

20.11.28 Lost Tribe of Magruder Hour.wav

SM: Sarah McConnell

AS: Audio Sample

RS: Ryan Smith

TH: Travis Harris

BP: Brian Palmer

[00:00:00]

SM After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States Navy scrambled to find land for training bases, and one tracked, they found, was Magruder, a mostly Black neighborhood along the York River, not far from Yorktown, where the British surrendered to Washington. Some of the residents had no idea what was happening until bulldozers arrived to level their property.

AS Bulldozers in their yard, so bulldozers are in their yard. Construction workers just walking through the plants in their gardens, walking through their yard, and then at some point the Magruder residents get a knock on the door.

SM And with that knock, many residents were forced off their land with little to no compensation. Now the land is the site of the CIA training base Camp Perry. And within Camp Perry's high security fencing, all that remains of the Black community of Magruder is a neglected cemetery. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. We'll have more about Magruder later in the show. But first, we often think of cemeteries as separate worlds unto themselves, but people at, for instance, Confederate graveyards were surely connected to people buried in African burial grounds, and the cemeteries reveal the intimacy of those connections. Ryan Smith is a professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University. He and his students have been transformed by tending to cemeteries. Ryan, you have said we can understand whole cities through the history of our dead. What do you mean? How do we learn from cemeteries and gravesites?

RS Well, everybody dies, and we have a ritual or approach to treating the body after death. And for most of American history, that means interring the bodies into the ground. Throughout all the generations of lives in these cities, we can go and look and see how the dead had been treated, how would they have been remembered, what role they play in the ongoing life of the city itself.

SM You created the Richmond Cemeteries Project with your students and volunteers, and I was struck by how many cemeteries there are in just that one city. And also, how many different groups of people the cemeteries reflect. You have burial sites of ancient Native Americans and enslaved and free African Americans, Jewish families, whole cemeteries for just Confederate soldiers, others for Union soldiers, cemeteries for elite white people. It's complex.

RS It's very complex. And we've tended in the past to see those sites as unique or just worth a visit unto themselves so that if someone comes through town and they want to visit a Confederate cemetery or a Union cemetery, they can do that. But if they don't look at both of them and their connections, they're missing a good chunk of the story. If we don't understand how Black burial grounds relate to white burial grounds, then we're not fully understanding those connections that families had, and residents had with one another throughout many different eras in the city's history. We see that above ground in the markers themselves. We might tend to see each of those

burial sites as independent or as not having a direct connection to the other. But they have really deep roots that that cross each of those lines. And it's just really essential to understand how those tell the life of the city in a way that may be uncomfortable to us. But we might tend to see each of those burial sites as independent, but they have really deep roots that that cross each of those lines. And it's just really essential to understand how those tell the life of the city in a way that may be uncomfortable to us but would help us recognize.

SM Your deep interest is especially in the African American burial grounds in Richmond and how they've often been mistreated, bulldozed, neglected by officialdom over the centuries. When did this really become evident and meaningful to you?

RS So the landscape of the dead here struck me in a in a really visceral way. The first time I led my students out to visit one of the biggest African American cemeteries in our area, it's known as Evergreen in East End, and it was founded after the Civil War, it's got really notable figures there. Maggie Walker, one of the first female bank founders in the country, it's got editors like John Mitchell Jr. and doctors like Sarah Jones. And we knew that this was a critical site for us to visit. And when the van started rolling down that road into Evergreen and East End Cemetery, we were, I would say, unprepared for what we were seeing there. I knew that the cemetery wasn't in great shape, but it's something different when you're leading students into that ground to have a conversation about it, immediately after visiting some of the more prominent cemeteries for white burials. And we saw trash and dumped debris on the grounds, and we could see headstones peeking out through the really dense foliage and trees and brush. And so we were able to make a tour around, but it was that day about 10 years ago when I saw that site through my students eyes and had to try to make sense of it to them and to think about the descendants. It really spurred me, as it spurred so many other folks, to continue engaging with that site after we left. To think about it, after we left to want to return there, to volunteer, to research about it. And the students found the same thing, that it was not the kind of place that we could just visit for one field trip. It was the kind of place that would haunt us, really, and motivate us for the rest of our lives.

