Reclaiming a Sense of Place:
Geospatial Technologies and the Flat Rock Cemetery Project

Jeffrey Glover,[1] Kathryn Jackson,[2] and Johnny Waits[3]

[1] Department of Anthropology, Georgia State University. USA.
[2] Greater Atlanta Archaeological Society. USA.
[3] President, Flat Rock Archive. USA.

Abstract

The Flat Rock community in southern DeKalb County, Georgia (just outside Atlanta) is one of the oldest continually-occupied African-American communities in Georgia. Although history shows that many African-American communities in the South were broken apart as former slaves migrated north in search of jobs and a more equitable life, Flat Rock remained an intact community. This was largely due to the efforts of individuals who were able to purchase land and later sell it in small parcels to fellow community members. Proximity—both to ancestors and significant places—is a cross-culturally important component to the creation of a sense of community. Placed on a high peak in DeKalb County, the Flat Rock Cemetery became such a place for the Flat Rock community. It contains burials dating from 1834 (three years prior to the official establishment of the community) through 1959.

In the spring of 2008, Johnny Waits, president of the Flat Rock Archive, proposed a project to the members of the Greater Atlanta Archaeological Society (GAAS) involving the clearing and mapping of this historic cemetery. These initial meetings eventually led to the involvement of Georgia State University (GSU). Through the use of a total station, Jeffrey Glover of GSU and his students have been mapping the cemetery and conducting research into its material culture. The objectives of this project, due to be completed in 2009, include completion of the cemetery map and the subsequent connection of identified graves to the archival data collected by Mr. Waits. These data will be integrated with photographic images of tombstones and material offerings, and will be established on GSU's geospatial server using ESRI's ArcServer. These interactive maps will be made accessible to visitors to the Flat Rock archive web site.

Keywords: cemetery, African-American, GIS, historical archaeology

1   PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In an era rife with change, the Flat Rock community lived steady. As waves of newly-freed slaves sped north, the people of Flat Rock put down roots. For over 150 years, the small, unincorporated community of Flat Rock, Georgia, has survived against immense odds and pressures, claiming today to be one of the longest continuously occupied African-American communites in Georgia.[1] Flat Rock was born out of three large plantations and has survived through its strong sense of community. This communal identity is reinforced by a deep connection to the land that has been farmed by community members for the past century and a half. Today many of these agricultural fields have been replaced by subdivisions, but the historic Flat Rock cemetery continues to materialize this strong connection between community and place.

In this paper we give a brief history of the community followed by a discussion of the three main objectives of the current project, which are:

1.   the mapping and photographic documentation of the cemetery for preservation purposes;

2.   the use of geospatial technologies to help people (re)connect with this important part of the Flat Rock community's heritage. Members of the Flat Rock Archive hope the story of Flat Rock resonates with others outside of the immediate community. Theirs is a story of how a group of people's shared sense of community and connection to the land helped them overcome obstacle after obstacle (from throwing off the chains of slavery and overcoming its lasting impacts to persevering through school and farm burnings);

3.   the demonstration to students, advocational archaeologists (like members of GAAS), and others of the applied nature of archaeological research; in particular how modern technologies can be employed not just to record arcane, minute archaeological details but also to actually impact people's lives.

In essence, we believe that this project, which is still in its nascent stages, is a good example of "making history interactive."

---

[1]Johnny Waits, personal communication to author, February 6, 2009.

Figure 1. *The location of the Flat Rock community.*

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To the outside world, the community of Flat Rock has long been folded into the town of Lithonia, Georgia, located approximately 20 miles east of Atlanta, within DeKalb County (see fig. 1). This area of Georgia has a long and complex history dating back at least 14,000 years to the first arrival of pre-contact peoples. Although archaeological sites of all major prehistoric time periods can be found within the county, the most abundant evidence is from Archaic and Woodland sites.[1] The best known and closest site to the Flat Rock cemetery is the Woodland period "Miner's Creek" site (9Da91), which provides ample ceramic, lithic, and organic evidence of early Native Americans in the area.[2] In fact, local lore states that the Flat Rock cemetery was first a Native American burial ground. This, however, has yet to be substantiated archaeo-logically.

The town of Flat Rock was founded in the early- to mid-1830s, which coincides with the earliest date recorded at the cemetery—1834. The area had recently

been within Henry County,[3] but in response to a growing population, county lines were redrawn in 1822, creating DeKalb County.[4] With the ever-increasing white population came a subsequent boost in agriculture as part of the economic foundation for DeKalb and Henry Counties. With cotton as the primary crop for each, these plantations required extensive resources, namely slave labor.[5] As mentioned, Flat Rock grew out of the slave population that powered several of the large local plantations individually owned by the Johnson, South, and Lyon families.[6]

The development of Flat Rock continued through the Civil War and into the late nineteenth century. The community had a US postal office, a one-room school, and locally run stores. As many former slaves relocated to the North or to bigger cities in the South,[7] Flat Rock remained not only intact, but in fact grew in population. This growth was partially the result of religious connectivity that grew within the community, and later, the opportunity for land ownership.[8]

Life in Flat Rock, like many communities of this time, in part revolved around two churches, both started by former slaves during the 1860s: the Flat Rock Methodist Episcopal Church[9] and the Bethel Baptist Church.[10] Although the latter closed its doors in the 1940s, the Flat Rock Methodist Episcopal Church continues to be a center for the community at large.

