

**Two Early Holy Trinity Cemeteries –  
the College Ground and the Upper Grave Yard  
by Peter J. Albert**

*As for us, our days are like grass;  
we flower like the flower of the field;  
the wind blows and we are gone  
and our place never sees us again.  
But the love of the Lord is everlasting . . .  
reaching out to children's children.  
(Psalm 103:15-17)*

The College Ground Cemetery

In September 1817, Benedict Fenwick, S.J., who was serving at the time both as pastor of Holy Trinity and president of Georgetown College, opened a “new burying ground” for the parish in the northeast corner of the Georgetown campus, in an area called “the College farm.” Intended to replace Holy Trinity’s existing cemetery, which was located next to the church, the new ground served as the parish’s principal cemetery until 1833, when the Upper Grave Yard, later known as Holy Rood Cemetery, was opened. (1)

Fr. Fenwick divided his new cemetery – sometimes called the Trinity Burial Ground or the Old Burying Ground, but most often referred to as the College Ground – into two parts, which he designated, respectively, “for the poor” and “for those who pay.” His cemetery Regulations provided that “the Poor are allowed to be interred in that portion allotted for them, gratis.” He set the cost of graves in the paying portion of the cemetery at \$8 for adults and \$4 for children under 12, and the cost of a cemetery lot at \$50. His Regulations, to be found on the first pages of the Cemetery Account Book, did not explicitly segregate the burial ground, but specified that “None but Catholics” were to be buried there. (2)

Historian Carlton Fletcher writes, “The College Ground came into use because the Holy Trinity churchyard had reached its limit, and was the only parish cemetery

available between 1818 and 1833. According to the Death Register of Holy Trinity, about nine hundred parishioners died in those years, and as burials in the College Ground continued for decades after that, the total [number of Holy Trinity parishioners buried in the College Ground] is likely to be nearer to a thousand.” In the 1950s, the university transferred the remains of some fifty bodies, “more or less,” from the College Ground to Mount Olivet Cemetery to make room for expansion, leading to the “unavoidable conclusion,” in Fletcher’s words, “that ninety-five percent of the people buried in the College Ground were left there.” (3)

The work of many hands over the course of many years, the Cemetery Account Book – maintained in conjunction with the College Ground cemetery and the first years of the cemetery at Holy Rood – is a unique and meticulously detailed resource of inestimable value. It gives us intimate glimpses, over the course of two decades, into the lives of innumerable early Holy Trinity parishioners as they grappled with the loss of members of their families. It gives us a sense of the early history and economy of Holy Trinity’s cemeteries. And it gives us a window into some of the racial dimensions of interments during Holy Trinity’s early years.

Entries in the Cemetery Account Book between 1818 and 1822, the years when its information for the College Ground is most complete, record 156 burials in the for-pay section of that cemetery. (4) Burials in the “poor” section of the College Ground were not recorded in the account book, since no fee was charged for them, so we cannot say exactly how many of them there were. But comparing the number of burials recorded in the account book from 1819 to 1822 (131) with the number of deaths recorded for those years in Holy Trinity’s Death Register (262), suggests that as many as half of those who died may have been relegated to “Poor” section. This “Poor” section would have included both Whites and African Americans. (5) By way of comparison, between 1835 and 1840, 42% (143) of Holy Trinity’s burials were for-pay, and 58% (197) were free burials. (6)

Unfortunately, many of the entries in the Cemetery Account Book cannot be matched to entries in Holy Trinity’s Death Register. For one thing, the account book entries are often not dated, so they cannot be precisely linked with entries in the Death Register. Then again, many of the account book entries do not name the deceased but,

instead, give the deceased's relation to the person paying for the grave (e.g., "for Wife deceased," "for Brother Drownd age 18 years," "for Servant woman Died in Declining age 39," etc.). Finally, as indicated above, many parishioner burials – those buried in the "Poor" section, free of charge – are not listed in the account book, so they cannot be linked with Death Register entries. (7)

Between 1818 and 1822, the Cemetery Account Book notes the burials of some 29 African Americans in the for-pay section – that is, some 19% of all the individuals recorded as being buried in the for-pay section of the College Ground in those years. By comparison, in the years between 1821 and 1828, Holy Trinity's parish death records indicate that African Americans accounted for at least 26% of the deaths recorded in the parish. Sometimes the enslavers themselves saw to these burials: (8)

*Apr. 23d, 1821 Crawford (for Servt) To 1 grave 4.00*  
*[April 1821] Mrs Dodd's Woman Ellen To 1 grave \$4 –*  
*May 1821 Mr Potteringer's (Woman) \$4.00*

Occasionally, the Cemetery Account Book suggests burials of African Americans from outside the parish: (9)

*[August 1821] Black child from the City 2.00*  
*[August 1821] Black woman from Washg- 4.00*

