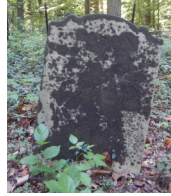


# Heritage Conservation Collective



## *Cemetery Conservation and Preservation Plan African Union Church of South Coventry Pottstown, PA*

Prepared For:  
Friends of the African Union Church of South Coventry

September 2023



## INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Heritage Conservation Collective (HCC) was contracted by Preservation Pennsylvania in partnership with Pennsylvania Hallowed Grounds with support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the 1772 Foundation to develop an actionable, site-specific preservation plan for the Friends of the African Union Church (FAUCSC) of South Coventry. The burial ground related to the African Union Church of South Coventry is located on Coventryville Road in South Coventry Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. The burial ground dates to the 1830s, and it is estimated that approximately 20+ burials took place here. Today three carved marble markers are visible along with roughly ten fieldstone markers.

A site visit was made in July 2023, and HCC met with a cemetery steward to better understand the history of the site, the topography, and the concerns facing the Friends of the African Union Church of South Coventry. The visit included examining the remains of the foundation of the church building, the three extant marble markers and the fieldstone markers as well as access to the site, topography and vegetation. This assessment includes conservation treatment recommendations for the grave markers and a list of additional priority projects. The burial ground is historically significant, deserving of a high level of care and maintenance. The following report will serve as a guideline to facilitate decision making regarding the allocation of funding and effort.



Overview of the cemetery, July 2023. Church building foundation visible in the foreground.



## HISTORY OF THE SITE

The FAUCSC has completed extensive research on the site and continues to expand the history of the site and its inhabitants. This section of the report includes a compilation of the information shared with HCC by a steward of the cemetery.

Records indicate that in the 1800s a small African American community lived in South Coventry. The burial ground dates to 1834 when George and Ann Chrisman of Coventry Township sold a half acre of land to the Trustees of the African Union Church—John Williams, John Thomas, George Brown and William Hinson all of Coventry Township as well as Joseph Smith of Montgomery County. The transaction was in the amount of \$15 and the stated purpose on the deed was “for building a church thereon and for burying ground”. The African Union Church is the oldest independent black denomination in the United States founded in Wilmington, Delaware in 1813. Records of activity at the South Coventry site date from the purchase of the land in 1834 through 1882 which is the last date to appear on a grave marker. T. J. Kennedy’s *Map of Chester County* in 1860 and A. R. Witmer’s *Atlas of Chester County* in 1873 denote the site as the “colored union meeting house”; however the site is not identified on a later 1883 map. U.S. census records from 1850 identify several Black families in the area and their surnames are also visible on the 1860 map. The occupation of the Black men in the census are listed as laborers who likely worked at nearby Coventry Forge or had work related to it which could include the charcoal hearths scattered throughout the area. The grantor of the burial ground land, George Chrisman, was the owner of the forge during the time the burial ground was active.

The history of the site and this small black community is rich and has many avenues yet to be explored. The Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.) generally held camp meetings each summer in the area during the 19th century and attracted as many as 15,000 people. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) also held camp meetings on the same property usually following the M.E. meeting and as many as 2,000 African Americans attended. In addition there were ties between Coventryville and Hinsonville, a mid-19th century Black community in Chester County likely named after Coventry African Union Church trustee, William Hinson. Another African Union Church was founded in Hinsonville in 1843. Finally newspaper articles indicate that Joseph Smith of Pottstown, founding trustee of AUCSC, was rescued from a slave ship by the U.S. navy warship the U.S.S. Ganges. FAUCSC continues to research the connections to between this African American community and others in Chester County and beyond. Representatives from FAUCSC are working with local historians to further the research of Black Americans associated with the Potts family (founders of Pottstown) and local iron forges. Another individual is also further researching the persons identified as being rescued from the U.S.S. Ganges.

The years between the last known burial in 1882 and the founding of the FAUCSC in 2010 are not well documented. An oral history taken from South Coventry Township resident Mrs. Joyce Romig in 2013 recalled her time working as a counselor for the local camp, Camp Oakleigh, from approximately 1944-1948. Mrs. Romig remembered taking students to visit the burial ground at the time referred to as “The Slave Cemetery”. Mrs. Romig and her students planted the vinca that now covers the area.



