

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery

Other names/site number: Kingston Memorial Park; Bethany Memorial Park

Name of related multiple property listing:

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: South end of Bethel Road

City or town: Huntington State: West Virginia County: Cabell

Not For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

☐ national ☐ statewide ☒ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

 X **A** **B** **C** **D**

Susan M. Pierce Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer *3-14-25*

Signature of certifying official/Title: **Date**

West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office, Department of Arts, Culture and History

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official: **Date**

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private: ☒
Public – Local ☐
Public – State ☐
Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s) ☐
District ☐
Site ☒
Structure ☐
Object ☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

FUNERARY/cemetery

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

FUNERARY/cemetery

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

N/A

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: N/A

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery is a small, seven-acre burial ground located in the hills of southeastern Huntington, West Virginia. It is wedged between several residential streets and Interstate 64. The cemetery occupies rolling terrain, with trees and patches of brush interspersed throughout. Most of the hundreds of graves, confined to the property's northwest corner, are unmarked and unidentified. Extant grave markers are primarily modest, granite and marble designs common from the early-to-mid twentieth century. These likely reflect the socioeconomic condition of the families buried here, many of whom worked in lower-income occupations. Despite being abandoned for around half a century and surrounded by urban development, the cemetery still retains the look and feel of an early-to-mid twentieth century burial ground, and as such retains historic integrity.

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Narrative Description

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery is located within the Stamford Park neighborhood, a collection of primarily single-family homes in the southeast corner of Huntington. The surrounding terrain is generally sloping and hilly, in contrast to the flat bottomlands that make up central and western Huntington. The cemetery is accessible from the southern end of Bethel Road, a small residential street intersecting with Norway Avenue. Private residences border the cemetery to the east and west on Norwood Road and Mayfair Way, respectively. The south side of the cemetery is bounded by I-64.

The grounds of the cemetery are very uneven, featuring various slopes. A chain link fence marks the northern border of the property, with a chain link gate marking the entrance at the south end of Bethel Road. From this entrance, a rough dirt path climbs uphill and forms a loop around one section of the cemetery. The eastern side of the property is engulfed by dense trees and brush. The caretaker's cottage, garage, and barn were located on this eastern portion of the property but are no longer extant. The brush has been cleared from the rest of the property thanks to volunteer efforts in recent years. Large, tall trees are spaced apart in this clear land.

Of the roughly seven acres of property, a little under two acres are known to contain graves, concentrated in the northwest area. For reference, the area containing graves can be divided into two sections. The "Northwest Section" encompasses graves to the north and west of the dirt path, extending eastward towards the entrance on Bethel Road. The "Central Section" is the small area of graves encircled by the dirt path. South of these sections, the terrain slopes steeply downward, bottoms out, then rises again to meet with I-64.

The Central Section and parts of the Northwest Section are lined with cinderblock retaining walls, one-to-two blocks tall. Parts of the walls have collapsed, sunk, or are otherwise deteriorated. To the immediate west of the Central Section, built onto the side of a slope, is the ruins of a small chapel. It was constructed from cinderblocks with a red brick façade on the front. Only the northwest corner and parts of the foundation remain standing. It appears that the front of the chapel had an arched entranceway flanked by a window on either side.

Researchers currently estimate around 800 people are buried in this cemetery. Approximately 150 graves have permanent markers. They are predominantly made of marble or granite and have simple designs. They are a mixture of upright and flush markers, with upright making the majority. Over 40 are military-issued headstones for veterans. Many are tilted and some have fallen over. Nearly all the stones have been cleaned in recent years.

Despite decades of abandonment, overgrown sections, some deterioration of gravestones, and the collapse of the chapel, the cemetery maintains historic integrity. All seven factors of integrity – location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association – remain. The graves have not been relocated. The setting has changed little since the end of the Period of Significance in 1974. No modern construction has taken place on the property, and original materials – namely the granite, marble, and metal of grave markers, and the cinderblocks of the retaining

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walls and chapel – are still present. The rolling landscape, grass, and trees maintain the cemetery’s park-like feel. Cleanup efforts in the 2020s which cleared away brush and cleaned or repaired grave markers have allowed the cemetery to better convey its historic appearance as an early-to-mid twentieth century burial ground.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☒ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Social History

Ethnic Heritage: Black

Period of Significance

1927-1974

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places on a local level of significance under *Criterion A: Social History* and *Ethnic Heritage: Black* for its strong association with twentieth century burial practices in Huntington's Black community. Established by the McClain Funeral Home, this was the only Black-owned and operated cemetery in Huntington. For over forty years, it served as a place for Black residents to bury their dead with dignity and provided an alternative to the Black section in Huntington's public Spring Hill Cemetery. Bethel also meets *Criteria Consideration D: Cemeteries* for deriving significance from its association with historic events. The Period of Significance begins in 1927, the earliest known date that the McClain Funeral Home buried people here, and ends in 1974, the date of one of the last recorded burials.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Black People in Cabell County Prior to 1871