In the cases of over half the African American burials recorded in the Cemetery Account Book between 1818 and 1822, the families of the bereaved themselves appear to have seen to the arrangements: (10)

*March 27 [1819] Burgess (Black Man) To 1 grave for his Daughter \$8.*  
*Aug [1819] Andrew Barker paid for his Father 8.00*  
*Aug 29 [1819] Walter Smith Black Man To 1 grave for Child 4.00*  
*[August 1819] Black Man for his Wife To 1 grave (Gerard Butler) 8.00*

Reading through the entries recording the interments in the College Ground between 1818 and 1822, one is struck by the sheer number of children who were buried – of the 156 burials recorded in these years, 81 (52%) were interments of children, that is, those under 12 years of age. (11). The Cemetery Account Book is a window on these bereavements, these griefs, family by family. Stunning as these numbers may appear to us, they are close to the historical average of childhood deaths in the United States for this period. (12)

In 1820, shortly after the establishment of the College Ground cemetery, the account book begins to note burials at half or less than the price stipulated in the Regulations. This range of pricing – burials at full-pay, at half-pay, and gratis – was a practice that was then followed at Holy Rood cemetery a decade later. Entries from just one page of the College Ground account book dating from 1820 – in this case, African American burials – illustrate both the reduced rate and the full-pay burials: (13)

*[May] 1820 Jack Neale (Color'd Man) To 1 grave for Wife \$4.*

*[May 1820] Bill Butler (Color'd Man) 1 grave for his Wife \$8*

*June 19 [1820] Enoch Halding To 1 grave for Black Child ~~4.00~~ \$2.00*

*[June 1820] Mr Ham To 1 grave for Negro Child 2.00*

The differential pricing range for burials continues in the following years. The fee for Lucy Butler's burial in November 1821, for example – she was the free Black godmother of so many African American children at Holy Trinity – was only \$1.00, as was the fee for "Mr. Pearson's Blk Woman" in June 1822, but the fee for "Mr Semmes Black Woman" in August 1822 was \$4.00. (14) It is not clear how these different pricing arrangements were made early on, but by 1827 and 1828 the account book was routinely mentioning burials "in the half pay ground": (15)

*October 14 1827 Henry Young to a grave in the half pay ground for an infant 2*

*1828 Jakeria Goddard to a grave in half pay ground 2*

*[1828] Mr Phelps to a grave half pay ground 3*

*[1828] Mrs Bird to a grave in half pay ground 4*

By the next decade, the practice was well established. In the years between 1835 and 1840, for example, over 30% of Holy Trinity's burials, in both the College Ground and the Upper Grave Yard (Holy Rood), were half-pay. (16)

The Cemetery Account Book contains no entries for 1823 or 1824, and entries for the years between 1825 and 1833 are far less detailed than those for the College Ground's first years, so it is difficult to make comparisons between the two periods. (17) The entries for 1834 refer to burials in both the old College Ground and the new Upper Grave Yard or Upper Burying Ground (Holy Rood), but in many cases no cemetery is mentioned. The burials which did not identify the cemetery may well have been in the Upper Grave Yard, which was now the principal parish cemetery: (18)

*July 28 [1834] Jas. Thucker for his daughter Adeline 16 months old buried in the Upper Grave Yard paid 4 –*

*August 29 [1834] Mrs E. Forest for her Col'd girl Chloe's grave paid 4 –*

*October 14 [1834] Mr. Hilbus for his Cousin's Child College Grave Yard half pay \$2.00*

*[note – October 16 By cash paid by Mr. Hilbus 2.00.]*

*November 13 [1834] William Becraft to one Grave for his daughter Suzanna, buried in the College Grave Yard – 8.*

*[note – November 19<sup>th</sup> By Cash \$5.00. 1835 April 15 By Cash 3.00.]*

Burials in the College Ground, however, although fewer in number, continue to be mentioned throughout the 1830s, down to the end of the account book in 1840. (19)

### The Upper Grave Yard

The Regulations for the Upper Grave Yard, dated 1835, clearly specified the cemetery's segregation, with one area for African Americans and another for Whites. Each area was then divided into three parts, one where the graves were free, a second where they were half price, and a third where they were full price. "The 1<sup>st</sup> Range near the North fence," the cemetery's Regulations said, "is 46 ½ ft. broad from North to South