## HISTORY OF THE SITE

It seems in the later half of the 20th century the cemetery was abandoned but families who had been in the area for generations knew it existed. There was no active group maintaining it during these years and it seems no direct descendants of those buried here remained in the area.

The Friends of the African Union Church of South Coventry was formed in April 2010 as a 501(c)(3) public charity with the mission to preserve the site of the church and cemetery. The FAUCSC has already made great progress towards preserving the burial ground and interpreting its history. They have employed ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to determine the approximate numbers of graves in the burial ground, they hold regular clean up days (fall and spring) to keep the site maintained, they have raised funds and installed a historical marker along Coventryville Road and additional signage including a wooden kiosk posted with information and smaller signage noting the grave marker inscriptions and foundation of the church building. In addition, an Eagle Scout project installed appropriate fencing to delineate the boundaries of the burial ground based on GPR findings. A bench has been installed for visitors and the foundation of the original church building has been cleared.



Overview of the property looking towards the burial ground. Kiosk is on the left, bench on the right, church foundation is visible just beyond the kiosk and the bench, the burial ground fence is visible in the background, August 2023.



## SITE TOPOGRAPHY AND VEGETATION

The site of the church and burial ground is located on Coventryville Road between Rose Lane and Franklin Drive but is not easily visible from the street. It is in a sloped wooded area, set back from the road and easy to pass by without seeing it. The speed limit along this portion of the road is 35 mph and while the sign the FAUCSC erected does help, the road curves and one quickly passes by. The church is no longer standing so other than the kiosk there is nothing of significant size that is noticeable from the road. In addition, the site is not identified on search engines like Google maps so an internet search will not help on locate the site.

Aside from visibility, access is also an issue. What seems likely to have been the original path is fairly steep with only a small footpath cleared. It is directly on Coventryville Road and there is no room on the burial ground side of the road to pull over nor is there room to walk along the road here without walking on the road itself. There is one partially visible stone step still in place and perhaps others exist if this area were excavated. Access instead is usually taken from the side which is a gentler slope but still with only a small footpath cleared.

There is an extra wide shoulder directly across the street which can accommodate about four cars. The next nearest additional parking area is Woody's Woods approximately 0.2 miles away from the site. While Coventryville Road is not extremely busy, one does have to be careful walking from the Woody's Woods parking area because the road is narrow with no shoulder.



View of the site from the parking area along Coventryville Road, August 2023. The presumed original path to the site is in the center of the photo. The path currently used most often to access the site is just out of the photo frame to the right of the large tree on the righthand edge of the photo.



## SITE TOPOGRAPHY AND VEGETATION

FAUCSC has done an impressive job keeping the site clear. Vinca blankets not only the burial ground but has spread across the whole site down to Coventryville Road. It is believed that the vinca dates to the 1940s when the burial ground was still tended by locals. As mentioned earlier in the report, Mrs. Joyce Roming while working as a camp counselor remembers taking campers to visit the burial ground and planting vinca. While the vinca does not date to the period of significance and it is not a native plant, it is identified as an important feature by the stewards today and is part of the history of the site. No other plantings dating to the active period of the cemetery remain.

The burial ground gets overgrown easily and there are many mature trees on the property. Within the burial ground itself there is one mature tree with several dead branches that is a hazard to the site and another tree just outside the fence that will likely also be removed due to decay.



Vinca blankets not only the burial ground area but much of the site all the way to the entrance on Coventryville Road, August 2023. Saplings, vines and other invasive species also grow here making it a challenge to keep it continually maintained. Vinca itself is not a native species and the spread of it also tends to be hard to control; however, removing the vinca in favor of a native species is not a viable option. Perhaps containing it to the approximate borders of the property would be helpful.

A mature tree (overall photo left and detail of top right) within the burial ground boundaries that has a significant amount of dead branches, July 2023. As these branches fall they present a danger to the remaining grave markers.





## ADDITIONS TO THE SITE



Kiosk (above), Coventryville Road signage (right), and the bench (below). Photos taken July 2023.



