

HERITAGE GAZETTE

FALL 2023

ASSOCIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF
HISTORIC CONGRESSIONAL CEMETERY

AT CONGRESSIONAL, WE ARE YOU.

A typical day at Historic Congressional Cemetery is, well, atypical—and we wouldn't have it any other way. The cemetery truly vibrates with all types of life, and nowhere is this truer than in the people, alive and dead, that spend their time here. People visit us for varied reasons. Some are volunteers from our Adopt-A-Plot program, generously donating their time to make the cemetery beautiful. Others are attendees of our engaging events, coming to experience a docent-led tour or take in a summer movie at Cinematery. Some aren't even human, as evidenced by the excited wags and pants of our beloved dogs when they approach our gates. Others visit to mourn, inter, memorialize, or remember their loved ones who selected our cemetery as their final resting place. Our visitors may come for different reasons, but they are all united by their relationship with our 35 acres of lively but serene green space here in our nation's capital.

While we serve many

groups, we know who we are. We are not simply a historic cemetery in the city. We are *you*. We are a direct reflection of our neighbors. We are the people whose narratives are interwoven into the tapestry of life at Congressional Cemetery. We are who we are because of you. No matter how you are involved with Congressional Cemetery, thank you for making us special.



Dr. Greg Carr, Associate Professor of Africana Studies at Howard University, poses for a photo at the grave of Alain Locke with Cemetery staff and tour attendees after a recent Cemetery Speaker Series event.

INSIDE

- 2 From the Chair
- 3 From the President
- 4 Around the Gatehouse
- 6 Stone Stories
- 8 Circle of Life
- 11 Black Photography
- 14 Death Days

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Almost every day, I drive past the Cemetery. I have the good fortune of living just a few blocks away. Every time I pass it, I look in wonder at the vibrancy of the Cemetery. For this simple reason, I am honored to serve on the Cemetery's board. And with the help and support of the entire board and Jackie's staff, we are working to strengthen our core mission "to preserve, promote, and protect our historic and active burial ground."

Our preservation efforts are more than fixing headstones. While that is important work to honor those interred within the Cemetery, there is so much more for us to do. For example, the Cemetery is currently doing an assessment of how many burial spots remain. While we look at that issue, we are also looking at capital improvements and projects that can help us continue to be a final resting place for our community.

To promote the Cemetery, we are always looking to find innovative ways to engage people and educate them about the site. Many are aware of events like Pride 5K, Soul Strolls, Cinemategy, and our tours—but were you aware that A.J. Orlikoff and his team recently put on the Gentleman's Gambit? It was a trip back in time that included interactive theater, a speakeasy in the public vault, and swinging live jazz. The evening creatively weaved in the true stories of the Cemetery's residents that, if you followed the clues, led you to the criminal mastermind James "Jimmy" LaFontaine, who led one of the largest and most profitable casinos at the Maryland Athletic Club.

To protect the Cemetery, we continue to take seriously our obligation as an environmental steward. Given our proximity to the Anacostia River, we have to be vigilant about stormwater and groundwater runoff. We have good reason to remain motivated in environmental stewardship, as our treasured bees located on top of Mausoleum Row continue to thrive alongside our partnership with the DC Beekeeper's Alliance. Creating an ecosystem for our little pollinators is of vital importance to our community.

This is just a small sample of the work going on at the Cemetery—there is so much more. Please accept my deepest gratitude for your support: for stepping up to adopt a plot, joining a committee, helping our staff do their daily work, attending our events, and for your donations.

The Cemetery is a big place—more than 35 acres in all—but our resources are limited. We continue to look for ways to fund the vital work we need to do in the Cemetery. I am especially appreciative of our strong relationship with the National Historic Trust and the support they provide. If you have not had a chance to donate this year, please consider it. Consider becoming a monthly donor or adding the Cemetery to your list of organizations for year-end giving. Your donations will only help to continue all of the good work we are doing.

It's hard to believe we have the fortune of having this special place right here in our backyard. I look forward to seeing you the next time I am there. Please say hello—I am always interested in meeting you and hearing about your connection to the Cemetery.