SM So when did that start happening? When did the African American cemetery fall into disrepair?

RS Evergreen and East End were both founded by two different private organizations in the late 1990s. The spot for Black burials before then were across a creek in a little place called Oakwood Cemetery that was owned by the city, and that had been the site of grave robbing and the use of Black bodies as cadavers for medical training at the Medical College of Virginia and other medical schools. And so the community pooled its own resources to purchase these sites. And Evergreen and East End would contain up to 30 to 40,000 bodies at least, and burials over the decades combined about 76 acres. So, it's just a gigantic, sprawling site. And when they were first laid out, we know that they were beautiful sites, that they were attractive, appealing, inviting, dignified, and they had markers and mausoleums that could compare with markers and graveyards throughout the rest of the city. But then we can look at aerial photographs over the next few decades and you start to see in those aerial photographs the foliage, the tree growth, starting to creep in around the edges. And so it seems to be by the 1950s and 60s that we start to see that overgrowth become a real problem at the cemeteries. Every cemetery has to fight for survival in a certain way. Time will inevitably take its toll. And so even the - the best funded white cemeteries need to arrange for funding and to arrange for donations and try to engage families with the upkeep of their plots. And so the Evergreen and East End cemeteries started to suffer from those problems as well. But the management there had to fight for good record keeping, had to fight for

resources from an impoverished community. But on top of that, in the 1950s and 1960s and certainly into the 1970s, these very prominent, once dignified African American burial sites were targeted by vandals in a really extensive and grotesque way. There were parties and gatherings in the evenings, where cars would break through the entrance and up to 80 people would be throwing beer bottles and things around. And new attention was paid to Maggie Walker's gravesite when they would show up for wreath laying ceremonies. Almost all of the cemetery behind Maggie Walker's grave site was impenetrable forest.

SM There's also another African American burial site, cemetery that you've said is the largest in the United States in that area.

RS It is. And if you were to drive by it today, it - it should shock you, it's shocking to all of us. Right now, the historic core of that site features an old gas station, and there's no other signage there to indicate to us the thousands of bodies that were buried there. And the history of that site goes back all the way to 1815. At that time, during the period of slavery, most burial sites for the enslaved were not very well marked. But this one we find on the maps, and we find records of, and we even find a few eyewitness descriptions of, from 1815 all the way up to the 1870s. And so generations of Black Richmonders were buried there. Unfortunately, as soon as the burial ground was deemed to be full, the city almost immediately turned to use that ground for other purposes.

SM What do you mean that people simply wanted to use the land for something else?

RS Well, they wanted to build roads through it. They wanted to level out the hillside with fill from those burials. They wanted to reappropriate those grounds for other purposes, including another cemetery for whites. They wanted to put a bridge across the valley that would disturb important portions of that burial ground. And then ultimately, by the 1940s and 1950s, the city itself claimed that they weren't sure whether it was ever used as a burial ground, it had been so run through and repurposed. And so that's when, in the late 1950s, that they assigned the core of that to the Sun oil company for use as that gas station. And they assigned another portion of it across the street for use as a dog pound.

SM It's kind of amazing, isn't it, how quickly our historical knowledge disappears. You know, that we could have the largest African American cemetery in the country and only a hundred or so years later, city officials honestly believing maybe there wasn't a large cemetery there.

RS It shows us how important that landscape is for telling our history and understanding the nature of the community itself. That's why cemeteries can be so critical to us. They tell us the stories of people who might not leave other types of records. These are essential sites for understanding the past, but also for our ability to tell those stories in the present. I think some of the most exciting places in our communities these days are our cemeteries. I've seen theatrical productions in the cemeteries, I've seen dance performances in the cemeteries. I've seen meals shared and concerts performed in the cemeteries. And so they're places of - of life really, and they're places of creativity. And it's those connections, those activities that take place in the cemeteries that help draw new interest to portions of our past that had been overlooked. And so we could imagine how important a place like Evergreen or East End Cemetery in Richmond, founded by and for the Black community would be to those communities. But we need to stop seeing those as just important for African American history. They're important for Richmond history. They're important for American history.

