



Gibsontown Fairview Cemetery

Jefferson County Landmarks Commission Nomination Report

By Addison Reese



Established nearly 150 years ago, Fairview Cemetery of Gibsontown remains the largest Black cemetery in Jefferson County, WV and is still an active burial ground today. Gibsontown was a small Black community outside the city limits of Charles Town. In early 1875, the Fairview Cemetery Company was incorporated and purchased land in Gibsontown to be used as a burial ground. By 1917, the local paper reported that, “*nearly one-half of the colored people of the county use Fairview as a burial place for their dead.*”¹

Fairview contains burials of some of the most prominent and influential Black citizens of Jefferson County from the 19th and 20th centuries. There are more than 100 military veterans buried in the cemetery, including more than a dozen Civil War and Spanish American War service members. Among those buried are formerly enslaved individuals and those born free, business owners, educators, officers and charter members of Black fraternal orders, farmers, trustees of Storer College, leaders and preachers of numerous local churches, and more. There are various types of unique handmade headstones as well as decorations and mementos left on graves that enhance the cultural significance of the site. This sacred burial ground provides insight into the people, events, and patterns of life that are part of the fascinating and rich Black history of Jefferson County.

Historical Background

On January 7, 1873, Charles Town’s newspaper, the *Spirit of Jefferson*, announced the need for “*a new burial ground for the colored people*” of Charles Town and vicinity; “*that they should have a decent and secure resting place for their dead is a question that admits of no debate but the plan by which such a burial place should be secured has not heretofore been definitively fixed upon.*”²

On May 10, 1873, the Virginia Press reported:

“It is generally known that a lot has been set aside for the burial of colored people in the eastern end of town. But the lot is now full of graves, and has been filled for several years. For some time past it has been impossible to dig a grave without cutting down upon some old grave; and it is believed by all who have examined the lot, that there is not room for a single additional interment within its bounds. When this state of things was made known to the Mayor and Council, authority was given for graves to be dug in the alley which runs by the Burial Ground, and which is not used for public purposes; but with the necessary provision that all remains interred therein must be removed whenever the authorities desire to open the public alley. This contingency may arise at any time in the future. Moreover, this alley is narrow, and its length (for this use) limited to the breadth of the small lot now occupied as a cemetery—so that it will be but a short time

¹ Spirit of Jefferson. [volume] (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 13 Nov. 1917. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1917-11-13/ed-1/seq-2/>>

² Spirit of Jefferson. [volume] (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 07 Jan. 1873. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1873-01-07/ed-1/seq-3/>>

*before it is filled. The purchase of an additional lot is, therefore, a necessity staring the community in the face.”*³

The burial ground mentioned is located on a property at the corner of S. Seminary Street and E. Avis Avenue, across from Edge Hill Cemetery in Charles Town. On December 16, 1836, land for this graveyard was deeded from Andrew and Elizabeth Ellen Hunter to the trustees of Charles Town (listing the mayor and each council member by name) and *their successors in office forever*. “The said lot or part of land being intended for, and always to be used as a Potter’s field and burying place for coloured persons.” The cemetery contains the remains of individuals who were enslaved as well as free people of color buried between **1836 and 1876**. The burial ground was officially closed for burials after Fairview was established.

In the early months of 1873, regular notices were published with updates regarding contributions made to secure land for the new burial ground. By February 1875, the *Fairview Cemetery Company* was officially incorporated. The record from the Jefferson County Corporation Book 1, page 5 states:

*“The undersigned agree to become a corporation under the name Fairview Cemetery Company, for the purpose of providing and establishing a burial place for the dead of the colored people of Charles Town, Jefferson County, West Virginia, and its vicinity...on the 9th day of February, 1875. Signed, John H. Talbot, Edward P. Talbot [Tolbert], Philip Jackson, George W. Jackson, Joseph Walker, Robert Ford, and Richard Jackson.”*⁴

Just nine days after incorporation, the Fairview Cemetery Company purchased two acres of land from Henry Bedinger Davenport in a deed dated February 18, 1875. Henry B. Davenport lived at “Altona,” the nearby ancestral home and farm he inherited from his father, Colonel Braxton Davenport. According to the obituary of cemetery trustee Robert Ford, he “was in antebellum days a slave of the late Col. Braxton Davenport.”⁵ Braxton Davenport was the county magistrate at the time of the John Brown trial and Henry B. Davenport was a lieutenant in the military company that helped repress the John Brown raid and later guarded over Brown when he went between the jail and courthouse.⁶ After emancipation, Robert Ford went on to become a hearse driver for the Sadler Brothers undertaking business for 40 years then for their successors, Strider and Ramey, until his death in 1905. His obituary in the Shepherdstown Register estimated that “about 3,000 bodies were conveyed by him to cemeteries in the hearse which on Tuesday

³ Virginia Free Press. (Charlestown, Va. [W. Va.]), 10 May 1873. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026784/1873-05-10/ed-1/seq-3/>>

⁴ Jefferson County, West Virginia. Corporation Book 1:5.