The 1860s brought an unusual turn of events for the town of Flat Rock. Despite a growing population, its status as an official town diminished. The post office, its only official connection with federal or state

---

[1]Vivian Price, *The History of DeKalb County, Georgia: 1822–1900* (Fernandina Beach, FL: Wolfe Publishing Company, 1997) 3–7; ICON Architecture, Inc., "Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area Feasibility Study," The Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, www.arabia alliance.org/docs/4-chapter4.pdf, 15.

[2]David Chase, "Archaeological Excavations of the Miner's Creek Site," *The Profile* 63 (1988): 92–95.

[3]Vessie Thrasher Rainer, *Henry County, Georgia: The Mother of Counties* (McDonough, GA: N.P., 1971) 83–85.
[4]Vivian Price, *The History of DeKalb County, Georgia: 1822–1900*, 63.

[5]ICON Architecture, Inc., "Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area Feasibility Study," The Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, www.arabiaalliance.org/docs/4-chapter4.pdf, 19.

[6]Johnny Waits, personal communication to author, February 6, 2009.

[7]Vivian Price, *The History of DeKalb County, Georgia: 1822–1900*, 375.

[8]Johnny Waits, personal communication to author, February 6, 2009.

[9]Flat Rock United Methodist Church, "The History of Flat Rock United Methodist Church," The Flat Rock United Methodist Church, Flat Rock, GA, www.flatrockumn.org/history.htm.

[10]Johnny Waits, personal communication to author, February 6, 2009.

agencies, was closed in 1870[1] and the town itself ceased to be shown on maps after 1865.[2] Its erasure from maps was in no way a reflection of its sense of community. It was more likely emblematic of the racism of the day, as well as being tied to the growth of neighboring Lithonia, given its lucrative granite quarries and location along the new rail line.[3]

Through an ever-changing environment and set of circumstances, Flat Rock was able to maintain its community ties through both a shared sense of history and by remaining in the location where the town had always existed. This was possible in large part through the efforts of one man, T. A. Bryant, Sr. (1894–1987), the son of Spencer B. Bryant (1864–1946)[4] T. A. Bryant, Sr. actively bought and sold land for over 60 years to help maintain Flat Rock as a viable community. He initially purchased land from former slave-holding families in 1925, and over the next six decades, he subdivided and sold his land holdings to various Flat Rock community members.[5] These sales allowed the community to maintain the geographical roots their families had started in the early and mid-nineteenth century. The Flat Rock Archive is itself located in Bryant's former house.

The ties between the people and places of the Flat Rock community remain unbroken to this day. This connection persists through the presence of people in the area as well as their proximity to places they have deemed significant. One such place is the cemetery associated with the Flat Rock Methodist Episcopal Church.

Placed high on a DeKalb County peak just north of the South River, the Flat Rock cemetery is the final resting place of over 250 community members (see fig. 2). With its oldest internment dating to the first half of the nineteenth century, the Flat Rock cemetery traces community history from slavery to post-World War II, and houses many members of the community's founding families. Among others, names such as Waits, Shoemaker, Bryant, Lyons, and Wise are found

---

[1]Jim Forte Postal History, "Post Offices, Georgia, Henry County," www.postalhistory.com/postoffices.asp?task=display&state=GA&county=Henry.

[2]Johnny Waits, personal communication to author, February 6, 2009.

[3]Vivian Price, *The History of DeKalb County, Georgia: 1822–1900*, 315.

[4]Johnny Waits, personal communication to author, February 6, 2009; Flat Rock United Methodist Church, "The History of Flat Rock United Methodist Church," The Flat Rock United Methodist Church, Flat Rock, GA, www.flatrockumn.org/history.htm.

