Oakwood: A Cemetery in Flux

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HIST 490
Buried within the corner-stone of the Confederate Soldiers’ Monument in Oakwood Cemetery lays a small box containing remnants of the South’s Lost Cause. Relics pertaining to Confederate leaders, Confederate imagery, and other historical legacies have remained undisturbed, since 1871, within this imposing stone monument. In this time capsule lies the legacy of Oakwood Cemetery: a list of all Confederate soldiers buried in this once thriving but now overlooked cemetery.¹ Oakwood, while containing several thousand Confederate soldiers, has become a discounted landmark of Richmond. What should have been a glorious resting place for the South’s soldiers, has turned into a nondescript field, devoid of proper grave markers. Oakwood, and its early history, lay hidden much like the tin box buried within the monument. The foundation of this cemetery in the 1850s was primarily out of necessity, but the Civil War severely changed the landscape and purpose of the cemetery, much as it did to Richmond and the rest of America’s South. After the war, Oakwood was in a perpetual state of flux and struggled to find its purpose and identity. The cemetery, initially meant to be municipal, became a hybrid in the city, as it accommodated thousands of soldiers, white and African American paupers, religious groups, and the normal citizenry of Richmond’s East End.

This paper aims to create a succinct and encompassing history of the early years of Oakwood. Detailed, well-written, smaller summaries of Oakwood exist on several websites of Confederate interest groups.² No concise history of the early years of Oakwood has been written or published. The purpose of this work is to narrate the conditions upon which Oakwood was established, its early beginnings, the grim relationship of Oakwood and the Civil War, the

¹ “Articles in the Corner-Stone,” *The Richmond Dispatch*, April 5, 1896.
aftermath of the war and formation of the Ladies Memorial Association, and to track the progress of the cemetery until 1891, as Oakwood celebrated its 25th Memorial Day Anniversary. 3 The Memorial Day was chosen as an ending point because it marked the heyday of post-bellum support for the cemetery. Up until this point, Oakwood had gone through several cycles of positive and negative press and growth, and the 25th anniversary marked an equilibrium point in the history of the cemetery. A full study of Oakwood’s history in the twentieth century is needed to describe and analyze the role of city and state in the maintenance of the grounds, as well as the emergence of modern Confederate memorial groups.

To fully appreciate and understand the context of this narrative, it is necessary to establish in the reader’s mind what Oakwood looks like today. Oakwood Cemetery is located in Richmond’s East End with a main entrance off Nine Mile Road and a back entrance at Oakwood Avenue. The cemetery is still in use today and has extensive land to expand upon. Stony Run Creek splits the cemetery into a new and old section, with the older part of the grounds in the eastern half. Oakwood is well-laid out into sections corresponding to a letter followed by a specific number. Visitors wishing to seek out loved ones should have little trouble finding gravesites. There are a small number of crypts and mausoleums in the older section. Roads are marked with street names and are easily accessible, for the most part. Some sections of the Confederate area have overgrown roads that are inaccessible. In the regular sections, plots are well-arranged but seem to be overgrown and untended in places. The old section is home to two unique areas: the Hebrew Cemetery and the Confederate Section. The Hebrew Section is well maintained but very small. The graves and stones are extremely close together and cramped,

3 Newspapers were scanned, using www.chroniclingamerica.org, for any reference to Oakwood from its inception until 1900. Individual letters and accounts, as well as interment data, were used to create a picture of Oakwood in the nineteenth century. Maps were used to establish the growth of Oakwood and to speculate on certain burial sites.
reminiscent of Sir Moses Montefiore Cemetery, a short drive away. Finally, the Confederate Section is clearly distinguished by the memorial placed in the middle of section A. Very small and worn markers are located at precise intervals marking a specific subsection, not individual gravesites however. A few markers from the Civil War pertaining to specific individuals exist but are in poor condition. Newer stones have been placed by veterans’ organizations and Confederate Memorial Associations. Flags are interspersed next to the small markers to distinguish the legacy of the deceased. An interesting note about Oakwood pertains to the property on the other side of Stony Run Road, directly across from the back of the Confederate sections D and E. This property has been listed in the past as part of Oakwood and contains about 10 acres. Today this section is not listed on the map the city provides to visitors to Oakwood, a similar copy found in Figure 1. Finally, another section omitted from Oakwood is the Colored Paupers’ Section which is slightly north on Stoney Run Road. This location is marked by a commemorative stone and plaque in a small open field. These are the conditions of Oakwood today.

\footnote{Maps can be obtained from the main office at the Nine Mile Road entrance.}
With a clear picture of Oakwood in mind, the early history of the cemetery can be unraveled in context to Richmond’s other cemeteries. Richmond is known for its history, be it Civil War, civil rights, or industrialization. Museums and monuments can shed important light
on these events that filled our past, but the cemetery is an overlooked locale for viewing change over time. Richmond’s early cemeteries included Shockoe Hill Burying-Ground, Hebrew Cemetery, as well as the Revolutionary era St. John’s Churchyard. Shockoe Hill, home to Chief Justice John Marshall and other local celebrities, was the place for white citizens of the city to be buried early in the nineteenth century. By mid-century, it was deemed necessary to investigate other locales in the area for a new burying-ground, as Shockoe was quickly filling up. The first mention of what would be Oakwood, was in late 1852 in *The Daily Dispatch* when the committee for cemeteries came across the need to take over “pieces of land in Henrico county, condemned some years since for a burying ground, near the eastern limits of the city”\(^5\) The deal to buy this land did not go through for two years until 1854 with the purchase of Shore’s farm to establish what was originally known as the Eastern Burying Ground.\(^6\) The name “Oakwood” was not applied to this new burying-ground until the end of 1854 with a “keeper” being appointed to manage and care for the land.\(^7\) Oakwood was finally established, run by Mr. John Redford, and prepared for its first residents.

