

History of the Orangeburg Cemetery

On April 5, 1889, several leading citizens of color, having determined the need for a cemetery to be established at Orangeburg for its residents of African descent, combined their efforts to charter the Orangeburg Cemetery Association. The individuals listed on the organizations original charter of incorporation are Rev. E.C. Brown, Major John H. Fordham, Rev. A.G. Townsend, Abram Middleton, B.J. Lloyd, W.L. Buckley and R.W. Jewell. The formalization of the association followed closely upon the purchase of a tract of land acquired on April 1, 1889 by Rev. E.C. Brown on behalf of the fledgling cemetery organization. The final payment on the site was made on September 3, 1896. The Rev. Brown was reimbursed by sale of individual shares in the property at \$10 per share. Rev. Brown subsequently deeded the land to the Orangeburg Cemetery Association.

Officers of the Association who signed the deed were Major John H. Fordham, listed as Vice President, Rev. A.G. Townsend, listed as Secretary, and Rev. D.M. Minus (whose position as an officer was not specified). The cemetery is considered to be the oldest, non-church affiliated, private cemetery organized for African Americans in Orangeburg County. The property remained in private hands from 1938 until the 1990s and was maintained by a vigilant group of private citizens. Lillie Jackson Matthews (1893 - 1987) and Hazel Tatnall Pierce (1888 - 1982) were pioneers in the Orangeburg Cemetery restoration project. In 1975 they appealed to churches and civic organizations to send people out early on Saturday mornings, with their own tools, to clean up the cemetery. Many came and worked faithfully. These two women served lemonade and bologna sandwiches to those who worked to clean the cemetery, which looked like a wilderness. They worked for months, but with hand tools, were not able to accomplish much.

In 1984 a committee of six interested people including Maude Lawrence, Sadie Dash McNair, Rev. & Mrs. John Salley, Daniel Moore, and Geraldyn Zimmerman formed an ad hoc committee to take up the challenge. They wrote as many plot owners as they could locate asking them to contribute \$25 a year to help improve the appearance of the cemetery. About 100 of the 300 people written answered, some contributing as much as \$100. With this money Herbert Myers was hired to help with the project. Members of the Epsilon Omega Chapter of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and Councilman Bernard Haire joined the group. Councilman Haire soon got Mayor Martin C. Cheatham interested in the project. Mayor Cheatham then made it possible for the committee to meet with City Council.

In 1987 the Association received a Keep America Beautiful Award for work in conserving the cemetery property, through the efforts of a local Girl Scouts Troop, directed by Mrs. Geraldyn Zimmerman. Later the cemetery site was recognized by presentation of the Readers' Digest Award for Community Service. This \$500 award was used for cemetery improvements and upkeep.

Management of the property was transferred from the private Cemetery Association to the City of Orangeburg in 1994 and the site was annexed as a public historic resource under the supervision of the City of Orangeburg Parks and Recreation Department.

The Orangeburg Cemetery Today

After the transfer of the cemetery to the City of Orangeburg was completed in 1994, a committee was formed to raise money to fence in the cemetery and make other improvements. Members of the present Cemetery Committee are Janye Clement, Charlotte Dixon, Harvey Durant, Vickie Green, Jerry Govan, Jr., Maude Lawrence, John Lessane, Jr., Eugene A.R. Montgomery, David Philips, Ellen Robinson, Buster Smith, James Sulton, David Wallace, Mimi Wannamaker, Clemmie Webber, Michael A. Wolfe, John H. Yow, and Geraldine P. Zimmerman. Mayor Martin C. Cheatham was an active member until his death in March 2001.

This committee worked hard and had several successful campaigns. Mayor Cheatham was responsible for tapping many resources to help with the project. His enthusiasm and hard work was a prime factor in making the project successful.

Most of Orangeburg's leading families of African descent purchased shares in the Cemetery Association and many prominent educators, religious leaders, physicians, entrepreneurs, agriculturalist and other professionals are interred at this highly significant historic site.