⁵ Spirit of Jefferson. (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 27 June 1905. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1905-06-27/ed-1/seq-2/>>

⁶ Shepherdstown Register. (Shepherdstown, Va. [W. Va.]), 19 Sept. 1901. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026824/1901-09-19/ed-1/seq-3/>>

conveyed his own remains to their final resting place.”⁷ According to the Spirit of Jefferson, all of his pallbearers were white and included his former enslaver’s grandson, Braxton Davenport Gibson. For years, Braxton Gibson’s mother, Francis Davenport Gibson and husband, John Thomas Gibson, owned a large piece of property adjacent to Fairview; it is likely the Gibson family for which Gibsontown was originally named.

Because the cemetery was established out of need, it is likely that the first burials occurred soon after the land was secured in early 1875. Changes in the landscape over time from erosion, invasive plants, and burrowing animals have caused some of the gravestones to topple and become buried by soil, especially in the oldest section which lies at the bottom of a hill. Without a burial map and many graves currently unmarked, for now the history must be pieced together through information on remaining visible stones, available death records, newspaper archives, and oral history.

The one visible stone with years predating the recorded establishment of the cemetery is a large obelisk for the children of Achilles and Ellen Dixon: Wilson (died in 1857), Urania (1864), and Marian Dixon Keys (1880). This obelisk could mark Wilson and Urania’s reinternments or their names could have been added in their memory when the stone was erected after Marian’s death. Their father, Achilles Dixon, was a successful blacksmith who was born free. In 1839, he purchased the freedom of his wife, Ellen, one daughter, and one son. In the deed of emancipation between Margaret Kearsley and Achilles Dixon, Urania Camilla is identified as the daughter whose freedom he purchased.⁸ The Dixons lived on the corner of Liberty and Samuel Street in Charles Town. In December of 1865, the first “colored” school was established in their home. When Ellen Dixon died in 1908, The Daily Telegram (Clarksburg, WV) wrote that the “*Freewill Baptist church was organized in her home. Her home was also the birthplace of government schools in the valley and especially Storer College.*” Her obituary also quoted Professor Nathan C. Brackett of Storer as saying, “*In the early days of the school at the close of the war she rendered great service to the teachers, her keen insight into human nature, her knowledge of people of both races were always at the service of the president and teachers.*”⁹

Although not the first burial, the earliest date on a visible marked stone is for Lewis Cooke who died July 14, 1879. His obituary reads: “*Lewis Cooke, son of Henry Cooke, the colored express man, of Charlestown, died on Sunday last. Lewis was well known, and one of the most popular barbers we ever had. He was a good boy and his death will be regretted by white and colored.*”¹⁰ His father, Henry Cooke, died seven years after his son; he was a sexton for the Presbyterian

⁷ Shepherdstown Register. (Shepherdstown, Va. [W. Va.]), 29 June 1905. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026824/1905-06-29/ed-1/seq-3/>>

⁸ Jefferson County Clerk's Office. Deed Book 23: 407. 19 Aug 1839. Charles Town, Jefferson County, WV.

⁹ The daily telegram. (Clarksburg, W. Va.), 01 Feb. 1908, p.2, col. 4. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85059715/1908-02-29/ed-1/seq-2/>>

¹⁰ Spirit of Jefferson. (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 15 July 1879. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1879-07-15/ed-1/seq-3/>>

Church for thirty years as well as the mail carrier and express messenger for the B&O Railroad.¹¹ Two years after his death, local stone carvers, Diehl & Bros., erected a headstone at his grave that was purchased through community donations from “those who appreciated the man whose memory they revere.”¹²

Every veteran interred at Fairview does not have a headstone recording their service, however, military records and visible headstones have helped to identify more than 100 military veterans buried there. Fairview Cemetery has government-issued military headstones and medallions throughout the cemetery, representing service in the War of 1812, Civil War, Spanish American War, WW1, WW2, Korea, and Vietnam. Some of the veterans buried at Fairview died in service including Eugene Luckett, who died in Germany while serving in the army during WW2, as well as James E. Thornton, George Carr, and Matthew Washby, all of whom died at camp from influenza shortly after they enlisted in the army during WW1. Shortly after the Spanish American War concluded, the newspaper began reporting on memorial services at Fairview, which implies that there were likely interments of those who died in service during earlier wars.

