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COVER: Photograph of the Harmony Grove Cemetery by Monica L. Hopkins, 2009.



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Harmony Grove Cemetery: A Window into Buckhead's Rural Past

By W. Wright Mitchell

Harmony Grove Cemetery sits on a small rise at the southwest corner of West Paces Ferry and Chatham Roads in Land Lot 114 of the Buckhead District of Atlanta, Georgia. Surrounded by trees, Harmony Grove encompasses a little less than one acre of land and contains at least 171 burials. Forty of the graves are marked with traditional, inscribed headstones while the rest are either unmarked or marked by fieldstones.¹ The northern section of the cemetery (characterized by formal headstones) contains primarily Caucasian burials while the southern section of the cemetery (defined by fieldstone markers) contains African American burials.²

Harmony Grove Cemetery can best be described as either a Southern Folk or Upland South burial ground.³ Both types of cemeteries share the same general characteristics of being small in size and located on an elevated plane.⁴ Although the exact origins of the cemetery are unclear, the earliest documented burials are attributable to the family of James H. Smith, who owned property near the cemetery.⁵

Mr. Mitchell is the President and Chairman of the Board of Buckhead Heritage and a labor and employment attorney at Constangy, Brooks and Smith, LLC.

1. Investigation and Mapping of the Harmony Grove Cemetery, Fulton County, Georgia, Diana Valk, M.A., New South Associates (19 October, 2007), p. 5.

2. Ibid.

3. Burial Customs and Practices in the Landscape of Harmony Grove Cemetery, Fulton County, Georgia, Patrick Haynes (Georgia State University Master of Historic Preservation Program, Historic American Landscapes & Gardens class assignment, 28 April 2008) pp 1-2.

4. Ibid p. 1.

5. The cemetery is located in the eastern half of Land Lot 114. Smith acquired Land Lots 141 and 142 consisting of 405 acres from Clarke Howell in

Although Smith is frequently assigned the sobriquet "Whispering" in historical accounts, it is unclear how he obtained this nickname.⁶

Smith was born ca. 1804 in South Carolina, but not much is known about his early life. By 1860, however, Smith was living in Buckhead with a seventeen-year-old farm laborer named John Rovans.⁷ At the time, Smith also owned eight slaves including two black adult males, one black adult female, and five mulatto children all under the age of eleven.⁸

In 1861, Smith purchased 405 acres of land (Land Lots 141 and 142) located in the vicinity of the present-day Governor's Mansion on West Paces Ferry Road.⁹ According to Civil War-era maps, Smith's house sat near the intersection of West Paces Ferry Road and old Howell's Mill Road, which is now Arden Road.¹⁰ Smith, like most residents of Buckhead at the time, supported himself by farming.¹¹

1861 according to a deed recorded in Fulton County on 27 August 1861. These lots adjoin the western boundary of Land Lot 114. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book E:683, Clarke Howell to James H. Smith, 1861; Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

6. The first, written reference to this interesting moniker seems to appear in a written history of New Hope Church (1869–1987) authored by Reverend Elizabeth Few. Although Smith is referred to as "Whispering" throughout the manuscript, Few offers no explanation regarding how Smith may have acquired the nickname. It is quite possible that Smith's nickname was passed down through the oral history of New Hope Church as related by its members, some of whom undoubtedly knew Smith personally. Unfortunately, the reason he was given this nickname seems to have been lost to time. Elizabeth C. Few, "Interdenominational Theological Center, a Research Paper, The History of New Hope African Methodist Episcopal Church: 1869–1988." (First Writing 1980, Second Writing 1987).

7. 1860 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia, population schedule, Buckhead Dist., p. 197 (penned), dwelling 1301, family 1405, Jas. H. Smith; NARA microfilm publication M653, roll 123 (viewed online at Ancestry.com on 5 July 2009).

8. 1860 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia, slave schedule, Cooks Dist., p. 27 (penned), Jas. H. Smith, owner; NARA microfilm publication M653, roll 145 (viewed online at Ancestry.com on 5 July 2009)

9. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book E:683, Clarke Howell to James H. Smith, 1861; Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

10. United States War Dept., *The Official Atlas of the Civil War*, 1891 reprint (Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), Plate 60, 1.

