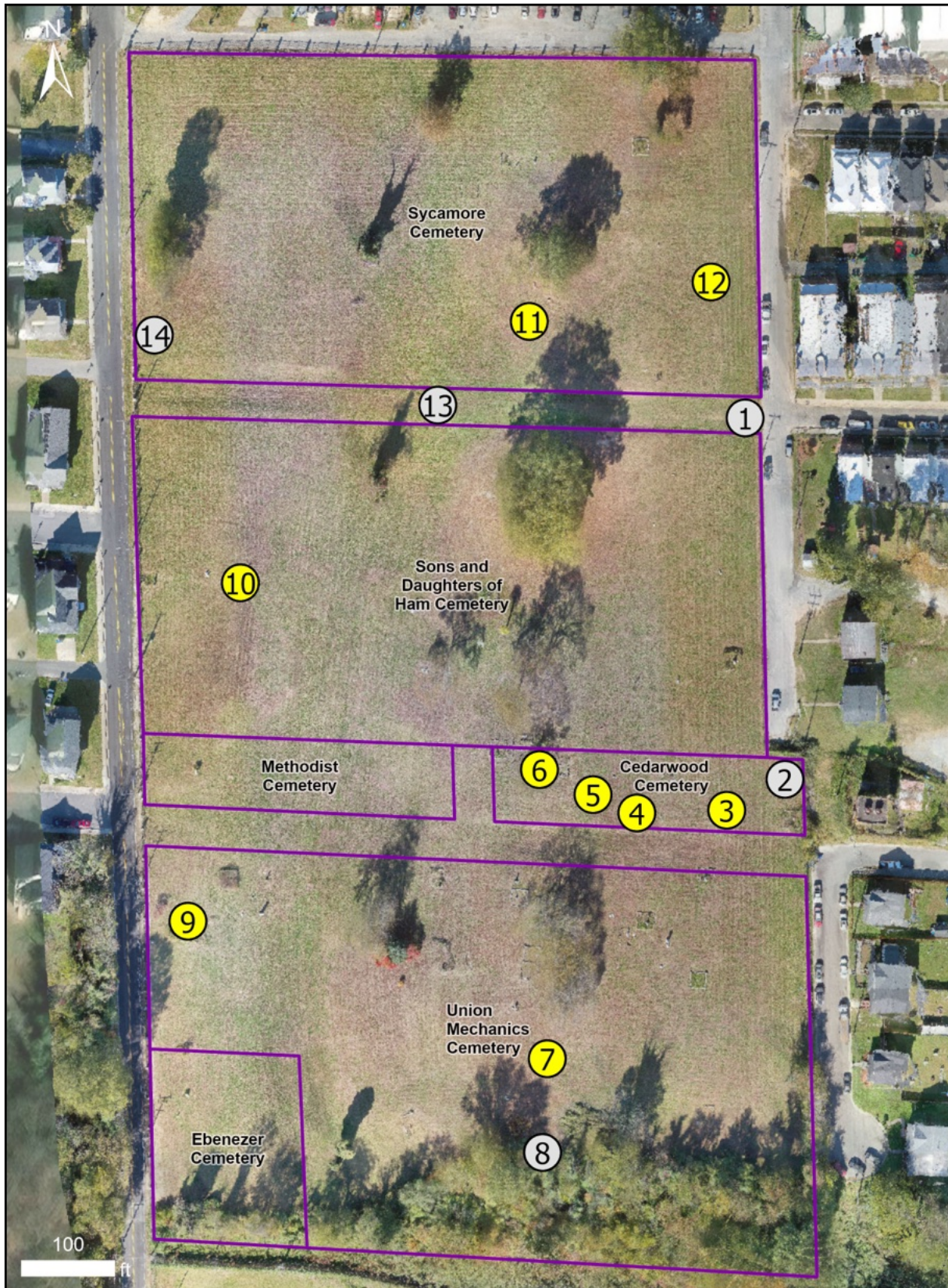


Barton Heights Cemeteries Walking Tour

Prepared by Sara Wilson in partnership with the
Richmond Cemetery Collaboratory, August 2025



Follow the numbered stops and see the accompanying descriptions. White numbers denote landscape and architectural points while yellow numbers represent burials.

