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8. An Evaluation of Black Church Rosters as a Predictor for Discriminatory Burial Location Practices in a Pioneer Cemetery

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Abstract

Were historically Black churches homogenous in race over the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Omaha? What was the percentage of Black citizens who regularly attended a given church, and might therefore be listed in its roster? This paper examines the rosters of historically Black churches to determine if several of the names of buried deceased persons that are already identified as “Black burials” are also among those in the church rosters, thus verifying the likelihood that the person buried was Black. It is also a possibility that currently unidentified Black burials could be newly identified by finding names among the rosters. This paper also examines the rosters of Black churches to determine if they are good predictors for Black burials in Omaha’s Prospect Hill Cemetery, and therefore could be used as identifiers of deceased persons and their families who were subjected to the discriminatory burial location practices employed in local cemeteries during the redlining era.

Keywords: cemeteries, segregation, redlining, digital humanities, history

Introduction and Background

The constructs of race and religion are intertwined, as both have cultural tells that reveal decisions made by authorities who embedded their choices in a world that by its nature records their choices in cultural artifacts. In the case of religion, some of these artifacts lie in church records, rolls, and other documents that reveal a shifting membership, one that often ends only with the last breath of a given individual member. In the case of race, the cultural artifacts are much more subtle, perhaps purposefully hidden; those who have abused their power of decision-making capacity reveal their biases, but only upon the scrutiny of historians and journalists. In the case of cemetery plot location choices made by the sextons and administrators of the Prospect Hill Cemetery, the choices they made to segregate the burials of deceased African Americans parallel those made by bank officers when denying home loans to African American applicants in all but the poorest sectors of the city of Omaha. This practice of redlining as applied to the location of African American burials has been revealed through the use of Digital Humanities tools, and in particular, visualization tools, through the Prospect Hill Cemetery Digitalization Project.

Prospect Hill Cemetery (PHC), “Omaha’s Pioneer Cemetery,” founded in 1858, lies upon a hill just north and west of downtown Omaha. In addition to unrecorded indigenous burials, over 11 thousand artifacts were generated (called burial permits), recording the burial and removal/movement of deceased Omahans recorded between 1856 through the 1970s, with an occasional burial during current times with permission of the administrators (the Prospect Hill Cemetery Foundation board of trustees). As a non-sectarian cemetery, PHC provided a burial place for anyone and everyone who died in the early days of Omaha but transitioned to become the burial place for those deceased who were members of Protestant churches and those with unknown religious affiliations as dedicated cemeteries were established for Omaha’s Roman Catholic and Jewish populations.

For decades, the PHC burial permits were housed in the Sexton’s quarters onsite and made available for viewing by cemetery visitors. As the age of digitalization arose in the twenty-first century, there was a demand for searchable records for genealogists and others who desired to do deeper research into the burials of loved ones and persons of historical interest. The Prospect Hill Cemetery Digitization Project arose out of this need.

The Prospect Hill Cemetery Digitization Project has produced crowdsourced transcriptions of over 11,500 handwritten burial permit records from the 1850s into the 1970s for the historic pioneer cemetery near 33rd and Parker streets in Omaha, Nebraska. The digitization project began in January of 2016 and included a total of 37 volunteers. About 5 volunteers were active at any given time over the years through the project completion date of August 8, 2020. The COVID pandemic provided a huge upswing in burial permit entry, due to many working remotely at home and other closures that gave the volunteers a surge of free time hours to input the records.

Although the volunteers worked hard and to the best of their abilities to input accurate data, the obscurity of the handwriting among the different sextons (cemetery clerks) and the different manner of writing dates, addresses, etc., provided a large amount of variation among the manual entries for any given field. Therefore, some additional methods were employed to fix entry errors that were glaringly inaccurate, and to then normalize date and lot number fields

so that database searching and other queries (such as “SELECT from Burial_Permits WHERE normDate>19000000”) could be more effectively done. A normalized date of 18920315 (or March 15, 1892) would easily allow such comparisons. These corrections and normalizations allowed for more timely and successful access to the data for further exploration.