Cabell County, in far western Virginia along the Ohio River, was established in 1809 from a portion of Kanawha County. From its earliest days, Black enslaved people lived alongside free white settlers in the county. Slavery was never as widespread in western Virginia as it was in the east due to the topographic and economic conditions in the Appalachian Mountains, but enslaved labor was still a widely accepted practice. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the population of enslaved persons living in Cabell County fluctuated in the low hundreds. The 1860 census recorded 329 Black people in the county (all but 24 of whom were enslaved), out of a total population of 8,000. Most enslaved people in the county were held by a handful of the largest landowners, such as the Jenkins, Buffington, Laidley, and Holderby families. Their enslaved labor farms, most notably the Jenkins family's Green Bottom Plantation, produced a variety of grains and livestock. Cash crops such as tobacco and cotton did not grow well in the region.¹

Directly across the Ohio River, several Black settlements existed in Lawrence County, Ohio. These included Macedonia Hill and what are now the communities of Burlington, South Point, Proctorville, and Rome. Some of these settlements dated back to the early 1800s and were established by freed slaves, mostly from Virginia. Their exodus into Ohio was prompted by Virginia state laws that prohibited emancipated Black people from living in the state, unless they

¹ Trent Spurlock, *Survey of Cabell County, West Virginia African American Historical Sites*, Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc., July 22, 2014, accessed January 13, 2025, <https://mapwv.gov/shpo/docs/PDFs/ArchitecturalSurveys/RCB-11.pdf>.

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received written permission from their county court, which had to be renewed annually. Escaped slaves crossing the Ohio River may also have found refuge in these Black communities.²

When West Virginia achieved independent statehood in 1863 during the Civil War, slavery was still permitted. It was not until the end of the war that the West Virginia legislature voted to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution that slavery was abolished in the state. A swift exodus of Black residents followed. By 1870, the Black population of Cabell County had declined to 123.³

Early Development of Huntington

Since the 1850s, business interests in Virginia had sought to construct a railroad directly linking Virginia to the Ohio River. The Civil War, West Virginia's split from Virginia, and the Reconstruction period delayed these endeavors. In 1868, two Virginia railroads merged to form the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad (C&O). The new business developed plans for a line that would cross the mountainous coalfields of central West Virginia, opening its vast reserves of natural resources for extraction. To pay for construction, the C&O turned to railroad financier Collis P. Huntington. Huntington agreed to procure funding for the C&O, in exchange for becoming its president.⁴

The C&O needed a terminus for the end of its line once it reached the Ohio River. In 1870, Collis P. Huntington arranged for the purchase of 5,000 acres of farmland along the Ohio River in northwestern Cabell County, just west of where the Guyandotte River empties into the Ohio River. Here the C&O would erect a series of railroad facilities, including a depot, car shop, engine houses, etc., in addition to a full-fledged city to house and support the railroad's workforce. Construction began immediately on this new city, which was named after Huntington himself. The West Virginia state legislature incorporated the City of Huntington on February 21, 1871. The C&O Railroad reached Huntington in January 1873.⁵

Huntington grew steadily. Within a half century, what was once farmland developed into a thriving industrial city with broad streets, fashionable brick homes, and a large assortment of factories, stores, churches, and public amenities. As a major transportation hub, the city's economy relied strongly on the railroad industry. The C&O brought vast amounts of coal to Huntington for shipment to markets far and wide. Huntington also manufactured many products including glass, steel, furniture, and appliances. Many migrants from the North and South, white and Black, native-born and foreign-born, moved to Huntington. Some worked in the industrial

² Ibid.; Ancella Radford Bickley, "Black People and the Huntington Experience," in *Honoring Our Past: Proceedings of the First Two Conferences on West Virginia's Black History*, Charleston, WV: Alliance for the Collection, Preservation, & Dissemination of West Virginia's Black History, 1991.

³ Spurlock, *Survey of Cabell County, West Virginia African American Historical Sites*; John Edmund Stealey III, "Slavery," e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, April 11, 2024, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/428>.

⁴ Robert L. Frey, "Chesapeake & Ohio Railway," e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, February 19, 2024, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/1101>.

⁵ James E. Casto, *Huntington: An Illustrated History* (Northridge, NC: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1985); Doris C. Miller, *A Centennial History of Huntington* (Huntington, WV: Franklin Printing Company, 1971).