Until then take care,
Richard Greene



Richard Greene, IV



THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION
OF HISTORIC CONGRESSIONAL CEMETERY

1801 E St. SE
Washington, DC 20003
202-543-0539

www.congressionalcemetery.org
staff@congressionalcemetery.org

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Richard Greene, Chairperson
Heather Alarcon, Vice Chairperson
Robyn Hinson-Jones, Secretary
Emily van Loon, Treasurer
RuthAnn Clark
Sam Cornale
Joseph Imamura
John Kellogg
Stephanie Lipscomb
James McGinnis
Nathan Neal
Rhonda Sincavage
Kirsten Sloan
Larry West

STAFF

Jaclyn Spainhour, President
Anthony "A.J." Orlikoff, Director of
Public Engagement
Lily Buerkle, Director of Sales and Funerals
Margaret Canilang, Director of Conservation
Antonio Coghill, Administration and
Communications Coordinator
Sarah La Rocca, Marketing and Events
Coordinator
Dayle Dooley, Archivist
Andrea McCants, Finance
Leigh Pickering, Horticulture and
Grounds Manager
Kennedy Simpson, Visitor Services
Associate-Lead
Quentin Datcher, Visitor Services Associate
Kurt Deion, Visitor Services Associate

The Association for the Preservation of
Historic Congressional Cemetery is a
nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. All
donations are deductible to the extent
permitted by federal tax laws. Funding for the
preservation and maintenance of Historic
Congressional Cemetery is provided in part
by the Congressional Cemetery
Endowment, which was created with
matching funds provided by the U.S.
Congress and administered by the
National Trust for Historic Preservation.

AT CONGRESSIONAL, WE CELEBRATE OUR NEIGHBORS.

On behalf of Congressional Cemetery, thank you for continuing to be a part of our mission to celebrate the legacy of those interred with us. Whether you are a site owner, a family member of a resident, a K9 member, or a frequent visitor, your presence truly makes our space an oasis for the living.

The cemetery has always been more than just a historical landmark; it is a vibrant and living testament to the stories of countless individuals who have contributed to the tapestry of our nation's history. Each step taken within its grounds holds a treasure trove of memories and lessons, reminding us of the journey we have traveled as a nation.

Your enthusiasm for and involvement in preserving this legacy means more than you may ever know. Your appreciation for the past and dedication to the future of Congressional Cemetery are what give life to this hallowed ground. Whether it's through your volunteer efforts, financial contributions, or simply spreading the word about our cause, your impact has been profound and heartwarming.

As I express this gratitude, I invite you and others who share our vision to become more actively involved with the site. Your future involvement can make a significant difference in the preservation and enhancement of Congressional Cemetery for generations to come.

Here are some ways you can further support and be a part of achieving our mission:

Volunteer Opportunities: Congressional Cemetery offers a unique and enriching volunteering experience. Whether it's helping with maintenance and gardening, guiding visitors on historical tours, or participating in special events, your time and expertise

can make a lasting impact on the cemetery's upkeep and visitor experience.

Support our Work: As a nonprofit organization, our continued existence and growth rely heavily on the generosity of individuals like you. Your financial support, no matter the amount, will directly impact our ability to preserve and restore Congressional Cemetery for future generations to cherish.

Spread the Love: Your appreciation for Congressional Cemetery is contagious. Help us raise awareness about the space by sharing its unique story with your friends, family, and colleagues.

Attend Our Events: Be present at our events and gatherings, where we come together as a community to celebrate history, culture, and the beauty of our cemetery. Your presence not only enriches these occasions but also fuels our determination to continue our mission.

Please know that your involvement, no matter how small, makes a profound difference.

I am always happy to meet new faces, and I invite you to reach out. Please let me know how we can better serve you and your family.

Yours in Service,

Jackie Spainhour
President
Congressional Cemetery



AROUND THE GATEHOUSE

MEET OUR NEW VISITOR SERVICES TEAM!

Congressional Cemetery is pleased to announce the creation of a NEW staff position, Visitor Service Associates (VSA)! While we are incredibly grateful for the service of our Gate Checkers, we believe this change will usher in a new and exciting chapter at Congressional. Our VSAs will be the new smiling faces you see when you walk into the cemetery. In addition to welcoming everyone who walks through the front gate, the VSAs will also: facilitate the K9 Corps/Day Pass program, assist with historical inquiries, aide funeral operations, and contribute to our events and educational programs. Please join us in welcoming them when you see them at the gate!