[5]Paul K Graham, *Real Property of T. A. Bryant, Sr. of DeKalb County, Georgia* (Decatur, GA: The Genealogy Company, 2005).

within the confines of the cemetery as well as on the roster of early Church Trustees, and these names are still found in the area today.
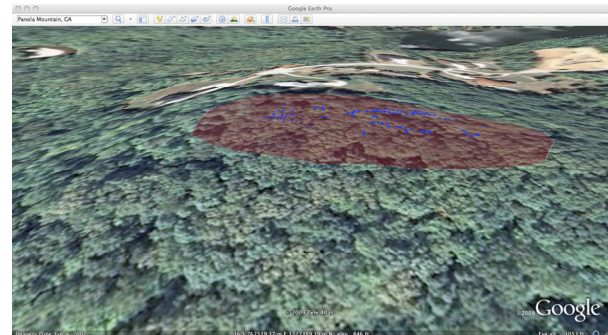

Figure 2. *A perspective view of the Flat Rock cemetery, looking west.*

3   THE CEMETERY PROJECT

The connection between the community and the cemetery has provided a launch point for recent preservation efforts. In 2007 and 2008, the Flat Rock Archive connected with the Greater Atlanta Archaeological Society (GAAS), who in turn contacted faculty at Georgia State University (GSU), with the shared hopes of restoring, preserving, and documenting the overgrown, but not forgotten, cemetery. This process is beginning to provide an invaluable knowledge base and digital record of the cemetery for the descendants of those resting in the Flat Rock cemetery, the academic community, and others.

Through initial conversations with Mr. Waits and Flat Rock community members, we envisioned creating a detailed map of the cemetery that could be available to a wider audience, including the publication of an interactive map on Georgia State University's Geospatial server. This included mapping the individual graves, where they could be identified, the headstone and footstone markers, and any other materials, such as offerings, associated with the cemetery's 100-plus years of use. To this end, the mapping project became the out-of-class assignment for Jeffrey Glover's Fall 2008 archaeological methods course at GSU. The students helped in continuing the clearing of the cemetery that had been started by GAAS and Flat Rock community members.

After the clearing, the next task was to identify and number the graves in the cemetery prior to any mapping or other data recovery could begin. This was not as straightforward as one might imagine. The majority of historic cemeteries where preservation efforts are well documented are the resting places of the white citizens, with notable exceptions such as the well-known African Burial Ground project in New York City. In most of these historic cemeteries the graves are well marked with inscribed tombstones and maintained in well-manicured, park-like settings. This

is not the case with many African-American cemeteries from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Often the cemetery was placed in an out of the way locale, as a result of their inhabitants' status as slaves and the unwillingness of slave owners to give up arable land for such a purpose.[1] There also appears to be a more natural aesthetic sense employed at African-American cemeteries, as well as continuity with earlier West African burial traditions, such as the placement of broken household items on the graves.

These elements, along with the fact that many African-American communities from the nineteenth to early twentieth century are no longer occupied, conspire to make the identification of these sacred places difficult. Additionally, even after the Emancipation Proclamation, most freed slaves could not afford elaborately-carved gravestones, and instead continued the practice that had begun during slavery of marking the head and foot of the grave with local fieldstones (see fig. 3). These fieldstones are generally small in size, and after a century, many have been lost or can be confused with stones from natural outcrops, often the same outcrops where these stones originated.

At Flat Rock there is a mixture of decorative techniques used to demarcate the graves; the majority are marked with fieldstones, while other graves are clearly visible. In addition to fieldstones, it was possible to identify still visible grave-sized depressions.

Figure 3. *A grave marked by a local fieldstone and metal plaque.*

While not one hundred percent reliable, these preliminary methods allowed us to identify approximately 180 of the reported 250 individuals buried at the site (see fig. 4). In the future there are plans to implement a systematic, subsurface probing program to check these preliminary identifications. These initial efforts were aided greatly by the local knowledge of Mr. Waits and others, as well as the fact

that the graves were organized in rows and oriented East-West, with the heads of the individuals toward the west. This pattern is seen across the South at other African-American cemeteries, where it is said that the individuals are placed with "their eyes facing Africa."[2]
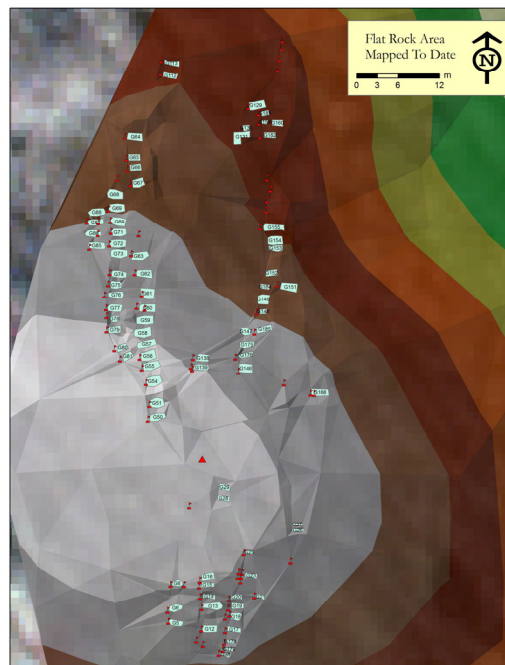

Figure 4. *Map of the graves recorded to date.*

It is also interesting to note that the inscribed headstones were oriented away from the grave, opposite to the pattern found in cemeteries of Americans of European descent. This can be attributed to the way in which people moved through this space. The significance of processions as part of the burial act has been commented on by a number of scholars[3] and the placement of the writing where it is more easily read is certainly testament to that. Another interesting cultural modification of the site that has helped in the identification of graves are landscaped terraces. Given the site's hilltop location, Flat Rock community members appeared to have constructed small terraces to prevent the erosion of their loved ones out of the hillside (although this has not been confirmed by any of the Flat Rock community members).