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jobs available, while others opened their own businesses. By 1900, the city's population had reached 12,000; in 1950, it peaked at 86,000.⁶

The Black Community in Huntington

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans, primarily from Southern states, flocked to West Virginia, coming in search of better paying jobs and less racial strife. Industrial expansion in the state created many new job opportunities; given the state's small population, businesses recruited Black and European immigrant workers in large quantities to fill the labor shortage. Most Black migrants found work in the coal, railroad, and manufacturing industries. Black workers and their families formed small but vibrant communities in cities and towns throughout the state. West Virginia's Black population peaked in 1940 at around 117,000 or six percent of the entire population.⁷

While West Virginia was often a safer place for African Americans to live compared to the Jim Crow-dominated South, various degrees of formal and informal segregation prevailed in the state. Schools were constitutionally segregated since 1872. White-operated churches declined to accept Black members. Coal company towns constructed separate neighborhoods for Black (and immigrant) miners. The state government operated separate orphanages, colleges, and hospitals for Black people. Lynchings occurred on a sporadic basis. Black West Virginians responded to these circumstances and supported themselves by forming their own institutions- schools, churches, businesses, newspapers, fraternal societies, and civil and political organizations.⁸

From its beginning, Black people had a role in the development of Huntington. Thousands of Black laborers worked in the construction of the C&O Railroad in the early 1870s. Black workers and their families also began laying roots in Huntington, first in small numbers during the 1870s-1880s, then in larger waves by the turn of the century. "The migrant black population settling in Huntington and seeking employment with the C&O contributed greatly to the city," writes historian Brooks Bryant.⁹ Some came from Virginia and other Southern states, while others came from the Black communities in Southern Ohio. While not all lived in Huntington proper, the total Black population in Cabell County jumped from 123 in 1870 to 902 in 1880.¹⁰

The early generations of Black migrants in Huntington primarily worked lower-paying, physically demanding jobs. Men mostly worked for the C&O Railroad, in some of the most dangerous positions. Women who worked found employment in domestic service. Racial discrimination limited Black laborers' opportunities to rise through the ranks in the workforce.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joe William Trotter, Jr., "African American Heritage," e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, September 23, 2024, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/18>.

⁸ Trotter, "African American Heritage."

⁹ Brooks Bryant, "Iron Road: The Rise of Huntington, West Virginia, 1870-1920," MA thesis, Marshall University, 2018, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2146&context=etd>.

¹⁰ Bickley, "Black People and the Huntington Experience."

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According to historian Cicero Fain, "In Huntington, with employment came a racist, color-caste occupational system that stymied black advancement."¹¹

During the nineteenth century, small Black neighborhoods formed in pockets at different spots around Huntington. Black migrants settled in these places due to the proximity to their workplaces as well as affordable housing. Later, in response to the growing Black population (and in line with practices in communities nationwide) white leaders and realtors imposed racial covenants, which restricted where Black people could and could not purchase property. These covenants effectively confined Black Huntingtonians to certain neighborhoods. By the early 1900s, the core of Huntington's Black community was located in or around Eighth, Artisan, and Ninth Avenues, especially between Sixteenth and Twentieth Streets.¹²

Due to the conditions imposed by segregation, Black Huntingtonians developed a close-knit community. Many had familial ties with one another, which aided in their migration to Huntington. Unable to patronize white businesses, they established their own; there were Black owned and operated stores, restaurants, clubs, barber shops, beauty parlors, newspapers, doctor's offices, a hospital, a theatre, and other services. Residents were heavily involved in school and church activities and formed sports leagues and social organizations. By the 1910s, there were at least four Black churches, seven fraternal lodges, and several schools. Huntington's Black population peaked during the 1920s at over 4,600, or some six percent of the city's total population. It constituted the second largest Black community in West Virginia at the time.¹³

Gradually, a small but critical class of professionals emerged among the Black community. These were the Black business owners, doctors, dentists, ministers, teachers and other well-educated, trained specialists. These professionals filled a critical void, providing essential services and products to the Black community that enabled it to survive. Those with financial means also began to invest in real estate. Some purchased land in outlying areas or in the hills south of Huntington, while others focused on home ownership. By 1924, 60% of Black Huntingtonians owned their own homes, a higher percentage than any other Black community in the state.¹⁴

The McClain Funeral Home and Black Burials in Huntington

One member of Huntington's Black professional class was Charles S. McClain. Born in Roanoke, Virginia in 1865, McClain married Mary S. Burke in 1888 and not long afterwards the couple moved to Ceredo, West Virginia. Here Charles worked as a farmhand. The McClains moved several miles east to Huntington sometime after 1900. Over the following years, Charles assumed a wide range of occupations and civic activities. He opened a barber shop (which a son

¹¹ Cicero M. Fain III, *Black Huntington: An Appalachian Story* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 68-69.

¹² Fain, *Black Huntington*.

¹³ Fain, *Black Huntington*; Bickley, "Black People and the Huntington Experience,"; Spurlock, *Survey of Cabell County, West Virginia African American Historical Sites*.

¹⁴ Fain, *Black Huntington*.