- Kennedy Simpson: Visitor Services Associate-Lead
- Quentin Datcher: Visitor Services Associate
- Kurt Deion: Visitor Services Associate



Quentin Datcher (left) and Kennedy Simpson (right)

Photo credit: Kitty Linton

**Historic Congressional Cemetery
Board of Directors
and President Jaclyn Spainhour
invite you to:**

CELEBRATING THE LEGACY OF



**A fun evening with drinks, bites,
and community to celebrate and
support HCC, our mission, and legacy**

Thursday, November 9, 6-8 p.m.
Christ Church Parish Hall
620 G Street, SE, Washington, D.C.

Come learn about how we are fulfilling our mission through the various pillars of our organization, meet some of our dedicated staff and volunteers, and mingle with others who are directly impacted by the work we do here at Congressional Cemetery. Hors d'oeuvres, drinks, and music will complete the backdrop of this event featuring members of the cemetery community. Much of the ticket price is a tax-deductible donation to help us kick off our year-end giving campaign. Thank you for your generosity and support. We hope to see you there!

**Tickets on sale soon!
Watch our social media, emails, and
website for more information beginning
in September.**

A SPECIAL INVITATION TO THE FAMILY AND FRIENDS OF OUR RESIDENTS

Throughout the year, our cemetery has been a place of reflection and a touchstone to awaken cherished memories. It is where we come together to remember the lives of those who are no longer with us physically but remain alive in our hearts and minds.

On November 1, 2023, please consider joining us for our first Day of Remembrance at Congressional Cemetery. On this special day from 9 am until 5 pm, we will be providing flowers for placement at the graves of our interred. These flowers symbolize the love and respect we continue to hold for those who have left an indelible mark on our lives. The simple act of placing flowers at their resting places allows us to honor their memory and bring a sense of beauty and warmth to our sacred grounds.

More than just a day of remembrance, we see this occasion as an opportunity to come together as a community. We are bound by the stories of our deceased residents, stories that we carry with us every day. By gathering on November 1, we can share these memories, find strength in one another, and provide support as we navigate the complex emotions that accompany loss.

The Day of Remembrance will be an informal and reflective event, providing you with the space and time to visit the resting places of your dear departed at your own pace. Whether you wish to spend a few quiet moments in solitude or share stories and laughter with others, know that you will be among friends who understand and empathize with your feelings.

We truly hope you will join us. No need to register—simply come to the gate to help us honor your loved ones.

Yours in Service,
Jackie Spainhour
President



Photo by Kitty Linton

A CALL FOR ARMS

MARGARET CANILANG
DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION

Though an elegant lady still honors the eternal resting place of Catherine J. Weller, her graceful arms outstretched to a cross have long retired to the basement of the gatehouse. It is unclear how long the statue's arms have been displaced, but evidence of previous failed repairs can be seen on the broken pieces. Standing proudly on the sloping hill of the Barney Circle overlook, this memorial is visibly in



The Weller Monument as it appears now



The Weller Monument with arms intact

need of restoration. The Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery is launching a fundraiser to restore Catherine Weller, much like the campaign years ago that secured Marion Ooletia Kalhert's statue back onto her high-buttoned boots. With your generous

donations, Marion returned to her site for the first time in thirty-one years. Catherine Weller's statue, witnessing this altruistic act, has politely requested the return of her own missing parts and pieces.

The Catherine J. Weller memorial consists of an intricately carved lady holding a cross with a writing tool in one hand. One knee is kneeling on the rock that serves as the foundation for the cross. The marble statue and two-tiered pedestal sit atop a granite base.

While the large memorial shows no sign of uneven settling, the delicate marble is showing considerable signs of weathering and deterioration. In addition to the fractured elements, signs of biological growth in the form of algae and lichen, black crust caused by pollution, and disaggregation of the surface were observed.

The restoration would consist of joining the many fractures with stainless steel pins and mortar. To add extra support for the reassembled structure and to ensure that this restoration treatment is more successful than the first attempt, an inconspicuous armature will be installed along the main structure of the cross. The disaggregating surface will be consolidated to reduce future erosion; a misting system will be set up to dissolve the black crust accumulated in



The Weller Monument arms and cross

sheltered recesses; and a biological cleaning solution will be applied to remove biological growth.

The cost estimate for such intricate and skilled conservation work comes in at \$10,000. With your support, we will be able to raise the funds to preserve Catherine Weller's marker. When you send in a donation, please indicate that you would like it to be set aside for A Call for Arms Campaign. And it won't even cost you an arm and a leg to give Catherine an arm and an arm.

