

*SC Preservation Society Conference,  
April 24, 2026*

# Centering Community at Sacred Sites

From the Anson Street African  
Burial Ground to Ethical  
Preservation Practice

Presented by La'Sheia Oubré & Joanna Gilmore







# Anson Street African Burial Ground Project

18<sup>th</sup>-century burial ground with no prior archival record

Identified 36 burials through archaeology in 2013

Community-led memorialization process

Outcome: “Community-engaged activist archaeology” model – honoring Ancestors and descendants

## Dozens of unmarked graves, thought to date to 18th century, discovered in Charleston

Bruce Smith

Feb. 23, 2013, 5:31 p.m. ET





# Gullah Society

Established in 2012

This work has required us to:

- Recognizing positionality and power
- Centering descendant authority
- Engaging continuously and establishing long-term relationships
- Asking who benefits, and adjusting when needed

Gullah Society Founding Director,  
Dr. Ade Ofunniyin  
Transitioned in October 2020.



# Defining Communities



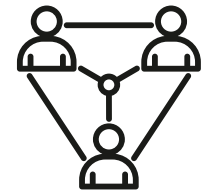
**Communities of Origin**



**Descendant Communities**



**Communities of Care**



**Stakeholders**



# Ethical and Participatory Engagement

1. Listen
2. Build relationships
3. Share decision-making
4. Follow-through

# Recognizing past harms

- **History of mistrust**
- **Breaking silences**
- **Education as empowerment**
- **Research Opportunities**





# Building Trust and Sharing Authority

- **Trust-building** is time-consuming and resource-intensive
- **Communication, consistency, and continuity**
- **Practical steps:**
  - Hold meetings in neutral, comfortable spaces
  - Provide multiple engagement levels
- **Inclusive activities:**
  - School workshops
  - Art exhibits
  - Community events

# Navigating Complex Realities

*Law, interpretation, and negotiated practice*

South Carolina burial ground law addresses:

- Protection of remains and markers
- Procedures for the removal and relocation of abandoned burial grounds
- And descendant access to graves on private property

In practice, implementation is shaped as much by relationships and power as by law.

# Scenario 1: Stewardship & Lost Connections

A historic African American burial ground is associated with a church that has since relocated.

Over time, the site has become overgrown and is no longer actively maintained.

Current congregation members have limited connection to the burial ground, and there is no clear ownership or stewardship structure in place.



# Scenario 2: Cultural Understanding

---

A volunteer “cemetery cleanup” group begins removing vegetation, bottles, and broken objects from an African American burial site, believing it’s neglect. However, descendants consider those items sacred parts of burial traditions.

# Scenario 3: Private Property

A historic African American burial ground is located on private residential property in downtown Charleston.

Gravestones were removed prior to the property's sale, and construction activities have raised concerns about the disturbance of burials.

Although individuals buried at the site are documented, descendants are unaware of its existence due to gaps in archival access.

South Carolina law allows descendant access to burial grounds (even on private property) but in practice, access is limited and difficult to navigate.



# Guided Discussion

- **Instructions:** In groups, discuss your assigned scenario. Consider:
- **Power & Stakeholders:** Who holds authority? Which voices are missing?
- **Risks:** What happens if this is mishandled (for community, project)?
- **Ethical Response:** What would respectful, community-centered action look like?
- **Report Back:** Each group shares **one key insight** and **one remaining question**.

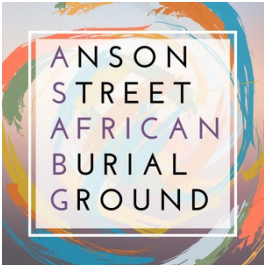


# Key Takeaways



In *any* cemetery project, ask:

- Who has authority here – and who is missing?
- What assumptions are shaping decisions?
- What builds or breaks trust?



# Resources



- South Carolina burial ground laws (access, protection, relocation)
- Practical advice for community engagement
- Cemetery conservation and documentation guides
- Charleston burial ground mapping resources

Contact:

Joanna Gilmore  
[gilmorej@cofc.edu](mailto:gilmorej@cofc.edu)

La'Sheia Oubré  
[oloubre@cofc.edu](mailto:oloubre@cofc.edu)