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later took over) and was reportedly hired as Huntington's first Black police officer.¹⁵ According to one article, he also "was one of the first blacks to serve on a jury in West Virginia, a leader in the local Republican party, member of the Negro Odd Fellows, Masons and Knights of Pythias and helped to reorganize the 16th Street Baptist Church."¹⁶

Charles McClain was most recognized, however, for being Huntington's leading Black mortician. He reportedly received training as an embalmer in 1895. In 1911, he opened the McClain Funeral Home, one of the first Black-owned mortuaries in West Virginia. The funeral home occupied a large house (where the family also lived) at 1644 Ninth Avenue, across the street from 16th Street Baptist Church, one of the city's major Black congregations. The funeral home was demolished decades ago.¹⁷

The McClain Funeral Home was one of at least three Black mortuaries in Huntington. The other two were owned by Herman Bryant and Arthur J. Williams, respectively. These businesses were vital in providing Black residents with access to funeral services and dignified burials at a time when white-owned funeral homes would not service them. Segregation provided Black mortuaries with a steady clientele by limiting funerary options for the Black community.

There are several communities in West Virginia with predominantly white public cemeteries that include small, once-segregated sections for Black residents. According to writer Samantha Stephens, "In cities, deceased African Americans were buried either in the fringes or in the Black sections of public cemeteries; segregated spaces tended to be less well-maintained, in comparison to White sections."¹⁸ One example is the Green Hill Cemetery in Martinsburg. From the 1850s until the 1870s, a one-and-a-half-acre portion of the cemetery was used to bury African Americans. It was subsequently abandoned, grew overgrown, and was used as an informal dumping site for many decades.¹⁹ Another case is in Bluefield, Virginia, just across from the West Virginia state border. The town's public Maple Hill Cemetery had a Black section dating to the 1890s. This section did not receive adequate maintenance, and in the 1980s the city fenced it off and abandoned the site. Bluefield resumed maintenance of the Black section in the 2000s only after mounting public pressure.²⁰

¹⁵ June Ashworth, "Kingston Memorial Park, Bethany Memorial Park, Bethel Memorial Park," KYOWVA Genealogical and Historical Society Newsletter 37, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 6-7; Bickley, "Black People and the Huntington Experience."

¹⁶ Ashworth, "Kingston Memorial Park, Bethany Memorial Park, Bethel Memorial Park."

¹⁷ Ibid.; Bickley, "Black People and the Huntington Experience."

¹⁸ Samantha Stephens, "Black Funeral and Burial Customs," e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, April 24, 2024, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/2443>.

¹⁹ "Green Hill Historic African American Cemetery," The Black Cemetery Network, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://blackcemeterynetwork.org/bcsites/green-hill-historic-african-american-cemetery>; Vanta Coda III, "Preserving hallowed grounds: West Virginia's Black cemetery caretakers," RealWV, November 12, 2024, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://therealwv.com/2024/11/12/preserving-hallowed-grounds-west-virginias-black-cemetery-caretakers/>.

²⁰ Connie Bailey Kitts, "Descendant Revisits, Revives African American Cemetery," WV Public Broadcasting, July 19, 2022, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://wvpublic.org/descendant-revisits-revives-african-american-cemetery/>.

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Such situations may not have been the case with Huntington. The city's main public burial ground was Spring Hill Cemetery, a picturesque expanse of rolling hills along Norway Avenue. Established in 1874, many of Huntington's most prominent and wealthiest residents were buried here; today, it contains around 80,000 graves. Spring Hill was considered "the only racially integrated cemetery in the area," according to local historian James Casto.²¹ However, most Black burials at Spring Hill were conducted in a single section. The cemetery also had separate sections for Jews, Catholics, and military veterans (including a separate one for Black veterans). The Black section may have been an intentional choice by those buried there. According to Spring Hill cemetery manager Eldora McCoy, "when individuals are buried in specific sections of a cemetery, it is often because they wish to be laid to rest near their family and friends. This sense of connection and closeness, even in death, seems to be an important factor in the decisions many people make regarding their final resting place."²² Still, not all Black Huntingtonians may have been satisfied with the accommodations at Spring Hill. "Black folks was only buried in one section, and we were buried in the section where the water came down and washed you away . . . So even in death in Huntington, we were segregated," recounted longtime resident Marie Redd.²³

Another factor to consider was the cost of graves. The price of burials at Spring Hill may have been cost-prohibitive for some Black families, many of which worked in lower-income careers. As a result, demand existed in Huntington's Black community for an alternative burial ground, one that was affordable but dignified. Records for the McClain Funeral Home have been lost, so it is unknown how much plots and burials cost at Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery. However, the large number of unmarked graves indicates that many families who buried people here may not have been able to afford permanent grave markers. Furthermore, death records for those buried at Bethel reveal that many of them worked in low-paying jobs. The overwhelming majority of occupations listed in the records were described as custodian/janitor, laundress, bellman, maid/housekeeper/domestic, waiter/waitress, cook, elevator operator, porter, painter, plasterer, and simply "laborer." There were also significant numbers of ministers, coal miners, and C&O employees.²⁴ Lastly, the McClain family chose to be buried at Spring Hill Cemetery, rather than Bethel, which they owned and operated. As owners of an important local business, the McClains would have had a higher income than the average Black family in Huntington. These pieces of evidence indicate that Bethel Cemetery offered more affordable burials than Spring Hill Cemetery, thus appealing to the lower-class members of Huntington's Black community.

