A large, textured tree trunk stands in the center of a cemetery. The ground is covered in green weeds and grass. Several small, pink markers are visible on the ground around the tree. The background shows other trees and a bright sky.

ENDING THE DESECRATION  
OF ANCESTRAL GRAVES  
OF PEOPLE OF COLOR  
IN THOROUGHFARE

Peyton Cemetery  
a potter's field

# SACRED LAND SACRED LIVES

A PHOTO ESSAY

ALL PHOTO CREDITS:  
DORA MUHAMMAD

# Dignity

Memories of the auction block that lied outside of the town of Thoroughfare drew many freedman to return to the area after the end of the Civil War in search of their loved ones in the place they last saw them. Thoroughfare, located near Haymarket in Prince William County, was founded by Freedmen of Color—a census classification not only assigned to formerly enslaved people but also to Native tribes in an effort to eliminate their culture. Many intermarried and established the town, living entirely self-sufficient until the 1940s.



*remembering  
generations past*



# Desecration

In October 2004, the Prince William County Historical Commission unveiled a highway marker along Thoroughfare Road to recognize the historical significance of the town and its founding. The first families comprised Native, Black and mixed ancestry. The Thoroughfare Gap/ye Indian Thorofare was home to a significant community of descendants of colonial era Indian Tribes – Rappahannock, Wicocomico, Nanzatico, Pamunkey, Patawomecke, Shawnee and Cherokee. The Indian Thorofare connected Shenandoah Valley Shawnee Tribes with the Iroquois Trail at Haymarket, three miles away. Three cemeteries, original burial grounds of founding families within yards of walking distance of each other, stand endangered from decimation with the continued land clearing and disturbance by owners pursuing development. The Scott Cemetery, where more than 100 graves are located, was bulldozed by the owner of the land. The owner did not obtain a permit from the county to clear the land. The location of the cemetery was documented and included in county records, yet those records were not in the database of the agency relevant to land development. The cemetery was omitted from the property deed prepared by a private company although it is clearly marked on the first land deeds prepared by the county. The owner put up a locked gate at the intersection of the main road and a gravel road leading to the cemetery and the Peyton Cemetery further down the gravel road. When asked, he said he will “never” give access again to the families. To honor his ancestral burial grounds desecrated by this landowner, a descendant regularly puts flowers in the gate.



*dehumanizing the dead*

# Dispute

The marked graves in the platted plots of the Peyton Cemetery and the Fletcher-Allen Cemetery can be found in the county's records. The county archaeologist believes, from his preliminary land surveyance, that there are hundreds more graves located in the woods that surround each of these cemeteries. A keen eye familiar with the historical fact that Native graves were marked with small rocks placed at the head and foot, and not the current tombstones that dot cemeteries today, can spot these fieldstone grave markers in forest brush. Observing land depression, the county archaeologist said there are graves in rows of 8-10 in the grove around the Peyton Cemetery. In the past 200 years that descendants and community members have visited and tended the graves, and lived with the expectation that they would be buried next to their family, never had they been informed that they needed permission because the land was no longer owned. The family is still trying to research how various parcels of their land was sold without their knowledge. Members of the Coalition to Save Historic Thoroughfare discovered several fieldstones in the woods recently behind the Fletcher-Allen Cemetery. The landowner removed them and has retained possession, claiming that the residents placed them in the forest. The presence of graves in the forest throws the known boundaries of these cemeteries in dispute. Nevertheless, the landowner of the plot that is home to the Fletcher-Allen Cemetery has put up "No Trespassing" signs and used a backhoe to dig trenches around the edges of the known boundaries of the cemetery. The owner has a plan to install six septic tanks in the field adjacent to the cemetery and surveyor stakes can be seen planted along the parcel of land and forestry.



## *recognizing place*

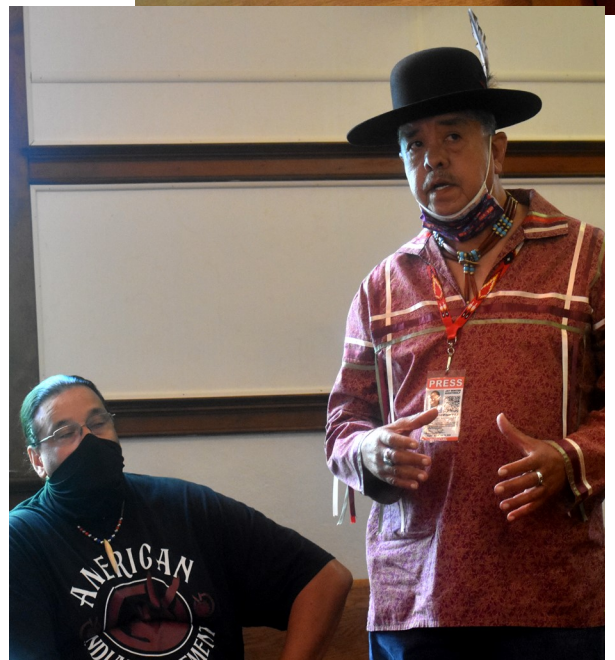




# A Community in Defiance



Community Meeting  
Oakrum Baptist Church  
Thoroughfare, Virginia  
Sunday, June 6, 2021





## Descendants

# *fighting for legacy*



For the past year, Frank and Dulany Washington (l-r), brothers descendant of the founding families of Thoroughfare, have been leading their family's fight for the respect and preservation of their ancestral burial grounds. Dulany serves as senior pastor of Oakrum Baptist Church, a historical landmark and community center for the town. The community has coalesced to join the

fight, forming the Coalition to Save Historic Thoroughfare. They have created a GoFundMe account to relieve the financial burden of this fight: [www.tinyurl.com/savethoroughfare](http://www.tinyurl.com/savethoroughfare). Unified by their agony and defiance as they face each turn of event and circumstance, the descendants remain determined to give their ancestors the respect of their humanity due in death that the Commonwealth and country never gave them during their life.