11. An Inventory of Smith's assets following his death provides an interesting glimpse at the type of belongings a farmer in Buckhead would have owned. They included: 4 head of cattle, 24 hogs, 2 wagons, 1 buggy, farming implements, 2 mules,

On 13 January 1868 Smith married Martha King, and the couple had two sons, James born in 1869 and George born in 1870.¹² The Smiths also had a daughter Sarah Emma, but her birth date is unknown. Smith had been married previously and had a daughter from that union named Elizabeth.¹³

The first recorded burial in the cemetery belongs to Smith's infant son James, who died on 4 March 1870. The reason Smith chose to bury his son at Harmony Grove is the subject of much speculation, since Smith never owned any part of the land lot where the cemetery is located. Rather, W. A. Parks owned all of Land Lot 114, including the cemetery property, when Smith's son died in 1870.¹⁴ Just several months prior, in fact, Parks had purchased the property from Henry Irby, one of the original settlers of Buckhead and proprietor of the famous Irby's Tavern.¹⁵

Thus, the mystery of the origin of Harmony Grove persists. It is certainly possible that the location was already being used as a gathering spot for people in the Buckhead community, and there may have already been burials on the spot. Indeed, the concept of outdoor worship services is well documented in Buckhead history.¹⁶ Regardless of the reason Smith chose Harmony Grove as the final resting place for his son, he obviously approved of the location as he was also laid to rest at Harmony Grove upon his death in 1872.¹⁷ Interestingly, in his will

14 bushels wheat, 16 bushels corn, bacon, lard, household and kitchen utilities, and firearms. Fulton County, Georgia, Inventory and Appraisement Book B:221, inventory of the estate of James H. Smith, 1872; Probate Court, Atlanta, Georgia.

12. Fulton County, Georgia, Marriage Book C:145, James Smith and Martha King, 1868; Probate Court, Atlanta, Georgia.

13. Fulton County, Georgia, Will Book A:205, James H. Smith will, 1872; Probate Court, Atlanta, Georgia.

14. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book P:26, Henry Irby to W. A. Parks, 1870; Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

15. Ibid.

16. Susan Kessler Barnard, *Buckhead: A Place for All Time* (R. Bemis Publishing, Ltd., 1996), 50.

17. Smith's older son George, who died in 1888, and his wife Martha, who died in 1905, are also buried at Harmony Grove. There is also one unidentified burial within the Smith family plot, possibly daughter Sarah Emma. Investigation and Mapping of the Harmony Grove Cemetery, Fulton County, Georgia, Diana Valk, M.A., New South Associates (19 October, 2007), Figure 2.

Smith designated a two-acre piece of property on present-day Arden Road to be used "for a church of colored persons."¹⁸ The church the local blacks built, New Hope AME Church, still holds worship services some 135 years after Smith's death. Unfortunately, no living descendants of Smith or his slaves can be located.

Following Smith's death, there was no recorded burial activity at Harmony Grove until the death of Smith's son George in 1888. But toward the end of the century, the burials began to increase in number, which coincided with the establishment of a church on the property.

The first specific legal reference to the church appears in deed of 26 August 1889 executed by Wiley Rice, which conveys the cemetery property to M. D. Lay, J. H. Maloney, and R. J. King as "Trustees for Harmony Grove Congregational Church."¹⁹ The property is described as follows:

Beginning at Rock Corner line between said party of the first part [Wiley Rice] and Dr. McFaul, and running East along the Road leading from Buckhead to Pace's Ferry ten rods to rock corner, thence South fourteen rods to rock corner, thence West ten rods to pinetree corner, thence North along line between party of the first part and Dr. McFaul, fourteen rods to beginning corner containing one acre . . . more or less.²⁰

The deed further provided that the property was to be used "for church and burial purposes."²¹ Although the deed does not mention a church building, it can be implied from the language of the deed that there was either already a church on the premises or plans were in the works to build one. A hand-sketched map in a later 1892 deed depicts a church fronting Paces Ferry Road, which conclusively establishes the presence of a structure by at least 1892.²²

18. James. H. Smith will (1872), Fulton County, Georgia, Will Book A:205, James H. Smith will, 1872; Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

19. On 26 October 1875 Rice purchased the east half of land lot 114 from Allen J. Bell for \$2,500, but there is no reference to the cemetery in that conveyance. Fulton County Deed Book Y:184, Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

20. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book F4:258, Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

21. Ibid.

22. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book H4:161, Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

According to individuals who were familiar with the church, it was a white clapboard structure, large enough to hold 150–200 people.²³ All eyewitness accounts seem to agree that the church was shaded by a large oak tree. Accounts vary regarding its actual location; but most place it on a small knoll on the property.²⁴

