Reconstruction at Randolph Cemetery

Thomas J. Brown
University of South Carolina

Burial grounds were important venues for the redefinition of citizenship in the United States after the Civil War. The invention of national military cemeteries forged a new relationship between Union veterans and the federal government with broad implications for the development of both soldiering and the nation-state. Memorial Days became calendar fixtures in both sections. Veneration of the Confederate dead reshaped the symbolic field of white southern community life and opened a realm of civic leadership to white southern women.¹ Scholarship focused on soldiers’ graves invites a closer look at the final resting places of the other great embodiment of postwar citizenship, African Americans. Many black cemeteries opened in the years after emancipation. The reorganization of Phoenix Cemetery in Richmond, founded in 1815 by the Burying Ground Society of the Free People of Color and renamed Cedarwood Cemetery in 1867, suggests the extent to which these institutions aimed not merely to extend but transform antebellum models. This process overlapped with the martial influence on interment in a variety of ways. In Raleigh, North Carolina, for example, the 1871 municipal establishment of Mount Hope Cemetery on the south side of town for African Americans mirrored the 1869 opening of the Oakwood rural cemetery at the northern edge of town, which encompassed and enshrined a small Confederate graveyard created in 1866.

Randolph Cemetery in Columbia, South Carolina, is an especially illuminating post-emancipation burial ground because it was deeply embedded in pivotal Reconstruction political struggles. Founded to honor Benjamin F. Randolph after the assassination of the prominent black Republican during the 1868 campaign, the cemetery promised the enduring resilience of biracial
governance. The party coalition had begun to collapse even before the dedication of the central monument to Randolph, however, and that 1871 ceremony highlighted one of the main fissures, controversies over the service of African Americans in the state militia. Once opened, the cemetery expanded quickly on the precedent of its namesake to become a showcase for black leadership. This role assumed new dimensions after the overthrow of Reconstruction foreclosed opportunities for black public office-holding. The cemetery is the final resting place for at least ten African Americans who served in the South Carolina general assembly during Reconstruction and at least six African Americans who served on the Columbia city council in addition to four who also became state legislators. The representation of the post-emancipation religious leadership of Columbia is equally impressive. Originally patronized by an elite social circle of African Americans, the institution eventually expanded its constituency but also continued to dramatize public service as a commitment that provided inter-generational identity to distinguished families.

A private black institution was in some ways an ironic commemoration of Randolph. As a key participant in the 1868 state constitutional convention, he led the demand for racial integration of public accommodations and schools even though he took much less radical positions on the disfranchisement of ex-Confederates, restriction of suffrage on the basis of education, and economic issues like the redistribution of land. “Some of you accused me of being too conservative, but you will see who are the conservatives in this house,” he declared in unsuccessfully advocating a constitutional ban on racial discrimination. He emphasized that ‘the day is coming when we must decide whether the two races shall live together or not.’ Randolph Cemetery acknowledged that the two races would not lie dead together. But in addition to promoting black access to elected office and the militia, the cemetery demonstrated that a private
association might exercise public authority, much as white social power often found expression in rural cemetery corporations rather than potter’s fields. This puncture of the public-private distinction would make the segregated cemetery a conceptual bridge to landmark achievements of twentieth-century racial integration.

Republican Remembrance

Randolph’s assassination presented the question of what to do with his body. Three white gunmen had killed the chairman of the Republican state central committee on October 17, 1868, while he was changing trains at Hodge’s depot, near the town of Cokesbury, during a campaign speaking tour for the fall elections. Randolph had appeared in Abbeville on October 15 and was headed to an event in Anderson. He represented Orangeburg in the state senate, as he had in the state constitutional convention held at the beginning of the year, but those seats reflected the dispersal of black Charleston leaders to more available electoral districts. Randolph had come to the lowcountry as chaplain of the 26th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops in March 1864 and remained in Charleston after the unit mustered out in August 1865. There he had successfully petitioned for appointment as a minister of the South Carolina Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and co-edited the Charleston Advocate, the weekly denominational newspaper for freedpeople. Born in Kentucky and raised in Ohio, the Oberlin graduate had no family in South Carolina to influence decisions about his burial. He was entirely a public figure.⁴

Community response to the murder caused political leaders to abandon initial plans to bring Randolph’s body back to the springboard of his career. White newspapers in Charleston expressed concern that reports of the shooting “created a profound sensation among the colored
people in this city,” many of whom “collected at the street corners and discussed the event in all its bearings.” Amid preparations for the arrival of the remains, “the more moderate advised against any display that would tend to increase the excitement.” Eventually, “some of the leading Republicans” concluded that the return of Randolph to Charleston “in the present state of feeling among the blacks would be unadvisable” and telegraphed Governor Robert K. Scott to intercept the corpse in Columbia for burial there.⁵

Unrest also simmered in the capital city, where outrage drew local fuel from the conviction that state Democratic executive committee chairman Wade Hampton III had spurred or at least failed to restrain the campaign violence that had now claimed the life of his Republican counterpart. Hampton and fellow Columbia grandees L. D. Childs and James Gibbes alleged to Governor Scott that African Americans had threatened to retaliate by burning the prominent Democrats’ houses. The governor replied that he could only protect them if the executive committee called for peace, and Hampton issued a statement on October 18 expressing apprehension that “the criminality of a few, and perhaps the indiscretion of many, have placed it in the power of malice and misrepresentation to injure us.” He professed no need to “urge upon you the policy and the duty of treating, with great kindness and forbearance, the colored population of the State” because “this you have ever done.” Republicans nevertheless inferred from the abatement of violence that Hampton could have stopped his murderous allies after the assassination of state senator-elect Solomon George Washington Dill in Longtown on June 1 or state representative James Martin near Abbeville Court House on October 5.⁶ They were especially angered by the committee’s employment of former state legislator D. Wyatt Aiken as a canvasser. Appearing in early August alongside Hampton at a rally in Anderson, Aiken had urged the Democratic crowd “never to suffer the Hon. B.F. Randolph to come in their midst; and,
that if he did, to give him a piece of land four feet by six.” In mid-October, Aiken had crossed paths with Randolph on the train platform where the murder took place a few days later. He loudly warned that if Randolph proceeded to Abbeville to speak he would not return home alive. Authorities arrested Aiken shortly after the assassination and held him briefly in a Columbia jail until Hampton and Childs paid his bail.⁷

With little time to prepare, the state capital hosted Randolph’s funeral on October 18. The town Democratic newspaper reported that the Bethel AME Church at Taylor and Sumter streets was “densely thronged” for the services. After three eulogies, the mourners formed a procession that marched with Randolph’s body to the municipal cemetery located just beyond the northwest boundary of the city. The council had purchased this twenty-seven-acre tract in 1859 from the adjacent Elmwood Cemetery, established in 1854 on a much larger property previously known as Tickleberry Farm.⁸ The municipal cemetery was the third to open in Columbia. The state legislature sold the first burial ground, located near the center of town, to become the site of First Presbyterian Church early in the nineteenth century.⁹ The second public cemetery, located near the southwest corner of Columbia, was for decades the principal site of secular sepulture but came to be known by mid-century as the Potter’s Field. An 1851 municipal ordinance provided that “the eastern half shall be used as a burial ground for whites, and the western half for blacks,” though it is not clear whether the regulation codified or changed previous practice. The closure of this burial ground in 1857 may have indicated that it had reached capacity, but the timing also reflected the transformation of the area through the building of a rail hub that would completely engulf the cemetery in the 1870s.¹⁰ Although railroad tracks also separated Elmwood Cemetery from the northwestern city cemetery at which the Randolph funeral procession ended in October 1868, no depot was located in this quadrant.
The burial of Randolph prompted his political heirs to try to envision the so-called New Potter’s Field as a suitable resting ground for him and more generally as a public institution that recognized the dignity of all Columbia citizens. Shortly after the funeral, Richland County state senator William Beverly Nash wrote to the city council, still controlled by Democrats, to complain about the exposed condition of the cemetery and request the construction of a fence to prevent depredations by livestock. When the state legislature convened, representative Thaddeus K. Sasportas introduced a bill providing for the erection of a monument in remembrance of Randolph. The proposal underscored the martyr’s public stature as well as his similarities with Sasportas, an affluent, well-educated, fair-skinned Charlestonian who like Randolph had served in the Union army and with the Freedmen’s Bureau and on the Orangeburg delegations to the constitutional convention and the general assembly.\textsuperscript{11} Nash’s and Sasportas’s initiatives identified remembrance of Randolph as a state responsibility that reached into the everyday life of the capital city.

The black legislators imagined a biracial if segregated burial ground, as white residents recalled the heyday of Columbia’s antebellum Potter’s Field.\textsuperscript{12} The city cemetery in Atlanta offered a nearby model of such an institution thriving in the postwar era. But that tract, which would be renamed Oakland in 1872, was the rural cemetery for the booming Georgia capital, and the Atlanta Ladies Memorial Association had already launched a campaign to sanctify it further by adding the scattered Confederate dead of the Atlanta campaign to the soldiers sent to the cemetery from the city hospital complex.\textsuperscript{13} In contrast, Elmwood Cemetery situated Columbia remembrance of the Confederate dead at a privately owned rural cemetery. Elmwood, moreover, was considerably larger than its counterparts in some vastly more populous cities, including Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, Green Mount in Baltimore, Elmwood in Detroit, and Hollywood in
Richmond. With more than 160 acres even after the creation of the municipal cemetery, Elmwood could easily develop into the primary secular burial ground of white Columbia and ensure that the public cemetery became an overwhelmingly black institution. During the Civil War the city had treated its municipal burial ground as an honorable resting place by interring 152 Confederate soldiers there, but in January 1867 a group of women organized as the Columbia Memorial Association foreshadowed the long-term white abandonment of the New Potter’s Field by making their first priority the removal of these graves to Elmwood.\textsuperscript{14}

Randolph’s admirers faced parallel challenges in other contexts. Public institutions that attracted exclusively black constituencies faced the prospect of hardened resistance to adequate funding. Most notable was the public school system, one of the chief innovations of the 1868 constitution. White South Carolinians shunned the new schools and continued to rely on private alternatives. The state orphanage established by the legislature in May 1869, open to black and white children, prompted the founding of the white-only Palmetto Orphan Home three years later. Burial presented a particular variation on black responses to the problem of white flight.

Without necessarily surrendering all hopes for the city cemetery and aware that their initiative would accommodate very limited numbers of African Americans, a circle of black Republican leaders began to look toward opening a new private cemetery in tribute to Randolph. Elmwood was highly unlikely to follow the precedent of some northeastern and midwestern rural cemeteries by integrating, but its surplus capacity made a sale of land plausible.\textsuperscript{15} Apart from the tendency of business deals to cross racial lines in many contexts, proponents of a new cemetery could expect political support for the arrangement from Columbia planter Thomas J. Robertson, who represented South Carolina in the United States Senate and was a candidate for re-election in 1870. A founder and prominent patron of Elmwood, the white Republican was well-positioned
to promote the cemetery board of directors’ receptivity to a project of such interest to leading members of his party.

