

Life After Death: THE MYSTERY OF OTA BENGA'S BURIAL

*A Presentation by Ted Delaney for the International Conference:
Lynchburg, Ota Benga, and the Empowerment of the Pygmies*

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INTRODUCTION

Where is Ota Benga buried? Since the publication of Bradford and Blume's definitive book in 1992, the search for the answer to that question has given the story of Ota Benga a new dimension of mystery and perplexity. For at least two decades now, historians, journalists, and curious readers have been asking the question, "Where is Ota Benga's final resting place?" For many, knowing the answer and being able to visit the spot where his mortal remains lie, would be the closure they seek for the tragic story of his life in America. Unfortunately the location of Ota Benga's gravesite remains a mystery, and despite exhaustive research, it has never been found. It is perhaps ironic that the recent focus on the end of Ota's life has given him new life in Lynchburg and generated new interest in him.

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

Around nine o'clock on the morning of Monday, 20 March 1916, Ota Benga's lifeless body was found in the hayloft of a cow stable near Virginia Theological Seminary and College (Virginia

University of Lynchburg today). The stable was owned by Josephine Anderson and was located behind her general store.

The Seminary and Anderson's store were located in what was then called "South Lynchburg" or "Durmid"—just outside the city limits in Campbell County—in what is known today as the Fairview Heights neighborhood of Lynchburg. Ota did odd jobs for Anderson, or "Mammy Joe" as she was known in the neighborhood. He lived part-time with her and part-time with former Seminary President Mary Hayes Allen, who lived across the street.

In her autobiographical book *Freedom's Child*, Carrie Allen McCray remembered, the stable was "our place for hide-and-seek and for eating Mammy Joe's cookies, a place we'd go and fall laughing onto the hay-covered floor, clucking chickens strutting around us. To think of Otto [Ota] lying there, blood oozing from his wound, was terrible."

Local law required the County Coroner to investigate all apparent cases of suicide. As was customary, a sheriff summoned undertakers from Diuguid Funeral Home in Lynchburg to Anderson's stable. Diuguid was Lynchburg's oldest funeral home, owned then by third-generation mortician William D. Diuguid. The Diuguid undertakers brought Ota's body to their mortuary on Main Street in Lynchburg to await examination by the Coroner. Later that day Campbell County Coroner Dr. John Wyatt Davis arrived at the funeral home. Dr. Davis examined the body and determined Ota *did* commit suicide and that his death was caused by "pistol shot of left breast." Dr. Davis signed the official death certificate and Ota's body was released to the funeral home for burial.

As word of Ota's suicide spread, the Virginia Seminary community began planning their own funeral rites for Ota. They knew if no one came forward to claim his body, Ota would have a pauper's burial, probably by the end of the day Monday. He would be interred in a Potter's Field in the City Cemetery, with a brief graveside service—if any ceremony at all.

Someone—or some group of individuals—representing what Diuguid called the “Colored Baptist Ministers Conference” went to the funeral home and made new arrangements for Ota. They agreed Diuguid would arrange for burial in the Public Cemetery, but another funeral home—Peoples Undertaking Company—would prepare the body and conduct the funeral.

Peoples Undertaking Company was a black-owned funeral home in Lynchburg, established by William J. Merchant in 1914. It was located at 1015 Fifth Street, near Polk, in the heart of the African-American business district. Ironically, as soon as Peoples Undertaking Company was given charge of the body, it hired Diuguid to embalm Ota’s body and then rented Diuguid’s hearse for the funeral. This type of collaboration between white and black undertakers was not unusual. For decades African-American funeral homes in Lynchburg had regularly contracted with Diuguid to provide special products or services to their customers. Despite Diuguid’s involvement behind the scenes, the switch from Diuguid to Peoples for leadership in the public funeral was an important expression of racial solidarity that we would expect from the Seminary community and the leading black pastors of the day. For them “racial interests” were paramount and support of “Negro enterprises” was crucial.

BURIAL IN THE PUBLIC CEMETERY

Two days after his suicide, on Wednesday, March 22, at 3:30 in the afternoon, Ota Benga’s funeral was held at Diamond Hill Baptist Church on Grace Street in Lynchburg. Although no funeral program survives, we might assume the speakers at Ota’s funeral included Rev. Bernard Tyrrell, pastor of Diamond Hill, and Dr. Robert C. Woods, president of Virginia Seminary. Noted musician and former Seminary professor U. S. G. Patterson likely sang a baritone solo and led a choir in singing hymns.

Once services at the church concluded, Ota's rosewood casket was placed inside the hearse and driven across town to the City Cemetery for interment. That cemetery is known today as "Old City Cemetery," but since its creation in 1806 was variously called the "Public Burying Ground," "Methodist Cemetery," "Old Methodist Cemetery," and "City Cemetery." It was Lynchburg's only *public* burial ground, in which plots were free and interment was open to all. The remains of citizen and stranger, black and white, free and enslaved, prosperous and pauper had lain together there for generations.

Several authoritative documents confirm Ota Benga's burial in the Old City Cemetery on March 22. W. D. Diuguid recorded Ota's place of interment as "Public Cemetery" in his burial record book. Diuguid wrote "Methodist Cemetery" in the space for 'Place of Burial' on the official Certificate of Death filed with the State Bureau of Vital Statistics. Ota's name also appears in the Burial Records ledger of the City Cemetery Superintendent. Both Diuguid and the Superintendent recorded Ota's name as "Otto Bingo"—the idiomatic moniker by which he was known during his time in Lynchburg.

