

TIMELINE FOR BETHEL BURYING GROUND (BBG)

(Revised 7/16/2016)

- Prior to March 7, 1810: In late February or early March of 1810, the trustees of the Ebenezer Methodist Church of Southwark considered the purchase of the Queen Street lot for use as a burial ground. The asking price was \$1,700. They instead purchased a lot on Christian Street. (*The History of Ebenezer M.E. Church of Southwark, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1890, 62).
- 28 April 1810: The parcel of ground bordered by the 400 block of Queen Street to the south, the 400 block of Catharine Street to the north, the 800 block of Leithgow Street (formerly Weccacoe Street) to the east and the 800 block of Lawrence Street (formerly Cobb Street) to the west in the Southwark District of the County of Philadelphia is purchased by Reverend Richard Allen and the Trustees of Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church on April 28, 1810 for \$1,600.
- 1819: A letter to *The Philadelphia Register* by a white man describes a funeral procession and burial at BBG of an unnamed Black man who was employed as a woodsawyer. The procession was led by his professional society.
- “The society walked by the grave, and were followed by many whose dress was comfortable, and whose appearance was neat. When we entered the burial ground of Bethel church, they commenced singing a hymn appropriate to the occasion, which was continued round the grave, and had a very solemn and impressive effect. When it was finished the preacher (a “coloured” man) delivered a discourse. . . . One sentence I particularly remember: “The greatest text is an open sepulcher, and the loudest voice that can be addressed to you will soon be heard on the boards of the coffin. (*The Philadelphia Register and National Recorder*, vol. 1; Jan to June, 1819, p. 84-85.
- 1835: BBG is included in the city guide “Picture of Philadelphia: Being a complete guide for strangers.” Map coordinates are given for “Bethel Church-Burial Ground.” (p. 232)
- 10 Nov 1847: The Philadelphia Board of Health notifies Bethel Church officials that the BBG is a public nuisance following complaints by neighbors and an inspection by Board members. “You are hereby notified, that in all future

interments made therein each body shall be deposited in the grave six feet in depth, and filled up with earth to a level with the proper surface of the ground; and that nobody shall be kept upon any part of the said grounds, or in any place appertinent and thereto, for a longer period than two hours previous to it being interred as above directed.” *Philadelphia Board of Health Minutes* for November 10, 1847.

- 12 May 1848: Rev. John Boggs, one of the early legends of the itinerant ranks of AME clergy, is buried at BBG. His funeral was attended by one thousand mourners including 200 clergymen. (PCDC and *My Recollections of African M. E. Ministers, or Forty Years' Experience in the African Methodist Episcopal Church*: Electronic Edition. Wayman, A. W., 1821-1895.)
- 14 Oct 1849: Ignatius Beck is buried at BBG; as an enslaved laborer worked on the construction of the U.S. Capitol Building.
- 1850: Bethel Church burial records “were lost,” according to William Carl Bolivar, “in the church Dissension of 1850.” (*The Philadelphia Tribune*, 10 Oct 1914)
- 1 Jan 1869: “Sixty years after the purchase of the ground that was long used by Mother Bethel as a burial ground,” the Trustees of Bethel rented the burial ground out on the first of January, 1869 to Barnabas H. Bartol, a sugar refiner, for 10 years at \$500 per year; the lot is to be used for the storage of wagons and drays. (*The Philadelphia Tribune*, 3 December 1921)
- City of Philadelphia Deed book JTO 209, 1869 January 1, p. 30 - :
- “The African A.M.E. Church of the City of Philadelphia to Barnabas H. Bartol ... party of 1st part leases to party of 2nd part of a lot on north side of Queen St. between 4th and 5th....” the same having been used and occupied by the parties of the first part hereto commonly known as the Bethel Church for the purposes of burial” provided "that the remains of the dead who are interred in the said lot of ground are to be allowed to remain there undisturbed." (Emphasis added)
- 6 July 1872: An article appears in *The Christian Recorder* by the editor Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner calling attention to the shameful condition of “the burial ground of Bethel Church.” The article exclaimed “. . . is there no more precious dust” than those who are buried there. These men and

women, these “heroes and heroines” are responsible for what Mother Bethel is today.