After cleaning and normalizing the data, we attempted to identify Black burials using information provided in a pamphlet that was created in the 1970s (and published as “Project Prospect” in 1981) through a National Endowment for the Humanities grant awarded to the Girls’ Club of Omaha.¹ This pamphlet provided good preliminary information, though it contained a number of redundancies and inaccuracies that were discovered upon more closer inspection of the data. The methods employed by the pamphlet research group involved extracting records with names followed by the notation “col.” or “colored” written on a given burial permit, as well as those burial permits listing the undertakers as “Myers” or “Thomas,” who were two mortuaries documented in the pamphlet to serve an almost exclusively Black clientele.² Additionally, more current methods of identifying the race and ethnicity of burials, using newspaper clippings through the *Omaha World-Herald* and *Omaha Star*, as well as census and voting records provided by the online version of Ancestry.com³ provided through membership in the Omaha Public Library, were also employed. An example of 3 burial permits is provided in Figure 1. The burial permits for Harry Oliver and Mentie L. Owens include a marginal note of “colored” within the burial permit information. Delray (Delroy) R. Moore has no such indication, but her mention in the Zion Missionary Baptist Church publication (discussed below) as well as her funeral and burial arrangements made by Myers are both indications that she was most likely African American.

After attempting to identify all the Black burials in Prospect Hill Cemetery, it was noted that the policies employed by the cemetery sexton and administrator(s) belied a segregationist approach at about the same time that financial and real estate redlining was being practiced in the same neighborhoods.

Redlining occurs when lenders, insurers, landlords, and real estate agents attempt to steer African Americans or other non-Whites towards specific parts of a city that are informally or formally segregated (see North Omaha History). Redlining in Omaha began roughly during the 1920s and lasted into the 1960s, when the practice was made illegal by the enactment of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 (see HUD).

¹ This pamphlet was widely disseminated at the time and still, to this day, remains the only published effort to identify Black burials in the Prospect Hill Cemetery.

² The first printed page of the pamphlet states: “On our next examination of records, we pulled all those names followed by ‘Myers’ and ‘Thomas’ because these mortuaries serve a predominantly black clientele [sic].” The paragraph also alludes to additional “black” mortuaries that “once served the community,” but does not name them.

³ Through January of 2022, the Omaha Public Library provided online access to Ancestry.com and its Ancestry Library Edition during the height of the COVID pandemic when library hours were reduced and travel on public transportation was not advised by the CDC. However, the Ancestry Library Edition is now only available in-person at an Omaha Public Library location.

When likely Black burials were identified, we used a visualization tool in Python's `graphics.py` library⁴ to plot and locate these burials against a cemetery map. This paper uses these visualizations of the data to analyze the burial location choices made over the history of the Prospect Hill Cemetery, as well as investigations into how church rosters of historically Black churches may also be utilized to identify and interpret a structure of segregation applied to Black burial locations that is similar to that of redlining housing and loans during roughly the same time period.