SM Ryan Smith, thank you for talking with me today on With Good Reason.

RS Oh, thank you so much, Sarah. It's been a pleasure.

[00:13:27]

SM Ryan Smith is a professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University. He directs the Richmond Cemetery Project and is the author of "Death and Rebirth in a Southern City: Richmond's Historic Cemeteries". In the Middle of World War II, families in the mostly Black community of Magruder, Virginia, woke up to find bulldozers outside their homes and construction workers stomping through their gardens. The Navy said it needed the property to build a training base for Seabees, so the people had to go. Travis Harris, who recently completed an American Studies Ph.D. at William and Mary, would have never known about this history had it not been for a conversation he had in the barber shop with his barber, whose family had lived in Magruder. Now, Travis is working to get displaced residents, their overdue compensation and access to the old cemetery, which is now on the inside of a highly secure CIA camp. Travis, tell me about the African American community that you studied, that got grabbed by the Navy to create a training ground in World War II. What was the history of that community and the jobs and the people who lived there?

TH Oh, man, when you think about the history - can I just paint this picture of walking down this nice waterfront property and ocean waves from the York River on splashing against the shore, and you can just see a vibrant community of Black people loving each other, having cookouts and enjoying life. They were farmers. They were in many ways, they were Black entrepreneurs. So they were oystermen, who would gather oysters on the sea and then sell it to people all throughout pretty much central Virginia. So even in Williamsburg, they would take the oysters to sell it there.

SM They also had churches and businesses there, or no?

TH Yup, so they had two churches, Oak Grove Baptist Church in Mount Gilead Baptist Church. And these churches show two things, right. They showed the community right there, but also this - this linkage to their ancestors. So Magruder community starts around 1871. And then when the - during World War II is when it was wiped out. So it only existed for around 70 years.

SM It was destroyed basically when the Navy came along and said, "we need this property for a training ground". This was back in 1942. Why did the Navy do that?

TH So the Army, Navy, et cetera, began to build bases around the world. And the sad story is, they dispossess primarily Black and brown families in order to build these military installations.

SM How did they find out? How do these residents first learn that they were going to lose everything?

TH So what I learned was the construction company, actually it was called the Bern Construction Company by a construction company, came on to the land before the Navy was prepared for their presence. Surprising to everyone. Surprising to the McGruder residents and surprising to the Navy. Bulldozers and their yard. So bulldozers are in their yard, construction workers just walking through the plants in their gardens, walking through their yard. And then at some point, the Magruder residents get a knock on the door. They go to see who's at the door, they look through

the peephole. And this is white man wearing a hard hat and like, "oh, my gosh, what are y'all doing here?" Pretty much. And they leave the notice, you got to leave. Some people receive as little notice as 10 days. Some people receive a three-week notice and then others were given more time.

SM Oh, my gosh. Did the Navy go back and make it right and more formally communicate with these people? They must have been just scared out of their wits.

TH So, unfortunately, the Navy was primarily focused on the war. They weren't thinking about the people who were being dispossessed, the Navy called them "takings". So they were three takings. So that's a - that's an interesting name, right, that the Navy actually called the removal of the land takings. What happened was they sent out someone to look at the land. Then they realized that they needed more land to create this training center. When they get to the third taken, a judge actually stepped in and a judge said that pretty much what you all are doing is unconstitutional. Like, you cannot just come in and take these people's land without giving them any warning, or any preparation, or providing housing for where they were going to go to. So when they got to the third taking, then they had a completely different process from what happened with the first two takings.

SM Let me read what you wrote that just really arrested my attention and moved me so much. You write, "bulldozers and other construction equipment were spread around the land and in residents' yards, random white men wearing hardhats were destroying their property and walking through their gardens. Bulldozers would then come and shake people's houses. The knock, knock, knock at the door. Magruder resident: Who is it? No answer. Magruder residents were notified, some of them, you have to be out in days. And you got that from descendants or family members?"

