

Enslaved Connections at Elmwood and Pinewood Cemeteries

Designation Report Addendum
Susan V. Mayer, SVM Historical Consulting
September 2024

Although property was purchased in 1853 for the establishment of a new city burial ground, Elmwood and Pinewood Cemeteries were slow to be utilized until after the Civil War. The only extant headstone which denotes the burial of a Black person during enslavement is an Allison family marker for four children including **William Allison**, who was born May 8, 1863, and died September 9, 1864. The marker likely was not erected until at least 1878, when fourth child passed away.¹

A search of the records for Pinewood Cemetery on Find a Grave shows records for 1,190 persons buried in the cemetery who were born enslaved before June 19, 1865. The earliest birth year of a recorded Pinewood burial is that of **Judy Phifer**, whose death certificate lists a birth year of 1802 in Alabama; Judy died on July 27, 1912, at the purported age of 110. There is no extant headstone for Judy.² The headstone with the earliest birth year belongs to **Henrietta “Rietta” Allison** (1807-1893), likely grandmother of the above noted William Allison.³ Her son **Alexander “Alick” Allison** (1832-1915) was born enslaved in 1832. Though he worked a laborer on the cotton platform, he was one of three Black men elected city aldermen in 1881. Alick was hired as keeper of Pinewood Cemetery in 1897, earning a salary of \$30 per month.⁴

The headstone of **George Miller**, who died on July 27, 1925, at around age 75, is notable for its direct mention of enslavement. The marker was erected by R. M. Miller, Jr., son of George’s enslaver, and is inscribed,

A Slave, And All of His Life
A Loyal and Faithful
Servant of—
R. M. Miller, Sr.⁵

When R. M. Miller, Sr. died in 1908, special mention of George was made by the *Charlotte News*:

He was always kind to his servants. An illustration of the fact is that one of his former slaves refused to leave his employ. George Miller, colored, born on the old Lancaster plantation,

¹ William Allison, Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/156694300/william-allison>, accessed August 18, 2024.

² Judy Phifer, Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/147037776/judy-phifer>, accessed August 18, 2024.

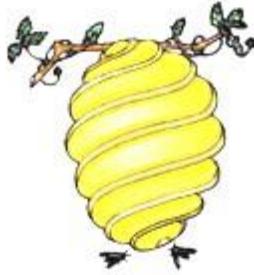
³ Rietta Allison, Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/139693536/rietta-allison>, accessed August 18, 2024.

⁴ Alexander Allison, Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/156691914/alexander-allison>, accessed August 28, 2024; “The City Election,” *Charlotte Democrat*, May 6, 1881; “The New Board Meets,” *Mecklenburg Times*, May 13, 1897.

⁵ George Miller, Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/18926063/george-miller>, accessed August 18, 2024.

about the same time as Mr. Miller's oldest son, is still with the family at the North Tryon street home, and this morning was shoveling a path through the frozen snow from the porch to the gate, that the friends might the easier come to the house to express their sympathy. Members of the family hardly feel a keener grief that this faithful old servant.⁶

⁶ "R. M. Miller, Sr. Passes Away," *Charlotte News*, February 11, 1908.



Survey and Research Report
on
Elmwood/Pinewood Cemetery



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Elmwood Cemetery is located on the 700 block of West 6th Street in Charlotte, NC.
2. Name, and address of the current owner of the property:

The present owner of the property is:

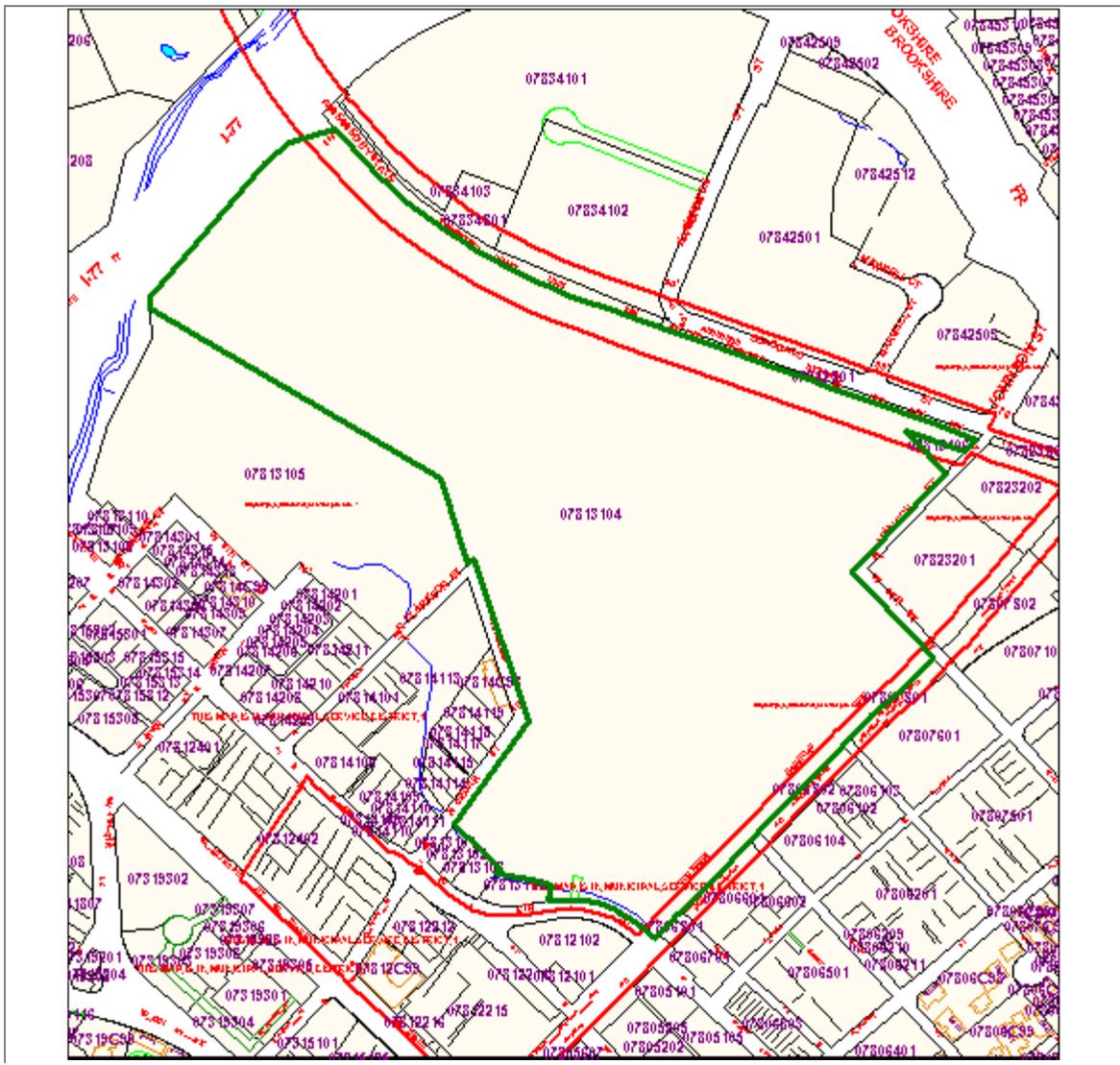
City of Charlotte

600 East 4th Street

Charlotte, NC

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

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



5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed on the property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1114, page 249. The tax parcel number for the property is 078-13-104.
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 architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

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. The Commission believes that Elmwood Cemetery does possess special historical significance for Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. It bases its judgment on the following considerations.

- 1) Elmwood Cemetery - originally opened in 1853 as a 100-acre plot that included Pinewood Cemetery, a segregated African American cemetery, and Potter's Field, a pauper's cemetery - forms one of Charlotte's oldest public cemeteries.
- 2) The Elmwood Cemetery, like all graveyards, is a reflection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's cultural history from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Elmwood contains the graves of some of Charlotte's most important citizens – textile pioneer D.A. Tompkins, developer Edward Dilworth Latta, former Charlotte mayor S. S. McNinch, and W.W. Smith, Charlotte's first major black architect, are among the hundreds of New South entrepreneurs, builders, political and religious figures buried in Elmwood Cemetery.