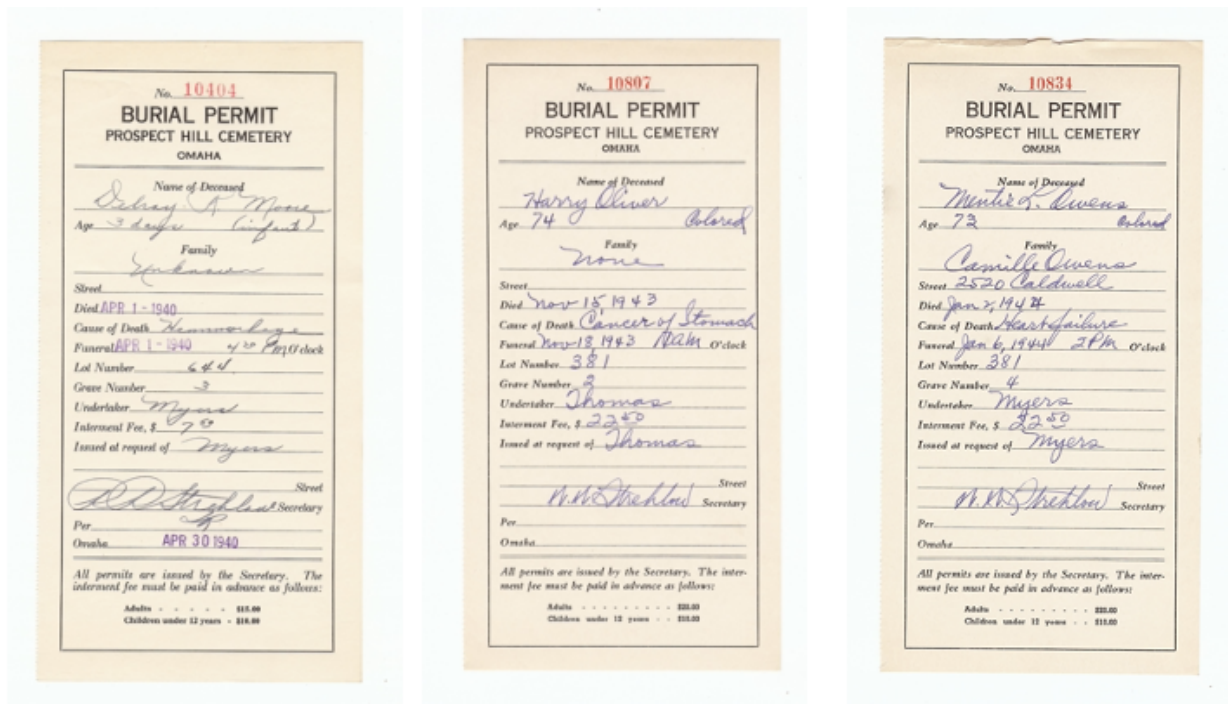


Figure 1. Sample burial permits for three African American burials: Delroy (Delroy) Moore, Harry Oliver, and Mentie L. Owens, buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery in 1940, 1943, and 1944 (respectively).

Burial Location Choices Over Time

From the 1870s through 1919, Black burials of paupers were generally intermixed with non-Black burials of paupers in lots that were opened and available in any given year. There was no obvious pattern of racial segregation in choice of burial location during this period. An example of burials during this period is provided in Figure 2.

Starting in 1920, a new pattern emerged where Black burials were mostly segregated in location from non-Black burials, and most of the Black burials were placed at or near the periphery of the cemetery, with many burials occurring in lots located outside the periphery

⁴ John Zelle's website supporting his Python Programming books provides a graphics library which allows one to easily build and interact with graphics, providing a quick and easy way for all Python programmers to visualize their data, especially those data (like burial permits) that may not be conventional.

road. These burials appear at the margins on the cemetery map. An example of a year of burials from this era is provided in Figure 3. Other years in this period provide a similar pattern.