Grave marker signage (above).



Eagle scout signage and burial ground fence (above) and church foundation signage (right), July 2023.



## CONDITION ASSESSEMENT OF EXTANT MARKERS

The three extant carved marble markers date to 1853, 1874, and 1882 and remain in overall fair to good condition. General conditions present including heavy soiling of biological growth, misalignment (tilted or leaning), disaggregation, and one marker has a fragment missing. In addition to the marble markers there are approximately ten identified fieldstone markers. While these markers do not exhibit any visible carvings, they are set in an upright position indicating that they were purposefully set, and GPR also confirmed a disturbance in these areas further confirming they mark burials. There were active stone quarries in Chester and other surrounding counties throughout the 1800s which are a likely source for the stone used for the marble markers. The fieldstone native to the area is a sandstone conglomerate. The conglomerate consists of a sedimentary rock with rounded pebbles that are greater than 0.08 inches in diameter. It has an appearance somewhat like concrete, with pebbles cemented together by finer grained material. This is noticeable especially in the stones used to form the remains of a wall along the rear portion of the burial ground. A map showing the stone types in this county as well as photos of the conglomerate can be found on page 11.



Overview of the burial ground from the church building foundation. July 2023.



## CONDITION ASSESSEMENT OF EXTANT MARKERS



Susan Williams grave marker condition, July 2023.

### Susan Williams Inscription:

Susan  
wife of  
Richard Williams  
daughter of  
George & Eliza Chester  
Died  
April 2nd 1853  
Aged 40 yrs. 8m. & 8 days.

### Current Condition and Treatment Recommendations:

This marble headstone is heavily soiled by biological growth and leaning to one side. There is slight disaggregation of the stone present. Excavate, straighten, and reset. Clean to remove biological growth. Clear invasive vegetation. Consolidation to arrest disaggregation can be considered. Evaluate after cleaning.



John Thomas grave marker condition, July 2023.

### John Thomas Inscription:

In memory of  
John Thomas  
Born 1802—Died Oct. 1st 1874  
Aged 72 yrs.

Therefore be ye also ready for in such an  
Hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh.

### Current Condition and Treatment Recommendations:

This marble headstone is lightly soiled by biological growth and leaning to one side. There is slight disaggregation of the stone present. The upper left portion of the headstone is missing. Gently probe surrounding area to ensure fragment is not nearby. Excavate, straighten, and reset the marker. Clean to remove biological growth and clear invasive vegetation. Consolidation to arrest disaggregation can be considered. Evaluate after cleaning.



## CONDITION ASSESSEMENT OF EXTANT MARKERS



Emma Johnson grave marker condition, July 2023.

### Emma J. Johnson Inscription:

Emma J. Johnson  
Died August 7, 1882  
Age 18 yrs. 6 Mos  
3 days

Lord Jesus I long to be  
perfectly whole,  
I want thee forever  
to live in my soul.

### Current Condition and Treatment Recommendations:

This marble headstone has already been reset and cleaned by FAUCSC. It needs no further treatment at this time. Keep clear of invasive vegetation including climbing vines.



Typical conditions present, July 2023.

### Fieldstone Grave Markers

### Current Condition and Treatment Recommendations:

There are approximately ten fieldstones identified as grave markers in the burial ground. While none appear to be carved, they are set in an upright manner indicating that they are purposefully set and mark graves. Like the marble markers, some of these are lightly soiled by biological growth but generally remain in good condition.



## CONDITION ASSESSEMENT OF EXTANT MARKERS



There is manmade metal component laying with the Susan Williams marker (photo taken July 2023). This may have been part of a plot fence surrounding her grave or from some other part of the cemetery. While it is understandable to leave it where it was found, after documenting it through photography it would be best to store it securely off site.

## GLOSSARY OF CONDITIONS PRESENT

**Leaning or Misaligned:** Markers that are leaning at a 45 degree angle or less puts them in danger incurring additional damage either from falling or in this case the misalignment puts them at risk for additional damage during mowing. Righting stones before they fall and/or realigning them is a cost effective way to maintain historic grave markers.

