



ASSOCIATION FOR GRAVESTONE STUDIES

Oakley Award Nomination

Shannon Evans

Vice President of the Mt. Zion Memorial Fund

How does the nominee's work or achievement reflect the Association for Gravestone Studies (AGS) mission statement? (500 words max.):

Since 2021, Shannon Evans has served as the vice president of the Mt. Zion Memorial Fund, a Mississippi nonprofit dedicated to the ethical and responsible practice of public history and heritage tourism in Mississippi. Through its research blog, memorials, and WebAtlas, MZMF promotes historic preservation in African American communities and encourages historic preservationists to work with descendant communities to prevent the erasure of endangered cultural resources.

Shannon spearheaded the effort of MZMF to establish the WebAtlas of African American Burial Grounds—an online ArcGIS-based survey and webmap—in Bolivar, Carroll, Lowndes, Washington Counties, Mississippi. With funding from the American Historical Association and the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, Shannon conducted research surveys in each of the target counties and developed a network of community partners to assist in our endeavor to discover the names and locations of burial grounds in African American communities. She developed relationships with local officials, community organizations, churches, librarians, historical societies, and community archivists, and she located data on more than 660 cemeteries—many of which were unmarked, endangered, and located on private land.

Shannon conducted workshops to encourage descendant communities to contribute to the WebAtlas, and she spoke at local events to promote the project. Moreover, she composed regular blog posts about her work on the MZMF blog, and she examined the organizational records of historic preservation groups to demonstrate how race, class, and gender impacts the imperatives of historic preservation. Indeed, Shannon's research has received the most traffic on the MZMF research blog, and it helped promote our work to new audiences across the country.

Like the AGS, Shannon embodies 1) the promotion of cemetery studies, 2) the expansion of public awareness of the significance of historic cemeteries, and 3) the encouragement of participatory cemetery preservation. At every opportunity, too, she also cooperates with groups that have similar interests.

How does the work or achievement benefit the community? (500 words max.):

Shannon's work seeks to recognize the cultural heritage of African Americans—a heritage still not adequately respected and preserved within state and federal programs. Before we can realize the role of cemeteries in community resiliency, we must first undo the systematic exclusion of these sites from past preservation activities. This past exclusion effectively condemned African American burial sites to abandonment which led to their being forgotten. Shannon has focused on the restorative work of remembering their existence and situating burial sites geographically and culturally.

Many areas of Mississippi are rich with the cultural heritage of African Americans, but racial segregation led to the exclusion of cemeteries from previous documentary programs, particularly those implemented by organizations whose priorities were on existing, recorded cemeteries, not locating those "lost" in the landscape. Black cemeteries are not only vulnerable to climate change impacts such as flooding, but they are also the "overlooked casualties" of a "pattern of racialized multi-hazard exposure." Since these cemeteries are often inaccessible and undocumented, Shannon worked with descendant communities to document endangered cemeteries through archival research. Black cemeteries are not only important historical and cultural resources, but they are central to African American identity and resilience, providing a space for the intergenerational transfer of values and traditions and connections to formerly enslaved ancestors. In many cases, Black cemeteries are the only evidence that an African American community once existed. Cemetery preservation is crucial to community resilience in Mississippi, as these sites serve as historical repositories and archives.

Shannon's work aims to generate the maximum possible level of community participation in accomplishing our goals. Since members of a given community have firsthand knowledge and direct experience in their community's cultural traditions and heritage, they are in a unique and optimal position to provide guidance and leadership in site determination and identification based on shared cultural heritage and familiarity with local communities. Those with personal memories or ties to a given community are most likely to remain personally invested in the goals of the project and provide ongoing input with research, preservation, and advocacy.

Shannon responded to the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic through the WebAtlas, which allows members of the community to submit information about historic sites and provide a more participatory model for online community engagement. MZMF's website facilitates the participatory development of the WebAtlas, enabling the public to access new and existing information.

What, if any, are the lasting contributions to the field of gravestone study and preservation made by the nominee? (500 words max.):

Shannon received her master's degree from the Mississippi University for Women in 2022, and she is relatively new to the field of historic preservation. Yet, she possesses a passion

and determination unlike most people, and I do not believe that anyone could have accomplished as much as she has in the past year. She has also made a serious impact on historic preservation in her hometown of Columbus, Mississippi. Recently, she provided the evidentiary basis for the Convention and Visitor's Bureau to remove its longtime director, who had previously spearheaded the destruction of the historic African American district in Columbus.

Shannon's diverse academic and professional background provides her with excellent insight regarding the opportunities and challenges inherent in the work of the Mt. Zion Memorial Fund. Shannon is always proactive in addressing such opportunities and challenges. In addition to Shannon's extensive work in the field of research and historic preservation, she assists fellow team members at the Mt. Zion Memorial Fund with the ongoing process of seeking funding opportunities and preparing grant proposals. Shannon serves as federal compliance agent for the organization. In team meetings, Shannon always asks the critical questions and provides constructive input needed to ensure that the grant proposal writing process is carried out as thoroughly and successfully as possible. She is consistently accessible to other team members who have questions about ongoing projects and plays a crucial role in event planning by locating community partners to serve in various capacities at memorial dedication events. Shannon will be conducting community-based training sessions with volunteers as the WebAtlas is expanded to include additional counties in Mississippi. In all these endeavors, Shannon embodies the Mt. Zion Memorial Fund's mission of partnering with descendant communities to prevent the erasure and destruction of Mississippi's precious cultural heritage resources—homes, churches, cemeteries, schools, photographs, documents, audiovisual media, physical artifacts, and oral histories—in African American Blues Communities.

To examine the WebAtlas of African American Burial Grounds, please visit the organization's website -

https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/37bbcb103554d05bd921ecf2c3d0d0b/page/MZMF-WebAtlas-1_1/

If you have images in a picasa, flickr or some website please add your links here; or upload your files in the section below, Otherwise, they will have to be emailed or mailed to AGS directly. UP TO 10 PHOTOS ONLY, PLEASE.:

