

Neely Slave Cemetery

This report was written on April 1, 2000



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Neely Slave Cemetery is located on South Ridge Drive, in the South Point Business Park, Charlotte, NC.

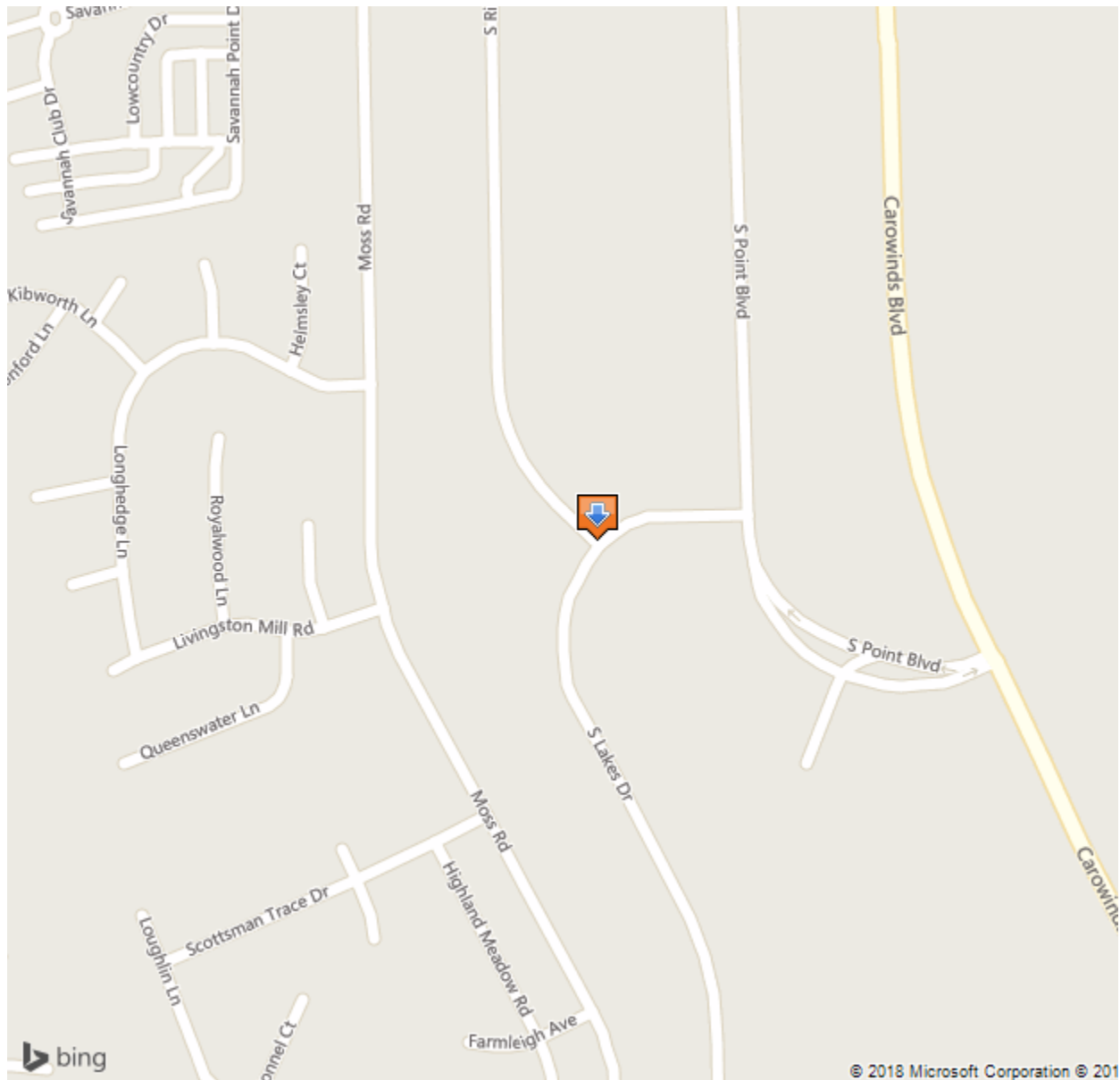
2. Name and address of the present owner of the property:

LBP South Point Inc.
Blaustein Boulevard #1400
One North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

(704) 339-0304

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



5. Current deed book reference: The most recent deed for the property is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 10679, page 255. The tax parcel number for the property is 203-202-01.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

7. A brief site description of the property: This report contains a site description of the property prepared Emily D. Ramsey.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5:

Special significance in terms of history, architecture, and cultural importance, The Commission judges that the property known as the Neely Slave Cemetery does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1. The Neely Slave Cemetery is a tangible reminder of many large farmers' dependence on slave labor from the mid-1700s to 1864; although a minority in an area of small, self-sufficient farms, cotton plantations thrived in certain areas of Mecklenburg County through the use of African and African-American slaves.
2. The Neely Slave Cemetery is a reflection of the traditions of the Afro-American slave population; death rituals and burial practices formed an important part of these traditions, and death itself carried great significance among slaves throughout the South.
3. The Neely Slave Cemetery is one of the few known slave cemeteries in Mecklenburg County, and one of the few remaining vestiges of slavery in the county. 4. The Neely Slave Cemetery is a representative example of slave cemeteries in the area - the periwinkle that covers the site, the use of found rocks to mark the graves, and the arrangement of the graves are all common features of slave cemeteries.
5. Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association: The Commission contends that the site description by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the Neely Slave Cemetery meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: There are no improvements on the property. The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the 28.919 acres of land is \$1, 643,520. The property is zoned II CD. The cemetery constitutes a small component of the property.

10. Date of Preparation of this Report: April 1, 2000

11. Prepared by:Emily D. Ramsey
745 Georgia Trail
Lincolnton, NC 28092

□

Statement of Significance

The Neely Slave Cemetery, once part of the Neely Plantation in the Steele Creek area of southwestern Mecklenburg County, is a site that possesses local historic significance as a tangible reminder of the use of slave labor on the county's large farms and plantations from the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the Civil War. Although the vast majority of Mecklenburg

County farmers operated small farms and did not own slaves, farmers such as Thomas Neely and his descendants, John Neely I, Thomas Neely, John Neely II, and John Starr Neely, ran prosperous plantations. Proximity to the Catawba River provided especially fertile land, but it was essentially the use of slave labor that allowed for the success of these large farming operations. Slaves were responsible not only for crops such as corn, wheat, or cotton (a demanding, labor-intensive crop in itself) but also for building jobs on the farm, the tending of farm animals, and other tasks, in addition to caring for their own small garden plots.

The Neely Slave Cemetery serves not only as a visual reminder of the use of slave labor in Mecklenburg County; it also serves as a reflection of slave traditions and the importance of a "good burial" in slave culture. Slaves in the South attached great importance to the death and burial of their fellow bondsmen. The slave funeral was at once a "religious ritual, a major social event, and a community pageant," drawing upon a mixture of cherished traditions.□ Although no records exist that outline the specific burial practices of the slaves on the Neely plantation, the cemetery exhibits many characteristics common among slave burial grounds in the South.

The Neely Slave Cemetery is also significant as one of the few vestiges of slavery remaining in Mecklenburg County and as one of the few known slave cemeteries in the area. Very little remains of the society that African-American slaves were able to build for themselves before the Civil War. Historian Belinda Hurmence writes that the slave dwelling, "one of the few remaining artifacts of slavery in the United States, . . . has virtually disappeared."□ Slave cemeteries, nestled in remote woods and largely unmarked and forgotten, are the only vestiges of the slave community that have survived the twentieth century in Mecklenburg County. Yet, because most slave cemeteries are unmarked and undocumented, only a small number have been discovered in the area.

Historical Overview

The existence of the Neely Slave Cemetery is intimately connected to the unique circumstances of large-scale farmers in and around Mecklenburg County during the late 1700s through the mid-1800s. The "remoteness of markets, poor roads, and the adaptability of the soil to the growth of grain and grass" greatly limited the development of a plantation economy that concentrated heavily on one cash crop.□ Unlike their neighbors to the north and east in North Carolina, where large plantations grew primarily tobacco and cotton for market, in Mecklenburg County even most prosperous farmers with large landholdings relied on a variety of food crops (wheat, corn, barley, oats and others) in addition to cotton. The vast majority of farms in the area were largely self-sufficient operations on a much more modest scale than those on the "rich lands of the low-country counties."□

Despite these restrictions, Mecklenburg County was still, historian Thomas Hanchett writes, "very much a part of the plantation economy," eventually accumulating "thirty plantations each employing twenty-five or more slaves," and "dozens of smaller farms" that utilized slave labor. □ The Neely family, beginning with Thomas Neely's arrival in 1754, belonged to this class of smaller slave owners. At his death in 1795, Thomas Neely owned at least five hundred acres in the Steele Creek area, "adjacent to the Catawba River", and approximately seven slaves. Neely bequeathed his land and slaves to his sons, John, Thomas, and Samuel. Included in his will were special requests for many of his slaves -allowing "our negro Joe . . . to be taught to read"; "giving our negro wench Susy two days every week for the purpose of providing herself in clothing"; and allowing the "negro child Dinah . . .to be learned to read." Neely also specified, "none of my legatees may sell any of my negroes out of the family under penalty of losing their inheritance." □ Although no records exist to verify whether or not these slaves remained in the family until their deaths or their freedom, the next generations of Neelys increased their slaveholdings and continued to farm the land that Thomas Neely had acquired during his lifetime. The Neely Slave Cemetery is a reflection of this interconnectedness between prosperity and ownership of slaves.