**1. Rev. Nelson Cornelson Nix
1866 - 1944**

Distinguished educator, religious leader, and business man, Nix was born in Barnwell County, SC, the son of Charity Gilliard and Allen Nix. He attended secondary school in Barnwell County and later matriculated at Claflin University completing the normal course of study in 1890. He finished his college level work at Claflin and Benedict College, fulfilling requirements for the A.B. and A.M. degrees from Claflin. He later received doctorate of divinity degrees from both Claflin and Benedict in 1907, and completed further post-graduate study at the University of Chicago.

When the Colored Normal Industrial Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina (now South Carolina State University) was organized in 1896, Nix was immediately invited to join the faculty, becoming head of the Mathematics Department, and later was made Dean of the School. In addition, Nix became a noted minister and religious leader in the Baptist denomination and was instrumental in the establishment of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church in Orangeburg. Nix owned and operated a 200 acre farm in Orangeburg County. A Mason and Pythian, Nix married the former Sylvia Robinson of Orangeburg.

**2. Benjamin Gilbert Johnson
1906 - 1981**

Born in Cope, SC, Johnson moved to Orangeburg with his mother and sisters where they were later joined by his father. He received his elementary, high school and college education from Claflin University. Johnson accepted Christ at an early age and was a faithful member of Trinity Methodist Church in Orangeburg. He served on the Steward Board, as a church school teacher, Secretary of the Methodist Men, and was the first President of the Golden Age Club. For many years he worked as a clerk at Maxwell's Grocery Store. In 1951 he began work at South Carolina State College as Assistant Military Custodian and remained there in that capacity until 1971 when he retired.

**3. Marion Raven Birnie Wilkinson
1870 - 1956**

The wife of Robert S. Wilkinson, Mrs. Wilkinson herself a prominent educator and social activist. A native of Charleston, she was a graduate of the Avery Normal Institute and taught there as well before she married in 1897. She was quite involved in campus activities while her husband was president, and for many years afterward. She was instrumental in founding a chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association on the campus and in overseeing the construction of the Marion Raven Wilkinson YWCA Hut, known as the "Y Hut," in 1925. Mrs. Wilkinson was also quite active in the larger Orangeburg community. She founded the Sunlight Club; was one of the founders of the South Carolina Federation of Negro Women; and was an officer in the National Association of Federated Negro Women. Mrs. Wilkinson also founded the Wilkinson Home, a home for black girls.

4. Robert Shaw Wilkinson

1865 - 1932

Wilkinson was a native of Charleston who, like Johnson Whittaker, attended the United States Military Academy at West Point but did not graduate. He graduated from Oberlin College in 1891, then taught at Kentucky State College until 1896, when he came to Orangeburg as one of the first faculty members of the new Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina (later South Carolina State College). Wilkinson taught physics and mathematics before becoming President of the college in 1911 when Thomas E. Miller resigned. Wilkinson, who led South Carolina State through a period of transition and growth in which the campus and the curriculum were both transformed, commented in 1931 that it was necessary “to provide for maintaining the present program and allowing for future expansion. What investment can promise more for the future of the Negro and of South Carolina?” He also served as President of the Negro Land Grant College Association and the Palmetto State Teachers’ Association.

5. Miller Fulton Whittaker

1892 - 1949

Son of Johnson C. Whittaker, Miller Whittaker was himself a prominent educator who served as the third President of SC State College (1932 - 1949). Whittaker, who had been at the college since 1913, had been professor and Dean of the Division of Mechanical Arts and was an architect who designed several buildings on the college campus including Bradham Hall (1916), Manning Hall (1916), Lowman Hall (1917), Hodge Hall (1928), and the Home Management House (1928); his design for Hodge Hall was his master’s thesis in architecture from Kansas State University. He also served as President of the Conference of Land-Grant Colleges and of the State Association of College Presidents, Deans, and Registrars.

