

I would give my bread to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw any one of my people dead and thrown out behind the wall of Nin'evah,
I would bury him.

Tobit 1:17

The Silent Witness of Saint John Cemetery

Charleston is blessed with an African-American Catholic community that has compellingly borne witness to the Gospel while living a rich cultural history including the injustices, triumphs, and struggles that characterize the experience of African-Americans throughout the southern United States. Many places in Charleston, to which almost half of all enslaved Africans first entered North America, signify struggle. One place in particular, Saint John Catholic Cemetery, is ground on which the enduring grace of faith in Christ has been a silent witness to injustice and indifference. It is ground on which today we lay Catholics can join together as brothers and sisters in Christ to bring long overdue recognition to the faithful souls there interred.

In its silence, Saint John Cemetery stands like Jesus before His accusers convicting us of our neglect. We owe our brothers and sisters in the community of saints a proper memorial that speaks to them and future generations about their faith, our faith, that in the words of Venerable Father Augustus Tolton, teaches us to, “pray and forgive.”



CHARLESTON, SC CIRCA 1844
(Map courtesy of Charleston Year Book 1944, #35; Reprints 3895-98; Tooley Dict.)

The first Bishop of Charleston, John England, reported in 1833 that roughly 1,200 enslaved people in Charleston were Catholic. In 1843, a representative of the Diocese of Charleston purchased a plot of land located near the Southeast corner of Coming Street and the Crosstown Highway for, “use of the colored Roman Catholic population of the City of Charleston and Charleston Neck, as a cemetery or burial ground for the said Colored Slaves or free,” black people.* The diocese later used a portion of the cemetery property at the corner of Coming Street and Shepard Street now the Crosstown, for the construction of Immaculate Conception Church which was dedicated in 1880. This wooden building was later converted to a school for African-American children. In 1923, the diocese used the western portion of the property along Shepard Street now the Crosstown to build a new brick Immaculate Conception Church for African-American Catholics. The cemetery remained in use. While it was owned by the diocese, the unincorporated “Saint John Burial Association,” comprised of African-American church elders, maintained the property.

In 1967, the diocese closed what had been the two African-American churches in the previously Jim Crow segregated Charleston—Immaculate Conception and Saint Peter which was located on Wentworth Street. African-American parishioners were transferred to Saint Patrick Church.



SAINT JOHN CEMETERY CHARLESTON, SC

A third historically African-American church, Our Lady of Mercy on America Street, was merged with Saint Patrick Church in 2014.

Also, in 1967, the South Carolina Department of Transportation which had taken by eminent domain a portion of the Immaculate Conception and Saint John property while eradicating the adjacent portion of Shepard Street, completed the Crosstown Highway. The school was closed and both buildings were damaged by fire and later razed. During the transfer of parishes to Saint Patrick Church, the cemetery death register for the period including the burial of enslaved people (1843-1882) was lost.

For more than twenty years, the property remained vacant and unmarked. Grave stones were lost, destroyed, or removed. Its history forgotten or overlooked, the diocese sought to sell the property in the 1990's. In 1994, a group of concerned African-Americans prompted a study conducted by the Chicora Foundation and initiated on behalf of the community by Calvary Episcopal Church. *The study concluded that as many as 1,000 souls may be buried in the ground of this consecrated Catholic cemetery.* The diocese suspended its efforts to sell the property. In recent years, at the request of Saint Patrick Church, the diocese assumed responsibility for the maintenance of the



PRESENT DAY SAINT JOHN CEMETERY CHARLESTON, SC

property. It fenced in most of the land and posted a sign identifying it as a Catholic cemetery.

For anyone unfamiliar with its history, the cemetery property behind the fence is an unremarkable grass field. Painfully, for our Catholic neighbors who still have a family or personal connection to the cemetery, it is often used as a dog park. For the souls interred therein, it is their final resting place—a place that connects our brief life in this fallen world with the hope of eternal union with Christ among the communion of saints.

The Saint John Cemetery Memorial Project

In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself. (WIS 3:2-5)



CONCEPTUAL DESIGN OF SAINT JOHN CEMETERY MEMORIAL PARK

The lay Catholic community of Charleston shares a duty to make this final resting place of our departed Catholic brothers and sisters a holy place of remembrance and prayer.

Carolina Catholic Professionals, a nonprofit charitable organization, has made the Saint John Cemetery Memorial Project its priority endeavor. *Pictured to the left is a conceptual design for a memorial park.*

** From passage quoting the Charleston County RMC Deed Book N11, page 130; referenced in "The St. John's Burial Association and Catholic Cemetery at Immaculate Conception, City of Charleston, South Carolina: What Became of the Dead?" Tinkley, Michael; Hacker, Debi; Chicora Foundation Research, 1994.*

We ask you to join us in support of this effort.

Donate here

<https://carolinacatholicprofessionals.com/Donate>

Please contact

Frank Dirks by email at carolinacatholics@gmail.com
or by phone at 843.670.1350