Elmwood Cemetery, located in the heart of Charlotte's center city, formed an integral part of the urban landscape at a time when cemeteries served not only as places for interment but as important public green spaces.

- 4) The Elmwood/Pinewood cemetery complex was the center of a civil rights controversy in the late 1960s, when city councilman Fred Alexander spearheaded a successful campaign to bring down the chain link fence separating all-white Elmwood from all-black Pinewood.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association. The Commission judges that the architectural description completed by Emily D. Ramsey indicates that Elmwood Cemetery meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the 71.864 acres of land that encompasses Elmwood Cemetery is \$6,260,790.00.

Date of Preparation of this Report:

May 13, 2001

Prepared By:

Emily D. Ramsey

745 Georgia Trail

Lincolnton, NC

Statement of Significance

Elmwood Cemetery

West Sixth Street

Charlotte, NC

Summary

Elmwood Cemetery is a property that possesses local historic significance as one of the oldest and largest public cemeteries in Charlotte and as a reflection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's nineteenth-and-twentieth-century cultural heritage.¹ The cemetery, a 72-acre plot of rolling green space in the heart of Charlotte, first opened in 1853. Some of Charlotte's most important citizens purchased family plots during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and Elmwood now contains the remains of such men as developer Edward Dilworth Latta, textile entrepreneur D. A. Tompkins, former Charlotte mayor S. S. McNinch, and W. W. Smith, Charlotte's first black architect. The graves of such important Charlotte-Mecklenburg citizens, alongside the thousands of others who lived, worked, worshipped and died in Mecklenburg County, make Elmwood an important historical and cultural resource. The intricacies of the gravestones themselves, the arrangement of family members within a plot and of plots within the cemetery, all give clues to the values and beliefs of specific persons within the Charlotte community and of the community as a whole.



The "log cabin" iconography of the frontier could even mark a resting place after death.

Elmwood Cemetery is also significant as an integral part of the center city's urban landscape. Like many urban cemeteries in the nineteenth century, Elmwood served as a place of respite for the living as well as the dead. Elmwood's strategic location and neatly kept, shady lawns attracted many Charlotteans looking for a place in town to take their family walks and Sunday picnics. As one of the only green spaces remaining in the heart of center city Charlotte, Elmwood still serves as a place for residents and workers seeking relief from the noise and bustle of the city.



Marker Honoring Charlotte Firemen

Elmwood Cemetery also serves as a representation of the increasing racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity of a New South city throughout the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries while remaining a tangible reminder of the system of segregation that characterized the South until the middle of the twentieth century. Although the graves of African Americans and Confederate veterans, Charlotte's poorest citizens along with many of its wealthiest, are all included among those interred at Elmwood, the separation of black and white graves into two completely segregated cemeteries (Elmwood was white, Pinewood, black, physically separated by a chain fence) made the Elmwood Cemetery complex the center of a controversial local civil rights campaign during the late 1960s.

Historical Background Statement

Although still far from the regionally important New South city it would become by the early twentieth century, Charlotte had already risen above other small towns in the piedmont of North Carolina in the years preceding the Civil War. As historian Thomas Hanchett writes, "Two events lifted Charlotte out of its minor place on the periphery of the plantation economy the discovery of gold in 1799 and the coming of the railroad in 1852."² Charlotte became the home of a branch of the United States Mint in 1836, and with the completion of the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad (one of the first railroads to penetrate the western region of North Carolina) in 1852, the city became a regional trading center and a magnet for miners, merchants, bankers, and cotton traders.