Richmonders had long been seeking burial in Shockoe Hill Burying-Ground, Hebrew Cemetery, and the long-standing St. John’s burial ground, all nearing capacity. Mid-century brought the establishment of Oakwood as well as its more famous contemporary, Hollywood Cemetery, and with them space for tens of thousands of future interments. In his history of Richmond, Tyler Potterfield discusses the development of the rural cemetery in Richmond. Hollywood was the first rural cemetery of its kind in Richmond, and Potterfield designates

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\(^5\) “Condemned Ground,” *The Daily Dispatch*, October 1, 1852.

\(^6\) “Eastern Burying Ground,” *Dispatch*, October 10, 1854.

\(^7\) “Local Matters – Eastern Burying Ground,” *Dispatch*, December 12, 1854.
Oakwood as the city’s alternative to Hollywood.\textsuperscript{8} It is interesting to note the development of both Oakwood and Hollywood from their establishments, through the Civil War, and how they survived afterwards. Both were established around the same time, for the same purpose, and in the same style. So why didn’t Oakwood end up as the East End’s Hollywood? Ben Crouch likens Oakwood to a “poor stepsister.”\textsuperscript{9} The Civil War certainly had an immense impact on both cemeteries futures as well as location. Oakwood, as Potterfield writes, “lacked the cachet of a James River view but was surrounded by attractive countryside with views of Stony Run Valley.”\textsuperscript{10} The connection between Oakwood and Hollywood again emerges in the 1860s and 1870s as memorial associations spring up around Richmond following the Civil War.

Most histories of Oakwood Cemetery establish the first burial as occurring in 1855, even as late as 1856.\textsuperscript{11} As the Eastern Burying Ground had been established briefly before the name change, it is possible that pauper burials occurred on the original piece of land purchased. However, formal plots were not established until 1855, which the committee on cemeteries commented on in November 1854, and the city did not sell areas inside the cemetery until formal sections were created.\textsuperscript{12} One final area to explore with the earliest burials is in regards to African American persons of Richmond. The Daily Dispatch notes in May 1855 that Mr. John Redford, the superintendent of Oakwood, had not sold sections to anyone yet, but that a “portion of the ground intended for ‘colored burials,’ is now ready for use, and a number of interments have already been made in it.”\textsuperscript{13} Oakwood was unique in that it was being groomed to become a new,

\textsuperscript{8} T. Tyler Potterfield, Nonesuch Place, A History of the Richmond Landscape (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009), 84-85.
\textsuperscript{9} Ben Crouch, "A Melancholy Field," Civil War 68 (June 1998), 57.
\textsuperscript{10} Potterfield, Nonesuch Place, 85.
\textsuperscript{12} “New Burying Ground,” Dispatch, November 27, 1854.
\textsuperscript{13} “Oak. Wood Cemetery,” Dispatch, May 16, 1855.
municipal cemetery for the people of Richmond’s East End but was also readily used throughout the nineteenth century as the burying place for the city’s paupers, here specifically “colored paupers.” It is very possible that the Eastern Burying Ground, or Oakwood late in 1854, was used as a resting place for the city’s poor before 1855. These claims cannot be substantiated without further research and exploration of the city’s records.

The end of the 1850s marked the first five to six years, depending on the establishment date, of Oakwood. The cemetery was very much in its infancy and had quite a ways to go. Growth was promising, as efforts to establish a Sailors’ Burying-Ground was put forth in the middle of 1859.\textsuperscript{14} Individual interments slowly crept forward in the 1850s, with probably no more than 10 to 15 interments per quarter.\textsuperscript{15} These small numbers did not mean the cemetery was failing in anyway. The low numbers indicated in the late 1850s for Oakwood suggest a growing acceptance for new cemeteries in Richmond with the possibility of creating a new popular place to be laid to rest. Oakwood continued to steadily increase its population through the late 1850s and into the early 1860s shortly before the maelstrom that was the Civil War.

Before war erupted in 1861, Oakwood began to gain its legs and take its role as the city’s next popular cemetery. The Dispatch writes, “\textit{Shockoe Hill Burying-Ground} is rapidly filling up, and in the course of a few years another cemetery will be brought in to general use. – Oakwood may answer for years to come, and is beautifully located for the resting place of the dead.”\textsuperscript{16} Oakwood had finally taken hold of its purpose and was poised to become the next great burial ground for Richmond. The years, 1860 and 1861, directly before the war, continued to see growing numbers of interments with 5 white and 15 African American interments in the second

\textsuperscript{15} “Local Matters – City Council,”\textit{ Dispatch}, October 13, 1859.
quarter of 1860 and 10 of each in the final quarter of 1860. However, this paled in comparison to almost 200 burials in Shockoe Hill.\textsuperscript{17} The whites being buried in Oakwood at this time were most likely the first to purchase sectioned plots and thus were of a wealthier social stature. The African American interments were certainly black paupers from the city’s almshouse. Oakwood on the eve of the Civil War can be characterized as a multi-use, suburban cemetery steadily growing and with a defined future ahead.