& is allotted for Coloured people who cannot pay for the Ground but, their friends must pay for the digging of the grave.” This is the area called “The Old Ground” on later diagrams of the cemetery. The second range in the northern portion of the cemetery was “allotted for the Coloured people who are able to pay half price, 4 dollars for a grown person & 2 dollars for a Child, whose Coffin or grave is less than 5 feet long.” The third range in the African American portion of the cemetery was full-pay, that is, 8 dollars for an adult and 4 dollars for a child. The White area of the cemetery was similarly divided into three sections, free, half-price, and full price. To the south of these areas for individual graves, the cemetery was laid out in quarter lots, half lots, and full lots for burials. Then, along the cemetery’s southern fence, was an area for the burial of stillborn children. These specifications were reiterated in a precis of the Regulations on the opening page of Holy Trinity’s Death Register. No specific mention was made of the segregation of the cemetery lots themselves, but they were laid out in the White section of the cemetery, and William Becraft, who purchased a lot for his family in 1839, for the burial of his daughter Rosetta, bought it in the African American full-pay section of the cemetery. (20)

Between 1833, after the conclusion of the cholera epidemic, and 1840, Holy Trinity’s Death Register recorded 432 burials in the Upper Grave Yard. Of these, 241 (56%) were White burials and 191 (44%) were African American burials. (21) At one point, the addresses of African Americans seeking burials for their relatives were carefully noted in the account book; this practice, however, soon fell into disuse. (22)

*[October 1834] John & Henny Belt, free Col’d people living at the end of High Street on the right hand, for one grave for their Child, half pay \$2.00*

*[note – 1834 October 9. By Cash \$2.00]*

*[October 1834] Elizabeth Hodge, a Col’d woman corner of 1<sup>st</sup> St & . . . for 1 grave for Elizab. Wullod buried Sep. 4 1834. T. C. Up. Grave Yard \$4.00*

*[note – 1834. October. 29. by Cash .50, By Cash 1.50*

*1835. February 22. by Cash 1.00, March 29 by Cash .50, October 3 By Bill .50]*

*[October 1836] Jarred Hopkins, a free Col’d man who lives near Mr. Camack’s Garden, near Tenny town owes for a grave for his son Jeremiah (8 years old) in the half*

*pay range for Col'd people 4.00*

*NB. through mistake, he is buried in the free range.*

In October 1834 the Cemetery Account Book notes that while the charge for digging the grave was included in the grave's cost, in actuality the grave digger was to receive \$2 for digging the grave of a grown person and \$1 for a child's grave. (23) This notation may have been occasioned by the death of Holy Trinity's grave digger, Siah Smith, in April 1834 at the age of 40. (Mr. Smith's wife died two months later.) (24) While the parish searched for a replacement, arrangements for digging the graves were left to Richard Pettit, born in Ireland and a carpenter by trade, who apparently hired "Mr. Martin in the City," the gravedigger at St. Patrick's Church, on a temporary basis. (25) Then, from the summer of 1835 until the spring of 1836, Timothy Coleman, also born in Ireland and a laborer, worked as the parish sexton and grave digger. His compensation, noted in the Cemetery Account Book, included lodging in a "small brick house," his fuel and candles, and a salary of \$8 a month plus "at Christmas 4 dollars, besides." His duties as sexton included "any work the Pastor will require of him," particularly the digging of graves, for which he was to receive "1 dollar for a grave that does not exceed 4 feet; 1.50 for a grave longer than 4 feet. & 2.00 for a grave 6 feet long & 6 feet deep, or longer & deeper." (26)

After Mr. Coleman left the work, the cemetery account book notes that on April 26 an enslaved man, John, "began to be at the Service of the Pastor of Trinity Church to dig the graves & do any work," in exchange for \$10 a month to be paid to the John's enslaver, Mrs. Waring. It subsequently records that "on the 22d September 1836, John absconded." In his place, on October 1, a free African American man, Henry Penny, from Charles County, "agreed to dig the Graves & to do any work the Pastor will require of him & to attend at the Church for Sweeping, Cleaning etc. etc. to be engaged by the year at the rate of 12 dollars a month, he finding clothing himself out of the 12 dollars." The account book subsequently records that Mr. Penny "was found unfit – & dismissed on the 15<sup>th</sup> October." (27) At that point Mr. Pettit resumed responsibility for preparing the graves, either hiring a gravedigger or digging the graves himself. (28)

The Cemetery Account Book also suggests, in the length of time sometimes

required to settle accounts, the financial difficulties that could be involved in paying for burials: (29)

*October [1834] for a Grave for George Washington McKenney 5 years old*

*T.C. Up. Grave Yard \$4.00*

*[note – December 14 [1834] By Cash 3.00 It is all that can be obtained from him]*

*January 11<sup>th</sup> [1835] Charles Butler, formerly a slave to Mr. Enoch King for the grave of his Son Augustus 7 years old, half pay 2.00*

*[note – November 13<sup>th</sup> [1835] By Cash \$2.00]*

*July 28 [1835] Mr. Mahoney for his Mother's Grave 8.00*

*[note – 1836. January 4. by cash in part \$00.20c; April 7 by cash 7.80]*

*October 2 [1835] for Michael Travis, Child (Col'd) 2.00 will pay about Christmas*

*[note – November 13 [1835] By Cash in part \$1.00]*

*October 24. [1835] The wife & the Children of Mr. George Hellenberger \$8.00*

*[note – October 24 1835 By Cash 3.00. November 18 By Cash 3.00. undated 2.00]*

*June 11 [1838] for Jeremiah Olearey \$8 / 2.2.2.2.*

This brief essay offers only a cursory glance at some of the salient features of the College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book. But, hopefully, even this initial exploration of this source, will give a sense of the wealth of multifaceted detail recorded in these pages and suggest the outlines of the first generations of the Holy Trinity community.