- 3 August 1872: Another article appears in *The Christian Recorder* calling attention to the disgrace of Bethel trustees who have let the “consecrated grounds” of the church’s “Old Burial Ground” on Queen Street crumble. The plot is in gross disrepair and has been rented out for \$500 a month to a company that dumps rubbish, old hogsheads, barrels and lumber over the graves. “There is not a grave stone unbroken and not a grave to be seen – all in confusion and shame.”
- 6 June 1873: In June of 1873, Barlot (the lessee of BBG) sought to be released from his agreement. The Bethel Trustees, led by Theodore Gould, did so on June 6, 1873 for a cash settlement and the erection of a “good fence” around the lot. (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees 1878-1891*)
- 14 Dec 1882: Another article in *The Christian Reporter* states that the “. . . graveyard of Bethel Church, where sleep the dead fathers and mothers of our Connection” is in a condition “not credible to us as a church.”
- 1 April 1885: President of the Board of Trustees for Mother Bethel introduces a motion that a sign be purchased advertising the sale of the Queen Street lot. It is also proposed that an advertisement be place in the “Ledger.” (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees 1878-1891*)
- 5 May 1885: “Resolved that the defective retaining wall of the African A.M.E. Church Burying Ground west of 411 Queen Street . . . are on account of their condition, nuisances prejudicial to public health, and as such the owners or agents thereof have failed to abate the nuisances in the manner hereinafter specified in accordance with the law, and the rules of the Board; viz.” (*Philadelphia Board of Health Minutes*, 5 May 1885; Nuisance 1521, p. 273)
- 1 April 1886: At a Bethel trustees’ meeting “Brother Cornish” asks his fellow trustees how many lots they desire for the reburial of the dead in the “Queen Burying Ground.” It was also suggested that “a large box or boxes” be purchased for the bones and then interred at Olive Cemetery. There is no evidence that this was ever accomplished. (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees*)
- 12 April 1886: At a Bethel Corporation meeting, it is requested by George F. Woodson that the retiring trustees and officers remain after the meeting to discuss

the erection of a building on the Queen Street lot. (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees*)

- 10 Oct 1887: Two nuisance complaints had been filed against the lack of upkeep on BBG. Bethel Church Trustee Shadd asks what has been done “to keep the Board of Health from the Queen Street lot.” The president of the board reports that a contract was issued to have a new fence erected and that he had obtained a building permit to have a building erected on the lot. (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees*)
- 24 May 1888: Philadelphia City Councilman Roberts reports the selection of 5 plots of land to become new city parks. The one that is to be called Weccacoe Park, in the Third Ward, “is now an old colored burying ground.”
- 1 Mar 1889: “Survey notice: Notice is hereby given that the Board of Surveyor has fixed upon Monday, March 2-5, 1889, at 10 a.m. for a hearing of all parties interested in the confirmation of the following plans: a plan of the lines of the Weccacoe Square at the Northeast corner of Queen and Cobb St. in the 3rd Ward. “ (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 1, 1889, p. 7)
- 30 March 1889: William Carl Bolivar, historian and journalist, reports in the *Philadelphia Tribune* that there is an offer of \$10,000 from the city to the Bethel trustees for the burial ground. He recommends accepting the offer “Since it is apparent that the present officials of Bethel cannot or do not keep the grounds in the condition it should be kept.”
- He also reports:
- + The burial ground contains “old, old members of the Church.”
 - + “Bishop Allen set apart a place where they (the dead) could have a proper kind of Christian burial.”
 - + “Twenty-five years have passed since the last burial (1864).
- 16 April 1889: “An ordinance to appropriate \$10,000 to purchase a plot of ground on Queen Street, to be turned into a square to be known as ‘Weccacoe Park,’ was ordered negatively reported.” (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1889, p. 3)

- 21 April 1889: City of Philadelphia Board of Surveyor has confirmed lines on Weccacoe Square between 4th and 5th on Queen Street. (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 21, 1889, p. 3)
- 24 May 1889: The Select Council of the City of Philadelphia transfers \$10,000 from the Department of Public Safety for the purchase and improvement of Weccacoe Square, to the department of Public Works for the repaving of Queen Street between 4th and 5th streets.
- 25 Nov 1889: “An ordinance to amend an ordinance approved December 24, 1888, entitled ‘an ordinance to make an appropriation to the Department of Public Safety for 1889.’ ”

Section 1. The select and Common Councils of the city of Philadelphia do ordain:

That Item 41, Section 8, of the Ordinance approved December 24, 1888, making an appropriation for 1889 to the Department of Public Safety (Bureau of City Property) , be amended by striking out the words “and improvement” as that the item will read “for the purchase of Weccacoe Square,” ten thousand (\$10,000) dollars.

