1. **Name and location of the property:** The property known as Cedar Grove Cemetery is located off of Hildebrand Street at the entrance to the University Park Creative Arts Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina, 28216.

2. **Name, address, and telephone number of the current owners of the property:**
   John Shead Davidson (Deceased)
   *Address unknown – No living descendants*

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

4. **A map depicting the location of the property:**
5. **Current Tax Parcel Reference and Deed to the property:** The tax parcel number is 069-125-47. The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1928, Page 125, on July 15th, 1957.

6. **A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by W. Kevin Donaldson.

7. **A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description prepared by W. Kevin Donaldson

8. **Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5.**
   a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance:
   b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association:
Figure 1: 2022 Charlotte City Boundary Survey
Historical Essay

Emancipation and the subsequent freedoms gained at the end of the Civil War allowed Blacks to create their own churches. They were primarily attracted to Baptists as there was no central church governing organization such as the top-down papal structure of the Catholic church, for example. The lack of systemic control of the church allowed Blacks to create and join congregations more freely, establishing their governing church bodies and training and placing their ministers. More than one million African Americans identified as Baptists in the South by 1890.¹ So the denomination allowed Blacks to worship as they saw fit.

To further insulate communities of color from the ravages of post-Reconstruction racism and exclusion in the latter half of the nineteenth century, African Americans created their communal economies through small businesses, newspapers, and these houses of worship. However, Blacks also had to establish segregated burial grounds due to discrimination. In the New South city of Charlotte, the dead were as segregated as the living. Cemeteries like Elmwood and Pinewood were directly adjacent to one another, but a wire cattle fence divided the graves by race of those buried there. Not until 1965 did Frederick Douglass Alexander, the first twentieth-century elected black member of the city council in Charlotte, personally tear down the fence that separated the African American Pinewood cemetery from the all-white Elmwood cemetery.² One hundred years since the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of Blacks, the vestiges of segregation in the burial of the dead remained.

As with most racially dominant cultures, whites in the Reconstruction South continued working toward methods of control and exclusion for Black America. Post-Civil War modes of management of spaces for Blacks included violence, segregation, Jim Crow laws, Urban Renewal, gerrymandering, marginalization, and gentrification. The results were murder, separate and unequal access, exclusion, lack of representation, forced relocation, carceral complexity, and poverty. However, there was a unique aspect to Charlotte among the affluent and progressive Blacks within the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. African Americans often took control of their financial futures, and one source of permanent business opportunity was in the management of burials. Funerary rituals adapted to the new landscape of the changing century—access to more significant means allowed families to manage their burial preparations and services on their own schedule. Though the body's preparation did not differ significantly from the pre-emancipation ritual, wealthier African Americans could now provide better clothes and coffins to bury the dead. In addition, the wake could now be scheduled as the family saw fit, and feasting and socializing were part of the process. After 1880 Black funeral parlors established themselves to exclusively serve the Black community, where white morticians previously offered their services to whites and Blacks alike. The maturation of the Black funerary industry provided a significant source of new wealth to African American communities throughout the South.

The funeral industry came to Charlotte in 1887 with the establishment of the first white mortician in the area. However, since funeral technics like embalming had only become common in the mid-nineteenth century, many families still conducted funerary services in their homes. The "funeral parlor" was meant to replace just what the name implied, the home "parlor," and so
the businesses often set up shop in elegant semi-residential homes.\textsuperscript{3} Due to the legal ramifications of Jim Crow laws in southern cities, the funeral business was rarely an exception to the rules of segregation. Nevertheless, as with many other areas of enterprise, the Black funeral industry blossomed in cities like Charlotte and led to the wealth of numerous African Americans who diversified their business interests through the turn of the twentieth century. As natural offshoots of the funeral business, products like life insurance and burial land often led to the creation of companies that could provide multiple one-stop services for their clients. Since life insurance often covered the funeral expenses such as body preparation and the casket, the next logical requirement was the sale of a place to bury the deceased. Providing secular and privately-owned burial plots could establish premier locations to lay established African Americans to rest. Still, it could also become another means of income for funeral service companies.\textsuperscript{4}

Charlotte has numerous cemeteries within the city that were, at one time, semi or exclusively for Blacks: Biddleville Cemetery, Pinewood Cemetery, St. Lloyd Presbyterian Cemetery, Cedar Grove Cemetery, and York Memorial Park, among others. The founding of these cemeteries, some over 100 years ago, provides insight into how African Americans navigated the segregated southern society while wholly participating in the commemoration of the dead on their terms. Similarly, historians and anthropologists can examine how African Americans currently memorialize their dead and how reflections upon the lives of the Black elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries help form African American heritage and memory.