As more and more people settled in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area, the need for a large public cemetery became apparent. Settlers Cemetery on W. Fifth Street, the first and only municipal burial ground in Charlotte at the time, was rapidly reaching its maximum capacity, and more people than ever were living and dying in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. In 1853, the city purchased the first of several tracts of land that would eventually make up Elmwood (for whites), Pinewood (for African Americans), and Potter's Field (set aside for those who could not afford a cemetery plot). Two years later, the "New Cemetery," as it was called, accommodated its first burial, supposedly a child of Mr. William Beattie.³ Although the cemetery opened before the Civil War, Elmwood lots did not begin selling at a brisk pace until after the war – a reflection of Charlotte's rapid development in the New South era. Charlotte's first textile enterprise, the [Charlotte Cotton Mill](#), opened in 1880 and was quickly followed by several others, including the [Alpha Cotton Mill](#), the Victor Mill and the Ada Mill. These cotton manufacturing ventures attracted related businesses, and by the mid-1880s, the town of Charlotte had become "a little city with big city ambitions."⁴ In 1889, city leaders, fearful that the cemetery was "too small for the requirements of the rapidly growing city," purchased a fifty-five acre tract adjoining the cemetery from James Erwin.⁵



Confederate Memorial at Elmwood Cemetery

Although only about one-and-one-half acres had been laid out in lots by 1891, the cemetery was already being prepared for public use – not only as a cemetery but also as a park. The Charlotte Chronicle reported in 1891 that on the “lower part of the grounds, which will not be needed for burial purposes for some time to come, good wide roads have been laid, affording pleasant rides for the citizens.”⁶ The city also constructed a bathing pool, “150 feet long, 80 feet wide, through which the creek flows, keeping it pure and healthy.”⁷ Such dual usage was not uncommon in the nineteenth century, when urban cemeteries often served as public green space as well as burial ground. Elmwood remains an integral part of Charlotte’s urban landscape as one of the few public green spaces within the center city. Even today, the cemetery continues to attract workers and residents seeking a quiet, shady respite from the bustle and noise of center city Charlotte.



The burial place of W. W. Smith has brick work reminiscent of the [Mecklenburg Investment Company Building](#), designed by W. W. Smith

By 1947, all of the plots in Elmwood and Pinewood had been sold. While Settlers Cemetery contains the bodies of Charlotte's oldest families - Revolutionary heroes, signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, and leaders in local, state, and national antebellum politics, Elmwood is the resting place of Charlotte's New South pioneers. D. A. Tompkins and Edward Dilworth Latta, among the first and most influential of Charlotte's New South leaders, are buried in Elmwood. Political leaders such as former Charlotte mayor S. S. McNinch, architects William H. Peeps and W. W. Smith (Charlotte's first black architect), religious and community leaders such as A. M. E. Zion Bishop Thomas H. Lomax and Caesar Blake, Imperial Potentate of the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order and leader of Negro Shriners throughout the 1920s, and businessmen like John Price Carr and Vinton Liddell, are also among the more than fifty thousand people buried at Elmwood. All were essential to Charlotte-Mecklenburg's exponential late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century economic growth and cultural development, during which Charlotte emerged as the state's largest city and the heart of a large and profitable textile manufacturing region that covered North and South Carolina as well as large parts of Tennessee and Georgia.⁸

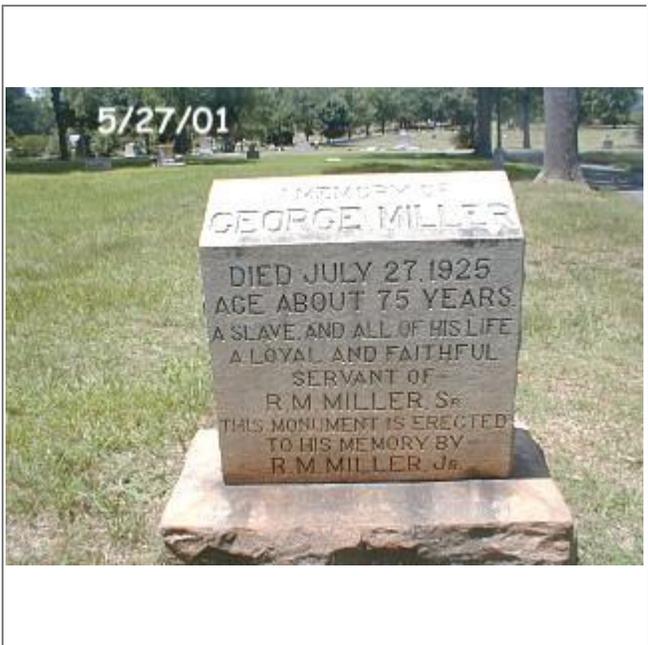
Landscaping and Funerary Art in Elmwood Cemetery

