

Sign 1 of the National Underground Railroad markers at the Calvert Street entrance to Walter Pierce Park, Washington, DC

Rock Creek Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



HALLOWED GROUND

Resilience and Resistance

Today's Walter Pierce Park was once the site of two cemeteries—the Friends (Quaker) Burying Ground, in use from 1807 to 1890, and Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, where more than 8,400 African Americans were buried between 1870 to 1890. Many stories of resistance and resilience lie in this hallowed ground.

Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery was owned by the Colored Union Benevolent Association, a group founded by free Blacks in 1838. Association members were activists. They established many of the city's earliest Black churches, schools, and social organizations. They worked with Washington's Underground Railroad—a secret network of Black and White operatives who, at great risk, helped enslaved people travel north to freedom.



TIERRA SAGRADA: *Resiliencia y Resistencia*

Entre los años 1870 y 1890, en el Parque Walter Pierce se encontraba el Cementerio de Mount Pleasant Plains, donde fueron enterrados más de 8,400 afroamericanos. El cementerio pertenecía a la Asociación Benéfica del Sindicato de Personas de Color, que colaboraba con el Ferrocarril Subterráneo—la red clandestina que ayudaba a las personas a escapar de la esclavitud.

Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery at Walter Pierce Park is a National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site. These signs were erected by Rock Creek Park and the Kalorama Citizens Association with funding from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, National Park Service.

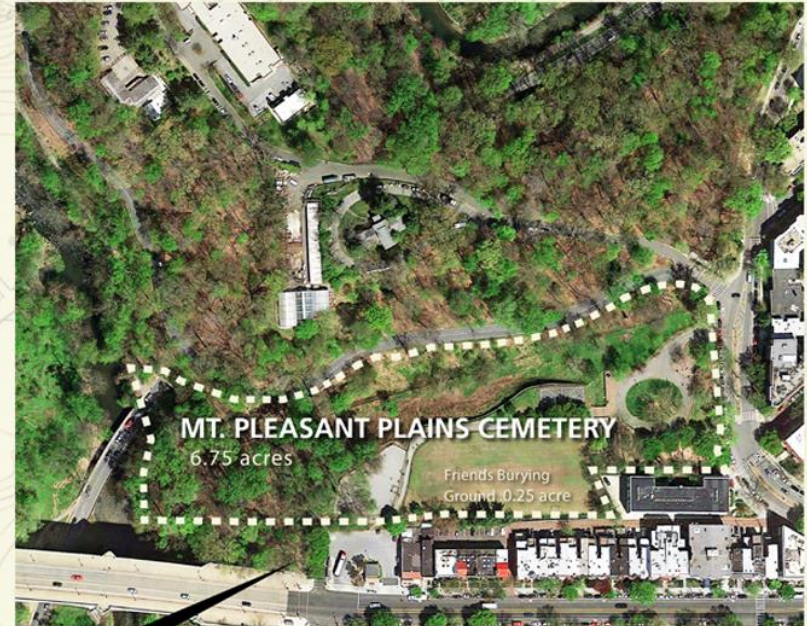
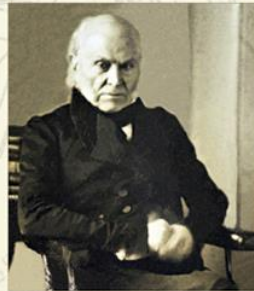


Civil War veteran Charles H. Shorter (1844-1916) was the last living trustee of the Colored Union Benevolent Association (insignia below). His father, John, was a founding member in 1838. — Family photo



This site was part of a large tract owned by Quaker Jonathan Shoemaker, who in 1807 donated a quarter-acre for the Friends Burying Ground. Future President John Quincy Adams (below) bought part of the tract, including a mill, in 1823. Adams' heirs sold 7 acres to the Colored Union Benevolent Association for its cemetery in 1870.

— Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery



You are here

The dotted line shows the historical boundaries of the cemeteries.
— Google Earth map



NATIONAL
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NETWORK TO FREEDOM



HALLOWED GROUND

Seeking Freedom

Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery was the final resting place for some of the passengers and conductors of the largest Underground Railroad operation in history: the escape on the sailing ship Pearl. In April 1848, after months of planning, 77 enslaved residents of the Washington area boarded the ship in darkness at the Southwest waterfront, setting sail for the Chesapeake Bay and then north to freedom.



Amelia Edmonson
1782-1874

But armed enslavers seized the Pearl where the Potomac River meets the Bay. Crew members were tried and jailed. Many of the enslaved passengers were taken to New Orleans to be sold.

Amelia and Paul Edmonson had six grown children on the Pearl. The couple's tireless efforts to buy them out of slavery energized abolitionists worldwide and eventually helped free most of the family.