**Biological growth:** The grave markers in the burial ground are soiled by biological growth primarily in the form of lichens or algae. Their presence can trap moisture under the surface of the stone and some types also secrete acids that can further deteriorate limestone and marble.

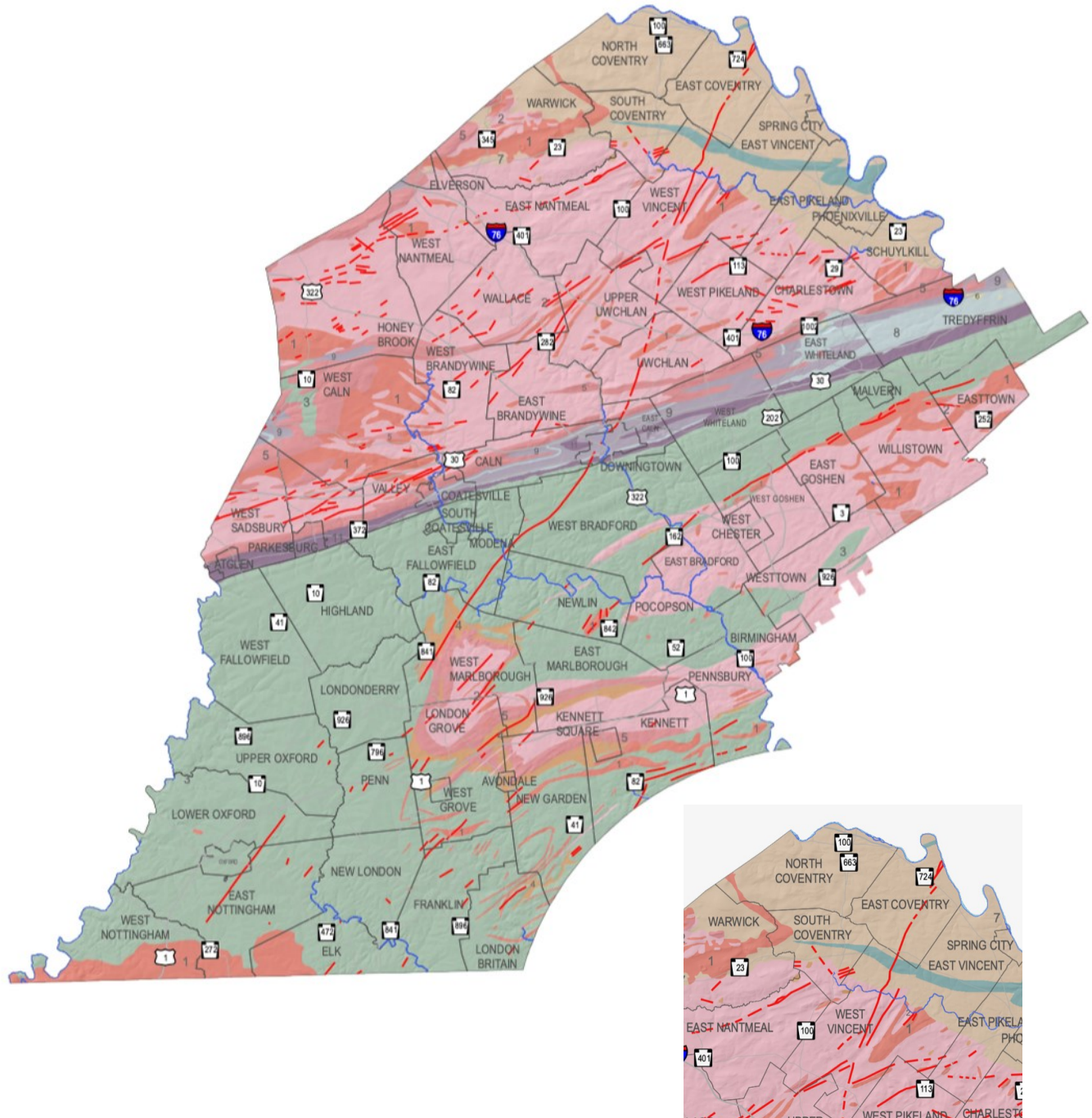
**Disaggregation:** Disaggregation refers to the deterioration of the surface of the stone, often called sugar-ing. Over time this causes a loss of material including stone inscriptions.

