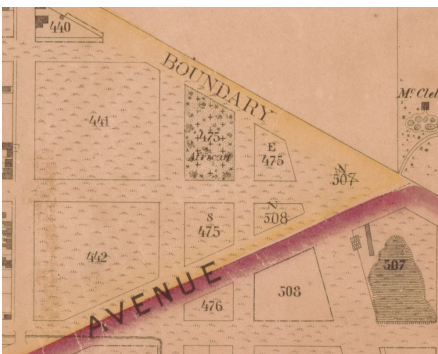
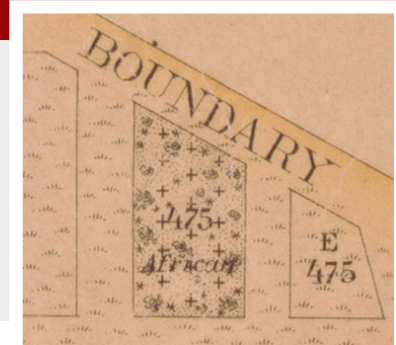


THE HARMONEON

Shaw's Lost African American Cemetery

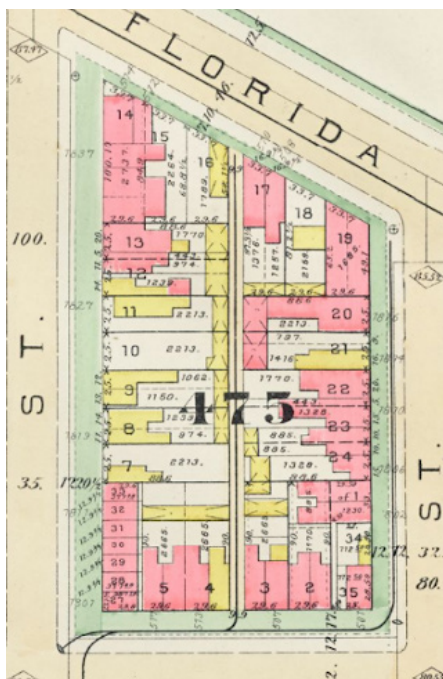
The Columbian Harmony Cemetery, one of the District of Columbia's most important and historic African American cemeteries, traces its roots to Shaw in the early 19th century. It was then known as the Harmoneon, and it was the first major cemetery established by and for African Americans in Washington, DC.



1857 map of Washington showing Harmoneon (African) Cemetery. Library of Congress

In 1825, the Columbian Harmony Society was established by free African Americans as a mutual aid and burial society. They paid an initiation fee and monthly dues, pledging to help other members when ill, attend each other's funerals, and support their widows and orphaned children. The founders and early members were among the most prominent African Americans in the city of their day. In 1828, the society purchased Square 475, an undeveloped 1.3 acre site at the northern edge of the city from the District of Columbia, for \$100. Only the portion bounded by Fifth and Sixth Streets, NW and S Street and Boundary Street (today's Florida Avenue), in today's Shaw neighborhood, was ultimately used for burials.

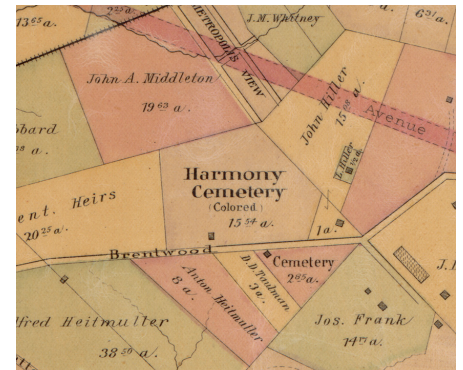
Referred to as the African Cemetery on maps of the time, the Harmoneon served as a key burial ground for people of African descent for the next thirty years. One of the most notable was George Bell (1761–1843), a founder of the city's first school for African Americans on Capitol Hill in 1807.



1892 map of Washington showing Square 475. DC Public Library

After local ordinances prohibited the establishment and operation of cemeteries within city limits, the society received Congressional permission in 1856 to sell Square 475 and purchase property outside of the boundaries of the city. A pastoral, 17-acre site bounded by Brentwood Road, NE and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and Rhode Island Avenue and T Street, NE was purchased for a new burial ground in 1857. The Harmoneon's graves were transferred to this new site, known as the Columbian Harmony Cemetery, by 1859.

Following the relocation of graves, the society's Square 475 property was divided into lots, the last of which were sold after the Civil War. Almost all the historic buildings on the former Harmoneon site were built before 1887. Human remains were reportedly found during excavation of the site in the 20th century.



1887 map of Washington showing Columbian Harmony Cemetery. Library of Congress

With the addition of 18 more acres in 1886, the Columbian Harmony Cemetery became one of the most active African American cemeteries in Washington, DC, well into the twentieth century. The cemetery was the final resting place for many of Washington's most prominent Black citizens, from activists, abolitionists, and Civil War veterans to entrepreneurs, educators, and entertainers.

After a period of financial instability, the cemetery's land was sold to developers in 1959, with the promise that all remains would be transferred to a new location. Approximately 37,000 graves were exhumed and moved to National Harmony Memorial Park in Hyattsville, Maryland. The original site was completely redeveloped to build the Rhode Island Avenue-Brentwood Metro station and surrounding commercial and residential properties. All evidence of this historic cemetery was erased save for a memorial plaque, although human remains continued to be found there during subsequent construction into the 21st century.



Columbian Harmony Cemetery, 1960. Scurlock Studio Records, Smithsonian Institution



Plaque at Rhode Island Avenue-Brookland Metro Station. Photo by Alexander M. Padro, 2022.

Tragically, cherished family headstones, monuments, and mausoleums were not transferred along with their remains, and the individual identities of many gravesites were not marked in their new location. The headstones disappeared and remained lost for fifty years, until many were rediscovered in Virginia, where they had been used as riprap on private property along the Potomac River.

In response to the desecration of these monuments, a restorative justice initiative called Project Harmony was launched. In collaboration with the descendant community and the governments of Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia, the project is recovering and repatriating the headstones and memorializing ancestors at National Harmony Memorial Park and at Caledon State Park, King George, Virginia.



Headstones found on the shore of the Potomac River. Photo by Edd Fuller, 2010.

The Harmoneon is one of a number of Washington, DC burial grounds for people of African descent lost to development over the course of two centuries. Efforts to reclaim their stories are part of a nationwide movement to honor the historic resting places of African Americans, both free and enslaved, that have been desecrated or erased throughout American history. To learn more about the history of the Columbian Harmony Cemetery's origins in Shaw as the Harmoneon, visit HarmoneonShawDC.com.

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