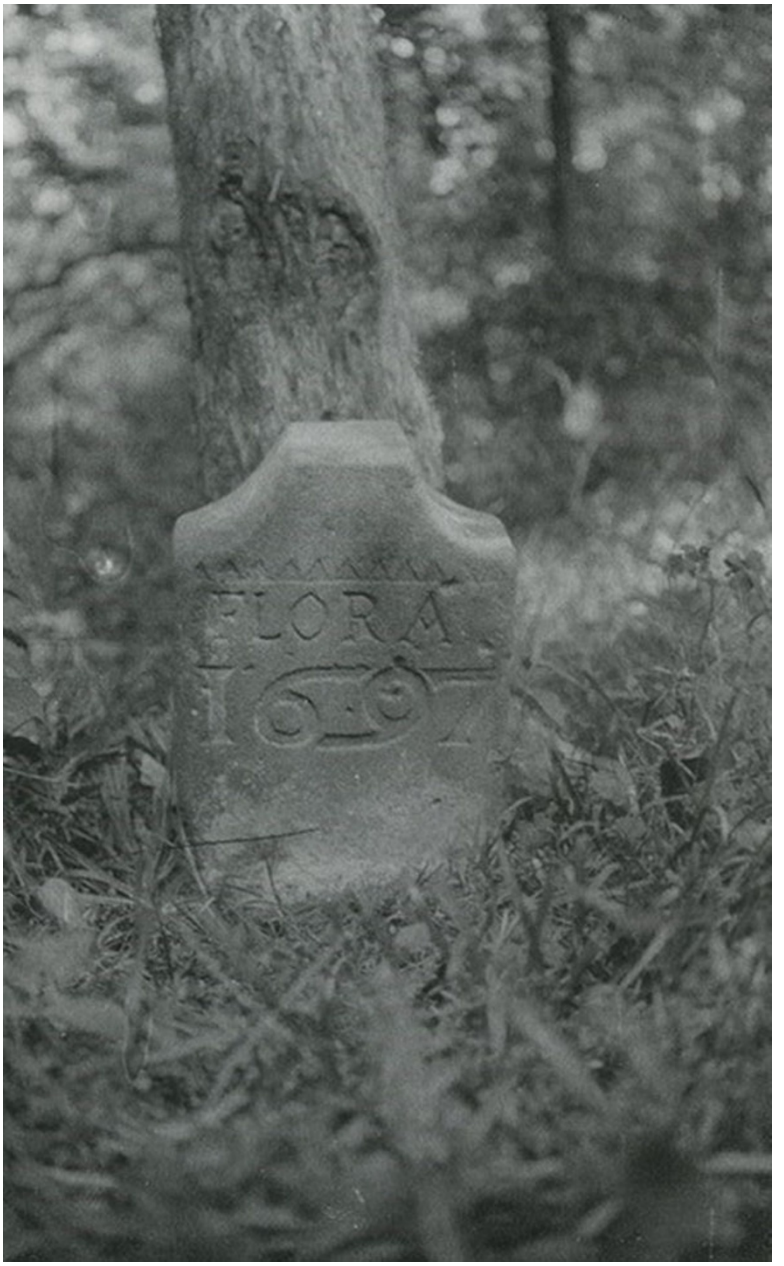

Figure 6. Grave marker for Flora in the Brent Cemetery, around 1922–1925. George Washington Stone Corporation, ca. 1922. Private collection. Photo courtesy of Jerrilynn MacGregor.

The US Navy acquired the property in 1942. During the construction of the Naval Air Station Patuxent River Base in 1943, the Public Works Department surveyed the location of each of the 320 observed graves, including 109 that marked the resting place of unidentified persons. Of those 109 graves, 54 were demarcated with wooden markers or stakes, and the rest were represented by depressions in the sod.