The Civil War hit the nation harder than most imagined. Instead of a few small engagements and quick victories, both sides soon realized the conflict was much more complicated and would cost more than regional pride. Richmond, as the capital of the Confederacy, was an important staging ground for troops from all over the South, as well as the headquarters for Southern political and military leadership. In addition to being the political rallying point of the South, Richmond became the nexus for the healing and treating of wounded and dying soldiers. At its zenith, the city had over a dozen hospitals spread throughout its perimeter. The two largest compounds were Winder in the west and the enormous Chimborazo to the east.\textsuperscript{18} Soldiers soon streamed into the various hospitals surrounding the center of Richmond befalling several fates: healing quickly and returning to duty, requiring a longer stay in a hospital, or succumbing to disease or wounds. Chimborazo at this time has been noted as being the Confederacy’s largest hospital, if not the world’s largest at the time, and handled the majority of wounded and sick soldiers.\textsuperscript{19} A general consensus among similar histories and research concludes that soldiers who died at Chimborazo and other eastern hospitals were

\textsuperscript{17} “Local Matters,” Dispatch, August 14, 1860 and “Local Matters – Interments,” Dispatch, February 12, 1861.
\textsuperscript{18} Salmon, “History of Oakwood Cemetery.”
\textsuperscript{19} For a detailed history on Chimborazo, its directors, and daily environment see Carol Green, Chimborazo: The Confederacy’s Largest Hospital (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004) and Phoebe Yates Pember, A Southern Woman’s Story (Colombia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1879).
eventually buried in Oakwood. The “Restore Oakwood” website states, “There does not appear to have been any special dividing point that dictated whether a body went to Oakwood or Hollywood. But in a general sense that unofficial line appears to have been at about 18th street.” In any case, it can be concluded that the primary resting places for Confederate soldiers were both Oakwood and Hollywood.

Oakwood’s progression through the Civil War can be traced via newspaper articles and records noting a soldier’s resting place. After the outbreak of war in 1861 and through its first months, Oakwood had 540 Confederates buried there. The numbers increased exponentially from 1862 through 1863. The year from September 1861-62 saw a total of 4,882 soldiers buried in Oakwood, and from September 1862 until the beginning of 1863 another 2,237 soldiers were interred. As the war grew closer to Richmond in the final days of the Confederacy, one can extrapolate that Oakwood continued to receive a steady feed of Confederate dead until 1865. Salmon writes, “By war’s end the Confederate section of Oakwood Cemetery covered approximately 7.5 acres and contained more than 16,000 dead.” Extrapolating from the last newspaper accounts of 1863, around 9,000 more Confederate bodies would be interred in the grounds of Oakwood. Besides the thousands of Confederate soldiers being buried in Oakwood, normal burials continued, albeit at a slowed rate. The Daily Dispatch commented on Oakwood’s final quarter of 1862 as having 23 white and 18 African American burials. It is interesting that African American burials continued to occur, even during the racially charged era of the Civil

21 For an excellent history on Hollywood and the affairs of that cemetery during the Civil War see Mary H. Mitchell, Hollywood Cemetery: The History of a Southern Shrine (Richmond, VA: Library of Virginia, 1999).
24 Salmon, “History of Oakwood.”
War. However, these burials were certainly paupers of the city. If soldiers were streaming into Oakwood and normal burials were occurring, what was the cemetery’s environment like and how was the management keeping up with inundation of bodies?

From the Civil War until the turn of the century, Oakwood appeared to have a skeleton crew. Mr. John Redford was the keeper from Oakwood’s founding until the early 1870s. Alongside Redford, at least during the Civil War, were two African American gravediggers, Redford’s slaves, named Wesley and Ellyson. Redford took out an ad in *The Daily Dispatch* concerning their escape and hopeful capture. Redford stated, “I expect that they have been pressed in some hospital as nurses…The men are grave diggers, and their services are very much needed.”

Throughout the rest of the century, a very limited number of gravediggers were mentioned as staff for Oakwood. As Redford notes in his ad, Oakwood had become overburdened with burials, and the loss of these workers was detrimental to his business and the welfare of the bodies being delivered daily from local hospitals.

In addition to Redford being concerned with the state of his cemetery, local citizens began to show their disdain for the care given to Confederate bodies and to the overall state of Oakwood. The middle of 1862 stands out as a particularly rough period for the cemetery. Numerous accounts describe horrible conditions of burial and maintenance of bodies. A particularly ghastly account, in *The Daily Dispatch*, described that, “Anxiety for the living swallows up respect for the dead, and the remains of the latter are often hurried too precipitately to the place of interment.”

The article continues on describing two separate instances in which still living soldiers were removed from their coffins. However, this particular notion of burying

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Confederate soldiers alive was retracted soon after with *The Daily Dispatch* writing, “that no soldiers were ever buried alive in the cemeteries near this city.”\(^{28}\) This same article also described enormous numbers of men flowing into the hospitals and that “Oakwood cemetery is filling up.”\(^{29}\) By all accounts, Oakwood, and presumably Hollywood, were overrun with burials to process leading to an overworked keeper and diggers who were doing all they could. This, however, seems to be a situation that could be remedied with the appointment of others to help. Redford and his workers, besides being charged with live burial, were criticized for leaving coffins in the open for too long and not burying soldiers quickly enough. *The Daily Dispatch* took it upon itself to call out Oakwood for neglecting the dead, writing, “We again call attention to the numbers of unburied dead that lie about Oakwood Cemetery…Surely enough hands can be obtained to perform the rite of sepulture – the last testimonial of respect which can be rendered to the unfortunate men who have fallen in the defence of our country.”\(^{30}\) This sentiment is repeated throughout various news agencies and local citizens, suggesting it was a common sight at the cemetery. *The Dispatch* noted later in July of 1862 that “For some days past details from the darkeys captured with the Yankees have been made, and sent out under guard to Oakwood Cemetery and other spots used as places of interment, and have been made to render considerable assistance…”\(^{31}\) Oakwood seemed to be trying anything in order to keep up with the rising demand for decent burials, including using captured African American Union soldiers. The question remains, how decent were these burials?