**Sunken:** Markers can settle significantly over time leaving some barely visible. This can also put them at risk for additional problems including lawn maintenance damage as the markers may be hard to see.

**Invasive vegetation:** Climbing vines or shrubbery and trees can cause problems in historic cemeteries. Large shrubs or trees growing near markers can eventually grow large enough that they can topple or displace stones. Climbing vines such as ivy can grow in open mortar joints and can also leave staining on markers once it is removed.



## CONDITION ASSESSEMENT OF EXTANT MARKERS



### ROCK TYPES

- |                            |                              |                           |                            |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Dark crystalline rocks  | 4. Marble                    | 7. Red sedimentary rocks* | 11. Limestone or dolomite* |
| 2. Light crystalline rocks | 5. Quartzite                 | 8. Limestone              | 13. Shale and siltstone    |
| 3. Schist*                 | 6. Unconsolidated sediments* | 9. Dolomite               |                            |

Chester County Map, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, April 2008.



## CONDITION ASSESSEMENT OF EXTANT MARKERS



Remnants of the fieldstone wall along the rear of the burial ground, August 2023.



Detail of sandstone conglomerate common in this area, August 2023.



## PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SITE

In conjunction with input from FAUCSC representatives, HCC has developed the following prioritized recommendations for the site. Many of these tasks can be completed by volunteers if there is enough interest and manpower; however, there are a few items that would be best handled by professionals. Some of the items captured here are already underway.

### Tree Work

Two mature trees identified by FAUCSC are slated for removal as funds allow. One is within the burial ground boundaries and has large dead branches in the upper portion of the tree that are an immediate danger to the grave markers as they break and fall. There is a second tree just outside the burial ground near the church foundation that is damaged and also slated for removal. The tree work will need to be undertaken by a professional tree removal company.

### Site Access

Access to the site can be improved. Widening the footpath will provide safer and easier access to the site and also make it more visible from Coventryville Road. Next steps include excavating what is believed to be the original entranceway to determine if additional stone steps still exist. It would be ideal to restore to the extent possible the historic entrance. FAUCSC should also determine which path (front or side) will be maintained as the primary entrance and develop a plan to clear it, widen it slightly, and maintain it. It may be best to keep both paths cleared—one to denote the historic entrance and the other to provide modern day access. Volunteers can complete this task but landscapers could also be hired if needed.

### Interpretation and Online Presence

#### 1. Google Maps

The site is currently not located by name on Google maps. A volunteer can add it which would make it easy to locate if someone is searching it on the internet by name. The following steps outline how to add a site.

1. Go to google maps: [maps.google.com](https://maps.google.com)
2. Use the search bar in the top-left corner of the screen.
3. In the sidebar that appears, click “add a missing place”
4. Add the place name, category, and address and category of the location as well as any attributes you want to add.
5. Click submit

#### 2. Website: [faucsc.org](https://faucsc.org)

FAUCSC has already established a website that provides valuable information. The tabs on the website currently include a welcome page with a link for monetary donations; a research tab consisting of a compilation of the research completed by FAUCSC all available to the public; a news tab with updates, recent meeting minutes and newsletters; and contact tab for users to reach the FAUCSC. This site serves as a strong foundation that can continue to be added to as additional information is gathered.



## PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SITE

### Interpretation and Online Presence

#### 3. QR Code

FAUCSC can employ the use of a QR code at the site that will take visitors to additional information. A static QR code is free to create and can be linked to the existing FAUCSC website or an information page that can be continually updated. Once a QR code is created and links to a specific webpage, one only needs to update the webpage the code links to, not the QR code itself. If FAUCSC wants to create a specific information page and have a QR code link to that, that page then continue to be updated but the QR code can remain the same. A QR code would be useful to add to the kiosk so in person visitors can link to additional information while on site.