At that time, the Navy entered into dialogue with the St. Nicholas community about the fate of the cemetery. The congregation wished to leave the dead in place, whereas the Navy preferred to remove the burials to a separate cemetery. As a compromise with the local community, it was decided to leave

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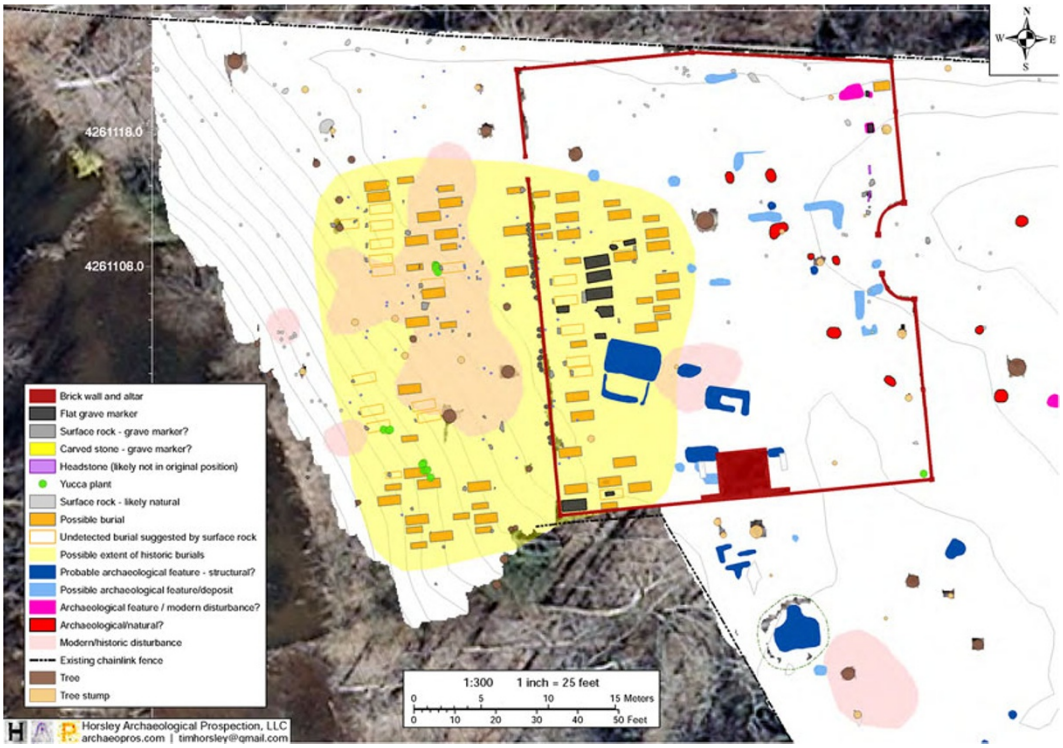

Figure 7. Map of geophysical anomalies in the Brent Cemetery, 2021 (image courtesy of Horsley Archaeological Prospection). (Color online)

the burials in place and convert the space into a park (Everett 1986; Gibb and Lawrence 2004). After documenting the graves, the Navy buried the headstones near each grave. However, the presence of these graves continued to be a source of tension.

In 1944, there was concern that the Navy was bulldozing some of the graves for a construction project just west of the cemetery. The St. Mary's County health inspector and Navy personnel inspected the excavations but did not see any evidence of burial disturbance. The Navy publicly confirmed the validity of the survey map by exposing the marker for a Captain Jarboe and re-erecting it in place (Dederer 1961).

Recently, there has been speculation about the Navy's motivations in burying the stones. The stones may have been buried to improve the morale of pilots flying over the cemetery. Gibb and Lawrence (2004) suggest instead that the headstones were buried to alienate the local population from the land they lost to the Navy or to more efficiently maintain the parcel.

In 1986, there was a movement to excavate and re-erect the tombstones, but the petition was rejected over concerns about costs, appearance of the stones, and lack of permission from descendants (Everett 1986). In 2002, James Gibb and Scott Lawrence mounted a phased campaign to recover the tombstones. There was some opposition to this process from descendants because of concern that cemetery restoration would disturb the graves. Nevertheless, their campaign gained support from the St. Mary's Genealogical Society and the Knights of Columbus, along with numerous other individuals. The first phase focused on the 13 recorded veterans, but after its initial success in recovering those stones, between 220 and 230 have been exposed and restored.

The team used the 1943 surveyor map to calculate the distances from each headstone to three positions marked on the 1916 chapel. Measuring tapes were stretched to triangulate the location of a buried stone. When a stone location was confirmed by probing the soil, it became another reference point for

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Figure 8. St. Nicholas church and cemetery around 1880. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Liljenquist Family.

the next find. Once identified in this manner, the gravestones were excavated, documented, and then re-erected. Because many of the headstones were badly damaged, they had to be professionally conserved and repaired before being remounted (Gibb and Lawrence 2004; Jim Gibb, personal communication 2023).