²¹ James E. Casto, "Spring Hill Cemetery," e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, February 8, 2024, accessed January 17, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/2349#:~:text=Its%20name%20is%20thought%20to.and%20reburied%20at%20Spring%20Hill.>

²² Eldora McCoy, email to Cody Straley, January 17, 2025.

²³ Marie Redd, interview by Raiven Scott, July 18, 2022, Marshall University Special Collections, accessed December 13, 2024, https://libguides.marshall.edu/ld.php?content_id=55650865.

²⁴ June B. Ashworth, Connie Jackson McCagg, and Wilma Skean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery, Huntington, West Virginia*, Westmoreland Chapter NSDAR, self-published, 2017.

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History of Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery

The early history of Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery is muddled. What is known is that burials began to occur within a tract of land at the south end of Bethel Road in Huntington's Southeast Hills neighborhood in the early 1900s. Interestingly, some of the earliest people to be buried here were white residents. The first known burial was for a white woman, Georgianna Ellis Smith, and her two infant twins, in March 1906.²⁵ Another white woman, Catherine Martha Williams Ellis, was buried there in 1919.²⁶ William E. Chapman, a white man, owned this land, a little over ten acres, and sold it to James Thomas Lykins, another white man, in 1915.²⁷ The property was described in the deed as follows:

Beginning at a stake in the Military Line (Old Savage Grant Line) corner to Francis A. Aills lot, with the Military line N. 88 W. 34 poles to a stake in the E. W. Gallaher's line 38 links from a large rock on the south side of a drain and another high rock S. 80 W. 31 links; thence leaving Military line and with Gallaher's line N. 4 E. 43 poles to a stake to James Martin line and the Thomas LeGrand S. 88 E. 26 poles to a stake N. 2 E. 22 poles to the turnpike S. 2 W. 22 poles to a stake in the Welington line 88 W. 26 poles N. 2 W. 23 poles to the place of beginning, containing in all 10-1/8 acres more or less.²⁸

By 1927, Charles McClain and his funeral home were burying African Americans on this property. Death certificates from that year refer to the site as Kingston Park.²⁹ Presumably McClain made an arrangement with Lykins to use his land as a burial ground. Between 1930 and 1934, the cemetery was called Bethany Memorial Park in some death certificates. By 1935, it was known as Bethel Memorial Park.³⁰

In early 1935, Lykins lost ownership of the ten-acre parcel in chancery court to the Industrial Savings & Loan Corporation. The company then immediately conveyed the property to Charles and Mary McClain. The deed noted that the land "had been used as a cemetery."³¹ In December 1935, Charles transferred ownership to his wife and Alfred Johnson, a Black man who worked for the C&O Railway. The deed at this time stated that the cemetery was called Bethel Memorial Park and contained 500 graves.³² In April 1942, Johnson conveyed full ownership of the

²⁵ "Georgianna Ellis Smith," Find a Grave, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/150669136/georgianna-smith>.

²⁶ "Catherine Martha Williams Ellis," Find a Grave, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/150670626/catherine-martha-ellis>.

²⁷ Ashworth, "Kingston Memorial Park, Bethany Memorial Park, Bethel Memorial Park."

²⁸ Cabell County Deed Book 138, Page 440, February 3, 1915.

²⁹ One of the earliest documented references to Kingston Park is the death certificate for Grace Ruth Braxton, who died on October 20, 1927. See "Grace Ruth Braxton," Find a Grave, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/268896706/grace-ruth-braxton>.

³⁰ Ashworth, "Kingston Memorial Park, Bethany Memorial Park, Bethel Memorial Park."

³¹ Cabell County Deed Book 285, Page 128, January 12, 1935.

³² Ashworth, McCagg, and Slean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery*.

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cemetery to Mary McClain. The deed specifically identified Bethel as “a cemetery for colored” and stated that the number of burials had reached 650.³³

The McClain Funeral Home conducted all burials at the Bethel Cemetery, even for funerals performed by other mortuaries. At some point the McClains constructed a caretaker’s cottage, with an accompanying barn and garage, at the east side of the cemetery. In later years, their daughter Frances McClain lived there with her husband Harrison Joyce. In the middle of the cemetery, the McClains also maintained a small brick and cinderblock chapel.³⁴

Charles McClain died in 1951. Interestingly, he was buried at Spring Hill Cemetery, with the funeral conducted by A. J. Williams Mortuary. Mary McClain continued to operate the family funeral home and cemetery, assisted by Frances as well as William McClain, one of Mary and Charles’ sons. Frances split her time between living at the caretaker’s cottage with her husband and the funeral home with her mother. After Mary McClain died in 1959, Frances operated the business with the consent of her siblings. Between Mary’s death in 1959 and December 1966, McClain Funeral Homes performed 384 more funerals (though not necessarily burials at Bethel Cemetery).³⁵

