

# Walter Pierce Park



Walter  
Pierce Park

Tuesday, September 26, 2023



# Rules of the Road:

- Welcome!
- Thank you for your participation.
- *Please hold all questions until the end of the presentation.*

## AGENDA:

- Team Introductions
- Project Background
- Project Overview
- Project Status
- Commemorative Signage Design
- Outdoor Restroom
- Contact Information
- Questions & Answers



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# DC Government Presenters

## Walter Pierce Park

**Tommie Jones**  
*DPR Chief of External Affairs*

**Christopher Dyer**  
*DPR Community Engagement Manager*

**Peter Nohrden, ASLA**  
*DPR Project Manager*

**Kelly Reed**  
*DGS Project Manager*

**Wayne Gore**  
*DGS Community Outreach Coordinator*



# Design/Build Team

## Walter Pierce Park

### DESIGN TEAM:

**Sulton, Campbell, Britt & Associates, P.C.**

- Alex Claros



### BUILD TEAM:

**Atmos Solutions Inc.**

- Evan Rivera



## BACKGROUND

WALTER PIERCE PARK IS COMMUNITY PARK IN THE HEART OF ADAMS MORGAN, WITH A VERY SPECIAL HISTORY. FORMERLY KNOWN AS THE MOUNT PLEASANT PLAINS CEMETERY, IT IS HOME TO OVER 8400 AFRICAN AMERICAN BURIAL SITES. THE HISTORICAL IS PARK IS BUZZING WITH ACTIVITY RANGING FROM DAILY BASKETBALL GAMES TO ANNUAL COMMEMORATIVE SITE VISITS FROM THE DESCENDANTS OF THOSE BURIED. THIS PROJECT AIMS HELP FURTHER COMMEMORATE THE SACRED GROUNDS BY INSTALLING COMMEMORATIVE SIGNAGE NEAR THE ADAMS MILL RD. ENTRANCE. THIS PROJECT ALSO PROPOSES TO INTRODUCE FREESTANDING RESTROOM AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE PARK.

**PROJECT BUDGET : \$600,000**

## PROJECT TIMELINE

- COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT / PERMITTING: SUMMER-FALL 2023
- CONSTRUCTION: FALL 2023
- COMPLETION: SPRING 2024

# Project Overview:

- Budget: \$600,000
- Scope of Work:
  - Commemorative Signage will be developed and installed honoring the 8400+ people who were interred in this park.
  - A free-standing restroom will be installed at the Adams Mill Road entrance

# Project Status:

- Community Engagement continues
- Design for Commemorative Signage nearing completion
- Design for Portland Loo (exterior restroom) is complete
- Portland Loo has been ordered
- Permits are being finalized
- Project will begin later this fall
- Construction will continue through the winter
- Project Completion: Spring 2024



# Commemorative Signage:

- Content donated by Descendants and Allies along with collaborative editing
- BaseCamp DC will assist with graphic editing and production
- Historic review by DC Historic Preservation Office



PROPOSED SIGNAGE FROM DESCENDANTS'



# Commemorative Signage:



FINAL PROPOSED SIGNAGE



# Commemorative Signage:

## WELCOME TO THE ANCESTORS PAVILION

This space honors the men, women, and children who were buried in two cemeteries here in the 1800. Quakers established the Friends Burying Ground in 1807, and the Colored Union Benevolent Association founded Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery in 1870. Both cemeteries were closed in 1890 due to neighborhood development.

### WHAT DID THE CEMETERIES LOOK LIKE?

The small Friends Burying Ground occupied the southeast corner of today's soccer field. Simple headstones in orderly rows marked its graves. There were an unknown number of burials in the Quaker ground because the city didn't begin keeping death records until many years after it was founded.

The 8,428 graves of the much larger African American cemetery spread across today's Walter Pierce Park, from Adams Mill Road down to Rock Creek and onto land now owned by the National Zoo. A cobblestone road wound through the burial ground.