TH So, yeah, I was fortunate enough to actually talk to some people who are still living, there are people who were who are still alive today who lived in Magruder and the Navy records.

SM I was also moved that you wrote that there were some allies for these people who tried to protest these takings.

TH Yeah, this was a grave atrocity. These were Black families, and they were - there were some white families. But these families have been on this land, owned their homes for generations. The Ashbee's, for example, they had owned a piece of land in this area there essentially, because Magruder's existence, since the 18th century. And just like that, you have to go. So, of course, people who live in Williamsburg heard about this and he said, look, "like this isn't right, we have to do something about this". So they joined in and protested against the Navy's taking of the land.

SM Some of the people were simply put up in tents on the grounds of the campus of the College of William and Mary.

TH So these were pretty much just an abandoned tent. And one of the former individuals who lived on Magruder, which eventually became Camp Perry, he said they call it tent city. And he just described the conditions as horrendous. It was so cold during the winter, that they would literally have to make fires to warm themselves. State of Virginia health officials came out and did an assessment of, quote unquote, "tent city", and she actually assessed it as - the conditions as deplorable. And actually, unsanitary for a human being to live on.

SM Were they there long?

TH I guess you can say from like six months to a year would be an average time.

SM So what was the deal they were offered? We will give you money. We'll help you find new jobs and we'll make we'll build a house for you where we decide in this other place.

TH Unfortunately - unfortunately, they weren't really offered a deal. Everything happened so quickly. Right. Like they're in their home, they get a knock on the door. They're told that they're going to get money at a later time. And pretty much they're just fending for themselves.

SM What about the churches and the cemeteries that were there? They didn't bulldoze does.

TH Both of the cemeteries are still in existence today. And one Oak Grove Cemetery is just outside of Camp Perry. So that was a part of the taking. But it didn't - they didn't disinter the bodies. And one of the cemeteries is actually still on Camp Perry. So this is one of the issues that we're dealing with today, while I'm still working with the descendants. As you can imagine, it's kind of difficult to get on to highly secure military installation. So now what we're trying to do is get access for the descendants to be able to tend and care for their dead.

SM So the Navy originally booted these people off, sent the bulldozers and put a giant fence around a training ground for the Navy. This was 1942. Eventually, the CIA took over and made a secretive base there. Right?

TH Right. When the Navy came in and took the land and they needed to create an area for training the Seabees. And then later the CIA took over and now it's Camp Perry.

SM It's such a secure CIA base, that I can't imagine they allow family members on to tend those graves of ancestors.

TH So one of the arguments that I make in the dissertation is the Navy's response to the taking and how they responded so differently to the white and Black families. They actually sponsored trips for the white families to come back on to the naval base, drove them around the base and gave them a tour and said, "hey, thanks for your contribution to our country". What I later found out was, they actually allowed whites to continue to marry into the white church that was on the base, so the white church is immaculate. They maintained that up to an excellent standard. On the contrary, the cemetery that has numerous former Magruder residents still there. They literally just let it rot. So they pretty much - they still aren't even maintaining the - the Black cemetery there, while they're upholding York Presbyterian Church and allow white families to marry there.

SM You found out about this when you're getting your haircut. Tell me about that.

TH Oh, my gosh. So I had just moved to Williamsburg and I was looking for a barber and I found this barbershop and I like his name is Al, so I'm talking to Al and he's kind of my hair. He was like, hey, guess what? My family's Portuguese. And I'm like, what are you talking about? So I go ahead, I go to my program and I'm doing some research. And while I'm doing some research, I found out that, oh, there were actually multiple land takings here in Williamsburg. Colonial Williamsburg actually used to be an area where it was a mixed interracial community where Blacks and whites were living there together. I was astounded. And then I found out about the naval weapons

station. The naval weapons station used to be a predominately Black community. For those who don't know this, the naval weapon station is also along the York river, which is close to the Atlantic Ocean. And so did I go back to the barber and say, hold on, can you tell me about that story about your family again? And come to find out, his family actually used to live on Magruder.