In 1962, the West Virginia State Road Commission used eminent domain to seize three acres at the southern end of the cemetery property for use in the construction of Interstate 64. This loss of land brought the parcel to its current 7.23-acre boundaries. In 1965, a jury awarded \$18,256.69 in compensation to the McClain family for the property taken. It was during the distribution of this money that the McClain children discovered that Mary McClain had deeded the eastern half of the cemetery, including the caretaker cottage and outbuildings, to Frances shortly before her death. Neither Charles nor Mary had written a will specifying how the family business and properties were to be distributed to their heirs.³⁶

This situation prompted a flurry of lawsuits between various McClain children and grandchildren over the eminent domain payment, the funeral home operation, and the cemetery ownership. In 1971, the West Virginia Supreme Court invalidated France McClain Joyce’s deed to the eastern half of the cemetery. Litigation continued for years over the proper distribution of the Charles and Mary McClain estate, with indecisive results. The McClain Funeral Home continued to operate until at least 1973, with regular burials conducted at Bethel until 1974.³⁷ Not long afterwards, the family conflict caused the funeral home to fold and for Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery to be abandoned, with no clear legal owner. The last known burial occurred in 1982; it was conducted by Ferrell Mortuary, Inc., which is where Frances McClain Joyce found

³³ Ibid.; Cabell County Deed Book 326, Page 269, April 11, 1942.

³⁴ Ashworth, McCagg, and Slean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery*.

³⁵ Ashworth, McCagg, and Slean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery*.

³⁶ Ashworth, McCagg, and Slean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery*.

³⁷ One of the last known funerals handled by the McClain Funeral Home was in February 1973 for Robert Hillman Collins. See “Robert H. Collins,” Find a Grave, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6646297/robert-h-collins>; the last known burial of the 1970s was for Cornelius C. Austin in October 1974. See “Cornelius C. Austin,” Find a Grave, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6646209/cornelius-c-austin>.

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employment after the family business shuttered.³⁸ Over the course of the lawsuits, the McClain Funeral Home records were lost, significantly impairing the ability to identify who and how many people were buried at the cemetery. In 2004, the Cabell County Circuit Court ordered the cemetery property to be sold via public auction. It was purchased in 2006 by Earl and Deborah Arentz.³⁹

Without regular maintenance, the cemetery fell into a severe state of neglect. The property was subsumed by trees and brush; gravestones became damaged or toppled; and the chapel collapsed. During the 2010s, a series of on-again, off-again efforts by various parties sought to clear the brush and identify gravesites. These activities grew more sustained in the 2020s thanks to the involvement of Marshall University and an informal group dubbed the “Friends of Bethel.” In 2023, this group was organized into the nonprofit Bethel Cemetery Preservation Society to pursue the rehabilitation, maintenance, and interpretation of the cemetery. In 2024, Earl and Deborah Arentz conveyed the property to the Society.⁴⁰

Criterion A: Social History and Ethnic Heritage: Black

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery is eligible for National Register designation under *Criterion A: Social History and Ethnic Heritage: Black* for its important historic contributions to the local Black society. Founded, owned, and operated by a Black funeral home, Bethel Cemetery embodies the limited opportunities for upward advancement among Huntington’s Black community. The McClain Funeral Home was part of a small but important assemblage of local Black businesses providing services to Black residents that may otherwise have been unavailable to them due to racial discrimination. Bethel Cemetery offered Black residents a more affordable option for burials. Its status as a primarily Black cemetery also strengthened community bonds by providing a common burial space for people with shared cultural and socioeconomic experiences in segregated Huntington.

³⁸ “John Fain,” Find a Grave, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/93014547/john-fain>; Ashworth, McCagg and Slean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery*.

³⁹ Ashworth, McCagg, and Slean, *Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery*.

⁴⁰ James Casto, “Making it Right,” *Huntington Quarterly* (Summer 2020), 14-17; Katelyn Aluisse, “Marshall professor leads crew to find unmarked graves in Bethel Memorial Park,” *Logan Banner*, March 30, 2024; quitclaim deed between Earl and Deborah Arentz and Bethel Cemetery Preservation Society, Inc., May 9, 2024, Cabell County Deed Book 1501, Page 546.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
____ previously listed in the National Register
____ previously determined eligible by the National Register
____ designated a National Historic Landmark
____ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

____ State Historic Preservation Office
____ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): CB-2389

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 7.23

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude:	Longitude:
2. Latitude:	Longitude:
3. Latitude:	Longitude:
4. Latitude:	Longitude:

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Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☒ NAD 1983