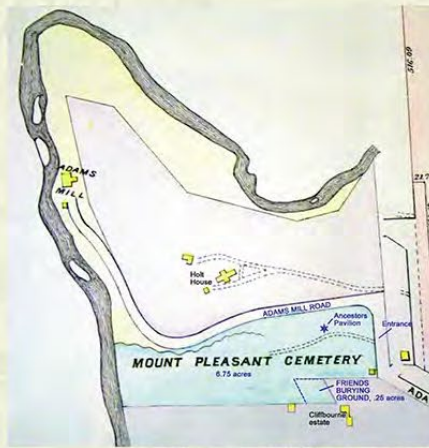


Graves in the African American cemetery were marked with headstones, marble monuments, and wooden headboards bearing painted messages. They were decorated with seashells, broken ceramics, and objects of significance to the deceased. Toys were left at children's graves.

Some of the grandest funeral processions of the late 19th century entered Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery's gates at Adams Mill Road, with dozens of horse-drawn carriages, hundreds of mourners on foot, and members of social organizations in full ceremonial costume, often moving rhythmically to the strains of brass bands.

### WHO WAS BURIED HERE?

Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery was Washington's busiest Reconstruction-era Black cemetery, with 400 to 600 burials a year at its peak in the mid-1880s. Nearly 60 percent of the people buried in this cemetery were children younger than five.



The cemeteries in 1887, with additions. (G.M. Hopkins Real Estate map, 1887.)

Of the adults, most were born in Virginia and Maryland, but some came from more distant places: Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, West Virginia, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, and Germany.

The Friends Burying Ground was the resting place of the first Quakers to settle in the nation's capital. Jonathan Shoemaker, the Pennsylvania-born miller who donated the land for the cemetery, and his wife Hanna Lukens Shoemaker, were among those buried here.

Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery served people of all religions. Many were self-emancipation men and women who arrived in Washington during the Civil War. Some were members of the city's early free Black community, including the founders of

churches, schools, and social organizations. Among the buried were musicians, government workers, teachers, carriage drivers, the first graduates of Howard University, the first Black men to vote, Civil War veterans, merchants, servants, church leaders, laborers, nurses, and midwives.



Members of the Colored Union Benevolent Association, whose insignia is shown at left, pooled their resources to provide benefits to each other. Many were buried here.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CEMETERIES?

Land values rose quickly in the late 1800s, as the rural countryside surrounding the cemeteries gave into a city neighborhood. Both burial grounds were forced to close in 1890 due to development pressures.

In 1923, after the owners of Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery had died, three court-appointed trustees prepared the land for sale. They conducted a search, finding fewer than 150 graves for removal. Parts of the site were bought by the federal government, National Zoo, and private developers. Quakers resisted selling their land, but the city seized it in 1936 for unpaid taxes. It was sold to developers who already had acquired most of the African American cemetery.

While visible signs of the cemeteries disappeared, most of the graves remained. The site was disrupted in the 1950s when developers excavated to build four large apartment buildings. Although they were never built, an unknown number of graves were desecrated. The creation of Walter Pierce Park in the early 1980s caused further disturbances.



Jonathan Shoemaker owned Columbian Mills on Rock Creek in 1807, when he donated part of his land for the Quaker cemetery. John Quincy Adams bought the mill site in 1823. In 1870, Adams' heirs sold 6.75 acres of it to the Colored Union Benevolent Association for its cemetery. DC History Center

In 2005, concerned community members, including descendants of the buried, stopped the city from building several large terraces for gardening in the park. They enlisted Howard University archaeologists to determine whether any graves remained. Under the leadership of biological anthropologist Mark Mack, a team of students and volunteers documented ample evidence of the cemeteries, including exposed remains, headstones, grave offerings, and coffin hardware.

Scientists conducted ground-penetrating radar at the site and found intact graves. They reported that many more might exist at depths too great to be detected, because land had been redistributed around the site in the 1950s and 1980s.



Howard University archaeologists map the park

### THE NAMES

The archaeology team searched District of Columbia death records to learn who was buried here. They found 8,428 individuals, including several hundred reburied here from the Young Men's Cemetery at 12th and V streets, N.W., which was owned by the Colored Union Benevolent Association from 1849 to 1870. The names, ages, and death dates appear on the following seven signs of the Ancestors Pavilion.

