

Oakwood Cemetery

Street Address: First Street

Map & Parcel: 270001000; 280195000

Present Zoning: R3

Original Owner: City of Charlottesville

Present Owner: City of Charlottesville

Historic Name: Oakwood Cemetery; Daughters of Zion Cemetery

Date/Period: ca 1860 - present

Style: Various

Land Area: 14.39 acres

Condition: fair - good

Sources: ACHS files; City records; Carter G. Woodson Institute for Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia

Criteria for Historic Designation

1. The historic, architectural or cultural significance, if any, of the structure or site and whether it has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the Virginia Landmarks Register:

Oakwood Cemetery is the one of the oldest public cemeteries in Charlottesville. Opened officially in the early 1860s, Oakwood houses the remains of many of Charlottesville's citizens, both prominent and unknown. The 14-acre plot was once a part of Alexander Garrett's 117-acre estate, "Oak Hill." Garrett was a prominent Charlottesville resident in the early 19th century, serving as Clerk of the County Court of Albemarle from 1818 to 1831. He was "an active man of affairs, a large dealer in real estate, and financial advisor to Jefferson during the building of the University." Garrett died in 1860 leaving instructions in his will regarding the sale of his property to pay debts and to support his wife and children. It is unclear when the city actually purchased the cemetery property, but records from 1864 make reference to the "new cemetery" in this area. The cemetery originally consisted of approximately 7 acres of land along First Street (south) between present-day Oak street and Elliott street. At the time the cemetery was beyond the city limits, but was annexed in 1888 as part of the city's expansion in that year. The extreme southern portion of the cemetery, approximately 25% of the land area, was designated the "colored section." By 1939 the city had added an additional 7 acres to the western side of the cemetery. In addition to the original boundaries of Oakwood proper, the Daughters of Zion Cemetery, established in 1873 and located in a 2-acre plot across Oak Street, became part of Oakwood Cemetery officially when the city assumed title to the property in the 1970s. This cemetery was owned and maintained by a charitable organization of African American women and served as the burial place of many of Charlottesville's prominent African American residents in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because Oakwood Cemetery is one of the oldest public cemeteries in Charlottesville, it reveals much about the makeup of the city throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, including the segregation between races and the passing presence of the majority of Charlottesville's citizenry. As was noted in the Daily Progress Historical and Industrial magazine of 1906, "any history of this vicinity would indeed be incomplete without a sketch of these cities of the dead (Charlottesville's public cemeteries) within whose confines the remains of its past brilliant careers as well as those who in their time constituted the woof and

warp of the complex fabric of human existence.” Oakwood Cemetery is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the Virginia Landmarks Register.

2. The association of the structure or site with an historic person or event or with a renowned architect or master craftsman:

Oakwood Cemetery has been Charlottesville’s primary public cemetery since the latter half of the 19th century when Maplewood Cemetery began to reach its maximum capacity. It was also the primary burying ground for the poor and indigent. The first recorded indigent burial took place there in February of 1883—that of “Sophie Shepherd’s child,” a local pauper. The cemetery still has a “Potter’s Field,” a colloquial term for cemeteries used for individual burials of the poor. Such cemeteries, or sections of cemeteries, have existed throughout history as places for those who could not afford a grave or family vault. Prior to the 19th century these burials took place in a section of the larger church or town cemetery. Later entire burial grounds were dedicated to the indigent. Often African Americans and other minority populations were also restricted to certain sections of the cemeteries, as was the case with the southern “colored” section of Oakwood. However, these populations also often chose to be buried separately. The Daughters of Zion cemetery and the Hebrew cemetery across First Street are examples of such independent burial grounds.