Over the years, many local fraternal organizations and historically Black churches have been involved in recognizing military service of those interred at Fairview. In 1903, *The Spirit* described a procession from the Fishermen’s Hall to Fairview. Charles Town’s Fishermen’s Hall, is located about 1.7 miles from Fairview and was established by the Grand United Order of the Galilean Fishermen in 1885. Cemetery charter member Edward P. Tolbert was also the president of the Galilean Fishermen during the year of the inception. The Black benevolent society, composed of philanthropic men and women, was focused on education and self-betterment and providing for the sick, assisting widows, and paying for funerals. Since its construction, Fisherman’s Hall has served as a community meeting place for a variety of groups and benevolent societies; organizations like the NAACP of Jefferson County still use this building today. At that 1903 memorial service, B.F. Nelson was president, L.L. Page master of ceremonies, and Philip Jackson, secretary. “*At the cemetery, prayer was offered by Rev. Washington Murray, addresses made by Rev. J.H. Burrill, Rev. C.R. Wills, and Charles Herbert, and essays read by Misses M.M. Simms and Elizabeth Moore.*”¹³ A later example of a Fairview memorial service was in June 1946—the Green Copeland Post No. 63 began the Memorial Day services by tossing a wreath in the Shenandoah for all the soldiers lost at sea then proceeded to Fairview to lay wreaths on the graves.¹⁴

As is typical with cemeteries lacking perpetual care, there have been times through the years when Fairview has become overgrown. On June 8, 1914, a community meeting was held at

¹¹ Virginia Free Press. (Charlestown, Va. [W. Va.]), 25 Feb. 1886. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026784/1886-02-25/ed-1/seq-2/>>

¹² Spirit of Jefferson. (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 15 May 1888. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1888-05-15/ed-1/seq-3/>>

¹³ Spirit of Jefferson. (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 09 June 1903. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1903-06-09/ed-1/seq-3/>>

¹⁴ Spirit of Jefferson (Charles Town, WV), 1946, June 5. Small Town Papers, Inc. <http://spj.stparchive.com/Archive/SPJ/SPJ06051946P02.php>

Wainwright Baptist Church to organize a clean-up effort. Their work day was described by the cemetery committee in the Spirit of Jefferson:

*Immediately following a devotional service conducted by Reverend Craven, “scythes, saws, axes, and grubbing hoes were to be seen in use, and by eight o’clock, be it said to their honor, sixty-nine of the most sturdy, respectable and industrious men of this community were upon the grounds and at work. Among them were to be seen, our ministers and teachers, as well as our good Dr. C. D. Wainwright, who showed he can wield the ax in good cause as well as write prescriptions successfully.”*¹⁵

Dr. Chester Wainwright, was the first practicing physician in Charles Town and for a time was the only Black doctor in Jefferson County. His father, Reverend Chester C. Wainwright, was a trustee of Storer College and for 27 years the pastor of Charles Town’s Freewill Baptist Church, later renamed in his honor. This type of community outreach for clean-up and fundraising can be found throughout newspaper archives over the next century to the present day—many of the efforts led by local historically Black churches and organizations like the Green-Copeland American Legion Post 63 and the Star Lodge No. 1, A.F. & A.M. Freemasons—the first African American Prince Hall Lodge established in West Virginia.

Location and Property Description

Fairview Cemetery is located two miles from the city center of Charles Town, WV. From Gibsontown Road via Augustine Avenue, visitors enter the cemetery from the southeast—this section is the original land purchased by the cemetery trustees thus containing the oldest graves. Seen in the distance to the northwest are lands once owned by the extended family of George Washington; there are numerous individuals interred in the cemetery who were enslaved on those lands.

