

Baltimore university plans to help restore historic, deteriorating cemetery

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Morgan State University is stepping up to help rejuvenate Baltimore's deteriorating Mount Auburn Cemetery, the historic burial ground that was the first in the city to inter African-American citizens, the Baltimore City Paper reports. "There's a class that does landscape architecture and another class that does site planning, and together we've come up with a solid plan to help turn Mount Auburn around," says Robin Howard, assistant director for the Center for Museum Studies at Baltimore's Morgan State.

With the help of the students, the Center for Museum Studies has created a renovation plan for Mount Auburn, which is owned by the Sharp Street Church. So far, the students have tested soil at the cemetery, and drawn up plans for new parking lots and driveways, a visitors' center, and columbaria. "It gives us a starting point, and it's a better starting point than we've ever had," says Douglas Sands, president of Mount Auburn's board of directors. Sharp Street will also receive help from the university in sorting out its records--many of the cemetery's record books are dry-rotted, some headstones are missing or turned over, and others are buried in overgrowth.

"They have books there that are dated in the 1890s," Howard says. "We're going in and putting the information on a database, and that alone is an incredible job in itself because the computers [Sharp Street has] now are only good for doorstops. Organizing the records room is going to take a couple of years in itself."

Daunting as their task may seem, Howard says she and the students are excited about the project. She says if they can impose some order on the church's maintenance and record-keeping for the cemetery, Sharp Street may be able to apply for funding to improve and maintain Mount Auburn. "If [the church] needs help with grants, we can write grants," she says. "We can hold their hand and help them any way possible, Sharp Street Church just needed a plan before they could go to the city or anyone else and say 'we want money.'" Meanwhile, the city of Baltimore is planning to make improvements to the perimeter of the cemetery as well. "Our agency has put it in the capital budget and will be working hand in hand with the church," says Brent Flickenger of the Baltimore Department of Planning.