Map courtesy of Beth Zizzamia, University of Richmond.

1. Lamb Avenue and Wellford Street Entrance

In 1815, the free Black women and men of the Burying Ground Society of the Free People of Color of the City of Richmond pooled money to purchase several lots on Academy Hill in what was then Henrico County. On this land, Phoenix Burying Ground (later known as Cedarwood Cemetery) was established and served as the resting place for many of Richmond's prosperous free Black residents. Subsequently, fraternal, religious, and mutual aid organizations formed five additional adjoining cemeteries, including Union Mechanics, Ebenezer, Methodist, Sons and Daughters of Ham, and Sycamore. The final cemetery, Sycamore Cemetery, was established by 1881, completing the Barton Heights Cemeteries.



2. Virginia Electrical and Power Company Substation

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the landscape surrounding Barton Heights Cemeteries began to change dramatically. Developer James H. Barton was largely responsible for establishing a suburban neighborhood in the surrounding area. Barton Heights became one of the first electric trolley suburbs in the United States with the construction of the Brookland Railway streetcar line in 1894, providing easy access to the city, and was a major catalyst for the neighborhood's growth. This suburb of Late Victorian, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival homes was developed for tradesmen and middle-class professionals. The incoming white residents swiftly put pressure on the Barton Heights Cemeteries. Much of the argument to close the cemeteries was predicated on the claim that they were a nuisance and health hazard, citing the allegation that graves were being reopened for new burials. An article from March 1896 in *The Richmond Planet* describes this campaign as a "case of vicious persecution," rebutting that Barton Heights Cemeteries were being run similarly to other Richmond cemeteries. Despite organized resistance by the Black community, the cemeteries were closed to new interments in 1904 under the jurisdiction of the town of Barton Heights. When Richmond annexed Barton Heights in 1914, the city threatened to disturb the graves, and many people responded by relocating their loved ones to other cemeteries. While this 1920s Art Deco electrical substation post-dates the initial streetcar servicing Barton Heights, it represents the shifting landscape of the neighborhood and the pressures facing Barton Heights Cemeteries.

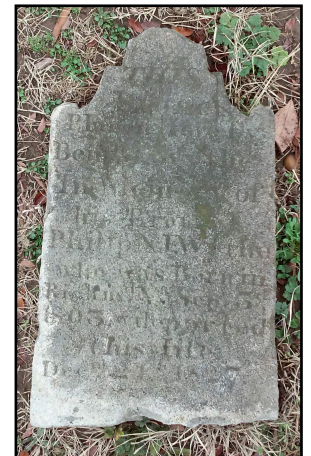
3. Frances Marshall

Frances Marshall's (d. 1854) impressive burial marker is a large ledger stone featuring a harp. Marshall was enslaved for a portion of her life, but she was emancipated in 1845 after her husband William purchased her from enslaver John Brockenbrough.



4. Philip Wythe

The marker for Philip N. J. Wythe (d. 1827) is the earliest surviving marker in Barton Heights Cemeteries and is located in Phoenix Burying Ground. Wythe and his brother Benjamin were raised by their relative Lydia Broadnax, who left them her considerable estate upon her death, including a house. After Philip's untimely death, Benjamin, a prosperous shoemaker, erected this headstone featuring baroque lines and a long inscription, to honor his brother. This impressive stone held great personal meaning and was a display of literacy. This headstone may be the oldest in place artifact associated with Black history in Richmond.





5. John Ferguson

This obelisk marks the burials of John Ferguson, his wife Harriet Ferguson, and two of their sons. John and Harriet lived in Jefferson Ward and had three sons and three daughters. John Ferguson (1810-1859) was a prominent barber with a business near the Exchange Hotel on Franklin Street. He held several enslaved people throughout his life, but it is unclear if these enslaved people were family members. In addition to his role as a barber, Ferguson was a significant investor in real estate, and was involved in over 20 transactions in Richmond and Henrico. Ferguson applied for a certificate which lifted certain legal disqualifications from free Black and mixed race people, arguing that he, his wife, and their children were less than one-quarter Black. While the court granted Ferguson's request, their racial status remained ambiguous in the eyes of the law, as this certificate did not provide legal equality to whites.