The cemetery has farm fields to the northwest and southwest, although there are plans for expansion of the Huntfield Development across most of the open land. Fairview shares its northeast border with Page Jackson Elementary School, built after school segregation was deemed unlawful and named after the first Black high school in Jefferson County—Page Jackson High School of Charles Town, now the home of the Jefferson County Board of Education. The name Page-Jackson honors two prominent Black educators interred at Fairview, Philip Jackson and Littleton Lorton Page. Philip Jackson spent 50 years of his career in education at Eagle Avenue in Charles Town as a teacher and principal of the school; he was also involved in various organizations and served on the cemetery board. Littleton L. Page was born enslaved. He fought in the Civil War and after returning from war a free man, spent his life dedicated to education. Both Jackson, Page, and many of their immediate family members are buried at Fairview.

¹⁵ Spirit of Jefferson. (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 30 June 1914. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1914-06-30/ed-1/seq-2/>>

Over the years, the cemetery was improved, and additional land acquired. On November 13, 1917, the *Spirit of Jefferson* newspaper reported that Fairview Cemetery was to be enlarged and improved—“*Negotiations have been concluded with Mr. Thornton Perry who owns land adjacent by which land will be obtained to enlarge the cemetery, making it about twice its present size.*”¹⁶ In a deed dated October 28, 1918, the trustees of the cemetery purchased an additional strip of land from Marshall and Lena Burns that ran along the dirt road to the cemetery (DB 116, 482). However, in August of 1919, the trustees acquired a larger piece of adjacent land and sold the Burns parcel. At that time, the *Spirit of Jefferson* reported: “*Thomas W. Moore has sold an acre of land at Gibsontown to John J. Dixon, trustee for the Fairview Cemetery, the purpose in buying it being to enlarge the cemetery. A small tract of less than an acre was bought last fall from Marshall Burns to add to the cemetery. The latter tract has been resold, as the Moore land was found to be more available.*”¹⁷ John J. Dixon was another son of Achilles and Ellen Dixon. According to the deed dated August 27, 1919, this land sale added about an acre to the cemetery (DB 117, 481). A deed dated August 30, 1919, shows the land sale from the cemetery trustees back to Marshall Burns (DB 117, 479). In 1929, Marshall Burns, now widowed, once again deeded less than an acre to the Trustees of Fairview Cemetery.

An undated tax card for Fairview identifies the property as Ventosa Cemetery of Gibsontown and states that it is 3.5 acres. Before the village was known as Gibsontown, the lots were historically known as Ventosa. A plat map from 1976 (PB 4, 59) shows the properties along Gibsontown Road up to the cemetery and uses both Gibsontown and Ventosa to describe the properties. On the plat, the surveyor acknowledges that some of the deed descriptions on record were too vague to reconstruct. Based on the number of land transactions altering the size of the cemetery, incomplete land records, and the potential for burials beyond surveyed boundaries, a more in-depth survey is necessary to determine the true scale of the cemetery and location of all burials.

Nomination Criteria

The Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission nominates Fairview Cemetery of Gibsontown under Criterion A for inclusion on the list of registered county landmarks. Criterion A states that a site may be nominated if, in the opinion of the JCHLC, it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

Nomination Action

Landmarks Commissioner, Addison Reese, presented the nomination to the JCHLC at their general meeting; the board voted unanimously to add Fairview Cemetery of Gibsontown, under Criteria A, to the rolls of registered Jefferson County Historic Landmarks on December 7, 2022.

¹⁶ Spirit of Jefferson. [volume] (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 13 Nov. 1917. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1917-11-13/ed-1/seq-2/>>

¹⁷ Spirit of Jefferson. [volume] (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 19 Aug. 1919. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1919-08-19/ed-1/seq-3/>>

