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GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: WAKULLA COUNTY'S FOLK GRAVEYARDS

by *SHERRIE STOKES*

CEMETERIES sometimes evoke a sense of dread among the living, but these last resting places of the dead often offer important clues to the social and economic backgrounds of those interred in them. Rural southern cemeteries generally are remote and only rarely are sought out by those who study gravestones and burial grounds. Nonetheless, many still are used for burials, and most possess material clues that illustrate gradual and abrupt changes in the traditional and folk funerary customs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The author surveyed and photographed thirty graveyards located in Wakulla County, Florida. Included were twenty white cemeteries, eight black, and two biracial.¹ The sites often were heavily wooded and difficult to reach. They typically contained clustered family groupings, and graves were identified with folk and commercially made markers. Spatial organization was somewhat chaotic. Random apportionment of burial sites was further confused by intrusive undergrowth and a lack of maintenance.

In the nineteenth century, Wakulla County's economy and social hierarchy represented an extension of traditions and values

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1. The author relied upon a Florida Department of Transportation comprehensive Wakulla County map to locate the rural cemeteries. White cemeteries examined were: Arran, Bonnet Pond, Council, Crawfordville, Curtis Mill, Davis Camp, Dugger, Grimes, Revell, New Light Church, Pelt, Oak Park, Raker, Sanborn, Smith Creek, St. Marks, Sutton, West Soppchopy, Whidden Lake, and Zion Hill. Of the eight black graveyards surveyed, two— Mayes and Stewart— are no longer in use. Four— Bethel, Buckhorn, Mt. Olive, and Salem— are associated closely with a nearby church. The remaining two— Smith and Walker— are sited in secluded areas far from the highway. "Biracial" refers to two graveyards that initially were private burial grounds for early plantation families. The first, Richardson Cemetery, is located at a popular crossroads leading to Spring Creek and is presently used by blacks and whites. Ferrell Cemetery, the second, lies off the Wakulla Springs Road on property still owned by the descendants of planter John Ferrell.

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that came with the early settlers from Virginia, Georgia, and North and South Carolina, and with blacks from Africa and the West Indies. At the top were planters and merchants; on the bottom were blacks and poor whites. White yeoman, farmers, and tradesmen came in between. The county's plantation system was small in comparison to other north Florida counties during the antebellum period, and only a few landholders owned slaves. Most settlers raised food crops to sustain themselves and their families. They produced some cotton and a few other staples for market. Furnishing merchants, acting as factors for middle Florida and south Georgia planters, founded trading villages along the St. Mark's River. Cloth, tools, books, and made-to-order mortuary goods were among the commodities supplied to planters through these trading ports.²

Planters usually established graveyards on their property, and some of these early graves still are marked by their original headstones of elaborate white marble tablets and obelisks. The blockade during the Civil War cut off the supply of these markers, although most Southerners likely could not have afforded them even if they were available. White and black burials, particularly among poorer families, utilized homemade headstones and funerary objects. Gravemarkers reflected a dependence upon available resources such as local or commercially produced cement and upon objects such as shells, wood, and even found articles.

Slaves often were buried in designated sections of a landowner's family graveyard, and formal headstones rarely marked them.³ After the Civil War blacks organized their own churches and established separate burial grounds. Some blacks in Wakulla County, however, continued to take advantage of burial

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2. Elizabeth F. Smith, *Wakulla County Pioneers, 1827-1967* (Crawfordville, 1968); Charles M. Greene, *Wakulla County Community Portrait* (Crawfordville, 1985); Federal Writers' Project, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York, 1939; reprint ed., St. Clair Shores, MI, 1976).
 3. Traditionally, slaves on north Florida plantations were buried in a segregated area of the white owner's family graveyard. Rarely, if ever, were headstones purchased for slaves. According to the census of 1860, the Richardson family owned twenty-two slaves, and the Barringtons owned twenty-five. Both families are buried in the Richardson cemetery, but above-ground evidence of slave burials is not present. Manuscript returns of the Eighth U.S. Census, 1860, Wakulla County (slave schedule).

privileges in a few of the old plantation graveyards on into the twentieth century.⁴

Wakulla County cemeteries contain three major types of folk gravemarkers: shells placed uniformly on the surface or a single shell at the head of the grave; hand-carved wooden headboards; and homemade cement markers, sometimes decorated with broken pottery or ceramic tiles. Additionally, other folk practices are reflected alone or in conjunction with the three types of gravemarkers. These include mounded earth and grass scraped away from the entire grave site; cultivation of symbolic plantings at the head or foot of graves; individual or family burial plots enclosed with fences or curbing; depressions marked by found objects (wood stobs and metal pipes from discarded farm equipment); grave goods placed on the graves; and the cemetery's random spatial organization.