#### 4. Virtual Tour

Creating a virtual tour of the site and posting it the website or using QR code to provide access it would be a useful tool both for those visiting the site and those who may view it remotely. This tour could be filmed and narrated by a volunteer or professional services could be employed.

### Grave Markers

Straighten and clean the two remaining marble markers . Volunteers can accomplish this task using the same technique that was employed to reset the Emma J. Johnson marker. Once the markers have been cleaned and reset, a stone consolidant can be applied to the surface of the two markers showing signs of disaggregation (Susan Williams and John Thomas) which would help slow the deterioration of the surface of the stone. A properly selected and applied stone consolidant still allows for the surface of the stone to be breathable, and it does not seal or trap moisture. An architectural conservator should be engaged to select and apply the consolidant. In addition, the area around the John Thomas marker can be carefully probed by a volunteer to see if the fragment may be on site just below the soil surface. If located, an architectural conservator should be retained to reattach the fragment.

### Vegetation

As described in the report, the site is in a wooded area with mature trees and heavy vegetation. The appearance of the area when it was in active use is not documented leaving us with the remains of the church building foundation and the grave markers as a guide. The naturalness of the site should be preserved and trying to create a formal cemetery is not advised. Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to the maintenance of the vegetation that is required to keep the site from being overgrown. As mentioned previously, vinca is not a native plant in this area but has some significance to this site and is a priority to retain. Pulling saplings and other weeds by the roots to prevent regrowth rather than trimming alone will help over time to reduce maintenance. Sprays for weeds will only damage the vinca so keeping weeds down in this way is not an option. Establishing the boundaries that are desired for maintenance is helpful so that not all areas need to be maintained to the same degree. For instance keeping the paths clear and weeding within the burial ground fence. FAUCSC has been successful in holding two workdays a year (spring and fall) and this should continue. The clearing and weeding of the site can continue to be maintained by volunteers if there is enough manpower; although occasionally hiring landscapers to help with the more difficult removal of hardier weeds and saplings may be desired as funding allows.



## PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SITE

### Research

#### 1. Site Research

Continue to research the history of the site and expand connections to other historic African American churches and communities within Chester County and beyond. For instance Bertha Jackmon, Pennsylvania Hallowed Grounds member, Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society member and church historian for Mt. Zion AME Church in Devon, PA has expressed interest in exploring connections between the two sites. Mt. Zion also has ties to the Potts Family and those rescued by the U.S.S Ganges. As mentioned previously, FAUCSC is currently working with the Historic Site Supervisor of Pottstown Manor who is researching Black Americans associated with the Potts family and local iron forges, and they have also been in touch with another historian researching slaves rescued by the U.S.S Ganges.

#### 2. National Register of Historic Places Nomination

FAUCSC may consider pursuing a National Register of Historic Places listing. This could provide more grant and funding opportunities. In 2021, the National Park Service approved a Multiple Property Documentation Form, *African American Cemeteries and Churches in Pennsylvania, c. 1644-1970*. According to PA Hallowed Grounds, "This document provides a detailed overview of Pennsylvania's African American history and the ways that African American church buildings and burial grounds illustrate that history". The document also specifies features that make individual sites eligible for the National Register and confirms that the NPS recognizes that "African American churches and cemeteries in Pennsylvania are eligible for the National Register due to their unique importance as historic resources that illustrate the state's African American history." Links to the website and document are included here:

<https://pahallowedgrounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/African-American-Churches-and-Cemeteries-in-Pennsylvania-c1644-c1970.pdf>

<https://pahallowedgrounds.org/american-american-cemeteries-and-churches-in-pennsylvania-c-1644-1970-mpdf/>

Pursuing a National Register listing is a time consuming task; however, much of the research has been completed for this site. This could be done by volunteers or a historic preservation professional could be hired. Additional information can be found here:

<https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Preservation/National-Register/Pages/default.aspx>



## PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SITE

Area of Need	Volunteer	Professional Services
Tree Removal		X
Site Access	X	X
Google maps (add site)	X	
Website updates	X	
QR Code	X	
Virtual Tour	X	X
Grave Markers	X	X
Vegetation Control	X	X
Site Research	X	
National Register Nomination	X	X