6. Johnson Chesnut Whittaker

1859 - 1931

Whittaker is best-known for an incident that occurred in 1880 while he was a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Born a slave in Camden, he was one of several blacks who attended the University of South Carolina during Reconstruction; he was appointed to the Academy in 1876. He was attacked in the middle of the night by masked white cadets who slashed and beat him, then tied him to his bed and left him bleeding there. The authorities concluded, after the court-martial, that since no white cadet admitted to attacking Whittaker, then the young South Carolinian must have faked the attack to draw attention to himself, and he was discharged from the Academy. Whittaker returned to South Carolina and received a law degree at USC. He practiced law in Sumter before beginning his teaching career at SC State College. Only three of twenty-three black cadets who attended West Point in the 1870s and 1880s, including Whittaker, graduated and received their commissions in the United States Army. Whittaker received a posthumous commission as a second lieutenant in the US Army in 1994.

7. Henry Winfield Embly

1882 - 1943

Henry Winfield Embly was enrolled as a boarding student in the newly established South Carolina State College in the fall of 1896. Upon receiving the L.I. Degree (Licentiate of Instruction) he was elected Teacher Principal of Calhoun County Colored Schools. He held this position until September 1916 at which time he and his family moved to Orangeburg, SC. Shortly following his settling in Orangeburg he and his wife purchased an appropriate site directly across from what is now South Carolina State University for the construction of Embly's Cafe and Boarding House. This was the first over-night accommodations available to African Americans in Orangeburg. The timing of the establishment of Embly's Cafe and Boarding House was a significant factor in South Carolina State College's ability to attract entertainers, speakers and educators of note prior to World War I.

The site of this early Cafe and Boarding House continue to experience uninterrupted Embly ownership and occupancy.

8. Sulton Family Plot

John Sulton, a white American of Turkish ancestry, who married a "free woman of color," began a flourishing lumber business in Orangeburg which ran for nearly 140 years. In a 1931 issue of "Southern Lumberman," a story was written about J.J. Sulton and Sons which claimed it to be, " . . . the only lumber manufacturing enterprise of consequence entirely owned and operated by Negroes.' " It started with a ground mill in the woods, which eventually grew in number to seven, and these mills were moved around to wherever needed. In 1920 a large plant was built near the railroad on what is now Whaley Street which housed a sawmill, planing mill and kilns. The building remained until the mid 1960s when timber became more scarce and it took more resources to keep the business going.

9. Alton Elvin Bythewood, Sr.

1876 - 1937

Owner and operator of one of the first funeral homes in Orangeburg, Mr. Bythewood served as Treasurer and Cemetery Manager of the Orangeburg Cemetery Association and the Burial Society for many years. After his death his second son took over the management of the funeral home as well as management of the cemetery.

10. Vastine Thomas Whaley

1874 - 1925

Vastine Thomas Whaley, better known as "Pink Whaley" was born in Orangeburg County on April 1, 1874. Born of mixed parents, he became an astute businessman dealing in farming, cotton buying, and real estate. He held the mortgages of many blacks and whites in Calhoun and Orangeburg Counties. Through these efforts, he was said to

be one of the wealthiest negroes in South Carolina. "Pink Whaley" was also a leader in the Republican Party.

"Pink Whaley" was shot to death in St. Matthews as he was sleeping on a bench at the Southern Depot on August 29, 1925. His assassins were never found.

11. Addison Evans Quick

1857 - 1926

Addison Evans Quick was born to slaves in Richmond County North Carolina. His father was a house carpenter of some repute of Marlboro County, SC, and his mother was a seamstress and sewed for white families in the neighborhood.

About 1877, he was converted and joined the A.M.E.Z. Church at his old home in Rockingham. He also attended the public schools there until he entered the State Normal at Fayetteville, NC, in 1874. In 1880 he married Lucy Ann Allman and they had ten children. During this time Quick affiliated himself with the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, and in preparation for his life's calling, he entered Gammon School of Theology in Atlanta, GA.