Lawrence used three parish burial registers and other primary sources to compile a list of individuals buried in the cemetery. Their race was identified using parish and census records for about two-thirds of these individuals (Gibb and Lawrence 2004). Although Lawrence stated that there was no evidence of segregation based on race or class (St. Mary's County Historical Society 2004), recent geospatial analysis of the burial ground suggests otherwise.

Most of the restored burials were in family plots north and northeast of the 1795 chapel and along the high ground of the chapel, with the high-status members positioned near the foundation. Many of the post-1916 burials were located to the northeast of the 1916 chapel. All these individuals came from European American families.

Only eight documented graves were associated with African Americans, with seven of them postdating 1916. All these graves were located to the south, downhill from the sites of both churches. However, this sample size is very small, possibly because of the impermanent nature of wooden crosses or planks used by St. Nicholas's African American community to mark the graves (Figure 8).

In 2023, the Navy started another phased approach to follow up on earlier work to rehabilitate the cemetery. The first phase was a GPR survey to identify cemetery boundaries and find unidentified graves (Walker 2023; Figure 9). The results indicated the presence of 194 unmarked graves, a figure that may include the 109 unidentified graves observed by the Navy in 1943. It is also possible that burying the

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stones in 1943 and remounting them in 2002 resulted in discrepancies between the stone position and the corresponding grave location. Gibb and Lawrence were not permitted to excavate at the site to confirm grave shaft locations, which would explain these errors.

The GPR survey included a large area on the cemetery's southern slope but only identified about 20 unmarked graves that were not present in the 1943 map. In addition, some of the graves plotted in 1943 did not show up in the GPR results. This suggested that either the GPR failed to identify some graves or that some of the "graves" documented in 1943 were, in fact, natural depressions. The first scenario is more likely, because there are apparently incomplete rows of both headstones and GPR anomalies. Thus, it is likely that either the African American section of the cemetery continued downslope or the earlier burials were located on a different parcel of land.

Community Engagement

The involvement of descendant communities in the study of plantations and cemeteries associated with the Catholic Church is a recent phenomenon. Most of these projects began during the period of "ethical awakening" noted by Sholts (2025), and as Hong (2017) observed, they suited institutional interests. Despite their multiracial histories, professional and avocational researchers studying Catholic cemeteries have traditionally been of European ancestry, which likely affected their research priorities (Reilly 2022). At the Sacred Heart / White Marsh and Brent Cemeteries, church communities focused on memorializing well-documented persons, most of whom were European American. At St. Nicholas Cemetery, the gravestones of veterans were prioritized in restoration efforts. These unequal representations of the past, although not intentionally harmful, compounded the process of forgetting persons without the means to purchase an inscribed headstone.

Moreover, racial segregation among St. Nicholas burials was initially dismissed until recent geospatial analysis showed clearly segregated burial clusters. Similar evidence of segregation is evident at the Sacred Heart / White Marsh cemetery. These forms of "latent" racism—a hallmark of structural violence—are fostered through ignorance about the role of slavery and segregation within Catholic communities. A recent movement to research the history of all cemetery interments—most notably through the efforts of African American parishioners at St. Mary's Basilica and the cemetery committee at Sacred Heart—is a common thread in all the case studies.

Often, the history of church congregations presents challenges to reestablishing relationships of trust with descendant communities (de la Cova et al. 2024). The case studies show several examples of the intentional segregation of Black and White church communities (St. Joseph's and St. Mary's in Norfolk; Holy Family and Ascension in Mitchellville/Bowie). In other cases, descendants of Black Catholics left the Catholic Church. Their departure creates the challenge of reintegrating church communities or working with multiple church and descendant groups, such as the White Marsh Historical Society. Identifying descendants is even more challenging given the depth of the burial sequence at the Brent Cemetery. This conundrum can be reconciled through detailed genealogical or controversial genetic studies, the latter of which were most prominently explored at Catoctin Furnace (Harney et al. 2023; Sholts 2025:8–9). Thus, although religion may unify communities, the lasting impacts of slavery, segregation, and racism on religious congregations present a significant barrier to establishing relationships of trust in the present.