To learn more about Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery and the Friends Burying Ground, see [walterpierceparkcemeteries.org](http://walterpierceparkcemeteries.org). A grassroots group of descendants and allies worked with the D.C. Department of Parks & Recreation to create the Ancestors Pavilion in 2023.

All photos by Mary Belcher and Gretchen Roberts-Shortner unless noted.

Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery at Walter Pierce Park is a National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site.



## FIRST PANEL: CEMETERY OVERVIEW







ANCESTORS: F-G

[illegible]

Gibbs, Laura, 2, 1937  
Gibson, Arakian, 32, 1975  
Gibson, Bruce, infant, 1983  
Gibson, Carter, 35, 1972  
Gibson, Emma, 34, 1968  
Gibson, Fanny, 31, 1960  
Gibson, Francis, 76, 1944  
Gibson, Harriet, 33, 1981  
Gibson, Horace, infant, 1982  
Gibson, Helen T., infant, 1980  
Gibson, Homer, infant, 1979  
Gibson, infant of Walter & Henrietta, 1978

### FOURTH PANEL: NAMES F-G



# Outdoor Restroom:

- Portland Loo will be installed close to the park entrance on Adams Mill Road as discussed previously in 2019
- This location was selected for:
  - Proximity to the street for utilities to reduce ground disturbance
  - Improved ADA accessibility by close connection to the sidewalk for those with limited mobility and special needs
  - Proximity to the playground for young children





The Concept Landscape Plan for the proposed 2000' x 1000' stadium shows a large green field area, a brown paved area, and a yellow circle highlighting a specific section. A key is provided in the bottom left corner.

**KEY**

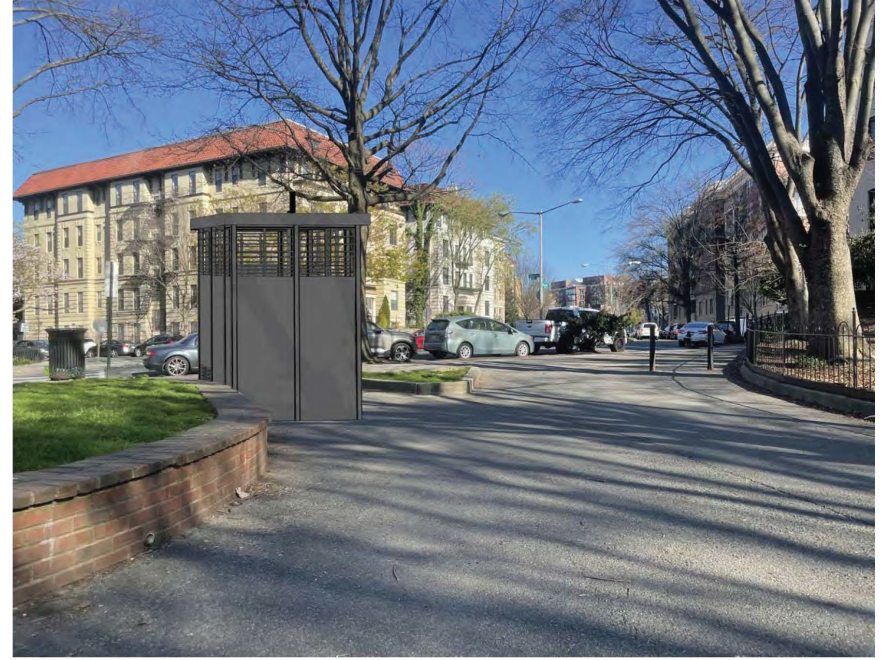
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# Portland Loo Rendering:



View from Adams Mill Road



View from the playground

# Contact Information

## Department of General Services (DGS)

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## Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR)

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Christopher Dyer / Community Engagement Manager  
[Christopher.dyer@dc.gov](mailto:Christopher.dyer@dc.gov)

## Project Website:

<https://dgs.dc.gov/page/walter-pierce-park-phase-ii>



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# Questions?