SM Was he bitter?

TH Oh, my gosh. I can really see a change in his life. And what I mean by that. Yes, it had definitely negatively impacted and affected his life, right. Because like think about it - this is his family's history. A lot of people who live in this area don't even know about this history. And he's carrying this story, but then there was a change. Ever since I started working on this dissertation, doing the research and work with him, he's been more joyful. So, to have someone to research this and to provide primary sources and evidence for what happened here in all my life. And here that it's - that it's true. I feel better, and this has brought me some sense of joy. Whenever someone or whenever a community is taken from their family in the way that this happens to the Magruder community, they lose so much. Right. So just think about all the memories you have growing up as a child. And then think about that neighborhood. Right. There's so much that was associated and attached to that, that when you - when that's taken away from you. Right. And then not only that, like think about having their church just rot. Like, how - how would that affect their faith? And then also think about this, so World War II, which was supposed to be a war for freedom and democracy, meant you losing your home and being unclear of where you're going to go next. There are so many other things that happens when someone is forcibly removed from their home. This is a common story for you can say thousands of families during World War II. So you can almost imagine, every military installation there was created during World War II potentially wiped out families. So the family I looked at is in Magruder. But the question is how many more stories are like this because of what happened during World War II?

SM Oh, Travis Harris, I'm so grateful for you taking the time to share your insights on With Good Reason.

TH And I'm grateful for being here as well.

SM Travis Harris recently completed an American Studies Ph.D. at William and Mary. He's now director of the Magruder Project. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

[00:28:03]

SM Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. So many African Americans struggle, because of slavery, to find records of their ancestors. Today, the story of Brian Palmer's search for his ancestors. Brian Palmer, after spending decades around the globe covering stories for CNN and U.S. News and World Report, moved from Brooklyn to Virginia in his search to uncover the stories of his formerly enslaved great grandparents. Now he spends a lot of time in cemeteries. He calls them outdoor archives, piecing together the forgotten stories of America, one headstone at a time. Brian, about a decade ago, you came to Virginia from New York and you were going through your father's belongings when you saw a photo that you knew had been taken at the site of a family homestead decades ago. What did that photo mean to you and what homestead?

BP My wife, Erin, found that picture. These African American seniors were shoulder to shoulder. They were in a clearing in the woods. You could see the tree line behind them, probably 1997, and they stood in front of a headstone and that headstone, said Matthew Palmer. And it said that he died at age 86 in the year 1927. So immediately I knew where they were. I knew they were at Camp Perry, which is a top-secret Department of Defense facility, which was before 1943, a large collection of settlements, villages, towns, mostly everybody called it Magruder, majority African American, probably about a couple of hundred families. There had been white landowners for a very long time, but African Americans after the civil war who were free started to move on to this land, including my great grandparents, Matt Palmer and Julia Fox Palmer.

SM Somehow, that photo triggered a lot for you. You did a lot of digging after seeing that?