“An old graveyard,” writes historian M. Ruth Little, “is a cultural encyclopedia.”⁹ The size, shape and design of a gravestone, the inscription carved into stone, concrete, brick or wood, the arrangement of graves within a family plot and the arrangement of plots within a cemetery - such seemingly mundane details are the most vivid reminders of a community's culture and the values and beliefs of the people who lived and died there. Although the landscape designer is not known (a 1906 map credits only “the Office of the City Engineer”), Elmwood's white cemetery unfolds in a methodically planned way - a visitor to the cemetery, entering at the West Sixth Street entrance, is greeted first by the cemetery's most impressive, elaborate and beautiful grave markers, shaded by large, mature hardwoods and dotted with cypress trees, boxwoods, and flowering shrubs.¹⁰ Sections A, B, and C, among the first

sections to be laid out in Elmwood and perhaps the most deliberately designed, are the only circular sections within the cemetery. As one moves East through the more rigid but still thoughtfully landscaped portions located in the middle of the cemetery, the gently curving driveways give way to the linear, almost grid-like planning of Elmwood's Eastern side. Pinewood Cemetery, in contrast, is obviously an organic burial ground. Although the African American cemetery is shaded by an abundance of mature hardwood trees, the family plots are laid out seemingly arbitrarily, and, since many African Americans could not afford expensive stone grave markers (often erecting simple wooden markers instead), many of the graves at Pinewood cannot be seen or identified by the average observer.



The Confederate Battle Flag marks the final resting place of a Confederate veteran. [Click here to read about Charlotte-Mecklenburg during the Civil War.](#)



Slavery could be a very personal institution. The marker was erected by the son of the slave owner to a faithful servant of the family.

Elmwood's diverse array of funerary art attests to the diversity of the people buried within the cemetery. The Baroque or Neoclassical headstone – most often carved from marble, granite, or local stone – is the most common type of grave marker, particularly in the Eastern portions of the cemetery. These headstones vary greatly in size, shape, and intricacy of detailing, depending upon the wealth of the family or organization that commissioned the stone. Although among the simplest of grave marker styles, the shape, decoration and inscription of a headstone often reveals a great deal about the person buried beneath it. Lambs and cherubs sit atop the graves of small children; blooming roses indicate the death of a young person, someone who died while in the prime of their life. The headstones of Charlotte's Greek citizens are decorated with the Greek orthodox cross and often feature a picture of the deceased, secured directly to the stone. Many members of the organization the Woodmen of the World

were honored after death with a tombstone intricately carved in the shape of a log or configuration of several logs - several examples of this type of headstone stand in Elmwood. Members of a Masonic order often chose to inscribe their tombstones with the compass and the square, the symbol of a Mason. A stone commemorating World War I Veterans from Camp Greene features the symbol of the American Legion. In many of Elmwood's plots, family members share a large common headstone, with individual names and dates inscribed on plain, flat footstones.



