

MEMORANDUM

TO: Town Council
FROM: Sandra Smith
DATE: September 2, 2020
RE: Benbow property

Council,

During staff meeting, I was asked to research the possibility that a cemetery, perhaps where slaves are buried, is located in the Oak Ridge Historic District behind the Jesse Benbow House. Here are my findings:

- The book *Family Burying Grounds & Abandoned Church Cemeteries in Guilford County* has no record of any type of cemetery on this property. (There is a small cemetery with about eight graves, known as the Graham-Holt cemetery, that is located across Oak Ridge Road from the Jesse Benbow House. I have found no information regarding a connection between that cemetery with the Benbow family or any slaves.)
- Internet research turned up no information about a cemetery here.
- Bob Benbow is a member of the Benbow family who is a great-great-grandson of Jesse Benbow. Mr. Benbow is 96 years old and is quite sharp. He has written his memoirs, which include information about his part in D-Day in WWII. He has also transcribed and indexed letters from four Benbow brothers who served in the Civil War, which he made into a book. Mr. Benbow was not familiar with any graveyard on the former Jesse Benbow farm.
- Paynie Stafford is a lifelong resident of Oak Ridge who is 97 years old and is mentally sharp. Mr. Stafford said he had never heard of a slave cemetery behind the Jesse Benbow House.
- Jim and Ann White are former owners of the Jesse Benbow House. The Whites were instrumental in the formation of the Oak Ridge Historic District. Neither had ever heard anything about any graveyard behind their former property.
- Bennie and Sadie Craven were local farmers who lived in Oak Ridge for decades. Although they have moved away, they still own property here. The Cravens farmed the property in question for many years for the former owners. They spoke to another staff member and said they had no knowledge of a cemetery.
- Kyle Anders has lived in Oak Ridge for many years and has mown hay on the property in question that formerly belonged to the Charles M. Benbow Co. He said he saw no evidence of a cemetery on the property, but there was a large pile of rocks that was indicative of a place where farmers would pile rocks found as they were plowed the field.



- Finally, I spoke with Richard Watkins, who is 90 years old, a longtime Oak Ridge resident, and has a great deal of knowledge about the African American community in Oak Ridge. His father, Nathaniel Watkins, was raised by the Benbow family and grew crops on the former Jesse Benbow farm property. Mr. Watkins said he spent much time playing in the fields behind the Jesse Benbow House. He was unfamiliar with any graveyard on that property, but did recall the field being called “the rock pile” for the rocks that farmers had piled up on the property.
- Planning Director Sean Taylor and I visited the property with Brian Hall. Although we saw a significant number of large rocks, we were unable to determine that any of them were grave markers.

In conclusion, I have been unable to find any substantial evidence about an abandoned cemetery or slave graveyard on the property behind the Jesse Benbow House currently up for rezoning. I would be happy to speak with anyone who has information on this topic so that I could document it for the Town’s history.