The region's white and black funerary customs showed similarities during the post-Civil War period. Since funeral homes were not established in Wakulla County until the twentieth century, burial preparations were performed by family and friends at the deceased's home. The body was washed, dressed, and placed on a cooling board propped between two chairs. A ritual "sitting up" was held by the family with food and drink provided by neighbors and friends. Placed in a plain, homemade, pine coffin, the body was transported by mourners to the church for the religious ceremony and subsequently taken to the burial site. If the distance was short, the coffin was hand carried. If not, a horse or mule-drawn wagon was used.⁵

By the late nineteenth century, many blacks and whites began utilizing cement grave markers. The thirty Wakulla cemeteries surveyed contain a range of modest to distinctive hand-cast cement monuments. Cement, when moist, allowed for handwritten

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4. The cemetery located on John Ferrell's property has an early nineteenth-century section where his ancestors are buried. Blacks were allowed to bury their dead there until recently. Like the Richardson cemetery, slave burials no longer are evident.
 5. Interview with Ruby Allen by the author, Buckhorn, FL, June 9, 1989 (notes of this and other interviews cited in this article are in the possession of the author, Tallahassee, FL). A resident of the Buckhorn community, Mrs. Allen described the burial practices of whites and blacks that she witnessed as a child in the early twentieth century.

inscriptions and ornamentation.⁶ The markers then could be painted white to resemble marble tablets. In more recent years, particularly since the World War II period, commercially made granite markers have become common. They not only decorate new graves, but they often replaced the older homemade folk markers.⁷

Inscriptions on folk markers, in both black and white cemeteries, generally reflect religious sentiments and expressions of love and lasting memory. The epitaphs often take the form of standardized quotes including “Gone But Not Forgotten,” “Asleep In Jesus,” and “Rest In Peace.” Many homemade markers do not provide even basic information such as the deceased’s full name and dates of birth and death. Some simply chronicle the dead person’s status as “father” or “mother.” Common to the homemade markers are recurrent misspellings: “Gone But Not Forgotton” and “Bornd.” Reversed consonants also are often found.

The exchange of material culture between blacks and whites— isolated on plantations and farms— was inevitable. Whites depended upon the black population for manual and domestic labor, and their daily interaction was essential. The slave system forced blacks to adopt the religious beliefs of the white population. By the mid-nineteenth century, most were Christians, although many adhered to some African belief and practices. According to one scholar: “Christianity was only a veneer overlaying pagan belief and ritual. Immigrants arriving in America brought with them a complex folklore of death and burial. Each new ethnic group added more beliefs and practices to the American way of death.”⁸

Shell-decorated fetishes and funeral offerings of shells played a significant role within certain West African cultures. In keeping with their belief that a dead person’s soul crossed a great water

6. Information regarding the deceased either was pressed into the surface with lettering tools or hand inscribed with some type of stylus or sharp-pointed object.

7. Interview with Glen Lawhon by the author, Crawfordville, FL, June 8, 1989. Mr. Lawhon replaced several cement markers on his grandparents’ graves with granite monuments. He indicated that, as the members of his generation “did better” financially, they replaced the “make do” traditions with other markers.

8. John R. Stilgoe, “Graveyards,” in *Common Landscape of America, 1550-1845* (New Haven, 1982), 222-23.

to reach the afterworld, Bakongo tribesmen of Central-West Africa viewed shells in the context of their watery origins—the sea. Cultural geographer Terry Jordan additionally has noted: “In West Africa . . . Nigerian Yoruba funerary party members typically threw cowries to the assembled crowd, and shells sometimes appeared as Yoruba grave decoration. Some Ghanaians made shell offerings to the dead, and along much of the old slave coast ceremonial gifts of shells at funerals were once common. A traditional Zairean belief held that the dead became white creatures living under river beds and lake bottoms. Bleached shells could symbolize both the whiteness and watery character of death. . . . Significantly, the custom does appear in black graveyards in the immediate vicinity of Charleston, South Carolina—the first-ranking American port of entry for colonial blacks . . . [and an] African origin of the custom is further indicated by the appearance of shell-covered grave mounds on St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, where blacks form a large majority of the population.”⁹

Symbolically, shells represented the deceased’s passage to the spirit world. Folklorist Sara Clark states that shells retained symbolic attributes from prehistoric times to the Renaissance, particularly in Christian iconography.¹⁰ Clark believes that shells universally “symbolize eternal life because of their watery origins and because of superficial resemblance of some shells to the female sexual organ. A shell can be used to symbolize birth hence rebirth and hence eternal life.”¹¹ Jordan’s studies of white and black graveyards in north Texas further connect shell symbolism with death in Europe. Relying on evidence surrounding the prehistoric Indo-European culture’s adoration of a female diety, he concluded that the shell inherited from pagan times its association “with the worship of a fertility goddess.”¹² Shell motifs appear in ancient Greek and Roman funerary monuments, and

9. Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy* (Austin, 1982), 21.

10. Sara Clark, “The Decoration of Graves in Central Texas with Seashells,” *Texas Folklore Society* 36 (1972), 41.

11. *Ibid.*

12. “Among the duties of the mother goddess was to oversee the dead, and through the supreme powers of fertility, to assure their rebirth into the afterlife. To place a shell on or in a grave was to intercede with the great goddess in behalf of the deceased.” Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, 25.

“the custom spread as far as Britain . . . making the transition from pagan to Christian” symbolism.¹³

Shells adorning graves were found in fourteen of Wakulla County’s cemeteries— twelve white, one black, and one biracial. While only one black cemetery revealed two examples, Bonnet Pond, a white graveyard, contained shell ornamentations that surpassed other cemeteries both in quantity and application. Various bivalves and gastropods, either alone or at the base of homemade cement markers, sometimes were the only documentation of a gravesite. Their abundant use in this cemetery may result from its location near a well-traveled intersection that leads to the coast. The Lacy Griner grave (1891), mounded with uniformly placed cockle shells over the entire surface, indicates a conscious effort to protect as well as to adorn the gravemound. The engraved marble headstone, probably added at a later date, in no way alters the significance of the original folk design. Shells symmetrically embedded in cement copings adorn two burial sites in the Buckhorn black cemetery.

Burial practices were designed to deal with the general confusion and fear of death. Each ethno/racial group’s traditions enabled it to express a unique cultural heritage and expectations regarding the afterlife. These burials portray the merger of pagan and Christian cultures.¹⁴ Whites and blacks utilized objects and materials found in nature to symbolize their relationship to life, death, and the hereafter. And even after articles such as shells lost that magical symbolism, they persisted in use for decorative value.

The most fragile of funerary objects— wooden gravemarkers— survive in the form of small pine boards or shakes carved to resemble a “head and shoulders.” In various stages of decay, they survive in four white cemeteries (Oak Park, Grimes, Bonnet Pond, and Smith Creek) and one black churchyard (Mt. Olive). Some markers are anchored firmly in the ground with their surface smooth from weathering, others are rotted and broken. This form simply may indicate the head of the grave or symbolize the deceased’s body. Israil Cauley, raised in the Bellair community of Leon County and now seventy years old, recalled the wooden “head and shoulders” boards marking graves in his churchyard

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 39.



Unidentified “head-and-shoulders” wooden marker, Crimes cemetery. *Collection of the author.*

prior to World War II. He believed that the forms “mark[ed] the head of the deceased’s grave.”¹⁵

15. Interview with Israil Cauley by the author, Tallahassee, FL, March 7, 1990. Mr. Cauley indicated that shaped-wooden markers had existed in his church graveyard, but the cemetery was plowed under by a pulpwood company prior to his return home from military service in World War II.