## **Notes**

1. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, 1817-1840, box 1, folder 17, pp. 1, 5, College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C.; Laurence J. Kelly, S.J., *History of Holy Trinity Parish, Washington, D.C., 1795-1945* (Baltimore, 1945), pp. 32-33; Carlton Fletcher, "Holy Rood Cemetery,"



*Glover Park History: Historical Sketches of Glover Park, Upper Georgetown, and Georgetown Heights* by Carlton Fletcher, <https://gloverparkhistory.com/cemeteries/holy-rood-cemetery/holy-rood-cemetery/>. It should be noted, however, that some burials continued in the Holy Trinity churchyard (see, for example, College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, p. 7: “May [1818], Andrew Ramsey, Esqr., Washington To 1 Grave for Child in Old Grave Yard 4 --”).

2. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, p. 5; Fletcher, “Holy Rood Cemetery.” Three unnumbered pages at the back of the cemetery account book, however, dated 1818, list three sizes of graves for seventeen individuals – simply “1<sup>st</sup> Size,” “2<sup>nd</sup> Size,” and “3<sup>d</sup> Size” – with the first size apparently priced at \$8 and the other two at \$4. The different pricing may be due to the different sizes of the bodies to be interred (adult males as opposed to women or children) rather than race.

3. Fletcher, “Holy Rood Cemetery.”

4. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, pp. 6-31, 35.

5. Ibid.; “Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, First Death Register, 1818-1867,” comp. David J. O’Connor.

6. Holy Trinity Church, First Death Register, 1818-1867, pp. 272, 278, 284, 292, 296, 300-301, Digital Georgetown Manuscripts Collection, Georgetown Univ. Arch., Booth Center, [https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA\\_1818\\_67.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/557000/DEA_1818_67.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

7. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, p. 6.

8. O’Connor, comp., “Holy Trinity Church Death Register”; Holy Trinity Church, First Death Register, 1818-1867; College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery

Account Book, pp. 19-20.

9. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, p. 21.

10. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

11. Ibid., pp. 6-35.

12. Aaron O'Neill, "Child Mortality in the United States, 1800-2020," Aug. 9, 2024, [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), reports that the child mortality rate in the United States in 1800 for children under the age of five was 47% – 462.9 deaths per thousand births.

13. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, p. 16.

14. Ibid., pp. 25, 29; see also Bernard A. Cook, "The Butler Sisters," <https://trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Article-08-Butler-Sisters.pdf>. Lucy Butler also appears in the account book on Sept. 5, 1818, requesting "1 Grave for small child." No purchase fee for the grave is recorded. (Unnumbered page at the back of the Cemetery Account Book.)

15. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, pp. 41-43.

16. Holy Trinity Church, First Death Register, 1818-1867, pp. 272, 278, 284, 292, 296, 300-301.

17. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, pp. 37-49.

18. Ibid., pp. 50, 54-55, 62-63; for the Becraft family, see Peter J. Albert and Bernard A. Cook, "Anne Marie Becraft – Pathmaker," <https://trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Article-07-Becraft.pdf>.

19. See for example, College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, pp. 62 (1834), 64 (1835), 74 (1836), 81 (1837), 82 (1838), 89 (1840).

20. Ibid, pp. 100-105; for Rosetta Becraft's burial, see pp. 83-84; for William Becraft's purchase of the lot and a sketch of its layout, see p. 251.

21. Holy Trinity Church, First Death Register, 1818-1867, pp. 271-72, 278, 284, 292, 296, 300-301. See Peter J. Albert, "Holy Trinity's African American Community and the Cholera Epidemic of 1832," <https://trinity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Article-09-Cholera.pdf>.

22. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, pp. 52-53, 54-55, 78.

23. Ibid., 60.

24. Holy Trinity Church, First Death Register, 1818-1867, p. 57-58.

25. College Burial Ground and Holy Rood Cemetery Account Book, p. 52.

26. Ibid., pp. 68-72. For information on Mr. Pettit and Mr. Coleman see the decennial U.S. censuses for 1840, 1850, 1860, and 1870.

27. Ibid., p. 72-73. Mr. Penny does not appear in the decennial censuses.

28. Ibid, pp. 79-80, 84, 87-90.

29. Ibid, pp. 54-55, 64-67, 74-75, 82.