1. Zone: 17N	Easting: 378508	Northing: 4251194
2. Zone: 17N	Easting: 378697	Northing: 4251181
3. Zone: 17N	Easting: 378690	Northing: 4251083
4. Zone: 17N	Easting: 378659	Northing: 4251083
5. Zone: 17N	Easting: 378655	Northing: 4251034
6. Zone: 17N	Easting: 378491	Northing: 4251028

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundaries consist of the entirety of a 7.23-acre parcel described in Cabell County Deed Book 1160, Page 604; Deed Book 1501, Page 546; and Deed Book 1157, Page 454. It is also identified as Parcel 06-05-0075-0088-0000 in West Virginia property tax records. The boundaries are illustrated in Figure 2.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The selected boundaries encompass the cemetery property in its entirety and do not include any unrelated resources.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Steven Cody Straley, National Register Coordinator
organization: West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office
street & number: 1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East
city or town: Charleston state: West Virginia zip code: 25305
e-mail: Cody.Straley@wv.gov
telephone: 304-558-0240
date: February 6, 2025

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Figure Log

1 of 5: USGS Map

2 of 5: Boundary Map

3 of 5: Drone Image of Cemetery, Spring 2024

4 of 5: Drone Image of Cemetery, Spring 2024

5 of 5: Photo Key

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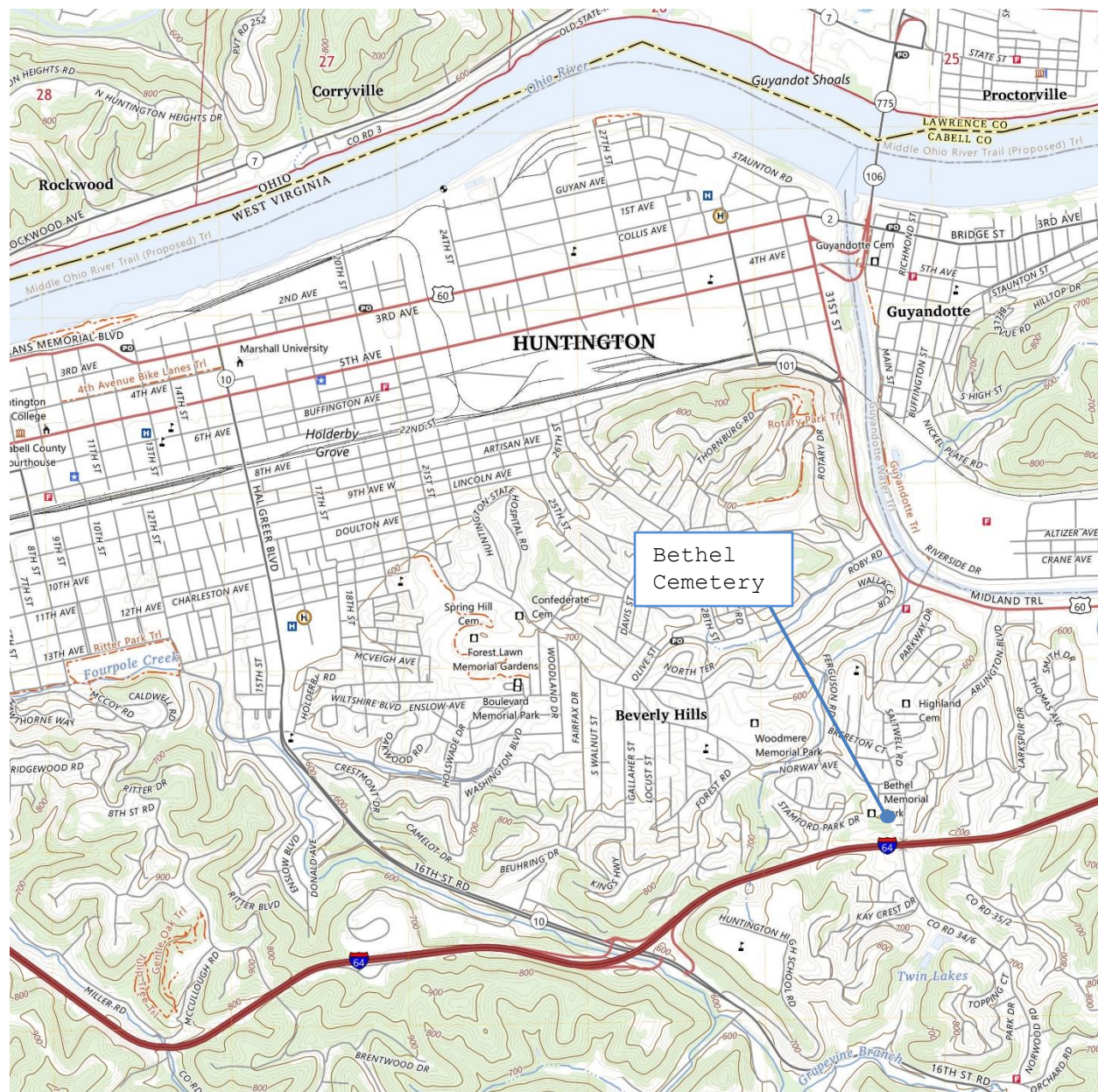