The practice may be drawn from earlier cultural roots. The Lobis of the Ivory Coast carved the heads of ancestors on posts. As noted by one scholar: "Kept in the home and often on the family altar, the head was well positioned to hear special requests for guidance and protection. It represented the Lobi's ancestors, who were regarded much like Christian saints as intermediaries between humans and gods."¹⁶ Generations of blacks from the sea islands of Georgia and South Carolina have designed and carved utilitarian objects with expressive and imaginative components; images of humans and animals adorned the surfaces of walking sticks and dishes. An example of this African tradition existed in the rural coastal town of Sunbury, Georgia, where Cyrus Bowen carved wooden gravemakers in his family graveyard. Destroyed in the 1950s, Bowen's mortuary carvings were mostly reptiles, another African theme, but one closely resembled a Lobi headpost.¹⁷

Wooden markers were known to English European settlers, like those moving into Wakulla County, and examples of wooden tablet traditions may be found throughout the upper and lower South and as far west as Texas.¹⁸ Wooden markers recorded in Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas indicate that the size and scale varies between each location. Stylistically, a number of carved wooden headboards in the lower South appear as "head and shoulders" compositions; elsewhere in the United States, an arched-rectangular shape is more common.

Shell ornamentation, similar to that used by Caribbean and African peoples, also is found in the Wakulla cemeteries. However, as with wooden headboards, irregular maintenance has caused these artifacts to disappear into the soil and undergrowth. In fact, many of the black graveyards lack much intact evidence. Those surveyed exhibited the most neglect from unchecked plant growth, while many white graveyards appear to have been cleaned and mowed sporadically. This circumstance raises an important question. If there was as much traditional or religious respect by blacks as by whites concerning their ancestors, why

16. Pamela McClusky, *African Masks and Muses: Selections of African Art in the Seattle Art Museum* (Seattle, 1977), plate 9.

17. Carole Merritt, "Cemeteries," in Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Section, *Historic Black Resources* (Atlanta, 1984), 34.

18. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, 43.



Lucy Griner grave, Bonnet Pond cemetery, 1891. Shell-encrusted mound with marble headstone. *Collection of the author.*

would there be any difference in the maintenance of their cemeteries?

One factor that must be considered is black mobility. During the Civil War, Union forces seized and removed some of the area's blacks, and in the decades following many blacks likely moved from the county for economic reasons. The blacks who remained in Wakulla found only low-paying menial jobs as domestic and farm laborers for local white families. Since they already were entrenched in the South's agricultural labor system, they also became tied to the tenant and sharecropping system.¹⁹ Although migrations and lack of financial resources partially may explain the relatively poor upkeep of ancestral burial grounds, additional reasons explain continuation of the practice into the twentieth century.

From roots in African-American superstition and folklore, many sea-island communities consider burial grounds off limits to the living in order to avoid harassment from wandering spirits or "plat-eyes."²⁰ This tradition stems from certain West African cultures that believe in the "tripartite division of the human being" after death.²¹ While Christian theology relies on the concept of a bipartite division of the body and soul, the tripartite tradition teaches that the "soul returns to the Kingdom of God" and the body and spirit remain on earth.²² Although the body remains underground, the spirit may wander and can bring harm to those who disturb burial grounds. Therefore, tradition may have caused nineteenth- and early twentieth-century blacks to fear retribution from spirits inhabiting the graveyard which, in turn, contributed to the cemeteries' deficient upkeep. Whatever the cause, the result was the rapid deterioration of shell and wooden gravemarkers.

A more durable option for marking graves was the standardized cement form: tablets, squares, and wedged-shaped headstones. Manufactured cement was inexpensive and widely available in the Wakulla area and provided an important option for less-affluent rural peoples. Wooden forms needed for the poured cement did not always afford the flexibility of creating

19. Interview with Lucy Harvey by the author, Spring Creek, FL, June 14, 1989.

20. "Plat-eye, the spirit who according to Afro-American folklore spells the doom of people who steal from graves." Elizabeth A. Fenn, "Honoring the Ancestors: Kongo-American Graves in the American South," *Southern Exposure* 13 (September/October 1985), 45.