Soldier accounts and newspaper narratives paint an image of how burials were conducted for soldiers in Oakwood. Soldiers, whatever side they fought for, deserved proper burial and

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\(^{28}\) “Soldiers Buried,” *Dispatch*, May 6, 1862.
\(^{29}\) “Local Matters – Sundries,” *Dispatch*, May 6, 1862.
\(^{30}\) “Bury the Dead,” *Dispatch*, July 12, 1862.
\(^{31}\) “Burying the Dead,” *Dispatch*, July 10, 1862.
rites performed at the gravesite. Individual graves were most likely dug early in the war, when the number of casualties was still relatively low. However, with the war in full swing by 1862, Oakwood adapted and according to the *Enquirer* “A plan had been since adopted, of digging trenches, which was performed more easily, and the burials were now conducted as expeditiously as might be desired.”32 One can envision Oakwood lined with rows upon rows of trenches, waiting to hold the bodies of Confederate dead. Although Oakwood may have been short on gravediggers, they remedied this through mass burial techniques. However, shortly after this article, the *Richmond Examiner* wrote, “We have it on the authority of a gentleman, an officer of the army, who has visited Oakwood Cemetery, that the coffins are often piled, in two and three deep, in one excavation and thus covered up, of course rendering it out of the question for an enquiring relative to recognize and reclaim a corpse.”33 Locating and retrieving loved ones from burial places throughout the South would become a major issue in post-war America. Soldiers were marked mostly with wooden boards with names, ranks, and regiments painted on them with the occasional soldiers receiving a lasting stone tablet, some of which can be viewed even today.34 Confederate soldiers were treated with as much respect and care as possible given the circumstances at Oakwood. Unfortunately, horrible instances of multiple bodies in a grave emerged, but this was not the norm.

One final aspect of Civil War burials in Oakwood to examine, briefly, is the controversial notion of black Confederate soldiers and the questions regarding Union burials in Oakwood. African American troops were pressed into service on both sides during the Civil War. The

34 Salmon, “History of Oakwood.”
Union adopted this policy much earlier than the Confederacy and employed African American men as actual soldiers. The Confederacy was more hesitant to do this and mainly used slaves as servants to perform menial camp labor. Only at the extreme end of the war were slaves employed as fighting troops with only a limited number of engagements and casualties taken.\(^{35}\)

Almost ten years ago, a local historian and activist, Veronica Davis, inspected an old map of Oakwood Cemetery and saw the words “Colored Confederates” in a now overgrown and neglected portion of the cemetery. Unfortunately, this map never resurfaced after her encounter with it. The area in question is, today, quite overgrown and is actually not even listed as part of Oakwood Cemetery. The property, as confirmed through two maps, Figures 2 and 3, is part of Oakwood and contains around 10 acres of land bordering on Evergreen Cemetery. Directly above this property is the Colored Paupers’ Section of Oakwood, also not listed as part of Oakwood on the current map. Davis states that the area of Colored Confederate graves is near the crossing of Stony Creek Road and East Richmond Road. This is an area of Richmond history that needs further research and possible excavation to prove conclusive.\(^{36}\)


\(^{36}\) This section paraphrases the article in Style Weekly by Sara Dabney Tisdale which can be found online at http://www.styleweekly.com/richmond/the-lost-soldiers/Content?oid=1380001. For more research by Davis, see Veronica Davis, Here I Lay My Burdens Down: A History of the Black Cemeteries of Richmond, Virginia (Richmond: Dietz Press, 2003). This issue of African American soldiers in Oakwood is not mentioned much in modern scholarship. In his article on Oakwood, Brag Bowling does write, however, “Legend has it black Union soldiers were buried in the Oakwood Confederate section, but were unceremoniously left behind when the Union soldiers were reinterred.” Brag Bowling, “Richmond’s Silent Gem: Oakwood Confederate Cemetery,” Confederate Veteran 70, no. 5 (September/October 2012), 44.
Figure 2. Map of properties surrounding Oakwood, 1980s?, Department of Cemeteries at Riverview Cemetery.

Figure 3. Map of land between Oakwood and Evergreen Cemeteries, 1990s?, Department of Cemeteries at Riverview Cemetery.
A more concrete dimension of Civil War burials that is unique pertains to the Union dead buried at Oakwood during the war. Numbers for Union dead usually hover around 200-300 with several being unidentified. The exact location of these burials is not known but references to the site can help narrow down specific areas. Dr. Joseph Kyle, in his article on Oakwood, writes, “Union soldiers were buried in a section set aside for the purpose on a ‘wild uncultivated hill, half covered with timber and brush,’...[with] 50 burials at the top of the hill and another 70 at the bottom of the hill across a graveled ravine from the main cemetery.” Kyle’s quote comes from a direct account of J.T. Trowbridge in his book, *The South: A Tour of its Battlefields and Ruined Cities.* Yet another source, a *New York Times* article written in May of 1865, notes that “there have been buried them [sic] two thousand six hundred and thirty-six.” No one is certain of how many or where Union soldiers were buried at Oakwood. Union dead were eventually disinterred from Oakwood and reinterred in Richmond National Cemetery in 1866 leaving just the Confederates to become the hallmark of the cemetery. One final aspect of the Union dead worth noting pertains to the death and burial of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren. Dahlgren was a notorious Union leader who was killed during a raid on Richmond. According to the *Dispatch,*

37 “A Short History of Oakwood,” Restore Oakwood.
38 Joseph D. Kyle, “‘A Densely Peopled Field of Death’ Oakwood Cemetery,” *Richmond Journal of History and Architecture* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 8-10. The quotation Kyle uses here is from J.T Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities,* (Hartford: L. Stebbins, 1866), a book which describes the south immediately following the Civil War. Trowbridge has a small section on Richmond and touches on both Hollywood and Oakwood Cemeteries.
39 The full quote on Oakwood reads:

> On the other side, Oak Wood, a wild, uncultivated hill, half covered with timber and brush, shading numerous Confederate soldiers’ graves. Here, set apart from the rest by a rude fence, is the ‘Yankee Cemetery,’ crowded with the graves of patriot soldiers, who fell in battle, or died of slow starvation and disease in Richmond prisons; a melancholy field, which I remember as I saw it one gusty September day, when wild winds swept it, and shook down over it whirling leaves from the reeling and roaring trees.