This plan ripened in conjunction with the reactivation of the Republican state central committee for the 1870 elections and party reassessment of the racial distribution of power. Randolph had been one of only two African Americans entrusted by the party with statewide office in 1868.16 His defeat of Daniel H. Chamberlain for the position of chairman had led to protests from conservative white Republicans and schemes to work around him. By the beginning of 1870, however, leading African Americans had made the equitable division of offices a major issue within the party. Jonathan Wright took a seat on the state supreme court in February; Robert C. DeLarge replaced Charles P. Leslie at the head of the state land commission in March. The most prominent face of this movement was Alonzo J. Ransier of Charleston, who succeeded Randolph as chairman of the state central committee. When the committee organized in March 1870 on the adjournment of the general assembly, Ransier responded to the adoption of resolutions mourning the death of Randolph by announcing that he had started a subscription fund to remove the martyr from his present resting place and reinter him with a suitable marker in a new burial ground that Ransier was now negotiating to purchase in Columbia.17

Adoption of the monument as a party project amounted to permanent acknowledgement of African Americans’ right to share in the leadership roles that Randolph had pioneered. After black legislators Robert Smalls, Henry J. Maxwell, and Lucius Wimbush spoke in support of Ransier’s initiative, the chairman called on Governor Scott to express white support for the initiative. The candidate for re-election agreed that the matter was “of interest to every member of the Republican party” because Randolph “simply took the place of one of us.” The remark reflected Scott’s recognition that the cemetery proponents sought to ratify Randolph’s legitimacy
as a party representative. The governor called for a monument that would record “the fact of his being a martyr, and charge the crime on the party who murdered him.” Fellow white Republican Christopher C. Bowen, soon to be defeated by DeLarge in the battle for nomination to the Charleston seat in Congress, echoed that “it is known that Randolph fell by the hands of the Democratic party” and compared the proposed memorial to the monument on the state house grounds to the dead of the Palmetto Regiment in the Mexican-American War. Ransier appointed a fundraising sub-committee that included white representative George F. McIntyre of Colleton County as well as two black legislators, senator Henry E. Hayne of Marion County and representative Wilson Cooke of Greenville. Scott announced that he would head the subscription list with a pledge of $100.  

The state nominating convention that met in Columbia in July 1870 began with a report from the Randolph Monument Committee. Ransier announced that Randolph would be reinterred “near the present Columbia Cemetery, in a lot of ground to be called the Randolph Monumental Cemetery.” His monument would be an obelisk that together with its base would rise to fourteen feet in height. Fundraising had yielded four hundred dollars toward the thousand dollars estimated to be needed. Ransier predicted that the remainder would be collected in the next six weeks and the monument soon completed. He emphasized that the commemoration honored an ideological principle fundamental to the Republican party. “The democratic party did not shoot Randolph because he was a negro,” Ransier maintained, “but because he was a man representing the principle of equal rights in this country.” Two days later, white South Carolina native Franklin J. Moses nominated Ransier for lieutenant governor and declared that placing him rather than conservative white rival C. W. Montgomery on the statewide ticket with Scott
constituted enactment of the Republican ideal of equal rights. The ensuing party endorsement affirmed the biracial connotation of the projected black cemetery.

Martial Citizenship and the Martyr

Memorial plans for Columbia receded from public attention when Republicans scattered around the state for the fall 1870 elections. The violence of this campaign recalled Randolph's murder two years earlier and made him an even more important symbol of Democratic lawlessness. But his significance as an emblem of resilience shifted with the emergence of a new controversy over the legitimacy of public institutions patronized primarily by African Americans. Although authorized by the legislature in March 1869, the state National Guard began to take shape in the spring and summer of 1870. In Columbia, for example, the first two companies formed in April. The volunteers were almost all African Americans, as whites again avoided integration. Instead some whites created independent rifle clubs, a structure that would become much more common several years later. The first white companies in Columbia dated from May 1870. Like mid-nineteenth-century militias across much of the United States, especially antebellum South Carolina, the National Guard provided an instrument for political organization as well as social relaxation, and Republicans looked to this exercise of equal rights to rally support for the party. But apologists for political violence argued that the outrages resulted from white anxiety over the so-called black militia. As Democrats pressed for disarming or disbanding of the militia units, Republican commitment to the National Guard and willingness to turn to it for protection of the citizenry became divisive issues within the party. Remembrance of Randolph became intertwined with a martial institution that animated the cityscape to be enhanced by the monument and cemetery.
Although Republicans overcame intimidation to sweep the 1870 elections, the violence moved toward a crisis immediately after the balloting ended. Whites in Laurensville killed at least a dozen Republicans on October 20, most of them African American. Most prominent among the victims was Wade Perrin, whom the vote count showed to have been re-elected to a second term in the state house of representatives. When the general assembly convened five weeks later, Republicans as in 1868 confronted the murder of a legislator. On the first day of discussion in the house of representatives, William B. Whipper of Beaufort staked out a leadership position that he would maintain through the session. Noting that Perrin’s widow was now in Columbia, begging for financial support, Whipper argued that Scott’s response to the upcountry outrages had been weak and called for mobilization of the state militia. Intraparty friction also shaped the first order of business, the election of a United States senator. Whipper and Francis Cardozo called for further recognition of black Republicans in the distribution of offices, but they failed to unseat Robertson.23