All photos courtesy of Congressional Cemetery

FINDING YOUR PATH ...THRU THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

BY SHARON METCALF

Some wander onto the hillside by chance in pursuit of their curious canines. Others arrive with intention, having discovered that the *Circle of Life* is a welcoming refuge where they can pause and rest during their meanderings through the cemetery.

Under clear blue skies, Harriet Radin (or “Hattie, 7 ½ years old” as she proudly told me) followed the labyrinthian path among images of nature with her eyes closed. Her mom, Sara, and sister, Freya, age 5, sat nearby on the sunflower bench at the *Circle*’s southern end. Living just a few blocks away, they often come to wander the cemetery grounds and play on the hillside.

Whenever I drop by the *Circle* to water the young linden trees or tend to the sedum plantings around the compass rose, I meet passers-by who happen upon the earthen monument and stay awhile to mellow out and reflect on its meaning.

Congressional Cemetery officially dedicated the *Circle of Life* on March 19, a blustery cold day that coincided with spring’s vernal equinox. Among those who came to commemorate the terrestrial artworks, depicting nature’s seasons and cycles, were the vibrant Batalá drummers, warming up the crowd with their inspirational rhythms.

The *Circle* is an interpretive monument that will have different meanings for every person who visits — depending on their beliefs, their experiences, and their stage of life.

For children, the *Circle of Life* likely brings to mind the story of *The Lion King* when Mufasa teaches Simba about the interconnectedness of all living creatures — and the generational cycle of birth, growth, death, and renewal.

For others a walk through the contemplative space, perhaps reflecting on the artwork, might be a quiet time to appreciate the present moment, secure in the understanding that the rhythms of nature’s ebb



Photo courtesy of Sharon Metcalf



Photo courtesy of Congressional Cemetery

and flow will give way to another day and another season.

For me, the *Circle* feels like a meaningful touchstone — a connection to a much longer through-line of history and civilization. Among the thousands of venerable gravesites and historic landmarks scattered across the cemetery, the *Circle of Life* hillside has a profound sense of place. This elevated corner of the city offers a full view of the southern horizon unobstructed by towering buildings.

It must have looked exactly that way hundreds of years ago when Native Americans and other Indigenous people stood on the same slope. As time marches on, one can only hope that the hallowed ground and enduring monument will be preserved so that those who chance upon it a century from now might appreciate its significance.

SACRED CIRCLES THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Ancient cultures the world over have created sacred circles reflecting their traditions with stone carvings,

often designed and placed in alignment with elements of nature. Indigenous tribes formed earthen wheels as expressions of gratitude to the great spirits and to serve as a sun calendar to guide planting and harvest.

Thousands of years before, ancient civilizations at Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, and Angkor Wat moved earth and rocks over vast distances to erect elaborate monuments with universal symbols

of nature. These enshrined landmarks and stone sentinels paid homage to their deities, served as ancestral burial grounds, and celebrated moments of the rising and setting sun on solstice and equinox occasions. Drawing inspiration from such rituals, visitors to the *Circle of Life* might enjoy their own vantage point to observe the sun's celestial trajectory. This "tree-henge," an arboreal perimeter spanning 60 feet in diameter, was purposefully planted in alignment with the eight directional points of the central compass rose. During Summer Solstice, the sun begins its long day's journey over the NE linden tree. As the sun intensifies and then mellows it casts a final shadow across the NW tree 16 hours later. Conversely, the Winter Solstice dims the light and shortens the SE to SW solar traverse to just 10 hours across the Circle's southern horizon.