This headstone features the signature of Junius S. Gardner, of J. S. Gardner and Sons. The company operated in Jackson Ward from 1882-1912. For at least some of that time, it was the only Black-owned stone cutting company in Richmond. Five markers and one plot border in Barton Heights Cemeteries have been attributed to J. S. Gardner and Sons.

6. Joseph E. Farrar

This obelisk marks the burials of Joseph E. Farrar, Maggie H. M. Dismond, Dr. S. H. Dismond, and Jesse Binga Dismond. Joseph E Farrar (1830-1892), a contractor and civic leader, was born in Charlottesville in 1830 to free parents. There, he learned to read and write and trained as a carpenter. He moved to Richmond in 1858 and became a prominent contractor, building many homes and schools, including Richmond Colored High and Normal School. He held leadership positions with Ebenezer Baptist Church, Colored Shiloh Baptist Association, and Virginia Baptist State Convention. Farrar helped to create the Virginia Home Building Fund and Loan Association to facilitate Black property ownership. Within a month of the end of the Civil War, Farrar became politically involved. He helped establish the Colored Men's Equal Rights League of Richmond and served as treasurer. Farrar attended Republican Party meetings in Richmond, and in 1869, the Radical Republicans nominated him to represent Richmond in the House of Delegates. Following a political controversy, he was dropped from the ticket. However, this did not mark the end of his political career; Farrar served on Richmond Common Council from 1886 until 1888. Farrar trained two of his sons, Daniel James Farrar and John E.C. Farrar, in carpentry and they went on to operate Farrar, Moore, and Co., carrying on their father's legacy. Farrar's great-great-granddaughter, Janith Libron, stated "I was the fifth generation to grow up in my great-great-grandfather's house... My great-great-grandfather has inspired me to make a difference in this world. And living in his house as a young child, with all of his belongings, was an inspiration to me. It is a blessing to know your family's contributions." Farrar's and Libron's home was demolished to make way for Interstate 64 constructed through Jackson Ward.





7. Joseph Abrams

Joseph Abrams (1791-1854) was an influential Baptist minister emancipated in 1844. Abrams joined Richmond's First Baptist Church in 1817, where he was deacon. For years, Abrams functioned as an ordained Baptist minister, and after the ban on Black preachers came into effect following Nat Turner's Rebellion, he continued to be an important religious leader. In 1841, he was a founding member and deacon of the First African Baptist Church. In 1844, enslaver Joshua J. Fry emancipated Abrams, and by 1845 Abrams had purchased two lots in Monroe Ward from Fry. There, Abrams built a house for himself and relatives. Six years later, Abrams was able to free his wife Sarah, daughters Emily and Frances, and six grandchildren. Upon his death in 1854, there was enormous response from the city; over 8,000 people attended his funeral service, the largest ever held in Richmond up to that point. Black Baptists from Richmond and surrounding cities, including Petersburg, Fredericksburg, and Manchester, raised money to purchase a burial marker featuring an inscription written by fellow deacons.

8. Vegetation

Note the vegetation along the southern edge of the cemeteries. This does not mark the edge of the burying grounds, but is rather the result of overgrowth. Burials and headstones from Ebenezer and Union Mechanics cemeteries are present into the trees.



9. Amey Elson

Amey Elson's (d. 1859) headstone features a lengthy scriptural inscription, an excerpt of which reads: "I have fought a good fight I have finished my course I have kept the faith henceforth there is laid up for her a crown of righteousness which the son the righteous judge shall give her at that day and not unto her only but unto all them also that love his appearing." Elson was born enslaved, but her husband John purchased her and their daughters. The stone was erected by Elson's granddaughter Henrietta E. Scott.