BP That photo, Sarah, was life changing. It didn't change my life until I visited Camp Perry and I saw that humble cemetery in the clearing and I gently, gently touched my great grandfather's headstone. Matt Palmer. We were pretty sure that he had been enslaved, so I touched that very - you can tell that that headstone, which is in the shape of a cross, is handmade, looks to be cement. And the inscription was clearly done with a stick or a finger. This isn't super-duper masonry. And it was that trip that reoriented how I started to think about my life and my history. After we had some time to wander around this cemetery, which was, you know, it's just a clearing of the woods, maybe a dozen recognizable headstones, most of them handmade, some professionally carved. But there were also depressions, unmarked depressions in the grass, in this brown-green grass indicating that someone was buried there, most likely without a vault, maybe in a pine box or wrapped up in something so that the soil had subsided, leaving that - that person sized depression there. And that was the first time I think I'd seen anything like that. So the public affairs officer, a very nice man named Fred, took us over to the other cemetery and to "the church", as he called it. That's York River Presbyterian. They have a nice cemetery, landscaped and everything, and a very nice church. White building looked like it had just been whitewashed. We went inside. It was so clean and there were hymnals in the - in the pews, almost as if a pastor could just kind of walk out from the back room. And we learned that, well this was the white cemetery. This was the white church. These were the things, the sites that the US government deemed to have value. My family's church, Mount Gilead, they let that rot and they had to bulldoze it in the 60s. Oak Grove Baptist, the same story. The public affairs officer told us that "we think that there's Cornerstone's somewhere around here", so we walked around, we found a stone in the dirt, didn't say anything. That was a little bit unsatisfying. So I left, having reconnected to a piece of my history, but also with this kind of incendiary rage, my wife was trying to peel me off the ceiling of the car. She said, "look, you just saw your great grandfather's grave". The day before we had found his - his name and Julia Fox, Palmer's name in the marriage register at your county, 1873. That was magical, it was wonderful. But I wouldn't say the anger erased that, but it definitely pushed it back to a part of my brain that at the moment I didn't have access to, because in addition to that lovely cemetery in the lovely church that seemed to be very well attended, there was a Confederate grave, the grave of the unknown Confederate soldier. And I thought, wow. So the care given to the Black cemetery is accidental, intermittent. They had raked the day before we arrived, I was told. But the care to the white cemetery in the white church and this Confederate grave with its Confederate flags, that was pretty damn good. They told us that U.S. military personnel take care of the grounds and individuals who come in, family members, look after the graves when they can come in. February 2012 changed my existence in Brooklyn, New York. I was going back and forth for quite some time between Brooklyn and Williamsburg. My wife and I got the idea that we would do a documentary, that we would do research on this because this mattered. But I was blowing up from this, this - maybe it was a northerner's anger, an African

American northerner seeing the resilience of Jim Crow on a U.S. military installation. Nobody felt or at least many people felt that it's not so odd that we would be so solicitous and - and caring of this one cemetery and the other, which is right next to a firing range, you know, we could - we picked up spent rounds from the cemetery grounds. That's just kind of, you know, it's an afterthought. It doesn't really matter. That was a little bit... crushing.

SM What did you think you would achieve in the documentary, could you just see it in your mind's eye?

BP I could see it in my mind's eye. We're still working on that documentary, it will most likely be a book. But what I envisioned was being able to find a wealth of records or any records about Matt Palmer, born in Goochland County circa 1850, 1840, somewhere around there. Julia Fox born, enslaved in Gloucester County. And then we would find footage and records of how this town called Magruder came to be. From the slavery period, through reconstruction, into Jim Crow and so on and so forth. So, yes, I could picture vintage footage of Magruder and the dairy farms and the African Americans and still pictures and on and on. And none of that exists.

SM And what you'd come up against was the problem every African American practically in this country has of finding records, because of slavery.

