

# Georgia Department of Natural Resources

## Historic Preservation Division

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

### **Basket Creek Cemetery Listed in National Register**

*Basket Creek is an excellent example of a Southern Folk Cemetery in Georgia.*

ATLANTA (June 5, 2009) –The Basket Creek Cemetery, located on Capps Ferry Road, Douglasville vicinity, Douglas County, was listed in the National Register on May 20, 2009. The Basket Creek Baptist Church sponsored the nomination and prepared the nomination materials.

The Basket Creek Cemetery contains 110 known burials of African American members of the Basket Creek Baptist Church. The cemetery opened in 1886 and is still in use. The cemetery is significant in the area of ethnic heritage-black because it is the last remaining vestige of a turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century African American community located in south Douglas County. This rural black community consisted of single-family houses, saw mills, tenant farms, and churches situated within an area along the Chattahoochee River.

The cemetery is significant in the area of social history because the survival of the funerary ritual of grave mounding for the past 123 years at this site reflects a series of unique circumstances that allowed for the generational persistence of this vanishing custom. The cemetery's continuous association with the Basket Creek Baptist Church and the diligence of the remaining descendants has preserved a funerary ritual that has virtually disappeared in Georgia due to evolving funerary customs within African American churches and the geographic relocation of many black families that occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similar extant examples of grave mounding in African American cemeteries have been documented in Louisiana and Texas. The funerary ritual of grave mounding has Trans-Atlantic origins linked to West African spiritual beliefs that predate the establishment of the slave trade. Basket Creek Cemetery is the only extant example of grave mounding documented in Georgia to date.

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The cemetery is significant in the area of landscape architecture for its exceptional and rare grave mounds. This expression of funerary ornamentation was common among African American Southern Folk cemeteries prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This cemetery has a square-shaped lot and is situated on flat terrain. The cemetery's 110 known burial plots are arranged informally along a series of irregular rows that do not form straight lines or grids. The cemetery is void of vegetation and has the appearance of a swept yard. A large majority of the graves have roughly carved upright stone markers. Most of the markers lack inscriptions. The grave mounds that ornament a majority of the burials are the cemetery's most distinctive landscape features.

Grave mounding is a type of funerary ritual that was introduced in Georgia by slaves from West Africa during the late 18th century. The practice had largely disappeared statewide by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Each one-foot high triangular-shaped mound runs the length of the grave between the headstone and footstone. The mounding ritual involves forming and continually maintaining sculpted red-clay mounds to perpetually commemorate the life of the deceased. The process involves scraping red clay soil onto the grave from its perimeter, then using a hoe to mound the loose material and finally, a metal file is used to hone the mound's sides to create a pointed top. Those involved in this ritual see a poorly maintained mound as an insult to their ancestors as well as a bad reflection upon the local community's association with its heritage. The constant erosion of the mounds caused by exposure and settling, therefore, necessitates the routine observance of this process. This funerary ritual has been observed at Basket Creek Cemetery on at least a biannual schedule for the last 123 years.

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources serves as Georgia's state historic preservation office. Their mission is to promote the preservation and use of historic places for a better Georgia. HPD's programs include archaeology protection and education, environmental review, grants, historic resource surveys, tax incentives, the National Register of Historic Places, community planning and technical assistance. For more information, call 404-656-2840 or visit their Web site at [www.gashpo.org](http://www.gashpo.org).

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*Photo available from Helen Talley-McRae (helen.talley-mcrae@dnr.state.ga.us). Caption information: Basket Creek Cemetery in Douglas County is the only extant example of grave mounding documented in Georgia to date. (Credit: Photo courtesy GA Department of Natural Resources/Historic Preservation Division.)*