Perhaps the most famous grave marker in Elmwood belongs to John King, performer and elephant trainer in John Robinson's Circus. King was killed in 1880, crushed against one of the circus's railroad cars by "Chief," one of his elephants. *The Charlotte Observer* covered the sensational accident in detail, reporting how "the enraged animal turn[ed] upon his keeper and crush[ed] him against the car. King sank to the ground without a groan and the men who were with him fled precipitately. The crowd scattered up Trade Street and the wildest confusion followed."¹¹ John King's fellow circus performers commissioned the monument over John King's grave in section A of Elmwood – the small obelisk-shaped marker is inscribed with the image of an elephant and these words: "Erected By the · members of · John Robinson's Circus · in memory of · JOHN KING · Killed at Charlotte · N.C., Sept 22, 1880 · by the elephant CHIEF · may his soul rest in peace."¹²

Among the most impressive of Elmwood's monuments are the Neoclassical-inspired obelisks, the massive above-ground box tombs, and the temple-like family crypts that crowd the Western half of the white cemetery. These grave markers overwhelmingly represent Charlotte-Mecklenburg's New South elite. A large obelisk marks D. A. Tompkins's resting place, while Edward Dilworth Latta is entombed, along with his wife and son, in an elaborate crypt, with a pedimented façade and large stained glass window in the rear. The oldest sections

of Elmwood, with these imposing types of monuments – the staggered heights of the upright obelisks and the lower but substantial box tombs – mimic Charlotte’s twentieth century skyline, with its foundation of early manufacturing and textile buildings in brick and stone, punctured by the glass and metal and dizzying height of modern day skyscrapers.

Although such expressions of wealth and prestige are less abundant in Pinewood, the African American cemetery contains several unique and impressive monuments. The crypt of W. W. Smith, Charlotte’s first black architect, is among the most unusual and personal grave markers in the Elmwood Cemetery complex. The crypt, a simple front-gable structure, is covered in Smith’s distinctive style of brickwork. The yellow brick elevations are dotted with contrasting red brick, and more red brick is laid in a diamond pattern across the building’s side elevations and across the rear. A plain wooden door, painted red and crowned with the word “SMITH” in simple red brick lettering, dominates the front of the crypt. The crypt, modeled closely on Smith’s design for the Mecklenburg Investment Company Building on South Brevard Street, is an homage to one of Charlotte’s most heralded twentieth century African American artisans.



Among the most moving of Elmwood’s grave markers are the statues of women in mourning. These poignant monuments were most often erected by grieving widowers for their deceased wives. By far the most artistically rendered of these statues kneels atop the grave of Mary Norcott London, wife of Edwin Thomas Cansler, Jr, who died in 1919 at the tender age of 24. The marble female figure, draped from head to toe in flowing cloth, poises on the verge of apparent collapse on a low, square marble base, one leg tucked beneath her. Her left hand covers her face, while her right hand, hanging limply in front of her, dangles a bouquet of roses – a symbol of one who has died in the full bloom of life. The statue’s intricately carved details – the wisps of hair that blow back across the figure’s cheek, the realistically rendered hands and folds of cloth draping down the back of the statue’s base – bring to life the grief of a young husband for a young bride who died nearly one hundred years ago.

Segregation and the Mark of Jim Crow In Elmwood Cemetery

Elmwood Cemetery's landscape design also tells the story of racial divisions within Charlotte-Mecklenburg, divisions that were strictly upheld throughout the South until the middle of the twentieth century. The Elmwood Cemetery complex was, from its inception, a combination of three distinctly separate burial grounds: Elmwood Cemetery, containing plots available for sale only to white citizens; Pinewood Cemetery, with plots available only to paying African Americans; and Potter's Field, a plot of land owned by the city and used exclusively for the burial of white citizens who could not afford to purchase a plot. While Potter's Field was placed on the edge but still within the boundaries of all-white Elmwood, Pinewood Cemetery was designed as a completely separate burial ground. No roads connected Elmwood and Pinewood, and Pinewood could not be accessed by the main entrance to Elmwood on Sixth Street – African Americans used an entrance on Ninth Street to enter Pinewood, which had no paved streets and no peripheral fencing until the middle of the twentieth century. The system of strict racial segregation set up under the Jim Crow laws of the early decades of the twentieth century dictated not only where African Americans could work, eat, shop, and socialize, but also where they could bury their dead. To emphasize the boundaries between the already segregated Elmwood and Pinewood cemeteries, a fence was erected in the 1930s between the two burial grounds. At one point, a "No Trespassing" sign was added to the fence, its warning addressing visitors to Elmwood.