Violence continued to escalate in the upcountry while the general assembly met. Congressional hearings later documented at least thirty-eight murders between the 1870 election and April 1871 in four of the nine counties where President Grant ultimately suspended the writ of habeas corpus. The statewide total was much higher.24 Legislative debate intensified in January 1871 after Ku Klux Klan members invaded a county prison in Unionville that held a dozen black militia men arrested after the recent murder of Confederate veteran Mat Stevens. The Klan members removed and shot five of the prisoners, two of whom died. Scott issued a message on January 16 insisting that regular law enforcement measures were sufficient for the situation and that mobilization of the militia was both unnecessary and financially impossible. He favored disarming the overpowered militia units. Nash responded by introducing a concurrent
resolution calling on the federal government for protection, which Scott’s supporters blocked. Whipper’s bill to declare martial law in the upcountry failed decisively. Scott’s main organ, the Charleston Daily Republican, scoffed at “what a mad-cap thing” it would have been to send black militia members to their deaths and claimed wishfully that the upcountry seemed to be coming to order.  

This struggle provided the backdrop to the extraordinary funeral staged for Wade Perrin in the state house on the afternoon of January 30, more than three months after his death. Disinterred in Laurensville, Perrin’s remains were placed upon their arrival in Columbia in front of the speaker’s stand in the hall of the house of representatives. The senate recessed to join the proceedings. The South Carolina Conference of the A. M. E. Church was holding its annual meeting in Columbia, and Bishop John M. Brown conducted the funeral. He declared that Perrin’s name had joined the roll of martyrs in the cause of racial justice alongside Lincoln, Lovejoy, John Brown, and Randolph. At the conclusion of the services the Republican members of the legislature formed a procession and accompanied the remains to interment “in the cemetery where Randolph lies.”  
The spectacle aimed to dramatize the ongoing carnage for Republicans satisfied with a constabulary response. A week later, the Senate passed Nash’s resolution calling for federal protection. In the extended debate, white conservative Charles P. Leslie blamed the militia for “creating alarming disturbances” and complained that “we can’t go back for two or three months and rake up every outrage, disinter the dead body of Wade Perrin, stand him up before the bar of the Senate, and cry over him, and then call upon the General Government for protection.”  

Four nights after the Senate vote, a Klan force estimated at eight hundred to fifteen hundred men returned to the Unionville jail and murdered all ten of the remaining black militiamen accused of involvement in the death of Mat Stevens.
In addition to its influence in the debate over a military response to the political violence, the Perrin funeral initiated a surge of memorial measures. Three days later, Whipper gave notice of his intent to introduce a bill to provide for the widows and orphans of Perrin, Martin, and Dill, to be funded by special taxes on the counties in which the legislators were murdered, and also a bill to commission monuments for the graves of Perrin and Randolph. When he did introduce these measures a week later, the house referred them to Whipper’s committee on ways and means, which promptly reported both back favorably. Enacted in modified form in the next session of the general assembly, the pension measure would be one of the first Republican statutes repealed by Democrats after redemption. The monument bill suggested that plans had not yet circulated for installation of the Randolph monument to be sponsored by the Republican state central committee. Whipper’s proposal, and the resumption of the debate over defense strategy in response to the Unionville massacre on February 12, may have spurred party leaders to make time in the busy closing days of the legislative session for dedication of the Randolph monument in the new cemetery.

The parade that highlighted the dedication ceremony on February 27 was, in the estimation of the capital correspondent for the Charleston Daily Republican, “as imposing and orderly [a] procession as has been seen in the city.” The formation highlighted the state militia. Nash, who was colonel of the Columbia regiment, served as chief marshal for the occasion and headed the line that assembled at the state house. Behind his entourage was the first of the bands in the parade, followed by Brigadier General Whipper and his staff. At the heart of the procession were four Columbia companies and two Charleston companies of the state militia. Both city delegations featured a company named the Randolph Rifles. The commandant and officers of the U. S. Army post in Columbia joined the parade in solidarity, a sharp contrast with
the previous commandant’s refusal to permit regulars’ participation in the most recent July Fourth parade as an inappropriately partisan ceremony. Governor Scott, the largest donor to the Randolph monument, also fell in line even though the spectacle implicitly criticized his tepid support for the state militia. Other prominent civilians in the “very large concourse” included the heads of the state executive departments, members of the general assembly, the Masonic fraternity that conducted its rites at the monument, and various civic organizations. One witness estimated that about two thousand people marched in the procession and described the participants as “Sum in uniforme and Sum in Citoson Clothiren Sum in Shurt Sleve and Sum barfutted but all wose a moven.”