This is an ambiguous reference to specific areas of Oakwood, so it is not entirely possible to determine which areas Trowbridge is referring to in this book. Kyle’s reference is out of context as his quote on Union burial location actually refers to where Confederates were buried. J.T Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities,* (Hartford: L. Stebbins, 1866) 183-84.
he was buried “not far from the road on the eastern boundary of the cemetery” but was secretly disinterred and later evacuated from Richmond by Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union spy.\textsuperscript{41} Unfortunately, like the situation with black Confederates, there do not remain, to this researcher’s knowledge, any war time maps of Oakwood to precisely mark the location of Union dead.

The Civil War left a lasting impression on the South, Richmond, and everywhere its fire burned. This included Oakwood Cemetery, whose future and direction was changed completely because of this conflict. Oakwood, throughout the war, was hopelessly understaffed to provide an adequate pace for burials. Coffins and their remains were a common sight on the grounds, as diggers prepared trenches to place the awaiting bodies. In dire circumstances, it seems multiple soldiers were placed in the same grave. Space was limited at Oakwood for Confederates, as only about 7 acres contain the bodies of soldiers. The purpose and reputation of Oakwood was forever changed to that of a Confederate burial ground that had been mismanaged during the war. In addition to a direct reputation of Oakwood being established, its role as a cemetery in Richmond can again be compared to Hollywood. During the war, both cemeteries became the primary resting place for Confederate soldiers. As Robert Krick, of Richmond National Battlefield Park, notes, Hollywood has a large number of high ranking officers and more well-known Confederate leaders, such as Jefferson Davis. Oakwood, on the other hand, is the resting place for primarily privates, corporals, and sergeants, with very few officers.\textsuperscript{42} Perhaps the location of burial was not so cut and dry as east versus west, but rather rank and file versus leadership. Management and maintenance of these graves would become a mainstay for the

\textsuperscript{41} “Dahlgren in Oakwood,” \textit{The Daily Dispatch}, April 15, 1883. Dahlgren was secretly removed because of fear his body would be vandalized further.
\textsuperscript{42} Robert E.L. Krick, Interview by author, March 31, 2014.
cemetery and the various associations, that soon developed all over the south to care for and properly memorialize these lost individuals, who took it upon themselves to provide necessary arrangements.

The end of the Civil War brought a period of rebuilding and remembrance throughout the country but particularly in the South. Substantial parts of Richmond had been destroyed by fire, and families all across the city mourned the loss of sons, brothers, fathers, and friends. Very quickly, however, groups of people, most notably women, sprang up all over the South to commemorate the loss of life and the Southern cause. Oakwood received ladies of its own to support and take care of the Confederate section of the cemetery. This Ladies’ Memorial Association for Oakwood first met on April 9, 1866 and decided upon a day to memorialize the dead buried at Oakwood. They chose the tenth of May, also Stonewall Jackson’s death date, as a memorial day for Oakwood. The day would consist of a procession to the cemetery, speeches by notable citizens, and the placing of flowers on Confederate graves. This first Oakwood Memorial Day would certainly not be the last, as the tradition continued into the twentieth century. The Ladies were formally incorporated by the General Assembly of Virginia in February the following year. The Oakwood Association was not alone in Richmond. Several other groups sprang up shortly after the war, including a group dedicated to maintaining the graves at Hollywood. The relationship between the two cemeteries can be viewed through these organizations. Caroline Janney in her work *Burying the Dead but Not the Past, Ladies’ Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause*, discusses the differences and connections between the two groups.

43 Salmon, “History of Oakwood.”
44 “General Assembly of Virginia,” *Staunton Spectator and General Advertiser*, February 12, 1867.
The OMA [Oakwood Memorial Association] probably had a slightly less elite membership than its Richmond sister, the HMA [Hollywood Memorial Association]. Surveys of both groups, including work done by historian Susan Barber, suggests that the OMA members came from a slightly less affluent section of the city...Likewise, Richmond residents buried in Hollywood and Oakwood Cemeteries appear to have come from different social classes.45

Although these two organizations were composed of members of different social standing, they were not openly hostile towards each other and even sought unification. However, this merger never occurred. “Though the OMA had initiated talks, its members rejected the HMA plan, anticipating a loss of both financial and political control of the association, presumably because of the HMA members’ more elite status.”46 Class issues and wealth seemed to distinguish not only the members of the memorial associations but the cemeteries as well. Nevertheless, the Oakwood Ladies would continue to play an instrumental role in celebrating Oakwood, maintaining its grounds, and keeping the memory of the Confederacy alive in the hearts of Richmonders.

In addition to an association forming for the benefit of Confederate soldiers and their families, a new group of Richmond made a home for its deceased in Oakwood. On July 9, 1866, a Hebrew cemetery was established in Oakwood, filling one small acre near the back entrance on Oakwood Avenue.47 This was not the first Jewish cemetery established in Richmond. Prior to Oakwood’s plot, a sizeable burying-ground had been used across the street from Shockoe Hill Cemetery, called Hebrew Cemetery. There was also a smaller cemetery called the Franklin Street Jewish Burying-Ground. The plot held in Oakwood was conjointly owned by Beth Israel,

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46 Janney, *Burying the Dead*, 49.
which later merged with Beth Ahabah, and Keneseth Israel. Oakwood’s Hebrew Cemetery is very small and crowded today. According to the “Index of Jewish interments in Oakwood Hebrew Cemetery” compiled by Samuel Werth and Dorothy Mae (Marx) Bennett Werth, the earliest burial took place in 1868, with a total of 4 burials in the 1860s. Oakwood’s Hebrew Cemetery does not play a particularly crucial role in the development of the cemetery, but it shows expansion in the city’s municipal cemeteries and the different branches of Judaism that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Growth and expansion became important themes and roles for Oakwood in the 1870s.