Given the role of multiple church and descendant community groups, many projects face the challenge of balancing different goals and priorities in cemetery research and memorialization. At St. Nicholas, mistrust between the Navy and the church community shows how land ownership as a form of power played a prominent role in compromise. The role of race both in 1940s community–military negotiations and in 2000s restoration efforts is poorly documented and understood. This clear example of landscape structural violence has led to major difficulties in relocating African American graves in the present.

Although African American parishioners at St. Mary's Basilica played a prominent role in decision- making from the inception of the project, the concept of shared governance has been a work in progress at the Sacred Heart / White Marsh and Brent Cemeteries—and has not even been broached at St. Nicholas. Structural parity (National Summit on Teaching Slavery 2019:10)

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Figure 9. Map of grave markers and geophysical anomalies at St. Nicholas, 2023 (image courtesy of Archaeo-Geophysical Associates).

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is a particular challenge given the organized hierarchy of the Catholic Church. At Sacred Heart / White Marsh, the formal organization of the descendant community as a nonprofit (White Marsh Historical Society) shows how descendants can encourage accountability from formal and hierarchical institutions.

Overall, forums for community engagement and dialogue have been diverse. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote events and communications such as Zoom meetings and social media have played a prominent role in these projects over the past five years. These means of communication have been particularly notable for the St. Mary's Basilica project but have also been used at Sacred Heart / White Marsh at the request of descendants and parishioners. Nonetheless, in-person meetings and events play a crucial role in fostering informal conversations: they build a shared commitment and sense of community that come from communal prayer, dialogue, and cemetery maintenance.

Archaeological and Geophysical Results

Project methodologies are closely related to community needs, as well as the context and goals of the projects. Noninvasive methods should be a priority for cemetery projects but are not always feasible. Moreover, documenting often poorly marked African American graves purely through features visible on the ground surface—grave markers or burial depressions mapped with a GPS or total station—often leads to underestimations of the total number of burials.

At Sacred Heart / White Marsh and the Brent Cemetery, rows of fieldstone grave markers clearly indicated burial locations. Yet, it can be difficult to differentiate between natural stone outcroppings and intentional placement in those cemeteries. Fieldstones have also commonly been moved whether for maintenance purposes, because they were not initially recognized as grave markers, or as an intentional act of erasure. Although a similar use of fieldstones as grave markers has been documented in plantation cemeteries, the extent of their use is dependent on local geology. At St. Nicholas, there is no evidence for the use of fieldstones, although a historical photograph (Figure 8) clearly shows the prevalence of wooden crosses as grave markers—probably because fieldstones were not readily available. Although burial depressions often indicate grave locations, they do not always preserve well, given sedimentation and erosion on wooded hillsides (Sacred Heart / White Marsh, Brent) or urban development (St. Mary's).

In addition, neither fieldstones nor burial depressions universally align with geophysical anomalies. At St. Nicholas, previously mapped burial depressions were not reidentified in a GPR survey. At the Brent Cemetery, GPR anomalies were not universally detected at the location of a fieldstone grave marker. When burial depressions or grave markers are absent, as in areas in each case study, a geophysical survey provides the only noninvasive option for identifying potential grave locations.

Although using multiple geophysical methods can provide a more complete understanding of the subsurface of a burial ground, time and budgetary constraints often prevent this approach. GPR is frequently found to be the most successful technique for the detection and mapping of burials in this region (e.g., King et al. 1993), even though comparison with known marked graves rarely yields a 100% success rate. There can be many reasons for this discrepancy, the most significant being the degree of geophysical contrast between the inhumation (with or without a casket) and the surrounding soils—which in turn is largely dictated by the degree of preservation.

The level of experience of the geophysical analyst in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data from historic cemeteries also plays a vital role in the successful outcome of a geophysical survey. The potential for a successful outcome can be greatly increased by collecting high-resolution data along transects aligned perpendicularly to burials and with careful spatial control. Furthermore, it is essential that data are collected for later analysis of the profiles and time slices to allow subtle vertical and horizontal relationships to be identified and interpreted.