The parade advanced almost two miles from the state house to the southwestern corner of Elmwood Cemetery, immediately east of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad tracks that defined the public cemetery. This two-acre tract would become Randolph Cemetery. Ransier presided over the grave-side proceedings. Moses was one of the principal orators, as he was the state adjutant general and had argued in the house of representatives for mobilization of the militia in response to the upcountry violence. The other main orator was Robert Brown Elliott, who had played a key role in organization of the militia as assistant adjutant general and was now the congressional representative for the district that included Columbia. One of the first and most active companies in town was the Elliott Guards. The monument inscription recalled Randolph as LATE STATE SENATOR/FROM ORANGEBURG COUNTY/AND CHAIRMAN REPUBLICAN STATE CENTRAL COMMITTEE/WHO DIED AT HODGES STATION/ABBEVILLE COUNTY/AT THE HANDS OF ASSASSINS/ON FRIDAY OCT. 16/A. D. 1868.”
The dedication of the monument was a highlight of the Republican ceremonial culture in which the local militia companies played a central part. Their participation in federal Memorial Day in May 1870 had been an impressive display of interracial Republican unity. The militia led a procession to Elmwood Cemetery for decoration of the graves of the Union soldiers buried there, after which the assembly heard a speech by white conservative Daniel H. Chamberlain, who had led a black regiment during the war. The federal garrison and its post band joined the militia on the return procession to town. This particular success would not be repeated, as the army removed the Union dead from Elmwood as part of a regional consolidation at Florence National Cemetery six weeks before the Randolph monument dedication.31 But the militia’s debut participation in Emancipation Day exercises had been a prime feature of the city celebration in January 1871, and the companies regularly held parades in conjunction with musters and other civic occasions. These claims to public space were a contested and vulnerable dimension of freedom. Two weeks after the July Fourth celebration that followed the Randolph monument dedication, the Columbia newspaper of the conservative “reform” faction of Republicans argued that “now that the right to peaceably assemble and parade the public streets has been established, although at a fearful cost of human life, it would seem to be good policy to say the least, to interdict all such street parades except upon public days or national holidays.” The Daily Union aimed to align this suppression with so-called “tax-payer” resistance to Reconstruction, insisting that “freedom of thought and opinion is one thing, but the freedom of the streets to public processions, which causes a loss of thousands of dollars to business, is quite another thing.”32

Funeral processions to the new cemetery would presumably be civilian ceremonies, except when the decedent was affiliated with the militia, but Ransier and his co-workers placed a
martial luster on the enterprise by meeting to establish the Randolph Cemetery Association on May 11, the day after Confederate Memorial Day. The annual veneration of the Confederate dead in Charleston and Columbia was especially flamboyant in 1871. The long-awaited proceedings in Charleston centered on the interment in Magnolia Cemetery of the state dead recently repatriated from the battlefield at Gettysburg and the laying of the cornerstone for a cemetery monument. In the capital, the statewide Tax-payers’ Convention called to protest against Reconstruction adjourned for the afternoon so that its delegates, who included a reported eleven Confederate generals as well as the former Confederate secretary of the treasury, might participate in ceremonies at Elmwood Cemetery. The juxtaposition of the organizational meeting and Confederate Memorial Day invoked Randolph as a martyr in a continuing civil war.

The location of Elmwood and Randolph cemeteries in the cityscape underscored the racial tension that the militia controversy had intensified. As the aesthetic ambitions of Elmwood had gained credibility from the adjacent Columbia branch of the celebrated Pomaria Nursery until the arboretum and greenhouse range closed in the wake of Sherman’s March, the political presence of the rural cemetery intensified after the war through its proximity to the state fairgrounds. The first annual festival sponsored by the State Agricultural and Mechanical Society, held on this site in November 1869, had established the state fair as a forum for Democratic efforts to foster white unity and regain control of South Carolina. The secretary of the society and lead coordinator of the fair was D. Wyatt Aiken. At his fair, white landowners colluded to block employment of black laborers deemed insufficiently submissive; a host of organizations gathered to direct white civic life. Among the most visible at early fairs was the association formed to commission a monument to the state Confederate dead, which initial supporters expected to be installed in Elmwood. The partisanship of the fair was a particularly
sensitive issue in Columbia because the Democratic city council displaced by Republicans in 1870 had, shortly before surrendering office, sold to the Agricultural and Mechanical Society for one dollar the fairgrounds for which the city had paid three thousand dollars. Efforts initiated by a Randolph Cemetery founder in July 1871 to rescind the sale failed, but the establishment of a black cemetery in honor of Randolph so close to the racist playground directed by the man blamed for the murder promised a perpetual vigilance against the political schemes promoted at the fair. The extent to which Randolph Cemetery could rally African Americans, however, depended on the patronage it would attract.

Community Institution

The early leadership of Randolph Cemetery illustrated its party origins. The meeting called by Ransier in May 1871 unsurprisingly elected Nash, vice-chairman of the Republican state central committee and head of the Richland legislative delegation as well as numerous Columbia enterprises, as the inaugural president of the Randolph Cemetery Association. Federal postmaster Charles M. Wilder, party chairman for Richland County, was chosen to be treasurer. State representative Samuel B. Thompson, party chairman for the Third Congressional District, became one of the three directors. Another director, John H. Bryant, was a Richland County commissioner. Even the minister named vice-president, AME preacher Addison Richardson, was chaplain of the state penitentiary and had served as a Richland election commissioner in the fall campaign. Other notable signers of the articles of association adopted in July 1871 included Ransier, Elliott, and Cardozo. Powerful city alderman Augustus Cooper, captain of the local Randolph Rifles, joined this list of nineteen founders along with his partner in a grocery business, William H. Taylor. But not every prominent Republican in Columbia participated in
the establishment of the cemetery, and some organizers were less politically active than others. The initiative drew from a distinct local African American elite. Exclusivity threatened insularity, but the promoters’ aspirations to community leadership—reflected most fully in religion after black access to officeholding ended with Reconstruction—helped to broaden the constituency of the cemetery and create a private institution imbued with public service.