21. Patricia Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (Athens, GA, 1987), 24.

22. *Ibid.*

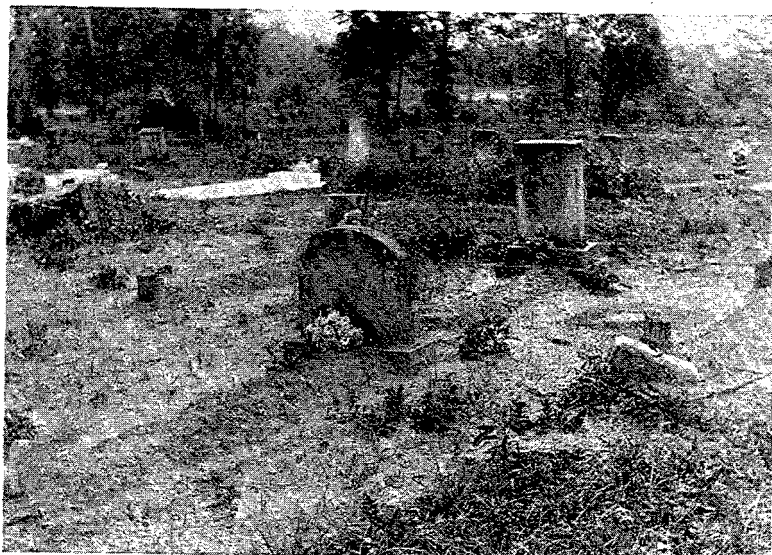
highly stylized or ornate monuments. Wet cement did allow for personalized inscriptions and some unusual forms and decorations. Exposed bits of scrap metal, old hinges, bolts, wire, and other odds and ends often were used to reinforce cement markers. Cement headstones were made on an "as needed basis" and tend to replicate more expensive marble tablets and granite monuments.²³

Although the majority of cement markers conform to standardized funerary monuments, a number of headstones in the black graveyards possess non-traditional cement forms: pyramidal shapes, obelisks, Gothic-points, and unusual ornamentation. In Wakulla County's white antebellum graveyards similar pyramidal shapes, obelisks, and Gothic-points are common. Sister Pinkie Donalson's cement headstone in the Walker cemetery is like the Gothic-pointed tablets marking white graves in the nearby biracial Richardson cemetery.

Sister Pinkie's marker and another Donalson cement marker contain bits of broken ceramic randomly set in the surface. Other examples of ceramic decorations also appear in white cemeteries, but they usually are decorative bathroom tiles uniformly set in the borders of cement copings. The maker of the Donalson headstones probably relied on a tradition found in African-American folklore that required the placement of broken china or glassware on graves. The Gullah and Geechee cultures of South Carolina and Georgia placed the deceased's personal objects— broken pieces of dishes, cups, medicine bottles, etc.— on the graves, or else they were pressed into the wet cement. A tradition of sea-island blacks required mourners to break "the last objects used by [the] deceased immediately prior to death" at the gravesite to symbolize the "shattered life" and further ensure that the chain of death was broken for other family members. This practice also precluded the theft of grave offerings because they were useless. In west and central Africa, broken crockery, bottles, and cooking pots adorned graves, and in parts of the Congo theft prevention also was the rationale for breaking grave offerings.²⁴

23. Interview with Vertia Rollins by the author, Spring Creek, FL, June 18, 1989. Mrs. Rollins recalled that Buckland Randolph (deceased, c. 1988) made many of the concrete headstones for blacks in the Walker and Richardson cemeteries.

24. Newbill Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill, 1926), 105.



Mounded- and scraped-earth burials, Richardson cemetery. *Collection of the author.*

The utilization of personal articles may have a deeper relation to ancestor worship. Breaking of personal items symbolically “free[d] the spirit from the article and let it go to the next world to serve the dead.”²⁵ Whether or not the person responsible for the Donalson family headstones was conscious of the concept of ancestor worship, he definitely retained a trace of this tradition in his work.²⁶

The practice apparent in a few Wakulla graveyards of scraping the area free of grass surrounding the graves, as well as maintaining an elongated grave mound, represents another feature of rural-southern burial grounds. Although mounded- and scraped-earth practices are declining in the rural South, examples persist in the Wakulla County cemeteries, especially the biracial Richardson cemetery. Historical origins of this custom may be related to early agrarian cultures in west Africa and Europe. Jordan has observed: “Mounded, bare-earth graves marked by head- and footstones [exist] among the Nubian people of the Sudan. This burial ground is strikingly like those of the

25. *Ibid.*, 106.

26. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, 21.