Figure 1 USGS Map - Huntington Quadrangle, West Virginia - Ohio 7.5-Minute Series, 2023



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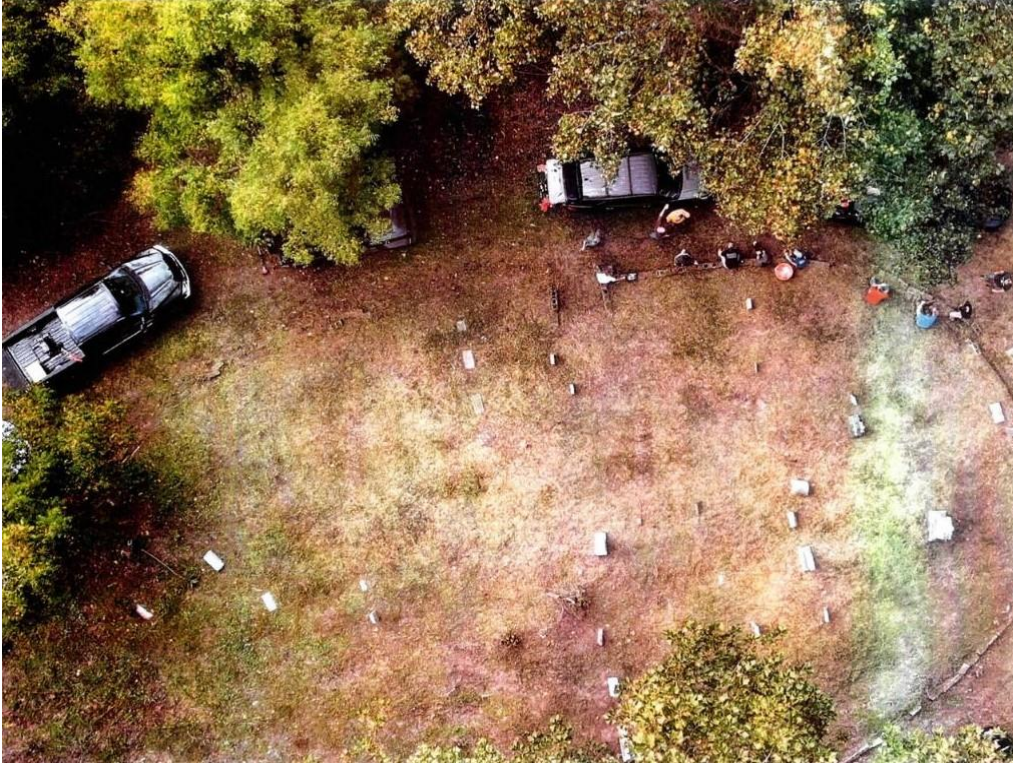


Figure 4 Drone Image of Cemetery, Spring 2024



Figure 4 Drone Image of Cemetery, Spring 2024



Figure 5—Photo Key

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery

City or Vicinity: Huntington

County: Cabell

State: West Virginia

Photographer: Cody Straley

Date Photographed: February 5, 2025

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0001
View of cemetery from entrance, northeast elevation
- 2 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0002
View up dirt path, east elevation
- 3 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0003
Central Section, east elevation
- 4 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0004
Northwestern Section, southeast elevation
- 5 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0005
Northwestern Section, east elevation
- 6 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0006
Northwestern Section, southeast elevation
- 7 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0007
Chapel ruins, northwest elevation

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- 8 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0008
View of I-64 from cemetery, north elevation
- 9 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0009
Chapel ruins, northeast elevation
- 10 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0010
Central Section, west elevation
- 11 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0011
Central and Northwestern Sections, east elevation
- 12 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0012
Elbert Ross flush gravestone, east elevation
- 13 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0013
Close-up of Central Section markers, east elevation
- 14 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0014
Orange L. Thurston flush gravestone, east elevation
- 15 of 15: WV_CabellCo_BethelCemetery_0015
Northwestern Section, southeast elevation

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

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Image 1 View of cemetery from entrance



Image 2 View up dirt path

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Image 3 Central Section



Image 4 Northwestern Section

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery
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Image 5 Northwestern Section



Image 6 Northwestern Section

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery
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Image 7 Chapel Ruins



Image 9 Chapel Ruins

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery
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Image 8 View of I-64 from cemetery



Image 10 Central Section

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery
Name of Property

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Image 11 Central and Northwestern Sections

Bethel Memorial Park Cemetery
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Image 12 Elbert Ross flush gravestone



Image 14 Orange L. Thurston flush gravestone

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Image 13 Close-up of Central Section markers



Image 15 Northwestern Section