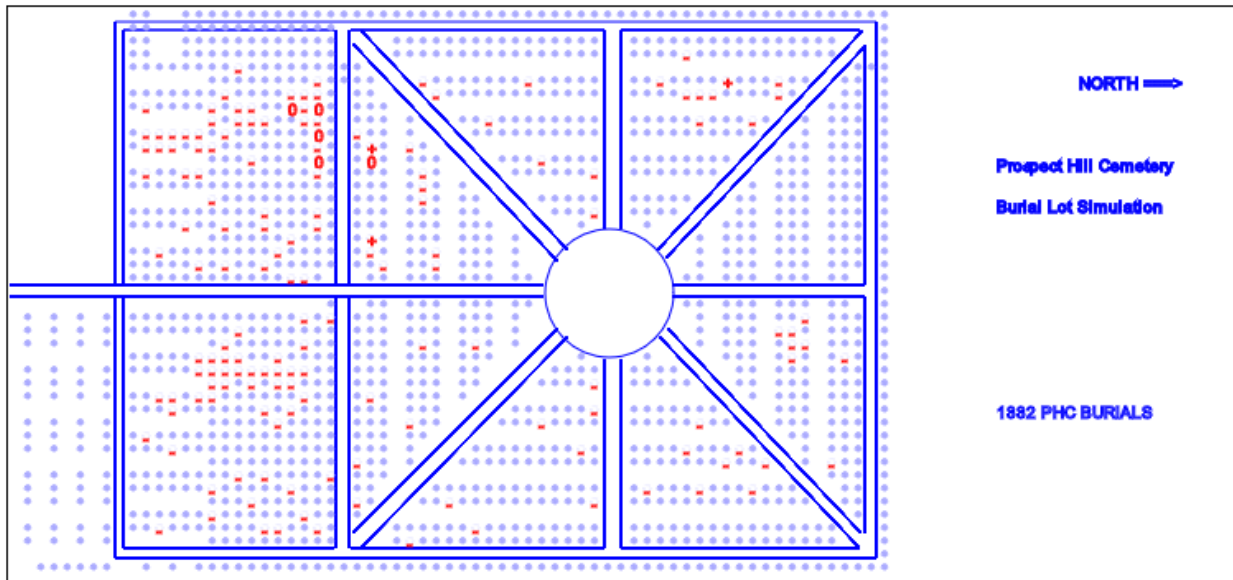


Figure 2. Prospect Hill Cemetery lots were burials occurred during the calendar year 1882. The dashes (-) depict only non-Black burials in the lot that year, zeroes (0) depict mixed (Black and non-Black burials in the lot that year, and plus signs (+) depict only Black burials in the lot that year.

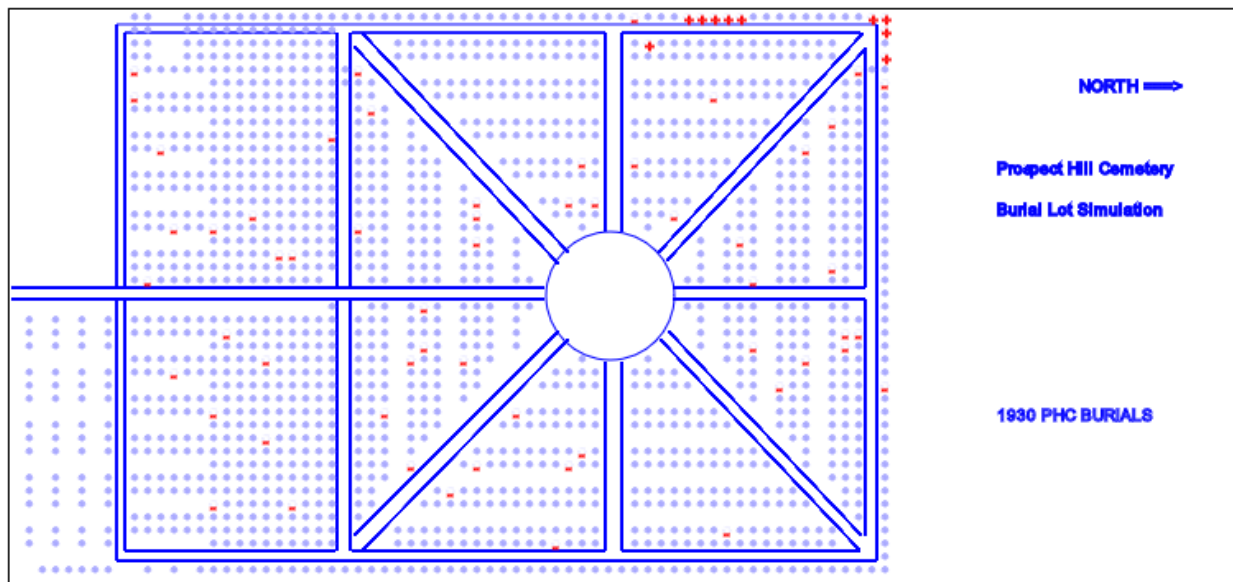


Figure 3. Prospect Hill Cemetery lots were burials occurred during the calendar year 1930. The dashes (-) depict only non-Black burials in the lot that year, zeroes (0) depict mixed (Black and non-Black burials in the lot that year, and plus signs (+) depict only Black burials in the lot that year.

