



connections encoded in gravestones featuring symbols of fraternal organizations, such as the three-link chain of the Odd Fellows Society or the square and compass of the Freemasons.

The birth dates on the grave markers remind visitors that many individuals interred at East End were born into slavery and lived during the turbulent decades of the Jim Crow era. A number of African-American families sought to signify cultural differences from their white neighbors by decorating the graves of family members with conch shells — a long-standing tradition of associating the deceased with African ancestors.

How is civic engagement part of the lesson here?

While many courses examine written texts that a religious community defines as sacred, we challenge students to explore the history of religion through material culture objects.

Students learn about 19th-century American attitudes toward death by “reading” gravestones, landscape architecture and public monuments, as well as mourning art, clothing, jewelry and photography. They conduct fieldwork at cemeteries, museums and Civil War sites around Richmond. Then they convey their findings to a broad public audience by producing short documentary films.

This ties in to the East End Cemetery Collaboratory, a project that involves faculty from UR and Virginia Commonwealth University who have been drawn to the cultural significance of East End. The members range from archaeologists and historians to biologists, geographers and sociologists.

All of us have been looking for ways to get our students out of the classroom and into the community to learn more about Richmond’s complex and contested history.

Tell us about some surprises.

One of my students discovered intriguing stylistic affinities between the small grave markers propped up on iron stands at East End and the rise of framed photographs, which appeared

with increasing regularity in the parlors of middle-class homes during the last decade of the 19th century.

Another surprise came from East End’s predecessor — the Barton Heights Cemeteries on the north side of Richmond, which served the African-American community from the 1810s through the 1890s.

At Barton Heights, VCU history professor Ryan Smith and I stumbled on a marker from the 1850s that was produced for an African-American family by prominent Richmond stone carver J.W. Davies. Scores of Davies’ monuments may be found throughout Hollywood and Shockoe Hill cemeteries, and he designed the obelisk that marks the grave of Dolley Madison at Montpelier.

The fact that members of the black community were also patronizing his studio before the Civil War is notable. Taken together, the evidence from Richmond’s historic African-American cemeteries points toward a dynamic and flourishing middle class.

In the recent semester, my students and their peers in a VCU course taught by Smith were collaborating to link recent research at East End with emerging stories from Barton Heights. They were inventorying the monuments at Barton Heights and gathering comparative data for UR’s digital history initiative.

What else might we be learning from the East End collaboratory project?

Several members of the group have set their students to work analyzing gravestone symbolism and compiling capsule biographies of the individuals interred at the site. Others have been collecting data to produce life tables and other demographic indices of public health in Richmond’s African-American community. Recently, three biology professors even began using East End as an ecology lab, sampling tree cores, mapping the vegetation and capturing video of the various animals that roam the cemetery at night.

Collectively, students from the collaboratory courses have transcribed inscriptions, photographed headstones and compiled GIS coordinates for all of the known burials at East End.

These data are being processed by UR’s Spatial Analysis and Digital Scholarship labs and will soon be made available to the public through the digital history initiative.

Our classes also provide opportunities for students to get their hands dirty with John Shuck, organizer of the East End Cemetery Cleanup and Restoration Project, by uprooting vines, removing trash and clearing brush from around the often-hidden headstones in the densely wooded cemetery.

How did New England influence this course?

As a historian of religion in early New England, I’ve spent many hours rambling through burial grounds in small towns from Connecticut to Maine. Nearly all of them feature carefully maintained stone walls, neatly mowed grass and occasional markers for historically significant interments. Decorated with winged skulls, cherubs and a host of eclectic religious symbols, the distinctive grave markers that dot the New England landscape remind visitors of the region’s distinctive religious history. They’re also places of community pride.

My experiences in New England led me to develop the course centering on Richmond’s historic cemeteries. Initially, the goal was to get students into Hollywood Cemetery. Next to Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Mass., Hollywood is quite possibly the finest example of the rural cemetery movement in the country.

But the course evolved, didn’t it?

In early iterations of the seminar, we moved steadily through time, visiting St. John’s Church, Shockoe Hill and the Hebrew cemeteries, and the various national cemeteries around Richmond. By April, with the dogwoods in full bloom, we found ourselves strolling the winding carriage paths of Hollywood, just as visitors have done for nearly two centuries.

But as with all things in Richmond, there’s a steep learning curve to studying of the city’s dead.

The first time I taught the course, debates over the so-called “Burial Ground

for Negroes” and the proposed site for a new ballpark in Shockoe Bottom were raging in the City Council. The Richmond Slave Trail had just been established. For years, I had been driving past East End Cemetery unaware that it stood on the other side of the dense thicket lining the shoulder of eastbound Interstate 64.

Through conversations with colleagues in the East End collaboratory project and community activists, I learned that there was a deeper and far more important history to recover with my students. The study of material religion can be about the beliefs, practices and experiences of past societies, but it’s also a powerful means of recovering the politics of race and cultural representation. ■

Douglas L. Winiarski, a professor of religious and American studies, examines the emergence of early American evangelicalism through the lives of ordinary people. He is the author of more than a dozen articles in leading historical journals as well as the Bancroft Prize-winning “Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England.” More about his scholarship can be found at douglaswiniarski.com.

Back to class



You might not be an undergrad anymore, but you can still give learning the old college try. At the University of Richmond, **Douglas L. Winiarski, Ph.D.**, teaches a class called “Richmond: City of the Dead” that is supported by the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement. Turns out, the dead offer many lessons.

What’s a notable takeaway about Richmond and, to be blunt, its deceased?

I often tell my students that you can learn a lot from how a society treats its dead. Richmond is no exception: Walk the grounds of Hollywood Cemetery and East End Cemetery and you’ll see.

The biggest difference between Richmond’s historic cemeteries and burial grounds and those in other regions of the country lies in the overgrown kudzu at East End. It’s the legacy of slavery.

What’s significant about East End Cemetery?

East End is a crucial site — and a powerful cultural space. Chartered in 1897, East End comprises more than 13,000 African-American graves, including many prominent community members. But it has suffered from decades of neglect and vandalism.

The gravestones at East End reveal the strong ties that bound together the African-American community at the turn of the 20th century. We see these



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