A theme for Oakwood in the 1870s is one of rebuilding, much like the rest of the country. Renovations and improvements to the grounds were a constant refrain, as well as calls to make sure the grounds did not fall into disrepair. An interesting letter remains from 1870 which does an excellent job of painting a vivid picture of what Oakwood looked like a few years after the Civil War. Dated May 11, 1870 and addressed only to “My dear Willie,” the letter appears to be from a foreign visitor to the United States, possibly from Scotland or England as the top of the stationary reads “Church Hill, Edinburgh.” The beginning of the letter provides a detailed description of a visit to the Petersburg battlefield, the battle that raged there for months, and includes a nice map of the battleground. Following this and some unreadable lines mentioning Richmond, the writer comes to a section in which he explicitly talks about Oakwood Cemetery. The letter reads as follows:

But the most impressive sight we have yet seen in America, we saw yesterday – [?] the Confederate Soldiers Cemetery called Oakwood. It contains 10,000 graves

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48 Ezekiel, Jews of Richmond, 318.
– each is a mound[?] – all in rows, as when an army is drawn up for review – and at the head of each grave, a thick plank of wood stands – painted white – rounded in the head, with name and regiment of each soldiers in black[?] letters – here and[?] there are[?] marked unknown.51

This paragraph is followed by a crude drawing of what Oakwood looked like to the viewer in 1870. This resource provides an excellent description of the state of Oakwood, how soldiers’ graves were usually marked, and a rough number of soldiers buried there. For the writer to state that Oakwood is “the most impressive sight…in America” the cemetery must have been in fairly good condition.52 This is remarkable given the short span of time since the Civil War. Additionally, the way soldiers’ graves were marked and even the kind of marker is clearly stated and described. Finally, the writer provides a rough estimate for the soldiers buried there, around 10,000. Now this may be just a figure of speech for saying that there were an enormous number of graves, but it confirms that not every soldier received a grave marker. Estimates for soldier graves at Oakwood usually average around 17,000 after a number of soldiers had been reinterred from other cemeteries.53 The number of Confederate burials in Oakwood is still contested to this day. Estimates range from as low as 10,000 up to 20,000. Robert Krick believes, following contemporary research, that there are only around 12-13,000 Confederates buried there.54 This estimate is based on the number of markers set up, corresponding to multiple bodies, as well as the limited space available for Confederate burials. No matter the inferences drawn, this unique letter provides a good starting point to discuss the rest of this important decade.

1871 appeared to be quite an important year for Oakwood, for several reasons. The grounds received significant appropriations from the city to improve the cemetery, often

51 Letter, 1870 May 11.
52 Letter, 1870 May 11.
53 Salmon, “History of Oakwood.”
54 Krick, Interview
specifically allocated to the soldiers’ section, a new Keeper was appointed amid a scandal with the current superintendent, and the symbol of Oakwood today, the Confederate Soldiers’ Monument was begun on Oakwood Memorial Day. Oakwood received two sizeable funds, of $2,500 and $600, *The Daily State Journal* reported, “to renovate Oakwood cemetery” and “to clean up that portion of Oakwood cemetery devoted to soldiers’ graves” respectively. The city was concerned with the appearance of its cemeteries, and these allocations suggest a specific focus on the Confederate section. Although the war may have been over, Richmond would not easily let go of its Southern heritage. On the topic of money and funding, an interesting article appeared in *The Daily State Journal* in August of 1871. The article began with Oakwood’s election of its keeper, a Lieutenant William L. Smith. What had happened to the steadfast Mr. Redford, the keeper since Oakwood’s inception? The *Journal* reports, “The ‘late keeper,’ a Mr. Redford, collected money from citizens for purchase of lots, and never accounted for it…How much money was thus filched from the people, has not appeared.” Redford was apparently “let off” and nothing more of the matter was spoken of. The owners of these plots were eventually given the deeds to the plots they had purchased. A scandal like this was probably not good for business. Wealthy citizens who were victims of this embezzlement might have spoken to their friends, and the story may have circulated throughout the upper rungs of Richmond society. Oakwood was not new to scandal, shown through the treatment of solider burials, nor would it be Oakwood’s last time in negative light.

However, the rest of the 1870s showed promise and growth for the cemetery, including the building of the Confederate Soldiers’ Monument. As noted earlier, 1866 was the first

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Memorial Day at Oakwood, hosted by the Oakwood Ladies’ Memorial Association. In this interim, both Hollywood and Oakwood’s Memorial Associations began to grow and make decisive actions towards caring for Confederate graves. Hollywood took the lead on this and constructed their “granite pyramid” in 1869. Oakwood soon followed and began campaigns to raise funds for a memorial of their own. Janney discusses how the Oakwood Ladies’ asked each southern state and even the Virginia legislature for funding for a Confederate monument. She also writes that, “Perhaps competition with the HMA sparked their vigorous pursuit of the monument…” 1871 marked the fifth anniversary of this tradition and with it the foundation for a spectacular monument was laid. The Daily State Journal wrote, “On the 10th of May next, the ceremony of laying the corner-stone of a monument to the Confederate dead will take place in Oakwood Cemetery…” Originally, the association had planned to construct a marble memorial to perhaps outdo Hollywood, however “a cornerstone for a twenty-five foot granite (not marble) shaft” was laid “and the monument was officially dedicated in May 1872.” Many local organizations were present at the event, and it was surely a turning point for the Confederate section of Oakwood.