Based on information provided by these visualizations, there appeared to be an intentional practice of segregating burial location choices over more than one lot opened for use in a given year, with mostly (or solely) Black burial lots and mostly (or solely) non-Black burial lots. If the classification data of Black and non-Black burials are correct, the only exception to this practice was brief period between 1940 and 1943, when a few non-Black burials were located in peripheral lots. Some of these burials were otherwise classified as “pauper” in the margins of their specific burial permits. It appeared that Crosby and Swanson were two undertakers who worked with Prospect Hill Cemetery during this period to arrange for burials of their likely non-Black patrons in these mostly-Black burial lots.

A study such as this one benefits from accurate and full data, and therefore additional evidence to support burials previously identified as Black, to remove burials incorrectly identified as Black from that category, and to add additional burials previously identified as non-Black to the Black burial category would provide a richer and more nuanced interpretation of the data to support the study question of segregation of burial location practices in Prospect Hill Cemetery as reflected in the burial permit data.

Additional Information Sources

Additional sources of information might provide more clarity in classifying Black and non-Black burials, which is the critical task of this project. But what additional sources might be employed to verify and validate Black burials already identified in the database, add additional verified Black burials to the database, or change the classification of non-Black burials that are currently classified as Black burials?

Since Ancestry.com validation was not practical to do for all 11,500 of the burial permits in the system, computer tools were considered to help with the process. In particular, machine learning was considered to do clustering on selected data dimensions in the burial permits to produce likelihoods that currently identified records as non-Black burials that clustered closely with verified Black burials might actually be Black burials, and therefore flag them for further investigation in Ancestry.com and other sources.

This machine learning process might produce significant results, and a significant improvement in the accuracy of Black and non-Black classification of the data. However, depending upon the dimensions selected upon which to train the machine to do clustering, it might open up the algorithm to use evaluative criteria that could be called racially biased (see O’Neil 2016). There are many studies in the literature that discuss how these biases arise and the damage that they do when used for significant decision-making activities (such as college admissions, loan applications, release for parole, health care decisions, etc.) (see Kuhlman, Jackson, and Chunara 2020; Obermeyer et al. 2019; Hooker 2021). In the spirit of doing no harm, machine learning was not used to aid the identification of possible Black burials for this project.

The rosters of historically Black churches provide another source of data, as they may augment the data provided through hand-written racial classifications and/or undertaker identity in burial permits. Although attendance at services in historically Black churches did not require the attendees to be Black, the findings of a Pew Research (2021) focus group study indicated “most Black Americans who attend religious services go to congregations where

most of the other attendees and the senior clergy are Black.” It is true that the generalizations of focus groups are not always accurate for particular individuals. However, this finding provides a good leg upon which to begin to identify Black burials when triangulated with other data sources.

Although official records often create an identity mesh to corroborate the identity and demographic data of a specific person, these records are still public and therefore reflect the public-facing persona of a person. As a result, there are likely cases where Black persons, especially those with comparatively lighter skin tones, may publicly represent themselves in a community as non-Black persons for reasons known only to them. Therefore, non-public criteria, or observation of choice behaviors, might provide more accurate data in cases particularly where Black and non-Black race is not recorded in census documents.

The choice of a church, and regular attendance at that church, could be considered a behavior that may reveal the race of a person and is also not considered a public record assertion of that racial identity. In this way, just as with the machine learning approach, burials with current non-Black categorization might be produced for further inspection on Ancestry.com and other sites. The difference between this method, however, and that of using machine learning clustering, lies in the fact that the only assumption used in the generation of new candidates via the church roster method is that members in the rosters of historically Black churches have a high possibility of being African American.