BP Precisely. We started our search in earnest in 2012 and we spoke to experienced genealogists. We spoke to a wonderful Library of Congress archivist, and she gently warned us, you've got to be prepared not to find much and you have to be prepared for the long haul. And of course, we were thinking, oh, we're journalists, we can do this. Oh, we're so great. But they were right. Before 1865, a big chunk of African Americans in the South were enslaved, as we know, and the written record of their existence is sparse because they were regarded as property. So we have found references, we think, to my great greats in the inventory of a gentleman that was made in 1858. And we found pieces of the Matt Palmer story and pieces of the Julia Fox story. We were so lucky to find a union pension application and that's what this archivist suggested we look for. It turns out that Matt Palmer somehow liberated himself from enslavement in Goochland County made it to Henrico County in Virginia, enrolled in the USCT United States, colored troops, segregated arm of the United States Army during the Civil War and served. So in that union pension application, which veterans needed to file in order to get any money, a pension from the US government, they had to lay down chapter and verse of their life post-civil war. What they did, their children, wife, residence, they needed affidavits, medical exams, all this stuff. So Matt Palmer's pension application was a treasure trove for us. It has a question in it which just rocked our world: were you a slave? His answer was yes. They asked for the name of the last owner and the name was Mabon - Mabon Hopson, and we were very lucky it wasn't Smith or Jones, Johnson or White, but it was a fairly uncommon name. And we were able to find that man who had served in the Confederate Army and had died before the end of the war in 1863 and whose house in Goochland County was still standing. So we went out to that house. We met the owner and we stood on land that Matt Palmer might have stepped on, might have worked. I've never felt more American ever in my life. Than I do now, knowing what Matt Palmer, Julia Fox-Palmer, their children didn't simply endure, they thrived. They made a way out of no way. We're in the habit of worshiping generals and so on and so forth, but I picture a young man, Matt may have been 14, 15, he may have been a little bit older. But navigating the landscape, the hills, the fields, the slave patrols to get the 50 miles east in Virginia to Henrico County to enroll in the Army, I picture Julia Fox-Palmer and her family escaping from this plantation slave labor camp, crossing the York River and delivering themselves to United States Army or union troops. I went to all of these sites, all of these - we

went to a lot of cemeteries because without records, cemeteries are outdoor archives, the headstones or texts, they don't have much information, but they often connect you to the next headstone. So if you don't find paper records for the person you're looking for, you may be able to find paper records for someone else. We found that picture, that single five by seven of my glowering dad and eight other African Americans standing on land that had been the cemetery for their community. Also that land, no longer theirs, but the government's.

SM Did you ever hear that story from your father? Of how the government paid them pittance and bulldozed their houses?

BP Oh, my goodness. Sarah, did I hear that story? Probably wasn't every Sunday breakfast, but it seemed like it.

SM So Magruder wasn't a mystery to you. You had heard of it.

BP No, no, no, no. And - and it's turned out to be instrumental in shaping this part of my life, my entire - my middle age. But he was 14 when the family was evicted and other families - the eviction happened in several phases. So the first round bulldozers showed up at people's homes. That didn't happen to the Palmers, it happened to other people. Lewis Palmer, my grandfather, was made an offer. Don't know how much that first offer was, but he said no. He waited and he waited, and my dad loved telling me these stories. He told me the story in 2001. And he just he just loved to say that by the time Lewis Palmer and Amelia Palmer, my grandmother, cut the deal with the - with the United States government, Navy sailors and contractors were - were driving equipment and bulldozers across their land or near their land and walking across their land. But he didn't leave until he got his check, and his check was pretty big. It was around seventeen hundred dollars for about 3.5 acres. You did not mess with Lewis Palmer. He knew how to make a deal.

[00:42:55]

SM You've said that the erasure of the Black community of Magruder is a story of the entire South. How so?

BP So there are many contexts here. We have our racial history context, which is messed up and discriminatory and awful. Then there's the larger wartime context. Then there's the socio-economic context where poor people, whether they were Latin people and Japanese people on the West Coast or Black folks and poor whites on the East Coast, they lost property at a higher rate than well-heeled white folks. So Yorktown Naval Weapons Station started out as a naval mine depot in the 20s. You had Camp Perry, you had Cheatham Annex, you had Colonial Williamsburg and on and on and on. So these displacements often hit broader than the Black community, but they hit the Black community hard because of Jim Crow. Black people couldn't just get a house in the neighborhood that they wanted to go. So when the Palmers moved from Magruder, where they had had a small farm, they had some animals. You talk about downsizing, they had to sell most of their animals in order to get a place in Grove and they had to rebuild wealth that was essentially taken from them. You cannot compensate someone for a lifetime, for a farm, for a history, for a cemetery with seventeen hundred dollars, much less the two hundred dollars, the fifty dollars, that they paid other families.

SM When you moved to Richmond to teach at the University of Richmond, you came across an ivy-covered wall that you and your wife soon discovered was an overgrown cemetery where

thousands of African Americans are buried. What made you so intent on restoring it, which is what you've done?