John Starr Neely (1817-1887) was the last of the Neelys to own Afro-American slaves; in his Bible, he recorded the names and dates of birth of all of the slaves born on his farm from the 1850s and 1860s. From this list and 1860 census records, which list Neely as the owner of twenty slaves (more than half under ten years old), one can estimate that John Starr Neely owned approximately twenty-four slaves by 1864. These slaves cultivated 170 of Neely's 230-acre farm, growing cotton, Indian corn, oats, and wheat. That year, Neely was enlisted and sent to serve as a guard at the Confederate prison in Salisbury, North Carolina. By the time he returned home in 1866, the war was over and his slaves were free men and women. □



John Starr Neely

Adeline was Born July 4th 1855
 Lanson was Born 3rd Apr 1853
 Emily Ann was Born Jan 14th 1854
 Samuel was Born August 4th 1847
 Rebecca Jane was Born Oct 3rd 1847
 Melin was Born May 4th 1847
 Corbala was Born May 3rd 1844
 Luina was born Aug 25th 1852
 Annaline was Born Jan 20th 1846
 Henry Jackson was Born July 10th 1854
 Francis was Born May 2th 1858
 Annais was Born May 31st 1858
 Kelly Jane was Born Feb 2th 1858
 Oliver was born June 1861
 Melvina was born November 1864
 Frank was born Jan 1st 1864
 Ida was born Sept 14th 1864
 Lory Hoke was born Oct 21st 1864

The Neely Bible

Those slaves who had not survived to see Emancipation were laid to rest in a small plot in the woods behind one of the Neely's large oat fields. African and African-American slaves in the South attached great significance to "a good burial;" a slave's funeral was considered the "true

climax" of his or her life. Their lives were spent in service to a master -death offered eternal freedom from bondage. The slave funeral was at once a "religious ritual, a major social event, and a community pageant," drawing upon a mixture of cherished traditions. □ Remnants of African culture and customs mixed with the restrictions of Southern plantation life to make the slave funeral a unique ceremony. After the death of a slave, a coffin would usually be made by a slave carpenter while the body was laid out on a cooling board. Since a corpse would decay quickly in the stifling Southern heat, slaves adopted the practice of sitting up all night to guard the body from prowling animals, often "singing and praying through the night." The funeral itself was often held at night, partly because of plantation labor requirements, partly because of the slaves' cultural preferences. The slave funeral was, therefore, a dramatic ceremony - according to the Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery, a typical slave funeral on a southern plantation proceeded in this way:

A slow procession of mourners carried pine torches to light the way to the burial ground. The coffin and pallbearers led off, followed by the family of the deceased and the master's household, with the slave community bringing up the rear. . . Whether urban or rural, the processions to the graveyard were always accompanied by slow, mournful spirituals. □

As was the custom in many slave cemeteries, the bodies in the Neely Slave Cemetery were buried east-west, with their heads to the west, their "eyes facing Africa." □ Some of the graves are marked with simple fieldstones, also a common feature of slave cemeteries. The remaining unmarked graves may have once had similar stones, which may have fallen or sunken over time into the ground below the covering of periwinkle. Forty-two graves have been identified, although there is a strong possibility there may be more, since the land was passed down through the family and worked by slave labor for over one hundred years.

Annabel Neely Grier, John Starr Neely's granddaughter, recorded stories of strange occurrences at the cemetery; she wrote of "a slave cemetery on the land" where "at times a mysterious light could be seen." On one occasion, her father, John Franklin, and "old Uncle Jim, the colored man who always lived there", took a kerosene lantern and went to "hunt the light." They never discovered its source.