The Church Roster Method of Generating Other Possibly Black Burials

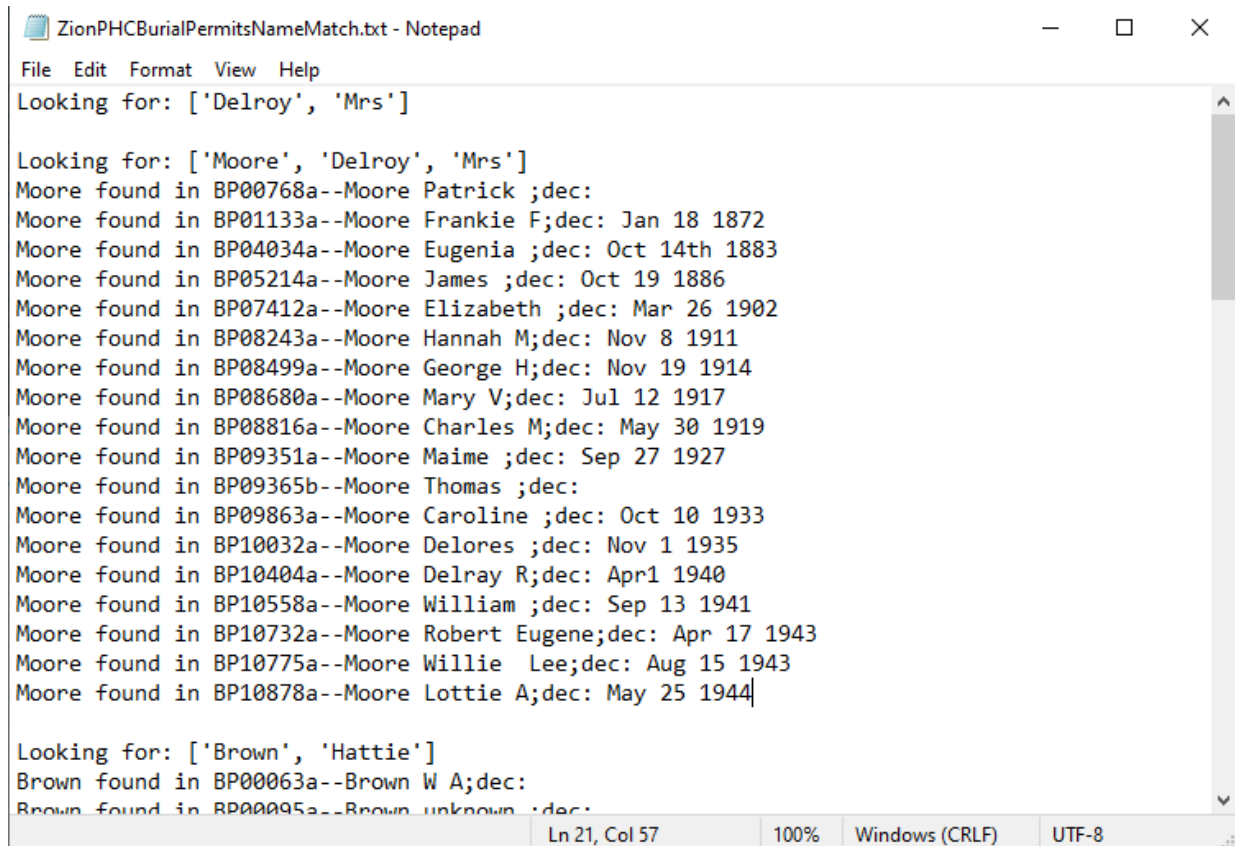
Compared to machine learning methods and other computer algorithms, the rosters of historically Black churches have a high possibility of producing names of burials in Prospect Hill Cemetery who are Black burials but are currently incorrectly categorized in the database as non-Black burials. Analyzing these rosters is straight-forward. Names are gleaned from the rosters in any number of ways, and then cross-matched programmatically against the names of buried persons in the cemetery, and then a quick inspection is done to determine if any of these are burials categorized as non-Black burials among that matched list.