After flagging the identifiable burials, the processes of documentation and mapping began. Mapping was done with a total station following standard practices, and was augmented by the use of GPS for more distant surveying. The documentation was done utilizing standardized forms, digital cameras, and stone rubbings. These data, along with information and images provided by the Flat Rock archive, are being

[1]The Heritage Education Network, "African American Cemeteries," Middle Tennessee State University, http://frank.mtsu.edu/~then/Cemetery/page7.html.

[2]Ibid.

[3]See, for example, John Micheal Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978).

integrated into the ArcGIS project being published to the web using ESRI's ArcServer software (see fig. 5). The project is being housed on GSU's geospatial server (http://geospatial.gsu.edu:8399/Flatrock); ultimately the web address and basic description of the project will be linked to the Flat Rock Archive website (www.flatrockarchive.org/).
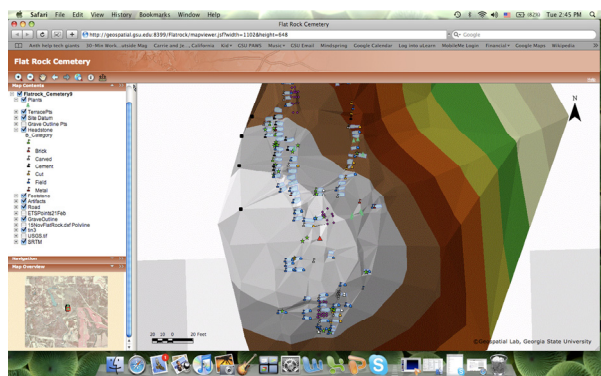

Figure 5. *Screen shot of ArcServer interface for Flat Rock interactive map.*

4 CONCLUSIONS

One of the primary goals of the Flat Rock Cemetery Project was that of "making history interactive." To accomplish this, a number of different groups were engaged. Georgia State university students and archaeological society members were taught the basics of archaeological survey techniques and note taking, with a brief introduction to ArcGIS. More significant,

however, is how it impressed upon the students the lesson that archaeology has real-world applications, and that it really can have an impact on people's lives today.

Most importantly, this project has begun to make the history of the Flat Rock community accessible in a way it never has been before. The combination of standard geospatial technologies with the Archive's written and oral records will make an invaluable tool for the community as they share their story. The hope is not to limit this story to local community members but to reach a much larger audience. This is not done out of vanity or a quest for fame but because the story of the Flat Rock community is inspirational; something that has struck us from the beginning of the project. The publicity received by this small community and its cemetery is a testimony to how their story resonates with people. Actor Chris Tucker was one of the African-American individuals featured in Dr. Louis Henry Gates' PBS series "African-American Lives." As it turns out, Chris Tucker is the grandson of T. A. Bryant, Jr. which makes him the great-grandson of T. A. Bryant, Sr. The history of Flat Rock was in part revealed on this nationally acclaimed series. The Flat Rock story has also been picked up by National Public Radio and featured on "All Things Considered" in 2008, as well as in multiple local newspaper stories. In a time where many of us no longer have deep connections to the places where we live, Flat Rock shows the true importance of a shared sense of place, and our hope is that this project provides one more avenue to engage the public and share this story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chase, David. "Archaeological Excavations of the Miner's Creek Site." *The Profile* 63 (1988): 92–95.

Flat Rock United Methodist Church, "The History of Flat Rock United Methodist Church." www.flat rockumn.org/history.htm (accessed March 9, 2009).

Graham, Paul K. *Real Property of T. A. Bryant, Sr., of DeKalb County, Georgia*. Decatur, GA: The Genealogy Company, 2005.

ICON Architecture, Inc. "Arabia Mountain National Heritage Feasibility Study." The Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance. www.arabiaalliance.org/docs/4-chapter4.pdf (accessed January 27, 2009).

Price, Vivian. *The History of DeKalb County, Georgia: 1822–1900*. Fernandina Beach, FL: Wolfe Publishing Company, 1997.

Rainer, Vessie Thrasher. *Henry County, Georgia: The Mother of Counties*. McDonough, GA: N.P., 1971.

Vlach, John Micheal. *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978.