The remainder of the decade proceeded smoothly with no significant events arising. The Memorial Day for Oakwood continued as scheduled, with similar services taking place at Hollywood and Hebrew Cemetery. The attention bestowed on Oakwood by the Ladies’ Memorial Association no doubt had a positive impact and influence on the cemeteries reputation, but it seemed the grounds nevertheless fell into disrepair at this time. The Daily State Journal

57 Potterfield, Nonesuch Place, 93.
58 Janney, Buruing the Dead, 91.
59 Janney, Buruing the Dead, 91.
60 “Local News – Oakwood Cemetery,” Journal, April 26, 1871.
61 Janney, Buruing the Dead, 91.
takes note of Oakwood in May and September of 1873 and commented on its need for repairs. It wrote, “Oakwood cemetery needs some attention at the hands of our city authorities, as well as our citizens generally…It has been much improved by…Lieutenant William L. Smith…”

Oakwood should be taken care of not only by the city, but by residents of the city, presumably residents near Oakwood. Oakwood is also compared to Hollywood as the Journal writes, “It [Oakwood] is larger by nearly thirty acres than Hollywood, and, while less beautiful and pretentious, it is nevertheless capable of being made a most charming and attractive cemetery.”

Some animosity towards Hollywood and the western portions of the city can be seen through these articles. The September article commented, “While so much is being done for the west end of the city we hope that the council will not forget that the eastern portion of our town has an equal claim on its beneficent regard.”

It seems that a trend may have been forming in which the eastern side of Richmond, now generally regarded as less wealthy, was not being cared for as its western half was. Oakwood at the end of the 1870s appeared to have emerged relatively unscathed from the decade and was taking its place as a calm, serene resting ground. The 1880s would bring a flurry of activity, both good and bad, to Oakwood that would change its landscape considerably.

1880 started off the decade with a huge scandal in Oakwood that led to the dismissal of its keeper, William Smith. The Staunton Spectator was one of several state news sources that broke the story, writing, “that within the past month about 40 graves in the pauper section of Oakwood Cemetery, the property of Richmond city,…have been robbed of the bodies buried

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64 “City News – Oakwood Cemetery,” Journal, September 16, 1873.
The article continues discussing that most likely the bodies were sent to various medical institutions across the country, including the Medical College of Virginia. The scandal took up most of the first half of 1880 and will be generally summarized here, as a complete detailed account would require another work on its own. The thefts in question were from the Colored Paupers’ Section of Oakwood, an overlooked and disregarded portion of the cemetery, most likely its oldest section, with the bodies being of African Americans. Initial reports claimed that the current keeper, William Smith, knew about these incidents and was secretly allowing medical staff from the college to exhume bodies for anatomy specimens. Smith continually denied any involvement in the thefts and claimed he had communicated with the Committee on Cemeteries about the issue, which was refuted multiple times. By late January, Smith, however, was dismissed from his position as keeper, and a Mr. William A. Dickerson was elected in his stead shortly after. Efforts continued until April to try to reverse the Committee’s decision on Smith but this was overturned. This was obviously not the right way to begin the decade, but Oakwood showed promising signs of growth and development until the end of the decade when negative light would again be shed upon this cemetery.

Oakwood continued to be led by Mr. Dickerson throughout the 1880s, although his name is often reported as Dickinson. Dickerson, as keeper, unfortunately had bad precedents set for his office, as the past two keepers were removed due to scandals. He retained his position throughout the 1880s and appears to have done an excellent job maintaining the grounds as Oakwood was reported in the papers “to be found in beautiful condition” and that “This sacred

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65 “Robbery of Graves in Oakwood Cemetery,” Staunton Spectator, January 6, 1880.
67 The information in this section comes from multiple articles in the Dispatch including January 6, 7, 8, 12, February 3, and April 16, 1880.
Dickerson and the city made several changes to the cemetery during this decade to improve the upkeep and overall appearance of the grounds. In an effort to combat the Civil War-era issue of manpower and lack thereof, local prisoners were used to maintain the Confederate sections of both Hollywood and Oakwood. This harkens back to the policy of using captured African American Union soldiers for burial detail at Oakwood during the Civil War. Physical additions to Oakwood took the form of moving the current barn and stables to a place where it would not be in the public eye as well as the construction of a new stone gate. These improvements to Oakwood no doubt made it a more attractive location for the people of Richmond to bury their loved ones.

Oakwood received hundreds and hundreds of new burials during the 1880s. Local papers published interment data on the various cemeteries in the city, usually on the first of the New Year. Newspaper articles that could be found containing this data provide a window into the busy day-to-day operations of Oakwood. Oakwood in 1880 reported 673 interments, with almost 100 more African American than white burials. Burials in 1883 and 1884 numbered 594 and 590, respectively, with these years showing similarities in terms of race to 1880. The burial statistic article for 1887 reported 623 interments in 1885 and 615 in 1886. Finally, interments for 1888 and 1889 were 713 and 650 respectively. Throughout all articles found, Oakwood was continually seen to have the highest number of burials out of any cemetery.

69 “Council Matters,” Dispatch, June 7, 1884 and “Cemetery Committee Meeting,” The Richmond Dispatch, October 30, 1884, respectively.
70 “Soldiers’ Graves,” Dispatch, April 12, 1882.
71 “Ordered to be Removed,” Dispatch, November 22, 1882 and “Council Notes,” Dispatch, April 8, 1883.
72 “Oakwood Cemetery,” Dispatch, January 1, 1880.
73 “Burials During the Year,” The Richmond Dispatch, January 1, 1885.
74 “Oakwood Cemetery,” Dispatch, January 1, 1887.
75 “Oakwood Cemetery,” Dispatch, January 14, 1890.
reported. Hollywood, while seen as the prime place for the wealthy to be buried, lagged behind Oakwood by several hundred burials each year. Another interesting note is that Oakwood was the only cemetery to report African American burials. Some of these cemeteries may have prohibited African American burials, which may account for this, or they may not have delineated burials by race. The African American interments for Oakwood are most likely for paupers and their children. This is most likely so because, as The Daily Times reports, “The first section ever sold to a colored person was bought a few days ago by Jane Wilson… and is not near the other section.” There is a mention of a notable African American man by the name of Charles Lewis being buried in Oakwood in 1884. His burial is notable first of all because it was in the newspaper, and secondly because his funeral was attended by only white citizens. Mr. Lewis may have been a long-time servant of a family in the area. Race and class divisions were quite clear at Oakwood, with African Americans most likely being the first to be buried there. Class also became an issue in the 1880s as people began to take issue with how the poor were being treated after death.