Fred Alexander watches the fence separating Elmwood Cemetery and Pinewood Cemetery being removed in January 1969.

Years after the city of Charlotte voted against discrimination in the sale of cemetery plots, the fence between Elmwood and Pinewood continued to stand as a symbol of racial discrimination. Finally, in the late 1960s, empowered by the successes of the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, black Charlotteans began a crusade to bring the fence down. Leading the fight was [Fred Alexander](#), Charlotte's first black city councilman and the political voice of African Americans in Charlotte. During the spring, summer and fall of 1968, Alexander argued the case for voluntary removal of the fence,

fighting a white majority opposition within the City Council until January of 1969, when “Mayor Stan R. Brookshire broke a three-to-three tie in the Council.”¹³ The next day, the fence was removed by the Mecklenburg Jaycees, an African American boys organization whose members had volunteered repeatedly before the City Council to remove the fence. “This fence,” Alexander told *Charlotte News* reporters as he watched the fence come down, “has always been an insult to Negroes. It didn’t mean anything to white folks, but when I was a little boy, I used to come here and see this and to me it was just the worst thing in the world.”¹⁴

With the removal of the fence between Pinewood and Elmwood, the Elmwood Cemetery complex became, essentially, one burial ground. Roads now connect the two cemeteries – although the Ninth Street entrance is still open, visitors can walk or drive through either entrance and access Elmwood and Pinewood. With almost 150 years of funerary art and cultural, economic, and social history in its shady, lush acreage, the Elmwood Cemetery remains a significant part of center city Charlotte and a reflection of Charlotte’s development as a shining example of a New South City.

1. For the purpose of this report, “Elmwood Cemetery” is used to denote the entire Elmwood Cemetery complex – including Pinewood Cemetery and Potter’s Field – unless otherwise specified. The Survey Committee of the Historic Landmarks Commission requested that two clarifications be made with respect to this property. The brick keeper’s house was constructed in 1935. The construction of I-77 did create some isolated graves in Pinewood Cemetery. Both are included in the prospective landmark.

2. Thomas W. Hanchett, “The Growth of Charlotte: A History” (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission).

3. William H. Huffman, “Survey and Research Report on the Old Settlers Cemetery” (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1984). *Charlotte Chronicle*, “Elmwood Cemetery: Some Facts About It Which the Public is Probably Not Aware of,” March 8, 1891, p. 4. Settlers Cemetery was officially closed on April 29, 1867.

4. Hanchett, “The Growth of Charlotte: A History.”

5. *Charlotte Chronicle*, “Elmwood Cemetery,” March 8, 1891.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Miller’s Official Charlotte, N.C., City Directory. (Asheville: The Miller Press, 1929).

9. M. Ruth Little, *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998) p. 3.

10. _ “Map of Elmwood Cemetery, showing Driveways and Sections, completed January 31, 1906 , Office of City Engineer” (Cemetery Records, Carolina Room of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The map lists thirty-four sections, including Potters field, in Elmwood; Pinewood Cemetery is listed, but not in detail. Although a driveway does originate at W. Sixth Street, the original notation does not pinpoint this as the main entrance. The words “Main Entrance 700 W. 6th St.” were added later, along with an arrow pointing the Sixth Street entrance. I-77 has also been added to the map.

11. _ *The Charlotte Observer*, “A Made Elephant Crushes His Keepers and Escapes From the Car,” September 28, 1880, p. 3.

12. _ John King’s grave is located near the southeastern edge of Section A in Elmwood.

13. *The Charlotte News*, “The Fence: Alexander Beams, Symbol Comes Down,” January 1969. *The Charlotte News*, “Drive To Remove Fence Not Over,” July 2, 1968.

14. _ *The Charlotte News*, “The Fence,” January 1969. *The Charlotte News*, “Jaycees Volunteer Again To Remove Cemetery Fence,” September 23, 1968.