As in many nineteenth-century organizations, the secretary of the Richland Cemetery Association best personified its identity. Captain J. Carroll would later serve as a city council member and county school commissioner, but he was one of less politically prominent participants in the meeting that called him to the chair in July 1871 and elected him to the position that he would hold for the rest of the century. His business partner Alonzo Reese, another cemetery founder, was even less politically active, as was their fellow barber Isaac Black, who was elected to the initial board of directors alongside Thompson and Bryant and would eventually become president of the Randolph Cemetery Association. If not high-level politicians, all three men were active in the Friendly Union society of Columbia, the president of which was Charles M. Wilder. Carroll was the secretary. Joseph Taylor, who became president of the Randolph Cemetery Association after the death of Nash, was treasurer of the fraternal society. State legislator William Simons, who signed the Randolph articles of association, was the Friendly Union vice-president. Census-takers identified all six men as mulatto. All owned substantial property. Wilder and Taylor, if not others, had been free before the war. Here was the core of the local elite that Samuel B. Thompson’s daughter Priscilla Minnie Thompson Allen, later buried at Randolph Cemetery, would satirize in her 1885-86 serial novel *Treading the Winepress*, set in a version of Columbia thinly disguised as Capitolia. The light-skinned patriarch
in that pioneering work of black women’s fiction was the federal postmaster, doubtless a nudge toward Wilder.

It was logical that the Friendly Union would provide a nucleus for the Randolph Cemetery Association. Burial had been important to the operations of the older African American benevolent organizations in Charleston since the Brown Fellowship Society opened its Pitt Street cemetery in 1794 as a resource for members and subscribing non-members. The Humane and Friendly Society and the Friendly Union, the latter established forty years before the 1853 founding of its Columbia counterpart, both purchased tracts from Magnolia Cemetery in 1856. So, too, did the Unity and Friendship Society, although it did not consecrate its cemetery until 1867. Alonzo Ransier would be buried there in 1882. The small society cemeteries detached from Magnolia offered an obvious model as he and his collaborators planned a small cemetery detached from Elmwood. A map of Randolph Cemetery reportedly drawn shortly after the association purchased an additional three acres from Elmwood in July 1872 to supplement the original two-acre tract indicates that the landscape design closely resembled the Charleston precedents of the Friendly Union Society and the Humane and Friendly Society. Unlike the winding arrangements of larger rural cemeteries, the grounds featured a major east-west axis that intersected a major north-south axis at a circular site for a decorative feature, which in Columbia was the Randolph monument. The lots were rigidly gridded for ready sale.

The association apparently did not sell many lots in its first years, although the absence of records and only partial survival of tombstones prevents exact quantification. Price surely limited sales. A lot measuring twenty feet by twenty feet sold for thirty dollars in 1886, a sum that probably had not increased much since the previous decade. The fee for a private interment at the
city cemetery in 1885 was one dollar. Randolph Cemetery did permit individual burials on the outskirts of lots, but family lots delineated by low brick walls were the basic unit of the site design. The approximately twenty graves that clearly date before 1880 mostly accommodated the founders’ families in lots located near the Randolph monument. A few people evidently moved graves originally placed in the city cemetery, which may not have provided for walled family lots. Joseph Taylor transferred the remains of his mother, who died in 1867. Edward B. Thompson, one of the signers of the articles of association, relocated his wife’s grave. Many of the early burials of the 1870s were children of founders. Benjamin M. Thompson was the eleven-year-old son of Samuel B. Thompson. Charles H. P. Wilder was the four-year-old son of Charles M. Wilder. Louisa and Benjamin Reese were the adult children of Alonzo Reese. Catherine Simons was the adult daughter of William Simons. The introduction of new names did not often change the social profile. Harriet McKinney was the mother of Cardozo’s brother-in-law. Rosena Palmer, buried at Randolph in December 1878, was the wife of prosperous fair-skinned businessman Robert John Palmer, who had served in the most recent session of the state legislature, and the daughter of William Simons. Lucius Wimbush, a state senator from Chester County who was buried in Randolph after he died of consumption in Columbia in October 1872, also shared a common background with many of his Republican colleagues who had signed the articles of association the previous year.

The political emphasis of the cemetery partly saved it from social narrowness. Among the objects placed under the base of the Randolph monument at the 1871 dedication was a small metal badge bearing the imprint “C. D. Lowndes 1870 Columbia, SC.” Caesar D. Lowndes was a twenty-eight-year-old black laborer who was politically active and would later serve on the city council. He and his wife had suffered the death of their young son a month before the monument
dedication, and Lowndes’s burial of the token suggested a commitment to the cemetery where he is now buried.\textsuperscript{43} John Fitzsimmons and Hampton Mims similarly represented a different social class from the other seventeen signers of the articles of association. Fitzsimmons was a policeman, later a laborer; Mims was an illiterate carpenter who owned no property. Junius Mobley, a farmer of modest means and state representative from Union County who had escaped to Columbia shortly before the 1871 massacres, was likely the father of the three young Mobley children interred at Randolph Cemetery during 1871-77. He and his wife would later be buried there.