BP So a wonderful photographer and educator told us about a cemetery called Evergreen, and she said, you will not believe it. It's a sprawling African American cemetery, foliage, overgrowth, all that sort of stuff. So we went to visit mid-2014 and we were floored, absolutely floored. 76 acres, only a portion of which was clear. Walk into the woods and you'd see just headstones, beautiful headstones, modest headstones, little temporary markers in the dirt, in the undulating soil where people had been buried without coffins. And we were just gob smacked. So we realized this could be part of our documentary. So we wanted to photograph video, audio tape. We wanted to capture people reclaiming an African American cemetery with their hands. So we looked up Evergreen, we saw that there wasn't - wasn't a volunteer effort there, but there was one at the cemetery next door, East End. We'd actually driven by East End. Aaron had seen some headstones deep in the woods, we didn't realize it was a separate cemetery. So we showed up, the first thing we saw: a group of white men hunting, discharging firearms in these overgrown cemeteries, which kind of blew our minds. Cops came, the people left, and these African American Boy Scouts got down to the task of pulling English ivy and weeds and vines and all sorts of stuff off burial plots. And Aaron, immediately drop down to her hands and knees and join the scouts and started pulling vines. And after she did that, after the day was over, she said, you know, you might want to try it. So we came back and we did it, we came back again, and again, and again, and again and what is it, almost six years later, there's no place that I would rather be now. That's what Matt did. That's what Julia did. That's what so many other people did. And yes, I've been to Afghanistan, Iraq, China, Vietnam. This is where I need to be. While it may sound corny, I feel that this this history is transformative, particularly at a time where certain classes of American citizens have been relegated to second class citizenship. You can only do that in ignorance. This is information. These are stories of people, of institutions every American should know. I'm not saying that Black history is more important than any history. I'm saying that history that has been written over, scribbled over, papered over by others who wanted to control us should be revealed, understood and respected and then made part of our various curriculum, culture, all that sort of stuff.

SM When you start to resurrect these people lovingly and one grave at a time, discovering who they are, you start to see a sea of humanity, right? You start to see these as people, not just graves.

BP Bingo. So if you drive through an overgrown cemetery, African American or otherwise, you can see the tragedy and you want to blame someone. But you have to wade into that cemetery in order to see the love that people invested in it, and that love is carved into the headstones. The different churches, the organizations, the House of Ruth, which have these beautiful 19th century, turn of the century names. The Oddfellows, which still exist, the Masons, Knights of Pythias, all of these organizations were ones that held the Black community together as it was under assault, as all of those rights were being swept away during and after reconstruction. These were the organizations that held the community together, that put these people in the ground. And it's a marvel that they were able to do that for the period of time that they did as Jim Crow was - was sapping people's energy, their dignity, limiting their opportunities, posing physical harm to them and their families. And they still - still kept going to church, starting new churches, starting new businesses. You know, the problem was that when you're under assault and everybody in your community is under assault, a cemetery becomes something that's at the bottom of the list of priorities. On the top of that list of priorities would be keeping a roof over your head and then taking care of the family burial plot that's kind of way down there.

SM If you could wave a magic wand and ensure the well-being of this cemetery and other neglected African American cemeteries. What would that look like?

BP I wouldn't immediately point my magic wand at cemeteries, I would point it at schools, I would point it at institutions where people learn about the past. We will not take care of these cemeteries until we value the people buried there. We will not maintain these cemeteries and other sites of memory until we believe that these are African American folks, these Native American folks, these Asian Pacific Islander folks, these Latino folks are just as American as the white folks.

SM Brian Palmer, thank you so much for taking this time to speak with me on With Good Reason.

BP Thank you for having me. It was lovely.

SM Brian Palmer is a journalism professor at the University of Richmond and a member of the Friends of East End, which is working to reclaim from nature and neglect East End Cemetery, an historic African American burial ground. Support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia Health System, a National Cancer Institute designated cancer center, researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow. uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis, Jamal Millner and Aidan Carroll. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.