Unfortunately, the members of Harmony Grove Congregational Church were not harmonious for very long. In 1896, the congregation squabbled over the issue of whether blacks should be permitted to worship in the church.²⁵ Since southern congregational churches were not as well established as their northern brethren, the northern churches set up a fund to benefit the southern churches. In return for funding, the more liberal northern Congregationalists attempted to impress upon the southern churches the notion that blacks and whites should worship together. This was commonly referred to as “the equal brotherhood of man.”²⁶

Certain members of Harmony Grove, who no doubt had fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War and still harbored resentment against the North, chaffed at this unwanted pressure and openly objected to the “equal brotherhood of man” philosophy. As a result, the Harmony Grove Congregational Church was expelled from the Gainesville Congregationalist District in August 1894.²⁷ The expelled church members subsequently held a meeting and passed a resolution changing the name of their church from Harmony Grove Congregational Church to Harmony Grove Southern Congregational Church.²⁸

A minority faction of the congregation, however, including church benefactor Wiley Rice and several of the original trustees, felt strongly

23. Barbara L. Smith., “Many People Remember Old Harmony Grove Church,” *Northside Neighbor*, 26 April 1978 (Harmony Grove Subject File, Atlanta History Center).

24. Susan Kessler Barnard, *Buckhead: A Place for All Time* (R. Bemis Publishing, Ltd., 1996), 50.

25. “Strife in the Ranks,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 March 1896; Accessed online at ajc.com on 5 January 2008, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1868-1939) p. 8.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

that blacks should be permitted to worship at Harmony Grove. On 14 February 1896, these members padlocked the door of Harmony Grove and posted the following notice:²⁹

You are hereby notified that any intrusion by opening this church, either for religious or any other service except by the regular membership of this the Harmony Grove Congregational church or by consent of the trustee of same, and any intrusion by any other persons whatsoever will be considered a trespass and will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The members of the majority immediately filed a petition for injunction with the court seeking to be granted possession of the church and asked the court to restrain the offending members from any interference with their use of the premises.³⁰ The majority members alleged that the minority members were unfairly attempting to implement the "fellowship of the races" concept at Harmony Grove.³¹ The petition was granted by Judge Richard H. Clark, and a Sheriff's deputy traveled to the church and placed the building in the possession of the Southern Congregationalist faction.³²

On 5 April 1896 Judge Lumpkin granted a permanent restraining order against the minority members and instructed them not interfere with the church building or property.³³ The parties subsequently reached a settlement on 22 September 1896 that resolved their differences, and a consent decree was entered, which ended the legal proceedings.³⁴

It is unclear what happened after the consent decree was entered, but it seems likely that the minority members left the congregation and

29. "Church Locked Up," *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 February 1896; Accessed online at ajc.com on 5 January 2008, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1868-1939) p. 7.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. "Sues for Damages," *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 April 1896; Accessed online at ajc.com on 5 January 2008, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1868-1939) p. 14.

34. "At War No Longer," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 September 1896; Accessed online at ajc.com on 5 January 2008, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1868-1939) p. 10.

formed or joined another church, probably Center Congregational.³⁵ Following the expulsion of the minority members, the Harmony Grove Southern Congregational Church congregation worshipped in racial segregation until the early 1900s.

On 1 January 1903, an article appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution* detailing a lawsuit filed by the Congregational Church Building Society against the Harmony Grove Congregational Church to recover \$300.00 that the Church apparently owed the Society.³⁶ According to the article, the suit alleged that the church had failed to honor the terms and agreements of the loan, which called for the loan to be used for an Evangelical Congregational Church, that worship should not be suppressed, and that the church should make annual contributions to the society.³⁷ The lawsuit further alleged that the church had sold its building to "a certain Baptist church."³⁸

Although no conveyance of the church property can be located around the time of the article, on 14 April 1909 the Congregational Church Building Society did indeed sell the church and cemetery to Buckhead merchant John N. Sims, as "Trustee of the Harmony Grove Baptist Church."³⁹ It seems likely that the Congregational Church Building Society obtained title to the building after prevailing on its suit against Harmony Grove Congregational Church for \$300.00.