STONES OF STEWARDSHIP

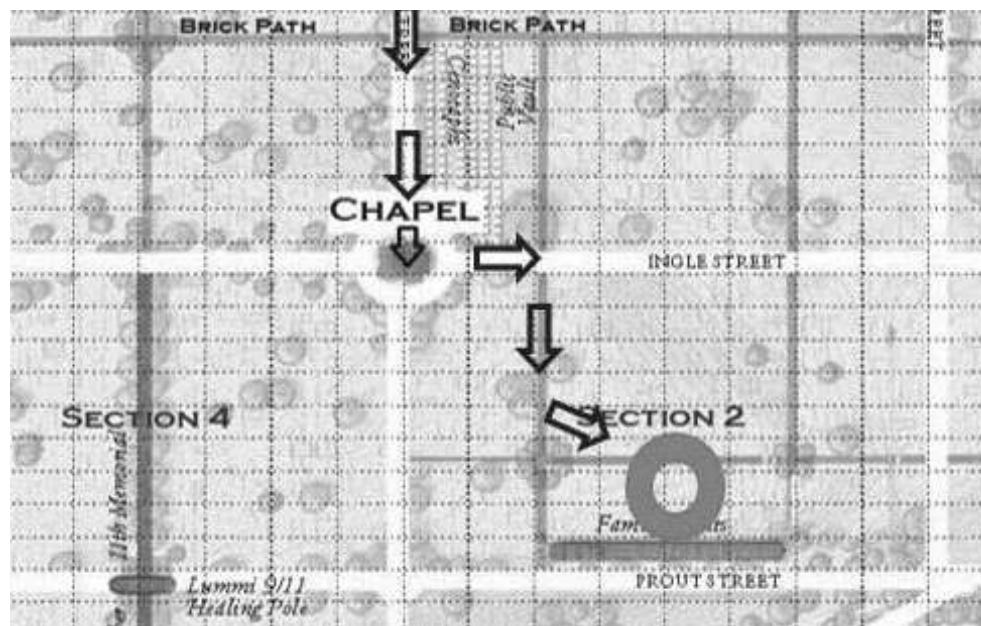
In the timeless tradition of sacred circles and remembrance stones, we invite each visitor to place a stone with their blessing beside one of the seasonal roundels. With this simple act, the collective grati-

MONUMENTAL MATTERS

tude of every individual creates a synergistic spirit that is greater than the sum of its parts.

A community grows stronger when we care for the land around us by taking what is barren and making it green. Planting trees can be a leap of faith. Over four decades the *Circle's* unassuming saplings will soar to heights of 70 feet, their branches extending 20 feet in all directions, providing shade to those sitting on benches within the serene outdoor sanctuary.

The *Circle of Life* expresses the values of environmental stewardship. Its design emerged from the collaboration of local artists, gardeners, nature enthusiasts, and cemetery walkers. Congressional Cemetery designated the sunny hillside for the Circle's creation. Casey Trees planted the surrounding lindens that embrace the sacred space. Fram Monument Compa-



ny sourced and meticulously engraved the granite artworks.

All who pass by contribute their energy so that those who follow in Hattie's footsteps can enjoy this sylvan oasis many lifetimes from now.

* * *

Circle of Life photos, video and background —
<https://congressionalcemetery.org/circle-of-life>

Information for your estate planning, bequest, stock gift, endowment match, or donation:

Legal Name: The Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery

Legal Address: 1801 E St. SE

Washington, DC 20003

Telephone: 202-539-0543

Tax ID Number: 52-1071828

Please contact us for wire instruction or banking information

PRESERVING EARLY BLACK PHOTOGRAPHY: THE LARRY J. WEST COLLECTION GOES ON DISPLAY

BY: A.J. ORLIKOFF, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, AND LARRY J. WEST, BOARD MEMBER

In the annals of photography history, three remarkable African American entrepreneurs stand tall as pioneers of their time: James P. Ball, Glenalvin Goodridge, and Augustus Washington. Not only were these men successful photographers during the Antebellum era, but they were also staunch abolitionists, dedicating their lives to fighting for freedom and equality for all. It is worth noting that two of them were sons of formerly enslaved fathers, making their journey from adversity to entrepreneurship even more inspiring.

Their contributions represent an often-overlooked chapter in the history of photography—the role of African Americans as both photographers and subjects. This lost chapter challenges contemporary assumptions about the racial demographics of early photography, providing valuable insights into the social and cultural fabric of the mid-19th century. In a groundbreaking exhibition set to

open on September 20, 2023, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), the work of these African American photographs will be on display for the first time. Many of these extraordinary artifacts come from the personal collection of Larry J. West, photography historian and Congressional Cemetery board member. The exhibition will focus on vintage 19th century photographs by Ball, plus oil paintings



A close up of the Mathew Brady Memorial at Congressional Cemetery. Several of the fired porcelains contain the work of African American photographers in the Larry J. West Collection. Photo by Kitty Linton