The excavation of overburden to expose grave shafts remains an important tool for certain projects. In ongoing construction projects like the St. Mary's Basilica, cleaning and mapping the exposed ground surface are often the most efficient methods for identifying grave shafts. When the results of surface and geophysical surveys show likely gaps in the data, systematic excavation provides a more comprehensive and concrete identification of grave locations.

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Excavation of the graves themselves, along with the ensuing bioarchaeological analysis, requires careful consideration. With respect to the Anson Street Ancestors (Fleskes et al. 2021, 2023; Gilmore et al. 2024), their disinterment was necessary to complete the expansion of the Gaillard Center in downtown Charleston. Where burials are exposed due to construction, erosion (e.g., Inuit burials in coastal areas; Tackney et al. 2019), or acts of nature (flooding of graveyards), it may be necessary to excavate and then rebury the remains elsewhere.

In these cases, community support and approval are needed for excavation and the potential analysis of skeletal individuals. This approval may be conditional on the kinds of information that can be obtained through disinterment and scientific analysis of the remains, as well as the community's interest in learning more about the individuals who will be the focus of this work. Approval may also come from foundations responsible for the care of the burial grounds (e.g., historical churches) in question. In many cases, state organizations overseeing archaeological research must evaluate the request to excavate and analyze archaeological individuals and approve these plans before they are initiated.

An important issue here are the questions animating the interest in conducting the research in the first place. Why excavate the graves? What will be learned from this work? What are the costs and benefits in doing this work? Is there community support for the research? The answers to these questions may vary depending on the burial site under consideration and the level of community investment in learning about the persons buried there.

Often, the scope of cemetery research relates both to the needs of the community and the partnering archaeological team. Both compliance and academic partners place a priority on achieving community goals. Cultural resource management (CRM) firms are often the only feasible option because of their year-round availability. These firms might offer reduced work rates or pro bono work because of their commitment to community partners when funds are not available.

In the last decade, there has been a marked increase in pro bono work conducted by research and CRM institutions, specifically those working with African American congregations and cemeteries—a public-sector echo of the "slow science" movement in archaeology (Cunningham and MacEachern 2016). Public and community archaeologists have developed strong commitments to community engagement and wish to contribute toward the goals of minority groups in whatever way they can—a long-term legacy of the "ethical client" model developed through the NYABG project (Blakey 2022). Yet, CRM firms are imperfectly situated to pursue community-based work because of time and budgetary constraints.

Long-term, community-based, participatory research relationships (Atalay 2012) are a more natural fit for the slower pace of academic research. Academic scholars often work on long-term projects funded through grants that come from public, private, and nonprofit funding agencies. The need to secure funding—especially given the expense of, for example, aDNA research—and to publish results limits the availability of researchers and leads to slower project timelines. Such scholars may work without payment from communities in exchange for the right to carry out broader research and to publish their findings.

For ongoing projects, communities and archaeological partners must negotiate their different needs and priorities, balancing ethical responsibilities to staff, project timelines and budgets, community goals, and other job responsibilities. Funding is an essential component of antiracist archaeology (Flewellen et al. 2021), needed to adequately support Black scholarly work and mentorship of Black archaeologists. These often-conflicting obligations also mirror the challenges of "slow science" in academia, including questions about research funding and recognition outside traditional avenues like grants and peer-reviewed publications (Conkey 2024).

Commonalities of Catholic Cemeteries

Several commonalities are evident between the St. Mary's Basilica and the Brent, Sacred Heart / White Marsh, and St. Nicholas Cemeteries. First, there is inconsistency in the methods used in marking burials, which seem to be shaped most prominently by wealth, geography, and period of burial. In the latter three cemeteries, formal grave markers remain present for some individuals. With the exception of Flora's

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marker at the Brent Cemetery, formally inscribed gravestones for African Americans there were absent until after emancipation and thereafter mark only a fraction of African American burials.[3] The use of fieldstones or wooden crosses appears to have been the most common practice, depending on their availability.

The extent to which fieldstones were used to demarcate the graves of non-African Americans remains poorly understood. Burial records from Sacred Heart / White Marsh suggest that fieldstones or nonsurviving monuments marked a majority of both African and European American burials into the twentieth century. Concrete, metal, and formal stone grave markers began to be used among African Americans beginning in the late nineteenth century, although it is highly likely that fieldstones were still used to mark their burials into the twentieth century.