American South, suggesting an African Muslim origin for some southern cemetery traits. Each grave is covered with small rounded rocks, not unlike the southern shell decoration custom.²⁷ The graves needed to be protected from grazing wild animals and domestic livestock. This practice also prevented grass fires, which resulted from slash-and-burn techniques of land clearing, from destroying the graveyard and its grave artifacts. This custom likely survived in the American South for the same reasons. The practice of mounding and scraping of loose earth above the grave continues, but most of Wakulla County's rural cemeteries now reflect urban twentieth-century customs: planted grass, cement copings, and curbed plots.

Cultivated plants played a significant role in the symbolism of southern cemetery landscapes. Wakulla cemeteries possess a variety of flowers and evergreens representative of the relationship with the afterlife. Cedars, the evergreen that serves as "a symbol of eternal life," appear in both black and white burial grounds.²⁸

Fencing and curbing of graves and family plots, another feature of white cemeteries in Wakulla County, was not utilized by blacks until much later in the nineteenth century. Lucy Harvey, a 102-year-old descendent of slaves, remembered that many blacks in the early twentieth century enclosed grave sites with some type of fencing or curbing. Whatever materials they could find— wire, rocks, or bricks— were used to outline the grave.²⁹ Fencing made with inexpensive wire, curbing constructed from cement, bricks, and wood boards appear in all the cemeteries surveyed.

Objects usually considered to be trash— wood stobs, broken bricks, metal pipes, and mason jars— were used to indicate where the earth had sunk mainly because of disintegrating wooden coffins. Perhaps, the temporary objects were meant to be replaced with more permanent symbols when finances allowed. Twenty of the cemeteries (fourteen white, four black, and two biracial) possessed at least one of the objects. As a group, they

27. *Ibid.*, 18.

28. Terry G. Jordan, "Forest Folk, Prairie Folk: Rural Religious Cultures in North Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 80 (October 1976), 155. Jordan traces the custom of planting evergreens in cemeteries to traditions of northeastern and central Europe.

29. Lucy Harvey interview.

likely indicate a particular period or segment of the rural population that was experiencing economic hardships. Without any formal markers to denote dates of death, however, the reasons for the practice cannot be determined.

Grave goods, such as ceramic animals and figurative vases, lay on or about gravesites in every cemetery surveyed. Although many vases likely were purchased containing live or artificial flowers, they usually have a sentimental greeting-card character common to late twentieth-century consumer culture. Others, like the tiny ceramic dog balanced atop the Hartsfield headstone in Bonnet Pond, suggest that dogs played an important role in the deceased's life. The same, perhaps, might apply to his spiritual world. In the majority of black cemeteries, colorful vases, either homemade or purchased, often held artificial roses and other kinds of flowers. These vases serve as permanent receptacles for receiving fresh replacements.

The original spatial organization of black and white cemeteries portrays a random placement of burial plots, although the graves adhere to the universally popular Christian practice of positioning the dead on an east-west axis. Such an alignment positioned the body to face toward Jerusalem—the direction of Christ's anticipated second coming.³⁰ Many more-recent burials suggest a growing acceptance of twentieth-century American mortuary practices—granite monuments, planted grass, and park-like settings. Vestiges of past traditions remain, though, to depict the folk-funerary ways of Wakulla County's rural culture. An examination of mortuary goods, funerary customs, and cemetery monuments assists the understanding of the area's history and development. While these rural burial grounds increasingly may acquire the look of twentieth-century urban cemeteries, they also may reveal more about their past. Other examples of early funerary objects, for example, may be found buried beneath discarded "piles of old floral arrangements, jars, and other related paraphernalia."³¹

For those who have the desire to examine, the cemeteries of Wakulla County serve as outdoor museums. They possess rich resources that help describe traditional behavior patterns of

30. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, 30.

31. John D. Combes, "Ethnography, Archaeology and Burial Practices Among Coastal South Carolina Blacks," in Stanley South, ed., *The Conference on Historic Sites Archaeology Papers*, 1972 (Columbia, SC, 1974), 59.

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blacks and whites in rural Florida. But, the fragile remnants of nineteenth- and twentieth-century folk burial practices and grave goods rapidly are disappearing. Family members replace them, and perishable materials fall prey to decay and neglect. In some cases, they are destroyed by encroaching development. The opportunities these graveyards afford should not be ignored, for soon, in many cases, that moment of opportunity will have passed forever.