10. Emmett Scott

Emmett Scott (1817-1889) served as Captain of the Attucks Guard, a Black militia group established in 1870 in Richmond. Captain Scott's impressive funeral procession began at the Armory, continued up Broad Street, to Third Street, and eventually to the Barton Heights Cemeteries. Captain William F. Jackson of Petersburg presided over the service, Rev. George Johnson led the prayer, and the first Battalion and the Knights of Pythias were also involved. The Ebenezer Baptist Church Choir sang and Professor Daniel B. Williams delivered an address. In the wake of his death, the Scott Memorial Club was formed for erecting a monument to Captain Scott in the Ham's Cemetery. The 10-foot marble memorial was unveiled by Mrs. James Page, the president of the Scott Memorial Club, and Captain Scott's daughter, Eva.



11. Williams Family Plot

Professor Daniel Barclay Williams (1861-1895) was the first Black classics teacher in Virginia. Williams graduated from Richmond Colored High and Normal School with an award for excellent academic achievements and conduct. He went on to attend Worcester Academy in Massachusetts and Brown University. At the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University), he taught Latin and Greek as well as Greek literature. Williams wrote several books, including *The Negro Race: The Pioneer in Civilization*, in which he argued that African civilizations had influenced Greek and Roman civilizations. He was described in *The Richmond Planet* as “ever ready to uphold the cause of humanity and to advance the interest of his race, devoted to its welfare and prosperity, one who was wise in counsel, and fearless in action.”

Professor Williams’ son, Dr. Daniel Barclay Williams (1895-1972), was a dentist in Richmond. He attended Richmond public schools, Virginia Union University, and Howard University. For decades, Williams held leadership positions with the First African Baptist Church and the Peter B. Ramsey Dental Society of Richmond and Petersburg. He was also a private in the Army Medical Enlisted Reserve Corps, but was never called for active service. Williams died in 1972, long after the Barton Heights Cemeteries were closed to burials, but according to his obituary and death certificate, he was interred here.

12. James W. Washington

James W. Washington (d. 1884) was a tobacco worker and served as a corporal in the United States Colored Troops, a segregated Union Army regiment that fought during the Civil War. Washington’s burial marker served as a focal point during Whit Monday celebrations in recent decades, with gospel music, military salutes, speeches, and interpreters wearing historical attire.



13. Wellford Street

The depression running east to west across the cemeteries is the remnant of Wellford Street. Fells Street, to the south, also crossed through the cemeteries. The roads were still present in the 1925 Sanborn Fire Insurance map, but were not visible in aerial images from the 1950s, so they likely fell into disuse sometime during that period.



14. State Historic Highway Marker

This State Historic Highway Marker represents a wave of recognition and preservation efforts spearheaded by Denise Lester. Lester arrived in Richmond in 1995, and pursuing an interest in genealogy, worked with the Library of Virginia and the Museum of the Confederacy to discover her great-great-grandfather, Peter Woolfolk. Woolfolk was an influential teacher, journalist, and businessman who was buried in Barton Heights Cemeteries. Upon visiting the site, Lester was concerned by the deteriorated conditions and lack of awareness regarding its history. In the 1990s, she secured the funding for the State Historic Highway Marker, successfully wrote a nomination for the National Register of Historic Places, and worked to revive Whit Monday celebrations. While the Whit Monday celebrations have faded over the decades, Lester’s work lives on in the State Historic Highway Marker and increased recognition of the site’s history. The sign succinctly highlights the importance of Barton Heights Cemeteries for not only familial ties, but also as representative of the cultural and economic strength of the nineteenth-century Black community in Richmond. The landscape surrounding Barton Heights Cemeteries continues to shift, with changes such as the new residential development across St. James Street.

Citations and Additional Resources:

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- * *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Richmond, Independent Cities, Virginia*. Sanborn Map Company, Vol. 3, Sheet 329-330 and 367.
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- * "Williams, Daniel Barclay." State of Virginia War History Commission Military Service Record. Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

Additional Resources:

- * Richmond Cemeteries Website, richmondcemeteries.org
- * Richmond Parks and Recreation Cemeteries Administrative Office, rva.gov/parks-recreation/cemeteries
- * Richmond Cemetery Collaboratory Website, Interactive Map and Headstone 3D Scans, cemeterycollaboratory.org