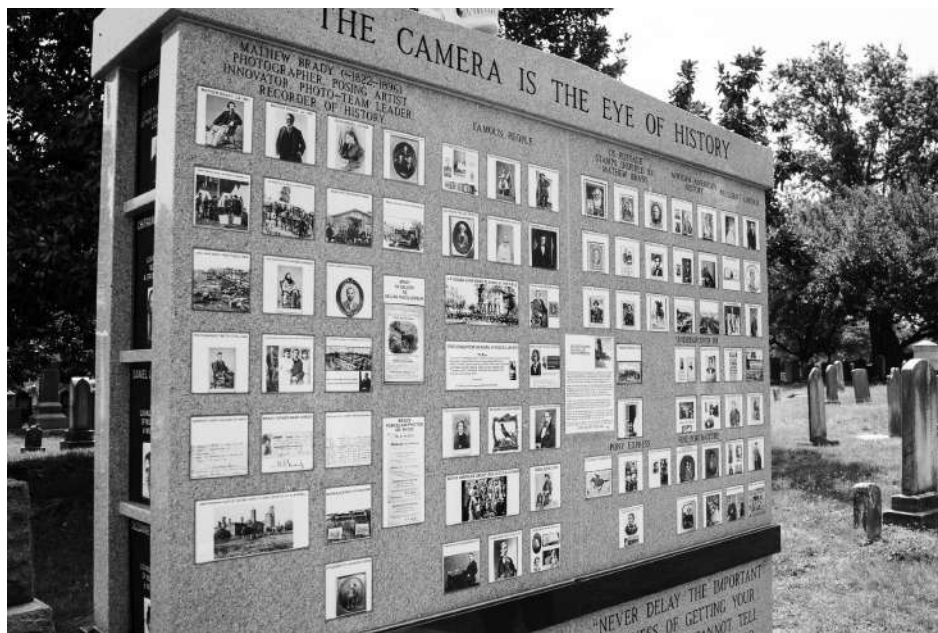
by celebrated artists such as Robert S. Duncanson.

Congressional Cemetery is no stranger to the rich history of photography. As the final resting place of Mathew Brady, the Father of Photojournalism and one of the greatest photographers in American history, the cemetery strives to celebrate Brady's legacy and help educate the public on his remarkable accomplishments. As part of this effort, West created the Mathew Brady Memorial. Dedicated last year, the memorial

honors Brady's legacy in the shadow of his own tombstone in the form of a memorial wall showcasing some of Brady's most influential photographs on fine fired porcelains. Yet the memorial goes beyond Brady's work and includes several reproductions of the pioneering efforts of early African American photographers from West's collection. It provides a gateway to a captivating chapter in African American history. Interestingly, these early black photographers "modeled" their daguerreotype portraits of black men after those of Frederick Douglass, who is also featured in the Mathew Brady Memorial.

The SAAM's acquisition of artifacts from West's collection in 2021 aims to redefine our understanding of the efforts of early photographers. West, who began collecting in the 1970s, believes that the works of Ball, Goodridge, and Washington, among others, highlight the pre-Civil War interracial interactions that benefited American society, blazing a trail for the development of improved race relations in post-bellum America.

The collection is divided into three distinct sections, each with its own unique significance:



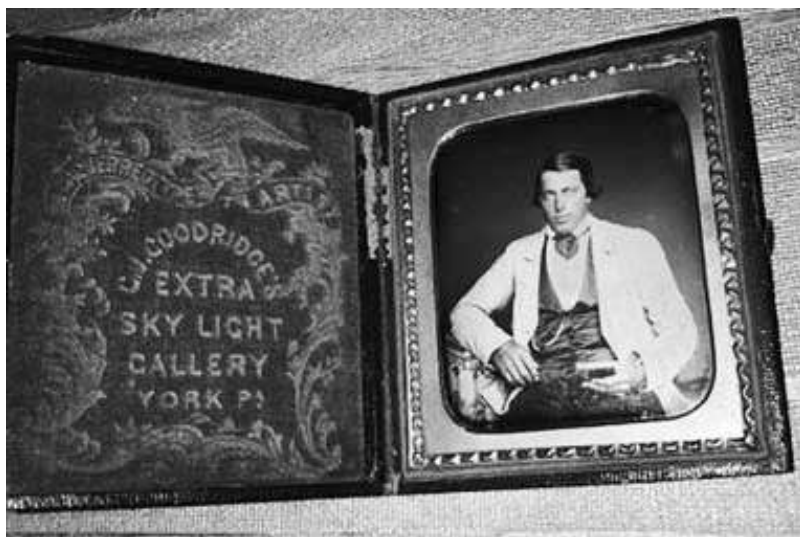
The Mathew Brady Memorial includes dozens of historical photographs on fired porcelains. *Photo By Kitty Linton*

COLLECTION 1: FINE PHOTOGRAPHIC JEWELRY & EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT IMAGES

Featuring an exquisite array of 165 pieces of early fine photographic jewelry, this collection is perhaps one of the most comprehensive in the United States. Showcasing 17 different types of jewelry adorned with vintage photographs, ranging from pins to earrings, it offers a stunning insight into the creativity and craftsmanship of the era. Additionally, it includes educational support images to engage viewers and provide context during SAAM exhibitions.