Approved this fourteenth day of November, A.D. 1889, Edwin H. Fitler, Mayor of Philadelphia.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov 25, 1889, p. 5.

- 2 Dec 1889: At a specially called meeting of the Mother Bethel Corporation, President D.W. Parvis states the City of Philadelphia has “ordained” that the BBG be used for a park. In addition, it is necessary for the Corporation to vote to empower the trustees to sell the plot for \$10,000 and the money is to be directed to be used for the improvement of the 6th and Lombard Streets properties. The Corporation voted unanimously 20-0 in favor of the sale. (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees*)
- 19 Dec 1889: *The Philadelphia Ledger* reports that the trustees of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church received the purchase money for Weccacoe Square. The Square is the first plot actually acquired as a result of the “Small Park” movement.
- 27 Dec 1889: Sale agreement signed by Mother Bethel trustees selling the BBG for \$10,000 to the City of Philadelphia.
- 5 Feb 1890: President D.W. Parvis reports on behalf of the Real Estate Committee that the “Queen Street lot” has been sold to the City of Philadelphia for \$10,000. In addition, Mr. Parvis reports that board member Charles Jenkins had an interview with Wendell P. Bowman, Esquire. Mr. Bowman “points out” that he had

“difficulties” in securing the high amount for the burial ground (\$10,000). Mr. Bowman’s fee is \$1,250. Trustee Parvis states he would be willing to check out with “other lawyers” to ascertain if the fee is excessive. Pastor Shaffer is in attendance. (*Minutes of the Bethel Trustees*) (Researcher’s note: Mr. Bowman is a white, Republican powerbroker and lobbyist. He is debatably one of the most influential men, in Philadelphia politics at this time.)

20 Aug 1890: “Contractor Filbert is getting Weccacoe Square, Queen St. east of Fifth, ready for Promenaders. The site is that of an abandoned burial ground for colored people.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug 20, 1890, p.1.

1890 – 1901: By all accounts, the condition of the graveyard in 1889 was a rubbish strewn, “hard clay” lot that was used as a trash dump and a space for neighborhood children to play. There were no headstones or other artifacts to indicate that a burial ground existed there, although newspaper accounts indicate it was common knowledge. The lot remained untouched for the next ten years. Even though the Select Council of the City in July of 1896 directed a portion of “the Weccacoe Park to be opened” and awarded a contract for certain “buildings” to be demolished on the property, it wasn’t until June of 1899 that the city legislature approved the appropriation of \$10,000 for the improvement of the property and to repave Queen Street between Fourth and Fifth Streets.^[1] A contractor was hired to ready “Weccacoe Square” for “promenaders.” It was reported that the property is the site of “an abandoned burial ground for colored people.”^[2]

Arbor Day was observed in the Park in the spring of 1901 with the planting of saplings and again in 1902.^[3]

1903-05: Weccacoe Square was used as a school/community garden by local sixth and seventh graders during the growing seasons of 1904 and 1905. ^[4]

Two initial plowings of the lot revealed many layers of ‘broken bricks’ with a bottom surface of “hard clay.” After further nurturing, the Weccacoe garden consisted of 250 single plots 4.5 ft. by 11.5 ft. that were tended by a single student. There were also 18 general plots that were used for instruction and to grow grain. The Weccacoe program engaged 250 students yearly. The immediate effect of engaging the students was that “Gambling and rioting have disappeared from the neighborhood, there have been fewer arrests than before and the college settlement, a block away, reported that ‘never had there been a summer so peaceful.’”^[5]

Perhaps a longer lasting effect of the movement was the mandatory establishment of an accompanying playground attached to the gardens. The rudimentary playground at Weccacoe took up one third of the entire lot and included softball (there was not enough room for hardball), basketball, ring toss and a punching bag. The average attendance in the playground was a reported average of 100 children a day.[\[6\]](#)

12 March 1912: *Philadelphia Tribune* columnist William Carl Bolivar writes a column retelling the history of BBG and Weccacoe Playground. The burial ground “is now used as a public square.”