□ The Neely Slave Cemetery is also significant as one of the few vestiges of slavery remaining in Mecklenburg County and as one of the few known slave cemeteries in the area. Very little remains of the society that African-American slaves were able to build for themselves before the Civil War. Historian Belinda Hurmence writes that the slave dwelling, "one of the few remaining artifacts of slavery in the United States, . . . has virtually disappeared." □ The slave quarters on the Neely plantation were torn down long ago, and no slave housing is known to have survived into the present in Mecklenburg County. Slave dwellings, usually hastily built structures of wood, sticks and mud, were used after the Civil War as "stock sheds, storage buildings, or housing for tenant farmers," but virtually all have now rotted away or been demolished. □ Slave cemeteries, nestled in remote woods and largely unmarked and forgotten, are one of the only vestiges of the slave community that have survived the twentieth century in Mecklenburg County. Yet, because most slave cemeteries are unmarked and undocumented,

only a small number have been discovered in the area. The largest slave cemetery yet discovered in Mecklenburg County, the W. T. Alexander Slave Cemetery, is now closed in by an upscale, gated apartment complex. The remains of seventeen slaves owned by the H.C. Dwelle family were relocated from their original home at 501 Queens Road in 1941 to make way for the Little Theater's new building. □ Although the Neely Slave Cemetery is not the largest, most impressive, or best preserved slave cemetery in the area, it remains an important piece of African-American history in a region where few visible reminders of slavery and slave communities have survived.

Architectural Description

Site Description

□ The Neely Slave Cemetery is located in the midst of South Point Business Park, on a plot of undeveloped land consisting of several acres. The cemetery is nestled in a small grove of trees towards the rear of a plot of undeveloped land consisting of several acres. To the south of the cemetery is a large, low brick building, and on the west and south is an open field bordered by South Ridge Drive. Beyond South Ridge Drive, visible from the cemetery, stands a row of office buildings. The grove of trees in which the cemetery is located stretches across the north side of the plot. The cemetery itself is completely inconspicuous, and would not be noticeable at all but for several "Keep Out" signs posted on trees located on the site, and the presence of blue and red flags which now mark forty-two graves.

The Neely Slave Cemetery is covered with periwinkle, a local groundcover often found at rural cemetery sites. In addition to the red and blue flags that mark the graves (blue at the head of each grave, red at the foot), a number of the graves are marked with simple fieldstones, which have not been carved or manipulated in any way. These stones were most likely picked up on the day of the burial and placed at the grave by a family member or fellow slave. The majority of the graves have no visible original markers. A group of large boulders are clustered at the south end of the cemetery, and the west and south sides of the cemetery are screened by a row of cedars. A mixture of hardwoods shades the site. Although the land around the Neely Slave Cemetery has been developed into a plush suburban office park, a sense of the original rural setting has not been completely lost.

Notes

- ¹ □ Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, editors. *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (Greenwood Press, Inc., New York: 1988) p.88.
- ² □ Belinda Humence, editor. *We Lived in a Little Cabin in the Yard* (John F. Blair, Winston Salem: 1994), p.xv.
- ³ □ Rosser Howard Taylor, *Slaveholding in North Carolina: An Economic View* (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: 1926) p.37.
- ⁴ □ Thomas Hanchett, "Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission).
- ⁵ □ Ibid.
- ⁶ □ Will of Thomas Neely II, dated 3 November 1793. Special thanks to Ralph Neely, Jr. for his invaluable assistance with this project.
- ⁷ □ Bible belonging to John Starr Neely. The names listed in John Starr Neely include: Adlade (b. 185?); Lanson (b. 1852); Emily (b. 1854); Samuel (b. 1847); Nolin (b. 1852); Isabela (b. 1854); Louisa (b. 1855); Annaline (b. 1856); Henry Johnson (b.1856); Francis (b. 1858); Ansin (b. 1858) Nelly Jane (b. 1859); Oliver (b.1860); Melvina (b. 1861); Frank (b.1864); Ida (b. 1864); Leroy Hoke (b. 1864).
- ⁸ Eighth Census of the United States: Slave Schedule, Mecklenburg County. The 1860 census lists 20 slaves owned by John Starr Neely -two adult males (ages 24 and 50), four adult females (ages 45, 32, 23, and 20), five male children (ages 13, 8, 8, 4 and 2), and nine female children (ages 14, 11, 6, 6, 5, 5, 4, 2, and 1).
- ⁹ □ Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, editors. *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (Greenwood Press, Inc., New York: 1988) p.88.
- ¹⁰ □ Ibid, p.88-89.
- ¹¹ □ Ibid, p. 88.
- ¹² □ Annabel Neely Grier. "Neely Homeplace" -essay compiled for Pat Hall, developer of Carowinds.
- ¹³ □ Belinda Humence, editor. *We Lived in a Little Cabin in the Yard* (John F. Blair, Winston Salem: 1994), p.xv.
- ¹⁴ □ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ *Charlotte Observer*, "Once A Cemetery, Now Home Of Little Theater" (September 1, 1978).