This process was done with the Prospect Hill Cemetery burial permit records database and some church roster data provided by a book published in 1988 by the Zion Missionary Baptist Church. Scanned images were made of the records of the church during the period of 1938 to 1959 and OCR (optical character recognition) processes employed using Abby FineReader. A significant amount of cleaning of the scanned data was required, due to the typewriter-typeset of the book.

After the historical accounts were scanned into text files, Python scripts were used to identify and separate names in the text, and then crossmatch those names with names in the burial permit database. Only a few matches were made (see Figure 4 for an example), and in these cases the burial permit data revealed those names as already categorized as Black burials.

Additional investigation was done by putting the scanned names identified in the book into the Find a Grave website, with Omaha, Nebraska, as the targeted area. Again, only a few of the names were matched with lookups in Find A Grave, and those names were already categorized as Black burials. Other names referred to burials in the Zion Missionary Baptist

Church section of Mt. Hope cemetery, also in Omaha, Nebraska (near Northwest Radial Highway and 74th Street).



```
ZionPHCBurialPermitsNameMatch.txt - Notepad
File Edit Format View Help
Looking for: ['Delroy', 'Mrs']

Looking for: ['Moore', 'Delroy', 'Mrs']
Moore found in BP00768a--Moore Patrick ;dec:
Moore found in BP01133a--Moore Frankie F;dec: Jan 18 1872
Moore found in BP04034a--Moore Eugenia ;dec: Oct 14th 1883
Moore found in BP05214a--Moore James ;dec: Oct 19 1886
Moore found in BP07412a--Moore Elizabeth ;dec: Mar 26 1902
Moore found in BP08243a--Moore Hannah M;dec: Nov 8 1911
Moore found in BP08499a--Moore George H;dec: Nov 19 1914
Moore found in BP08680a--Moore Mary V;dec: Jul 12 1917
Moore found in BP08816a--Moore Charles M;dec: May 30 1919
Moore found in BP09351a--Moore Maime ;dec: Sep 27 1927
Moore found in BP09365b--Moore Thomas ;dec:
Moore found in BP09863a--Moore Caroline ;dec: Oct 10 1933
Moore found in BP10032a--Moore Delores ;dec: Nov 1 1935
Moore found in BP10404a--Moore Delray R;dec: Apr1 1940
Moore found in BP10558a--Moore William ;dec: Sep 13 1941
Moore found in BP10732a--Moore Robert Eugene;dec: Apr 17 1943
Moore found in BP10775a--Moore Willie Lee;dec: Aug 15 1943
Moore found in BP10878a--Moore Lottie A;dec: May 25 1944

Looking for: ['Brown', 'Hattie']
Brown found in BP00063a--Brown W A;dec:
Brown found in BP00095a--Brown unknown ;dec:
Ln 21, Col 57 100% Windows (CRLF) UTF-8
```

Figure 4. Text document produced by cross-indexing the Prospect Hill Cemetery burial permit database with the Zion Missionary Baptist Church published records OCR scans. Note the name difference between this reference to Delray R. Moore and the Delroy R. Moore on the burial permit shown in Figure 1.

Though this pilot process was carried out on just a few recorded pages of one text, it revealed some possibilities as well as some challenges in identifying Black burials through this method. Some of the possibilities include:

- Church records are recorded and published through the assent of the gathered body—as such, they reflect the truth of membership and role within the church body and structure.
- Names provided in church rosters and other official records are highly likely to be relevant to the study, so very little sifting through the data needs to be done.
- A positive match between a church record and a burial permit with the same categorization provides a very strong corroboration of the data from both sources.

- In cases where the burial permit and church record do not agree, past verification of records in either of these sources may indicate which source should take precedence in resolving the disagreement.