Treatment of the poor became a brief issue at Oakwood in the late 1880s. Since its inception, Oakwood had been burying the majority, if not all, the city’s poor, as Shockoe Hill’s Pauper Burying-Ground had long filled to capacity. If Oakwood was handling a large volume of interments, how were burials conducted and were they respectful of the dead? The answer at least up until 1888 was no. 1886 is the first mention of any issue with pauper burials with The Richmond Dispatch reporting on measures to regulate and improve burial conditions for the poor. These measures included installing and using a phone to connect the almshouse and Oakwood so that proper notification could be given to gravediggers and that bodies could only

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76 “The Committee on Cemeteries,” The Daily Times, July 24, 1880.
77 “Briefs and Personals,” The Daily Dispatch, February 26, 1884.
remain at the almshouse for a certain length of time. These measures indicated a need to expedite these burials so that bodies were interred in the ground in a timely fashion. It seems these measures were not taken to heart as another article appears in 1888 written by a concerned Council member. He described the conditions of these pauper burials in a very negative manner which seemed to resemble the way soldiers’ during the Civil War were buried in Oakwood, especially when large numbers of dead arrived. Bodies were piled into carriages from the almshouse and brought to Oakwood without notice to the gravediggers, thus leading to bodies sitting in the open for hours if not days at a time. This negative environment in the cemetery did not seem to arouse much public anger in comparison to the controversy brewing over the condition of the Confederate section, especially in regards to the headboards in place.

Over the course of 1887 and 1888, the city ran into great opposition with the Ladies’ Memorial Association over the deterioration and subsequent removal of old Confederate headboards. Beginning in 1887, the city council proposed that the rotted headboards marking Confederate graves in Oakwood be removed and the sections leveled and smoothed over. This suggestion from the city did not sit well with the Ladies’ as they continually rejected the proposal. The Daily Times described the Confederate section quite negatively writing that “The headboards are worm-eaten and broken down and the graves sunken.” The situation became so dire and distressing that the council decided to remove the headboards regardless of the Ladies’ decision and to go ahead and landscape the area appropriately. It seemed that while the Confederate section of Oakwood fell into disrepair and neglect during the 1880s, the rest of

78 “Pauper Burials,” The Richmond Dispatch, March 2, 1886.
79 “Pauper Burials,” Dispatch, March 8, 1888.
80 “Oakwood,” The Richmond Dispatch, April 20, 1887 and “Confederate Graves in Oakwood,” June 2, 1887.
81 “Oakwood,” The Daily Times, June 17, 1887.
82 “Oakwood’s Dead,” The Richmond Dispatch, May 2, 1888.
the cemetery was thriving. Interments for each year were most likely all above 500, including a quickly filling paupers’ cemetery. The Confederate section had once been a hallmark of Oakwood, bringing in hundreds of visitors each May to celebrate its honored dead. Oakwood, led by William Dickerson, seemed to instead focus on its future instead of its past, leaving the Confederates grounds in the hands of the Ladies’ Memorial Association. This section would get face-lift in the 1890s but it seems its glory days were well in the past.

The final years of Oakwood to be examined were relatively quiet but left the cemetery in a state of hope and remembrance after several uneasy cycles of gain and loss. 1891 brought a resurgence in the Confederate Memorial Day with the 25th Anniversary of Memorial Day at Oakwood. The Dispatch featured a prominent and lengthy article on the event, noting that “The crowd that witnessed the ceremonies demonstrated that interest in these occasions is by no means on the wane. There were people there from all classes in all parts of the city.”83 It seemed that a surge of pride and emphasis on heritage was flowing through Richmond. A year after this ceremony the Dispatch commented that “The soldiers’ section in this cemetery is one of the prettiest in the country. It has been recently been put in perfect order and is now being re-turfed.”84 Perhaps the Memorial Day encouraged local citizens and the city to remember their Confederate past one more time and present its heroes in the best way possible.

Oakwood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia on the surface seems like an ordinary burial ground, with an older section as well as a new, currently in use one. Old monuments and obelisks dot the older section much like contemporary cemeteries throughout the city. Oakwood’s unique identifier, the Confederate Soldiers’ Monument, is a relatively plain and

83 “The Oakwood Dead,” Dispatch, May 12, 1891.
84 “To Decorate the Graves,” Dispatch, May 7, 1892.
unobtrusive monument to the deceased soldiers buried around the granite. However, beneath the surface of Oakwood’s veneer of normalcy, is a world of question, scandal, and cycles of boom and bust. Questions abound regarding the burials of several groups of people including Union soldiers and possible black Confederate soldiers. Maps are the best piece of information for these types of inquiries; however, no wartime maps survive. Land, supposedly part of Oakwood, is not acknowledged today and is just an overgrown forest. No one knows who is buried there. Scandal also rocked Oakwood several times throughout its history in the nineteenth century. Two keepers were removed within about 10 years of each other due to issues involving finances and the theft of paupers’ bodies. The Pauper section of Oakwood is a very ambiguous place and is not well-defined. Finally, the cemetery went through cycles of great improvement and promise to nadirs of rotting headboards and overgrown plots. At its inception Oakwood was poised to become a great new city cemetery with a promising future. The Civil War, however, wreaked havoc on the landscape and permanently inscribed the Confederate section into the grounds. This section continually exerted its weight and needs on the cemetery and its management, constantly needing repair and expensive maintenance. Without this burden and the several cycles of boom and bust, Oakwood may have grown even more than it did and maintained its positive atmosphere until today.
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