Many of Charlottesville’s prominent African-American residents were buried in the Daughters of Zion cemetery, which later became a part of Oakwood. Benjamin Tonsler, for whom Tonsler Park is named, is one such resident. Tonsler, born in 1854, was a former slave who attended the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) and returned to Charlottesville to become a teacher and then principal at Jefferson Graded School, the first such school for African Americans. At risk to his career and himself, he helped many African American students gain an education beyond the legal limit of 8th grade, preparing them for college. A friend of Booker T. Washington, Tonsler was an important figure in Charlottesville’s civil rights movement in the early 20th century. He died in 1917. Other notable African American Charlottesville residents buried in the Daughters of Zion Cemetery at Oakwood include doctors, ministers, businessmen, and educators like Benjamin Tonsler. Kenneth Walker and Dorothy Murray Allen, both buried there, owned the Rose Hill Market on Rose Hill Drive. Rev. M. T. Lewis and Rev. Jesse Herndon were both local ministers (at the First Baptist Church and Mt. Zion, respectively). Charles E. Coles and his descendants, who owned and operated Charlottesville’s leading black construction firm which specialized in building and renovating residences at the turn of the century, was buried in the “colored section” of Oakwood proper. Dr. Bernard A. Coles, buried in 1971 in the later, non-segregated addition to Oakwood, was a local dentist and the first president of the Charlottesville chapter of the NAACP. Oakwood Cemetery also contains the remains of many of Charlottesville’s white residents who were considered well-known by their contemporaries, including religious leaders such as Rev. James Gates, Rev. Jacob Manning and the wife of Rev. C.E. Bane, all ministers of the Methodist Church. Among the civic leaders buried at Oakwood are ex-Lieutenant Governor John E. Massey, his son who was killed on the Southern Railway, and Charles M. Brand, printer and reporter who was on the staff of the Progress, the Chronicle and the Jeffersonian. Businessmen and workmen, such as “William T. Morris, who was killed Aug. 3, 1957 in an explosion of his slate quarry over Monticello mountain and his son, ‘Blind’ Tom, who lost his eye sight at the same catastrophe” are also buried Oakwood, as well as Italian and Russian immigrants and railroad workers killed in the

wreck on the Southern Railway at Rock Fish Gap. Many of those buried at Oakwood, while not all remembered in history, at the time constituted an important part of Charlottesville society. Ministers, government officers, merchants, and workmen are all buried here. Oakwood's gravestones serve as reminders of both the men and women who contributed much to local society and those who are and were all but unknown.

4. The age of the structure:

Oakwood Cemetery opened in the early 1860s and continues internments today.

5. Whether the structure is of such old or unusual design, texture and material that it can be reproduced only with great difficulty, if at all; Whether the structure or any of its features represent an infrequent or the first or last remaining example of a particular detail or type of architecture in the city:

The majority of the gravestones and grave markers at Oakwood Cemetery are in forms which span the entire history of the cemetery itself. Early slate headstones and stone obelisks are common in the earlier portion of the cemetery near First Street. While there are few sculptured grave markers, those that exist reveal trends in funerary practice that ranged from the elaborate organic designs and adornments of the Victorian era to the more staid engraved granite symbols of more modern markers. The arrangement of stones, too, is unique to the general era in which they were laid, from the jumbled arrangement of the early markers in the Daughters of Zion Cemetery to the more organized family plots found in the main body of Oakwood near First Street to the orderly rows of headstones found in the most recently used portions of the western half of the cemetery.

While Oakwood Cemetery is not overtly threatened by development, the deterioration and vandalism that continues to undermine the cemetery without proper maintenance and security constitutes a significant threat to the longevity of the property and its continued role as a place of mourning as well as a source of information about Charlottesville society from the 1860s until the present. The continued deterioration of this and other public cemeteries would be a significant loss to the city's local history and culture.

6. The degree to which the original distinguishing character, qualities or materials of a structure have been retained:

Many of the stones in Oakwood Cemetery are original, though some have been repaired or replaced due to weather damage and vandalism. The majority of the stones are of more modern origin, but there are many 19th century slate markers and stone carvings as well as cast iron fencing which reference an earlier era of funerary practice. The walls surrounding the cemetery, though incomplete, are of 19th century origin.