Written records for all churches, but especially for historically Black churches in the redlining period, where segregation and other harmful practices were occurring, are difficult to identify and even more difficult to access. Here are some challenges to using church roster data to identify Black burials:

- Current church staff is limited due to low resources, and for the same reason, church administrative staff positions have a high rate of turnover, or are done primarily or wholly by volunteers. Therefore, some staff members at these churches may not know where the church records are stored and, if they do know, may not know how to access the records (or may simply not have time to do so).
- Some records have been lost during moves and perhaps destroyed from church fires, flooding, vandalism, and other tragedies.
- Since in all but the earliest years of Omaha history, there have been several active cemeteries receiving burials, it is difficult to find names that are relevant to any one cemetery. Thus, a large number of records from other cemeteries need to be procured and made available to the computer programs in order to find a few names of people actually buried in the target cemetery.
- Church records often record names that are familiar names, including nicknames. Burial records often record names that are formal names, or those given at birth. During the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, first and middle names were often reversed, and nicknames used in social and informal settings were recorded. This makes matching names between church records and burial permits, and even official public documents such as census records, extremely difficult. For example, in viewing the burial permit for Delray R. Moore (Figure 1), the permit says “infant” with the deceased date of April 1st, 1940. However, the Zion Missionary Baptist Church’s published information references a Mrs. Delroy Moore (Figure 4) as an active member. Are these the same person? If so, could the burial permit be interpreted, therefore, that the person buried was an infant of Mrs. Moore, not Mrs. Moore herself (interestingly enough, with “unknown” listed in the family section of the burial permit). If Mrs. Moore was an active member of the Zion Church, then her family was definitely known. This existence of conflicting information among the burial and church records is one of the major challenges of historical research.
- In the same vein, residences of church goers changed often, with marriages, divorces, and other life events causing citizens to change residences. Attempts to use address or general residential location in the city to link names from church rosters to burial permits becomes difficult with such changes, especially since citizens sometimes moved in with their families at a time just before their deaths, and that temporary address may have sometimes been reported as the permanent address. Yet census records maintained the place of residence for these people every 10 years, so they may

not match the addresses provided in the burial permits and perhaps also in church rosters.

Conclusions and Remarks

Identifying Black burials in the Prospect Hill Cemetery burial permit database is important work in that it allows us to capture insights into the race relations and the structural biases and segregationist practices that existed over a period of time.

However, as important as the work may be, it is also difficult work, in that those who are using unethical practices such as redlining and outright discriminatory practices are less likely to reveal those practices in public records, or even in private ones like journals and diaries, since they know that eventually others will have access to those artifacts. Therefore, those doing the discrimination are likely to try to cover their tracks, especially to later eyes, and it is the job of historians to uncover those tracks and interpret them properly, finding the truth in them. This makes the process difficult, because historians are trained to not make errors in judgement equal to those errors made by those under study.

Although this type of work is difficult, it is made easier by employing digital humanities tools, such as database design, SQL queries, visualization, and data management tasks such as searching and sorting. Employing these tools makes the process easier for researchers, who would find a manual attempt at these tasks error-prone and filled with applied biases that may be unknown to the researcher. Beyond the human-machine comparison in terms of accuracy, employing machine tools also shields the researchers from making erroneous choices within the analytical stages, based on feelings over reason.

In particular, there is more to be learned through applying machine learning processes such as clustering and artificial intelligence techniques to the data, which would discover insights and other connections within the data that unaided human beings would simply be unable to find. Yet with these machine processes are openings where bias can arise through retraining the algorithms themselves, making the process “racist” and the outcomes subject to scrutiny and outright rejection. This danger motivates researchers to use the tools, but to use them carefully and with watchful eyes towards results that might in any way appear biased.

However, the power of these digital humanities and artificial intelligence tools provides such a great opportunity for producing new insights that the attraction to employ them to the problem is strong, despite the dangers. It is important to make these studies available to other researchers and to present them in symposia such as the Kripke Symposium to allow others to observe and comment upon the findings, and to point out where biases may be influencing the output and motivating the researchers to produce incorrect conclusions based on the data.

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