In each of the four case studies, some or all grave markers—especially fieldstones—have been moved from their original locations. This action, viewed as landscape structural violence, has contributed to the decline of public memory about the full extent of the cemeteries, leading church communities (until recently) to clear and maintain only a fraction of the original burial grounds. Recent teams have used a variety of methods—historical research, surface survey, geophysical survey, and excavation—to restore public memory of cemeteries and the individuals interred therein.

In most cases, mortuary practices other than grave markers have not been fully investigated. The extent of coffin use is not well understood, although based on the comparative literature, the presence of coffins should be expected in at least some burials. Specific plantings noted at the Brent and Sacred Heart / White Marsh Cemeteries include yucca, periwinkle, lily of the valley, daylily, and daffodils, some of which are considered "indicator plants" for African American cemeteries (Montpelier Foundation 2023).

These cemeteries show the proximity of African and European American burials, rather than the creation of separate African American burial grounds. However, there is clear spatial segregation of burials identified in distinct clusters of African and European American graves at these sites. This pattern mirrors the character of Catholic masses, which were historically integrated but with segregated seating. Black Catholics were sometimes buried near White families who were landowners, enslavers, tenant farmers, or overseers, perhaps marking attempts at continued temporal and spiritual power over the deceased.

The nature of relationships between Black and White Catholic families is complicated and often intertwined with histories of enslavement and inequality. These families often shared surnames that can be traced to slavery and, in some cases, also have shared ancestors (Kevin Porter, personal communication 2024). Intensive genealogy is thus often necessary to reveal these relationships, which can expose raw wounds, especially within church communities.

In some cases, it may not be possible to make these connections because of limitations of the historical record. Moreover, in the case of either modern or aDNA analysis, piecing together the ancestries and histories of individuals may be complicated based on the osteological and genetic evidence obtained from the burials. Nevertheless, understanding and naming this history are important parts of an ongoing process of reclamation and reconciliation in Catholic communities today.

Conclusion

The perception of an individual's importance in life is communicated through their final resting place, especially its location, memorialization, and long-term maintenance. In Virginia and Maryland, racism and segregation shaped both cemetery layouts and the public memory of Catholic cemeteries. Through cemeteries, lived experiences of the structural violence of racism become embodied in the physical landscape.

As church congregations and archaeological partners confront these difficult histories, there is a need to develop strategies on a case-by-case basis. Methods for both community engagement and archaeological survey must be adapted to the physical landscape of the site and to community goals. Yet, histories of church segregation, departures from Catholicism, and economic changes in land ownership and use create challenges for the contemporary reintegration of church and descendant communities. These case studies show how communities are working to overcome these obstacles.

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Each of the four cemeteries discussed in this article is the final resting place for Catholics of both European and African descent. Today, their graves are marked by a variety of formal grave markers, carved and natural fieldstones, and intentional plantings—if they continue to be marked at all. In each case, GPR (among other geophysical methods) was used to identify some burials, although surface mapping and excavation also play an important role in identifying and preserving burial locations. All four studies are currently in different stages of their research process, seeking—in a variety of ways—to restore dignity to all persons interred in the cemeteries. The careful process of documenting someone's final resting place and remembering their name—in a manner of speaking—restores breath, sinews, and flesh to the dry bones preserved in the ground.

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Data Availability Statement. Original data are preliminary. Final data will be made available first to community partners.

Competing Interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. Burials are described at several points as "unmarked." This term refers specifically to their present-day appearance on the ground surface. We acknowledge the likelihood that most or all these resting places were, at one point, marked and deeply remembered by loved ones. These markings may have taken the form of stones that were later moved, wooden crosses that have decomposed, or artifacts like shells that were since buried.
2. These individuals include GU272 (persons sold by the Jesuits in 1838) descendants; persons whose ancestors were enslaved by the Jesuits but were not sold in 1838, in part because of freedom suits associated with White Marsh; and persons whose ancestors (who may or may not have connections to the Jesuits) were buried in the cemetery.
3. In the Sacred Heart / White Marsh Cemetery, a list of common African American surnames is being used to connect African Americans with potential ancestors. The resting place of Jane Murry (d. 1837), identified as likely African American based on her surname, is marked by a formal gravestone.

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