\textsuperscript{3} Hanchett, \textit{Sorting Out the New South City}, 192.  
\textsuperscript{4} Rainville, \textit{Hidden History}, 67.
The stories of many farmers, laborers, doctors, lawyers, and the formerly enslaved are buried in cemeteries segregated from the gravesites of whites or otherwise separated by church affiliation. Unfortunately, some of these Black cemeteries became lost to abandonment and neglect because of gentrification, urban renewal, and mass in-migration. Some scholars saw the abandonment and neglect of African American cemeteries as a self-inflicted systemic social problem. For example, in the Black newspaper, the *New York Amsterdam News*, in 1928, African American sociologist Kelly Miller wrote, "the Negro race spends the maximum amount of money on funerals and the minimum amount on graveyards." 

Miller generalizes here, focusing more on the appearance of the cemeteries to those outside the community. He does not consider the more significant expense of funerals (greatly increased from home "parlor" services and burials on family land) for working-class African Americans and their reasonable expectation that the landowners selling funerary plots will maintain the cemeteries in the future.

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Cedar Grove Cemetery

By 1910, Black Charlotteans began making headway in economic independence, and as the city continued to grow, African Americans wanted to experience the move to suburban life. As a result, white landlords and property developers were utilizing restrictive covenants when deeding property that prevented Blacks from purchasing land or homes designated as "whites only" or that specifically cited properties that "shall be owned, occupied and used only by members of the Caucasian race, domestic servants in the employ of the occupants excepted." The Black middle class was nevertheless ready to buy, and white developers seized the opportunity to purchase land in the North and West of the city of Charlotte to develop property exclusively for Blacks.

Three white developers and investors, Walter S. Alexander, John M. Scott, and A. Morris McDonald formed The Freehold Realty Company, purchasing a large tract of land to the West of Beatties Ford Road. The men intended to sell lots and build more than 200 homes in an area that would come to be called Washington Heights, named for progressive Black leader Booker T. Washington. Freehold secured the services of C.H. Watson. Watson was one of the city's Black leaders and listed "real estate" as his occupation in city directories. (See Figure 2) Many lots sold to African Americans throughout the early 1900s. Sales went so well that in 1913 McDonald purchased another 67+ acres what was once known as the "W.H. Schenck land" at a probate auction on the county courthouse steps. Schenck was from a family of African American saloon owners who became successful at the end of the nineteenth century and accumulated large tracts

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of land north and west of Charlotte. The three Schenck brothers included A.B. Schenck, William H. Schenck, and John Thomas Schenck, the latter serving as the first Black police officer in Charlotte during Reconstruction. He would also later serve on the board of alderman for four terms and as the head of the Republican party and other political organizations in the Charlotte area for many years.\(^7\)

In 1914 McDonald sold the property to Propst Contracting Company. The Cedar Grove Cemetery Association (CGCA) purchased this property from Propst one year later. Propst chose to sell the land to the cemetery association and not develop single-family homes for unclear reasons. On August 21, 1915, the "Cedar Grove Cemetery Association for colored people" was founded as a North Carolina corporation. The individuals filing as officers of the new cemetery company were African Americans Robert B. Bruce, a bishop in the A.M.E. Zion Church, lawyer and financier J.T. Sanders, W.P. Robinson, physician Dr. Allen Atkins Wyche, white tax assessor W.M. Tye, and the white owner of Oaklawn Cemetery, John Jacob Misenheimer. News reports the following week stated the company purchased "67 acres or more" to start a cemetery.\(^8\) (See Figure 3).

However, the deed for the property lists the land purchase as "66-76/100 acres more or less."\(^9\)

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Ten years after the founding of the CGCA, the company sold the deed to the "66-76/100 acres more or less" to T.T. Cole in exchange for Cole settling land debts for the company. At the time, the CGCA owed more than $15,000 in mortgage notes on the land. Deciphering the deeds filed with the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds allows for the discernment of two assumptions. First, the land in possession of the CGCA was valuable. The property carried many debts to investors, including J.J. Misenheimer, his brother C.A. Misenheimer and a third mortgage security in the name of W.L. Jenkins. Secondly, the CGCA conducted burials on the site from 1915 to 1925 and wanted to retain the land in some form because, in February of 1925 (nearly one month to the day of closing the first deal with Cole), the CGCA acquired 17 acres of the land "back" from T.T. Cole and his wife, Sallie Marks Cole. The property described is a portion of the original parcel of land first purchased by the CGCA, presumably used as a site of burial plots. Five years after founding the CGCA, Bishop Robert Blair Bruce died at 59. Buried at Cedar Grove, Bruce's tombstone is the most ornate in the cemetery and is an extraordinary dedication to the pastor and member of the Masons. (See Figure 4). Following the deaths of the other founding members of the CGCA by 1935, the cemetery...
corporation ceased to conduct business. The company dissolved due to continued inactivity by 1955.