Quick ministered at several churches in South Carolina, among them were Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church in Beaufort, SC, and Trinity United Methodist Church in Orangeburg. During his final years he was affiliated with the Baptist church and died in Beaufort, SC, in 1926.

12. Monroe Crawford, M.D.

1894 - 1976

Crawford is best known for his contributions to the field of medicine. In 1927 he was recognized for diagnosing the first known case of Tularemia in South Carolina. In 1934 he received recognition for his special treatment of Malaria Fever in Orangeburg County.

13. James Arthur Pierce, Sr.

1876 - 1937

Pierce was among the first group of students to register at the Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina in 1896. In 1902 he received the degree of "Licentiate of Instruction." After serving as Superintendent of Mayesville Institute in Mayesville, SC, for seven years, he returned to the college and worked in the division of Mechanical Instruction for twenty-seven years, and in 1934 received a B.S. degree from the college.

14. John Moreau Maxwell, Sr.

1884 - 1938

Maxwell, son of South Carolina State Senator Henry Johnson Maxwell and Martha Louisa Dibble Maxwell, owned and operated Maxwell's Staple and Fancy Groceries at 189-191 East Russell Street in Orangeburg from 1904 until his death in 1938. The Maxwell store employed eleven full-time and several part-time workers, and was

considered among the finest in the state according to Asa H. Gordon in Sketches of Negro Life and History in South Carolina. After his death the store was operated until 1951 by several of his surviving children, however, it is no longer standing.

15. Reverend Abram Middleton

1827 - 1901

Rev. Abram Middleton lived a remarkable life as a businessman, Methodist minister, statesman and father. Although he was born into slavery in Charleston in 1827, he became literate and hired-out his skills as a master carpenter and contractor before he gained his freedom at the end of the Civil War. He then purchased property in Midway, SC and built a home for his family there and served two terms as school superintendent in the Barnwell District. He was enrolled in the state militia. Middleton was a delegate to the 1868 South Carolina Constitutional Convention in Charleston, and became one of the founding Trustees of Claflin University when it was formed in 1869 in Orangeburg, SC. The Rev. Middleton built 28 churches, gave one and bought one for the South Carolina Methodist Episcopal Church Conference (now know as the United Methodist). His son, Nathaniel Hill Middleton, born before the Civil War, was one of the first two graduates of Claflin University and became a medical doctor. A grandson, Earl M. Middleton, trained as one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen and served in the South Carolina Legislature for ten years while owning a real estate and insurance businesses which is still thriving in Orangeburg.

The Rev. Middleton was stricken by death “at his post” in the pulpit preaching the gospel. The next Minutes of the SC Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church noted in his memorial that, “He died poor in this world’s goods, but enormously rich in that inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled and that fadeth not away. His legacy to the Conference and to his family is a stainless record, a pure life.”

16. Joshua Enoch Blanton

1880 - 1970

Born in Rice, Virginia, the son of Emily Crowder and Walker Blanton, Joshua was educated at Hampton Institute in Hampton, VA, and later became an instructor in Agriculture for the historic Penn Normal School of St. Helena Island, SC. St. Helena had forged a special relationship with Hampton in part as a consequence of the “Port Royal Experiment,” a Union based movement to determine the effectiveness and feasibility of African American Emancipation prior to the conclusion of the Civil War.

Blanton eventually served as Governmental Farm Demonstration Agent for Beaufort County, SC, from 1907-1912 and was promoted to the position of Superintendent of the Penn Normal School, which provided the experience and expertise in administration that later afforded him the opportunity to become Principle of Vorhees College (1922-1947) in Denmark, SC. Blanton worked to strengthen and reshape the educational program of Vorhees establishing a supportive alliance with the Episcopal Church.

In addition to his academic activities, Blanton served in France as a representative of the War Department following the First World War, during the period of the Armistic visiting 275,000 African American troops, with Dr. H.H. Proctor and Miss Helen Hagen.