A more striking diversification took place along lines of religious denomination. The two clergymen among the founders, Addison Richardson and Hardy Edwards, were both AME ministers.\textsuperscript{44} Edwards, who had served in the 1868 state constitutional convention, fled Abbeville around the time of the Randolph murder to come to Columbia. One of the first high-profile burials at Randolph Cemetery was W. D. Harris, former pastor of Bethel AME Church in Columbia, who died in Charleston in August 1874. The \textit{Daily Phoenix} reported “a large attendance” at what it called “the colored cemetery.”\textsuperscript{45} The next year brought the interment of another AME minister, Simon Miller. The twenty known burials of the 1880s often resembled those of the 1870s, again centering on the founders’ families, and the burial of Felix H. Torrence in 1883 added one more AME minister. But this decade also brought the cemetery its first Methodist Episcopal Church minister since Randolph, former Kershaw County state senator Henry Cardozo, and also established a presence for Zion Baptist Church. Founding deacons Isaac Goodwin and Andrew Worthy were buried in 1881 and 1885, followed by early pastor Scipio B. Stratford in 1887. Mack G. Johnson, pastor of Ladson Presbyterian Church since 1876, purchased a lot at Randolph in 1886.\textsuperscript{46} The cemetery was becoming a place that connected
separate and to some extent rival institutions in the community. The showcase for the post-emancipation religious leadership of Columbia eventually also attracted A.P. Dunbar, pastor successively at First Cavalry and Second Cavalry Baptist Churches; J. J. Durham, a student at the University of South Carolina during its period of integration and later a prominent Baptist minister; and Joseph W. Morris, also a former University of South Carolina student, who became president of AME-affiliated Allen University.

This emphasis on black achievement and uplift was not entirely safe from contestation. Vandals mutilated the Randolph monument in February 1873, which required repairs to the obelisk. A subtler challenge came when white insurance magnate Edwin G. Seibels, whose father had founded the family business in Columbia in 1869 while also participating actively in real-estate investment and Democratic politics, sponsored a monument to Elizabeth Poinsette after her death at an advanced age in 1916. A tombstone boldly emblazoned “Mammy” identified the donor as “one whom she loved and cared for from infancy and who loved and cared for her until her death.” Whatever the feelings of Poinsette and Seibels for each other may have been, the tribute celebrated a stereotype of the faithful white servant that was growing in power in the early twentieth century and that obscured the household Poinsette made with her husband, hostler and church sexton William Poinsette, and their child or ward Hattie Poinsette during Seibel’s childhood in Reconstruction.

The number of burials at Randolph Cemetery began to increase in the 1890s as the deterioration of the city cemetery, now commonly described by white politicians and press as “the cemetery for colored people,” reached an appalling level. Columbia newspaper The State observed in 1891 that “it is certainly in about as bad a condition as a cemetery can well be” and looked to African Americans to repair is as “the white people have begun to clean up and

22
beautify Elmwood Cemetery,” although the city cemetery was municipal property. The city council decried the situation but took little interest in improvements; instead it leased a portion of the grounds to a butcher as a place to keep livestock. The population of Randolph grew much more rapidly in the first three decades of the twentieth century with an expansion of activity by African American funeral directors. A recent sampling of individuals buried in the cemetery before 1940 concludes that the institution came to serve a broad segment of black society.49

Even in this period, however, Randolph was most notable as a home to local leadership. As the cemetery welcomed a second and third generation descendants of its founders, new burials dramatized the extent to which public service could provide a defining ethos for families. N. J. Frederick, son-in-law of Captain J. Carroll, was the founder and editor of the Palmetto Leader weekly newspaper. William D. Chappelle, son-in-law of Robert John Palmer, was president of Allen University and an AME bishop. H. H. Cooper, grandson of Augustus Cooper and great-grandson of Charles Wilder, was a founder of the Palmetto Medical, Dental and Pharmaceutical Association. One of Cooper’s partners in that initiative was Alonzo McClennan, nephew and ward of Edward B. Thompson. Established to honor a public figure with no nearby relatives, Randolph Cemetery reinforced kinship networks that strengthened black Columbia. The institution typified the strategy of community self-help after the disintegration of the biracial promise of Reconstruction.

A Second Reconstruction

On June 21, 1981, an African American commemorative society placed a new monument near the entrance of the cemetery established with the installation of the Randolph obelisk one hundred ten years earlier. The granite stele honored George Elmore, who owned a five-and-dime
store and two liquor stores in mid-twentieth-century Columbia and also drove a taxicab. Elmore was the Richland County secretary of the Progressive Democratic Party, an organization established to thwart the attempted circumvention of the United States Supreme Court’s ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) that white-only political primaries violated the constitution. Embracing a rationale already rejected by the court, the Democratic Party in South Carolina claimed to have reorganized as a private club free to set its own rules of membership. The fair-skinned Elmore managed to register and voted without difficulty on some occasions, but when denied access to the ballot in the August 1946 primary, he sued with legal assistance from Thurgood Marshall and Robert L. Carter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as well as local attorney Harold Boulware. United States district court judge J. Waties Waring held that Supreme Court precedent clearly controlled the case and that the party could not discriminate in its primary election on the basis of race. Elmore suffered extensive local retaliation. Whites refused to supply his stores. A lender called in the loan on his house and forced his family to move. Ku Klux Klan members burned crosses on his lawn. His wife suffered a nervous breakdown that ended in permanent mental illness. The exhausted and depressed Elmore stopped taking medications for his diabetes. He died in 1959 at the age of fifty-four and was buried in Randolph Cemetery. The monument installed twenty-two years later saluted the “UNMATCHED COURAGE, PERSEVERANCE AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE” that had re-enfranchised African Americans.50

Elmore’s postwar vindication of a black right to vote in the Democratic primary renewed Randolph’s postwar personification of a black right to hold office in the Republican party. In addition to serving as reminders of both men’s sacrifices for the cause of racial equality, the old and new monuments also resonated as meditations on civic institutions. In a Reconstruction
environment in which whites often boycotted state programs, Randolph Cemetery helped to secure a form of citizenship that endured through a Jim Crow environment in which whites often monopolized state programs and ancillary vehicles of power. The overthrow of the white primary affirmed the premise of the black cemetery that a private association could be so infused with communal significance as to constitute a public realm.