John Jacob Misenheimer (see figure 5) passed away in 1947, but upon his death, he bequeathed the majority of his estate to his real estate assistant of many years, Mrs. Adele L. Hendrix, and her husband. Misenheimer’s will left the entirety of the Oaklawn Cemetery and much of the remainder of his estate to the Hendrixs’.

In January of 1955, John Shead Davidson entered a quit-claim deed with the wife of W.L. Jenkins. Along with having deed claims with the CGCA property, Jenkins had been a shareholder of the CGCA. As no remaining heirs or claimants to the CGCA land were alive, Davidson offered Mrs. Jenkins five dollars to acquire the 17-acre cemetery property. However, as evidenced by the civil suit Hendrix filed in the Superior Court of Mecklenburg County in early 1956, she also felt entitled to the Cedar Grove Cemetery, of which Misenheimer was the last living shareholder.

Accordingly, the receiver, lawyer Winfred R. Ervin (later Judge Ervin), auctioned the property on October 29, 1956. The highest bidder was the Board of School Commissioners of the City of Charlotte (the predecessor of Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools), paying Hendrix $28,100 for the land. The city immediately executed plans to build the University Park Elementary School to accommodate students in the growing Beattie’s Ford Road corridor. Considering the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, in 1954, many
Black Charlotteans saw the new school measure as an attempt to maintain the status quo of segregated schools in Charlotte, if only by proximity.

The 17 acres sold to the City of Charlotte included a portion of land that the CGCA had utilized for burials since 1915. As a result, in 1957, Davidson finally acquired the 1.769-acre tract of land used as the primary cemetery grounds directly adjacent to the future University Park Elementary School for $500, which subsequently "reopened" in September of 1958. A respected pastor and graduate of Biddle University, Davidson owned Davidson Brothers Funeral Home with two of his brothers on South Mint Street. The company chose to reopen the cemetery under the name Cedar "Hill" Cemetery, once again selling burial plots. Davidson Brothers advertised in the Charlotte Observer in March of 1957, referencing "a number of our outstanding citizens" buried at the cemetery "such as Dr. Shute, Bishop Bruce, Rev. Hairston, and others." The ad described the cemetery as a beautiful and desirable location and that "the prices of graves and lots are no higher than those of any other cemetery in the city of Charlotte." 10 (See figure 6) In 1957, Cedar Grove Cemetery returned to operation as an active burial site, now forty-two years old.

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John Shead Davidson was born in 1872, and by the time he acquired the Cedar Grove Cemetery with his brothers, he was already 85 years old. (See figure 7) Davidson Brothers Funeral Home opened in 1935, operating into the 1960s. Davidson eventually left Charlotte, living out the rest of his years in Nashville, Tennessee, where he died in 1972 at the age of 100. Davidson and his brothers ensured that the Cedar Hill (Grove) Cemetery regularly received maintenance and upkeep until his death. Unfortunately, after his death, any care for the property ceased, and within ten years, the gravesites became utterly overgrown, with the cemetery falling into complete disrepair. The cemetery deed remained in Davidson's name as his brothers and business partners preceded him in death. Davidson and his wife had two daughters. His wife preceded him in death. Both children moved from the Charlotte area, with his daughter Ruth Marie Powell becoming an academic and author and her sister Vera Davidson relocating to Flint, Michigan. Unfortunately, neither sister had children, so the Cedar Grove Cemetery property became legally abandoned upon their deaths. Today there are an estimated 75 to more than 150 gravesites located at Cedar Grove Cemetery. Many unmarked surface
anomalies exist, and metal funeral home markers remain, never replaced with formal headstones. These markers are temporary, and most of the names and dates of birth and death are no longer legible.

In a Spring 1982 article in *The Charlotte News*, staff writer Osker Spicer reported on the cemetery’s condition. Spicer spoke with long-time residents Lessie and Vandee Irby, discovering the couple lived in the neighborhood for more than 18 years and knew Davidson. ""It was the prettiest place when we moved here," Mrs. Irby said. "When Mr. Davidson was alive, he'd keep it clean.""11 Contrary to Miller's argument on the neglect of African American cemeteries, at least at the time of the operation of the facilities, burial spaces for Blacks such as the Cedar Grove Cemetery met the standards of upkeep expected to honor the dead. Yet, many things changed as the 1960s ended and the 1970s began. Like many other cities in the United States, the full force of the Urban Renewal Act of 1954 meted out change. From 1960 to 1967, developers and city officials used federal funds to bulldoze more than 1,480 structures, displacing 1,007 families in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Charlotte. The same period saw 216 businesses uprooted, many of which would not reopen.12

At the time of Davidson's death, Charlotte was in the throes of community upheaval. The landmark case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* in 1971 shook the foundations of white America with mandatory busing to achieve racial integration of public schools. The realization of the marginalization of Blacks in housing, education, and their systematic removal to low-rent peripheries of the city frustrated many African Americans in Charlotte. The earlier contributions of prominent Blacks in neighborhoods like Brooklyn and

12 Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 160.
Washington Heights faded from memory. The immediacy of civic action and the societal hangover from the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam left the needs of Blacks in cities like Charlotte as an afterthought.