Incidentally, no business papers or burial record books are known to exist from Peoples Undertaking Company. The company went out of business in the mid-1930s, and it does not appear to have had a successor.

Although these documents do provide many interesting and insightful details about Ota Benga's burial, they are missing one very critical piece of information: the exact location of his gravesite. Nowhere does Diuguid's record book or the superintendent's ledger give precise locations of graves or family plots within the City Cemetery. In the mid-1800's W. D. Diuguid's father George established a basic grid system for recording plot-holders and locating graves in the Public Cemetery, but he never applied that system to the "colored" sections of the segregated Cemetery. To add to the confusion, Cemetery superintendents completely abandoned Diuguid's

scheme after 1890. The resulting chaos in burials and frequent “overburying” led to the Cemetery’s closure in 1925.

If Ota Benga’s grave was marked in 1916, and if that marker was identified with his name, it has been lost. A careful inventory of gravemarkers in the Old City Cemetery was conducted in the late 1990’s, but it did not identify a tombstone or marker with any words remotely resembling “Otto Bingo.”

REMOVAL & REBURIAL?

The mystery of Ota Benga’s burial would seem to end here—in an unmarked grave in the Old City Cemetery. It would seem to end here—except for persistent oral history that suggests his body was removed in the early 20th century from the City Cemetery to another burial ground in town called White Rock Cemetery.

Chauncey Spencer, who died in 2002, insisted that Ota’s remains *today* lie in White Rock Cemetery. Spencer seems to be a credible source: he was 10 years old when Ota died, he was a frequent playmate and companion of Ota, and his mother Anne Spencer was a professor at the Seminary while Ota lived in Lynchburg.¹ Mr. Spencer was very clear about “Otto Bingo’s” reburial in White Rock Cemetery.

White Rock Cemetery is located on White Rock Hill in Lynchburg, near the City’s eastern border with Campbell County. It was established by an African-American congregation in Lynchburg—Jackson Street Methodist Church—in the early 1880’s. Although the graveyard was conceived as a burial ground for Jackson Street members, by 1910 interment there was generally open to any black resident of the City.

¹ Anne Bethel Spencer taught at Virginia Theological Seminary and College for a “short term” sometime between 1911 and 1924.

Unfortunately the extant burial records for White Rock Cemetery are very incomplete, and no documentation of Ota Benga's reinterment there is known to exist. The current director of White Rock Cemetery, Laura Munson, has been looking for Ota's gravesite in her cemetery for almost a decade. She has walked over every square inch of the property and has studied every one of the thousands of artifacts above ground. She has never found a gravemarker of any sort bearing the name "Otto Bingo" or "Ota Benga."

Some have suggested that if Ota Benga were removed to White Rock Cemetery, he may have been placed in the family plot of Seminary President Gregory W. Hayes. Unfortunately, cemetery records do not indicate the location of the Hayes plot or any one of the three or four graves it contains. Ms. Munson has never found any marker for any member of the Hayes family.

After 1960 the number of interments in White Rock Cemetery declined dramatically, and the place became densely overgrown with trees and vines. Countless gravemarkers have been lost to time, weather, and benign neglect. The markers for Ota Benga and the Hayes family could easily have been among them.

Despite the lack of documentary evidence—and despite the weaknesses of the oral history—the removal of Ota's remains to White Rock is actually a very plausible conclusion to this story. For years White Rock Cemetery was the favored burial ground of the Virginia Seminary community, to which Ota was always closely connected. The Seminary's second president, Gregory W. Hayes, who was instrumental in bringing Ota to Lynchburg, was himself buried in the City Cemetery, later removed, and eventually reinterred in White Rock Cemetery. Dozens of other Seminary students, faculty, and alumni chose White Rock Cemetery as their final resting place.

Much of the appeal of White Rock Cemetery to the Seminary community was symbolic. It was something created "by the race, for the race" in the era of 'separate but equal' segregation. It reflected a new social order—a community controlled by African Americans, free from the

trappings of slavery and racial prejudice. By contrast, the old Public Cemetery could easily symbolize the old regime—a place many progressive and forward-thinking black Lynchburgers would disdain. Like the decision to involve Peoples Undertaking Company, burial in White Rock Cemetery would have been a conscious expression of racial solidarity.

On the other hand, in early April 1916, only three weeks after Ota Benga's death, a beloved member of the Seminary community died, was buried in the City Cemetery, and was *not* later removed to White Rock Hill. Ulysses S. Grant Patterson (1867–1916) was professor of music and music director at Virginia Theological Seminary and College for almost a decade. He was married in the Seminary chapel, and even after leaving the school to become a mail carrier, he remained firmly in Seminary social circles. One wonders why Ota Benga would be removed from the Public Cemetery, but Professor Patterson would be left behind.

CONCLUSION

So, where is Ota Benga buried? No one knows exactly where, and we may never know. It appears he is either in the Old City Cemetery or in White Rock Cemetery. For many who seek Ota's final resting place for closure, it compounds the tragedy of his short life that his remains are still “missing” and that there is no monument over his grave. However, Ota's burial and his “life after death” should not be remembered as an unsolved mystery or disappointing conclusion. The greater lesson is not whether he rests in the City Cemetery or White Rock Cemetery, but that he is in Lynchburg, and that he will always be a part of the City's history. Let both cemeteries claim him. Let the Old City Cemetery and White Rock Cemetery and the Seminary campus be his monuments. Let them all tell his story—and may we never forget his name.

Detailed sources are available upon request. Please contact the author:

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