Although the Baptists worshipped at the church, the congregation fell apart after several years. Following the dissolution of Harmony Grove Baptist Church, the Baptists living in the Buckhead area met for outdoor worship services on a knoll located near the location of

35. Harriet M. Cox deeded property along present day Moore's Mill Road to the "Trustees of Center Congregational Church" on 3 January 1895 to be used "for church purposes of the Congregational Denomination and left optional for the church to use for school purposes." Fulton County Deed Book 174:168, Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

36. "Suit to Foreclose on Sister Church," *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 January 1903; Accessed online at ajc.com on 5 January 2008, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1868-1939) p. 0_1E.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book 717:84, Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

the present-day Buckhead Library.⁴⁰ In 1911, the erstwhile members of Harmony Grove formed the Buckhead Baptist Church.⁴¹ In 1932, Buckhead Baptist merged with Second Baptist Church and Ponce de Leon Baptist Church and became Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church.⁴²

Left with a deed to property in the name of a congregation that no longer existed, John Sims subsequently conveyed the cemetery property to his wife S. C. Sims on 6 June 1914.⁴³ Sims specified that the land should "remain forever as a cemetery for which it is now being used." It is not clear what happened to the church, but it appears to have been torn down in approximately 1918 according to newspaper accounts.

There is no official mention of the cemetery—other than in obituaries—until 1942, when Susan C. Sims died and left the cemetery property to her children.⁴⁴ She also set aside five hundred dollars to be used by the executors of her estate "to clean off the cemetery and remove bushes, rubbish and etc., that may grow up in the cemetery." Mrs. Smith also specified that the money should be used to "place a suitable fence around the entire cemetery."⁴⁵

The next recorded reference to the cemetery appears in the will of Ms. Sims's son, Ralph G. Sims. In the will, Ralph Sims bequeathed the property to his daughter Melissa Lou Sims and authorized her to sell plots to fund the maintenance and upkeep of the cemetery.⁴⁶ At this point, however, the chain of the Sims ownership seems to cease. Melissa Lou Sims's whereabouts were unknown, even to family members.⁴⁷

40. Susan Kessler Barnard, *Buckhead: A Place for All Time* (R. Bemis Publishing, Ltd., 1996), 83.

41. "Old Harmony Grove Church Cemetery Last of Old Buckhead's Land Marks Standing in Area's Finest Section," *Metropolitan Herald*, 26 March 1953 (Harmony Grove Subject File, Atlanta History Center).

42. Ibid.

43. Fulton County, Georgia, Deed Book 717:85-86, Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia.

44. Fulton County, Georgia, Will Book O:211, will of Susan C. Sims, 1942; Probate Court, Atlanta, Georgia.

45. Ibid.

46. Fulton County, Georgia, Will Book 31:560, will of Ralph G. Sims, 1958; Probate Court, Atlanta, Georgia.

47. In 1950, an individual by the name of J. M. Camp conveyed an inverse L-shaped piece of the cemetery property to George Brown. Fulton County, Georgia,

Following the closure of Harmony Grove Baptist Church, Harmony Grove became a public burying ground, as there are many burials from the 1920s and 1930s. It is unclear, however, who was maintaining the cemetery during this period. By approximately 1950, the burials had largely ceased and the cemetery fell into disrepair.

In 2006, recognizing the historic significance of the cemetery, the Buckhead Heritage Society undertook an extensive restoration of the cemetery. Buckhead Heritage is a 501(c)(3) organization committed to preserving, protecting, and promoting the Buckhead's historic resources. Buckhead Heritage enlisted the services of mortuary archaeologists, landscape architects, and headstone repair experts during the restoration, which lasted approximately three years. In May of 2009, the Georgia Trust presented the Buckhead Heritage Society with an Excellence in Rehabilitation Award for their restoration of Harmony Grove Cemetery.

Harmony Grove Cemetery now exists as a functional green space in Buckhead and a tangible link to Buckhead's rural past. Notable occupants of Harmony Grove Cemetery include Confederate Civil War veterans, prominent local businessmen, the father of Dorothy Shay (better known as The Park Avenue Hillbillie), and even the great-grandparents of actress Julia Roberts.

For more information about the restoration at Harmony Grove Cemetery, including necrologies and obituaries, please visit Buckhead Heritage's website at <http://www.buckheadheritage.com/our-work/restoration>.

Deed Book 2559:85-86, J. M. Camp to George Brown, 1950; Superior Court Clerk's Office, Atlanta, Georgia. It is unclear how Camp acquired interest in this piece of property, but it has subsequently been conveyed as part of the land belonging to the house located on Chatham Road to the south of the cemetery.