COLLECTION 2: THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, ABOLITIONISTS, AND WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

This collection is a treasure trove of historical artifacts, with a particular focus on the Underground Railroad. It highlights the efforts of figures like the Coffin, Goodridge, and Douglass families, shedding light on the crucial role of women during the abolition movement. This includes the efforts of Anna



This striking photograph by Goodridge from the collection shows a gentleman in a white jacket holding a cased image. Note the tablecloth, a signature of Goodridge photos.
Photo courtesy of Larry J. West

Douglass, another individual highlighted in the Mathew Brady Memorial.

COLLECTION 3: THE PIONEERS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Paying tribute to the three of the earliest African American photographers—Ball, Goodridge, and Washington—this collection showcases their talent and dedication in capturing everyday life and famous personalities, including Frederick Douglass. With 40 vintage daguerreotypes, it represents the most extensive collection of their work anywhere. Spanning from the mid-1840s



to about 1925, these photographers used various photography technologies to capture the beauty and complexity of both Black and White subjects. Their talent and dedication transcended racial barriers, with many of their surviving daguerreotypes featuring White subjects due to the retail market's demands at that time. West's *African American Photo-Pioneers Treatise*, part of Collection 3, presents a groundbreaking study of the 40 pioneer daguerreotypes, along with other photographs taken by these photographers in later years.

Within each collection, there are several sub-collections. Each revolves around a mix of visual and material culture, featuring nearly three hundred objects, many of which are three-dimensional. Among these fascinating artifacts, you will find a variety of objects, ranging from a photo pigment print cup and saucer with a portrait of President Lincoln (captured by Mathew Brady) to a grand gold bracelet housing a gentleman's daguerreotype.

SAAM is set to embark on a series of exhibitions and public programming centered around these historic objects, celebrating the power of collaboration and embracing the diversity that enriches our society and culture. Through these collections, West and SAAM honor the legacies of Ball, Goodridge, and Washington, whose talent and innovation continue to inspire today. Their contributions to photography and the fight for freedom and equality are etched in history. We hope that you will visit the objects from the West Collection when the exhibit opens on September 20, 2023, featuring photographs by Ball and oil paintings by African American artists.

A magnificent vintage daguerreotype of a young African American girl in braids. *Photo courtesy of Larry J. West*

A YEAR OF 'DEATH-POSITIVE' ACTIVITIES AT CONGRESSIONAL CEMETERY

BY: LAURA LYSTER-MENSH
DEATH DOULA IN RESIDENCE

Late last year, I had the honor of planning out a year of “death positive” activities at Congressional Cemetery for their 2023 event season. I was going to be the first “death doula in residence” at Congressional Cemetery.



Laura Lyster-Mensch *Photo courtesy of Laura Lyster-Mensch*

As far as I know, I’m the first “death doula in residence” anywhere!

But first, what is death positive? Who is positive about death? It’s a simple

idea: death positivity is embracing life with curiosity and courage, knowing that it is finite.

Death positivity is not a new idea. It has existed in many cultures throughout history. Calling it death positivity was the brilliant idea of the American writer and mortician, Caitlin Doughty. She identified the American fear and avoidance of death as avoidable and unhealthy. I agree. More and more people are moving toward this way of thinking. They are recognizing what we have lost as dying has been removed from our homes, and better living conditions (for many of us) have given us longer lives.

Death is a popular topic these days. When we started holding death positive activities at Congressional last year the response was immediate, a rush of

interest. When the *Washington Post* featured one of our death positive events in January, we were fielding media and researcher inquiries so often I had to create a spreadsheet to keep track. I hear from friends and people in the community every week with links to articles, news stories, features, and podcasts that refer to death positivity and death doulas. “Look,” they say “you’re on to something!”