17. Reverend Alonzo Gray Townsend

1853 - 1937

Born in Charleston, SC, Townsend married Emma Harleston also of Charleston. To this union, three daughters and four sons were born. Left a widower, he married Ocala Robinson who took excellent care of him in his declining years. Rev. Townsend's father died when he was two, and at the age of nine, he began working in order to help his mother financially. Rev. Townsend began preaching at an early age. At 14, he was conducting prayer meetings. He entered the SC Methodist Conference in 1878 and retired in 1931. He held many pastorates, from Centenary in Charleston to the humblest mission. He was a District Superintendent several times. He was a teacher at Claflin University and a member of the South Carolina Head of Examiners.

18. James McPherson

1843 - 1906

Mr. James McPherson served with distinction as a Warden of the City of Orangeburg from 1881 - 1883. Also interred in the McPherson family plot is a son of James McPherson, who was the first African American mail carrier in the Orangeburg area.

19. Laval David Dash

1878 - 1928

From childhood, Dash always wanted to work for himself. He was a southern black farmer and laborer born in the 19th century with a limited education. What Dash did have going for him was a handsome, high-stepping horse. Dash purchased a surrey, a light four-wheeled two-seater commonly called a "hack" and began a taxi business. Dash's Taxi Service was the first taxi business owned and operated by a black or white man in Orangeburg. When the automobile began to take the place of horse and surrey, Dash purchased a T-Model Ford. On Christmas Eve 1928, Mrs. Mattie Rufus Dash found her 50-year-old husband dead beside his car after having made his last pickup for the day. She stepped into her husband's shoes and hired a driver until her oldest son, then 13, was granted special permission to chauffeur a taxi. Dash's Taxi service grew to a 10-cab taxi fleet during the World War II era.

20. Major John H. Fordham

1856 - 1922

Born in Charleston, SC, John Fordham received a liberal education at Avery Institute. He later took a three-year course of study under Rev. J.B. Seabrook, Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Subsequently, he read law under Rev. Seabrook and was admitted to the Bar in 1874. He later moved to Orangeburg where he engaged in a number of endeavors, such as Coroner of Orangeburg County, Postal Clerk in the Railroad Mail Service, and Deputy Collector of Internal Revenue. He later returned to private life and resumed the practice of law. He was a member of Trinity Methodist Church and he and

his wife, Louisa Smith, had nine children. The title “Major” came about because he was one of the organizers of the Carolina Light Infantry of Charleston, which was the first colored brigade organized in the South. He was appointed Judge Advocate with the rank of Major, a position he held until disbandment of the brigade.

21. Florella Fordham

1880 - 1973

Miss Fordham, daughter of Major John H. and Louisa Fordham, attended Claflin College, graduating in 1900. With sheer determination, and over her parents’ objections, she went to Hampton Institute in Virginia to get her nurses training. She came home to Orangeburg a R.N., the only one so highly trained in town. For years Miss Fordham was the only nurse doctors could call on to assist in home maternity cases . . . and for a time after she began practicing nursing, there was not even a hospital in Orangeburg. In 1932, she became the resident nurse for SC State College. She stayed until 1952 when she retired - for the first time. Because she was still a very active woman, and the love of her profession, she allowed herself to be “re-activated” in 1953 when she went to Claflin, her Alma Mater, as the resident nurse. She retired from Claflin in 1959 after 56 years devoted to nursing.

22. Mildred Roberts Lindsey Cooke

1898 - 1967

Known as the “Orangeburg Song Bird,” Cooke lived her entire life in Orangeburg and was in demand all over the country to sing at weddings, funerals and other special occasions.

23. Julia Moorer Breeland

1882 - 1952

Julia Moorer Breeland was a black cosmetician called “Madam Breeland” by her students. Even though her clientele was white, she operated the first cosmetology school for blacks in South Carolina. She graduated from South Carolina State College in 1905, and she made and distributed her own brand of beauty products. On July 15, 1936, she organized the South Carolina Beauticians Association with twenty-six members and served as its President for four years. This organization is now called the South Carolina State Cosmetology Association affiliated with both regional and national associations and has a membership of several thousand.