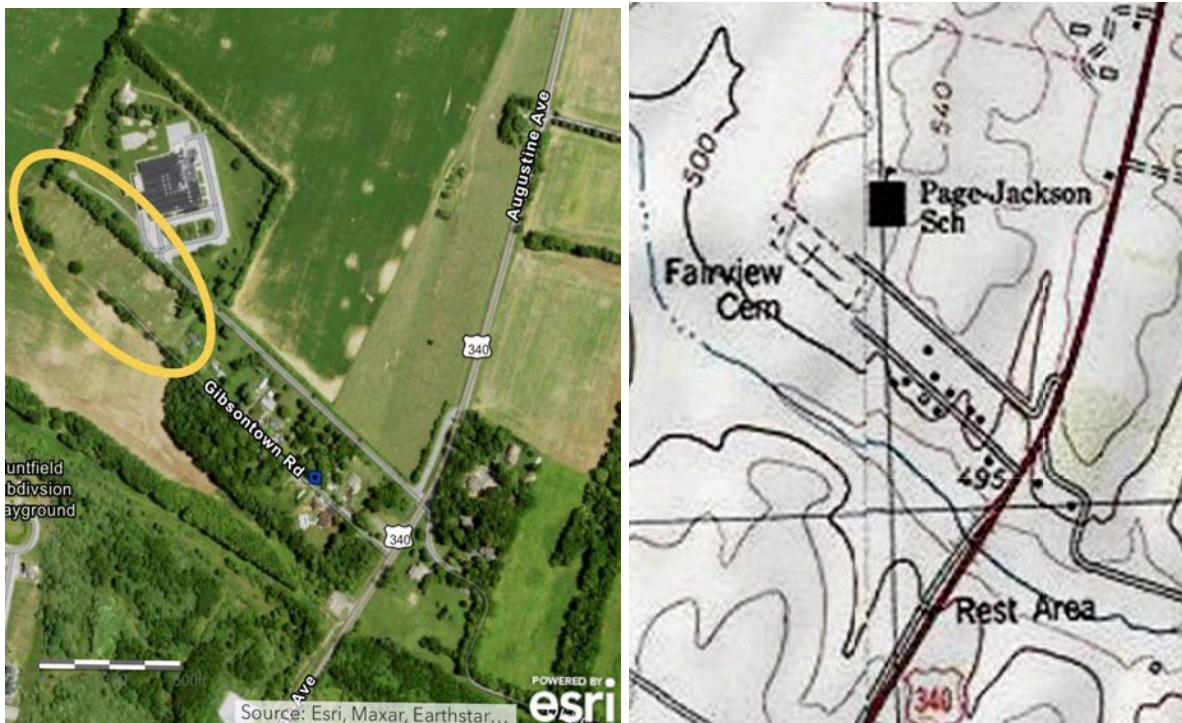
Background Documentation and References:



Looking Northeast at Fairview Cemetery



Aerial Photograph of Fairview Cemetery and Page Jackson Elementary School



Aerial Imagery and USGS 1:24,000 Topo of Fairview Cemetery

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The undersigned agrees to become a corporation by the name of Fairview Cemetery Company, for the purpose of providing and establishing a burial place for the dead of the colored people of Charles-town, Jefferson County, West Virginia, and its vicinity, and for that purpose desires authority to purchase, hold, lease, sell and convey real property to the value of three thousand Dollars, and personal property to the value of one thousand Dollars. Given under our hands this 9th day of February, 1875.

(Signed)

John H. Talbot
 Edward P. Talbot
 Philip Jackson

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George N. Jackson
 Joseph Walker
 Robert Ford
 Richard Jackson

February 9, 1875. Fairview Cemetery Company, Corporation Book 1: 5. Jefferson Co., WV, County Clerk's Office.



Photograph of Dollie Thompson at her Gibsontown homestead circa 1920. The funeral for her husband, Jasper Thompson, and countless others were held at the Thompson home (Photo and Oral History from descendent, Monique Crippen-Hopkins)

One of the original houses still standing was owned by Jasper and Dollie Irving Thompson. During the Civil War, Jasper Thompson enlisted in the army and quickly reached the rank of 1st sergeant of Co. F, 23rd Reg. of the U.S. Colored Troops. Returning from the war, he worked as a farmer and was involved in many local organizations. In hand-written family records, his daughter described his occupation as being a farmer and “leader of organizations of his race.” At the time of Jasper’s sudden death in 1906, he was survived by his wife and 9 children, several children having preceded him in death. According to his obituary, “His funeral took place on Sunday afternoon, at his late residence, Rev. C.R. Willis conducting the service, and was attended by the order of True Reformers and a large body of colored people.”¹⁸ Dollie Thompson remained at the family homestead until her death in 1933.

Some other families once living in Gibsontown were Bradford, Brookins, Clay, Cross, Drummonds, Ford, Herbert, Lawson, Roman, Short[s], Smith, Thompson, Toliver, and Walker. Many members of these families and their descendants are interred at Fairview.

¹⁸ Spirit of Jefferson. (Charles Town, Va. [W. Va.]), 11 Sept. 1906. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026788/1906-09-11/ed-1/seq-3/>>

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