We named our weekly activities in 2023 “Death Doula Days.” A death doula, also called end-of-life doula, is a trained supporter for dying people and their families. I completed training as an end-of-life doula in early 2022 from an organization called the International End of Life Doula Association (INED-LA). I am currently in the process of being certified, and I still attend some kind of training every week or



A group of attendees who gathered for a Death Doula Day at Congressional Cemetery *Photo courtesy of Laura Lyster-Mensch*

MONUMENTAL MATTERS

so. I also volunteer at a hospice hospital ward for Capital Caring Health.

But I have long wanted to connect people to talk openly about death. I believe by seeing death as a normal part of life we can also organize our affairs and connect with those around us. As the pandemic has waned, the importance of in-person connection has risen.

Our Death Doula Days on Saturdays are informal, experiential opportunities to think about dying and death. I encourage participants not to take life for granted or waste time on things they do not value. We try to normalize discussing and planning for our eventual demise. We work on addressing our fear of death, and on caring more for those who are facing the ends of their lives. Each week I select a topic or an activity. We have conversations, engage in activities, play games, and host drop-in guests who share their ideas and wisdom.

The result, seven months in, is truly “positive.” There has been laughter, tears, surprise, and insight. The people who attend are a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and beliefs. We have had young people come on a date to write their obituaries. We have had gravely ill people come to work on projects of preparation. We have participants who come most weeks, others who come every once in a while, and many who have a special interest in a single topic.

One of our special guests was a well-known person at the cemetery, the 2022 Docent of the Year, Robert Hoffman. Known to everyone as “Hoff,” he had made all his preparations for his own death, including a playlist of music that was important to him for his “transition playlist.” He was on the calendar for March 4 as our guest, to play his selection and explain the reason and significance of each song.

Hoff ghosted us for that appointment. He died while on an extended vacation. We hosted him anyway. People who knew him, and people who had never met him, came to listen to the 3-hour playlist. People asked for the list so they could curate their



Laura and Hoff at Congressional Cemetery in December 2022.
Photo courtesy of Congressional Cemetery

own list. Hoff would love that, I believe. He continues to teach us all the value of death awareness, advance planning, and of living fully.

So far in 2023 we’ve gathered to write our bucket lists, and we literally planted and watered them there at the cemetery. We’ve practiced dying while experiencing a “song bath” by the Threshold Singers. We eaten popcorn while watching a film about talking to family about advance planning. Twice we’ve sat and played a card game called Death Deck because it was so popular.

I think Laura left out part of her thought. How about: “I dreamt of doing a project like this for several years, and my dream became reality when Congressional’s leadership said yes to my idea. Being the death doula in residence is one of the greatest honors of my life.”



The Threshold Singers prepare to give event attendees a “song bath.” *Photo courtesy of Laura Lyster Mensh*

Yes!

I want to help preserve and restore Congressional Cemetery with a tax deductible donation.

☐ \$25 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$75 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$250 ☐ Other _____

Special donation for the Endowment:

Anonymous ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ Check enclosed, made payable to Congressional Cemetery

☐ Please charge my credit card ☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard

Card # _____

Cardmember Name _____ Exp _____

Signature _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone/s _____

Email _____

☐ My employer makes matching contributions. Please send me the matching gift form.

Thank you!

Please mail with your donation to the return address on the mailing panel or use the envelope inside this newsletter.



Association for the Preservation of
Historic Congressional Cemetery

1801 E St. SE
Washington, DC 20003
www.congressionalcemetery.org

NONPROFIT ORG.

U.S. POSTAGE

PAID

PERMIT 821

TBD

Scan here to learn more!



MARK YOUR CALENDARS

Check out our website for more information on our upcoming events

- Sept 9: Outdoor Mindfulness in the Cemetery
- Sept 12: Tombs and Tones Book Club 10th Anniversary Birthday Party
- Sept 17: Grave Book Signing with author Allison C. Meier
- Sept 22: Outdoor Concert featuring DC Strings
- Sept 28: Live After Death Comedy Show featuring Ben Wasserman
- Oct 10: Death Café
- Oct 14: Dead Man's Run 5k
- Oct 20, 21, 27, 28: Soul Strolls Twilight Tours
- Nov 6: John Philip Sousa Birthday Concert featuring the Marine Band
- Nov 9: Celebrating the Legacy of Congressional Cemetery: A Community Fundraiser
- Nov 14: Tombs and Tones Book Club



*This City of Silence
has a lot to say.*

Help preserve the stories of all Americans
at this National Historic Landmark in your backyard.

Learn more at www.congressionalcemetery.org