**Physical Description of Cedar Grove Cemetery**

Cedar Grove Cemetery is an endangered Charlotte/Mecklenburg landmark and has no current living owner or caretaker. As a privately held and untaxed parcel, there is no impetus from the state, county, or city to maintain the property. Thus the upkeep has been through recent volunteer participation. Underbrush removal has been successful, and the cemetery is currently being mapped, but grave markers have toppled, eroded, or have been completely lost to time. As a prominent and historically Black section of Charlotte, Washington Heights and the Cedar Grove Cemetery house many post-emancipation African American leaders' histories and legacies.

There are more than eight different family plots in the Cedar Grove Cemetery. In addition, families such as Harris, Hairston, Edwards, and Aery have four to six family members interred in the cemetery. Many indentions in the earth present the possibility of as many as fifty or more unmarked graves. Comprehensive
shallow depth clean-up has led to the discovery of numerous slightly buried and toppled

Figure 9: Four African American Veteran gravestones.
headstones. There are indeed more to be found during mapping.

There have been fifteen military grave markers identified in the cemetery, with soldiers serving in World War I and II, including general service members.

More than thirty headstones show birthdates from 1872 to 1898, with the oldest extant stone showing the burial year of 1915, which coincides with the establishment of the Cedar Grove Cemetery Association. However, it is not clear if this location was used for burials before the establishment of the CGCA corporation. The gravestone of Samuel H. Stitt shows that this

![Grave of Samuel H. Stitt](image)

*Figure 10: Grave of Samuel H. Stitt born before emancipation.*
particular individual was born before emancipation. However, genealogical records have yet to be identified to determine if he had previously been enslaved. (See Figure 10).

Many of the grave markers in Cedar Grove Cemetery are common mid-twentieth-century gravestones made of marble and engraved. In addition, there are several limestone markers and other materials such as concrete. The more ornate stones belong to families that were quite

![Figure 11: Typical elaborate engravings.](image)
wealthy. Older stones have decorative carvings such as a hand holding a cross or two hands intertwined meant to represent the hand of God reaching out to the departed to aid in ascension.

Several obelisk grave markers are present, as well as damaged markers from vandalism and mishandling of gravesites by tree-trimming contractors working in the area.

Figure 12: Obelisk style markers. On the top left a sign of the Freemasons is engraved. Bottom damaged gravestones
Conclusion

African American burial grounds are essential community resources for remembrance, commemoration, and local history. These spaces can serve as historical sites or remain private, family-oriented spaces. For example, many states have laws allowing family members to enter private property to visit the graves of deceased family members with the relevant permission from the landowner. In addition, abandoned cemeteries receive historic designations or otherwise acquire protected status. Government officials are promoting bills and other legislative measures to allocate funding to memorialize sacred spaces like cemeteries for the enslaved, family cemeteries, and abandoned burial grounds. In February 2019, North Carolina representative Alma Adams proposed legislation for the African American Burial Grounds Network. Initially proposed to protect "at-risk" cemeteries in South Carolina, the bill has national implications because it allows Congress to authorize the Department of the Interior to survey Black burial grounds across the country comprehensively. The efforts would allow for the coordination of research and the creation of a nationwide database of African American cemeteries to receive grant funding.¹³

African American cemeteries provide researchers and visitors access to the past in anthropology, archaeology, genealogy, public history, and Africana studies as an educational and cultural resource. A successful project in this category is the Geer Cemetery in Durham, North Carolina. Like the Cedar Grove and Biddleville cemeteries, Geer was a cemetery lost to time and the elements. Beginning as a work, training, and clean-up project for the Durham Service Corp in 1990, a non-profit formed in 2003 for the ongoing care and maintenance of the property and the

approximately 1,650 known graves on the site. Like Biddleville Cemetery in Charlotte, the Geer cemetery achieved historic landmark status through genealogical research, monument documentation, and mapping processes. The Friends of the Geer Cemetery have erected placards along walking trails to identify the graves of prominent African American citizens and provide a history of the progress of Blacks in the Durham area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By involving Boy Scout Troops to conduct clean-up and construction projects and providing guided walking tours with college history students as docents, the project has taken on a cultural role in the area, far exceeding the founders' hopes when creating the Friends of Geer Cemetery organization. Like numerous similar projects throughout the United States, the Geer site is a model project for the sustainable use of an abandoned graveyard. Whether these projects serve as a volunteer opportunity or become a living museum, the neglected cemetery need not be a strain on municipalities or small communities but an educational resource for understanding the past.
References


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