Amelia Edmonson and her sons, Ephraim and Richard—who had been aboard the Pearl—were buried at Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, along with Luke Carter, who hid passengers in his home before the escape. Many members of the Colored Union Benevolent Association, which established the cemetery in 1870, had family and friends on the Pearl and actively took part in the escape attempt.



TIERRA SAGRADA: *En Busca de la Libertad*

En 1848, 77 residentes esclavizados del área de Washington, intentaron escapar hacia el norte en la goleta Pearl, en busca de la libertad. El plan fracasó y muchos fueron llevados al sur para ser vendidos. Algunos de ellos fueron enterrados aquí, en el Cementerio de Mount Pleasant Plains.

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Edmonson family descendants celebrate their ancestors at Walter Pierce Park in 2008. Left to right, back row: Paul C. Johnson III, Jules I. Johnson. Front row: Janessa R. Robinson, Amy S. Johnson, Diane T. Young, Dawne E. Young, Muriel Scott. Seated: Jeannine S. Clark —Barbara Bates
—Amelia Edmonson portrait (left, middle), Association for the Study of African American Life and History



Voyage of the Pearl

- 1 Departs Southwest Washington
- 2 Seized at Cornfield Harbor, Maryland
- 3 Planned destination: Frenchtown, Maryland

—David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries



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HALLOWED GROUND

Soldiers, Sailors, and Refugees of War

The Civil War changed Washington, as Union troops poured into the city to secure it, and thousands of refugees from slavery arrived here seeking freedom. More than 40 African American soldiers and sailors were later buried at Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, including at least three who fled enslavement to serve on the front lines. Also laid to rest here were countless self-emancipated men, women, and children who traveled dangerous distances to establish free lives in the District.

Among the freedom seekers buried here:



Fort Corcoran,
Arlington, Va., 1865
—Library of Congress

- Soldiers Lewis Ferguson, William Tolson, and Edward Marks escaped slavery to join the U.S. Colored Infantry's First Regiment.
- Dabney Walker crossed into Union lines near Fredericksburg, Virginia, to become a Union scout. His wife, Lucy Ann, was a Union spy.
- Nancy and John Pinn ran from slavery in northern Virginia early in the war only to be arrested as suspected fugitives. They and others were freed from jail months later by federal order.

• Lucrecy Bonner, Matilda Golden, and Maria Willis arrived as refugees at a Union camp on Mason's Island (now Theodore Roosevelt Island) seeking food, shelter, and employment. When Willis and her 10 children left the island for the city of Washington, officials noted that they had "gone to do for themselves."



TIERRA SAGRADA: *Soldados, Marineros y Refugiados de Guerra*

Entre los enterrados en el Cementerio de Mount Pleasant Plains se encontraban veteranos de la Guerra Civil y refugiados autoemancipados que eligieron la libertad, a pesar del peligroso viaje y la incertidumbre del futuro.

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Above: Thousands of self-emancipated people stayed at Camp Barker at 12th and R streets, N.W.
—Library of Congress

Below: The First Regiment of the U.S. Colored Infantry mustered at Mason's Island (now Theodore Roosevelt Island).
—Library of Congress





HALLOWED GROUND

Rediscovery and Remembrance

The African American and Quaker cemeteries here were almost lost to time. Both closed in 1890 due to development. Parts of the land were sold to the National Zoo and National Park Service. Developers bought the rest and tried unsuccessfully to build apartment buildings on this site. In 1978, activist Walter C. Pierce persuaded the city to create the park that now bears his name.

In 2005, city officials proposed a major construction project in the park. Concerned community members and descendants of the buried joined forces to protect what was left of the cemeteries. Howard University biological anthropologist Mark Mack led the archeological survey that documented exposed remains, grave goods, and headstones. Ground-penetrating radar detected dozens of graves, and scientists determined that thousands more might remain too deep to be detected.

The archeological team searched city death certificates to learn who was buried here and found more than 8,400 individuals. Descendants and community members have gathered at the park each spring since 2005 to remember them, saying their names and telling their stories.



TIERRA SAGRADA: *Redescubrimiento y Memoria*

El cementerio que alguna vez estuvo aquí, cerró en 1890; sin embargo, quedan aún pruebas de su existencia, incluyendo tumbas. Los nombres e historias de los aquí sepultados son recordados en ceremonias públicas cada primavera.

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Mark Mack, 1961-2012
—*The Washington Post*



The Howard University archeology team surveys the park.

—*Mary Belcher*

Descendants and allies gather at the park to read aloud the names of the buried.

—*Gretchen Roberts-Shorter*



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