10 October 1914: A subsequent Bolivar column: “The great strides of Bethel in the way of membership forced that body to secure a lot, now a playground, running from Catharine to Queen Streets above Fourth. This was not only for its own members, but for others outside of its fold, and in the plot the remains of scores of old families . . . Unfortunately, the records of Bethel’s Queen Street burial grounds were lost in the church dissension of 1850.”

3 December 1921: *The Philadelphia Tribune* article recounts BBG history: On April 28, 1810, Matthew and Hannah Waring sell to Bethel for \$1,600 a lot on the north side of Queen Street, between 4th and 5th Streets, in the District of Southwark with a frontage on Queen Street of one hundred and twenty-one feet and two inches, extending in depth northward one hundred and three feet. Lot was part of a larger plot previously owned by James Currie of Richmond Va., a physician.

Sixty years after the purchase of the ground that was long used by Bethel as a burial ground, the Trustees of Bethel rented the burial ground out on the first of January, 1869 to Barnabas H. Barlot, a sugar refiner, for 10 years at \$500 per year; the lot to be used for the storage of wagons and drays. In June of 1873, Bartol sought to be released from his agreement. The Bethel Trustees did so on June 6, 1873 for a cash settlement and the erection of a good fence around the lot.

Subsequently, the lot was sold to the city of Philadelphia and is now used as a public square.

1905-1921: Now established as one of the nicest parks in the vicinity, it hosted 4th of July celebrations, carnivals, pageants and athletic events through the first couple of decades of the 20th century. [\[7\]](#)

Weccacoe Playground was one of nine city playgrounds under the control of a quasi-governmental agency called the Philadelphia Playground Association that

relinquished oversight in 1910 to the Bureau of City Properties which in turn transferred responsibility to the Board of Recreation in 1912. The park system created a valuable amount of political patronage jobs that resulted in a tug of war between city agencies.^[8]

14 June 2013: The Philadelphia Historical Commission votes unanimously to designate the property at 405-25 Queen Street as “historic” and subsequently will list it on the *Philadelphia Register of Historic Places*.

2 June 2015: The full board of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission votes unanimously to approve the application for National Register status and forward it to the National Park Service for their consideration.

January 2016: The National PRK Service places BBG on its Registry of Historical Landmarks.

¹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 June 1889.

² *Ibid*, 20 Aug 1890.

³ *Ibid*, 12 Apr 1901 and 5 Apr 1902.

⁴ John W. Harshberger, PhD, *The Botanists of Philadelphia and Their Work*, 1899, p. 252-253. Available at Google Books; *The Gardeners' Chronicle: A Weekly Illustrated Journal of Horticulture and Allied Subjects*, vol. v, 3rd series, Jan to June, 1889, London, p. 529. Available at Google Books; also see, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 June 1912; *NYT*, 1 Sept 1895; Stephanie G. Oberle, *The Influence of Thomas Meeham*. The above photograph was published in *Appleton's Magazine*, vol. 5, January-June 1905.

⁵ *The Nature-Study Review*, vol. 1, 1905, p.34; Published by the U.S. Bureau of Education and available through Google Books; James Ralph Jewell, *Agricultural Education including Nature Study and School Gardens*, Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Education, whole no., 368, bulletin no. 2, 1907, p. 212-217 and available through Google Books; *U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Annual Report of the Office of Experiment Stations for the year ended June 30, 1905*, printed 1906, p. 356-7; *The Booklovers Magazine* (later “Appleton's Magazine”), vol. 5, Jan-June, 1905, p. 468-478 and available through Google Books; *Philadelphia Inquirer* articles on the Park's gardening era include: 25 Feb 1904, 9 Mar 1904, 17 Apr 1904, 24 May 1904, 20 Oct 1904 and 23 Dec 1904.

⁶ *The Booklovers Magazine*, p. 473; *Annual Report of the Mayor of Philadelphia . . . for the Year ending 31 Dec 1912*, vol. 1, 1913, p. 706. Both are available through Google Books. Note: For remarkable photographs of the plot before and after the garden was planted see *The Playground*, a monthly journal published by The Playground Association of America, no. 15, June 1908, p. 2-6. Available at Google Books.

⁷ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 July 1905, 19 June 1910, 29 June 1911, 2 July 1911, 16 June 1912, 7 June 1914, 6 June 1915, 4 June 1916, 27 May 1917 and 5 July 1917; the above photograph is from *The Philadelphia Ledger*, 1 Feb 1915, p.1.