Randolph Cemetery made a distinct contribution to the political culture of American burial in the mid-nineteenth century. More committed to civic engagement than the grounds managed by black benevolent societies, the cemetery adapted the social leadership but eschewed the reassurances of secure serenity offered by rural cemeteries like Elmwood. Though wooded in cypress, the rectilinear lots did not promote the discovery of repose through meandering paths across bucolic topography. The Randolph monument also cast a shade very different from the memorials in the new federal military cemeteries to Union soldiers, casualties in the everlasting preservation of the nation, or the Confederate dead in southern cemeteries, embodiments of a Lost Cause that would never mount another a separatist movement even if it rose again in other ways. Like the decision of African Americans in Franklin, Tennessee, to name their post-emancipation burial ground for Toussaint L'Ouverture, the tribute to Randolph located heroism in continuing, often violent, struggle. The namesake’s call for integrated public institutions suggested a fundamental restlessness in the black private cemetery. The burial ground perpetuated the unfinished revolution of Reconstruction in the permanence of the grave.


7 Evidence Taken by the Committee of Investigation of the Third Congressional District, under Authority of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Regular Session, 1868-69 (Columbia: John W. Denny, 1870), 496, 585, 592. See also James S. Cothran to D. Wyatt Aiken, Jan. 15, 1869, Aiken Papers, South Caroliniana Library.


10 Michael Trinkley and Debi Hacker, Columbia’s Scandal: Lower Cemetery. Chicora Research Contribution 521 (Columbia: Chicora Foundation, 2009), 6-7. The city council started proceedings to remove the graves from the Potter’s Field in 1871 but retreated when criticized
652; Journal of the Senate of the General Assembly of the state of South Carolina, Being the Regular Session of 1871-72 (Columbia: Republican Printing Company, 1872); Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Passed at the Extra Session of 1877 (Columbia: Calvo & Patton, 1877), 223.

29 “From Columbia,” Charleston Daily Republican, Feb. 28, 1871, 1; unidentified letter, March 10, 1871, Elsie H. Booker Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

30 “From Columbia,” Charleston Daily Republican, Jan. 11, 1871, 2.

31 “Decorating the Graves of the Federal Dead,” Charleston Daily News, May 31, 1870, 2;


32 “Are Public Parades Necessities?” Columbia Daily Union, July 18, 1871, 2.

33 “Local Miscellany,” Columbia Daily Union, May 12, 1871, 3.


37 Untitled, Columbia Daily Phoenix, Oct. 8, 1874, 2.


41 Trinkley and Hacker, Small Sample, 8; Trinkley and Hacker, Columbia’s Scandal, 9.

42 The graves described in this paragraph and the two following paragraphs include all of the twenty graves that in addition to the Randolph monument clearly date from the 1870s except for the following: 1. Joseph Henry Lee (born Aug. 18, 1860, died April 7, 1866), identified in “Obituary,” Columbia Daily Phoenix, April 10, 1866, as the only child of John Lee, listed in the 1860 census as a free black shoemaker, and his wife, Sarah S. Lee; 2. Sarah Lee (died October 4, 1867, inscription reads “to my daughter”), listed in the 1860 census as an eighteen-year-old mulatto married to John Lee; 3. “H. E. M., our little daughter” (born Dec. 24, 1872, died Jan. 27, 1873); 4. Josie Simons (“our darling son,” died May 17, 1873), the child of Agnes Jackson and Bill Simons; 5. Christina Banks, listed in the 1870 census as the fifty-five-year-old wife of prosperous blacksmith Richard Banks; 6. Fannie Hart (died Jan. 28, 1879), listed in the 1870 census as a seventy-six-year-old black woman living with twenty-year-old mulatto Pauline Hammond. The transcription of Randolph Cemetery tombstones in Cemetery Records of
Richland County, South Carolina (Columbia: Columbia Chapter of the South Carolina Genealogical Society, 2000-), vol. 4, does not include Banks. That transcription erroneously identifies C. R. Driscoll as buried in 1817 rather than 1917, J. C. Robertson as buried in 1822 rather than 1922, and John Robertson (should be Robinson) as buried in 1829 rather than 1929. I have assumed that the burial date of Oct. 26, 1822, is similarly incorrect for Samuel T. King.

43 "Funeral Invitation," Columbia Daily Phoenix, Jan. 8, 1871. Lowndes is identified as a laborer in the 1869 militia enrollment for Columbia; the 1870 federal manuscript census lists no occupation.


45 "City Matters," Columbia Daily Phoenix, Aug. 15, 1874, 2. The article confuses W. D. Harris with state legislator David Harris, also a minister.

46 Trinkley and Hacker, Small Sample, 8.


49 Trinkley and Hacker, Columbia's Scandal, 10-13 (quotation 13); Trinkley and Hacker, Small Sample, 65-66.

50 Carolyn Click, "One Man's Sacrifice Ends White Voting 'Clubs,' The State, March 3, 2003; Carolyn Click, "SC Man's '40s Stand Helped Pave Obama's Path," The State, Jan. 18, 2009.

Memoranda in the Isaiah DeQuincey Newman Papers, University of South Carolina, detail the installation of the Elmore monument by a group called WEB, an acronym for Waties, Elmore, and (Alex) Brown.